

A DISPROPORTIONATE FANTASY NOVEL

8PANK:

ODYSSEY



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SPANK: Odyssey

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This book contains profanity, violence, and explicit sexual content.

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To Toni, who dared me to write this book, and to Armana, who helped me with my programming schoolwork.

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Chapter One

Two Guys, One Pole

Kumkurda. The unyielding bastion of peace, ethnic diversity, eye-maiming fashion, and legal prostitution. Capital of the prosperous Republic of Kitaria and the seat of the ever-popular strip club Cazzo Grande. No ass was too small. No breast was too saggy. No dick was too short. No arm was too many. The owner's business practices were pioneering in the way that they slashed all restrictions in favor of pleasing every Kumkurdan's desire, no matter how obscure. Just as long as there was proof of consent from all parties involved.

It was a hectic time that fated night. Cazzo Grande was celebrating its twelve-year anniversary and the owner was throwing a humongous party. Coins were flying left and right. All the dancers wore colorful flesh-squeezing thongs and fifteen-centimeter platform stilettos. Every local drunk, every horny schoolboy and schoolgirl, every unhappily married spouse was there to support the club and fund it for another twelve glorious years to come.

The crystal chandeliers hanging above the lounge areas were covered in lit torches. They let off a warm glow around the spacious room that was crowded with white-painted wooden furniture, and a horde of guests.

While the serving staff rushed to hand out all the overflowing beer steins to the rowdy crowd, a particular young man was in the changing room with all the other dancers, stretching his arms and legs.

Domino Enviedhieri—the sole heir to one of the most powerful family legacies in Kitaria, a lord forced into exile at the age of eighteen, and a semi-homeless pole dancer for two whole years. His wavy blond hair, like golden threads, curled down into a low ponytail. His eyes were as

green as clusters of magma-forged peridots. His skin a light shade of creamy beige. His figure tall, slender, and limber—ready to lay siege to the stage in his turquoise thong and pink stilettos.

Sitting still with his legs pressed together and his hands on his lap was his two-meter-tall demon minion Sublivion. From top to bottom, he was covered by a skintight black latex costume with a silver zipper spanning from his rear all the way to just above his crotch. His face was concealed inside a black horse gimp mask with another silver zipper around the mouth area. Though it seemed pointless for him to wear a thong over his suit for the upcoming show, it most definitely *wasn't*, according to a couple of regulars who got a masochistic kick out of being denied nudity. Without showing any skin, one wouldn't be able to tell Sublivion was a demon until he spoke in his deep, ghastly voice in a tongue foreign to almost all of humankind.

And Deghmonghnjichki was already a scary enough language in and of itself. Every syllable reminded people of a rabid dog gnawing on a fresh corpse. The *G's* and *H's* were pronounced in a way that made the speaker seem like they were trying to spit out slime from their lungs after a heavy cough, and all the *J's* sounded like consonant *Y's*.

"You ready?" asked Domino, smiling.

"Dagh..." Sublivion replied and nodded.

"Remember—your job is to make me look good. But if I wanna look good, all my backup dancers need to look good," Domino explained. "Pretend you're really the star of the show, and that I'm just the gorgeous statue in the middle you point at and try not to block out of view."

"Dagh, gosphjodar," said Sublivion.

One of the other staff members walked through the changing room at a hurried pace. "Four minutes, guys."

"I asked them to let us go onstage first tonight. That way, no one will judge us based on the group that came before," Domino explained, spinning his ankles in circles. Everyone was always bitching about how unsafe and unhealthy it was to wear stilettos, but really, the biggest danger of high heels was humiliation. And relaxed tendons meant less chance of accidentally murdering your reputation as a human being.

A youth in a navy-blue thong and stilettos stepped out from behind the curtains and approached Domino and Sublivion at a brisk pace. Unaware that one of his legs was still wrapped by the curtains' fabric, he plummeted to the ground.

Shimmering tentacle-shaped pink energy with a big clawed hand at the end emerged from out of Domino's body and caught the youth midfall. Without showing any signs of fatigue, it placed him back onto his glittery stilettos and retracted back into Domino.

"I don't know why you wanted me to check the turnout," said the youth, walking over to Domino with a bit more caution this time. "But yeah, it's crowded."

His name was Bowie Kira. Barely of legal age and the only child of a wealthy but not so much noble man. He stood out from the crowd with his messy ginger hair, thin but athletic build, and light complexion, complemented by his hazel eyes.

"Ugh! Okay, but I asked *how* crowded!" Domino hissed, glaring at him. "Are there more than five people at each table? Are the waiters moving slower? I wanna be praised for my spontaneity when I try to crowd surf! I don't wanna be the retard everyone throws up laughing at!"

"They'll laugh because they're drunk," groaned a man sitting nearby as he massaged his temples. "People don't give as much shit about you as you think, Domino."

An enigma—going only by Ken. No surname, no family, and no possessions. Yet, for some reason, he sounded more like a nobleman than Domino, who was an actual aristocrat. He had shoulder-length ink-black hair that he always kept slicked back, and his skin was only barely tanned. He had a slim waist, but perhaps his most fascinating feature was the color of his eyes. Two starry galaxies—pools of deep purples mixing with swirls of blue. No man had ever possessed eyes such as his. He wore a black thong and red stilettos, and was the only dancer there with a bandaged-up abdomen.

"Oh my Xar—I wasn't even talking to you!" Domino shouted, curling his fingers in front of his face as he itched to pounce on Ken and scratch his eyes out.

"Yes, but I can't listen to you no matter whom you speak to," said Ken in a monotone voice, not even bothering to look at Domino when he spoke to him.

But before Domino could think of a proper retort, the band banged on their drums and played their guitars as the eager crowd pounded their fists against the tables in the rhythm of the music.

"*Shit!*" barked Domino and rushed to the curtain to hold it up for his companions as he nervously waved his hand at them. "Come on, come on! We're gonna miss the *cue!*" One by one, he saw them off. "You'll do great!" He smiled at Sublivion. "I'm counting on you!" he told Bowie. And as Ken passed him, his grin quickly turned into an annoyed frown. "Break a leg. Literally."

"Shut up." Ken sighed as he stepped onstage, rolling his eyes at him.

Domino hurried after him with a furiously grotesque grimace on his face. However, once he got onstage, he put on a smile and grabbed the middle pole, not realizing that Ken had already claimed it until they locked glares like two female hyenas in heat.

The beat was picking up. Sublivion and Bowie were in position, their bodies wrapped around the metal poles.

The guests were whistling and banging their hands against the table in restless anticipation. Beer foamed out of their steins as they chugged with forceful swigs. They'd already made peace with the fact that they might have gotten killed on their way home that night—either by falling under a moving carriage or running into a rebellious teen looking to harvest organs and earn some extra coin. However, they were completely unaware that an even greater danger lay right before their eyes that very moment, as Domino and Ken glared at each other and pushed for more space around the pole.

"Are we ditching the routine?" Bowie whispered. "Do we have to improvise now?"

"What I *need* is for Domino to stop acting like a fucking child!" Ken growled, bumping Domino with his firm butt cheek and shoulder as he elegantly circled the pole.

In response, Domino shoved Ken back with a bit more force, circling in the opposite direction. "You knew the plan! I was supposed to take the middle one! You did that on purpose!"

"Pft!" Ken scoffed, swinging his leg onto the pole. He proceeded with the choreography, masterfully evading Domino.

Unlike Ken, Domino had been improvising his moves the entire time they grinded against and spun around the pole.

"What? You think I spend all my free time just thinking about how I'm going to fuck with you next?" Ken argued. "Is it so hard to accept that not everyone is obsessed with you?"

Meanwhile, Sublivion and Bowie continued to dance, focusing solely on their own performances and trying not to pay attention to Domino and Ken. They kept their smiles and legs spread wide while twirling on and around the poles like ballerinas. When on the ground, they'd occasionally perk up their behinds toward the eager audience, who'd give them a spanking.

Domino moved over to Ken's side as his rage continued to build. He wrapped one leg around his waist and pinned him to the pole, glaring directly into his eyes. "If you hate me so fucking much, why don't you just *leave*?" he asked.

Ken winced from the sharp pain and let out a deep grunt after the back of his head hit the metal.

The display roused the crowd even further. Half of them rose up from their tables, far from the edges of their seats, anxious to find out how the catfight was going to progress.

"Because I *don't* hate you!" Ken shouted, shoving Domino away to continue with the routine. "How could I? You keep acting like you're so full of yourself, I don't even *know* the real you! I would at least have a shred of respect for you if you were even *half* the horse's ass you pretend to be!"

Domino mimicked Ken's moves after returning to the other side of the pole, trying to burn a hole between Ken's eyes with his glare. "The real me is the guy who at least fucking deserves to be *acknowledged*! I keep sacrificing my happiness so retards like you can have their way!"

"If by this point you haven't already realized nobody's going to thank you for doing what they want you to, I'd think twice about who the retard is," argued Ken.

"Well, I'm starting to think you have a point!" Domino snarled, butting heads with him. "Maybe I was a retard for ever letting you stay with us!"

Ken took a step back. He glanced down at the guests nearest to the stage, his lips curling up into a menacing grin. "You're right, Domino. I truly *haven't* shown you enough gratitude," he said. "As I recall...you've expressed a desire to surf the crowd, correct?"

Bowie and Sublivion had their limbs entwined around the poles as they hung off them, preparing for the final move to end their dance number with.

"Let me help you with that..." said Ken as he pushed Domino off the stage, directly onto the lap of one of the guests.

Sublivion dropped to his knees and reached for Domino. "*Gosphjodar!*" he yelped.

Bowie remained in place, curiously gazing at Domino.

"Let's go," ordered Ken, tapping Sublivion's shoulder before heading backstage. "Let him cool off for a bit."

Bowie jumped off the pole and followed behind.

Hesitantly, Sublivion left through the curtains in the back like the others.

The crowd cheered, clunking their steins together.

Soon enough, a second group of dancers made their way onto the stage to keep the show going in the boys' stead, and a different musical score started blasting through the club.

After shaking his head back into consciousness, Domino turned his face toward the person onto whom he'd been pushed by his most disliked traveling companion. He laid his eyes upon a pastel-yellow bishop-sleeve shirt with ornamental gold patterns around the edges and a muscular dark-skinned chest that peered from underneath. His face transformed into a look of otherworldly dread as the man's lips smiled back at him.

"*Gah!*" Domino shrieked, falling back onto the floor. "*You!*" he barked, pointing at the man with his finger and glare.

"I-it's all right, friend! It's only me!" said the man, standing up from his chair to help Domino.

His jaw was square and masculine, yet his smile was kind. His skin was a warm copper-brown color. He had a buzz cut, an athletic build, and a large sword sheathed away on his back that hung off him by several leather straps. The whole world recognized him and his raging success in the endless battle against evil fiends across the globe. He was a hero by profession. Admired by many, despised by the rest, but most of all, he was feared. He was Zephyr Hugo.

Domino slapped Zephyr's hand away and stood up by himself. "What? You came here to rub your giant magical sword in my face?"

"Of course not." Zephyr chuckled, averting his bashful gaze. "I—I mean...I could show it to you if—"

"Why did you come to bother me while I'm at work?" argued Domino. "No—why did you come to bother me—*period*?"

"Well, uh..." mumbled Zephyr. "I know how much you hate charity, so I realized the best way to help you would be to pay you in exchange for your noble services."

Domino's face turned blood red. His eyes opened wide from the sheer amount of shock and embarrassment coursing through his body.

Zephyr presented him with a heavy coin pouch, smiling and blushing like a prepubescent boy confessing his feelings to his crush.

"Oooooo!" the nearby spectators cheered.

Domino glanced at the drunkards with a fierce glare, wishing he had the balls to throw a beer stein at each and every one of them.

Zephyr continued to gaze at Domino with his hand stretched out, holding the coin pouch in front of him.

"Stop staring at me like that, you freak!" Domino shouted at him, his voice revealing a hint of anxiety among all the anger and discomfort. "I'm not gonna fucking sleep with you!"

"O-oh, *no*!" Zephyr replied, pulling back the pouch and placing his hand on his chest, unable to look Domino in the eye anymore, let alone keep his smile subdued. "You misunderstood me. I—I merely wanted to compensate you for your performance. Isn't that how it works?"

A moment of silence filled the air around them, though it wasn't much, considering how the rest of the club was still raving with noise from the music and the crowd's cheers.

Domino took a bit of time to think about the proposal before answering. "Okay," he grumbled, grabbing the pouch from Zephyr while keeping his glare pointed at him. "I'll take the coins. But only 'cause I'm poor now." He then tied the pouch around the side of his tight thong that slowly slipped down due to the excess weight. "Fucking shit..." he groaned as he tried to pull the thong closer to his hip bone, hoping it would stay on until he could store the pouch in a less inconvenient location.

"I understand." Zephyr nodded, his breath weighing him down as he spoke. He stared at the floor, holding his hands behind his back as his smile refused to yield. "By the way, I...wanted to ask you if...maybe you wanted to—"

But Zephyr's words were cut short by the voice of one woman from backstage—louder than any other sound in the club. "I'll fuck the wall with your *head*!"

Suddenly, a giant wardrobe flew from behind the curtains and onto the screaming crowd. They froze in terror, unable to dodge the fast-coming object from crashing into them.

A sparkling, translucent hot-pink tentacle made of ethereal energy emerged from Domino's chest and formed a human-size shieldlike shape at the tip. Domino covered his face with his arms and squatted behind it.

Zephyr quickly unsheathed his sword made of black iron. As he swung it toward the heavy wooden wardrobe flying directly toward them, it grazed part of Domino's shield.

Domino shouted out in pain and fell to his knees while digging his nails into the sides of his skull. His magical pink tentacle immediately retracted back into his body. The suffering lasted only a moment, but its short life span couldn't compensate for the agony it caused.

Zephyr cut the wardrobe in half with his sword, sending debris flying. Everyone ducked with loud screams, just barely evading the broken wood.

A demoness with feathers covering her gorilla-size arms leaped onto the stage from behind the curtains, holding a young man and woman by their wrists as their naked bodies struggled to wriggle out of her grasp.

“Did any of you motherfuckers know about this?” she roared. “Start talking, or I start biting shit off!”

“Stay calm!” Zephyr said to the tear-ridden captives. “I’ll take care of this!”

“What? No!” Domino shouted. “You fucking retard! If you and that bitch wreck this place, I’m out of a job!”

Without any form of acknowledgment of Domino’s words, Zephyr rushed onstage with a grim, focused expression on his face.

“Hey! Hey!” yelled Domino. “Didn’t you fucking hear what I said?”

The demoness threw the man and woman at Zephyr as if they were mere rag dolls. A bone-rattling roar escaped her maw as she charged at him.

With swift movement, Zephyr stepped out of the way and swung his sword at her.

The now-released captives crashed into Domino, their three bodies tumbling into the chairs and tables behind him.

Upon his recovery, Domino shoved the two off himself with violent thrusts, even though the other guests were already trying to help them stand up. He glared at Zephyr and marched toward the stage with a look fueled by flames. “I won’t be ignored!” he bellowed.

Zephyr slashed the surface of the demoness’s skin open before she was able to move away.

Her shriek echoed through the room as blood coated her abdomen. Enraged, she pulled one of the poles off the stage and swung it at Zephyr.

Approaching the epicenter of the conflict, Domino summoned four tentacles made of sparkling pink magica out of his back and wrapped the pole up in them so as to stop it from clashing with Zephyr’s sword. He ran over in front of him, struggling to keep the demoness from pulling the pole out of his tentacles’ hold.

Moments passed, but the demoness persisted.

Domino’s energy depleted at an accelerating rate. He turned his head toward Zephyr. “You fucking ass, I’m stalling for you! Do something!” he shouted.

Zephyr then swung his sword and allowed the force to pull him around Domino and toward the demoness’s side.

She finally ripped the pole out of the grasp of Domino's tentacles and pushed Domino away with it.

The tentacles retracted back into Domino's body when he crashed into the tables and chairs at the foot of the stage, forcing the air out of his lungs with a loud grunt.

Then the demoness turned her attention back to Zephyr and swung the pole at him with full force.

The sword cut through the pole and slashed through the demoness's wounded abdomen. She flew back and fell with a loud thump, blood spilling through the large cut on her stomach.

Out of breath, Domino sat on his knees, observing Zephyr.

Zephyr walked up to the demoness with a stern brow.

She coughed out blood through her shaking lips. "So that's it, huh?" she cried. "You're gonna punish me instead of them? That bastard cheated on me with my best friend!"

Without a word, Zephyr held up his sword with both hands, pointing the tip at the demoness's stomach.

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa*! What are you *doing*?" yelled Domino. He attempted to pull himself off the ground and summon more of his magica to stop Zephyr, but ended up tumbling back down with a loud grunt.

Zephyr gripped the sword tighter and drove it into the demoness's stomach.

Domino's dread-filled eyes and mouth were wide open as he watched the demoness cough out more blood before drawing her final breath.

Without a word, Zephyr pulled the sword out of her lifeless body.

Once Domino snapped out of his trance, he trudged toward Zephyr. "You...self-absorbed *swine*!" he shouted.

Zephyr turned to Domino with a curious gaze. "Hmm?"

But before he had a chance to approach Domino, the people rushed toward Zephyr, pushing Domino out of the way and almost stampeding over him without a single thought.

Coins spilled from the pouch Domino had hung on his thong—one that Zephyr had gifted him.

"Xar bless you!" the people cheered.

"You've saved us all! Thank you!"

Gently, Zephyr tried to move them away. "My dear friends, please—I only did what was right. The important thing is you are all safe."

His words only roused them more. They continued bombarding him with thanks and praises.

"Long live Zephyr Hugo!"

"Long live the greatest hero!"

"Fuck my titties!"

"Please, friends," said Zephyr, "there's really no need to be thanking me."

But they refused to listen. They kept going—on and on and on. Domino watched them with eyes drowned out by the flames of his rage. That bastard. That fucking *bastard*. He didn't punish the adulterers, but instead murdered the demoness who merely sought justice for what they'd done to her. Then he let Domino lie there to pick up his coins from the dirty floor, humiliated and ignored. Domino couldn't hear the music anymore or the loud chatter of the people around him. The only voice present in his head was the voice of his own darkness.

"Worthless..." it said.

But in the depths of all those whispers, he kept hearing another voice, like a raft trying to reach him and save him from drowning in a sea of self-loathing. "Look at him...just massacred an innocent...blind to the wrongs happening right under his nose...and denying the deserving their fame. What kind of world calls a man like that a hero?"

Droplets of tears formed in the corners of Domino's eyes. He stood and violently shoved the people out of his way one by one. Once he reached Zephyr, he grabbed his shirt collar and glared into his eyes, their foreheads almost touching.

Zephyr stared back at him with a surprised look, blushing.

"Ready your sword," Domino growled.

"You...want to duel?" asked Zephyr, his eyes fluttering.

"Oh my Xar—this is hot," commented one of the drunks.

"*Shhh!*" another hissed.

"I want to gouge your eyes out," said Domino. "Maybe it'll help you see better."

Zephyr's arms shuddered. "I wish I could oblige, friend, but...we could both get into a lot of trouble for this..."

"Stop calling me that, you fucking retard!" Domino told him.

"I-I'm sorry." Zephyr panted. "They'll take you to the dungeons. You don't have a permit. *Do you?*"

"The fuck are you talking about? What permit?"

"You...can't *legally* fight someone. You need a brawling permit. They could capture and imprison us in the middle of the duel if we don't have them. Every guard hive has an employee with teleportation magica, and I can't hide from the authorities with *my* reputation."

Unable to listen to that blabbering bastard any longer, Domino used up the last of his strength, summoning faint glimpses of glittering hot-pink tentacles from his back using his magical powers. However, it only resulted in him losing the strength in his legs and Zephyr having to catch him in his arms before he fell.

Domino shoved him away and grabbed hold of a nearby chair for support. "Don't touch me, motherfucker!"

"Please, let me help you, friend," said Zephyr, gazing at Domino with concerned, grief-filled eyes. "You need to rest up."

"I'll make you regret you were ever fucking born!" shouted Domino, pointing his finger at him. "I'm better than you, and I'll be more *powerful* than you someday! People will cheer for *me*! People will praise *me*!" He turned around and trudged toward a stairway by the west wall. Before climbing all the way up, he stopped in the middle and leaned against the railing, panting. "By the way...where do you *get* brawling permits?"

"BCS booth in the square from eight to four," said Zephyr, giving Domino a light smile. "Sleep well, friend."

"Oh, I *will*!" Domino yelled out as he continued to climb up the stairs. However, once more, he stopped before reaching the top. "But not because you told me to!" He proceeded to climb, but stopped again and ducked down so he could see everyone from under the bottom of the upper floor. "Retard!"

He dragged himself over to the bedroom where he and his friends had been residing and quietly opened the door to see his companions fast asleep in their beds.

Except for Sublivion. He slept on the floor due to there being room for only two people on the double bed.

Domino sighed and grabbed a large blanket from the wardrobe.

Sublivion quickly turned onto his back with his legs stretched out and his arms neatly resting against the sides of his body.

“Thanks.” Domino smiled and cuddled up with the blanket on top of Sublivion, making sure it covered both of them. “I still can’t believe my weight doesn’t bother you.”

Sublivion nodded.

“We’ll figure out how to kill Zephyr tomorrow.” Domino patted Sublivion’s horse-gimp-mask-covered head and closed his eyes. “Good night.”

A pillow flew across the room and crashed into Domino’s face.

Ken’s voice bellowed through the darkness. “I only get four hours of sleep a *night*, cunt!”

Chapter Two

Person of Technicolor

The sun was malevolently beating everyone and everything that dared walk in its rays that day. Hooves of horses clacked against the granite-paved streets as the majestic beasts pulled carriages full of fruit and vegetables. The smell of bread and other baked goods spread throughout the city square.

Unlike the local elders, who sat outside their houses and gossiped the morning away in their lightweight robes, the merchants kept shouting at the passersby to buy their produce and trinkets.

The homemakers opened up their red-painted blinds. They watched the square and market come to life—watering the flowers inside their window boxes. The roof tiles protecting the limestone walls of the buildings were a bright-red color just like the blinds, symbolizing the power of the great nation that had set the whole continent aflame in the times of the ancients.

Domino brought Sublivion to one of the booths in the main square that day. They wished to obtain a brawling permit that would grant them legal rights to harass and possibly kill anyone who'd ever wronged them—provided that these individuals who had sinned against them possessed brawling permits as well.

Under a gold-embroidered cloth sign that read "Bureau of Cockfighting Shenanigans" stood the young Lord Domino Enviedhieri, leaning against the lacquered wooden counter with an angry grimace on his face. He wore only a black leather codpiece and a pair of black boots to match. It was certainly not dignified enough to equate to the value of his family name, but he couldn't afford anything more than that. Leather

was the cheapest material he could buy as at-least-somewhat-protective armor, but it was not cheap enough for him to afford the whole set.

Sublivion wore a horse gimp costume, as he always did. Just without the flashy neon thong from work. He stood next to Domino, completely still. And the fact that he did not speak made him seem even more menacing to the onlookers passing by the BCS booth.

"Now, unfortunately, I can't reject you just because you look like a bunch of gigolos," said the woman behind the counter in a slow, melancholic voice as she glared at Domino with judgmental eyes. "But as per Kitarian rules, I cannot give you a brawling permit unless one of your members is a minority."

"There's, like—only four elemental horsemen in the world! Sublivion should practically count as *ten* minorities!" Domino replied in agitation.

"Demons under your direct control, animals, and inanimate objects don't count."

Domino let out a long, loud sigh and proceeded to explain his point further—passion fuming from his lungs. "He is a person with feelings! Just because he pretends to be a piece of furniture when I tell him to doesn't mean he's any different from everyone else! What kind of sick, hypocritical cult are you running here?"

Bowie approached the booth, wearing a dirty-red mankini and pointy brown suede shoes and eating vanilla ice cream out of a waffle cone. "Domi, it was just like you said! The shopkeeper recognized me from the club!" Bowie boasted.

"Uuuuuuuugh..." Domino groaned, clawing at his face. He met Bowie's eyes and banged his fists against the counter. "Why didn't you get *me* one?"

Though his smile was somewhat diminished, Bowie barely flinched and simply shrugged.

"Here's the deal," said the woman, pushing herself up from her seat. "I'm not gonna let a couple of assholes who got bored and decided they wanna kill some people without consequences shit on the fine name of this establishment. We've spent decades upon *decades* trying to get more people of color to commit their lives to organized crime, and you will not ruin our plans to continue building a society where not every single

mob boss who sits in a gilded chair with his pet leopard is a fat, old white man in silk robes. You get a non-Kitarian, then we'll talk."

Her words were followed by silence.

Bowie continued eating his ice cream, staring the woman with a confused look.

Domino kept his eyes focused on her. "So you're not gonna make us an official brawling team because we're a bunch of middleeners?" asked Domino, fondling his chin with his fingertips in sarcastic contemplation. "Hmm...if only there was a *word* to describe a person who makes decisions regarding other people based on their nationality or race."

Without even a blink, the woman sat back down and settled into yet another deathly silence. She leaned to the side and shouted out to a small row of people behind Domino and his companions. "*Next!*"

With pouting lips and a squinting glare, Domino led Sublivion and Bowie away from the booth.

They made their way to a narrow alleyway between two fruit stands, where Ken, wearing nothing but long beige cloth robes and leather sandals with thin straps, had been waiting.

Ken raised an eyebrow at his teammates. "Well?"

Domino crossed his arms. "She says we need at least one minority to join us before she'll give us the permit."

"Do we know any?"

"Not yet," said Domino and turned back toward the busy square. "Our best bet is to start asking around. Come on."

But Domino didn't even manage to take a second step before Ken stopped him. "That's it? You think a brawling permit is all you need to defeat the most powerful hero in Kitaria?"

"Hi, doggy!" Bowie waved at a dog that was strolling around with its owner nearby.

"Of course not, you fucking retard," Domino replied. "First, we're gonna get our brawling permit, then we'll find a way to get a shitload of coins to buy the best equipment with, and *then* we'll learn how to fight better. I don't know the exact wheres, whens, and hows, but you probably don't, either. So, no, I *don't* think a brawling permit is all I need. I'm just choosing to focus on one thing at a time because I'm not a

retard like you. Now, let's go." Domino motioned for Sublivion to follow him as he walked off.

Both Sublivion and Bowie went with Domino.

Ken, however, remained by himself for a moment longer. He let out a deep sigh, gently banging the back of his head against the wall on which he was leaning. He then joined the rest of the group in the middle of the square.

"I know you're dragging your feet on purpose, Ken," growled Domino.

"I have chronic migraines, you cunt."

"Whatever—I hope you die from them," Domino told him. "Anyway, here's the plan. There's only one way to brute-force recruit random retards off the street. Gang up on them and tell them what they wanna hear."

"The give-us-your-coin-pouch-or-we-will-order-our-demon-to-sever-your-anal-cavity approach," Ken added, rubbing his forehead with the tips of his fingers.

"Uh—no!" scoffed Domino. "We'll form a human wall in front of them so they can't escape while I'm talking."

"All right," said Ken. "Let's say I'm on board with this idiotic plan for the sake of my own health. Who's our first target?"

Domino looked around for an unaccompanied person of color among the sea of people in the square. His eyes opened wider, and his lips curled in delight. "*Aha!*" he shouted and ran toward a passerby, Bowie and Sublivion following close behind.

Ken, on the other hand, took his time to stroll over to them.

"Hey! You! Are you lonely?" asked Domino, stretching his wide smile at a man of eastern descent. "Like—*really* lonely?"

The man paused to stare at them in utter confusion and then let out a chuckle. "All right—I see where this is going. You can count me in," he said. "But if someone asks, tell them you met me at a convention. I can't have my clients finding out about this."

"Oh—they don't have to," Bowie commented. "After a while, I realized people are actually more likely to forget you when you wear *less*."

"Really?" asked the man. His gaze shifted over to Sublivion. "Then... why is he wearing the suit? Are we starting *already*?"

"Actually, I don't think I've ever seen him without it," Domino answered, looking at the floor as he searched through his memories.

"Oh, my," cooed the man, grinning while sizing Sublivion up. "I must commend you on your dedication."

"I know, right?" Domino chuckled. "I don't even get how the fuck he makes it in this heat. I mean, I know demons are supposed to be super resilient, but it's still fucking impressive."

Sublivion turned his head to the side, holding his hands tight behind his back as he moved his shoulders toward his chest.

Once Ken finally arrived, he walked over to his teammates and stared at the possible new recruit with an unimpressed frown. "Whatever they said—it turned my life around. Now I only reconsider staying alive *once* a month."

"All right—I have some parchments to sign right now, so is it possible we could regroup at a later time?" asked the man.

"Tonight, ten o'clock, here in the square," Domino told him.

"Domi, what are you—?" Bowie attempted to speak, but had his mouth closed shut by Domino's hand.

"Excellent!" the man cheered and went on his way. "Tonight it is!"

Domino removed his hand from atop Bowie's lips, not breaking his smile the entire time.

"He could have signed the contracts *now*," Bowie reminded him.

Domino grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him. "Did you see how easy it was to convince that guy? If it took so little to recruit *him*, maybe we could gather a whole *horde* of people!"

"An army?" Bowie inquired.

Domino let go of him and turned his head toward the crowded square with a devious smirk. "A legion."

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The walls of the houses were covered in large torches to illuminate the dark streets.

It was ten o'clock that evening, and Domino was shaking from excitement as he stood in the middle of the square with his crew. His eyes glimmered with anticipation. His heart raced beyond control. He couldn't help but stroll around in circles to appease his restlessness.

"I'll just take this time to remind everyone that we missed our shift at the club for this," Ken complained, his arms permanently folded, and his face carved into a judgmental, disappointed frown.

"We won't have to work there anymore with the new recruits helping out," Bowie added and gave him a light smile.

Domino flailed his hands around in a frantic fashion, his eyes unable to decide whether to express dread or joy. "I think I'm having a stroke! I can't calm my pulse!"

Ken rolled his eyes, trying to contain his annoyance.

Finally, the people gathered. Little by little, men and women in skimpy leather outfits filled the area.

Domino's heart soared on the wings of pride. He couldn't believe all those people came to join *his* cause, *his* group. It was a magnificent sight to behold. So many people. So many eyes staring only at him. Was this how it felt? Fame? Recognition? Admiration?

"Hey, is this the right place?" someone asked.

"Yeah, we're here for the orgy?" said another.

Ken covered his mouth with his palm before he burst into laughter.

"E-excuse me?" Domino chuckled, his smile remaining on his face, but his eyebrows slowly tilting upward, forming a subdued look of sorrow.

"So? When do we start?" one woman inquired.

"Question!" shouted a man with round glasses and cold, glaring eyes as he raised his hand. "Will there be a vote, or will the dominants be chosen via mortal combat?"

The crowd only got louder and louder from that point on, drowning out any other sounds with their vigorous discussions.

Domino remained paralyzed in place, silent, unable to accept the reality he was currently in.

"Where are you keeping the snacks?"

"Are there scheduled bathroom breaks or can we just go whenever?"

"How long is this thing gonna take? I gotta pick up my kids from a slumber party in the morning."

Listening to them, hearing their complaints and demands like *they* were in charge—it made Domino's heart fume with scorching, rage-fueled heat. How fucking dare they? He was promised followers and acolytes! Instead, they came marching into the square with these wild impressions that they were going to participate in an open-house sex party. Having no more room left in his heart for self-control after all that happened to him, Domino shouted his lungs out at the people. "Oh my fucking *Xar!*"

The crowd went silent, staring at Domino with confused eyes.

He entwined the hair on the sides of his head between his curled, twitching fingers and pulled it like his intention was to rip it out. "Are you shitting me right now? At what point did any of us mention anything about an orgy? Please! Tell me! I will shave my fucking head if someone gives me one example of what we said that could have *possibly* made you think this was about an orgy!"

"But...you kinda look like..." one person mumbled.

"We're poor!" Domino screeched. "We only had enough givits to buy me this codpiece! Bowie's mankini was a gift from work, and Sublivion's been wearing that gimp suit since the day we met! And that was two fucking years ago!"

"Aherm," coughed Ken. "I've also kept my robes from before I joined."

"Nobody asked you!" Domino shouted in his face and swung his arms upward as he walked away.

His team followed behind, leaving the crowd of half-naked people sighing and moaning in disappointment.

"Ugh... Domino, why does it take so little to upset you this *much?*" Ken groaned. "When you finally go into cardiac arrest, for once in my life, I'll be sure it's not just your bad acting."

"I swear, if one more person talks to me—" Domino snarled through his teeth, clutching his fist tight, his arm cocking back.

Loud, swift footsteps approached.

A hooded man was running toward him from the alleyway, carrying a horribly mismatched purse. "Move, you fucking taint!" he shouted.

Like touching a worn-out trigger, it took only a mean look to provoke Domino. He swung his fist directly into the hooded man's face,

knocking him out cold. With a wide-open glare, he let out a powerful battle cry. A single tear formed in the corner of his eye.

"Shit!" Bowie gasped, looking both confused and impressed at the same time.

"I concur..." Ken commented, his eyelids drooping over his eyes halfway.

"Help me, you retards!" Domino shrieked in agony, grasping his wrist as his punching hand trembled.

Soon enough, a group of gray-skinned young women wearing short skirts and high heels came running through the alley to the edge of the square, tumbling down every other step of the way. Upon their arrival, they kicked the unconscious hooded man several times and flipped their neon-colored hair off their sweat-ridden, makeup-smudged faces.

"Oh my Xar—thanks you so mupch for your help, mistrep! I've got twenty grams of weeds in leftph in here," said one, picking up the purse from the floor, barely able to stand from the amount of alcohol her brain had been marinating in. "Hey, we were just looking for a portull! You gotta come barck with us to Zigos so Daddy can reward you for yor nicessness!"

Domino immediately stopped his whining and cocked his head up with an excited grin. "Hey—you're Balalacan, right?" he asked. "We just need a signature! We'll take *that*!"

"Nooooooo!" She giggled, waving her finger in front of Domino's unenthused face. "Daddy doesn't let me sign parchpmentps from stranagers anymore."

"Ugh...fine," groaned Domino, his skeptical glare darting around at each one of them. "But if we find out you lied so we'd get you home, we're taking your kidneys as collateral."

"Yeah! Let's get more peachkas!" one of the girls shouted.

"O-oh, Yagoda, you promised we'd go clubbing with your cousins! You totally forgot!" complained another, almost tripping over her own worn-out heels.

"Which *ones*?" Yagoda laughed as she was counting her fingers and puffing her strawberry-red hair away from her eyes. "I have, like—"

"Nobody cares!" shouted Domino.

“Just...try to keep up.” Ken sighed and proceeded to lead everyone to Kumkurda’s central portal station.

• • • •

One short teleportation later and the group appeared inside the grand, luxurious palace at the heart of the mighty city of Zigos—capital of Balalaca and the only former Kitarian colony that hadn’t been fully conquered in the times of the ancients. It was in the torch-lit throne room of Overlord Selyah Jiracha that the greatest feasts and celebrations were held—packed with giant beer-spitting fountains, gold-incrusted beer steins, lace tablecloths, and heavy wooden chairs and tables. Around the huge gold-painted oaken throne, musicians banged their drums and blew into their saxophones while a sheep-voiced middle-aged woman in tight, short metallic clothes sang about breaking shot glasses. There were masses of people dancing, drinks flying, and an infinite buffet of all the most fattening and potent foods that Balalacan people were so fond of. No foreigner was said to have ever tried their cuisine and not fallen in love with it. Most likely the reason being that those who *did* complain were never heard from again.

“Okay, listen up,” Domino told his team. “Here’s what we’ll do. We get the prize, kidnap one of the darker ones just to be safe, and take them back to Kumkurda with us to sign the contract in the morning.”

“Maybe we can ask for our reward to *be* the person we were gonna kidnap,” said Bowie.

“No,” Domino replied calmly, but with an agitated look on his face. “Free coins—the fuck’s wrong with you?”

“Yes, Domino will kill a man if it means getting a compliment, but he draws the *line* at missing out on a givit more,” said Ken.

Domino pouted his lips, glaring at him.

Soon enough, Yagoda recognized her spouse’s colossal bronze mane among the gray-skinned crowd with rainbow-fuzz-covered heads.

The man was a beast. A meter and ninety centimeters tall—bulked up like he’d been living in the woods since birth wrestling bears and kicking down trees for fun. The ground quaked as he pounded his heavy leather boots against it, with the only other thing covering his

dark-gray skin being a pair of loose black denim pants. One would think a manly figure like that would have grown out a matching beard, but it was the only part of his body that was neatly shaven.

When he was fully facing Domino and his crew's way, the first thing their eyes were drawn to was the insanely humongous jungle of pubic hair peering out of his low-hanging pants.

"Daddy!" shouted Yagoda through the crowd and ran into Overlord Selyah's bulky arms. Excited to see her husband, she devoured his lips and long, wriggling tongue like a hungry lioness.

"You girls had a good time?" Selyah chuckled.

"We did body shots and got mugged!" Yagoda exclaimed.

"These hooker guys totally saved Yagi's purse!" her friend added.

Selyah's eyes darted toward Domino and his companions. "They *did*?" he pondered, looking over the young men and their tall demon with a sly grin. "All right, sweetie cakes, you go have fun. Daddy needs to chat with the boys in private."

Yagoda dashed away, waving at Domino and his team with her back turned as she and her friends disappeared into the wild crowd. "Okay! Bye!"

Selyah and his new guests then made their way toward his chambers through a sea of hairy, sweaty bodies dancing without any semblance of grace or coordination.

"Sublivion!" Domino called out. After clapping his hands twice, he let Sublivion pick him up and place him on his shoulders before proceeding.

Meanwhile, Ken was just trying to make it to the other room unmolested. He was desperate to keep close to his teammates, but the Balalacan women were constantly dragging him down, groping and catcalling him every step of the way. Not even his furious expression discouraged them.

"Please stop," growled Ken. "This is why I condone violence against *all* genders."

"Brother, you are *cold*!" Selyah laughed. "Come on—the ladies just want a little love!"

"I apologize, Your...Overlordship...but I'd prefer to save my love for someone with whom I have a little more in common," Ken replied.

Selyah burst into laughter once again, his thundering voice overshadowing even the music.

It took a while for the five men to push their way through the crowd, but it only made the relief that much sweeter once they entered Selyah's personal chambers.

It was surprisingly dark and gloomy, unlike the throne room. In the middle stood a large stone fireplace, serving as the sole source of light. There were two wooden tables full of books and, between them, a giant armchair with gilded ram horns protruding from the top. The walls were covered with stuffed bovine, ovine, caprine, and cervid heads of varying shapes and sizes. Their gilded horns shone, and their glass eyes glistened in the glow of the dancing flames that made the wood in the fireplace crackle.

"Pardon me, Overlord, but we'd just like to take our prize and be on our way, if you don't mind," said Ken. "If you intend to invite us to join in the festivities later, I'm afraid we will have to decline."

"Good. We can skip the small talk, then." Selyah sighed in agitation as he sat into the abnormally large armchair. "I've got too many kids, and they all technically have the right to inherit the throne. I'm afraid they'll start...cutting up the competition, if you get what I'm saying. I need to get rid of them, and that's where you come in."

"Our prize is a child slave?" Domino groaned and hopped off Sublivion's back. "*Ken* can barely keep up with my choreography, and he's *built* for that shit!"

"It's true. It's too demeaning," Ken added. "Of course, by that I mean it's embarrassingly graceless and crude."

"Fuck you!" Domino hissed.

Selyah banged his fist against the armrest, raising the volume of his voice. "Your 'prize' is a twenty-one-year-old fully grown adult who sits in his room all day jerking off, lifting weights, and making his guitar shriek at five in the afternoon."

The young men responded with blank, slightly frightened stares.

"Starabey!" Selyah yelled, making even the stuffed animal heads on the walls shake.

In a few moments, through the beastly wooden door came in a broad-shouldered, athletically built young man with gray skin. His hair was

long, abundant, and frizzy—an electric-blue color so bright it almost looked like a cheap wig. He stared at Domino and his posse with drowsy amber eyes and was adorned with only a pair of thick harem pants.

“Say hello to our guests, Bey,” ordered Selyah.

“I...thought you said I don’t have to do it if I don’t make eye contact,” he replied with an airheaded, puzzled gaze.

Selyah smirked. “You’re moving out. These boys have come to take you with them.”

“Okay, but...uh...” mumbled Starabey, his eyes darting around the room from discomfort. He let out a light sigh and mustered up the courage to look into Selyah’s eyes. “I’m...uh...not one hundred percent sure how sex dungeons work...”

“Ugh!” Domino groaned at the top of his lungs, leaning his head back and pulling down the skin on his cheeks. “We’re just poor!”

“Domino, we’re strippers,” Ken argued, rubbing the side of his head with his fingertips. “We wear even *less* at work. Why does this bother you so much?”

However, Domino refused to grace him with a reply.

“Jai morphjati noshjiti crnghjo odhjelo jer jai bihti rujghno,” said Sublivion.

Starabey turned to Domino and the rest, his eyebrows cocked up in awe and confusion. “Um...”

“He can understand Kitarian, but he can’t really speak it,” Bowie elaborated.

“Yeah—we mostly just try to guess what he’s saying or ask him to pantomime,” said Domino.

“Jai moghjiti naughjiti...gosphjodar,” Sublivion added, turning to Domino as he spoke.

Starabey stared at the young men and the demon, his expression showing nothing but fear and uncertainty.

“By the way, I’m Domino,” said the blond with a snobbish grin and pushed his ponytail over his shoulder and onto his chest. “Heir to the Enviedhieri family estate, star performer at Cazzo Grande, Buonarroti High School honors graduate, master of the fourth elemental horseman.”

"Ken." He bowed his ink-haired head, still keeping on a cynical frown. "Seer of bullshit. Prophet of imbecile stunt outcomes."

The ginger smiled and waved. "I'm Bowie."

"Oh, yeah, and that's my elemental horseman," Domino explained, "Sublivion."

The demon nodded.

"Your father has spoken of your...extraordinary musical talents," Ken told Starabey, a light smile curling onto his lips. "But I think you lack entrepreneurial spirit. Domino is quite the expert in the field of business and management. If anyone can make you succeed above such cutthroat competition the music industry is notorious for, it's him."

Domino's eyes opened wide, twinkling like crystal clusters in sunlight. He looked at Ken, dazed but deeply, warmly, sincerely touched by his words.

And like a slug, a light smile slowly crawled its way onto Starabey's face.

"Go pack your things," ordered Selyah. "The rest of you can go with him. Sleep wherever. Whenever. Just be gone by this time tomorrow."

With a graceful "thank you" from Ken, indifference from Bowie, and a proud heel-turn from Domino, they took their leave with Prince Starabey guiding them back to his room.

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While walking through the tight hallways with boarded walls full of family portraits and lit torches, Bowie and Domino flocked around Starabey with inquisitive looks in their eyes.

"Hey—why do you Balalacans love showing off your huge pubes so much?" asked Domino.

"Oh my Xar..." Ken groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Um...most of us just...find it attractive...I guess," Starabey explained, averting his gaze. "The first humans were really hairy—to have stronger body odor, for one thing. It's...kind of how they'd pick their partners. And we're...um...we're technically their closest descendants."

Ken smirked at him. "Well...despite your copious amounts of alcohol intake, I see your people are not *nearly* as dimwitted as one might

suspect. Brute strength, boldness, *and* intellect. It's no wonder Emperor Helis never managed to conquer all of your villages."

Starabey returned a light smile for a brief moment. "Um...thanks..." His gaze then continued to dart around the walls. "So...what do you guys do when you're *not* stripping?"

"We're on a quest to kill Zephyr Hugo," Bowie replied, smiling at him.

"Hugo?" scoffed Starabey, as if his shy, anxious demeanor from a few seconds ago had been shoved out of existence. "I hate that guy. He just walks around with his shit stick, killing anything that moves," he said. "One dumbass kid gets their arm bitten off by a rabid fox and suddenly the whole species has to be fucking exterminated."

Domino suddenly stopped without provocation, forcing everyone behind him to bump into each other. Once Starabey turned around, Domino stared at him for a few seconds, completely silent. With a firm grasp, he grabbed hold of Starabey's shoulders. "You talk like an environmentalist, feminist, atheist vegan, but I love you."

Starabey responded with an awkward smile and an unfocused gaze that darted to the side every so often. "How...did you—"

"Okay, back to your question," said Domino. "Basically, ever since I was a kid—"

"Why don't we let Bowie explain it to him?" Ken suggested. "It'll be quicker."

Domino let out an agitated sigh, crossed his arms, and rolled his eyes toward his angry brows. "Okay—fine."

Bowie pouted and squinted one eye as he was looking upward. "I think it was two years ago—"

"Also...we can keep this discussion going *and* walk at the same time," Ken added.

The group obliged.

However, Domino was now strolling down the corridor in front of Starabey, letting the only available path guide him.

"Two years ago, Domi left home because his parents didn't think he was as good or hardworking as Zephyr, and then he asked me to join him because my mom was forcing me to practice ballet every day after school against my will," Bowie elaborated, smiling casually. "After Subi and Ken came, we started pole dancing at Cazzo Grande so we could get

a place to sleep and a few givits for food. Then Zephyr showed up again and made Domi so mad, he wants to kill him now.”

“But we’re missing a key ingredient in order to receive a permit that will allow us to do so without risk of incarceration,” Ken added, glancing at Starabey from the corner of his eye. “We’re in need of someone with your...skin color...”

“Isn’t...um...murder a bit too extreme?” asked Starabey. “Don’t get me wrong—I hate Zephyr as much as anyone, but...aren’t the *parents* the real bad guys here? Why does *he* need to die?”

Domino’s walking came to an abrupt halt, inconveniencing his teammates yet again. He turned around to face Starabey with a cold glare as he exhaled through his nostrils. “Do you know what it’s like to always be trying your best? Always trying your hardest to be the perfect son, the perfect friend, and the perfect student?” Domino growled.

Ken dragged his palm down his face, rolling his eyes.

“I sacrificed my happiness to make my parents happy. When Zephyr walked into my life, everything I’d ever done, all my hard work, all those sacrifices I made...disappeared like they never even happened,” Domino continued, reciting each word as if he’d been practicing every day in front of a mirror for the past two years. “I don’t hate that self-absorbed son of a bitch because he’s better than me. I *despise* him... because he came to *my* house, walked up to *my* parents, and stood there without a word as they kept praising him like he was some kind of fucking all-powerful A-grade demon—right there in front of me!” He tried to hold in his tears and keep his lips from trembling. “He could have protected me, just like he protects everyone else every day.” A maniacal laugh escaped his lips for a brief moment as he stared at the ceiling, remembering the exact feelings, sounds, and sensations of that moment when Zephyr walked into his life for the first time. “All I wanted was for him to say, ‘Hey...Mr. and Mrs. Enviedhier...don’t push your kid to be like me. Domino’s awesome! Domino works really hard! Domino just wants you to be fucking proud of him!’” He gritted his teeth, shaking and lowering his head. “And even today, he’s *still* the bastard who’s blind to everything other than what concerns him personally.” He looked up at Starabey one more time with a sharp,

glassy glare. “*That’s* why I despise Zephyr Hugo. *That’s* why he *deserves* to die.”

For a short while, nobody made a sound. They simply observed as Domino stared furiously into Starabey’s amber eyes.

“Domi, I gotta go to the bathroom,” Bowie commented with a pain-ridden look in his eyes, swinging his leg back and forth.

After a few more seconds, Domino’s enraged frown relaxed as he turned around. He continued walking, with everyone else following behind.

Ken sighed and forced on a smile. “Domino, why don’t you tell Starabey about how you met Sublivion?”

Domino cracked a smile, slowing down his pace so as to swiftly regroup with Starabey and the others as he spoke. “Okay, you’re not gonna believe this! Some random girl with white hair just *gave* him to us! She walked up to us, asked us if we wanted him, and left! An elemental horseman! Can you believe it? A B-grade demon that can control water!” He straightened his posture and placed his hands behind his back as he continued to smile with pride. “And...you know...he obeys *me*, which technically means I could take over the whole country if I wanted to.” He flipped his golden hair—unintentionally—right into Ken’s face.

Ken just spat out any extra hair that may have gotten into his mouth and glared at Domino as if trying to push a knife through the back of his skull.

Domino chuckled. “I’m just kidding. I love President Pumpkinhead. He’s the only person who deserves praise more than me.”

Starabey shifted his gaze between Domino and Sublivion. “So, uh... *you* two are gonna fight Zephyr?”

“And me,” Bowie announced.

With a surprised yet puzzled look in his eyes, Starabey turned to him. “You’ve got magical powers, too?”

“No, but...I can hit stuff with other stuff.”

“You’ve got like a sword or something?”

“No, I just use whatever I can find lying around.”

“Oh,” said Starabey as he shifted his gaze away from him.

Suddenly, a painful realization hit Bowie, his smile slowly turning into a dazed, sad frown.

"Sublivion's got the best powers, but he's...shy..." Domino explained, looking at the ground with traces of sorrow in his eyes. "Some drunk retard at the club wanted to challenge him to a fight once. I...yelled at him when he refused, and he just...squatted down like some scared little kid..."

Sublivion's horse gimp mask tilted downward a bit.

"But we'll work on that," Domino added, his voice reverting into tones of joy and enthusiasm as he lifted his head back up. "And we'll make that asshole Zephyr lick shit off my boots when I bash them in his *face*!"

"Ugh..." Ken rolled his eyes.

"By the way, how did you manage to get to your dad's trophy room so fast?" Domino asked Starabey. "I feel like we've been walking for *hours* now."

Conveniently, they had just arrived before a heavy wooden door decorated with little golden stars and with Starabey's name painted on it.

"He was looking for a servant to fetch him something from the gardens," Ken answered.

The young men turned to Ken, their faces revealing nothing but utter confusion.

Ken's eyes darted around from one person to the next, his voice trembling. "I mean, it's...*probably* what happened...I..."

Just then, an unknown Balalacan swung the door open from the other side and leaned against the frame. He was roughly Starabey's height and had a much denser, luxuriant, lionlike mane of a radiant sunset-orange color. His irises were like two rings of shimmering bronze, and his skin was a darker shade of gray, almost like the overlord's. He had the fangs and muscles of a wild animal and enough body hair to make a fitting coat out of. His orange pubic hair reflected any and all light it caught as it peered out of his low-hanging black leather pants. The matching black boots on his feet were just heavy enough to send the heads of his enemies flying off their necks. Golden piercings covered his earlobes, and his arms were drowning in jewel-encrusted bands and rings. He even wore a big gilded belt buckle with his name on it. "Kolyatch," it read. The overlord's favorite son, named after their ancestor, Kolyatch the Unsated.

"Bey—heard you're in a gang now!" he exclaimed.

Domino gazed at him with squinting eyes, shaking his head lightly and raising part of his upper lip. "*How?*"

"I bet my horses on your fight in the coliseum tomorrow. You throw the match—we split the coins," said Kolyatch.

Starabey gave him a tired, annoyed glare. "Won't you just fuck off already?" he growled. "Stop going into my room! Why do you have to be such a massive faggot?"

Kolyatch tilted his head up, flashing Starabey a sneering grin. "Your mom thought I was pretty massive when I banged her last night."

"Guys, this is my half brother Kolyatch," said Starabey, motioning his open hand toward him. "He's gonna be the next overlord when Dad decides to retire."

"That's what *he* said—not me." Kolyatch sighed with a drowsy smile. "But you still have a chance to start kissing my ass—in case I do decide to take the job."

"Like I said, he's a massive faggot," Starabey added.

Domino leaned toward Ken with angry brows pressing down on his eyelids. "Tell him to stop," he hissed. "He's gonna fuck us all over."

"Why don't *you* tell him?" asked Ken.

Domino raised his hands to the height of his chin, curling his fingers to resemble claws as he glared at him, groaning loudly.

Ken, however, paid him no mind.

"I'll make him move if you want," said Starabey.

Domino quickly turned to him, holding out his hand with his eyes wide open from panic and agitation. "*No!*" he shouted.

Kolyatch kept still the entire time, smiling at them.

With his eyes closed in order to establish inner peace, Domino took a deep breath. "How much?"

"Just try to imagine the worth of horses bred only for the overlord's service—foals of the strongest, fastest steeds on the continent," said Kolyatch. "Twenty percent."

Domino kept silent, his subdued glare focused to the side. Twenty percent wasn't enough. They were the ones that were going to take all the beatings, and healing in Kitaria definitely wasn't cheap, even if they counted in the coins they'd received from Zephyr back at the club. He

clutched his fists, trying to subdue his anger for not being able to force himself to speak his mind. Kolyatch did have a point. And no matter the cost, Domino just couldn't bring himself to argue with anyone he didn't feel was one hundred percent in the wrong.

"Why would you bet on us to *lose*?" Ken inquired. "Everyone else will, and for good reason. Nobody is going to take us seriously dressed like this. Besides, what you see is what you get. Sublivion is powerful, but he's too timid to do anything. Domino is our last and *only* line of defense."

Kolyatch chuckled. "Oh, I know that. Don't worry—pretending to be a pussy or weirdo to get your opponent to underestimate you has become a bit of a trend these days." He slowly strolled past them without looking back, then raised his fingers and bent them back down one by one as he counted. "Going once. Going twice..."

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To this day, Balalaca, the partial ex-colony of Kitaria, still upheld the traditions of old by hosting numerous fighting matches between any two souls looking for a quick route toward fame and fortune in one of the most well-preserved replicas of the mighty coliseum in Kumkurda. While the Kitarians now used their own coliseum as a mere tourist attraction, Prince Kolyatch, like many other Balalacans, sought to make thousands upon thousands of givits by betting on the brawlers that would come do battle in its sister structure situated just outside of Zigos, surrounded by a stretch of flat plains.

Every day, masses of citizens would come to watch brawl-hungry humans and demons alike fight each other. The place was almost always packed with audiences demanding entertainment. Their cheers and screams were heard even underneath the ground, where the fighters awaited their turn to butt heads.

The stone walls were damp, the lights coming off the lit torches were fairly dim, and there was barely any room on the wooden benches.

While the other contestants were shouting and swearing at each other, Domino and his crew waited to be called for by the overseers walking

around and keeping the brawlers from starting a fight before the good people of Zigos had a chance to witness it.

Sublivion was down on his hands and knees as was requested of him, so Domino could sit atop his back.

Domino brushed his fingers through his hair, crossing and uncrossing his legs.

Ken was resting against the cold wall with Bowie.

Starabey, on the other hand, passed the time by admiring his outfit that he'd changed into that morning.

He sported glittery leather tights that were as golden as they were constricting. However, their rise was kept low, showing off his dense electric-blue bundle of pubic hair. He looked like he could run a marathon with those thick, strong legs of his—even in those giant gold boots with buckles and undersides that were almost ten centimeters thick.

Domino hopped off Sublivion's back and clapped his hands. "Okay, guys, quick note—try to at least make yourselves bleed a bit and pretend you broke something so we can get a free stay with food at the healer's," he said.

"Um...only winners get healed by the coliseum's healers," Starabey added, his eyes wandering.

Domino's lips ceased moving as his eyes were forced open by anger and shock.

The commentator's voice sounded from above. "Welcome, one and all! Thank you for joining us for yet another spectacular event here at the coliseum!"

"You're up," said one of the overseers in heavy leather armor as he passed Domino and his companions.

One by one, they exited and followed him up the narrow spiral staircase, squinting their eyes as the sunlight hit them.

The crowds were cheering. Their voices echoed all the way to Zigos.

"And now, witness one brave warrior as he takes on five adversaries all at once! The bold, the deadly, the un—" The commentator suddenly went silent for a moment. "Hey, you! Down there! I haven't announced you yet!" he shouted.

"And I'll die before you do!" Ken yelled back.

"Hi, doggy!" Bowie exclaimed, waving at one of the dogs among the crowd of spectators in the seating areas surrounding the arena.

The commentator's voice jumped up a pitch as he continued to speak. "No! No—that's not how this works! Go back and walk out *after* I announce you!"

"Kumkurda's coliseum has gates for that shit!" Domino shouted.

"*You* built this coliseum when you conquered over half our nation, you cunts!"

"Oh, lick my dick! Emperor Helis freed you later!" argued Domino.

"Um...actually...we *did* have gates," Starabey explained. "We just had to take them down one hundred years ago so more people could fit for the parties at night."

"What'd he say?" yelled the commentator.

"Start the fight already!" the crowd roared. "Come on! Fight!"

"Nobody fights until I do the announcements!" the commentator screamed and pointed at Domino and his team. "You five, go back inside and wait until I call your names!"

"Fuck your mother—start the fight!" shouted a woman from the audience as she threw a beer stein the commentator's way.

"You better not fucking make me come up there!" one person yelled while pointing a blade at him.

The commentator begrudgingly whispered, "Corboir Biselune will now fight the condescending douchebags..."

The crowd rejoiced once more, scaring off all and any woodland creatures that may have been scampering around the coliseum.

A light-lavender-skinned warrior made his way onto the battlefield. His stature was menacing, his expression serene and fearless. His body was lean and muscular, and the baldness of his head shone under the sun's rays. His scleras were as black as the void, and like his glowing irises, he had a pearly-white lace choker around his neck and two similar bracelets around his wrists. He wore black tuxedo pants and red suspenders to hold them in place, while his feet were adorned with a pair of slick, pointy black shoes.

Sublivion kept turning his head left and right as if he were a dazed animal.

The others simply stared curiously at their opponent.

“Okay, how do we do this? Do we just flip a coin and see who goes first or—” Domino asked the purple-skinned man.

“I would sever you before the coin landed on the back of your palm,” Corboir threatened him, his light Phranisian accent and manly voice giving his words an extra dash of malevolence. “Tell your companions to stay out of my way. I’m only here for you, Enviedhieri.”

“Hear that, Ken?” Domino looked back and grinned his way. “He’s only here for *me*.”

Ken smiled with his hand on his chest. “Bless his heart.”

“Do we...start hitting each other?” Starabey asked.

In less than a moment, Corboir lunged toward Domino like a panther.

While everyone else moved out of the way, Sublivion sprung into action, tackling Domino before the enemy could get to him.

Corboir missed his target and scratched the dirt upon landing behind his opponents. His expression remained cold and focused the entire time.

As Sublivion’s and Domino’s embraced bodies hit the ground, they were enveloped by a glowing pink-and-mint-green glittery cocoon. It wriggled and pulsated as everyone watched with eager anticipation. After a few moments, it opened up like a flower and disappeared, revealing an unfamiliar creature in its place.

He had Domino’s face, stature, hairstyle, and clothes, but the colors of his body and hair were mint green. His irises transformed into a slew of pink-and-mint swirls. His fingers became bone-slicing claws and his ears like those of horses. The creature turned around and gave Corboir a ghastly grin, revealing two rows of flesh-tearing fangs. He stared back into Corboir’s fearless eyes—smiling. With a deep phantasmic voice, he said, “Pochivajti u mirghj.”

Chapter Three

Friendship Is Tragic

Bowie, Ken, and Starabey kept their unblinking gazes focused on Domino and Sublivion's fusion.

The fusion stared down at his lavender-skinned opponent, Corboir, with eyes wide open and an even wider smile to match.

But Corboir didn't let himself be distracted by the unyielding stare. He slid one foot back and held his fists up in level with his face.

But strangely enough, instead of lunging at Corboir and ripping his body apart with his claws, the fusion dropped onto the floor, his body twitching and grinding against the group uncontrollably. He curled up into a ball and arched his back while digging his claws into his own scalp. He shrieked like an entrapped animal with a broken spine, begging for the sweet release of death with his screams. Then his tone then unexpectedly changed into gasps of pleasure without warning. "Gosphjodar..." the fusion moaned as he lay. He was stroking and embracing his body one minute and clutching his stomach in discomfort the next. "Sh-shit! I...can't—!"

However, Corboir held his ground, switching focus between the fusion and the rest of his adversaries.

"Why does it always look so easy when he does it?" Bowie asked.

"Not his subtlest performance," Ken added, raising an eyebrow above his unimpressed stare, "but holding out his hand toward us is a nice touch."

"Help...me...!" hissed the fusion.

Corboir's lips trembled. His facade of strength was decaying. "You miserable coward, leave him out of this!" he shouted.

"It's over," Ken argued. "Just do *us* now so we can call it a day."

"I'm gonna..." the fusion moaned, as if holding back a sneeze. Finally, he let out a wailing, ghastly cry that echoed throughout the coliseum.

A gigantic wave of water was released from the fusion's body and swept away the four other men, flooding the entire arena. The wave crashed against the walls and overflowed the coliseum before the impact forced much of the stone to come crumbling down. Large pieces of rubble flowed across the plains with the water, collecting the wriggling bodies of the masses of spectators like ants along the way.

Despite having sustained a few injuries, the able spectators kept scouting the area, passing by all the wounded and unconscious.

Kolyatch held his own in the disaster and walked off his minor wounds as he searched the drenched field.

Upon seeing Ken raise his head in the midst of the crowd trudging their way around, Kolyatch dragged himself over to him and kicked him back down into the dirt.

Corboir thus ended up being the first to pull himself out of the mud and stand up.

"Corboir Biselune wins the match!" shouted the commentator as he floated by on a small wooden raft in the shallow parts of the now largest local pond.

Corboir's eyes searched around the area and soon caught sight of Domino and Sublivion lying unconscious on the only small speck of land that was left of the arena, surrounded by a large body of water like a lonely island at sea. He swam over to them and immediately started looking over Domino's limbs and the surface of his skin. The longer he searched, the more his glare turned into a frightened, hopeless gaze. "*How?*" he muttered. "*It has to be there!*" Soon enough, he groaned in agitation before diving back into the water as part of his tactical retreat.

Bowie climbed onto the little island and approached Domino's and Sublivion's motionless bodies with a confused grimace on his face. "Are you sleeping?" he asked as he knelt beside them.

"I was watching you guys. Though, I'm not exactly sure what I saw anymore. Then I pretended I was unconscious while that purple retard felt me up," Domino explained while continuing to rest his eyes. He then sat up like his muscles could barely hold their own weight. "Ugh... I had the fucking weirdest dream," he said. "I feel like I was fucked by

an ivory tower. I was calling out to you guys for help, but—" He turned to Bowie, glaring at him with squinting eyes.

Bowie looked back at him with a puzzled gaze.

"And you didn't do *shit*!" Domino yelled out. "I was in so much pain, begging for help, and you just *stood* there!"

Bowie shrugged. "Why didn't you just say you weren't acting?"

"*Sublivion*!" Domino gasped, turning around and rushing to aid his fallen minion. "Sublivion! Are you okay? A-are you breathing?"

With a nod, Sublivion pushed himself off the ground and onto his feet.

"So, what happened out there?" Bowie asked. "When Sublivion jumped on you, it looked like your bodies got fused into one."

Domino crossed his arms and paced in a circle. "I remember being turned on for some reason, but it was really uncomfortable at the same time," he explained. "I felt like me, but sometimes, I did and thought things that didn't feel like they came *from* me." Excitement suddenly rushed through his body. He turned to face Bowie with a wide smile. "But I could speak fluent Deghmonghnjichki! It was like I've always known it, and I've never opened a Deghmonghnjichki dictionary in my life!" Suddenly, upon remembering the events that followed, his lips drooped into a confused and annoyed frown. "Well...the last thing I remember is just a really painful orgasm." He sighed.

Soon enough, seemingly out of nowhere, a hooded man floated by on an elongated piece of wood near the small patch of dry land Bowie, Domino, and Sublivion had been sitting on. He wore plush red robes with a black coin pouch tied around his waist and white fur sewn onto the edges of his hood and sleeves. The only traces of dampness were on the parts of his robes that had nowhere to go but float on the surface of the water as he used his hands to row. With his clawed white hands, he took off his hood, revealing big, lightly curved, white ramlike horns; pearly white skin; a face with no nose; eyes with pitch-black scleras; and glowing white irises. "Hey, there!" He waved at the young men with a bright smile.

Bowie waved back, a light grin trying to fight off the confusion on his face.

"I'm looking for a buddy of mine—black hair, resting bitch face, can see through time, has constant headaches..."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! You know a *prophet*?" Domino exclaimed. "Where did you find him? Does he charge per hour?"

"He should be around here somewhere. Wanna help me look?"

"Yes! Let's go right now!" Domino replied. He then turned to Sublivion. "Hey, could you lie down on your back, please?"

Sublivion did as he was told.

"Everybody sit on Sublivion. He's gonna be our pretend boat," said Domino.

Once everyone was sitting uncomfortably on his muscular torso and crotch, Sublivion crab-walked his way off the shore. He used his magica to manipulate the water beneath him as he lay on the surface and make it act like solid matter that moved his body across while also keeping him from sinking.

"By the way, I'm Domino," said the blond-haired youth. "That's Bowie, and this is Sublivion. He's a B-grade elemental horseman." He pointed to the ginger, and the demon they were all sitting on top of.

Bowie nodded back in response.

"Nice to meet you," said the white-skinned stranger. "I'm Porthos."

"Hey, I think I saw you somewhere before..." Bowie told Porthos as he inspected his face and horns. Then suddenly, he gasped loudly, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "Oh my Xar—are you—"

"Yes, I *am* that Porthos," he said. "Former imperial advisor of the late Emperor Helis."

"Shut the fuck up!" Domino barked, his eyelids stretching open and his mouth gaping as he stared at Porthos. "I fucking played you in my elementary school play! *The Master of Flames and the Siren Slave!*"

"Why not the head overseer of the harem? His name was Domino, too," Porthos replied.

"Well...originally, I wanted to play the empress, but they decided to give me the role with the most talking because I was the only kid there who could remember so much text," Domino explained. "Hey, did you know the empress and the head overseer were actually my *ancestors*? I'm an *Enviedhier*!"

"Really? No way!" Porthos exclaimed.

Domino's face and voice were giddy with excitement. "Yeah, I know!" He took a deep breath so as to calm himself a bit. "Wow...I—I mean...I can't believe you're even still *alive*!"

"Why not? Lots of *demons* are. They can live up to five thousand *years*," Porthos elaborated.

"Oh—sorry. I forgot you guys were like—mega tortoises of life expectancy," said Domino, chuckling.

"So, what are you doing here?" asked Porthos. "I thought the Enviedhieris lived in Kumkurda."

"We do," answered Domino, "but right now, I'm working on killing Zephyr Hugo. I gotta get a brawling permit, and then I have to somehow make my *magica* stronger..." However, Domino ceased speaking after that, for he'd spotted a very angry Kolyatch waiting on the shore.

His eyebrows alone looked like they wanted to eat Domino and his companions alive. He was holding up Ken and Starabey by their hair as their knees were still touching the ground.

"Left!" Domino commanded.

Sublivion's body slowly turned in the desired direction, but back on the shore, Kolyatch took a few long steps to the right to meet them head-on.

"Right!" Domino barked.

Sublivion obeyed the command, but Kolyatch was still determined to match their approximate landing spot while keeping his eyes locked on them the entire time.

Domino paused to contemplate his next move. "Left!" he repeated, and Sublivion obeyed.

Once they came ashore, they were met with Kolyatch's fiery, soul-tearing glare. "You assholes are fucking lucky I was here," he growled as he threw Ken into the mud. "Since this motherfucker almost cost me my horses, I'll be keeping your cut. Good riddance." He tossed Starabey onto the ground as well and walked away toward the main road that would lead him back to the overlord's palace in Zigos.

Once Domino was confident that Kolyatch was far enough away as to not hear him, he channeled all of his power into his leg and kicked the

mud beneath as he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Oh my fucking Xar!"

The others flinched from the sound of Domino's shriek piercing their eardrums.

"This isn't fair! We had a deal!" he yelled, walking around in a circle, thinking out loud and waving his arms. "We fucking had a deal!" He stopped, gripped his hair, and pulled it like he was trying to rip it from his scalp. "Uuuuuuuugh!"

Nobody said a word. They just observed Domino's tantrum.

After a few moments passed, Domino sighed and calmed himself. "We can kiss those coins goodbye now." He turned to his crew to explain. "You mess with one Balalacan, ten more will come to beat the shit out of you."

"Yeah...we take care of our own," added Starabey as he and Ken were brushing the mud off their clothes.

"Oh, by the way, this is my friend—the one I was looking for," said Porthos, smiling as he pointed at Ken.

Ken gazed at him with a puzzled look in his eyes "Porthos?"

"Yep!" he replied. "Sorry, people aren't used to seeing me in these types of clothes anymore."

"Wait...Ken's the prophet?" Domino shouted, juggling his heart in his throat. He grabbed Ken by the shoulders and shook him. "Why didn't you say anything? That's *incredible!*"

"I didn't think it was relevant," said Ken, glaring at Domino until he stopped shaking him. He sighed. "But I suppose I am something like that. I wouldn't say I'm particularly good at it, though."

"Listen, guys, why don't we all head back to my place?" Porthos interjected. "I'd hate to leave the dirt to dry on your clothes like this."

"Really?" Domino exclaimed, his eyes darting between his teammates before looking back at Porthos. "*Thanks!*"

"Yeah, um...thank you," Starabey added, a light smile curling up on his face.

Porthos fanned his palm up and down. "Oh, don't sweat it," he said. "Just doing my job!"

And so, with Porthos leading the way, the group headed back to the city of Zigos and took the closest portal back to Kitaria.

• • • •

In the outskirts of Kumkurda, Porthos led Domino and his team to a stone cottage surrounded by a small number of trees. He stood in front of the red door, searching through his pockets for the key.

Ken rolled his eyes and made an annoyed grimace. He massaged the side of his head with his fingers. "Inner pocket. Left side."

"Oh—thanks!" Porthos exclaimed. Once he found the key, he opened the door for his guests.

They found themselves in a cozy living room filled with a variety of valuable historic artifacts, raw crystals, and tomes and scrolls that were overflowing every single one of Porthos's bookcases. The furniture wasn't as high-end as, say, one would find in the estate of a wealthy family such as Domino's, but it certainly looked refined enough—made of long, swirly, mountain-sheep wool and dark cherrywood crafted by an affordable but reliable Kumkurdan carpenter.

While Bowie was strolling around the room and looking over all the treasures, Porthos rushed over to him. "Hey, can I ask you for a huge favor?" he pleaded.

Bowie shrugged, his puzzled gaze fixated on Porthos. "Sure—I guess."

"Could you please go out back and pick all the berries you can find? I'm gonna make smoothies!"

"It's okay." Bowie chuckled. "You don't have to bribe me—I said I would help out already."

"Great!" said Porthos. "Thank you!"

Bowie then took his leave through the front door.

Meanwhile, Starabey stood next to Sublivion by the door in complete silence, shifting from one leg to another. Occasionally, he'd glance up at Sublivion with a curious look in his eyes.

"Okay, make yourselves at home. I'm gonna go get you guys some robes to change into," Porthos told them and strolled into one of the other rooms.

Once Porthos was out of sight, Domino rushed over to Ken, grinning in his face. "So, can you predict some stuff for me now?" he asked. "Will I become better than Zephyr at everything and earn over one thousand

givits a month as a self-employed entrepreneur while having dinner with President Pumpkinhead every other weekend?"

Ken's eyes rolled back as deep into his skull as possible, revealing the underbelly of his scleras. He shut his eyelids and huffed out a hot breath of air through his nostrils. "I can barely control it," he told Domino, opening his eyes to glare at him. "And even if I could, I can only see the *near* past, present, and future."

"Okay, so...would you, for example, be able to tell which hand I'll raise up now?"

"I can't predict the results of every single possible circumstance. That's not how it works," argued Ken and sat on one of the armchairs. "I can only see what will happen in the *current* timeline."

"There's more than one timeline?" asked Domino.

"Yes," Ken grumbled. He slapped his lap with his palms and spread his arms in frustration, shrugging. "Maybe. I don't know."

Back by the entrance, Starabey kept raising his hand and putting it down, as if asking for permission to speak but then changing his mind.

"Look... Even when I do see something that will happen, the smallest change of events could steer the future in a completely different direction and I would be seeing something else the next time a vision of that time and place came to me."

"Hmm..." Domino stared at the floor in contemplation. "I guess. Even just learning about the future could change its course." His lips then transformed into a confused, agitated frown as he looked up at Ken with a suspicious glare. "But...why didn't you say anything *before*?"

"I didn't think you were ready to learn the truth. I'm still afraid you'll force me to make predictions and screw us all. People most often meet their destiny on the path they take to avoid it."

"I hope you understand how incredibly *convenient* your answer sounds right now," argued Domino. "How do you expect us to trust you now? This is a huge fucking deal!"

Ken groaned and hunched his back over so that he faced the ground between his legs, digging his fingernails into the sides of his head. "You don't understand," he growled through his teeth.

"I mean...I thought we were supposed to be in this *together*," said Domino, his tone echoing sorrow and disappointment.

Ken tilted his chin up and stared at Domino with furious brows. "Everything I did, I did it for *your* sake."

Without another word, Domino turned his head to the side with sharp, angular eyebrows forming wrinkles on his forehead.

"I just realized I'm not supposed to let you change out of your old clothes yet," said Porthos, chuckling as he returned to the living room.

Starabey turned to Porthos, gazing at him with a fearful and confused grimace.

Porthos looked at both Ken and Domino respectively. "Come on, don't be so gloomy!" he said and gave Domino a light, friendly shake when he approached him from behind. "You wanna talk about it?"

"It's fine," Domino replied. He took a deep breath and forced a smile onto his lips.

"Hey—you know what'll cheer you up?" added Porthos, turning Domino around by his shoulders to face him. "How about I teach you some advanced stuff about anima and magica?"

Domino's eyes opened wide. "Wait—really?"

"Yeah! Why not?" Porthos exclaimed. He sat down on the sofa, placing his hands behind his head and crossing his legs. "I've got some time to waste until tomorrow anyway."

"But...didn't you say you needed *Ken*?" Domino asked. "Why would you want to help *me*?"

"You said you wanted to make your magica stronger, right? I needed to find Ken to talk to him about something in person, but I'd still be *more* than happy to help you while I'm here."

Soon enough, Bowie returned inside with his hands cupping a whole bunch of berries of different sorts after Starabey opened the door for him. "Got 'em."

"Awesome! Thank you!" Porthos told him, smiling as he sat up. "Oh! Actually, I wanted to ask if you could do me one more favor."

"Sure—no problem," said Bowie, placing the berries onto the nearby dining table in a pile.

"Ugh...I'll go find a bowl..." Domino groaned while glaring into empty space.

"Oh, come on," said Porthos, flapping his hand at him. "Just leave it. Don't worry about it."

"No, no, it's fine," Domino assured him with an annoyed sigh as he searched the cupboards around the room.

"Um...do you need some help with that?" asked Starabey, reluctantly holding out his arm toward him.

"It's okay. I'll take care of it," Domino told him.

Porthos turned back to Bowie. "Anyways—could you please go to town and buy some rainbow sprinkles?" he asked, handing him his coin pouch. "Oh, and please send a message if there's something super interesting going on."

Bowie nodded and walked back toward the front door with the coin pouch grasped firmly in his hand just as Domino was heading toward the dining table with an empty bowl.

"I think I'll go meditate out back for a while," said Ken as he made his way into the hallway. "I wouldn't want to get in the way of Domino's training."

Domino shot a spiteful glare Ken's way as he passed him.

And just before Bowie left the cottage, Starabey approached the ginger-haired youth. "Hey, um...would you mind if I tagged along?"

"If you want," Bowie replied with a light shrug and smile.

The two exited the cottage together, leaving Domino to scoop up the berries and place them into the bowl he'd found.

• • • •

Just like any other day, Kumkurda was crawling with merchants and eager shoppers looking to snatch some exotic produce and trinkets. The sun's rays were at full blast. There was no escape from the wave upon wave of chatter lingering in the air. But, that day, something was different.

Bowie and Starabey arrived at the main square at a slow, carefree pace.

For one, Bowie noticed a lack of inquisitive eyes staring at him. He let his gaze wander, seeing an unusual increase in people dressed like battle-ready brawlers.

Menacing and heroic figures alike strolled across the square, whispering to the merchants—some browsing their wares, some sneaking into their tents. They wore everything one could have possibly

imagined—from feathered hats and water fountains on shoulder pads to giant spiked stomping boots and flamethrower codpieces.

A man covered in a metal suit of armor passed by with a small, pudgy dog by his side.

“Hi, doggy!” Bowie exclaimed, waving at the dog. He then turned to Starabey with a casual smile. “Could you tie this onto your pants?” he asked as he held out Porthos’s coin pouch in front of him. “I’m not wearing any.”

“Oh—um...yeah, sure,” Starabey replied in a bumbling tone and wrapped the string of the pouch onto one of the belt loops on his waist.

Suddenly, someone called out to them from within the sea of people. “Hey! Guy with the blue mane!”

They turned around and searched for the origin of the voice. Sure enough, they noticed a demon that looked like he was half man, half lizard shouting and waving at them from behind one of the booth counters.

“Over here, mate!” he shouted.

Bowie approached him from across the square, with Starabey following behind at a slower, more cautious pace.

“Good thing you came to me first,” said the merchant in a friendly yet raspy and sly voice reminiscent of the settlers of the southern continent. “You wouldn’t *believe* the vultures out there trying to sell all that cheap shit to our boys.” He leaned onto a wooden counter, grinning at the two. “Whaddaya buyin’? Got some rare things on sale today.”

“Depends. What are you selling?” asked Bowie.

“I think I’ve got somethin’ that might interest ya,” said the merchant. He leaned forward, his eyes slowly glancing left and right. “Follow me,” he added and retreated inside the tent behind the counter.

Starabey and Bowie followed shortly after.

Inside was a whole bazaar filled with the sharpest, shiniest, top-of-the-line weaponry. There were hammers with horns of giant flying reptiles forged onto them, swords made of metal that were mined from fallen meteorites, and daggers made of the teeth of colossal Hydras.

It was unlike anything Bowie had ever seen in the marketplace. His heart raced with excitement, and his smile grew wider and wider as he looked around. Why was the merchant keeping his stuff hidden? It

wasn't illegal to sell weapons. Not even the ones made of dead animal body parts. Poaching was not a problem with the monsters whose bones those weapons were made of. In fact, more people probably died trying to kill *them*. This guy was truly something. You'd usually find a merchant with one or two fancy things, but he had it *all*. "How come you don't display this stuff outside? Wouldn't you earn more coins that way?" asked Bowie as he strolled through the tent.

"Not everyone can pay for my beauties. I choose my own customers and invite them inside so I can help them find what they're looking for in a nice, relaxed environment," the merchant replied, sitting on a chair next to a small coffee table and resting his feet on it. "Let's see...you blokes are both nobles looking for some excitement—didn't really outgrow your rebellious phase. Am I doing good so far?"

Bowie's amazed and inquisitive eyes opened wider as he gazed at the merchant. "How did you know?"

"The way you talked," he said. "You sounded too sincere to have been in the game long. I would have probably believed *you* were an urchin if you hadn't said anything, but your Balalacan friend is far too well dressed. And let me guess...your parents mistreated you and now you wanna become official brawlers so you can legally kill them."

"Close," Bowie added with a light smirk. "I'm a runaway. Bey's dad just gave him away because he has too many kids already."

"Ah." The merchant nodded. "Well, either way, I'm sure you've got your ways of getting the coins from your parents. Especially since now we know they'd deserve to have them disappear in the middle of the night—am I right?" He chuckled. "Well...feel free to browse. Take as long as you like or longer. You can't rush these things, ya know? The best brawlers pick and treat their weapons like their women. Be rough, be bold, but you respect her like the A-grade demoness that she is." He banged his fist against the table and leaned back into his chair. "When us demons merge together to become more powerful, it only works if we show each other trust and respect. Same goes for your weapon. You remember what I told you here today, mate."

Bowie nodded and he and Starabey continued to look over the wares, admiring the craftsmen's attention to detail.

One particular item attracted Starabey's eyes. Long, fretted, lightning-bolt-shaped neck; six metal strings and knobs on the head, along with a big, round button; and a body that was shaped like a fat arrowhead and coated with shimmering silver lacquer. Attached to it was a bulky guitar pick, just waiting to be abused.

Starabey's hands shook and his mouth watered.

"You like?" sneered the merchant as he approached him and placed his arm around him. "You could wield thunder with this sheila as good as a C-grade demon *easily*," he explained while pointing at the guitar's key components. "Just strum through the strings to generate electricity, then push the button to shoot it out like lightning." He then stroked the guitar and gently ran his fingers over its strings. "She's a piece of art in and of itself. You can only use a special type of pick." He tapped the guitar pick with one knuckle. "The tip is metal, but the base is made of rubber so there's less chance you end up accidentally frying yourself."

"How much?" asked Starabey, his eyes unblinking.

"For you," said the merchant, taking a step back, "twenty-four thousand givits."

Starabey averted his gaze as a frown formed on his face. "I...don't have the coins," he mumbled.

"Come on, mate." The merchant chuckled, squeezing Starabey closer. "Your dad gave you *away*. Who the fuck does that to their kid? If he didn't want that many, he should have watched where he was aiming." He patted Starabey's back and moved the tip of his lizard maw closer to his ear. "I bet that old fucking wombat's got a shitload of coins stored away somewhere in a big, old, fancy vault. He's already kicked you out. You don't gotta worry about sucking up to him anymore, mate."

Starabey stared at the exit with eyes full of disappointment. "We should...probably—"

But before Starabey finished his sentence, Bowie grabbed a gold-embossed shovel off the wall and smacked the side of the merchant's head with it.

A loud thump that sounded like a piece of metal slamming against a cantaloupe thundered through the tent.

When Starabey turned back to see what was happening, the merchant was already lying unconscious on the ground. "Shit..." he panted,

staring back and forth between Bowie and the merchant's motionless body with a puzzled, timid look in his eyes.

"Grab it and walk out—slowly," said Bowie, his eyes strained by adrenaline.

Starabey took the electric guitar off the wall and followed Bowie out of the tent at a slow, wary pace. His stare remained completely blank while they were walking through the market, his new guitar hanging on his back off a black leather strap.

The farther they walked away from the tent, blending into the crowd, the more Bowie was at ease. Nobody seemed to suspect a thing. The outside chatter was far too loud to allow a knock on the head to overshadow it, and no one else was inside to witness the crime.

However, Starabey kept facing the ground, his now-upward-pointing eyebrows wrinkling up his forehead.

"You okay?" asked Bowie.

"Huh? Y-yeah," Starabey gulped as he faced him. "I just...I've never done anything like this. Is this what you guys do...usually?"

"Sometimes. If we have to," Bowie explained. "But we don't do it so much anymore, now that we have a job."

"I don't...really know how to feel about all this..."

"Oh—it's okay—the guests don't bother you as much as people think," Bowie smiled at him. "Domi says you just gotta let them spank you every once in a while."

"It's not that...it's..." Starabey sighed. "How am I supposed to feel about this? This whole...brawling thing? If I feel so guilty after stealing something, how am I going to be able to...kill someone?"

"Oh—Domi wants to do it himself anyway," said Bowie. "And maybe you can just try to focus on being happy about getting that guitar?"

Starabey smiled back at him. "Thanks. I...appreciate it."

Bowie's grin disappeared as he looked at Starabey all puzzled, tilting his head to the side. What was he thanking him for?

"No, no! It's amazing!" Starabey assured him. "I really love it, but...we...*stole* it..."

"Yeah," Bowie replied, his smile returning to his face, "but he's got a lot of stuff *already*. What's one shovel and a guitar to him?"

"But..." Starabey muttered.

"But nothing! With *your* strength and resolve, a weapon could make a whole *world* of difference!" said an unidentified voice.

Bowie and Starabey looked around in search of the man who'd just spoken to them.

"We need people like you to save us from the source of all despair! This country has become a breeding ground for the cotton plague!" the voice shouted. "They suffocate our children! They deny us our fundamental rights! They rape the very foundation of freedom! Death to the whites! May Xar rain down a swarm of moths upon their silky stitches!"

Starabey turned around and back.

"Little Firecrotch!" shouted the voice.

Bowie blinked in confusion.

"You! The ginger! *You* will be my champion! Use me to cut down the cold, strangling fabric that is killing our unborn and draining our coin pouches!"

Bowie looked down at the expensive, overdecorated shovel he had been holding on to all this time.

"Liberate the people! Free the ballsack! Free the nipple!" the shovel preached.

Starabey looked at Bowie with disbelief in his eyes.

"Sorry. We're not interested," said Bowie as he held up the shovel.

"There's no time! We have to find the president and *warn* him of the evil garments!" the shovel continued. "I've overheard the merchant say the picking is being held in Sirena Sposa Square today. Once the president is chosen, we have to grab his attention and make him aware of the *real* issues that burden Kitaria!"

"The...*presidential* picking?" asked Starabey.

Bowie gazed at him with a puzzled look. "Is that something interesting?"

"Well...um..." Starabey mumbled as his eyes darted around.

"Yes!" the shovel shouted, attracting Bowie and Starabey's attention. "It is only the most important event of this year!"

Bowie turned to Starabey once more. "Hey, there should be a big messenger office around here somewhere, right?"

Chapter Four

Permit to Kill

While Bowie and Starabey were off on their little adventure in Kumkurda, Domino, Sublivion, and Porthos were starting their study session off with the foundations of life on Earth itself. They sat at the dining table that now had several big, dusty books with rugged covers on it.

"Anima is pure, concentrated energy. It's life force. It's everything around us. It's the water, the earth, fire, and air... It's in humans, animals, demons, plants...even the dead," Porthos explained. "Magica is *manipulation* of anima. Special skills like time travel, super speed, control over the elements, and so on."

"I mean...I already knew that..." Domino commented.

Porthos paused, staring back at Domino with a semi-forced smile. "Oh! Oh—I'm so sorry about that. In that case, you can just tell me what you already know, and I'll go on from there."

"Okay, so...you only learn about demons and anima if you go to college for that. They didn't tell us much after the definitions and colors in high school," said Domino. "Basically, plants, animals, and most people have anima between red and yellow hues and pretty shitty magical powers because of it. All the good powers come from green to violet anima."

"You could put it like that—yeah," said Porthos with a light shrug and nod.

"Like—you could have indigo anima and maybe be a messenger—do telepathy and shit—or you could be like me and have anima the color of a burst hemorrhoid, with the power of transforming into tentacle porn

and the only useful thing you can do being the ability to have an orgy by yourself.”

Porthos’s eyes glanced to the side while he was still keeping on a smile.

“Look, I’ll show you,” said Domino. He then stared down at his chest with bored, uninspired eyes.

A glittery, translucent, tentacle-like hot-pink appendage emerged from it, wriggling around like a snake. The magical tentacle then morphed its tip into different things one after another: a hand with claws for fingers, a whip, a beer stein, a seventeen-centimeter-long dildo... Then, the tip turned into a hammer and banged against the table a few times. With the last swing, instead of clashing with the wood and creating a clacking sound like before, it passed right through the table.

As Porthos observed, slowly but surely, his smile melted away into a suppressed angry frown. “You’re...*not* joking?” Porthos inquired.

“No!” Domino barked.

“Your anima is pink. I saw it. With my *eyes*. Not to mention that I was born a demon. We literally have a sixth sense for anima. How do you think Sublivion knows which way to go even when his eyes are covered?”

“I don’t know!” Domino groaned. “You know blind people—they see better than how *most* people see!”

“Anima is not a physical *thing*. It’s *energy*. You have the power take your own life energy, concentrate it, and make it act like solid matter! Didn’t anyone ever tell you that wasn’t normal?”

“Um...no?” Domino scoffed. “Why *would* they? It’s a retarded power from retarded-red anima.”

“But it’s...pink...”

“Yeah—pink, red, same difference.”

“Pink is a hue of *violet*,” Porthos argued, glaring at Domino with his bulging black scleras and glowing white irises, tapping the tips of his clawed fingers against the table to the rhythm of his speech. “Vi-o-let!”

Domino’s eyes exploded with a glistening shine. His heart turned to stone for a moment, stopping all blood flow, until it was reanimated and pumping stronger than the hooves of stampeding horses impacting the ground.

Porthos's annoyed grimace suddenly transformed into an excited smile. "It's violet!" he exclaimed, frantically waving his arms at Domino as he stood up.

With his gaze fixated on Porthos and his jaw dangling, Domino stood up from his chair and grabbed hold of Porthos's arms from across the table. "Are you fucking with me right now?"

"No!" Porthos screeched with joy, shaking his head.

"It's violet?"

"It's violet!"

The two hopped in place with ecstatic smiles, screaming and squealing like a couple of schoolgirls.

"Oh my fucking Xar!" Domino screamed, holding his hands together and shaking them as he gazed at the ceiling. "Yes! Thank you! Yes!"

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeees!" Porthos shouted out in a deep, booming voice as his eyes rolled toward the back of his head. He then drove his forehead onto the table with massive force.

Domino immediately jumped back, his face stricken with terror and confusion and his hands held out in front of himself for protection.

Porthos looked at him once he'd swung his head back up, his smile more manic and his eyes opened wider than usual as he panted.

"What the *fuck*?" Domino screeched.

"I'm so happy for you!" Porthos yelled back.

"Okay! Stop yelling!"

"Okay!"

"Okay!"

Porthos sat back down, his facial features gradually becoming less and less exaggerated.

"Okay..." Domino sighed and sat down as well.

"I'm sorry...what were we talking about again?" Porthos inquired.

"You said my anima is violet?"

"Oh, yeah!" said Porthos while he searched through the pockets of his robes. "Hold on. I gotta check my list real quick." He took out a small parchment and read off it. "Tell H to take next week's shift. Go look for Ken around the Zigos coliseum, blah blah blah blah... *Aha!* Lesser and demonic anima—that's our next topic."

As Porthos folded the parchment and placed it back in his pocket, Domino's lips form a steep frown. "Wait," he said as he stared into blank space with a concerned gaze that grew angrier by the moment. "I'm not a demon..."

"So?"

"So...that makes my anima—"

"Lesser," Porthos added.

Domino's eyebrows tilted upward like that of a frightened, confused lamb. He looked at Porthos, unbelieving. "But...you said you were happy for me..."

"You were happy, and that made me happy, too," Porthos explained.

Domino's eyes glistened. No words escaped his trembling lips. He merely kept glaring at Porthos as his chest was pumped with fire.

"G-gosphjodar?" said Sublivion. He reached out for Domino's hand from under the table but pulled away at the last moment.

"Hey, come on." Porthos chuckled while wiping the sudden tears off his own face. "It's not so bad."

"Not so bad?" Domino yelled out, pushing down the chair behind him as he stood up. "I finally learn my anima is powerful, and it still doesn't mean shit to anyone!"

"Well...it means a lot to *you*...right?" Porthos asked him, forcing a comforting smile onto his face.

"It doesn't matter what I think!" argued Domino, beads of tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "You said it's called *lesser* anima!"

Suddenly, Porthos's expression turned grim as he stared at Domino. "You really wanna know what I think?" he growled.

Domino took a step back in surprise. His eyes opened wider but still oozed with rage.

Porthos stood up. "I think you're just *jealous* of Zephyr. That's why you wanna kill him. He's everything you're not and people love him for it."

With a relentless, blazing look, Domino continued glaring at Porthos.

"He doesn't do things just to get someone else's approval." With those words, Porthos grabbed the bowl full of berries from the table and left the room through the hallway in the back.

But before Domino could let out some steam via shouting his lungs out, out of thin air, two words made of sparkling indigo mist suddenly appeared before his eyes.

“Presidential picking?” asked Domino. “Ugh...I completely forgot about it.” He looked at the floor and rubbed his chin in contemplation. Lots of people were going to be there. Valuable things to use as blackmail. If he challenged Zephyr right then and there, he’d have no choice but to accept, permit or no permit. “He doesn’t want me to do things just for praise, huh?” He smirked as he headed toward the front door of the cottage, rubbing his teary eyes dry. “Fine,” he growled.

Sublivion followed close behind.

“But I *will* be acknowledged...” snarled Domino.

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On the metal pole in the middle of the smaller square, several Kitarians were hoisting up the Kitarian flag. It featured a light-sky-blue background, with golden flames having surrounded the white coat of arms in the middle in a circle, from the outside inward. The coat of arms resembled three round lines, one on top of the other. From top to bottom, the next line was longer than the last. Finally, each line continued downward in a straight line that curled up at the ends, like a simplistic illustration of waterfalls.

The presidential candidates were already standing atop the frugally decorated wooden stage and posing with the sacred president-picking pig for the artists in the front rows. The crowd surrounding them was huge, consisting of people from almost the entire city, and even some from other parts of Kitaria.

On the left was candidate Giovanni Melaseme, whose campfire had once accidentally killed a mosquito. From then on, he swore never to light a fire in his life again.

The man Melaseme was running against had been picked for presidency every four years since Kitaria had become a republic. He went by the name of Horatio Pumpkinhead. Like the name suggested, he had a human body but an lit, carved orange pumpkin for a head. He had two big hollowed-out eyes with two small spherical embers inside

made of orange, midnight-green, and yellow flames that moved around in the dim orange light coming from inside the pumpkin. He smiled with his wide zigzag-carved mouth as he was looking over the masses of people attending the presidential picking. His long black coat with five pairs of buttons danced with the summer breeze and covered over half of his pants of the same color. His black boots stood firm against the floor beneath, and his black leather gloves made no sound. He merely stood in silence with his hands behind his back.

Soon enough, a woman, the hostess of the event, joined the two candidates onstage. She didn't open her mouth, yet her voice was heard. "Everyone, may I please have your attention? The candidates are ready to take your questions. And, once again, remember that the pig from our famous Spessore farm will be taking the candidates' answers into account when picking Kitaria's president for the following term. All right! Let's begin!"

The first question came from a young woman in the audience, chosen by the hostess. Melaseme held himself proudly and smiled with confidence.

"Mr. Melaseme," the woman growled, "why are you so jealous of President Pumpkinhead?"

"Excuse me?" he said, chuckling.

"Yeah. I mean...obviously, you can't do a better job than him, so, why are you even here? Are you here just to make it harder for him to get picked?"

"No, of course not," replied Melaseme. "I hold Mr. Pumpkinhead in the highest regard, I assure you. However, I am deeply concerned for his moral code, or rather...the lack thereof. As I recall, just last month, he killed an innocent spider during his visit to the local children's orphanage. I'm sorry, but I cannot support a man who sleeps so peacefully after killing an innocent creature in cold blood like that. I, for one, believe *all* of Xar's creatures have an *equal* right to live. None of us have a right to make the conscious decision of who shall live or die. Not me or you or Mr. Pumpkinhead."

Heads turned toward Melaseme's opposition.

Smirking, Pumpkinhead remained standing in place. His carved-out mouth and eyes moved and warped just like they would have on any

other face, even though his head was not that of a human. He then spoke in his signature masculine voice that was warm yet somewhat threatening at the same time. "The itsy-bitsy spider...went up the water spout. Down came the rain...and washed the spider out. He was far too small to run away...in water, he was bound. He fought and twitched and swam for his life...slowly...slowly...the spider drowned."

The public's eyes were filled with dread. Tears were shed. Hearts were shattered.

"I saw the spider crawling on the table that day," he said. "I did...kill it. I killed it because I knew it was going to meet an even more agonizing death otherwise. Children are curious and carefree. They would have toyed with it, ripped out its little legs...one...by...one. I couldn't let such cruelty befall that spider. So, I killed it myself. Its death was quick and painless, I assure you." He turned his pumpkin head toward the other candidate. "What Mr. Melaseme failed to mention was that the children and I held a funeral for the spider that same day. I told them to respect all living things, no matter how big or how small." He then turned back to face the audience. "Next time I come visit, and I see another helpless creature, I'll leave it be. I trust now that the children will keep it out of harm's way and release it back into the wild."

The angry mob focused their furious glares at Mr. Melaseme.

"Go home!" yelled someone.

"You *suck*!" shouted another.

"How dare you try to make President Pumpkinhead look like a heartless monster? He is a national treasure!"

"People, *please*!" Melaseme shouted, his voice trembling. "I'm sorry! I—I didn't know!"

"Get off the stage!"

"Go fuck yourself!"

Tears formed in Melaseme's eyes as he stood there. He dropped down to his knees, grabbed the ends of Pumpkinhead's coat, and wept.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, my lord! You are right! You are *always* right!" cried Melaseme. "I was foolish to think I could be better than you! Forgive me! I have failed you! Oh, please, forgive me!"

Pumpkinhead placed his right hand upon Melaseme's head and said, "No need. You only wanted to do good by these people. And I thank you for that."

The hostess handed him a small puppy with curly fur.

Pumpkinhead then passed it to Melaseme. "Please accept this little stray as your consolation prize."

Bowie shouted from the crowd, waving his hand. "Hi, doggy!"

Men and women in the audience cried while their lips were smiling.

Melaseme stood up with his new pet in his arms, grinning softly as his face glistened from the tears.

"I guess there's no point in dragging this on any longer," announced the hostess. "The picking pig will now make its choice."

The pig moseyed around the stage, sniffing and oinking. It approached Melaseme but quickly switched its attention over to Pumpkinhead. It sniffed at his feet, then at his crotch, and then proceeded to lick his pants.

"The picking pig has spoken! Horatio Pumpkinhead wins again!"

The crowd went completely wild, cheering, screaming, whistling, and throwing their hats up in the air in celebration.

Meanwhile, Sublivion had been moving through the horde with Domino sitting atop his shoulders.

"Domi, over here!" Bowie yelled and waved at them from among the crowd.

Unfortunately, too much noise clouded the air, and Domino was unable to notice him.

Once they arrived, Sublivion helped Domino onto the wooden stage, among the hostess, the presidential candidates, and the picking pig.

Pumpkinhead's carved-out eyes suddenly widened. For a split second, his smile disappeared like vapor in the summer sun, but he quickly put on a new one.

"Wait—who the fuck is *that* guy?" asked one woman.

"What's he doing?" complained another.

As the crowd continued to calm down and whisper among themselves, Melaseme and the hostess simply stared at President Pumpkinhead like frightened sheep.

Pumpkinhead raised his hand.

The crowd went deathly silent.

"Thanks, Mr. President," said Domino, smiling at him. "I—I just wanna say...I'm a *huge* fan. Like—you're the only person I know that's one hundred percent not retarded. Congrats on winning again. You deserved it."

Pumpkinhead shook his hand. "Thank you, but I can't take *all* the credit. If you and everyone else weren't such outstanding citizens, I would have hardly done as much good as I have so far."

"Aw..." the crowd moaned.

Domino brushed his hair back, struggling to keep his lips from curling while his eyes tried to evade Pumpkinhead's dashing smile. "Um... heh...thanks..."

"What's your name?" asked Pumpkinhead.

"Domino Enviedhieri," he replied with a nod.

Pumpkinhead looked him over with his embers for eyes, smiling. "Is there something I can help you with, Domino?" he inquired.

"Yeah! Actually...would you mind if I borrow your stage for a bit?"

Pumpkinhead bowed, taking a step back. "By all means."

"Thank you very much," said Domino. He then turned around to face the crowd. "Zephyr Hugo, if you're hearing this, I challenge you to come up here and stop me and my supermassive, asshole-ripping elemental horseman from stealing the presidential picking pig!" he announced. "But, really, I'm actually doing everyone a favor! I mean, President Pumpkinhead is the best president ever! Why do you need a special pig to tell you that? If I had a daughter, I would want President Pumpkinhead to be my son-in-law! I wouldn't settle for the fucking Xar himself!"

"Preach it, brother!" someone shouted from the crowd.

"We love you, Mr. President!" a young girl yelled out.

"Um...I thought you guys didn't get your brawling permit yet," Starabey whispered to Bowie within the crowd.

Bowie shrugged. "We *didn't*."

"Oh—by the way," exclaimed Domino, "nobody make up a shitty name for us! We're still in the process of thinking of our name and logo!"

"What do I write for this week's scroll *instead*?" asked one of the reporters.

"Is it asshole ripping as in R-I-P-P-I-N-G or R-E-A-P-I-N-G?" another inquired.

"What? *No!*" Domino shouted in agitation, pointing his finger at the reporter. "I know you're doing that on purpose! We have dignity and will not stand for your bullshit!"

"I mean, you kinda *look* like ass rippers," someone commented.

"Maybe people would respect you if you didn't wear your BDSM outfits out in *public*," said another.

"No—these guys are just a bunch of assholes who wanna be 'edgy.' They're probably vanilla as fuck."

"Yeah, yeah—like vanilla ice cream, but with a ball gag around the scoop!" one reporter said, laughing.

"Shut the fuck up, Luca."

The crowd continued to chatter as Domino glared at them.

"It's gotta have a ring to it. What do posers think BDSM is?" asked one of the reporters.

"Being forced to eat vegetables?"

"Light tapping on your ass?"

"You mean: spanking?" another groaned.

"Spank..." one reporter thought out loud. "S-P-A-N-K."

"*Okay!*" Domino shouted. "We're SPANK! There! Can someone please call Zephyr over now?"

Someone from the crowd replied, "Isn't he supposed to be fighting that six-headed lizard in Gritse?"

Domino's expression turned ice cold yet was scorching with fury at the same time. He finally built up so much anger inside him that he could no longer contain it. He opened his mouth, taking a deep breath.

Suddenly, blackness.

• • • •

Inside Kumkurda's largest fortress, beneath that ground floor, were dungeon cells in which criminals had to serve their respective sentences in decently decorated rooms with neat, comfortable beds and clean toilets. They usually did so by reading, writing, painting, working out, enjoying the fresh air outdoors, and spending every single day knowing

they would never be able to decide when they would eat, shower, or sleep, nor when they would be able to perform a certain leisure activity until they were allowed to return to their normal lives as free citizens.

On the ground floor was the holding cell in which the accused were kept while awaiting judgment. The walls were made of big stone slabs, with only lit torches as a source of light on them—all except the fourth wall facing the hallway, which was just a row of metal bars. However, the fear of retribution from some of Kumkurda's strongest magicians that had been recruited into the city guard was more than enough to keep people from using their magical powers to escape.

Domino woke up from his unconsciousness with a light headache.

The cold stone against his skin was smooth as he lay on top of one of the stone blocks. The other inmates filled the room with echoes of chatter. It was like they were all trapped together in some sort of underwater cavern.

"Tai bihti dobrhjo, gosphjodar?" asked Sublivion, who'd been resting on the floor beside the block of stone Domino was lying on. As soon as Domino moved and groaned, he got onto his knees and loomed over him like a mother praying next to the bed of her sick child.

"Sublivion?" Domino mumbled, feeling up a sore spot on the back of his head as he sat up. "Are we in the guard hive?"

His minion nodded.

"Wait...weren't we at the presidential picking?" asked Domino.

Sublivion nodded again.

Bowie and Starabey soon thereafter walked down the hallway to the holding cell.

Bowie greeted Domino and Sublivion with a light smile. "Hey, guys."

"Sorry about...this," said Starabey, averting his gaze. "Bowie got a... talking shovel...and..."

"He was taking too long! I had important matters to discuss with the president!" the shovel replied, wriggling out of Bowie's grasp and levitating in front of Starabey.

"*You* hit me?" growled Domino, glaring at the shovel.

The magical shovel flew over to the cell bars. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were a friend of Little Firecrotch."

Domino's eyes squinted in confusion. He was no longer angry at the shovel—just baffled.

"I shave—I don't know why he calls me that," Bowie commented.

Moments thereafter, Domino's pupils grew twice their size.

The sound of heavy metal boots clashing with the stone floors spread through the hallway and to the holding cell.

The hairs on Domino's body straightened while he listened to the rattling of a breastplate and the song of a dancing cloak.

"Domino," said Zephyr as he approached the cell at a hurried pace, "I came as soon as I heard."

His armor was coated in sterling silver and featured a coat of arms resembling a swan spreading its wings.

"How fucking convenient," Domino scoffed. "What about me challenging you in front of the whole city? You didn't hear about *that*?"

"No, I...I'm terribly sorry. There must have been a mistake. I only received a message saying you'd been imprisoned," Zephyr explained.

Domino's face was drowning in disappointment and regret, ashamed that he was so consumed by his own pride and anger that he hadn't even thought about hiring a messenger, instead of embarrassing himself in front of the whole capital by challenging the almighty hero Zephyr Hugo, who wasn't even in the same country at the time. "I was ready to kill you," said Domino, chuckling all of a sudden. "I was seriously ready to make you eat your own balls."

"I know." Zephyr laughed and motioned one of the guards to come and release Domino and Sublivion. "I have no doubt that one day we'll settle the question of who is strongest, but I stand by my word. I won't accept your challenge until you have a brawling permit."

Once the two exited the cell, Zephyr opened up his arms to Domino with a bright smile on his face.

Domino replied by hissing at him.

Zephyr's face turned red in an instant, his chest heaving.

"Let's go, guys. We're getting our permit right *now*!" Domino ordered as he walked away with his followers close behind.

"I'll see you around, then!" Zephyr shouted after them.

In response, Domino lifted his hand up, flipping him off.

Once they were outside, the magical talking shovel floated over to Domino as the three young men and the demon walked through the crowd. “Why did you send him off? He’s a very influential person! We could have used him to spread the good word!”

“I can’t believe that fucking asshole,” Domino complained, completely ignoring the shovel’s words. “He probably thinks he’s *so* amazing just because he paid for my bail. I would have been released in a couple days *anyway*! This doesn’t change *shit*!” He lowered his head, glaring into the distance. His voice became lower and quieter. “How fucking dare he call himself a hero when he only picks and chooses to save people when *he* feels like it?”

“Attention, people of Kumkurda,” said a loud voice from afar. “As a special gift from President Pumpkinhead after having won the picking, he would like to announce that all prisoners in the guard hive charged with disruption of public peace during today’s presidential picking are to be released—effective immediately. A message in his name will be sent to the city guard hive momentarily. Thank you.”

“No,” announced Domino, huffing out air through his nose like a mad ox. He continued to walk toward the Bureau of Cockfighting Shenanigans booth in the main square. “No! I’m not gonna waste any more energy on being pissed! I don’t care! I just want my fucking permit!”

“Hey, can we pick up some rainbow sprinkles for Porthos when we’re done?” asked Bowie as he poked the back of Domino’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” barked Domino as he shook his upper body and turned his head back to glare at Bowie.

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The trees near Porthos’s cottage provided some shade for Ken, who’d been meditating underneath one of them. Sadly, it couldn’t stop the heat from seeping into his skin, no matter how still and tranquil he tried to be. But it wasn’t just the heat that had been bothering him. Ken had difficulty concentrating when all he could think about was his recent falling-out with Domino. The whistling birds in the treetops and the rustling leaves in the mild breeze—it was all an annoyance now. And his

headaches were starting to act up again. What a disgusting day it was. Then, suddenly, an image of two lavender hands enveloping his face from behind flashed before his eyes. "I thought you'd at least wait a couple more days before hunting us down," he said.

A purple-skinned man stepped out of the bushes. It was their opponent from the arena fight back in Balalaca. Corboir Biselune.

Ken turned his head toward him. "You're here for Domino, right? Sorry to say, but I'm assuming he went out, considering that I can't hear his autistic screeching anymore." He smiled and leaned back against the tree with crossed arms. "But since you're here, I'm curious to know what business you have with him."

"Let's just say he has something that he doesn't deserve. I can't be at peace until he releases it," Corboir explained, turning his head to the side and gazing into the distance.

"He stole something from you?" Ken inquired. "I'm merely asking because...I'm sure if he doesn't want it anymore, you could just go ask for it back and he'll give it to you."

"I seriously doubt that," answered Corboir while staring back at Ken. His eyebrow rose up to half the height of his forehead.

A thick silence enveloped the space between them.

Corboir turned his back to Ken completely and faced Porthos's cottage.

"We don't have to talk, but would you at least have a seat? My legs hurt just from looking at you," Ken commented.

Corboir eventually sat down in Ken's near proximity, still keeping an eye on the cottage.

The silence continued for a while longer.

"Where did you say you know Domino from?" asked Ken.

Corboir darted a cold, disinterested glare his way and went back to staring at the cottage without a word.

"Are you *sure* you wouldn't want to just ask him for the thing back?"

"By answering that question, I'd also be revealing what it is I'm looking for."

"If he knew he had something so valuable, he wouldn't be able to shut up about it." Ken chuckled. "My guess is, you're either lying, or none of us are aware of the power that thing possesses." He shrugged. "I'm just

trying to figure out whether it's something I've seen before. If I haven't, then I'm eager to know where he hid it. You've seen what he's wearing."

After receiving yet another annoyed sigh as a reply, Ken concluded it may have been time to try and use his powers to retrieve some information himself and then let Corboir take it from there. And so, Ken closed his eyes and tried to enter into a meditative state, where he would hopefully be able to summon his powers at will. He was visualizing the entire world, all that he knew of, as if time was standing still. Flashes of light kept reappearing over and over again, with barely visible visions shown to him in between. But the harder he focused on what he wanted to see, the more time there was between each flash of light, not to mention that more and more intense his headaches became. After powering through the pain, a clear vision finally came to him. A feminine hand with long white fingernails removing a metal chain off a pitch-black gleaming neck, as if it was covered in some sort of rubberlike material. "Domino's not the only person here that you know, *is he?*" said Ken, smirking and opening his eyes to see Corboir's reaction.

Corboir's brows became sharply steep.

"You're not looking for *something*," Ken continued, "but *someone*."

Corboir smiled at him and turned his head back around to stare at Porthos's cottage. "You have quite the gift," he said. "If you've managed to figure that out, then you know why I have to be aggressive. From what I've observed, Enviedhieri seeks power. And Juli—I mean... Sublivion...is one of the most powerful demons that exists, second only to the A-grade demons and third to Xar himself."

"Yes, Domino can get a bit too obsessed with his ambitions, but he's still human. He can be reasoned with...most of the time. Especially if it's about Sublivion's well-being. He might pretend he'd sell his own blood for a coin or a compliment, but he's an incredibly selfless person. So much so that...he cares for perfect strangers more than he does for himself."

"Reason can't help with matters of the heart." Corboir sighed, his expression having turned from that of concern to spite.

It was almost like Domino was sitting next to Ken instead of Corboir. Ken knew that look all too well. The look of gnawing, festering envy. Not only that, but Corboir's appearance had been bothering Ken ever

since their battle in the coliseum. He couldn't have been a human. Or at least, Ken had never heard of a human race with purple skin and black eyes with white irises. Was he a demon, then? But even so, Porthos had almost those same exact eyes, and demons were always so incredibly diverse in their physical appearances, it almost seemed there were never any two completely alike. Or at the very least, nobody ever recorded the existence of two demons with the same eyes unless they were born twins. Was there a connection, or was it just an incredibly unlikely coincidence? "You'll have to pardon me for asking...but...you don't strike me as—"

"Human?" Corboir interjected. "My humanity died a long time ago."

Ken smirked. "Oh, I wouldn't say *that*. You're here to help your friend and we're having a nice, civilized conversation. I like to think it's compassion and selflessness that make us human. I *have* to think that—I'm barely able to *function* in this body."

Corboir faced Ken with a puzzled glare.

Ken let out a relaxed sigh, contemplating whether to sacrifice his own secrets for the sake of learning his. Ultimately...what was his own secret worth anyway? He looked down at the soft green blades of grass and started to slide off the upper part of his robes.

"Ken!" shouted Porthos from the kitchen, approaching the open window. "Are you still out there?"

Upon hearing his voice, Corboir immediately jumped behind the bushes.

Ken got up and readjusted his robes in a hurry. "Why now?" he groaned while returning inside the cottage and storming into the kitchen.

Porthos waited for him with a glass of cold, milky berry smoothie, staring at him with a bright smile. "Hope I'm not bothering you," he said, handing him the glass. "Domino and Sublivion left, and I've got nothing to do while I wait."

Ken accepted the drink and took a sip. "Well, what's done is done."

Porthos leaned against the wooden counter. "You know, back when Kitaria was still an empire, I could only give out coins, food, toys, and make new clothes for people. But now, I feel like I'm making a real difference in the world!"

"I'd hardly call granting one man's selfish wish a difference," said Ken. He took another sip of the smoothie.

"If it'll make you feel better, you're not the only one whose wish is riding on this."

"It's still no excuse." Ken sighed. He smiled back at him and nodded. "But...thank you for trying."

"You feel bad about your fight with Domino, right?" Porthos inquired.

"I thought I'd distracted myself long enough to have forgotten about it, but when you mentioned his name..." Ken looked at the ceiling, trying to figure out how to convey his emotions correctly, though he was already struggling to understand them himself. "I don't know why. I shouldn't. He's just someone who happens to hold the key to my goal. I would never have tolerated him thus far otherwise." He chugged down a few bigger gulps of his smoothie as he kept losing himself in his thoughts. "Don't you have anything stronger?"

"I've got something *better*. Let me give you some advice—and I'm talking from experience," said Porthos. "There are dogs that bark, and there are dogs that bite. Which one would *you* rather have?"

Ken remained silent for a moment, staring at Porthos with an unenthused look in his eyes. "Those are general facts, not advice."

Porthos's lips drooped into a frown. His eyelids fell halfway over his eyes as he glared back at Ken. "Okay, you've just lost your smoothie privileges," he told him. He grabbed the berry smoothie from Ken's hands and spilled the remainder out the window.

"I'm not going to lie, I was actually looking forward to finishing that," Ken confessed.

Porthos pointed toward the way back to the living room. "Out."

"All right," groaned Ken as he was leaving the kitchen. "I'm sorry if I offended you."

However, just as he left, another one of his headaches kicked in, forcing him to grip onto a nearby shelf for support before losing balance as the pain slashed through his forehead.

"Shit!" he hissed, shaking his head sideways in torment.

Another vision was coming to him. A vision of his friends: Domino, Bowie, Sublivion, and Starabey standing in front of the Bureau of Cockfighting Shenanigans and signing a gold-outlined parchment. He

tried not to smile, but a part of him just couldn't help but be excited after they'd all gone through so much trouble to get that damn brawling permit. He swung the front door open and ran out—full speed.

• • • •

Domino coughed violently a couple of times to get the attention of the woman working the BCS booth.

After a few more moments of ignoring him, she finally looked up.

With a wide smirk, Domino raised one of his eyebrows at her. "I believe we qualify for our brawling permit now."

"Fantastic," replied the woman, her expression and tone remaining unenthusiastic. "Your group's name?"

Pondering in silence, still trying to keep on a smile that was undoubtedly turning into a sour frown of defeat, Domino was forced to mumble out the only name he could think of at that moment. More specifically, the one the crowd and he had agreed upon back at the presidential picking.

"SPANK," he gulped. "All caps."

Luckily, his teammates were kind enough to keep their mouths shut.

"All right. Can you describe your team logo for me?"

Domino turned to his friends with eyes full of despair, begging for a suggestion.

Bowie merely shrugged in response, with a face lacking any remorse whatsoever.

Starabey averted his anxious gaze, scratching his arm.

Domino turned back to the booth worker with beads of sweat slipping down his face. His stare dropped to the floor, weighed down by shame. He blurted out the only idea that he could force into clarity. Another memory from his most recent endeavor. "It's...um..." he mumbled, "a vanilla ice cream with a ball gag wrapped around the scoop."

The woman proceeded to fill out a couple of more fields herself, then handed them the document. Each one but Sublivion—and the talking shovel, for obvious reasons—signed their names onto their respective empty fields with a colorful quill.

Before the young men even realized they weren't all accounted for, Ken casually strolled over to them seemingly from out of nowhere.

"Hey, Ken," Bowie greeted him with a light smile.

Domino jumped back with a fearful look in his eyes. "*Shit!* I totally forgot we need your signature!"

"Not really," the woman commented. "You just need one minority. Doesn't matter how many of you there are."

"I *know* that," Domino argued through his teeth, his eyes open wide and his eyebrows tilted downward as he stared at her.

Ken approached him with a confused gaze. "Domino," he said, "you *want* me to be a part of the team?"

"Shut the fuck up and sign," Domino growled. He looked away as he handed Ken the quill and the document.

Ken gazed at Domino and smiled before placing the tip of the quill onto the coarse beige parchment paper.

As soon as Ken finished signing the document with nothing but the name everyone had been addressing him as, Domino snatched the parchment from him and slammed it onto the counter in front of the woman behind it. He looked at the sky and raised his arms in victory. "Yes! Suck my ass, retard! I can kill you and not go to the dungeons for it!"

"We wish you luck on your many brawling exploits," the woman added as the newfound team of brawlers walked away.

The breeze was warm, the sun was cooking, and the blazing flame in Domino's heart was dancing to the imaginary sounds of Zephyr's pleas for mercy.

"Congratulations," said the talking shovel.

"Thank you so much," Domino replied, shooting him a genuine smile. "Who are you again?"

"Bey and I stole some weapons from a merchant in the square before the presidential picking," Bowie explained.

As Starabey raised up the electric guitar in his hand, a deeply envious glare arose from Domino's eyes. "Why didn't you get *me* anything?"

Starabey lowered his head in response and looked away.

"You've got magical powers, right?" Bowie asked.

"Yeah, but—"

“By the way, Domino,” Ken interrupted, “there’s someone waiting for you back at Porthos’s place. I’m sure you’ll be very interested in hearing what he has to say.”

Domino gave Ken a suspicious glare. “Like what?”

“It’s a surprise,” Ken replied.

“Which is—” added Domino.

Ken’s expression turned grim and agitated as he rolled his eyes.

“Okay—fuck you, then,” Domino groaned.

Chapter Five

Do Not Begin Unless You Intend to Finish

The newly founded team of brawlers returned to Porthos's cottage one walk, one portal, and another walk later.

"All right, you can come out now," said Ken as he strolled over to the nearby bushes.

Nothing was happening.

The others stared blankly in the same direction.

"Where *is* he?" Ken groaned as he walked around searching the bushes.

"Perhaps your friend left?" said the talking shovel in Bowie's hand.

"Son of a bitch..." Ken hissed. He banged his fist against a nearby tree and let out an angry grunt.

Bowie continued to gaze at him with his puzzled eyes.

"I just...I thought I got through to him," said Ken. He then straightened his robe and sighed, staring at the sparse flora surrounding Porthos's cottage. "He'll turn up again eventually—I suppose."

"Okay—can we please go now?" Domino complained. "We can look for your imaginary friend later. Porthos is gonna leave soon, and I gotta learn from him as much as possible before he does."

"If his time is so precious to you, why did you waste it going to the picking, then?" asked Ken with a sly grin.

"Shut your mouth," barked Domino and headed back inside the cottage. "Let's go, Sublivion."

As instructed, Sublivion, along with everyone else, followed Domino through the front door and into the living room of Porthos's cottage.

Starabey sat on the floor and leaned against the bookcase while turning his new guitar over to the front, trying to get a feel for the cords

by strumming string after sting, creating a quiet, slow, yet still melodic tune.

While Ken disappeared into the hallway, Bowie joined Starabey by the bookcase to listen to the gentle tunes of Starabey's guitar. He placed the shovel on the floor beside himself, and like a little kid, he sat with his legs crossed, leaning onto his knees with his elbows as his head rested on his palms.

"Oh, hey! You're back!" Porthos exclaimed as he walked into the living room from the hallway through which Ken had gone just moments ago.

"Wait—you're...you're not mad?" asked Domino, dumbfounded by Porthos's jolliness.

"No!" Porthos chuckled. "Should I be?"

"No, I mean..." Domino sighed and smiled at him. "You know what—never mind."

"Okay, so, wanna continue with the lesson?" Porthos asked him.

Domino sat down at the dining table and motioned for Sublivion to follow.

Porthos pulled up a chair next to them. "Okay, last time, we talked about lesser anima," he said while flipping through one of the old books on the table. "Now, let's talk about demonic anima." He smiled at Domino and turned the book around to face him instead and to show him the pages with two colorful, elongated rectangles illustrated on them.

"So, what goes after violet?" asked Domino. "You're kinda running out of colors here."

"Lesser and demonic anima are two different spectrums of anima colors," Porthos told him. "The lesser spectrum goes from red to violet—all the colors we can see and the only colors of anima humans, animals, and plants can have." He placed his thumb on the left side of the first rectangle, where the inside was colored red, and his index finger on the other end, where indigo and violet were colored in.

"Is it possible that a human has *demonic* anima—whatever that is?" Domino inquired.

"You can't be born with it, I know *that*," Porthos explained. "Though, I do know one human guy who got into a freak accident once and ended up getting a demon's anima instead. But his body can't take it. He's

probably gonna die. Very slowly and painfully. Rotting from the inside. While his organs are crushed by the awesome power of demonic anima."

"You look...happy about it?" Domino commented, gazing at him with a worried look on his face.

"Oh, *no*! No—sorry—I just thought you'd be curious about the process." Porthos chuckled and fanned his hand at Domino. "Anyways, look at this." He moved his index finger to the left, tapping it against the second rectangle that looked like a child had regurgitated all its crayons inside it at once. "This is the demonic anima spectrum," he elaborated. "Demons have anima colors that our eyes can't register. They just look like swirling pools of a *couple* of different colors."

"Like—we see them as multicolor milkshakes, but they're really whole new colors?" asked Domino.

"Right!" Porthos exclaimed. "And unlike humans and animals, the color of a demon's eyes will always match the color of their anima."

"But...have you ever thought that maybe demons can just have more colors at *once*?"

"Like I said before, demons can sense anima. They can tell that yellow, and yellow with violet—let's say—are not the same yellows," Porthos explained. "It's just like the difference in numbers. You write ten like number one next to number zero, but you know ten's a different number, not a one and a zero smooshed together, even though it looks like it."

"Okay, I think I get it now. Kinda retarded, but—"

"One other difference in the spectrums is that you look up the power level of lesser anima by the color. With demonic anima, color doesn't mean much. It's what demons can *sense* that counts. Let's call it 'potency.' More potency means better magical powers and a better grade. D-grade demons have the weakest anima, and A-grade demons have the most potent anima," Porthos added. "No, wait—I lied—*Xar* has the most potent anima. You could say he's an S-grade demon. Except, he's the only one."

"So...humans are basically just F-grade demons," Domino groaned.

"Come on, stop acting so depressed," Porthos teased him. "My mom was a human, and she made Dad her *bitch*."

All of a sudden, Bowie's magical shovel floated by. "Excuse me, but I *must* interrupt," he told Domino. "I just remembered that we haven't been formally introduced yet."

"Oh, right! Sorry about that," Domino replied with a smile. However, his wide grin then immediately turned into an annoyed frown. "I must have lost part of my memory after that fucking concussion you gave me."

"I've already apologized for that," said the shovel. "Even though you still haven't apologized to me for taking up so much of the president's time. He needs to know underwear makes men sterile!"

"Porthos, this is a magical shovel that's been made on this earth by Xar to punish us for our sins—including our conscious decision to bring him with us," Domino explained with a tired glare.

"In any case, my name is Enzo," the shovel continued. "I used to be a...farmer..." He paused. "But my former business partner and I had some creative differences we couldn't work out. Then he hired Zephyr Hugo and a few of his hero friends to destroy my base of operations and turn me into a shovel."

"Why didn't he just kill you?" asked Bowie with a curious and puzzled tone.

"Sorry, guy. We don't have time to help you on your revenge quest," said Domino. "We already have one of those. Zephyr and I go *way* more back than you."

"Listen...I have no direct quarrel with him," Enzo added, "but I won't stand in the way of your retribution. I only wish not to have to spend another eternity locked up in a storage room or be hung off a tent wall. If I have a human or demon by my side, I can ask them to do things I can't do myself and vice versa! You strip your enemies when you defeat them and burn the clothes, and I'll serve Little Firecrotch as a weapon. Do we have a deal?"

Domino stared at him, unable to decide whether his eyes should look more unimpressed or angry. "You know we can just find other...*mute* shovels, right?"

"Yes, but I still have my magical powers from back when I was human," said Enzo.

Domino leaned back into his chair, tapping his fingertips against each other and tilting his head up. "Go on..."

"I can appear more intimidating to different creatures, depending on their definition of 'intimidating,'" Enzo told him. "Very useful for scaring off animals and weak-minded people."

"Still, I gotta talk it over with Ken, at least," said Domino. "I don't wanna be the only one to blame if you fuck us over."

"Little Firecrotch will take full responsibility. He is my wielder, after all."

Domino realized the shovel was just not going to let it go until he agreed, and so, he was forced to make the decision on his own. "*Fine*. You can stay," he groaned.

"Thank you!" Enzo exclaimed as he floated back to Bowie and Starabey by the bookcase.

Domino then turned back to Porthos, awaiting further instructions. "Sorry about that. You said something about your dad being a bitch?"

"Domino..." said Porthos, smiling at him, "I gotta go pack my stuff."

"*Already?*" Domino moaned. "Well...how much stuff do you have? I can ask the guys to pack for you instead!"

"No. I have a system," he explained.

"Okay, but...can you at least tell me where I'm supposed to go from here? Do you know any people who can teach me how to *fight* better?"

"Sublivion is an elemental horseman. A B-grade like him is *super* powerful," Porthos told him. "But, if you wanna even have a chance at beating someone like Zephyr, you'll have to get *really* jacked up. You'll need the powers of the other three elemental horsemen. If you can get them...you'll prove to the whole world that you're the most powerful human who ever lived."

Domino's eyes shimmered with fierce flames of eagerness and amazement. He imagined himself standing at the top of the world, admired and acknowledged for his accomplishments. Nothing could have brought him more joy at that moment. His ears weren't lying. Porthos had told him he could become the very best. Like no one ever was.

"It's not gonna be easy. Sometimes, shit needs to hit the fan for people to learn," said Porthos. "But if you're gonna take away one thing from

this journey, I hope it's this: don't let a bunch of assholes tell you what you should be. If you ask them, you're always gonna end up a piece of shit."

Domino immediately jumped from his chair and threw himself across the book-filled table to trap Porthos in the tightest embrace his arms allowed. A small tear slipped down his cheek and onto Porthos's robes as he was struggling to keep his lips from curling so much it was almost painful. He was ecstatic beyond words.

Porthos closed his eyes and smiled as he placed his palms onto Domino's back.

• • • •

The following morning, the SPANK team got up early to embark on their new mission to find the other three elemental horsemen apart from Sublivion. They stood outside the cottage as Porthos joined them.

"Some time ago—I don't know when—Xar made and gave away four elemental horsemen to four A-grade demons. Sublivion used to be with Venon. Obviously, something happened, and now he's not," Porthos explained.

Domino nodded with a proud, excited grin. "Thank you...for everything..."

"Oh—you're *welcome!*" Porthos chuckled. "Now, if nothing else changed with the others, Massire should be with Juniper, Pleito with Regaliz, and Sadonage with Erika. Massire is the earth guy, Pleito controls air, and Sadonage does fire stuff. Okay?" He clasped his palms together. "Juniper lives in the Galana Jungle in Titi. Lots of animals and plants that either wanna rape or kill you. Or both. At the same time."

Ken kept his eyes closed, massaging the side of his head with his fingertips.

"Next, *Regaliz!*" Porthos added. "You'll find him and his sex resort on Mount Xarko Upahar. You'll have to meet with one of the elemental masters in their temple and ask him to let you pass to the peak of the mountain. They're the previous generation of B-grade demons with elemental powers. Spiritual predecessors to the elemental horsemen—

let's say. You'll probably run into the one who likes to fight. Good luck with that shit."

Starabey's lips dropped down into a frown as his wide-open eyes darted left and right.

"And last but not least, you gotta visit Erika in her fortress in Hengendepikkinord. That's where Sadonage should be. Little tip—Erika *loves* to watch other people have sex—especially guys, so that shouldn't be too hard for you."

"Um...I don't..." said Starabey, skittishly raising his index finger up in the air.

"Fuck..." groaned Domino. "I don't wanna lose my virginity while someone's watching."

"Who said she was going to choose *you*?" Ken chuckled with a sneering grin across his face.

Domino flicked his hair with the back of his palm, glaring at him. "Well, for starters, Ken, I—"

"Thank you for your hospitality, Porthos," said Ken. "If that's all, then we'll be on our way."

Domino continued trying to burn a hole in Ken's skull with his glare. His eyes were wide open, furious from having been interrupted midsentence like that—on purpose.

"Good luck and don't forget to have lots of fun, *too*!" Porthos exclaimed with a wide smile and then went back inside his cottage.

Domino turned to his team posthaste. "All right, you heard Porthos!" he shouted with leader-like enthusiasm. "Let's go this wa—" However, his expression turned grim as he was hit by the sudden realization that Porthos never told them exactly which way to go for *any* of the three locations he spoke of. "*Fuck!*" he shouted as he kicked the ground beneath with the soles of his boots.

Ken sighed as he walked past Domino without so much as glancing at him. "Just follow me..."

• • • •

After having spent the whole morning getting to the exotic country across the ocean called Titi, the four men, one demon, a talking shovel,

and a malnourished thirteen-year-old boy from one of the local villages swam in the thick, moist flora of the Galana Jungle.

Nothing but a sea of giant leaves and trees that looked like they could touch the cosmos. The air was heavy and full of moisture, making it harder to breathe even while standing perfectly still. The jungle buzzed with the fluttering of insect wings and the chirps of indigenous critters. The heat, however, was even more merciless than back in Kitaria.

The majority of the group was already sweating gallons. It was dreadful to think just how blazing it would have been if they weren't shielded from the sun's death rays by the dense treetops.

Bowie was waving the blade of his magical shovel in front of his face like a fan, completely ignoring Enzo's wails of discomfort.

As the travelers made their way through the plant life, Domino was sitting atop Sublivion's shoulders observing the wilderness around him without a hint of fatigue. A translucent, glittery, serpentine pink appendage protruded out of his back. He'd morphed the tip of it into a giant handheld fan, with which he'd been fanning himself and Sublivion's masked head for the entirety of the journey.

"How much longer do we have to suffer?" groaned Ken as he trudged his way forward.

The boy with warm, light-orange-brown skin turned his head back as he walked to smile at him. "We are almost there. It shouldn't be long now," he replied with a slight accent.

"Uh...I don't want to offend anyone..." said Starabey, glancing around as he panted for breath. "But, um...I...*really* don't think we should be here..."

"Mistress Juniper's camp is in the heart of the jungle," the young guide told him. "The only way to get there is through the forest or if you drop down from the sky."

"My idea was to have Sublivion make a tidal wave and surf us over," Domino argued.

"But the animals would...drown..." Starabey commented quietly.

"Thank you again for all your help," Ken said to their guide.

"You are most welcome. It is the least we can do," the boy replied. "But...you should be warned—Titi is not like Kitaria. You have a voice there. Not like us." He sighed, frowning at the thought. "My father's

friend tried to change the way Mistress Juniper treated us. Our wells were dry for a long time..." His smile returned to his face. "Until *you* people came."

"You're *welcome*." Domino chuckled from above, patting Sublivion's head in praise.

The boy glanced up at Domino and bowed his head. He then turned back to Ken. "Mistress Juniper has great use of the demon you're looking for. Convincing her to let you have him, even for a little, is a very harsh task." Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. "This is as far as I can go," he said.

"Hey—this wasn't part of the deal!" Domino shouted. "Sublivion refilled your wells! What kind of crap are you trying to pull?"

"Domino, calm down," Ken growled.

The young boy turned around to face them. "I am sorry." He shook his head. "Mistress Juniper can't know I left. I can't risk another punishment on the village."

"*Fine!*" Domino yelled as he jumped off Sublivion. "*Whatever!*"

"Sir," said the boy as he approached him with a humble look in his eyes, "we are all very grateful for your help. Your servant saved many lives today."

"Oh, really?" Domino smiled sarcastically as he bent down to look the boy straight in the face. His smile then flipped into an angry frown. "If you really *were* grateful, you'd do what you promised! You could have just told us you'd take us halfway in the *first* place, but you decided to lie and ditch us in the middle of this fucking frying pan without warning! Is that what you call being grateful?"

The boy bowed his head. "I am truly sorry," he said. He tilted his head back up, glaring sternly at Domino. "But if Mistress Juniper sees I am not back in the village, then she will punish us again, and your help will have been for nothing."

The insolence. The nerve. It made Domino want to bash the boy's head straight into the ground. Though, in the end, he somewhat had a point. Though Domino was furious beyond measure, there was nothing he could have said that would have successfully countered the boy's argument. He simply scoffed, straightened his back, and walked farther

into the jungle with Sublivion following close behind. "Ungrateful shit," he grumbled.

"Forgive him," said Ken. "We'll take it from here, then."

The young boy nodded with a light smile across his bony cheeks.

And so, the rest of the SPANK team continued forth.

"What was *that* about?" Enzo whispered to Bowie.

Bowie merely shrugged in response as he walked beside Starabey.

Ken, however, went ahead to catch up to Domino and Sublivion on his own. "Domino!" he panted. "Domino, wait!"

But Domino paid no attention to him. With menacing, furious brows, he stomped through the wild flora.

Ken ran in front of him and grabbed ahold of his shoulders to capture his attention. "Stop it!" he yelled. "What is your *problem*?"

"My problem?" Domino barked. "You wanna know what my problem is? How come everyone always expects me to do everything they tell me because they did me one fucking favor once, but when I go out of my way to help someone, *they* get to decide when their debt's been paid?"

"First of all, you didn't help them, Sublivion did!" Ken argued. "And second, nobody expects *anything* of you! It's always *you* who chooses to comply!"

"I ordered Sublivion to refill those wells!" shouted Domino, violently poking his own chest with his finger. "I offered it! I could have just threatened them instead!" He took a step forward and got right up in Ken's face. "How come I have to sell myself whole when no one else fucking does?"

"You're the only person who believes that!" Ken yelled back. "If you were that boy, and someone criticized you, you'd have probably risked your life and the lives of everyone else just because you wouldn't want them to think any less of you!"

Domino had nothing more to say. He glared into Ken's eyes, unable to think of a proper reply. Ken was right.

"Gosphjodar..." said Sublivion, his voice echoing of sadness as his mask faced Domino.

Soon enough, Bowie, Starabey, and Enzo caught up with them.

"What's going on? We heard yelling," said Bowie in a calm, curious tone.

Before anyone could answer, out of the ground beneath them surfaced a giant plant. It's fifty thick cherry-colored vines knocked the whole team down, covering them in soft, moist dirt.

From its wide stem protruded a bulbous head that parted in the middle, resembling a dragon's maw with thorns for teeth and drops of water for saliva. Viscous orange liquid trickled out of the tips of its soft vines as they wriggled around. Though the entire plant was made up of red and purple colors, the head was surrounded by a ring of tiny orange leaves. It didn't only look like a vicious predator, but it hissed like one, too.

Following the plant, two young women in leather hot pants and rugged long-sleeved shirts jumped down from the treetops before Ken and Starabey, pointing the stone tips of their spears at the two awestricken men.

"Gosphjodar!" Sublivion called out to his master and rushed to his aid, extending him an open hand.

The sound of his voice snapped Domino out of his trance. He looked at Sublivion and nodded with a serious, determined gaze as he grabbed hold of it.

A pink-and-mint cocoon emerged from under their feet and swallowed them.

After a few moments, it blossomed like a flowerpot, and from it emerged a singular being—the same demon fusion from the coliseum that looked as if Domino had been dunked into a pool of mint-green paint, and his irises became a swirling smoothie of pink and mint colors. With a daunting smile, the fusion charged toward the plant monster, slashing through its vines with his claws like thin blades through a melon.

Orange goo oozed out of the vines as if it were juice mixed with gelatin powder, covering the soil and the fusion's face and body.

The plant screeched in agony, its blood-chilling screams echoing through the jungle.

"No! Wait!" Starabey shouted.

However, he was quickly silenced by one of the warrior women holding him prisoner. She yelled at him in a foreign language and moved the point of her spear closer to his throat.

Meanwhile, Bowie was busy struggling to cut through the vines with his magical shovel.

One of the vines slithered over to him from beneath and wrapped itself around his ankle. He raised his arms, ready to swing the shovel at it, but instead, it pulled him up, forcing him to drop Enzo as a bunch more vines came to coil around his slender, pale body.

"Little *Firecrotch!*" Enzo shouted. He flew up to Bowie in an attempt to free him, but the vines grabbed hold of his shaft, slamming him onto the ground and keeping him constrained.

The other vines continued to constrict Bowie's body. His legs, arms, torso, neck—anything they could grasp. Like serpents, they curled and slithered around him—over and under his mankini.

Bowie grunted and thrashed in their tightening grasp.

The vines brushed against his ass cheeks and crotch, lathering his skin up with orange goo oozing out of their tips.

Bowie swung his legs around, but the ooze they'd already secreted over his body made him only slip around in their coil. He bit into one of the vines, but not only did it fail to result in anything, it made all the vines constrict his body ever harder, forcing a moan of pain out of him.

"I," Domino and Sublivion's fusion growled in a low phantasmic voice, "will not be..." He released four tentacle-like appendages made of translucent, sparkling pink energy from his own back and wrapped them around the plant's big, meaty head. "*Ignored!*" he shouted as the magical tentacles violently and swiftly pulled the plant's head onto the ground with a loud, heavy slam.

The vines released Bowie, causing him to plummet to the ground. He fell onto the soft soil and let out a grunt.

The vines holding Enzo down loosened their grip, and he flew over to Bowie. "Are you all right, Little Firecrotch?"

The plant quickly regained its consciousness and fumbled back into an upward position, screeching at the demon fusion, who stood completely still, glaring at it.

"No," spat Bowie, staring at the plant with angry brows. "But this bastard won't be, either." He grabbed hold of Enzo's shaft and swung the blade at the surrounding vines.

Meanwhile, the plant charged a good number of its vines straight at the fusion of Domino and Sublivion while the rest were trying to fend Bowie off.

Without breaking a single bead of sweat, the fusion masterfully evaded every whip and lash thrown at him. "Come here." He chuckled, grabbed the vines, and spun in place, like a fork coiling spaghetti around itself. He fused his magical tentacles into a thin, circular wall above his head just slightly wider in radius than his own body and thinner than a sword's blade. He then forced it down onto the ground, slashing through the vines like a metal cookie cutter, making orange ooze splatter all over him. He smiled.

The plant let out a loud cry and lunged its colossal maw toward the fusion.

Just as it was about to swallow him whole, the fusion jumped into the air to avoid the attack. Once he landed back on solid ground, he let out a sinister chuckle as he grabbed more vines and transformed the tips of his merged magical tentacles into a giant pair of scissors. "Am I worthy of your acknowledgment *now*?" he cooed.

The plant continued to screech and lash its vines around.

Several meters away, the warrior women were still threatening to pierce Starabey's and Ken's skins with their spears.

Within seconds, Ken bent his head back to further distance himself from the spear being pressed against his throat and kicked it out of the warrior's hands.

In the midst of the other warrior's confusion, Starabey strummed his guitar, creating a high-pitched, bellowing sound that made both warriors flinch. He pressed the button at the top and released a flashing bolt of lightning, sending the two women flying—right between the plant creature's protruding roots. He jumped to his feet and sprinted toward an opening between the fat roots coming out of the plant's giant stem. He dodged the lashes of its vines by sliding down into the hole under the plant.

"Domino, Sublivion, stop!" Ken yelled out, tumbling around as he was struggling to stand back up.

The fusion spread his arms, standing calmly before the giant plant as it was cocking back its vines like crossbow arrows. "I...am..."

The tips of his magical pink tentacles turned into draconic heads with giant, tooth-filled maws.

With a low phantasmic growl, the fusion said, "Subidom."

Bowie backed away as the vines he'd been fending off slithered back to the plant monster. He gazed at the fusion with a cold, guarded stare.

The fusion's magical tentacles slowly approached the plant creature, snapping their jaws, ready to tear it to shreds.

The plant screeched and tried to repel them with its vines, but despite its efforts, the vines failed to harm the ethereal tentacles.

"If you kill it, Juniper may never let you have Massire!" Ken warned the fusion.

Subidom's laughter was immediately silenced. His face went from a delightfully manic grin to a puzzled frown in a tenth of a second. He tilted his face downward, and his sparkling pink tentacles retracted back into his body.

As the opportunity presented itself, the plant monster gathered all of its vines again and prepared to swing them at Subidom, wailing and screeching.

Beneath the surface, in that dark hole underneath the monstrous stem and roots, a large, fleshy, bulbous pink vine that looked much shorter than all the rest wriggled around in front of Starabey's face. He had a determined, bold look in his eyes as he grabbed hold of it with both hands and forced the tip into his mouth, sucking and squeezing out the plant's juices.

Suddenly, instead of lashing its vines at Subidom, the plant twitched and swung its stem in a circle like a drunkard before coming crashing down.

The two female warriors barely moved out of the way in time, before the plant's head hammered them into the ground. They stared at it in awe, holding each other in fright. Moments later, they averted their eyes toward Starabey, who was climbing his way out of the hole in the ground, covered in orange plant-monster goo.

Starabey took a breath. Then another. Three. Four. Then he fell to his knees, still gazing up at the sun's rays as they snuck their way through the branches.

A glittery, translucent pink-and-green cocoon enveloped Subidom. When the cocoon disappeared, it was Domino and Sublivion who emerged from it, lying on the ground, exhausted.

Chapter Six

Make My Monster Grow

The SPANK team was situated in the middle of a big, grassy clearing full of small wooden cottages that were slowly being overtaken by moss colonies. They were surrounded by bowls of food and pitchers filled with both alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages. Unlike the rest of the jungle, the clearing was ten times cooler in temperature thanks to giant patches of ice-blue cacti that were planted by the edges, taking in vast amounts of heat and moisture from the air and releasing dry, cool air into the environment.

Beside the guys sat the A-grade demoness Juniper. She had two small eyes with black irises that glistened like onyxes, surrounded by her warm baby-pink skin. Her legs ended with two petite cloven hooves and were covered by a light layer of chestnut fur. She wore a thick piece of cloth over her crotch and bottom, tied together by strings over her hips, while her human torso was covered with a long-sleeved checkered shirt. Her hair touched the floor, almost covering up her stubby, furry tail, and was so messy, so unkempt, one would surely lose their fingers if they ever tried running them through the beastly thing.

"Okay, so...I gotta know," she said while facing Starabey, "how does a guy from Balalaca, the most patriarchal country on your side of the world, know what a *duloa* is? And second question—how did you know how to knock it out?"

Starabey took sip of his iced tea and smacked his lips. "My...uh...mom is always looking for new health and food trends to follow. Duloa jelly was... um...well, it was my breakfast for three whole years." He chuckled. "I used to hate how she didn't let me eat what other kids did. Now that I'm actually *stuck* eating unhealthy stuff, I feel like crap."

"I have a feeling your passive-aggressive comment was meant for *me*," Domino argued.

Starabey's smile diminished as he nodded lightly, and then he awkwardly looked away.

"Just so we're clear, it's because of me we even got this far without having to resort to cannibalism," Domino continued. "I'm the only one here who can resist temptation and stick to our budget plan."

"We would have foraged for food or robbed people again without you telling us to, should there have been a need," said Ken with a cynical frown.

Juniper turned back to Starabey. "Anyway—you were saying?"

"Oh—um...that's about it. Mom never trusted merchants. She insisted we farm our own ingredients whenever we could, so we had a couple little duloas in the garden. But...I've never seen them grow as big as yours."

"I'm really, really surprised," Juniper commented, gracing Starabey with a proud grin. "I didn't think I'd meet a straight guy from Balalaca who was actually somewhat decent. Now it makes sense why your gay friends accepted you into their group."

Bowie stared at Juniper with a puzzled gaze. "Gay?"

"*Friends?*" growled Ken, squinting his eyes.

"Um...thank you?" Starabey replied, forcing a confused smile onto his face.

Domino glared at Starabey with eyes fueled by the fury of his envy. Why was Starabey so special? What did *he* ever do to warrant such praise? It wasn't fair. Domino clenched his fists. It wasn't fair. He deserved to be praised, not Starabey. It wasn't *fair*.

"And I'm really glad you're not one of those homophobic-type Balalacans," Juniper added. "Those guys really deserve a good beating."

Starabey looked away, rubbing his shoulder. "Yeah...I...I guess..."

Suddenly, Ken placed his hand on his forehead as he closed his eyes shut. His face wrinkled up as he winced.

Having snapped out of his fury-filled trance, Domino quickly crawled over to Ken, breathed out hot air into his fingertips, and pressed them hard against the sides of Ken's head to help his blood vessels widen and relax.

“Should we...uh...help him?” Starabey whispered to Bowie.

“He said regular healing doesn’t help,” Bowie replied.

Juniper called for one of her followers, who then leaned over as Juniper whispered something in her ear.

The young woman nodded at Juniper and walked away at a hurried pace.

Juniper turned back to Ken. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you something for the pain.”

Soon enough, the girl came back with a pouch and a wooden platter full of two different kinds of weeds. She handed them to Juniper before taking her leave.

Juniper gave Ken a piece of the mushy dark-green ones and a pouch with a whole stash of them inside.

“The rest of you take the purple ones. While Ken here is recovering, we’re gonna have a bit of fun,” she announced with an enthused smile. “Don’t be shocked if you can’t feel your limbs—that’s perfectly normal.”

“Excuse me, Your Radiance,” said Enzo, floating over to Juniper, “but aren’t those—”

“What do you want?” Juniper growled at him. “Seriously! Can’t you see we’re busy?”

Domino’s and Starabey’s eyes widened in surprise.

Ken raised an eyebrow as he stared at her.

Enzo, however, did not reply. He just flew back over to Bowie and lay down on the ground beside him.

Sublivion unzipped the mouth of his horse gimp mask and pushed his hand through the hole to take a bite of the weeds.

The other members of SPANK popped the fluffy weeds into their mouths—Bowie less hesitantly than the rest—as they passed the platter around.

“When you can’t taste them anymore, spit them out,” Juniper explained, grabbing a piece herself.

However, Domino had already gulped down his share. He looked at Juniper with an innocent gaze. “What?” he said, having failed to hear her final comment.

Juniper’s surprised yet agitated gaze darted toward Domino.

"Oh my Xar..." Domino whined in despair, staring back at her with eyes glimmering from terror. "Am I gonna *die*?"

Everyone but Sublivion kept silent and continued looking at Domino.

While muffled whimpers escaped Sublivion's mouth like that of a confused child unable to find its mother, he crawled over to Domino. His hands hesitantly lingered around Domino's torso as the tip of his mask kept changing the direction to which it pointed.

Domino jumped onto his feet. "What's gonna happen to me?" he shouted at Juniper.

"You're not gonna *die*! Calm down!" Juniper assured him with a stern voice. "You're just gonna go deeper into your subconscious than us."

"Aw...lucky..." said Bowie with pouting lips before his body went limp and kissed the ground.

Starabey followed shortly after.

"Don't worry, Domino. I'll keep watch so you don't accidentally croak," Ken sneered while loudly chewing on the weeds in his mouth.

The numbness finally began to spread through Domino's body at a rapid pace. "Calm down, calm down, calm down..." he whispered to himself, trying to keep his breath steady. Soon enough, he hit the ground with a loud thump.

"*Mastergh!*" Sublivion shouted.

Blackness enveloped Domino's vision and silence filled his ears.

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Lit torches on dark stone walls. Closed heavy curtains. Simple wooden tables and cabinets. A large cast-iron cauldron in the middle of the room. A portrait of President Pumpkinhead surrounded by a detailed gilded frame. Nothing but sounds of a bubbling broth and the smell of burned flesh.

Wearing a white coat that was too big for him, Domino was stirring the cauldron filled with red liquid. His face was pale and bony. His eyes were surrounded by purple circles. Sad, steep brows rested above. There was no trace of a smile on his lips. He looked up at the portrait of the Kitarian president. It brought a light grin to his face. "This is it," he said. "They will *love* this."

The clacking of metal hooves sounded against the stone floors.

Bowie, covered in thorny vines, with a single yellow rose covering his crotch area, rode into the kitchen on an equine steed made completely out of steel plates, with a shovel-shaped crest painted in gold on the horse's forehead. He threw the sack he'd been carrying onto the floor before Domino's feet.

Beaten and smooshed fruit and vegetables scattered across the floor.

Domino bent over to pick them up, what little he could salvage. "Where are the fresh ones?" he asked, looking up at Bowie with a sad, doelike gaze.

Bowie shrugged, smiling. "You didn't *ask*."

The metal horse gasped. "Tomatoes are bad for you! They rape puppies!" it announced in Enzo's voice as it turned around and kicked Domino's head with his hind leg.

Domino fell back. The sound of the hoof slamming into him was far worse than the actual pain, though. With a straight yet tired face, he sat back up and picked up the rest of the ingredients off the floor.

Bowie just kept smiling as his dead eyes stared out into empty space.

Enzo huffed out air through his snout and trotted away with Bowie on his back.

Domino returned to the wooden counter and placed the produce on a chopping board. From one of the cupboards beneath, he took out a knife with a furry blue handle and chopped up all the cleanest, most untouched parts of the food to drop inside the scalding cauldron.

A black cat appeared next to Domino's feet, staring up at him. "Smells good," it said in Ken's voice.

"Thank you!" Domino replied with a wide, joyous grin. "I just added my blood and tears to make the broth sweeter, and then I—"

"Oh my Xar..." the cat groaned. "Somebody give this man a medal. He did his fucking *job*." With a flick of its tail, it disappeared into the shadows.

Domino's smile transformed back into a disappointed frown.

"Mastergh?" said Sublivion as he walked over to Domino on his hands and knees.

"Oh, Sublivion..." Domino sighed and squatted to pet him. "You're my only *real* friend."

"Mastergh!" Sublivion exclaimed with glee.

"I've never told this to anyone, but," Domino continued, averting his gaze, "sometimes I masturbate to the thought of us rubbing against each other naked...but you still have your mask on 'cause...I only know the color of your skin from when I looked at your dick to see if it was bigger than mine that one time. And you're...not my minion—you're my boyfriend. Is that weird?" He sighed and smiled at Sublivion, his eyes glistening from tears. "But if I weren't your master, you probably wouldn't stick around, right?"

"Mastergh," Sublivion replied without any variance in his tone to signify a clear yes or no answer.

"Sorry. I'm rambling again." Domino chuckled and patted the top of Sublivion's head before standing up and rubbing his eyes dry. "Let's go. The soup's ready." He served the soup in two wooden bowls that featured spiral serpentine decorations and then walked out of the kitchen with Sublivion alongside him.

Nothing but Domino's steps were heard as he walked down the hallway and into the grand throne room of the castle. It was dark, with only a bit of light provided by the statuettes of gilded cobras on the walls, inside of whose open maws danced orange flames. At the very end of the room were two identical gilded thrones, with two figures sitting on them. A man and a woman whose upper halves of their bodies were hidden away by thick shadows. Above them hung the Enviedhieri family coat of arms: a reverse egg-shaped shield made entirely out of gold, featuring a purplish-red ruby relief in the shape of an openmouthed cobra. Under it were engraved words in capital letters that read: "OUT OF REACH, BUT NOT OUT OF SIGHT." Finally, in front of the two noble figures in the dark was a mesmerizing, lean wooden table with gold-encrusted edges and illustrations of cobras. Upon the table was a buffet full of all the most expensive and high-end foods nobles such as themselves could desire.

However, the man on the throne just waited in silence, while the woman was tapping her long, painted fingernails against the table.

Domino approached and bowed while presenting the bowls of red soup. "Mother...father..."

"Finally!" barked the woman.

"You're too slow, Dom," said the man.

"I know, I know!" Domino replied, bowing his head farther down. "I'm so sorry you had to wait so long! I—I just wanted to make sure everything was perfect!"

"Just bring it over," the mother groaned.

Domino scurried over to the table, keeping his head down at all times so as to not offend his parents by appearing too cocky. Gently, he placed the two bowls before them and backed away to the spot in front of the table from whence he'd first addressed them.

They took small sips to taste test the soup.

Their intrigued gazes and delightfully surprised hums brought a smile to Domino's face and a spark of hope to his eyes.

Out of nowhere, the black cat from before appeared once again, clawed its way up Domino's robes, and clung on to his shoulder.

"I only used the most flawless parts of the ingredients!" Domino boasted. "I double-checked every step I made to make sure I didn't miss anything!"

The nobles nodded at each other and took another spoonful.

"It's too salty," said the cat.

Domino's lips trembled as he turned his head to look at the cat in sheer terror. "What?"

"You're *right*!" shouted Domino's mother, banging her fist against the table. "It *is* too salty!"

"Yes, it could have used less salt. Such a shame..." the father added.

"No!" Domino cried out. He dropped to his knees as the cat hopped off him. "Please! I did everything I could! I tried my best!"

"Mastergh..." Sublivion whimpered, circling Domino nervously. He then lay down next to him, curled up like a frightened mouse.

"It doesn't matter how hard you tried," scoffed the mother. "Only idiots and sore losers talk like that."

"But you looked like you liked it up until the cat complained!" Domino whined.

"Domino!" the mother shouted. "Bite your tongue before you embarrass yourself any further! How low can you stoop so low as to blame an innocent bystander for your own failures? We would have

found the soup's quality dissatisfactory even by ourselves! What kind of sheep do you take us for?"

"Is it really too much to ask for just a *bit* more effort?" the father asked. He took out a single chocolate cookie sprayed with edible gold and held it up. "If you had worked hard enough, I'm sure you would have done a perfect job."

"But I *did* work hard!" Domino cried out. "I *bled* for you!"

"Oh, stop acting like a fucking victim!" the mother argued. "Bad things don't *happen* to you! You *let* them happen! Everyone can control what happens to them, and those who fail just weren't smart enough!"

As Domino wept, covering the ground with his tears, the sound of a stone slate being dragged across the floor filled the room. He turned around.

Zephyr as a stone statue was sliding down the hall up to the nobles' table, as if some invisible force was pushing him from behind, with a rotten, undead pig carcass walking beside him.

Domino was left completely unnoticed, staring at Zephyr with his teary eyes.

"Look, honey," said the father with a giddy tone, "it's that nice young man from next door!"

"Yes! You must be the young Lord Hugo!" the mother exclaimed. "We've heard from the professors that you are at the top of your class! Your parents must be so proud! *Your* dishes must be out of this world!"

"Oh, Paola," the father told his wife, "a parent couldn't ask for a better son than that. He's smart, handsome, athletic, hard-working, kind—he's even a minority!"

No sound came from Zephyr's statue. His carved stone face merely kept smiling.

The fly-ridden pig carcass jumped onto the table before Domino's parents, shrieked, and collapsed.

"A gift? You shouldn't have!" The mother chuckled. "What a lovely gesture! Thank you!"

Domino grasped his abdomen with both arms and hunched forward in pain from the cramps. His stomach rumbled, and the acid inside it burned like the organ was trying to consume itself.

"Here you go," said the father, throwing Zephyr the cookie he'd been holding. "You've earned it."

The cookie hit Zephyr's face and crumbled into little pieces upon impacting the ground.

"Please...help...me..." Domino whimpered as he crawled toward Zephyr.

The darkness grew thicker.

"I-I've never asked for your help...I need you...just this once...*please...*" Domino cried. He could barely feel his arms anymore. Each time he moved, the weight holding his body down got heavier. "They'll listen to you! You just have to speak! That's it! I'm not asking for anything more!" He could barely keep his eyes open. The numbness took over. He could no longer move. "*Say something!*" he screamed. His stomach convulsed once again. A sharp pain slashed through his abdomen, and he yelped. His eyelids were sealed shut. Though he could open them just a little, there was only bright-white light.

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Domino was lying on his stomach with foam running out of his mouth onto the grass. Though he couldn't move or speak or open his eyes completely, his ears still registered the sounds and some sights around him, even if his mind was only partly awake.

"*Mastergh!*" Sublivion shouted as he threw himself before Domino's motionless body. He took him in his bulky arms and cradled him with his masked head resting atop Domino's, whispering to him in Deghmonghnjichki.

Starabey turned to Juniper, who was still lying on the warm earth and smiling. "He's gonna be okay, right...?" he asked.

Bowie crawled up to Sublivion and Domino, looking over Domino's body with a concentrated glare and pouting lips. "It looks kinda yellow," he said while inspecting the foam coming out of Domino's mouth.

Ken observed them while sunbathing, struggling to keep a straight face. After a few more moments of relaxation, he stood up with a sigh and approached the group. "All right, I'll fix him..." He yanked

Domino's mouth open a bit farther with one hand and stuck two fingers inside.

After a few pokes to the back of his throat, Ken stepped back, and Domino's stomach pushed out metallic purple-and-green tar.

"Tai bihdju dobrhjo, gosphjodar...tai dozvolghiai ono vangh..." Sublivion comforted Domino while holding his hair back and leaning him forward.

Regardless how close or far, Bowie and Starabey flinched when the unnatural substance escaped Domino's body.

Soon enough, Domino's eyes opened up completely while his slimy mouth was still gasping for air. His vision was blurry and bright.

Ken lightly slapped Domino's face a couple of times. "Come on. Say something."

Domino flopped out of Sublivion's grasp, crawling away from his teammates on the ground with half-paralyzed limbs. "I'm *fine*!" he shouted, still coughing out bits of the weeds he'd swallowed. "I'm fine!"

"Just give him a moment to gather up his pride," Ken assured the others.

Suddenly, everyone but Domino's and Sublivion's heads and eyes followed the sounds of rustling leaves coming from the edge of the clearing.

A man in shining silver-plated armor walked out of the flora and into the clearing.

Juniper stood up and begrudgingly went to meet the visitor halfway. She sighed with her arms crossed once she'd approached him. "Are you the guy that's supposed to ask me for a scavenger-hunt riddle?"

"Pardon?" said Zephyr, confused but smiling. "Oh! No, no—I'm not participating in anything like that, Your Radiance. I am a merely an adventurer who seeks to help the weak and innocent."

"Bowie, get the shovel," Ken ordered.

"I'm already holding him," said Bowie, staring at Ken with a puzzled look in his eyes.

"Thank you for using my preferred pronoun, by the way," Enzo told him.

Domino continued to moan and grunt from behind them, as his stomach still hadn't stopped hurting completely.

Sublivion kept creating little floating spheres of water and giving them to Domino to drink as the two of them sat on the ground.

Meanwhile, Ken and Starabey glanced behind for a second to check how Domino was doing, then turned their attention back to Juniper and Zephyr in the distance.

"I don't want to take up too much of your time," said Zephyr, his signature smile shining toward Juniper. "I just wanted to let you know that the nearby villagers have been complaining about some grapevines taking on lives of their own and eating their livestock, so I cut them down. Do you think there could still be more out there in the jungle? It'd be best if I got rid of them all while I'm here. If you could just point me in the right direction, I would be most grateful."

Juniper's lips trembled as she glared at Zephyr without blinking. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists until her nails dug themselves into the flesh of her hands.

Her followers fearfully backed away as the ground began to pulsate.

"Your Radiance...?" said the hero, gazing at Juniper with a concerned gaze.

As the earth trembled, a layer of giant dark-brown scales with yellow stripes was emerging from under them. Louder and louder, a rattling sound echoed through the clearing.

"What the—" Starabey blurted out, looking down at the scales in fear and awe.

Sublivion helped Domino stand up.

While looking around to try and piece together what was going on, Domino laid eyes on Zephyr and Juniper in the distance. His expression turned from surprise to that of vindictive ice-cold anger.

"Everyone, move away from the creature and stay put," Ken ordered while backing away from the surfacing scales. "If we're lucky, we'll be ignored."

While Bowie and Starabey moved onto solid ground, Domino's body tensed up. He walked past Ken, still trudging a bit, with Sublivion close behind. His glare was fixed on Zephyr.

"M-mastergh, tai negh bihti dobrhjo josh!" said Sublivion with a worried tone, but Domino just kept on walking.

Bowie grasped Enzo harder in his hand and ran over to Domino and Sublivion as the two were making their way across the crumbling dirt and the giant snake scales in the ground that continued to grow with each passing moment.

Starabey just kept staring at them as they walked toward Zephyr and Juniper, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

"I...don't understand," said Zephyr, gazing back at a giant, glassy serpent eye slowly emerging from the earth in confusion and sadness. "I've *helped* your people."

"Y-you...bastard!" screamed Juniper. "I was growing those grapevines for the poor a-and you...you ruined them!"

"Your Radiance, they were eating their livestock," Zephyr explained. "The villagers were *hungry*."

"If the plants were looking for meat, then it's in their fucking nature to eat it!" argued Juniper. "The villagers shouldn't have been killing those poor cows for food anyway! Meat is murder!"

Zephyr stared at her with a worried gaze, lightly shaking his head.

Juniper shut her eyes and held on to her head. "Y-you...fucking..."

"You won't kill him like that," said Domino as he approached them with Bowie and Sublivion by his side. "It doesn't matter how big you make it grow, it's still just a retarded animal. It's not gonna fight Zephyr for no reason."

A light smile crept onto Zephyr's face.

"But we've got a *couple*!" Bowie exclaimed, swinging Enzo's shaft onto his shoulder.

"Fuck o—" Juniper shouted, but he was interrupted by further rumbling of the ground.

The giant snake's rattle ceased to produce sound, and it shook off everyone who'd been on and around it as it dashed off into the wilderness, leaving huge piles of dirt behind and knocking down almost every tree in its path.

Frustrated beyond measure after having fallen to the dirt, Juniper screeched at the top of her lungs. "Kill him, kill him, *kill* him!"

Domino gave Zephyr a wide, wicked smile as he stood up. He reached his hand out toward Sublivion.

Upon the two of them joining hands, their bodies were enveloped in a sparkly, ethereal pink-and-mint-green cocoon.

When the cocoon spread its petals like a flower before disappearing, it revealed the light-green-skinned fusion Subidom. Four sparkling, magical pink tentacles emerged from his back, wriggling around in the air. "Ready when you are."

Zephyr's cheeks blushed with excitement. "You have the permit?" he inquired with a smile.

"Of course." Subidom chuckled as he approached.

"Oh, good." Zephyr sighed in relief. "I'm really sorry I had to bother you with it. I just wanted us both to be safe before we started."

The tentacles pushed Subidom upward, propelling him into the air. He then darted toward Zephyr from above with his tentacles pointing directly at him.

In the meantime, on the ground, Bowie charged toward Zephyr, gripping the shaft of the magical shovel Enzo with both hands.

Zephyr held his palm on the hilt of his sword and took a step back.

A deep, sinister voice spoke nearby. "Adorable."

"H-ngh!" Bowie grunted as he swung Enzo.

Just before impact, Zephyr unsheathed his sword and used it to protect himself from the shovel, making the two blades clash with a loud clink. At the same time, he released sparkling, ethereal pastel-green energy from his body that transformed into a perfect clone of himself without a sword midair just as Subidom's tentacles were about to hit him.

Zephyr's clone managed to push the tentacles a bit farther away, but they still impacted him with tremendous force, pummeling him into the ground. Immediately after, he dispersed back into a cloud of green energy and returned inside of the real Zephyr.

Subidom landed, driving his claws into the ground to keep his body from being propelled back too far as he glided across the ground-up earth. Annoyed by having the pleasure of drawing first blood taken from him, he unleashed his magical tentacles upon Zephyr once again.

However, in turn, Zephyr created more clones that jumped onto the tentacles from above and stopped them right in their path while he was busy fending off Bowie.

"Stop *ignoring* me!" roared Subidom as his tentacles shook off the clones and beat them back into sparkling green energy with hard thrusts that made the impact upon the clones' silver armor sound as loud as the striking of gongs.

Meanwhile, Bowie used up all of his strength to be able to swing Enzo back and forth, but Zephyr deflected the attacks with his sword each time with barely any effort put in.

His reflexes were so fast, it was almost as if he knew exactly where each one of Bowie's hits would land before the strikes even commenced.

"Take my advice, sweetheart—stop. Let him focus on the one who's actually a *threat*."

"Where's that *coming* from?" growled Bowie.

"Right here," the voice replied. "I'm Master Zephyr's sword."

"*Unbelievable!*" Enzo whined, struggling to suppress his grunts every time his blade-part clashed with Zephyr's weapon. "He gets to be a sword, and all I get to be is a dirty, disease-ridden *shovel!*"

Behind Zephyr, Subidom continued fighting off waves of oncoming Zephyr clones. He tried shoving them away, clawing at them, turning his magical tentacles into all kinds of weaponry ranging from spears to maces to quintuple-ball-and-chain flails. Every time he made a step closer, the clones forced him two steps backward. He didn't even get the satisfaction of watching their blood and innards spew out as he struck them down without mercy. The moment he'd hit them, they'd turn back into sparkling, ethereal clouds.

Domino was agitated beyond sympathy and understanding. He wasn't just angry at Zephyr for not fighting him face-to-face any longer. He was angry at himself for not being able to use Sublivion's magical power for attacking as Subidom. Domino's power only had a limited amount of anima he could control and materialize outside of his body at the moment. If the fusion Subidom could have used both Domino's and Sublivion's powers, it was Domino's assumption that they would have most likely succeeded in reaching the real Zephyr. But in addition to his own thoughts, there were someone else's present. Emotions that didn't quite seem like his own, though they were still very similar. Shame. Loathing for oneself. Were they Sublivion's?

With his self-deprecating thoughts, Subidom's teary eyes glared at Zephyr while his magical tentacles and the claws on his hands slashed away at every clone Zephyr threw at him.

Meanwhile, Ken and Starabey remained on the sidelines.

Starabey kept glancing back and forth between Ken and the fight. "So, uh...you think we should go over there and help?" he asked.

"No," Ken replied, not even turning his head to look at him when he addressed him.

Starabey's eyes darted around some more. He sighed quietly, covering up his chest with his folded arms.

Subidom sent his tentacles out to attack once more. However, instead of going for a direct assault like before, he made his tentacles pass through the surrounding walls of earth without disturbing them.

The clones couldn't reach them without having to push the giant piles of dirt away first.

Bowie rolled away in response to the incoming approach of Zephyr's talking sword and swung Enzo toward his feet.

Zephyr jumped in place to avoid the blade of the shovel and kicked Bowie with the sole of his heavy metal boot.

With a painful grunt escaping his lungs, Bowie fell back.

"*Bowie!*" shouted Subidom.

His magical tentacles surfaced from out of the earth around Zephyr, but instead of attacking, as was the plan, they surrounded Bowie and fused into a shieldlike shape to stop Zephyr from swinging his sword at him.

The sword hit Subidom's magical shield, and Subidom let out a horrifying loud scream in undiluted agony. He retracted his tentacles back into his body before falling to the ground, holding his abdomen.

Zephyr turned around to face him with a frightened look in his eyes.

Bowie remained silent, staring at Subidom with a confused gaze.

"It really *is* you!" exclaimed the sword and floated out of Zephyr's hands to get to Subidom. "Sublivion, baby, it's *me!*"

Subidom struggled, but he used every last bit of his strength to crawl away from the sword, panting in panic and staring at it with dread-filled eyes.

Another wave of strange emotions that didn't seem like his own wash over Domino. He didn't understand why, but he was overcome with anxiety in the presence of Zephyr's talking sword.

"Come on. Unfuse so we can talk," said the sword.

With a severe lack of energy from having suffered through such pain, Subidom could barely move, let alone use his *magica*. In his state of terror, he couldn't even speak. Like an animal, he merely thrashed around as his last resort at keeping the sword at bay.

"That's enough," said Zephyr and extended his hand.

Without question, the sword quickly returned to him so he could be sheathed.

A pink-and-mint-green cocoon enveloped Subidom and opened up like a flower to reveal Domino and Sublivion in their respective bodies.

As soon as they were unfused, Sublivion clawed his way over to Domino and hid his face in his chest, cowering like a child, breathing heavily.

Zephyr ran over to the two of them. "Are you all right, friend?" he asked Domino.

But before Domino could mutter a word, Juniper came marching over with a fuming glare. "What's going on here? Why aren't you ripping out his arms and legs yet?" she shouted.

"I—I..." Domino stuttered in fear, still feeling the aftermath of those dreadful emotions. He stared back into Juniper's eyes like he was about to cry.

Meanwhile, Zephyr just stood there, gazing at her like a dumbfounded lamb.

"Why the fuck are you still sitting *down*? Get up and *fight* him!" she screamed at Domino.

Just then, Enzo flew out of Bowie's hand and over to Juniper. "What is *wrong* with you?" he roared.

Juniper turned toward him with a puzzled look.

"You dance around this jungle covered up with your disgusting oversize shirt, eating your meatless, milkless, tasteless, *joyless* tree bark or what have you, preaching about how men are the plague, and screaming out your lungs like a child whenever something doesn't go your way—all while deciding not to let your giant plant abomination

kill us just because one of us happens to share the same opinions and lifestyle as you! And now you're ordering our injured teammate to murder a man who helped the people of this jungle not starve to death because your plants were destroying their main source of food and income!" As he argued, Enzo moved closer and closer to her face, forcing her onto the ground as she continued to stare at him in fear.

Juniper's lips trembled and her eyes were tearing up. "B-b-but..."

"How come you punish entire villages by cutting off their water supplies if they disobey even your smallest order? How come your killer plants go around attacking anyone that's not part of your little inner circle? Who exactly *are* you helping? Tell me! Your plants? You force them to grow thrice their normal size until they mutate into man-eating monsters or pump out crops in tons! Where'd you get the cotton for all those shirts you and your little society are wearing? You've probably made supersize cotton stems and keep them alive in an extremely humid, scorching part of the world they wouldn't be able to survive in on their own! Oh! And let me take a wild guess—you've probably 'asked' the people who live around the jungle to harvest it and make the shirts for you without getting paid! You—make—me—sick!"

By that point, Enzo was hovering over Juniper's face as she wept and sniffled. She held her arm up just above her face. "I'm sorry!" she cried. "I—I didn't mean it! I'm sorry, okay?"

Domino stared at Juniper and Enzo in disbelief.

"I'll do anything! I'll fix everything, I swear!" Juniper sobbed. "I just wanted to help! I didn't mean to hurt anyone!"

Nobody else made a peep. They just stared at Enzo with awestricken gazes.

"Take off your clothes..." Enzo replied in a threatening tone of voice.

"W-what?" Juniper inquired, her hands shaking as she wiped away her tears.

Enzo turned to face Juniper's followers. "*All* of you! Take off your clothes and make a pile!"

Hesitant at first, Juniper sniffled and failed to cease her weeping as she was unbuttoning her plaid shirt with trembling hands.

The other women soon followed.

Farther away, Ken and Starabey were still observing the drama after all that time.

Starabey's eyes darted around. He leaned onto his right foot and placed one hand on his hip, glancing at Ken every so often. He pursed his lips like a horse and blew out air as he shifted his weight onto his other foot, turning his head away.

Ken sighed and raised his eyebrow at him. "I really appreciate you listening to me, Starabey," he said, "but I think it's safe to go now. You don't always have to wait for my permission. I'm just trying to keep you all out of harm's way..."

Starabey looked back at Ken once more with a puzzled expression and pouting lips. After a few moments, he made a run for it.

Ken followed not too long after.

In the meantime, Juniper and her followers were already halfway done making a big pile of clothes.

"Ah! Starabey!" Enzo exclaimed as he hovered over to the blue-haired Balalacan. "Quick! I need you to use your lightning to set this pile on fire!"

"Um..." Starabey stared back at him in utter confusion, then averted his gaze toward Ken.

"Yes," groaned Ken, rolling his eyes.

Zephyr quickly backed away to a safe distance.

Starabey then followed Enzo to the pile of clothes, holding his head down and his eyes away from the nude women. He made several short and rapid strums on his guitar, allowing high-pitched metallic sound waves to gush through the clearing. Once sparks flew from the metal strings, he let his pick slide off before pressing the button on the head.

The clearing turned blue. An electric current flashed through to the clothes pile with a loud screeching sound as it traveled through the air. Within seconds, the pile was set ablaze.

"Oooooo!" Juniper and the women gasped with eyes full of wonder.

Once finished, Starabey moved his guitar onto his back by turning the strap and zipped up his guitar pick safely in his pocket.

"Oh! Ms. Juniper," said Enzo. "I do have *one* more small request to ask of you."

"O-okay?" she mumbled anxiously.

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After a long, awkward, excruciating walk back to the village where Sublivion had previously refilled all the wells with fresh water, the SPANK gang, Zephyr, and Juniper found themselves inside a large hut full of stuffy air, dirt, and light-skinned half-naked men. One half of the room was occupied by big wooden contraptions with long, thin, colorful threads tied to each end, like the strings on a harp.

Some of the men tirelessly wove the fabric of various plaid patterns on them, while the rest sat at small tables on the other side, stitching together pieces of said fabric to form shirts.

A demon sat at the front. His height and build matched that of Sublivion impeccably. His skin was a golden yellow, and he had round eyes that covered almost the entire upper half of his face. His pupils were light bronze, but his irises varied in shades of yellow that were just on the verge of turning orange, as if the sun had poured its rays down in liquid form. His scleras, though, were a light creamy yellow to match. He had a smooth head with no nose, and a mouth large enough to snap someone's arm clean off. He even had glowing gold lines over it that resembled his teeth even when his mouth was closed. His two real rows of sharp, flesh-tearing teeth then showed once he turned his head and smiled at his mistress, Juniper, making everyone but Sublivion cringe at the sight of them. On his body was only a long white silken skirt with a yellow sash around his waist, leaving his toeless feet, clawed hands, and lean but wide muscular torso completely bare. Even when Juniper came to visit with her guests, the demon didn't stop working. He took one piece of freshly picked cotton after another into his hands and held it as dirt particles floated out of the white cotton balls and onto the floor. However, his magical power was only to control earth. Anything else stuck inside the cotton, he had to remove by hand.

"Um...Massire...you're gonna be helping my friend here for a while now, okay?" Juniper told him, nudging her head toward Domino and placing her hand on the yellow demon's shoulder with an apologetic look as she curled her lips inward.

Massire nodded in reply, keeping a light smile on his face.

"What are you doing?" asked Enzo.

"I'm...giving you Massire?" said Juniper.

"Not like *that*," Enzo replied. "We'll need some kind of guarantee you won't betray us and order the demon to turn against us."

Juniper sighed and looked at Massire with sadness in her eyes. "Give him your seal."

Massire walked over to Domino, and as his finger glowed with honey-orange and yellow colors, he lifted it up in front of Domino's face.

Domino made an angry grimace with his eyebrow raised high up toward his forehead. "The fuck does he want?" he whispered to Juniper in an agitated tone.

"Show him where you want him to put his seal," she explained, struggling to keep her tone pleasant and understanding.

"A *what*?"

"A symbol, a logo, a signature—*whatever* you humans wanna call it," Juniper groaned. "If you have someone's seal, they'll do anything you want them to."

"Domi, don't you remember how you got *Sublivion's* seal?" asked Bowie with a puzzled gaze, tilting his head to the side.

"Do *you*?" argued Domino.

Bowie shrugged.

"See? And you people expect *me* to remember every fucking little detail about my life!" Domino complained. He turned back to Juniper. "So, Massire will serve just me from now on? No one else?"

"Um...*yeah*. You can only give your seal to one person," replied Juniper, annoyance seeping through her vocal cords. "Why else would *this* guy still be following you?" She motioned her open palm toward Zephyr.

"I think you meant *him*, Your Radiance," Zephyr commented, pointing at Sublivion.

"Why are you still here?" Domino asked.

Zephyr smiled at him. "Oh—my mistake, friend. I merely wished to make sure there wasn't anything else you needed of me."

"Get out of my face, you retard," growled Domino as he attempted to push him away with the sole of his boot.

"All right, all right." Zephyr chuckled, raising his arms. "We'll finish the duel some other time, then. I have to go hunt down that giant snake before it starts dining on the locals."

Some of the workers in the hut glanced at each other with fear in their eyes, but they kept their hands busy nevertheless.

Zephyr bowed to Juniper. "Your Radiance." He then took his leave, giving one last smile and wave to Domino before exiting the hut.

Domino glared at him the entire time, as if trying to shoot flaming arrows through his head with his eyes.

"Now"—Ken coughed—"if we may continue..."

Domino's glare bounced around the area, from Ken to Starabey and all the way back to Massire, who was still looming over Domino with a kind smirk. Domino took his time due to uncertainty and fear of further humiliation brought on by his ignorance on the subject of seals, but in the end concluded that he needed to expose a piece of his flesh to the demon. Hopefully.

Massire drew a strange mark onto his skin as if his finger was a piece of burning metal, branding Domino with his unique personal symbol.

Domino didn't feel a thing, yet his skin sizzled like a piece of bacon on an open fire.

Once he was finished, Massire remained at Domino's side, awaiting orders from his new master.

Domino rubbed the glowing yellow mark on his skin with his palm out of curiosity. After satisfying his need to discover what a seal felt like to the touch, he tilted his head up and addressed the A-grade demoness Juniper. "All right, then..." he said. "I guess that's it. *Is that it?*"

"Yes..." Juniper sighed, struggling to keep her eyes from narrowing in anger any further.

"Great," said Domino with a wide grin and then headed toward the door. "Let's go, guys."

"I trust you'll do the right thing, Juniper," Enzo told her. "I know deep down, there is a reasonable person inside of you."

Once SPANK and their newest addition to the team, Massire, were outside, Domino turned to his teammates. "Great work back there, everyone," he said. "Starabey..."

The prince looked up, staring at Domino all puzzled.

"If you hadn't worked your vegan powers on that plant monster back there, Juniper would have probably never heard us out," said Domino.

Starabey's face lit up with a smile.

"And, Enzo," Domino continued, "you got Juniper to give us Massire on *my* terms. That's even better than I could have hoped for. My prediction was that we were gonna have to offer up Ken as a virgin sacrifice."

Ken rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Once Domino's speech was over, Bowie's smile diminished into a light frown as he stared into empty space.

"Okay—where to next?" asked Domino.

"I'm not your tour guide," Ken complained, folding his arms and raising an eyebrow. "But you're lucky I don't have the luxury of waiting for a more polite and respectful request." He looked around and walked past Domino.

"See—if it was anyone else that said it, you *wouldn't* have complained," argued Domino. He then turned around and proceeded to follow Ken, along with Bowie and Starabey. However, instead of taking a step forward, he bumped into Massire's exposed chest and abdomen face-first. He glanced at Sublivion with an anxious expression, and then looked up at Massire, who'd been staring at Domino with an unsettling smile the entire time. Domino's first reaction was that of fear. He didn't want Sublivion to possibly interpret any time spent with Massire or another elemental horseman as intimate or romantic. Then again, why was he even afraid? Sublivion was his minion and a really good friend. Domino just had some occasional harmless experimental thoughts about what it would be like if they were a couple. It was just for curiosity's sake. It wasn't like he was slowly developing a crush on him...*was* he?

Massire continued to gaze at Domino.

"Okay, new plan," Domino told him. "You do what you want, go wherever you want, don't try to follow me, and I'll let you know when I need you."

Massire nodded.

Suddenly, cheering and large furniture being tossed around sounded from inside the hut.

As a horde of men stampeded toward the hut's exit, Sublivion and Massire got ready to leap and push Domino out of the way.

However, Domino's reflexes compelled him to summon a magical tentacle from his body and transform its tip into a shield to protect him from the joyful, screaming workers that were running toward him.

The men at the front of the pack bumped into Domino's ethereal shield with loud, violent thumps and were pushed back onto the people behind them, forcing almost every one of them to lose balance and tumble onto the ground.

"Not guilty!" announced Domino, retracting his magical tentacle and raising his arms. "You two saw it! They came at me out of nowhere!"

Chapter Seven

From the Ashes

Snowflakes were gently floating around the SPANK crew as they traversed a dirt path surrounded by the snowy terrain of the mountainside. Snow was falling around them from the cloudy skies, but it quickly turned into a drizzle of rain when it got close to the path. Behind them was the mountain base and the local villages and above was their next target, Mount Xarko Upahar.

"It's so weird," Bowie commented. "Everything looks like it's the middle of winter, but it's not *cold*."

"Don't get too excited, Bowie," Ken warned him. "We don't have as much air to waste at these heights." He turned over a colorful folded piece of parchment he'd been reading off of the whole time they were making their slow hike. "But, yes, I agree. We're fortunate that the elemental master of fire is residing in the temple this week," he said. "According to the brochure, there is a grand-scale tunnel system inside the mountain connected to a giant furnace underneath the temple that provides free heating for the local residents. And when the elemental master of fire is the designated overseer at the temple, the furnace emits double the amount of heat than usual." He folded the parchment back and placed it under the pouch strap on his waist. "We must be walking just over one of the tunnels, then, which would explain the unusual warmth."

Domino sat atop Sublivion's shoulders as the demon did all the walking for the both of them. "This is such bullshit," he groaned. "Why do we need to be on some retarded list just to use the fucking lift?"

"Accept it, Domino," Ken replied with a sarcastic sigh. "You're just not a very important person."

"When I start my own business, I'll have a list, too, and then you'll be one of the dicks who won't be on it," argued Domino.

Ken spoke in monotone, not even looking up at Domino. "I guess I'll just have to kill myself, then."

Domino growled as his eyes rolled toward the back of his head.

"By the way, Domino," said Enzo, "back in the jungle, did you notice that Zephyr's sword...well...*talked*? It's highly possible he was a man turned into an inanimate object like myself—don't you think?"

Sublivion lightly turned his head to the side.

"Yeah...now that you mention it," Domino pondered aloud, "I think I remember him saying he recognized Sublivion." He faced Sublivion and waited for his response.

However, Sublivion kept quiet as everyone stared at him.

And before long, the team arrived in front of colossal stone gates.

The snowflakes were floating over the huge wall that stretched far beyond what their eyes could perceive. There were no sounds to be heard. Nothing but the gentle gusts of wind.

There were words in several different languages carved into the stone of the gates. The one in Kitarian read: "Please pull on the string! Thank you kindly!"

The young men's eyes fell to the string that was protruding out of a hole on the gates from high above.

Domino hopped off Sublivion and tugged at the string. Nothing happened. He turned to his teammates.

Bowie just shrugged, Starabey merely averted his gaze while scratching the back of his head, Sublivion stood his ground in silence, and Ken stared blankly into nothing.

Annoyed, Domino continued to tug at the string.

"Yes—because pulling harder and several times more will make all the difference," Ken commented.

"Maybe they're on the toilet?" Starabey added.

But Domino refused to listen and continued pulling the string.

All of a sudden, a loud clacking sound of stone and wood boomed. Giant gears turned behind the decorative holes in the wall, opening the gates to just the right width for two men at a time to pass through comfortably.

Domino's eyes opened wide, sparkling with awe. His jaw would have dropped down to his feet if it could.

"Mr. President!" said Enzo as he erected the shaft of his shovel body.

Pumpkinhead gently nodded at the group with a warm, comforting smile upon his orange pumpkin face. Though his grin was as all-inspiring and mesmerizing as always, not a single one of the members of SPANK could keep their eyes off his toned abs and chest that were left uncovered. He was as beautiful as a painting with his charcoal-black skin tone—a work of art in mind, body, and apparently anima as well. On his legs, he sported a pair of knee-high harem pants made of white cloth with a red squarelike pattern stitched into the parts around his knees. On his feet, he wore boots covered in long, frizzy black fur, and a golden ring with a mesmerizing purple-and-reddish uncut ruby lay around his ring finger. "It's good to see you again, Domino—Enzo," he said, bowing his head lightly toward both of them respectively. "What brings you to our little sanctuary?"

Domino's eyes were permanently stuck in surprise and admiration mode. No words could escape his lips. The realization that his country's beloved president was also an elemental master beat his cognition processes into a state of malfunction.

Ken sighed and rolled his eyes. "We seek passage to Regaliz's resort," he said. "I'm Ken, this is Sublivion, Bowie, Starabey—and Domino and Enzo, you already know." He pointed at his teammates as he said their names.

"It's nice to meet you," answered Pumpkinhead. "We're *always* happy to provide tests of worthiness to newcomers."

He escorted the young men and Sublivion inside. One by one, they passed through the gates, which closed behind them on their own.

"What exactly does this test entail, if you don't mind me asking?" Ken inquired.

"Regaliz doesn't want just anyone coming to his resort," Pumpkinhead explained. "In exchange for providing training grounds and meditation chambers for my brothers and myself, we promised one of us would always be up here to see if the people who want to visit his resort are worthy."

"Do we get one of those lift passes, then?" asked Bowie.

"That's right." Pumpkinhead chuckled. "You'll be able to come and go as you please."

As they walked, Domino kept inspecting President Pumpkinhead's body from the back with envy, but also great admiration at the same time. "Can I ask you a question? You don't have to answer if you don't want to," he said with an inquisitive smile.

Pumpkinhead turned his head back to look at him. "Go ahead."

"Your name is Horatio Pumpkinhead," said Domino, "but...don't demons have just *one* name?"

"You're not wrong," Pumpkinhead replied. "I used to have a different name, but at one point, I thought if I was *truly* going to prove I worked in service of my people, it only made sense to take on a *human* name." He glanced at Domino with an inviting grin.

Moments later, the group arrived in the circular stone-paved courtyard. In front of it towered a tall pyramid temple with jagged layers made of stacked stone blocks.

"Mr. President, I don't mean to sound rude, but could you please tell us what the test is sooner rather than later?" Ken insisted.

President Pumpkinhead turned to Domino with a sly grin. "You wanted to challenge Zephyr to a fight back in Kumkurda, correct?"

With unblinking eyes, Domino nodded.

"If you're so eager to fight a powerful warrior like Zephyr, then I'm sure *I* won't pose as much of a threat," said Pumpkinhead as he extended his hand toward him. "Care to indulge me?"

Domino's eyes sparkled, and his heart continued to pound aggressively inside his chest. He was so honored, so flattered, he could have cried right there and then.

"Come on—make space," Ken ordered and took to the sidelines with Bowie and Starabey.

Pumpkinhead flicked his finger against the stem of his pumpkin head, lighting a small flame that burned without damaging it, like a candle that refused to melt. "If you can put it out, I'll let you pass," he said.

Domino remained standing still, staring at President Pumpkinhead completely dumbfounded. He couldn't force his mind to clear up, regardless of effort. He was still mesmerized by the thought of President Pumpkinhead, his greatest idol, giving him all of his attention.

"Must I make the first move?" Pumpkinhead sighed with a smile. *"Very well."* He then formed a giant flaming serpent and released the flames upon Domino and Sublivion.

Once the smoke cleared, out of a pink-and-green ethereal cocoon emerged the fusion Subidom, grinning at Pumpkinhead as he approached him—four magical pink tentacles forming out of his back. He chuckled in his thundering phantasmic voice. *"I will douse your flame."*

President Pumpkinhead taunted him with a confident smirk.

As promised, Subidom sent his magical tentacles toward him, aiming for Pumpkinhead's head as he kept his manic eyes focused on him.

Pumpkinhead stood in place, waiting for the tentacles to come close enough. But despite their incredible speed, he bent his entire upper body backward and squatted just enough to allow the tentacles to pass without touching him.

Subidom stared at Pumpkinhead with a puzzled grimace as his tentacles retracted back into him.

While Subidom was dazed, Pumpkinhead fired flaming spheres from his palms at him like a meteor shower.

In response, Subidom transformed his magical tentacles into a shield and protected himself before the flames engulfed him.

The two circled around each other. Their steps were as silent as the paws of a lion tiptoeing on dry dirt, ready to pounce on its prey.

Bowie casually approached Pumpkinhead with Enzo in his right hand and tapped the president's shoulder.

"Yes?" said Pumpkinhead with a smile, looking as if he was now completely ignoring the fight and focusing solely on Bowie.

"Do you have any snacks?" Bowie inquired.

"Of course! Help yourself!" he replied. *"Just go inside, and you'll see the kitchen on your left."*

Bowie thanked him and headed into the temple.

"Such a nice man," Enzo commented.

Meanwhile, Subidom's magical tentacles returned to their original form and rushed to grab Pumpkinhead by his feet.

Fashioning a dashing, even menacing smile, Pumpkinhead jumped backward into a headstand with his arms behind his back and swung his

legs, thus hopping back onto his feet, completely evading Subidom's assault.

Ken's and Starabey's eyes widened in awe.

Subidom huffed out a hot and enraged breath through his nostrils as he sent out his tentacles to continue the onslaught—only, this time, he'd narrowed their tips to become even deadlier to the touch.

Pumpkinhead let out a sinister, satisfied chuckle. "Relax—we're just having fun," he said, evading Subidom's jabbing tentacles with his hands still behind his back.

With a piercing glare pointed at Pumpkinhead, Subidom then turned the tips of his ethereal pink tentacles into large bone-severing sword blades with which he slashed at Pumpkinhead all at once, from both sides.

Pumpkinhead propelled himself into the air by blasting fire into the ground beneath him to avoid the attack.

In turn, the tips of Subidom's tentacles transformed into big clawed hands and thrust themselves into the ground to swing Subidom over to Pumpkinhead with his claws pointed directly at him.

Within a single second, as he was descending, Pumpkinhead grabbed hold of Subidom's wrists, pulled him closer, and after doing a semi-summersault, kicked him to the ground below.

While Pumpkinhead landed on his feet, Subidom crashed and broke the stone-paved floor due to having managed to shield himself with his magical tentacles somewhat. He struggled a bit to rise off the ground as his body ached from the impact and the scratches on his skin stung. He stared at Pumpkinhead with fury blazing in his eyes.

"When you're tense, you can't adapt quickly enough," Pumpkinhead told him, smiling. "Why are you taking this so seriously, anyway?"

But like an agitated animal, Subidom lunged at Pumpkinhead, slashing at him with his claws and tentacles without rest. It was getting harder to breathe. His energy was slowly leaving him.

As if he wasn't putting in absolutely any effort, Pumpkinhead continued dodging the attacks and struggled to keep himself from laughing at Subidom's feeble attempts at hurting him.

At one point, Subidom stepped back. His four tentacles merged into one, this time coming out of his chest. As he panted for breath, sweating

beyond control and glaring at Pumpkinhead without yielding, the tentacle's tip transformed into a hideous, monstrous, anglerfish-toothed head with hollow eyes.

It rushed toward Pumpkinhead, opening its massive jaws that stretched to swallow ten men at once.

The moment the monster was at an arm's length from him, Pumpkinhead jumped, squatting midair, and landed right on top of Subidom's tentacle. "The cruel irony of life is..."

Subidom's angry frown quickly shifted into a menacing grin.

His magical tentacle enveloped Pumpkinhead's legs like a blob of living slime. Within seconds, it crawled up them until it swallowed Pumpkinhead's entire body and part of his head.

"Answers often find you only when you stop *searching* for them," said Pumpkinhead with a smile.

Subidom's smirk widened. His heart was pounding relentlessly.

Then, a faint orange glow suddenly appeared from within the ethereal insides of Subidom's tentacle.

His overjoyed expression suddenly turned to shock and despair.

The tentacle caught fire and blazed its way back to Subidom like it was traveling on a strip of oil. Before he even realized it, the fire reached him and blasted him into the soft, moist dirt over forty meters away.

Pumpkinhead dusted himself off—his body unscathed. He used the tips of his fingers to put out the small flame atop his head.

"*Shit!*" shouted Starabey as he ran to Subidom's aid.

Ken closed his eyes and held his head down for a moment, then followed behind at a casual pace.

When Starabey arrived, Subidom was enveloped by a sparkling pink-and-mint cocoon, separating back into Sublivion and Domino.

While Sublivion wept on the ground, gripping his mask with his claws, Domino struggled to stand himself up. He grasped his abdomen and limped forward, letting out quiet grunts of pain with each step.

Upon seeing the rage in Domino's teary eyes, Starabey reluctantly left his arms hovering around him instead of helping him up. He then turned his attention to Sublivion and placed his hands on his shoulders, trying to console him. "Hey—it's okay. It's over."

Domino faced Pumpkinhead as the president approached him. “No! It’s *not* over!” he yelled like a beaten dog. His peridot eyes glistened from so many tears. Despair spread its foulness within him. He could only think about how much of a fool he’d made of himself in front of a man he revered so much. He couldn’t forgive himself for not living up to the expectations of someone who believed in him, in his potential. Pumpkinhead had given him a chance, and he’d blown it. So much power...yet he still couldn’t complete the task. “I can do it! I swear!” Domino cried. His hands were shaking, and he could barely stand up straight, but his exhaustion was completely numbed out by the overwhelming feeling of defeat and shame.

“We’ll try again tomorrow. Right now, you and your friend need some time to recover,” said Pumpkinhead, turning his head toward Sublivion.

“No! No—you can’t *do* this!” shouted Domino. He let out a moan as the pain in his gut slashed through him again. “I can still...I...” He panted and gulped down all the saliva in his mouth. The pain pulsed inside of him. His skin burned from the scratches. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth while sobbing. He lost all feeling in his limbs.

Pumpkinhead caught him in his arms before he collapsed. He turned to Ken. “Would you believe that...I wouldn’t have hurt them if I didn’t know what the future held?”

“I know *exactly* what you mean...” Ken sighed.

• • • •

Domino woke up to the sounds of Sublivion’s quiet mumbles and sniffles. His eyes were only slightly open, and his vision a little blurry, but he could make out the lit torches on the moist windowless stone walls nonetheless. The others must have taken him inside the temple since he blacked out. There was a warm, light pressure on his left arm.

Sublivion was kneeling and holding Domino’s arm firmly in his hands, his masked head buried into the sheets of the bed Domino had been lying on. “Jai probhjati tagho jagho bihti svegh tai htjeghti jai bihti, alghi jai samgho svegh zabrghljati,” the demon cried. “Tai bihvao tagho dragho premghja jai, gosphjodar...i jai negh chakh bihti tkho jai bihti napravghljeno—tkho tai...zaslughjiti. Jai radhjidju vishghije dobrhjo,

gosphjodar—jai kunighti. Jai molghjiti...dodhjiti natraghj premghja jai...”

Domino had slowly been learning more of Deghmonghnjichki the longer he spent fused together with Sublivion. From what he could gather, Sublivion was upset about not being good enough, and he appeared to have been asking—no, *praying*—for Domino to wake up. Those last few words lit a spark of adrenaline inside Domino. His heart beat faster, and his palms were sweating. He was unsure what to think. What Sublivion said brought so much torment and chaos to Domino’s mind, he found himself unable to think about anything else. To the best of his developing knowledge, “dodhjiti natraghj premghja jai” meant “come back to me.”

Suddenly, there was a long creak of a wooden door opening and thumping footsteps following shortly after.

Domino kept his eyes gently squinted—enough to make it seem as if he were asleep, but still allowing himself to somewhat make out what was happening in the room.

Starabey stood by the door, but then reluctantly walked up to Sublivion. “Hey,” he said, placing one hand on the demon’s shoulder. “How you holding up?”

“In order...” Sublivion sighed, raising his head up from the sheets with his mask still pointing down toward Domino’s body. “But he...still sleepgh.”

Starabey stared at him in awe and confusion, unblinking. “I...thought you didn’t *speak* Kitarian.”

“Veghn mastergh and I one, I able to knowgh meni thing he knowgh. I learn, and...I *feel*...” Sublivion stroked Domino’s forehead with his palm and moved strands of his hair from his face. “Since I meet mastergh, I understand haugh stupid be this vurgd in jor language...‘please.’” He chuckled and smiled. “In Deghmonghnjichki, ve not have separate vurgd. Ve seigh, ‘jai molghjiti,’ or ‘molghjiti tai’ when ask something of someone. It mean...‘preigh.’”

“You mean...‘pray?’” asked Starabey.

Sublivion nodded. “Ve preigh the other does vhatgh ve ask them. Ve...preigh to vhughever listen... That is all ve can do...preigh.”

"Hey—I've been wondering something for a while now," said Starabey. "Is it true that...when you give someone your seal, you'll never feel like you want to leave, no matter how badly your master would treat you?"

Sublivion gave him a light nod without turning his head away from Domino. "The seal...petchath...be contract betveeghn ju and jor mastergh. Ju cannot leave... Ju not *vaghnt* to leave..."

"So...what then?" asked Starabey.

"Somedeygh...veghn someone come to help..." said Sublivion and turned his head to face him, "ju must let them."

"But...if someone were to ask you if you were happy," Starabey continued to question him, "you'd be able to answer *honestly*, right?"

"If I be vithought joigh, I not seigh a vurghd."

"Are you? Happy?"

Sublivion turned his head back toward Domino's body on the bed. "Mastergh is kind," he explained. Gently, he stroked Domino's hair. "He never tell me I must do something I not *vaghnt*. He care for me. I... *vaghnt* care for mastergh back."

"Then...why did you cry after you and Domino defused?" said Starabey.

Sublivion stood up and turned toward Starabey. "Because I responsible! Mastergh fail because I *veakgh*!" he shouted, then grasped his masked head with his clawed hands. "Jer jai bihti *kukghavitsa*!" he roared, punching the wall with the side of his fist, almost nearly bringing the whole thing crumbling down.

Both Starabey and Domino flinched. It was like the sound of thunder had taken on a physical form.

Sublivion's body went limp and he slid onto his knees in tears.

"Whoa! *Whoa*!" Starabey chuckled with an awkward forced smile across his face as he rushed to Sublivion's side, patting his back and trying to help him stand back up. He spoke in bit more of a cheerful voice. "Hey, come on. Don't cry. Look, I've only known you guys for a short while, but from what I've seen, I'm sure Domino doesn't blame *you* for what happened."

"Ju don't understandgh..." hissed Sublivion. "Subidom cannotgh control *vaghter* because I can't allauvgh it...because I *afraid*..."

While Domino continued to lie still in his bed, his heart felt heavy enough to drag him all the way to the center of the Earth. “I *don’t* blame you...” he said.

Sublivion and Starabey turned their heads, staring at him with surprised faces in silence.

Domino slowly sat up as he gripped his stomach and winced from the slight but sharp pain that was still lingering. With a disappointed frown and an angry look in his eyes, he stared at the floor. “He said *I* could beat him. I should have been able to, with or without your powers. I let him down...I let *everyone* down...”

“M-mastergh...” Sublivion wept and crawled over to the bed.

Domino used the chance when Sublivion got close to wrap his arms around his neck, burying his face into his shoulder. He hoped he could hide the warm tears that formed on the edges of his eyes. “It wasn’t your fault...” He sniffled.

Sublivion’s hands trembled and his chest heaved.

In the meantime, Starabey tiptoed his way out of the room, gently closing the door behind him with a light smile on his face.

• • • •

Once Domino had gathered enough strength to walk on his own, he and Sublivion followed the underground stone-paved hallway to the sounds of chatter coming from one of the other rooms. The flaming torches on the walls lit their way, but Domino still felt the need to touch the drywall as he took another step forward. A spark of surprise flew through his head once his hand made contact with the stone. He expected it to be cold, but it was almost hot to the touch. It must have been because of the furnace underneath the temple. As Ken said before, the flames inside it would always burn hotter when the elemental master of fire was present.

Soon enough, Domino and Sublivion came across a slightly open door. Judging by the volume of the voices, it was clear they’d reached their destination.

Domino waited by the door, peering inside with a concerned frown on his face. He couldn’t force himself to go in and show his face in front of

everyone just yet. Especially Pumpkinhead. He was a failure. Worthless. He didn't deserve to even be in the president's presence.

Inside the room, Pumpkinhead was sitting at a simple wooden table, along with Starabey, Ken, Bowie, and Enzo, who had his very own seat as well.

The torches on the walls provided humble lighting but still managed to make the oils on the roasted turkey steaming on the table glisten.

The already torn-up bird lay on a bed of soft, wet, thin flatbread that had been marinating in the juices. The thinner parts of its skin were almost burned to delicious salty crisps, while the rest was almost sliding off the tender meat.

Ken kept glaring at Bowie, who was devouring the turkey leg like he hadn't eaten in days and using the fork only to eat the flatbread with. "Bowie, your knife is looking awfully lonely," he complained. "Would you mind?"

"Actually, he's eating just fine," Starabey commented with half a mouthful, chewing on his seitan cordon bleu with a side dish of seasonal salad leaves and chard topped with a sour dressing. "In Balalaca, if you have time to think about etiquette, that means you're not enjoying yourself enough."

"All right." Ken sighed, placing down his fork and knife. "I will admit, this *has* been a rather tedious endeavor." He picked up his roasted wing, holding it by the ends with only his index fingers and thumbs as he slowly chewed on every small bite he took. "My compliments to the chef, by the way," he told Pumpkinhead with a light smile curled up on his face.

Meanwhile, Pumpkinhead would just toss pieces of the turkey and the wet flatbread inside his pumpkin head through the wide zigzag carving that was his mouth. Each time he did that, the warm light from inside the pumpkin shone brighter for a moment. "Thank you," he said. "I just wish Starabey would have been able to try it. I was hoping to get some feedback from a local."

"Well....in my opinion...the only way you can fuck up turkey with mlntsi is by not adding enough turkey grease," replied Starabey.

"Good to know," said Pumpkinhead, chuckling.

"Mr. President," said Enzo, "now that we have some time to spare, I'd like to continue our conversation from before about the very important issue threatening the continued development of our civilization."

"Oh my Xar..." groaned Ken.

"The suffocating fabrics we call clothes are murdering our youth as we speak," said Enzo. "Raping them, too."

Pumpkinhead stared at the shovel with a wide smile.

"You've most likely already been notified of our triumph in the Galana Jungle, over the mighty A-grade demoness Juniper," Enzo continued. "There's your proof! If we can get every single person in the world to burn their clothes, we'll bring an end to wars, disease, world hunger—"

"Your concern, and hard work conducting research, are greatly appreciated," said Pumpkinhead, "but I'm afraid I will have to give you the same answer as I have at the picking ceremony. If you take one vanity item away from the people, they will just find a different one. That would be the *best*-case scenario. Worst case—the prices of clothes rise, people smuggle them, and wear them illegally in the privacy of their homes."

"So, are you saying we should just wait for an apocalypse?" Enzo inquired.

"It might be true that you really *do* know better than everyone else," Pumpkinhead told him. "However...just because you know something others don't...doesn't mean you can't try to make them understand. If you take the time to talk to them, explain things to them...you'll be surprised how many might come to understand that what you're doing is for their own good."

"*Aha!* Yes, that makes *perfect* sense!" said Enzo with genuine glee in his tone. "I'll be frank, I've had my doubts about you, Mr. President, but now, I finally see why you've never lost a single 'best political leader' and 'sexiest man alive' title."

"Thank you," Pumpkinhead replied. "That's very kind of you to say."

"Though I now understand I may not be able to convince people to burn their clothes, I think I shall continue to take that role upon myself. Perhaps others will one day follow in my example," Enzo added.

The door creaked open, and heads turned.

Facing the floor, Domino walked in with an ashamed, defeated frown.

"Please," said Pumpkinhead, extending his arm toward the empty chairs at the table, "have a seat."

After a long pause, Domino took a seat several chairs away from him.

Sublivion followed and sat next to him.

Starabey filled two plates with turkey and thin, wet flatbread and handed them to Domino and Sublivion. "You guys are gonna *love* this!"

"I think Mr. Pumpkinhead is secretly Xar," said Bowie with a full mouth.

A smile and a light chuckle managed to creep out of Domino. "And you've only figured it out *now*?"

"Well, we can't help we're a bunch of *retards*," Ken added, smiling snidely.

Domino closed his eyes, trying to hold in his laughter.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Ken," said Enzo, "Mr. Pumpkinhead is far too humble to be showing off his plethora of talents and rock-hard abs all willy-nilly."

"I'm glad you two are feeling better," said Pumpkinhead, smiling at Domino and Sublivion. He then turned his head and looked at each one of the SPANK members respectively. "Now that you're all here—before I forget—I'd like to ask a small favor of you."

Everyone but Domino turned their heads toward him.

"I'd like to keep my magica a secret. For now, at least," he said. "Would that be all right with all of you?"

"Don't worry. We won't tell anyone," Starabey assured him.

"You have our word," added Ken with a light nod.

Pumpkinhead smiled. "Thank you. If the people found out, it would cause me a lot of inconvenience at this time that I can't afford to have."

"If I may ask," said Enzo, "what *is* your reason for keeping this a secret from the public? I'm sure people would be thrilled to hear just how powerful you really are!"

"Let's just say I'm currently working on a very important personal project and that I'd like to keep disturbances and additional things to deal with at a minimum."

"Ah. Yes, of course," Enzo agreed.

Pumpkinhead turned to the blond youth sitting several seats away. "Domino?"

The young lord's disappointed eyes darted his way.

"I hope you won't object to a rematch tomorrow," said Pumpkinhead with a smirk.

Domino's brows tilted downward toward his nose as he glared at the table and took a deep breath. "No..."

Pumpkinhead's smile remained undisturbed.

Ken raised an eyebrow out of confusion and concern. "Really?" he asked.

"I'm already a failure. At least people won't be able to call me a quitter, too." Domino sighed, glaring into the distance.

"Harsh words," said Pumpkinhead. "I can't really understand how a man with your accomplishments and determination could think so lowly of himself."

Domino closed his eyes. "Please...I don't need any more expectations put on me...I don't want to be a disappointment again."

"Disappointment?" Pumpkinhead chuckled. "You're ready to defy both physical and mental wounds for the sake of reaching your goal. Most people would be bedridden for days after what you've been through today. And an even greater number of people would have given up if they felt the way you are feeling now. Who exactly did you disappoint?"

Domino averted his eyes. "I don't believe you..." he growled.

"I don't need you to believe me," Pumpkinhead told him. "I need you to believe in *yourself*."

"Why? It doesn't matter what I think," argued Domino as he shot him a glaring look. "Nobody can be objective when they're supposed to judge themselves. My opinion of myself means *nothing*."

"I disagree," said Pumpkinhead, smiling at Domino with a warm grin. "What do fish know of flowers? What do cobblers know of gold and rubies?"

Domino cocked his head up. "Well, I'm pretty sure a clockmaker will know how *clocks* work."

"But in the real world, clockmakers don't *make* clocks," said Pumpkinhead. "In the real world, lions can mate with sheep, and birds can birth horses. In the real world, nobody knows us better than we ourselves."

Domino turned his head to the side, avoiding Pumpkinhead's eyes in silence as he picked up a fork and finally started eating so as to show him he had no intention of continuing the conversation with him.

"I'll let you finish up," said Pumpkinhead as he stood up from the table. "I think I'll retire a bit earlier today." However, upon reaching the door, he grabbed the handle and then suddenly turned back around. "One more thing..."

Domino looked at him, annoyance still lingering in his eyes.

"I believe that, to a true friend, you are more important than your friendship. And I hope you consider me one of them." He walked out the door, shutting it behind him.

Domino looked back down at his plate and continued eating. A light smile crept onto his face.

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Sublivion and Starabey stood alongside Pumpkinhead in the courtyard the next morning. The skies were clear enough to allow the surrounding mountains to showcase their snow-painted beauty.

Ken was the first to walk out the temple doors with his signature unimpressed and disinterested facial expression. However, on his body, he no longer wore his old robes. Instead, he sported longer and looser white robes that dragged across the floor as he walked and featured a geometric flame pattern around the bottom. He'd tied the pouch full of medicinal weeds that Juniper had given him around his waist. "Are you sure you're ready to part with these? You won't be getting them back," Ken told Pumpkinhead upon approaching the group.

"Don't worry about it," Pumpkinhead replied. "My designer is very passionate about his work. He's always delighted to get more requests. Besides, I have a good reason to ask for a wardrobe update now. I've been wearing those old things for decades."

Bowie was the second one to come out. With Enzo in his hand and a jolly smile on his face, he strolled over to the group wearing a pair of wide ashen-gray harem pants that clung onto his hips for dear life. The only thing keeping them from slipping off were his plump ass cheeks.

Finally, Domino walked into the courtyard with a wide grin, strutting in his new pair of black pants, black boots, black gloves, and a long black coat with five pairs of undone buttons. The same items of clothing Pumpkinhead had worn during his most recent presidential picking.

"Hey—did you know your sweat smells like bacon?" Domino commented.

Pumpkinhead smirked. "Really? I hadn't noticed." He straightened his back and crossed his arms. "Am I allowed to assume you're feeling better?"

"Until I lose again." Domino sighed, rolling his eyes as he struggled to keep his smile curled up.

"Don't worry," said Pumpkinhead, chuckling. "You won't be participating today."

Surprise and confusion forced Domino's eyes to open wider. "What?"

Sublivion stepped forward, holding his head down and fiddling around with his fingers as he held them in front of his abdomen. "I... vaghnt help m-mastergh..." he said. "I vaghnt...make mastergh...h-happghi..."

Domino's face was flushed with tints of red. He gazed at Sublivion for a brief moment and then looked away as he was clearing his throat. "I—I...um..." He took a deep breath and stepped closer to Sublivion, keeping his eyes on the ground. "L-look, I...I really appreciate the gesture, but I know you don't *really* wanna—"

"I no vaghnt be afraid anighmore...mastergh..." said Sublivion, raising his head up slightly.

Domino looked up at his masked face, his eyes trapped in awe.

"It's settled, then," said Pumpkinhead. Once again, he flicked his finger against the top of his pumpkin head to light the stem on fire.

Everyone except Sublivion and him walked away to make space for the two of them and stood outside the stone circle in the ground.

"So...are you guys...*official*?" Starabey asked, leaning his head toward Domino but averting his gaze toward the opposite direction.

Domino turned to Starabey with angry brows to complement his red cheeks. "The fuck are you talking about?"

"You and *Sublivion*," Starabey replied.

"What?" barked Domino. "Whose ass did you pull *that* out of?"

"When you were asleep, he held your hand and talked about how he wanted to 'please' you and stuff," Starabey explained. "And then, when you woke up, you hugged him really tight—"

"Okay!" Domino shrieked, shutting his eyes in both anger and shame. He then let out a sigh. "Look, it's probably the seal talking."

"But you only have *Massire's* seal," Enzo commented.

"Okay, first of all, how the fuck do *you* know that?" Domino shouted. "It's probably on my lower back or some shit!"

"It's not on your posterior, either," said Enzo.

Ken snickered.

"You saw me *naked*?" Domino screeched.

"Little Firecrotch laid me against your bedroom wall last night when he was borrowing your bathroom."

"My tub wasn't big enough," said Bowie, shrugging.

"I never knew you slept in the nude, by the way!" Enzo added. "I can't tell you how happy that makes me!"

Ken's laughter had gotten louder in the meantime.

"Don't change the subject!" Domino complained. He turned to Ken with an even redder face and steeper-tilted eyebrows. "Stop laughing, you fucking retard!"

"Maybe the seal is between your butt cheeks," Bowie suggested.

"No," said Enzo.

Starabey stared at Sublivion and Pumpkinhead in the center of the courtyard, smiling. "So, all this time he wasn't *forced* to carry you around and follow you—he just had a really big *crush* on you."

Domino gazed out into the courtyard, his awe-filled eyes following Sublivion relentlessly.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the stone-paved circle, Pumpkinhead was walking around Sublivion, eyeing him with a sinister, sneering look. "I'm curious...what do *you* think of me?"

Sublivion stood his ground, as still as a mountain, as firm as a statue. "I believe ju be verghi cunning man," Sublivion replied, "but ju do all for good of jor people."

Pumpkinhead suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned his back to Sublivion, holding his head down as he spoke. "I wish you didn't think so highly of me." He sighed, his grin slowly diminishing. "Good intent

cannot justify ill methods of achieving one's goals, but...sometimes you have to make a choice between the two."

Sublivion turned both his head and body toward Pumpkinhead. "I do not knowh ju vhell, but I do not look at vhath people *are*," he said. "Vhath matters most to me is vhath ju vish to *be*."

With a light nod and a smile returning to his carved-out mouth, Pumpkinhead faced Sublivion. "You and Domino...you remind me of my wife..."

"Ju...have vife?" asked Sublivion.

Pumpkinhead nodded with a smile. "She's away, currently...but I... still have hope we'll be reunited in the near future," he said. He proceeded to circle around Sublivion at a strolling pace once again. He let out a light chuckle. "No amount of physical pain could leave a scar as deep as her wounded pride. All it took were a few words to break her."

"I...fear, too..." Sublivion confessed, tilting his masked head down, "veghn someone shout at me...tell me I am bad..." His hands trembled more as the moments passed. "If I hit back...ju vilgh...shout at me..."

Pumpkinhead let out a sorrowful sigh and kicked Sublivion's back with tremendous force, knocking the two-meter-tall demon to the ground.

Sublivion grunted as he hit the stone floor and kept his head down.

"What about *my* punishment?" asked Pumpkinhead as he continued to circle him.

"I-it...could be...vurghse..." Sublivion cried.

In response, Pumpkinhead kicked Sublivion in the stomach.

Sublivion's muffled moan echoed through the courtyard. He curled up in a ball, gripping his abdomen.

"I intend to kill you, and you're more worried about whether I will raise my *voice* at you?" Pumpkinhead growled as he kicked Sublivion even harder. "Domino failed the test because of *you*!" he shouted. He continued to beat Sublivion's body, each kick weighing more than the last. "And now you're here, wasting everyone's time!"

Sublivion's body rolled over from the force of Pumpkinhead's kick. He covered his masked head with his arms and tensed his muscles.

As they observed the fight, Domino's, Starabey's, and Ken's faces were stricken with terror while Bowie's eyelids merely slightly dropped over his eyes.

"You think just lying here makes you good?" yelled Pumpkinhead. "You think letting me beat you will somehow make everything you did right? I mourn the air wasted on your breath! Do us all a favor and die already!"

Sublivion's mind was overtaken by whispering voices. "It's your fault," they said. "You're a failure. You're worthless. Master is suffering because of you and your incompetence!"

"M-mastergh..." Sublivion whimpered quietly. As the voices continued to corrupt his thoughts, suddenly, he realized something. Why was he listening to Pumpkinhead and the voices? Why did he believe that man, whom he'd seen only twice in his life, and who did nothing but hurt him and Domino? Why did the words of an insignificant stranger who was beating him mean so much to him? How was it possible that man deserved the same subordination from him as his beloved master, Domino? Sublivion finally understood... He did not owe Pumpkinhead his kindness. In fact, he owed him *pain*.

After a few moments, the crying and whimpering ceased.

Sublivion pressed his palms against the ground and struggled to stand up.

In turn, Pumpkinhead took a couple of steps back as a gleeful yet sneering grin returned to his face. He spread his legs, squatted, and held one fist up while the other remained close to his chest.

Slowly, Sublivion opened up his palms toward the floor and summoned two jet streams of clear water from his palms, right through the latex that made up his costume like it wasn't even there. He cut the stone into a square shape, picked it up, and lifted it above his head. His hands trembled but refused to falter.

Pumpkinhead remained perfectly still, gazing up into Sublivion's black horse gimp mask with a taunting smirk.

Reluctantly, Sublivion threw the block of stone and earth at Pumpkinhead with less than half the force he could have used, still not ready to fully commit to harming Pumpkinhead.

Pumpkinhead moved to the side with his upper body remaining in the same exact position as the stone shattered before his feet.

When it hit the floor, Sublivion immediately stepped back, holding his clawed hands in front of himself and hunching his back in fear. However, moments later, he took a deep breath and shot more jet streams into the ground.

"Your fusion with Domino has one of the strongest bonds I've ever seen," Pumpkinhead commented.

Sublivion tossed another large piece of rubble at him.

Pumpkinhead evaded it, moving only his feet once again. "But it's imbalanced. The strength of your bond didn't come from a place of love—*any* type of love."

Sublivion panted as he picked up a piece of the ground that challenged his physical strength. "I...*love*...m-mastergh..."

"I don't doubt it," said Pumpkinhead, "but can you honestly say you were feeling *love* when you were fused with him?"

Sublivion threw the cluster of stone and earth at Pumpkinhead, this time putting a little more back into it.

Pumpkinhead hopped to the side. "A fusion built on mutual hatred, a common goal, or shared fear, anger, and sadness cannot stand. Not for long."

"It *be* built on love!" shouted Sublivion, and this time, instead of shooting jet streams into the ground, he shot them directly at Pumpkinhead.

At the very last second, with fearful eyes, Pumpkinhead dove to the side and rolled into a low squatting position. His lips curled back up. He then shot Sublivion a sneering grin and blasted several fireballs at him from his palms.

Sublivion summoned up a wall of clear liquid. He moved away as far as he could in the half a second he had to evade the oncoming danger and wrapped the flaming spheres into his blanket of water, turning them into loud, hissing steam.

"You think crawling on your knees and catering to his every whim is love?" he scoffed with a smile on his pumpkin face. "Do you want to be his husband or his whore?"

“Zatchepghiai taivog *ustgha!*” roared Sublivion, marching toward Pumpkinhead and shooting streams of gushing water out of his palms.

Pumpkinhead continued dodging the streams by bending his limbs and torso, taunting Sublivion with his wide grin. “Remember, our powers are the fundamentals of nature itself,” he explained. “If you want to use them to their full potential, you have to adhere to nature’s laws.”

Water enveloped Sublivion’s arms as he was taking a few steps closer to Pumpkinhead. He poured gallons of it onto the ground and whipped it toward the president like he was straightening out bedsheets, forming a large, powerful wave that overshadowed part of the courtyard.

But instead of the water crashing down onto him, Pumpkinhead relaxed his body in order to be pulled by the wave, but still kept his head above the surface. He then engulfed himself in flames and turned almost the whole wave into steam before landing safely back on his feet on solid ground. While Sublivion was conjuring up razor-thin towers of water, Pumpkinhead said, “The elements aren’t forces. They’re reactions. You have to learn to use them as such.”

Sublivion pushed the sharp liquid pillars at Pumpkinhead one by one, sometimes several at the same time and as many as he had the energy to form, but his frustration grew ever stronger as Pumpkinhead simply kept evading his attacks with jumps and twirls, not fazed in the slightest. In fact, he almost looked like he was...dancing.

“If you want to be a worthy partner to Domino, I’ll tell you the same thing I told my wife,” said Pumpkinhead with a chuckle. “A lover who lives to serve does not serve me by living.”

“Vghoo can seigh that to their love?” Sublivion argued.

“Any old snake and fool can be kind,” Pumpkinhead replied. “Only those who care about you are able to hurt you if that’s what it takes to help you.”

“Then ju have not experienced *true* pain,” Sublivion growled, smashing his fists through the stone-paved ground.

Fountains of fast-gushing water emerged through parts of the courtyard, following Pumpkinhead as he was jumping around and dodging.

"If you don't believe me, then tell me what I'm doing here," said Pumpkinhead. "Do you think I enjoy fighting someone weaker than me?"

Sublivion pulled his hands out of the rubble and shot high-speed droplets of water like arrows at Pumpkinhead.

But President Pumpkinhead merely swung his legs in the air in a circular motion and jumped over the incoming projectiles as if he'd done it a thousand times before. "I take no pleasure in tormenting those who are beneath me."

"Ju are a covghard vith eksuses!" shouted Sublivion, moving closer to Pumpkinhead, one foot at a time. "This not be for maigh ovghn good! It be for *jor*! Ju say it be good for me, but I onleigh suffer!"

"Are you speaking to me or your former master?" Pumpkinhead inquired.

Sublivion curled his clawed fingers. Copious amounts of water spilled over the ground as he continued to approach Pumpkinhead. "I vilgh not let ju use me as he did!" he proclaimed. "Fortune graced *jor* vife veghn ju became separated! Vaght tvisted lies must ju have fed her! I preigh she never see ju *again*!"

Pumpkinhead squatted and dashed by Sublivion's side when he summoned blasts of fire from his palms to propel him forward. He appeared behind Sublivion's back within moments and grasped his neck. "I am not him," he growled, his smile having turned into a frown and his glare piercing through the back of Sublivion's head. "You will listen to me, and you will remember the words I tell you here today—"

Sublivion remained still, not out of necessity, but rather, out of surprise. Despite the fact that Pumpkinhead was holding him by his neck, he felt no pressure on it whatsoever.

"I don't love her enough to let her cry on my shoulder when she's upset about something stupid. I don't love her enough to tolerate the annoyance she embodies." Orange flames peered through the crevices on Pumpkinhead's pumpkin head. "I love her enough to cut her with my sharpest blade and make poison bleed out of her. I love her enough to break her legs and put them back together so she'll never crawl *again*."

Though he had every opportunity to strike, Sublivion chose not to act. He remained motionless, listening.

"I will accept a life of unrelenting guilt for having caused her harm," Pumpkinhead told him, "so she can have *real* happiness—not the one she *settled* for."

On the sidelines, Domino covered his mouth, gripping his lips with his gloved fingertips, his teary eyes refusing to blink.

Starabey's eyes were frozen in shock.

Ken's worry and fear were concealed by his glaring eyes at first, but his true feelings were ultimately revealed by the beads of sweat on the side of his head.

"*Look!*" Enzo gasped, pointing his blade toward Pumpkinhead.

Everyone turned their attention to the pumpkin on top of the president's shoulders. Their eyes widened in surprise when they noticed the little water sphere enveloping the stem.

The flame had been extinguished.

A droplet of rain fell onto Pumpkinhead's arm. Drop by drop, a light drizzle of melted snowflakes enveloped the area.

Pumpkinhead chuckled and removed his hand from Sublivion's neck.

"Ansvghers often find ju...onlghi vhen ju stopgh searching for them..." Dizzy and without any energy left to keep balance, Sublivion collapsed backward into Pumpkinhead's arms. "Vhat...is her name?" he asked, panting slowly. "Jor...vife..."

Despite Sublivion's weight and size, Pumpkinhead remained standing firm as he held him. He kept smiling, his eyes narrowing into a drowsy, serene look. "Delphi," he replied.

"Thank ju..." said Sublivion, "for everighthing..."

"*Sublivion!*" Domino shouted, rushing to his aid. Once he reached him, he grabbed hold of his arm. "Oh my Xar—are you okay?" he asked, his voice pitched higher. He pulled Sublivion over to hold him himself, but his legs trembled under the demon's weight. "Take him back!" screeched Domino. "Take him *back!*"

Pumpkinhead took Sublivion in his arms again, letting his limp body rest on his chest as he hooked his arms under Sublivion's. "Don't worry," Pumpkinhead assured Domino. "Demons aren't that fragile. He'll be all right."

"I-I'm fine...mastergh..."

The others came to look over the damage soon enough.

"Is he gonna be *okay*?" asked Starabey.

Pumpkinhead gently placed Sublivion on the ground in a sitting position. "There we go."

"You fucking retard," groaned Domino as he squatted, summoning a magical pink tentacle from his back. He shaped the tip into a giant fan to cool Sublivion down with as he held one hand on Sublivion's stomach and the other on his back to help him keep balance. "I can't believe you fucking wanted to—"

Suddenly, Sublivion pulled Domino closer into a tight embrace.

Domino's face turned red, and his eyes widened.

Starabey coughed into his fist, averting his awkward, anxious gaze. "I'm just gonna—" He then turned around.

Ken released a sigh of relief as a light smirk snuck its way onto his face.

Pumpkinhead smiled upon Domino and Sublivion. "Congratulations," he said. "You're free to go see Regaliz."

"Not quite yet, Mr. President," said Enzo as he floated over to him. "You see, every enemy defeated by at least one of our team members must have their clothes burned."

Domino wriggled his upper body away from being buried into Sublivion's shoulder. "No! He doesn't count!" he shouted.

Enzo turned his blade toward Domino. "But you said—"

Domino urged Sublivion to let go of him and marched over to Enzo with a spine-chilling glare. "You fucking *dare* pin this on me? In front of *him*?" He pointed at Pumpkinhead. "After I let you on my fucking team?"

"It's all right, Domino," said Pumpkinhead, moving his palms up and down in a calm, soothing manner. "I'm not angry with you. Don't worry."

Domino turned to him, worried and ashamed. "I—I *swear*, I—"

"Calm *down*." Pumpkinhead chuckled. "It's all right. Really. I honor my losses. And if those are the terms, then I accept."

Domino took a deep breath and nodded as a light smile crept onto his lips.

Within moments, Pumpkinhead's boots and pants were set ablaze.

The guys gazed upon the shining flames around Pumpkinhead's body in awe.

When there was no more cloth left to burn, the fire disappeared.

Domino's, Ken's, and Starabey's jaws dangled in midair as they laid eyes upon the majestic, dark, thick jewel hanging off Pumpkinhead's loins.

"I hope this will suffice," said Pumpkinhead. "And, please...call me Horatio from now on." He gave them a wide smile and left them with the view of his plump gluteus maximus as he walked back to the temple.

Domino's unblinking eyes begin to shed droplets of tears around the edges.

Ken turned to him with a confused look on his face. "Domino? Are you—"

But Domino remained silent. His eyes were watering and his hands trembling.

"Never in my life have I witnessed such...*majesty*..." Enzo commented.

"It's so..." said Starabey.

"*Fat*," added Bowie, tilting his head to the side.

Domino's eyes remained open and his body unmoving. "I'm scared, but I'm not afraid..."

Ken coughed into his fist. "Perhaps we should..."

"Yeah..." mumbled Starabey, staring at the ground as he turned toward Ken. He then looked up with a puzzled grimace. "Wh-where do we go?"

Sublivion picked Domino up into his arms.

Domino's limp head fell back, his face frozen in a smile with open crying eyes.

Sublivion attempted to straighten his master's neck, but without constant support, it fell back again.

Meanwhile, Ken was turning left and right. "The tunnel should be..."

"Is *that* it?" asked Bowie, pointing at a big round hole in the mountainside between two flaming torches and under a stone carving that spelled out "Haven in Vitro."

One by one, the gang disappeared into the torch-lit tunnel, well on their way toward reaching the mountain's peak.

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Pumpkinhead retreated into the lightless depths of the temple. The blazing metal furnace illuminated his charcoal skin and muscular chest. His face was relaxed, tired looking.

"Why are you angry now?" asked a young woman's monotone voice from behind him. "You did good. They're on the right track."

"Even when you know it's the right thing to do"—Pumpkinhead sighed—"it's *never* easy." He held out his hands and released an inferno of a blaze into the open fire through the furnace door.

Chapter Eight

Love Is in the Drinking Water

It was already nightfall when the SPANK team exited the tunnel. Gentle snowflakes floated down from the sky, but once again, they turned into nothing but a light drizzle above the young men's heads. The heat from the furnace reached even Regaliz's resort with its underground tunnel system, keeping Domino and his companions from catching their deaths in the cruelty of the mountain peak's cold.

Standing beside Sublivion, Domino squatted to rest up a bit after such a taxing climb up the tunnel stairway. "I think I'm gonna throw up..." he panted.

Sublivion bent down, reaching out to him with his hand. "Please. Let me carreigh ju..."

"No need for that," said Ken and took a deep breath of the thin mountain air, his eyes sliding toward the back of his head. "We're... here..." His body went limp and dove face-first into the dirt.

"*Shit!*" barked Starabey. He crawled over to Ken, dragging himself as if he weighed ten times more than usual.

"I think you'll have to revive him," Bowie commented.

Meanwhile, Domino struggled to wriggle his way out of Sublivion's grasp. "I-I'm fine!" he groaned, his face turning red.

Sublivion stood behind Domino and held him with his arms locked together around his abdomen. He kept pressing his curled-up hands against Domino's stomach in short, forceful intervals. "Ju mustgh let it out, mastergh. Ju feel better then," he explained.

"No!" shouted Domino, pushing himself away and flailing his legs. "You're making it worse!"

Starabey turned Ken's fainted body around and sat down on Ken's crotch, pressing his palms against Ken's chest, and grunting with each thrust. Then, every so often, he pinched Ken's nose and breathed into his mouth.

"I don't believe it's working," Enzo commented.

"Let me try something," said Bowie and held up Enzo's blade just above Ken's face.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" said a sensual male voice.

Sublivion, Domino, Bowie, and Starabey turned their heads and stared back at the person wide eyed.

Standing before them was a tan demon with black feline ears and a long, glossy, furry tail to complement his other more human features. His irises were like two rainbows enveloping a shadow-covered Earth, but certainly not as alluring as his dashing fairy-tale smile. He wore silk robes with a swirly technicolored pattern and a wide silk belt around his waist to match. The sleeves looked like they could have been the sails of a boat, they were so long.

Ken opened his eyes, stricken with utter shock, anger, and discomfort when he saw Starabey sitting on his crotch and Bowie getting ready to smack him with the shovel.

The others—Sublivion excluded—looked up to witness the majesty of the resort. A wooden complex situated on the side of the mountain peak. Its warm light shone into the serene night. It was one singular structure but looked like several cottages smooshed into one. The wood was covered with a fresh coat of gloss, with red and gold decorations painted over the facade.

"Ooo! You must be our new guests!" exclaimed the stranger, clasping his hands together. "Welcome!"

The young men continued staring back and forth between him and the resort.

"I'm Regaliz. I'll be your host during your stay here at Haven in Vitro," said the cat-eared man. "Follow me. We'll talk indoors." And with that, he retreated back inside the resort.

For a moment or so more, the guys remained paralyzed, glancing at each other in confusion.

"Will you fucking get off me?" Ken shouted, pushing Starabey away and rolling to the side.

"Wait! Fuck! *Cramp!*" Starabey barked as he was trying to get his leg unstuck from beneath Ken.

Bowie lowered Enzo, staring at Ken and Starabey as the two fumbled around on the ground.

Sublivion let go of Domino in the meantime.

Relieved, Domino huffed and slowly made his way to the resort door with Sublivion alongside him.

Once Ken and Starabey got a hold of themselves, the group entered the facilities.

They were greeted by a cozy glow of light coming from the deer-antler chandelier with lit torches above them. There were comfy sofas and furry carpets spread throughout the room, along with coffee tables that held glass bowls of gourmet chocolate pralines. The walls were covered in swirly red hearts and portraits of various humans and demons, including President Pumpkinhead.

"Welcome to Haven in Vitro!" a nude demoness greeted them from behind the reception desk. "Feel free to get comfy. Reggie will be with you shortly."

"Thank you," Ken replied. However, mere moments later, he winced in pain and quickly stuck his hand into his herb pouch to take out a weed to chew on.

"See anything?" Domino inquired.

"Just a hand stroking someone's face," said Ken as he massaged his temples with his fingertips. "I'm unsure as to how it could relate to our current situation, though."

In the meantime, Bowie had been inspecting the gallery. "Hey, Subi! Is that you?" he asked, pointing at one of the portraits.

Sublivion turned his head away as the others approached the painting.

The portrait was indeed that of Sublivion, with the same exact costume he was wearing at that moment. His mask was facing the floor and he was fiddling around with his fingers as he laid his hands against his abdomen.

Domino turned to Sublivion, smiling. "Why didn't you tell us you were here before?"

"I—I...forget..." he answered, lowering his head.

Domino pouted his lips as his brows tilted downward, puzzling over why Sublivion was suddenly acting so strange.

"Check this out," said Starabey, touching the discolored part of the wall shaped exactly like all the other paintings. "There used to be a portrait here, too."

"I hope Horatio didn't give you *too* much trouble," said Regaliz as he entered the lobby from one of the edgeless-ceiling hallways concealed behind curtains of colorful beads. He carried over a gilded platter with glasses of champagne and offered one to each of his guests. "He's always loved the thrill of battle. Even in the bedroom."

Domino stared at him with his doelike eyes glistening from the tears that began to surface.

Regaliz looked at Domino with a confused, grinning expression and then burst into a chuckle. "Oh, no! No, we didn't *sleep* together, if that's what you think."

But Domino's expression remained a bit distressed looking, for he needed some time to recover from his mini-stroke.

"Yes, well...thankfully, we've managed to pass his test the second time around," said Ken and took a sip of his champagne. He then looked around the room. "By the way, you have a beautiful home, Your Radiance," he commented with a smile.

"Please—no need to be so formal," the host replied. "Just Regaliz or Reggie is fine." He then slipped off his robes and hung them on his arm. "Make yourselves comfortable."

Ken's eyes narrowed in annoyance as he laid them upon Regaliz, struggling to keep his lips from frowning.

Starabey coughed into his hand. He turned to the side and stared out the window as he sipped on his drink.

Regaliz reached out with his free hand toward them. "May I take your clothes?"

Everyone but Sublivion looked at each other from the corners of their puzzled eyes.

"Do...do I have to?" asked Domino, his face showing nothing but dread as he kept avoiding Regaliz's gaze.

"Don't be scared—I'm not going to hurt you," Regaliz assured him, smiling sensually.

"You *can't* be serious," Ken growled.

Not being able to force himself to pose the question again, Domino looked at the floor and reluctantly started taking off his clothes with trembling hands.

Without a care, Bowie slipped off his shoes and pants.

Starabey hesitated, but ultimately took off his pants. His chest heaved and his cheeks blushed under his terror-filled eyes.

Finally, Ken sighed and took off his robes and sandals as he glared at Regaliz—all but the bandage around his abdomen. "This is fucking ridiculous."

The young men then handed their clothes to Regaliz, and all except Bowie covered their crotches with their hands.

Regaliz quickly walked over to the front desk and placed the clothes there for his nude assistant to store. Soon thereafter, he rejoined the group. "I'm sorry if you're feeling uncomfortable, but we have a strict no-clothes policy here."

"Is...this the afterlife? A-am I dead?" Enzo asked with a shaky voice.

Regaliz turned to Sublivion, who was still covered by his black latex costume from top to bottom. "Would you like some help?" he asked, gazing at Sublivion's mask with lustful eyes.

"Look...can you...can you please just let him stay dressed?" Domino pleaded, barely able to keep eye contact with Regaliz.

"Oh, of course!" Regaliz chuckled. "Don't worry. I know Sublivion needs a bit more time to open up. I was actually referring to something *else*." He gazed at Domino, his eyelids drowsily covering the upper halves of his eyes as he kept smiling at him. He then turned his attention back to Sublivion. "I hoped I'd never see you here again"—he sighed—"but I'm even happier to know you're in good company now—thank Xar."

"If I may interrupt...Regaliz...we're on a bit of a tight schedule. We just came to ask a favor of you," Ken explained.

"We have a schedule?" asked Bowie.

Regaliz smirked, resting his head on his knuckle while his other arm provided support for the elbow.

Ken turned to his friend. "Domino?"

Domino looked at Ken as if he'd just regained consciousness. "Huh? What?"

"Ask him about *Pleito*!" barked Ken.

"I'm naked in front of a guy I've never met! Stop riding my ass!" Domino shouted, his cheeks reddening more by the second.

"Oh my Xar..." Ken groaned, rolling his eyes before he turned back to Regaliz with an annoyed, drowsy look in his eyes. "Can you lend us your elemental horseman for a little while?"

"I wish I could, but it's not up to me," Regaliz replied.

"Excuse me?" said Ken, placing his hand on his hip.

"You're his *master*," Domino added. "Can't you just—like—order him to give me his seal or something?"

"Pleito can do whatever he wants," said Regaliz. "I have his seal, but that doesn't mean I own him."

"It kinda *does*," Bowie interjected.

"I meant—I choose not to exercise that privilege," Regaliz elaborated. "If you want his loyalty, you'll have to deal with him *personally*."

Domino glanced to the side before facing Regaliz with an anxious expression again. "Okay?"

"You!" exclaimed Regaliz as he pointed at Ken.

Ken stared back at him with resentment in his eyes.

"I have a feeling you'd get along with him best," Regaliz told him.

A light smirk appeared on Ken's lips. "Really? I didn't know Pleito was a corpse."

"How do you know?" Bowie asked Regaliz.

"It's my *power* to know," he explained. "I can sense when someone's anima is being pulled toward another's. The greater the force, the better the match. That's one of the reasons why so many people want to come here. So I can point them toward their missing halves. Or thirds. Or *fourths*." He took Ken under his arm and headed toward the main hallway. "Come. I'll take you to him."

"Can we come, too?" Bowie inquired, already following behind with Enzo in his hand.

"Just you and your shovel friend," Regaliz replied. Once Ken, Bowie, and he went deeper through the hallway, he stopped one of his

employees to speak with her. "Have someone escort the blond one and our friend Sublivion somewhere *private*," he said in a soft voice. "And bring as many girls as you want for the Balalacan."

His subordinate nodded with a smirk and continued on her way.

Meanwhile, back in the lobby, Domino and Starabey were facing each other, their hands still covering their own crotches.

"Okay—we show our dicks on three," said Domino. "One...two...three!"

Both Domino and Starabey raised their arms, releasing their genitals.

However, Domino shut his eyes as tight as he could. "Did you look?" he asked. "Just tell me if it's bigger than mine! No, *don't* tell me!"

But before Starabey responded, he was attacked by a swarm of demonesses.

"Woowow! Look at all those *pubes*!" one gasped at the sight of Starabey's enormous bush from underneath his belly button.

"They're *huge*!" exclaimed another as she brushed her fingers through it.

Starabey stayed perfectly still, turning his blushing face away.

Domino opened his eyes, glaring at Starabey and the naked demonesses crawling over him. "Hey, what the fuck?" he shouted. "What's wrong with *my* pubes?"

Giggling and gasping in awe, the demonesses dragged Starabey deep into one of the other hallways.

"I was talking to you! Stop fucking ignoring me!" Domino screeched. "I know where you live!"

However, one of the employees remained nearby. "Sir?" she asked.

"*Fuck!*" yelled Domino, flinching and turning to face her.

"Reggie has something special prepared for you and your friend," she told him with a smirk, motioning her hands toward another hallway. "Right this way, please."

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For some time now, Domino had been relaxing in the hot water on the other edge of the pool, gazing out through the wall-size glass window overlooking the dark, dead outdoors. The soft orange glow of the indoor

lights was cast as the snowflakes gently floated onto the snow-covered ground. The darkness beyond provided for a mesmerizing view. What creatures could have been hiding in its depths? Were they asleep or prowling the resort grounds?

Until today, Domino had never understood how just lying still and staring out into the distance could have been so relaxing. He didn't want to move. Not even a centimeter. He was like a blob of jelly, slowly melting away in the heat of the water. But the warmth *wasn't* what made him so comfortable. It was the fact that he was aware of how cold it was outside when he was indoors in a cozy pool. Getting the good while knowing the worst was the trick. Regaliz really *had* thought of everything when he had built the resort.

Between the luxurious deck chairs made of white wood and silver was a large coffee table with lube, condoms, various sex toys, and a platter full of gourmet chocolate pralines shaped like hearts, each hand-decorated with cream that shimmered in the light from pieces of edible gold that had been mixed in.

Domino summoned one of his magical tentacles from his back and brought a praline over into his hand. The water's heat was just warm enough to melt the chocolate between his fingers. He popped the chocolate into his mouth, savoring the milky sweetness and the crunch of the hazelnut core that made his ears almost twitch with delight. As he licked his fingers clean, plops of feet against the wet floor sounded themselves from the other side of the pool. He turned around.

Sublivion was just taking a seat on one of the marble benches, still wearing his black latex suit and mask. He sat with his back straight. His locked fingers lay on his lap.

"You can...um...come in if you want..." Domino told him, averting his worried wide-eyed gaze. Slowly, he turned back around to look at the beautiful scenery outside, but mostly to hide his blushing face from Sublivion.

"If...ju vaghnt me..." Sublivion replied.

Fucking shit. Domino's face morphed into an angry, annoyed grimace as his glaring eyes tried to roll to the back of his head. *Now* how was he supposed to find out whether Sublivion actually had a crush on him or whether he merely saw him as really good friend? Domino just wanted

to avoid making the wrong assumption. He let out a deep sigh and closed his eyes. "Did you know?" he asked. "That there was no seal?"

"Dagh..." said Sublivion.

Domino turned back around, gazing at Sublivion with a puzzled look. "So...you stayed, even though you knew you could have left at any time?"

"D-dagh..." Sublivion answered, gripping his lap with his claws.

"Why?"

Sublivion's masked head turned to the side and faced the floor. "Maigh former mastergh...Venon..." he said. "He...tell me I am bad... and make me vhear this suit because I...repulsive..."

Domino took a deep breath through his nose, staring down at the water.

"Every time I touched Zephyr's sword with my anima, it was like someone lit a torch inside my rib cage. But...when we were fused in the jungle...even after I thought the pain stopped, I felt something else. I felt this...incredible *fear*... Fear of someone standing right in front of me." He looked at Sublivion with a confused and concerned expression. "Is... Venon Zephyr's *sword*?"

Sublivion nodded. "Zephir and one of his friends come to defeat Venon. One turn him into a sword, and Zephir get him to give him his seal. Girl with white hair release me and take me to mastergh." He gulped. "Venon be able to make jor bodghi relive pain ju feel in the past like it just happen to ju."

Though the air grew thinner, Domino tried to keep his breathing steady and focused an intense glare on Sublivion.

"I have no problem serving ju..." Sublivion added. "Ju make me feel like horse."

Domino jerked his head back, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

"I don't mind carreighing ju, or letting ju sleepgh on me... Ju talk to me... Ju pet me... Ju...take *care* of me..."

Domino nodded, a smile emerging on his trembling lips. He turned around to face the large window...so that Sublivion wouldn't be able to see the tears that were slipping from his eyes. He had no idea why he wanted to cry so badly, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Mastergh?" Sublivion called out to him.

Domino didn't answer. He couldn't risk letting Sublivion know with the sound of his voice that he was crying. He stared down at the edge of the pool with eyes widened by surprise at the sounds he never expected to hear in a moment like this.

Zipper were undone. Something upset the stillness of the water.

Domino feared Sublivion could hear his heartbeats and sniffing from across the pool.

Then...two big arms enveloped his abdomen.

Sublivion embraced Domino from behind. Closer. Tighter. "Vaigh ju craigh?" he asked.

Domino shut his eyes as hard as he could to stop his tears from falling, but it only made even more of them slip down his cheeks. "*N-no!* I'm not your master!" he cried, trying to wriggle out of his grasp. "Just stop! You don't have to do this!"

Sublivion gently turned him around.

Like being drawn by a magnet, Domino's tears were pulled down into the water.

With a frightened, saddened gaze, Domino looked up. The first thing he laid eyes on was Sublivion's mint-green skin, with what seemed to be a lightly visible skeleton from underneath—almost like his skin were translucent. He then looked down at Sublivion's sculpture-perfect abs that were peering out less than halfway from under the water. His eyes crawled up Sublivion's giant, lean figure, past his plump, muscular chest, until he finally grasped the look of his almond-shaped, porcelain-smooth face.

The demon had no nose, but his eyes and his maw that stretched almost to the back of his head were big enough to fill up the majority of the space on his face. His eyes were like a layered cake of minty delight, with the pupils being almost black, followed by swirling colors of different shades of mint green for the irises, and finally light-green scleras. His head was bald, all but for one narrow streak of mint-colored finger-long hair that started at the top of his head and ended somewhere on his back, resembling the soft, majestic mane—and the ears—of an equine. As was the case with his body, there were faint traces of his bones—or skull, in this case—showing underneath his skin like he was made of thick gelatin.

Sublivion's chest heaved as he closed his eyes for a moment. "I vaghnt to..." he replied as he stared back at Domino.

Domino's mouth dangled slightly open. He gazed into Sublivion's eyes as his cheeks were flushed with shades of red, and then back down at his body.

A few bruises lay on Sublivion's abdomen, fresh from his fight with President Pumpkinhead.

Sublivion pressed Domino's body closer against his own, enveloping him with his arms and stroking the back of his head. "I vilgh understand if ju not vaghnt me around enighmore..." he told him. "I just...need knovgh ju vilgh be all right..."

Domino's lips curled into a wide smile as he cried into Sublivion's shoulder. He couldn't help but chuckle through his sadness at just what a spoiled brat he ended up seeming like. "All this fucking time, I've been bitching about my own problems...when you've had it so much worse."

"No..." said Sublivion. "Maigh problems do not make jors enigh less valid... Ju have everigh right to be sad..." Once again, he made Domino's tears float away into the water. He lightly pushed him away, still holding his shoulder with one hand, and smiled softly at him, stroking his cheek with the other.

Domino gulped, struggling to stop himself from crying as he looked deep into Sublivion's eyes.

"Please do not craigh for me," said Sublivion. "There be enough hate in jor heart aheadghi... I vish *no* more of it for ju... Onleigh love...and happiness..."

"How can you even think about *me*?" Domino asked. "After everything you've been through..."

Sublivion shook his head, smiling. "Ju bring me joigh... Veghn I see ju...veghn I think of ju...there be no pain..."

Domino was short of breath. His chest was scorching and heavy, almost like it was buried under a pile of molten lava.

Sublivion leaned his forehead against Domino's with closed eyes and a warm smile on his face. "I only preigh that...ju vilgh do me this kindness... Make me forget."

For the first time in his life, Domino was overcome by the innate desire to love another. In every single way. In all possible ways. Always.

Gently, he pressed his lips onto Sublivion's. The lighter the touch, the stronger the rush of blood hit him.

Sublivion pressed Domino closer against himself, locking him in so that he could never escape from his embrace ever again.

Domino looped his arms around Sublivion's neck as they caressed each other's lips. Not even when he was drunk had his limbs gone so numb or had the passage of time felt that slow. Finally, he allowed himself to do whatever he felt like, whatever he wanted. He didn't want to waste time and energy trying to figure out what to do to make someone like him more. He just wanted to enjoy himself and enjoy *Sublivion*. When his crotch started to itch, he didn't hesitate for even a second. He grinded his lower body against Sublivion's and let out a deep breath.

As if having a mind of its own, Sublivion's long, meaty tongue slipped into Domino's mouth.

Domino leaned his head back and let out a muffled moan. He was almost choking, but he didn't care. There was nothing he'd ever experienced before that felt better than when Sublivion's tongue completely filled his mouth and throat. He couldn't understand it, but he didn't want to. He just let his body be overtaken by ecstasy and his mind be shut down. He didn't want to think about anything anymore. He just wanted Sublivion to tell him what to do and use him in any way he liked.

A magical pink tentacle emerged from Domino's lower back and wriggled its way between his legs. Two others soon surfaced beside it, but instead of traveling downward, they slithered over to Domino's arms and coiled tightly around his wrists, ultimately pulling them behind his back and disabling him from using them any further.

Taken aback by what was happening, Sublivion pulled his tongue back and moved his torso a bit farther away as he gazed at Domino with a puzzled, concerned look on his face.

"W-what's wrong?" said Domino.

"Ju...tied jorself up?" asked Sublivion.

"I'm so sorry! Is it bothering you?" Domino replied, his voice trembling. Within a second, he made his magical tentacles retreat back into his body and held his hands up. "I can stop if you want!"

Sublivion chuckled and gently pushed Domino's hands back down behind his back, positioning them as they were a moment ago. He closed his eyes, rubbing the side of his face against Domino's chest and down to his abdomen as he secretly used his magical powers to envelop Domino's wrists in water to keep his hands constrained behind his back, like he wanted.

Domino's eyes opened wider as his cheeks burned redder. His heart thumped faster and faster as he tried to compensate for the sudden lack of air in his lungs, anxiously awaiting Sublivion's next move. "W-what are you—"

From Domino's stomach, to his chest, and up his neck, Sublivion trailed his long, moist tongue against his skin, smiling at the sounds of Domino's body shuddering with pleasure.

"Oh Xar," Domino gasped, leaning his head back and looking at the ceiling with a timid gaze.

However, once Sublivion was done caressing and licking Domino's neck, he nuzzled his face against Domino's, caressing it and kissing Domino's lips whenever they met his. He leaned him against one side of his chest, cupping the side of Domino's body with his arm to make sure he wouldn't fall back, and using the other to gently squeeze Domino's erection.

A soft moan escaped Domino's mouth as he jerked forward, leaning his head onto Sublivion's shoulder, barely able to keep his eyes open. "Your hands are...really *big*..." He gulped down all the excess saliva that had accumulated in his mouth. As his head fell to the side, facing Sublivion's neck, he continued to pant for air while Sublivion stroked him underneath the water's surface.

Sublivion leaned his forehead against Domino's and gazed into his eyes as he proceeded to squeeze harder, smiling.

"I...I think I'm gonna..." Domino moaned between breaths. "If you want to go...all the way..."

"Another time..." Sublivion chuckled. "I just vaghnt to look at ju...jor face..."

The longer Domino gazed back at Sublivion, the more his loins ached for release. "Can you...lower the water?" he asked as he moved away from him a bit.

Confused but curious, Sublivion pulled part of the pool's water upward behind himself into a large wall of liquid, thus lowering its level at the front, as Domino requested.

Gently, Domino pushed him back against the water wall and knelt down before him while his arms were still constricted behind his back.

Sublivion's breath quickened. "Mastergh..." he moaned, gripping the edge of the pool through the water behind him with his hands.

With his eyes closed, Domino breathed onto Sublivion's groin. "Fuck my mouth..."

Sublivion hesitated at first, but slowly he inserted his erection into Domino's mouth—as much as it fit. "M-mastergh..." he moaned out once more as he gently gripped the sides of Domino's head, brushing his fingers through his wet hair. He closed his eyes.

As Sublivion began to thrust, careful not to push too deep, Domino kept letting out muffled moans as his ecstasy was approaching a crescendo.

However, Sublivion couldn't forget about his unfinished service to Domino. While he was slowly losing control over his thrusting, but still able to keep himself restrained enough so as not to push past the back of Domino's throat, he used his magica to make the water covering Domino's lower body create an underwater whirlpool, and with that, a vacuum of suction around Domino's cock.

Domino shut his eyes tight. His heart could almost burst through his heaving chest. With a loud, muffled grunt, he orgasmed into the water below.

The vibrations of his voice aroused Sublivion beyond what he could take. After he threw his head back in a semicircular motion, it fell forward onto his own chest. He ejaculated into Domino's mouth, gripping him by his hair. "Domino!" he hissed.

Domino's eyes opened and shot up at Sublivion as his throat contracted from shock.

The water Sublivion had been holding up with his powers came crashing down onto the two of them.

Immediately after swimming back to the surface, Domino gripped his own neck as he was trying to gulp down all of the white ooze that was now so uncomfortably coating his throat.

"A-are ju all right?" Sublivion asked with a concerned expression as he reached out to Domino with his hands.

Domino raised his index finger in front of him and continued to struggle with swallowing all of the cum, trying to signal Sublivion to wait before he could speak to him again.

"Are ju hurt? Please, tell me!"

"I'm fine," Domino replied. "This shit is just..." He gulped. "It's really hard to...swallow..." Once his throat cleared, he smiled at Sublivion, who just kept staring at him with an anxious gaze as he panted. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Did I...upset ju?" Sublivion asked.

"What? *No!*" Domino assured him, smiling with upward-tilted brows. He leaned against the edge of the pool next to him, just under his arm. He then looked up at Sublivion and stroked the back of his hand. "No, I was...I was actually really pleasantly surprised. It's the first time I've ever heard you say my name."

A light smirk returned to Sublivion's face as he bashfully averted his gaze. "I'm...glad I could please ju..."

"Did *you* like it?" asked Domino.

"Perhaps...too much..." Sublivion chuckled and glanced back at him.

"Hmph...*definitely*," Domino replied with a smirk as he gazed out at the other end of the pool. After a couple of moments of serenity and silence, he leaned his head against the side of Sublivion's chest and closed his eyes. "I like this..." he said. "You...with me..."

Sublivion looked down at him with a warm smile and stroked the side of his head. "Ju vith me..."

• • • •

Bowie hit the leather ball thrown at him as he was jumping into a large pool of water.

The resort staff was all giggling and laughing as they tossed the ball around.

Enzo, on the other hand, lay against the wall near the long marble seats, watching everyone having the time of their lives while he was forced to stay away from the pool so as to not rust quicker than he

wanted to. "Is this it, Xar? Is this my punishment?" he asked. "Just let it be known that I did everything in my power to try and convince him to grow shrooms *instead*. That is all I am going to say."

However, two staff members, a demon and demoness, approached him after having heard him speak.

"Oh, hey!" exclaimed the demoness. "I totally forgot you were here!"

"I do blend in with the rest of the furniture quite nicely," Enzo replied in a sarcastic tone.

"You know," said the demon, chuckling, "your friends said they weren't up for a party, but maybe *you'd* be interested?"

The demoness turned to her colleague. "I can't fit him in unless we remove his handle, though."

"Oh, fuck—I didn't even think about that," the demon replied. He then turned back to Enzo. "Okay, would you like us to maybe rub you or something?"

"Yes, rubbing sounds delightful," he answered, his voice seeming anxious and excited both at the same time. "But...I do have...one more request."

The demon and the demoness glanced at each other with curious looks in their eyes.

Enzo paused, then said, "Stick me in a watermelon."

Meanwhile, inside the pool, the elemental horseman Pleito separated himself from the ball-tossing group and went to lean back against the edge of the pool next to Ken. Like Sublivion, he was a tall, muscular beast. He had clawed hands, toeless feet, and a short, curly plum-purple mane. Though his skin was of the same color as his hair, it glistened from the little droplets of water still on him. He possessed two eye illustrations currently positioned on his upper abdomen and shoulder that were of a lighter color than his skin, and which seemed to change position ever so slightly every time one looked at them, as if they were moving around his body at a very slow, barely noticeable pace. His *real* eyes, however, were identical to those the other elemental horsemen all had but in color. His scleras were reaching toward dark lavender, his irises were two swirling rings of purple and violet, and his pupils were the darkest of the shades. Despite his monstrous maw and fangs, and the complete lack of a nose, it was abundantly clear from that gentle yet

sinisterly alluring look on his face why he would be paired with someone like Regaliz.

"You don't have to stay," said Pleito with his deep phantasmic voice. "If you'd rather be doing something else, you're free to go."

Ken turned his head, staring at him with his eyes open wide. "You speak *Kitarian*?" he asked.

"I know a few other languages as well. We receive guests from all *over* the world here," Pleito added with a soft smile.

"Hmph. And what exactly do you do with those guests, pray tell?" Ken replied with a cynical chuckle. "I don't believe your profession requires much *talking*."

Pleito took a long, puzzled, even disappointed look at him. Without another word, he lightly thrust himself away from the edge and took a few steps back toward where Bowie and the other demons and demonesses were tossing the ball around.

Though Ken had anticipated that response, he didn't count on the fact that it would have actually made him feel bad about what he'd said. He huffed angrily. "W-wait!" he called out to Pleito. "I didn't...mean it like that..."

Pleito smiled at Ken before turning back around. "Apology accepted," he said. Once again, he leaned against the edge next to him. "Since you won't play with the others, would you mind playing a game with me *instead*?" he inquired.

"As long as it doesn't involve any physical activity other than breathing..." said Ken, trying to conceal a light grin forcing its way onto his lips.

"I'll say one truth and two lies about myself. If you guess which statement is true, I will grant you a favor. If you guess wrong, you owe *me* a favor."

"What are the stakes?" Ken asked.

Pleito chuckled in reply. "You let me kill you and take your body to Xar."

"So he can make more demons with elemental powers?" scoffed Ken. "He seems to be very fond of that."

"No. Your anima would create something far more powerful. An A-grade demon like Master Regaliz," Pleito explained. "It's *wasted* on a fragile human body."

Ken looked down at his bandaged abdomen with a soft glare. "How do you know I'm a human? Demons come in many forms."

"Even though I do not serve him directly, I still consider myself to be one of Xar's acolytes. I keep in touch with them," Pleito answered.

A relaxed smile emerged onto Ken's lips as he looked up at Pleito. "Why even bother with the stupid game? Why not kill me right *now*? Domino's not here to protect me. You could just stab me with one of your claws and be done with it."

"Oh—I'm not allowed to kill without master's permission," Pleito explained, gazing at Ken with a sinister grin. "*Unless...*"

Ken smirked. "Unless the person you're killing gets off on it."

Pleito shrugged with an unsympathetic grin. He then lifted his hand out of the water, holding his glowing index finger against the center left part of his own chest.

Ken wondered whether he even had a choice. Accepting or declining, conquest or defeat, he had nothing to lose that he wasn't losing already. "If I guess correctly, you will give your seal to my magician friend. I'm certain your master will oblige."

Pleito's teeth peered through his lips as his grin widened. He scratched a cross symbol with his glowing purple claw across a small part of his chest, burning the skin like branding cattle. Moments later, the mark disappeared.

Assuming by Pleito's unrelenting stare, he wanted Ken to do the same. "I thought we'd already established I wasn't a demon," Ken commented.

"I know," Pleito replied. "I will hold my promised reward in my mind and you focus your energy on your finger."

"All right?" Ken sighed. He held up his finger to glare at very intensely. Pleito seemed to have been convinced Ken would be able to do the same thing he did, so Ken begrudgingly decided to humor him.

"Don't be so tense," Pleito advised him. "Just relax. Feel the flow of your anima."

Ken exhaled and closed his eyes. The moment he shut his sight from the world, he sensed a tingling sensation traveling from his palm and into his index finger. As moments passed, it was heating up almost to the point of it feeling like he was touching a ceramic mug full of hot tea. He opened his eyes and saw a faint glow of swirling blue and deep-purple colors. He turned to Pleito, confused beyond words.

"Wherever you like," Pleito told him.

Ken slowly moved his finger to the back of his own hand and scratched out a glowing cross symbol that soon disappeared into his skin. Much to his surprise, it didn't hurt, despite it sounding like the sizzling of meat in a pan full of oil. He looked at his hand while flipping it around. "How...how was I—"

"I am a virgin," Pleito proclaimed. "That is my first statement."

Ken's eyebrow curved upward, almost reaching the center of his forehead as he looked at Pleito, unbelieving. Pleito was the minion of an A-grade demon that had lived probably most of his life surrounded by promiscuous demons and demonesses. What else could Regaliz have *possibly* been using him for?

"My second statement—I enjoy serving my master," Pleito added.

No matter what he was saying, Pleito had a consistent eerie grin showing, Ken observed. There wasn't a single trace of a tick or some kind of sign of changing emotions he may have been trying to mask. But it didn't matter. Ken certainly didn't need any signs from him. He would simply use his powers to search the near past, present, or future for clues, and be able to tell which statement was the true one.

"Third—I can tell when someone is using *magica* even when I don't see it," said Pleito. He tilted his head down slightly, still keeping a steady gaze on Ken.

Ken's heart jumped straight into his throat. In seconds, his confidence had been shaken down to half its original size. He was already soaking in sweat.

If Pleito could sense when someone was using *magica*, then that meant he could see whether Ken would use his magical powers to cheat. *No!* No, no, no, no, no, no, *no!* Ken turned his face away, trying to gulp down a mountain of spit. How could he win without using his powers? Was this the end? Had his plans been thwarted after all the time and effort

he'd put in? He clutched his fist. He needed to stay focused. There was just no room for panic in a situation like this. The only thing he could do at that moment was try to come to a logical conclusion.

Pleito's first statement was about him not being a virgin. An absurd thought, but...the truth was often the hardest to believe. Perhaps he really *was* a virgin. Maybe he was so valuable to his master, Regaliz refused to let anyone touch him. Even Regaliz himself. And what of the second statement? Pleito said he was happy serving Regaliz. When demons give someone their seal, does that mean they feel like they actually *enjoy* serving their masters, or do some simply serve them against their own wishes? Pleito seemed comfortable enough, but it was very well possible that he was miserable in his lack of freedom.

"Feel free to take as much time as you need," Pleito told him, closing his eyes, leaning his head back, and relaxing with a big smirk still glued to his face.

It seemed that Ken had no choice but to use his magical powers to find out which statement was true. Better risk being caught cheating than potentially guessing the wrong answer when he could have gotten away with it. He concentrated on a single point between his brows. That usually managed to stir up his mind. He was just waiting for the stinging in his head to start. Almost...just a little bit more...then suddenly, he stopped and opened his eyes as if he'd just received a fatal stab to his chest. His face was covered in cold sweat and completely pale. The weeds... He had chewed on the weeds when he'd entered the resort. Now he couldn't call upon his powers even if he wanted to. What was left? What other clues could he have fallen back on? Panic seeped into his muscles at an accelerating rate, making his body tremble like a wet dog in the cold. His plans were ruined within moments. All that hard work. All of that patience. All gone. All because of one stupid misstep. If he were to guess wrong, he'd be killed. No. There had to be a way to know for sure which statement was true.

Then, just like he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning, Ken jerked his head up—his skin riddled with goose bumps. He remembered having one last vision before chewing on the weeds to block out his migraines and his powers along with them. He saw clawed plum-purple hands caress someone's face. From both of the skin tones, he could have

thought of only Pleito and Regaliz. It may as well have been the only clue Ken had to aid him. But what did it mean? Regaliz was Pleito's master—that was a fact. The act of Pleito caressing Regaliz's face was one that entailed intimacy and gentle care. Were they lovers? Perhaps. Though, another interpretation could have been that their love was so sacred and so powerful, they refused to consummate it. It would have also explained why Ken hadn't seen Pleito being intimate with the other staff members at the resort after Ken and Bowie refused their services. Once Ken thought about the second statement as the true one, keeping the vision in mind, the hundreds and thousands of his doubts all fell into the glimmering crystal waters. His eyes glistened just like the light being reflected off the pool's surface. If going by the vision, Pleito's statement about enjoying serving Regaliz had to be the absolute truth. No one would have ever thought to make such an oddly minor yet specific request of their minion such as having their cheek stroked, and no minion who was miserable in their master's care would have done it on their own accord. That was it! It *had* to be!

Ken took a deep breath. The longer he waited to give his answer, the stronger was his suffering.

Pleito turned his head toward Ken with a leering smile. "You've figured it out, haven't you?"

"The second one..." Ken blurted out, keeping his eyes shut and his fists clenched like he was holding on to a single thread for his life. The swift thumps of his heart were torturous to listen to, let alone having to feel it banging against his rib cage. He was out of breath, but he refused to pant so as to not appear as deathly nervous as he was.

"One hundred percent?" asked Pleito.

"Yes!" Ken screamed.

Pleito gazed at the surface of the water for several moments. He then turned to Ken and smiled. "Tell me, did you *guess* the correct answer, or did you really manage to string together some form of logic to get to it?" he inquired.

Ken opened his eyes, his hands trembling uncontrollably. He didn't even have the energy to look Pleito in the eyes as he spoke to him. "I just got really...*really* lucky..." He let out a long sigh of relief as he tried to keep himself from laughing out of sheer joy.

“Watch out!” Bowie shouted from afar.
A speeding ball hit Ken right in the forehead.

• • • •

It was the morning after Domino and his friends had indulged in Regaliz’s luxurious resort activities. He, Sublivion, and Ken sat around on the fur-covered sofa in the lobby, waiting for Starabey, Regaliz, and Pleito while Bowie was restlessly scouting the room. Since they were on their way out, the current receptionist gave them their clothes back—clean and dried. Everyone got fully dressed—as fully as their particular ensembles allowed at least. However, one glittery golden pair of pants and golden boots were left unworn.

After putting his pants on, Bowie kept looking for and wrapping chocolate pralines from the glass bowls into napkins and stuffing his pockets with them.

“There’s a bowl over here, too!” Enzo shouted out to Bowie while flying around and pointing at yet another bowl of pralines with the tip of his blade.

With a swift step, Bowie rushed over. However, his pants slipped off him midway. “Shit!” he barked and started gathering his napkin-wrapped chocolates off the floor.

“What fascinates me the most is the fact that he didn’t think to pull his pants up first,” Ken commented in a monotone voice, his eyelids lazily sagging over his eyes halfway.

“Guy’s got different priorities,” said Domino, tapping his finger against his cheek as his head rested on his palm. After a few moments of contemplation, he turned to Ken, smiling. “Okay, hear me out! What if—like—strippers wore coin pouches strapped to their thongs? And when the pouches got too heavy, the thongs would slip off! People would wanna spend more, and we wouldn’t have to make the strippers pick the coins off the floor after every show!”

Ken glanced at him with an unimpressed, disinterested expression and said nothing.

Domino’s smile retreated into a disappointed frown as he leaned back into the sofa, looking away. “Yeah, it’s stupid,” he groaned. “I guess it’d

be a bitch to keep an eye on people so they don't put rocks or some other shit in there." Though, soon after, his face lit up with hope once again. "But I still think it'd be a perfect addition to the usual routines if I work out all the kinks!"

Ken turned his entire body to face Domino as he sat. He crossed his arms and then dragged his hand over his face with his eyes closed. He took a deep breath, huffed out the air from his lungs in an angry fashion, and opened his eyes to glare at Domino. "Why do you feel the need to justify yourself to me?" he asked. "It doesn't matter what I think. *You're* going to be the one who'll reap the rewards if they come. You tell *me* if it's a good idea."

"U-um..." mumbled Domino, looking down and tilting his head toward the floor. A part of him wanted to feel hurt and worthless. Ken meant to say that Domino was dumb, naive, and a disappointment for trying to ask for his opinion instead of being confident in himself. However, another part that had been buried deep within, which had only recently started peering out through the thick layers of doubt and self-loathing, planted in his mind a single thought among all those others that were whispering about nothing but despair and darkness. Maybe...just maybe...Ken was trying to tell Domino that his own opinion was the only one that should matter to himself.

Meanwhile, Bowie was just about done picking up the chocolates and stuffing them back into his pockets. He stood up, pulled his pants up, and went to the reception desk to ask the demon currently working the shift for a thin rope.

Just then, Starabey came waltzing into the room with no clothes on and a whole flock of naked demonesses under his arms talking and laughing together with him. Once they got to the lounge area, he turned around to face the demonesses. "Okay, okay—seriously, I need to get going now," he said, still recovering from laughter.

"No!" one demoness howled.

"Come on, Bey!" whined another. "Can't you stay for one more day? Or week?"

The demonesses moaned and cried, tugging at his arms.

"It's only been a night, but you've truly become one with the spirit of our little family," said Regaliz with a proud smile as he walked into the

lobby with Pleito—both lacking in any form of clothing. As sunlight from the windows hit his face, his irises turned from rainbow colored to black. “Please, tell me you’ll come and visit us again.”

“You promise?” a demoness asked Starabey.

“Yeah! Promise!” the other added.

“Okay, *okay!*” Starabey chuckled. “It’s a deal.”

The demonesses cheered collectively, giving Starabey one last group hug goodbye.

“Let’s wrap this up, please,” Ken groaned, spinning his finger in a circular motion and glaring at Pleito. He then held up Starabey’s pants with only his thumb and index finger.

While Starabey went to get his clothes from Ken and put them on, Pleito nodded with a grin on his face and approached Domino.

“Shit!” Domino whispered. “What do I *say*? I totally forgot about that guy!”

“It’s all right.” Ken sighed. “I’ve taken care of it.”

“Wait...” Domino blurted out, staring at Ken with a puzzled gaze. “What? *How?*”

“We played a guessing game, and I won,” Ken explained. “All you have to do now is take his seal.”

Domino just smiled, his stare forever locked on to him.

“No need to thank me,” Ken added.

With a light chuckle, Domino nodded. “I appreciate it.”

But Ken just turned his head away as a smirk forced its way onto his face.

Pleito cleared his throat while holding up his glowing index finger, smiling.

“Right, right. Sorry,” said Domino and exposed his forearm to him. “Seal here.”

Pleito drew his symbol onto Domino’s skin with his glowing claw as if it were burning metal, leaving a faint-glowing mark just under Massire’s.

“By the way, this came in the mail for you today,” said Regaliz, handing Domino a red envelope.

"What the—" Domino mumbled as the rest of his team—except Ken—gathered behind him. "I'll read it out *loud*," he complained. Once the others moved back a bit, he proceeded to open the envelope.

It was sealed with gold-colored wax and spilled glitter all over the floor once opened. The letter inside was written with a golden marker and filled with all sorts of colorful stickers and doodles featuring hearts and positive messages such as "you are loved," "you got this," and "never stop believing."

"Domino, come to Gothiens. I have a present for you. Enter through the round door with a white rose around the handle, east of the Cathedra of His Celestial Radiance. Bring your friends," Domino read.

"Why didn't they just hire a messenger like a *normal* person?" said Enzo.

"Hey! I *know* that handwriting!" Bowie exclaimed. "It's Santana Cleaver!"

"Who?" asked Domino, raising an eyebrow at him.

Starabey crossed his arms, staring at the letter in utter confusion. "*Santa* Cleave? That stalker guy in red latex that breaks into people's houses and leaves presents with creepy messages on the cards?"

"He tortures bad guys, too. That's why they call him Cleaver. 'Cause he's got two meat cleavers he chops them up with," Bowie added with a smile. "I dunno why they call him Santana, though. He wrote on my card that I had beautiful empty eyes."

"He just gave me a box full of napkins with messages from different people telling me they wanted to have my babies," Starabey confessed, staring at the floor with a fear-stricken look on his face. "I was thirteen."

"Veghn I open mine, it be emptigh," said Sublivion. "The card tell me to pack maigh things. I had no things. But...one veek later is veghn I meet Domino and Bovghie."

"W-wait! So, all of you got fucking presents from this Santa bastard but me?" Domino shouted. He stood up, crumpling up the letter. "This is such *bullshit*!" he screeched. He shook his arms like a child in the middle of a tantrum before slamming the paper ball into the ground.

Ken rolled his eyes. "Oh my Xar," he groaned.

Domino turned to his teammates, screaming at them. "I deserve a present! I want my present!"

"He told you to come to Gothiens so he can give you one, right?" Bowie reminded him.

"O-oh," Domino mumbled, his eyes opening wide and his angry frown shrinking into a lighter, calmer expression. "Fuck. Yeah, he...he *did* say that."

"Must be real special if he's inviting you over to *his* place to pick it up," said Starabey with a smile.

Domino's cheeks blushed red as he turned his head to hide his face away. He made a scene to show his discontent, and as it turned out, he'd actually gotten a better deal than all of them.

"A personal invitation from Santana, huh?" said Regaliz, spreading a sly grin across his face and resting his hand on his hip.

Everyone pointed their curious stares at him.

"You're lucky," Regaliz added. "They're very picky about whom they invite to their little clubhouse."

"What?" asked Domino.

"Oh—I'm sorry." Regaliz chuckled. "You've never heard of animadros, have you?"

The guys responded with silence.

"Well...they're sort of like the dead that walk, but not *really*. They're not demons or humans anymore. They're creatures that feed on others' anima because they have none of their own."

"But...you can't live without anima," argued Domino. "You can't fucking do *anything*! You're dead! No—scratch that—even the run-over cat on the side of the road has a little bit of anima still left in it!"

"That's why I said you couldn't exactly call them 'dead.' If anything... they're a completely different *level* of dead," Regaliz elaborated. "They can't function without a strong source of anima—a lot like how reptiles need an external heat source to live. Some have even formed a society and follow a single leader. The first animadro that created all the others—the one and only Animadre. Santana."

Domino, Ken, and Starabey glanced at each other.

"And unlike other creatures, even us A-grade demons, they don't age. Isn't it marvelous?"

"Okay, but..." said Domino, glancing around anxiously, "they're not *dangerous*, are they? Like—they're not gonna cut off our arms and butt-fuck us with them, right?"

Ken turned to Domino with a disgusted yet confused glare.

"Not likely. Unless that's something you're into," said Regaliz, chuckling. "When you're around them, you won't feel any different. They are more like—" He looked around the room, snapping his finger. "They're like plants! Yes. Just like the trees collect sunlight, animadros are fueled by the anima we radiate. And if the emotions of the person they're feeding off are strong enough, the animadros will even start feeling those emotions *themselves*."

Ken stood up from the sofa and bowed his head to Regaliz. "Thank you for your hospitality, Your Radiance, but we really *should* get going," he said. "Now, if there's nothing else—"

"Oh—before you go," Regaliz interrupted him, "I just need you to approve of the portraits for me." He then clapped his hands.

One by one, the nude demonesses left the room and returned carrying large framed portraits of each of the SPANK members.

"I did not consent to this," said Ken, his eyes glaring at his own portrait in annoyance.

"What do you boys think of our dear Sublivion *now*?" Regaliz asked as he motioned his hand toward Sublivion's portrait.

The painting depicted him without his gimp costume, gazing into the outside world with his big mint-green eyes and a warm, wide smile.

Everyone but Domino turned to observe the portrait with great interest.

Sublivion tilted his masked head downward.

"Can you guys see the skeleton under the skin, too?" asked Bowie.

"That is the fucking coolest shit I've ever seen," said Starabey.

"I know, right?" Domino exclaimed. "Okay, okay—let's see mine next!"

Regaliz took Sublivion's portrait from his employee's hand, laid it against the wall, and proceeded to take the old one off the wall—the one in which Sublivion had his mask on and was holding his head down. In its stead, he hung up the new portrait. "I think this one is a *much* better fit," he said, taking Domino's portrait from another demoness and hanging it in the empty spot next to Sublivion's new one.

Upon nothing but a glance that lasted less than a second, Domino tilted his face toward the ground, covering his eyes in shame.

"Not a fan?" Starabey asked him, patting his back with a comforting grin on his face. "Come on. I bet mine's *twice* as hideous."

"You think it's *hideous*?" Domino shouted, staring into Starabey's eyes with sad, lamblike eyes.

"He's merely talking about Domino's *face*, Your Radiance," Ken told Regaliz.

Domino glared at Ken, his eyes almost tearing up and his lips trembling.

Sublivion walked up to Domino from behind him and pulled him into a tight embrace.

Domino yelped and twitched in surprise. His cheeks were reddening as he averted his gaze toward the floor in embarrassment.

"I still think they're dull." Pleito sighed, frowning as he observed the portraits.

"I'm so sorry, cherry plum," cooed Regaliz, taking Pleito's hand to kiss and rub. "I'll make something more fun next time. All right?"

"I'd like some ice cream now," Pleito added, a light smile returning to his face.

"Of course," Regaliz replied. He took Pleito's arm and headed toward the main hallway with him after motioning for his staff to hang up the rest of the portraits. Before disappearing behind the beaded curtains, he turned to the SPANK team. "Oh—and feel free to use my portal. It'll take you to the International Portal Station. Second door on the right."

"You heard him," said Ken. He then promptly proceeded to walk toward the second door near the exit. "Let's get a move on."

"But we can return here anytime we want, correct?" Enzo inquired.

"I think they only really want *Starabey*," Ken replied.

Domino kept pouting while Sublivion carried him, glaring at the back of Starabey's head.

"No," Bowie added, "one of the demons said they want cute couples so magicians can send visions of them having sex to other people and earn lots of coins."

Domino shrieked with joy, digging his nails into his face.

Everyone flinched and stopped in front of the door. They turned around to face Domino and Sublivion with confused, shocked stares.

"You think they were talking about *us*?" exclaimed Domino, gazing up at Sublivion with a bright smile.

Ken rolled his eyes.

"U-um..." Sublivion mumbled, turning his head to the side.

"He said Reggie wants to watch and broadcast Mr. Pumpkinhead's second wedding night," Bowie explained, shrugging. "It's gonna be his greatest masterpiece—whatever *that* means."

Domino's smile crumbled into a frown. His eyes opened wide, glistening like a dam that was about to break and release an onslaught of tears. After a few moments of trying to contain the gut-wrenching disappointment, he lowered his head and rubbed his nose after a sniffle. "Okay. That's fair," he said with a light tremor enveloping his voice.

They entered through the door and into a small room, almost blinded by the swirling colorful lights emitted by the round portal encased in a giant gilded frame.

"Imagine if your parents watched a vision of you having intercourse," Enzo commented.

Domino's pupils shrunk. A horrified, disgusted frown drooped over his chin.

"I don't think I've ever been more thankful for no one being able to recognize me," said Enzo.

Starabey pinched the root of his nose and shut his eyes. He then looked at the ceiling with a worried gaze and sighed as he stepped into the portal with the others.

Chapter Nine

Great Is the Giver

Gothiens—the capital of Phranis. The Cathedra of His Celestial Radiance was casting a twenty-story shadow over the main square with its tall towers and beautiful detailed masonwork made completely out of black marble. But, regardless, it was still brimming with color provided by the sea of flowers covering the merchants' stands, as well as the swarms of tables of the local cafés. It was noon, and all the citizens were out and about, either socializing with their peers or observing and judging each passerby based on how close their garments adhered to the standards set by the latest couture. As elegant and intriguing as the patterns on their folding fans were, they were no match against the summer heat, shade or no shade.

Domino and his teammates were walking through the square, past the tall place of worship, with a swift march toward the east.

"So, we're not just going to be fighting Zephyr, the greatest and most accomplished hero this side of the continent, but his sword with the anima of an A-grade demon as well?" Ken inquired.

"If I don't die of fucking heatstroke first," Domino replied with glaring eyes, flapping the sides of his black coat to let some air reach his skin. "And no, I'm *not* taking the coat off."

Ken rolled his eyes as a light sigh escaped his nostrils.

"Hi, doggy!" exclaimed Bowie as he waved at one of the dogs walking by with its owner.

"The two of us must have been turned into inanimate objects by the same person," Enzo commented. "It's a very high-level magical power. I doubt one would be able to find more than one person who has it across *several* countries, let alone Kitaria by itself."

"Why'd you get turned into a shovel, again?" Bowie asked him.

"Well...I suppose there's no point in keeping it a secret anymore," Enzo confessed. "When I said I was a farmer, what I *really* meant to say was that I was a bored wealthy youth who started a weed-growing business with a friend of mine back in the day. Though he didn't actually betray me, the rest of the story was true. Zephyr and a few of his hero companions busted our entire operation, and one of them used their *magica* to turn me into a shovel." He sighed. "When I realized my family failed to realize who I was and that you couldn't buy or own anything as a...*thing*, I gave myself away to a merchant and stayed there alone with my thoughts...until Starabey and Little Firecrotch came along, that is."

"Hold on," Domino interjected, "I thought weeds were *legal*. Zephyr's a self-absorbed retard, but he doesn't attack for no reason."

"They were endemic species," said Enzo, "from a couple of different nature reserves."

"Hey—I think that's *him*!" exclaimed Bowie, pointing at Zephyr in casual cloth clothing sitting at a table at one of the cafés.

"Oh my *Xar*!" shouted Domino, his brows pointing toward the root of his nose like arrows. "That *motherfucker*! Are you seeing this shit?" He threw out his hands with his open palms facing up. "He's following us on purpose just to *fuck* with me!"

"So, you've finally noticed," said Ken in an unimpressed monotone voice.

"Dom, calm down," Starabey told him with a warm, laid-back grin and firmly placed his hand on Domino's shoulder. "Zephyr's *always* on the road. I'm pretty sure it's just a coincidence."

But Domino's ears were shut by the gushing sounds of boiling blood. All other noises were muffled as he glared at Zephyr from afar, his lungs itching to scream. He just ignored everything and everyone around him and marched over to Zephyr's table.

"More inconvenience, please," groaned Ken as he and the rest followed.

Domino approached Zephyr's small, thin lime-green-painted table with his hand on his hip and a smug grin on his face accompanied by a

snobbish glare. "Well, well, well," he said, chuckling, "look who we have here."

Zephyr's eyes lit up with joy as he laid them upon Domino's face. He immediately stood up from his seat, straightening his white bishop-sleeve shirt and gleaming vanilla-colored vest. "Domino? I-is that you?"

"Yeah—but I bet you won't be having trouble recognizing my new *outfit*." Domino sneered as he showed off his long black coat. "President Pumpkinhead gave it to me. We're best friends now."

"I'm sorry—it's been far too long since you've worn something over your shoulders." Zephyr chuckled and spread his arms, reaching for an embrace. "It's so good to see you again, friend!"

Domino took a step back, evading Zephyr's arms as he waved his palms in front of him with an angry grimace on his face. "Hey, *hey!*" he shouted. "Back off!"

Sublivion remained still and silent but clenched his fists tight.

Though Zephyr ceased with his pursuit of a hug, he kept smiling nevertheless. "You know, I'm really glad we've run into each other like this. There's something I've been wanting to ask you for such a long time... I won't be able to sleep soundly if I squander this chance." He took a deep breath and stared at the ground.

Domino merely crossed his arms and stared back at him with a condescending yet curious expression.

The others' curiosity was perhaps burning even hotter than Domino's as they stood beside him.

Zephyr looked up, smiling. "Domino Enviedhier, he said, "will you go out with me?"

Domino's eyes widened in shock. Zephyr's question hit him like a hammer to the back of the head. During all his years of hatred and resentment, not once had he noticed a sign that made him suspect Zephyr had romantic feelings for him. It was almost surreal.

Everyone turned their heads toward Domino.

"Y-you...wanna go...*out* with me?" asked Domino.

Zephyr nodded.

With his brain in shambles, all Domino could do was let his eyes dart around without focus as he tried to pick up the broken pieces of his

thoughts. Once he'd figured out what he wanted to say, he looked back at Zephyr. "B-but...I said I wanted to *kill* you."

"Don't fret—I'm aware those were just empty words, friend," said Zephyr. "I know how short-tempered you are. But it's all right. We all sometimes say things we don't mean."

"I'm working on a way to kill you right *now*!" Domino shouted. "I *tried* to kill you back in the *jungle*!"

"Yes, but...you were under a lot of stress," said Zephyr. "You were frustrated. I can understand that. And I forgive you." He glanced downward and then gazed back at Domino, smiling. "You haven't changed a bit. Even to this day, you never quit *anything*—no matter how hard the journey may get... You're passionate, you're ambitious, you're hardworking...you're *gorgeous*, and...you'd risk everything in a heartbeat just to help someone in need... You were the one who inspired me to become a hero in the *first* place."

"Okay, um..." Domino mumbled, his eyes searching around the floor. "Wow..." He looked up at Zephyr, unable to keep the corners of his lips from curling upward. "I never knew you thought of me like that."

"I meant every word," Zephyr told him.

"But...but, then, why didn't you stop my parents when they were talking about how amazing you were compared to me when we were kids? And back at the strip club, why didn't you tell those people how I helped you beat that crazy demoness?"

"Don't worry," said Zephyr as he gave Domino's upper arm a firm, friendly stroke, "if you keep working hard, I'm sure you'll do great things in the future, too. Just keep it up."

Domino's smile spread to his cheeks, and his eyes opened wider as he stared into Zephyr's in complete silence.

"Domino?" Starabey called out to him quietly.

Bowie waved his hand in front of Domino's face with a puzzled glare.

"I think he might be having a stroke," Enzo commented.

Sublivion picked Domino up into his arms. "I vilgh forgive ju this because ju not knovgh," Sublivion warned Zephyr. "Touch maigh love again...and I vilgh sever ju."

"I'm...sorry?" said Zephyr, staring at Sublivion with a confused expression.

"Come on. Let's move him. His eyes are starting to twitch," said Starabey and lightly pushed Sublivion away by the shoulder.

Starabey, Bowie, Enzo, Sublivion, and, by extension, Domino all then walked away, back toward the route they'd been taking before their little detour.

"You can expect an invitation to another duel soon, I should suspect," Ken told Zephyr. Then he went after the rest of the group, leaving Zephyr alone at the café.

Soon enough, Domino shook his head and awoke from his trance, though not as the same Domino he was moments ago. "I'm fine, Sublivion." He chuckled as he patted Sublivion's chest. "You can let me down now."

Sublivion reluctantly placed him on the ground, and the group continued walking toward the east end of the square.

"Domi, you're acting *weird*," Bowie commented.

"Leave him be, Bowie," Ken told him. "He's deserved this moment of overreaction."

"Come on, everybody," said Domino, smiling. "We're not gonna let this slow us down! Santana's place should be right around the corner!"

A young girl in a sweet, breezy dress carrying a basketful of shell-shaped biscuits hopped over to Domino with a warm smile on her face. She held up her basket, her eyes glimmering in the sun's rays, and spoke to him in her native tongue.

"No, thank you," Domino replied, waving his palm in front of her as they passed by. He turned to his teammates. "She's *adorable*," he commented.

Two little birds soon flew onto Domino's shoulder. "Why *hello* there, little ones," he said and rubbed their feathery little heads with his fingers. "You're just the cutest little balls of chub I've ever seen—*aren't* you?"

"Dom, you're freaking us out," Starabey complained in a more timid tone.

"If you die, may I inherit your place in Mr. Pumpkinhead's circle of close friends?" Enzo asked.

"Ugh...this is idiotic," Ken groaned, rolling his eyes. He marched over to Domino and grabbed hold of his shoulders, stopping him in his tracks. "All right—just let it out."

Domino took a deep breath and released a long, loud scream into Ken's face until all the air had left his lungs.

"What's your name?" Ken asked with an annoyed gaze.

"Domino Enviedhieri," he panted.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Occupation?"

"Ax. Murder. Kill."

Ken turned to the rest of the group. "He's back."

"You feeling better?" Starabey asked Domino.

"No," Domino barked. He continued walking with angry brows forming wrinkles on the root of his nose. "Let's go."

Without asking further questions, everyone followed behind in silence.

Soon enough, they found themselves before a round wooden door—east of the Cathedra of His Celestial Radiance, just like Santana's letter said. However, a crucial element was missing.

Domino examined the door from all possible sides—even squatted to try to peek under it. He couldn't find the white rose the letter spoke of.

"Maybe we're at the wrong place," said Bowie.

"No, this *has* to be it." Ken protested.

Domino banged his fist against the wooden door like an angry drunkard.

Moments later, a small wooden panel on the left side of the door opened, with two glowing white irises glaring at them from the other side.

The person asked them a question in Phranisian. "Mot de passe?"

"Yeah, um...there was supposed to be, like, a white rose on the door or some shit?" Domino explained. "Is there a Santana Cleaver living here?"

The wooden panel slid back into its original position, closing up the hole. The man behind it unlocked the door. His purple hand placed the stem of a fresh white rose into a small hole at the tip of the door handle and locked the door back up. Once again, he slid the panel open. "Sorry.

Old women that visit the cathedra keep taking the roses,” he explained. “Password?”

Domino turned to his teammates. “Do you guys remember a fucking password?” he groaned.

Bowie merely shrugged in response.

“Don’t look at *me*,” Starabey added.

“Sir, I don’t have all day,” said the gatekeeper of the door.

Domino then turned back to face the man’s eyes. “The letter we got from your boss didn’t say anything about a password.”

“Sorry. Can’t help you,” the gatekeeper added.

However, just before he was about to close the panel, another man came and whispered to him from the inside in Phranisian.

The gatekeeper let out a loud chortle.

The locks suddenly clacked before the door opened, revealing a hooded figure in plush red robes.

“This way, please,” said the gatekeeper as he moved aside for the SPANK team.

One by one, the team entered the dimly lit hallway with a bit of caution in their step.

“Not you,” the gatekeeper announced, extending his arm toward Bowie.

“Ugh! What now?” Domino complained. He turned around with the rest of his team.

“Why not?” Bowie asked with an innocent, confused look in his eyes.

The gatekeeper appeared to only lightly tap his chest, but Bowie flew out the door like he’d been hit by a horse carriage. “I must ask that you remain outside,” said the gatekeeper.

“Okay, I get why you’d wanna kick Enzo out,” Domino commented, “but Bowie is the *last* person that would give a shit about what you guys do here.”

The gatekeeper glared into Domino’s eyes. “This is a place of *giving*. And it only takes one bad apple to spoil the entire barrel.”

“Hey—who are *you* people to judge Bowie like this? You’ve never even met him!” Starabey argued. “If you did, then you’d know he was the one who put his ass on the line for me so I could get my guitar!”

"Stop," Bowie told him, gazing at him with cold eyes deprived of all shame or sympathy.

Everyone but the gatekeeper turned to Bowie with a puzzled gaze.

The gatekeeper's eyes remained squinted as he looked at him.

"You don't have to defend me, Bey," Bowie explained. "I didn't do it for *you*."

"I told you. He's incapable of giving," said the gatekeeper. "Nobody is judging him. We just can't allow him *in* here. You're all supposed to refill the anima we circulate among us with your presence. If he's with you, there's a high chance he'll smother it."

"Well," Starabey replied, "so what if that's true? We don't need you, but you need *us*. If Bowie doesn't get to go down there, *none* of us do. Tell 'em, Dom."

Domino averted his eyes and tilted his head downward, his face unable to shift out of his guilt-ridden frown.

Starabey turned to him with a concerned expression. "Domino?"

"N-no..." he mumbled.

"What?" Starabey inquired, taking a step closer.

Domino looked up at Starabey, his hands trembling. "I-I'm sorry... I can't."

"Why not? What do you mean?" asked Starabey, genuinely surprised by his answer.

"It hurts to hold it in and it fucking hurts to let it out, but I can't...I can't do this anymore..." He chuckled lightly as a way of trying to numb the pain inside his chest. "I don't want to keep *pretending* anymore."

Ken raised his eyebrow as he stared at Domino.

Like gulping down a giant, rough piece of stone, Domino turned to Bowie, unable to look him in the eyes for more than a couple of seconds at a time. "I've *always* been there for you. I stuck up for you in front of your mom, I—I did things I didn't want to just so *you'd* have it better..." he said. "I never expected you to return the favor..." A deep sigh escaped his lips. "Maybe it's my fault for hoping you would someday, but...you were never there for *me*. In *any* way. Not...not even when you were buying ice cream, as retarded as it sounds. It's like I'm just a random person who happens to be walking next to you all the fucking time. I'm sorry, but...I don't wanna stick up for you anymore."

"I don't blame you, Domi," Bowie told him with a light smile on his face. "You did lots of nice stuff for me, and like you said...I never did anything for you unless you asked me to."

"Bowie...I..."

"Don't worry. It's not your fault," he continued. "I never asked for your help or gifts or favors, but you'd give them to me anyway. I never knew why you've been so nice to me, but I should have stopped you. I know I'm not the kind of person who'd think to do something nice for someone on my own. Maybe I intentionally didn't question why you did nice things for me all this time because I liked it. I never thought I was actually *hurting* you." He nodded as he looked Domino straight in the eyes. "I'm glad we came here and I'm glad you told me. Now you can save your efforts for people who *deserve* them." He then walked away with Enzo in his hand.

Everyone kept staring at Bowie until he was out of sight.

Starabey sighed and crossed his arms.

Domino buried his face into his palm, gripping his hair as tightly as he could, and shaking his head, trying not to shed a tear.

Gently, Sublivion placed his hand on Domino's shoulder.

"Follow me," said the gatekeeper as a tear slipped down his cheek. He proceeded to walk deeper into the underground down the old, creaking wooden steps.

The farther they all went, the more hooded men joined their company.

• • • •

Bored, with nothing to do, Bowie strolled around the bustling streets of Gothiens. The sky was glowing with sunlight, and the air was filled with heat, sounds of footsteps, and the chatter of the people passing by.

"Does this mean we're leaving the team?" Enzo asked.

Bowie shrugged, a tired frown slumping over his chin. "I don't know."

"Well...do you *want* to?" Enzo added. "You didn't seem very happy in their company, from what I could see."

"It's not them," Bowie explained. "I've just been really bummed out lately. Domino and Sublivion have their magica, Ken's a prophet, Bey knows a lot of stuff, and I'm...I'm just holding everyone back."

"I suppose." Enzo sighed. "And if what Domino spoke of is true, you haven't been much of a companion, either. But I completely understand where you're coming from. You just function differently than other people. And there's nothing wrong with that."

"Maybe I *should* just leave for good," said Bowie. "I don't want to be anyone's burden."

"Hey—I just remembered something," said Enzo. "You never did say what you actually got from Santana when you were younger."

Bowie shrugged. "It was just another box wrapped up like a present."

"You mean...you got a gift box inside *another* gift box?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"Une glace à la vanille?" said a male voice.

Bowie turned to the left and saw a wide smile on a noseless porcelain-white face underneath a shiny, plush red hood with white fur around the edges.

The man's scleras were as black as the night itself, and his irises two glowing white rings.

"Porthos?" asked Bowie, squinting his eyes.

"Hey—you looked up!" Porthos exclaimed, standing in front of a glass casing filled with colorful ice cream. "How's it going? I heard you guys only have one more horseman to go! Nice job!"

"*Whom* did you hear it from?" Enzo questioned him.

"One of my buddies was following you around this whole time, and he told me everything," Porthos replied. "Anyways—want some ice cream?" He took out two waffle cones from inside the casing, each filled with vanilla ice cream and with sugar-sculpted pink ball gags around the scoops. "I made them myself! It's just like the SPANK logo! You like it?"

"Oh! How thoughtful of you!" Enzo commented.

"I don't think I can eat two at once," said Bowie.

"Okay, well...maybe you can take one and then give the other one to someone else?"

Bowie tilted his head to the side. Why would he give it to someone else without asking first? If they didn't want ice cream or didn't like the flavor, it'd be a waste of a perfectly good ice cream.

"None for me, thank you," said Enzo. "Unfortunately, I no longer possess a mouth."

"What about Domino?" Porthos asked. "Maybe *he'd* like some."

"He told you that?" Bowie replied.

"Just take the fucking ice cream, Bowie," growled Porthos, glaring at him with a steep frown and wide-open eyes as he handed him the two cones.

Bowie gazed down at the ice cream and then back at Porthos, puzzled by his sudden change in tone.

Porthos's face then readopted the grin he'd previously been fashioning. "What I meant to say was...sometimes people don't even *know* they want something. Dogs can't tell you what they want or when they want it, but you still pet them and give them treats, right? It doesn't even matter if you guess it wrong that time. You cared enough to think about doing something nice for someone for no reason." He grabbed another scoop of ice cream with a deep spoon, dropped it into an ice-cream cone, and handed it to a customer who'd been waiting to be served beside Bowie.

The customer attempted to ask a question in Phranisian.

However, Porthos continued to speak to Bowie while shooing the person away with light flaps of his hands. "And remember—even if it doesn't make a horse run faster, the horse can't function without its anus. These are my lessons for you."

"Don't I get an inspirational quote?" Enzo asked.

"Girth is more important than length," said Porthos.

Bowie's eyes gravitated toward the ground in silent contemplation. After a few moments, he looked back up at Porthos with a stern, determined gaze. "I'm gonna go look for something else because this ice cream will melt before I get back."

"Oh. Right," groaned Porthos, squinting his eyes and frowning. "Forgot about that..." He then put the ice cream back into the casing and jumped over it. "Well...I should go before the owner sees me. I don't actually work here—I deliver presents and kill people."

Paralyzed, with a dumbfounded look in his eyes, Bowie stared at Porthos the entire time he was running away and still in sight.

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The room was dark and dimly lit by flaming torches on the cold stone walls. There was nothing inside but a large, round wooden table and some chairs. No decor, no paintings, no luxury of any kind.

The hooded men accompanying the SPANK team bowed their heads toward the table on the other end of the room. "Great is the Giver," they said in unison. Then they quietly retreated out of the room, closing the heavy doors behind them—all except for one person.

The one that remained took off his red hood, revealing his lavender skin and clean-shaven head to Domino and his crew. His eyes were completely black, but his irises were a glowing white color.

"Oh, *now* you show yourself," Ken complained, glaring at him.

"Hey, aren't you that guy from the coliseum?" Starabey concluded. "Corboir, right?"

"So, all this time, you were just faster and jumpier because you're an animadro," Domino sneered.

Corboir stared at them, his expression cold and stern. "I've spent the last one hundred years training in martial arts with Animadre."

Domino crossed his arms, looking away with angry brows and pouting lips.

Suddenly someone burst through the doors, rushing past them toward the table. "Sorry I'm late, guys!" he said in a jolly tone and walked behind the table, facing Corboir and the SPANK gang. His slender body was covered in red latex—including his downward-pointing ramlike horns—and his neck, shoulders, and the areas around his wrists were covered in large bushels of white fur. He wore a black leather belt around his waist and tall black high-heeled boots. The only parts of him that remained bare were his noseless pearly-white face and his black scleras with glowing white irises.

"Great is the Giver," said Corboir as he bowed his head toward him.

Domino's eyes opened wider, along with his mouth. "Oh my Xar—*Porthos*?"

"In the flesh!" he exclaimed, spreading his arms. He then sat down in the middle chair and crossed his legs. "Okay, well, while I'm wearing

this, I'm technically Santana Cleaver, but please, keep calling me Porthos. Santana is just my stage name."

"I can't believe I didn't notice it before," said Starabey with a chuckle. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I just wanted you guys to get to know the real me before I revealed that I was also a present delivery guy and serial killer kinda," he replied.

Starabey's smile quickly morphed into a subdued frown as he gazed at Porthos in awe.

However, Porthos's expression suddenly turned grimly abhorred as he gasped and gripped the edge of the table with one hand while pointing at Domino with the other. "What are you *wearing*?"

Domino glanced around at his companions and then looked back at Porthos. "Who? Me?" he asked. "Oh—President Pumpkinhead gave it to me." His eyes moved toward his coat as he posed in it. "Of course, we're on a first-name basis now. We're, like—really close."

"I made that outfit specifically for Horatio!" Porthos shouted, his eyes drowning in panic. "He *needs* it!"

"Mr. Pumpkinhead told us his designer would be *glad* to get more work," Ken added. "I'm assuming he was talking about you?"

"If he wanted new clothes, he could have just asked me. And you don't even fit in them." Porthos groaned and shook his head. "No, no! I'll make all-new outfits for you. I'll *die* before I let you fight in those." He turned to Starabey with a smile. "Okay, *you*—how do you feel about feathers?"

"I guess if they're naturally molted—" Starabey replied.

"Done!" Porthos exclaimed.

"If you'll permit me, I'd like to give my opening statement now, Animadre," Corboir announced.

"Opening statement?" asked Domino. "Fuck—are we being *sued*?"

"Wait—we thought you just invited us here to give Domino his present," Starabey commented.

"Oh, I lied." Porthos chuckled. "Sorry about that. I needed to convince you to come here somehow. Oh—but don't worry! Your present is on its way! Twenty years away, but..."

"*Twenty*?" shouted Domino.

"Ugh!" Porthos groaned, smiling and gripping his horns while flailing his legs around as he was sitting in his chair. "I can't say anything! It's supposed to be a surprise!"

"Really? You're *serious*?" Domino exclaimed, his cheeks hurting from how hard he was smiling.

"I wish I could tell you!" Porthos replied.

Domino ran up to him and grabbed his shoulders. "Tell me! *Tell* me! Will I love it?"

"It's gonna be the best thing *ever*!" Porthos shrieked.

The two kept calling out Xar's name, giggling, and hopping in place.

While Starabey stared at them with a confused but warm smile, Ken groaned while his palm was covering up half of his face.

As a light grin peered through Corboir's stern frown, he coughed into his fist before a full smile developed. "Animadre," he said, "if I may continue..."

Porthos turned to him. "Oh! Oh—right! Sorry!" He sat back down. "Okay, everyone take a seat! Corboir wants to share something with you!"

The SPANK gang sat next to each other in a row facing the wall.

Corboir took his seat on the opposite side, next to Porthos. He looked around the room with glaring eyes and stopped at Domino. "Let's not waste any more time," he said. "You came here of your own free will, but you won't be leaving that way. Not until Enviedhier releases Sublivion from his unjust imprisonment. If you don't comply, you'll be *forced* to do it...one way or another."

"Oh my Xar—I fucking *knew* it!" Domino whispered to his teammates, his voice pushed to the highest of pitches by the sudden onset of fear.

"I refuse," Sublivion growled.

All eyes were on him.

"I'm not giving you a choice," Corboir argued. "You're not capable of thinking freely as long as you're bound to him."

"There *be* no seal," Sublivion replied and stood up from his chair. "I be vitgh him of maigh ovghn free vhighl."

Corboir turned to Porthos. "Animadre, in light of this new information, I ask that you allow me to imprison them—just until I can be sure."

"Yeah, yeah! No problem!" said Porthos with a few nods and clapped his hands.

Several hooded animadros opened the doors and surrounded the SPANK team.

"Is this really necessary?" groaned Ken.

"I need to talk to Sublivion in a more private setting," Corboir explained.

"Don't worry—I'll be eavesdropping, so shout if you'll need anything," Porthos added.

"Okay...let's go, guys," said Domino with a sigh, snapping his fingers while standing up from his chair.

"Just to check, we're *not* fighting back," Starabey commented as they were leaving the room with the animadros.

"Porthos wouldn't allow us to come to harm," Ken replied. He then glanced at Domino with a tired frown. "At the very least, he wouldn't order them to sexually assault us with our dismembered limbs."

"We're still friends!" Porthos shouted out before they left.

• • • •

At the top of the stairs that lead down to the dungeon cells sat Corboir, glaring at the cells holding Domino and the others, trying to gather the courage to descend and talk to Sublivion. Despite having gone through all that trouble to get a moment somewhat alone with him, he kept wondering whether he himself was ready to find out the truth. But...the longer he remained at the top of the stairs, the longer he could hold on to his hopes. The longer he could pray.

Each present member of SPANK was placed in his own cell, sitting or lying on a rather comfortable bed, surrounded by lit candles and books. The metal bars and parts of the stone walls were painted over with various vibrant colors. The air was refreshing, and the ambience quite cozy. Had it not been for the bars, nobody would have been able to guess the place the animadros now called home was actually the old Gothiens guard hive before the staff and prisoners were relocated to a more spacious facility.

Ken turned to the wall as he sat on the white sheets, hoping his companion would be able to hear him better. "Domino..." he said. "Do you believe that...humans and demons are the same species?"

"I mean...they can have kids together," Domino replied, crossing his legs as he lay. "Makes sense to me."

"Yes, but...did you know that...all of those things demons can do...humans can, too?"

"You mean magica?"

"No, I mean...giving away your seal...fusing..." Ken explained. "Back when we were at Regaliz's resort, Pleito showed me how to create a promise mark."

"A what?" asked Domino.

"It's a kind of seal shaped like a cross that you place on yourself, and it keeps you from breaking the promise you made when you marked yourself," said Ken.

"That's retarded," Domino commented. "Why would you *not* wanna have the option to break a promise?"

"Anyway," Ken groaned, "Pleito also told me how it happened. How we...came to be, in a sense."

Domino sat up, gazing at the wall with a puzzled, curious expression.

"Millions of years ago, when Xar supposedly fell from the sky, Earth was nothing but a thick soup of scorching rocks and scalding seas. Xar used his magical power to create the first life on Earth—small creatures that would be able to survive in such a harsh environment."

"Hold on, hold on," Starabey interrupted. "I thought Xar created Earth *itself*."

"I thought so, too," Ken replied. "But I'm inclined to believe Pleito. He wasn't born from a mother and father. *Xar* created the elemental masters and horsemen."

"True," Sublivion added. "Zargh be a star that fall to Earth, and ve all cerrigh part of him inside us."

"At one point, Pleito said Xar started growing lonely. So, he decided to create something different. Something in his own image."

"Demons," Domino concluded.

"Exactly," said Ken.

"Okay, so...where do *we* fit into all of this?" asked Domino.

"Xar didn't stop there. He continued creating more and more demons, each with a unique magical power granted by the anima Xar gave them. Those powers allowed them to roam the land without...erm..."

"Getting fucked by the forces of nature?" Starabey chuckled.

"Yes..." Ken sighed. "In any case, as the most powerful demons were slowly claiming their territories over which to rule, the weaker ones were forced to continue searching for a place to call their own. They eventually found a small haven. A valley where the living conditions were more favorable, allowing the life Xar had created upon his arrival to evolve much quicker. There were trees, grass, fresh water, and even what would eventually become the animals we know today. The demons that settled there were at the top of the food chain. There was no reason for their bodies to keep the attributes that served to protect them from the rest of the infant Earth. Over the course of time, their descendants' powers weakened and their appearances changed. This new race eventually came to call themselves...humans..."

"Now, I'm just wondering why they didn't teach us *that* at school," said Starabey.

"Onleigh ve vgho be born from Zargh and raised baigh the acolaighes knovgh the truth of our past," Sublivion answered.

"Ah," said Starabey, nodding, "and Pumpkinhead can't teach it to humans because he'd have to reveal he's an elemental master. Though, I still don't get why he's keeping it a secret. Or why he didn't make us do that promise mark thing Ken talked about."

"Maybe because he *trusts* us?" Domino scoffed through a chuckle, leaning his back against the wall with his hands behind his head. "He probably just wants to make sure people respect him for his work, not because he can barbecue them at will."

Corboir's footsteps sounded against the stone staircase.

Everyone but Sublivion turned their heads toward him as he walked past their respective cells.

He stopped in front of the last cell, gazing at the demon in black latex through the color-coated metal bars. "Why?"

There was no reply.

"Why won't you let me save you?" Corboir continued.

"I alreadghi be saved..." Sublivion told him.

Corboir let out an annoyed sigh and closed his eyes, wondering what he could do or say to help Sublivion realize he didn't need to serve anyone any longer. "A part of me is doing this for selfish reasons. That, I will not deny," Corboir explained, staring at Sublivion. "But there is a part that only wants to see you happy...and free... I understand that your seal bond is making you want to please him, but can you honestly tell me you *enjoy* being someone's slave?"

"Ve vilgh *never* be free," Sublivion answered. "Ve vilgh forever be slaves, seal or no seal...ve vilgh *alveighs* be slaves to those ve love."

"Please, try to be *reasonable*," argued Corboir, "can't you see he's just using you for his own meaningless goals?"

Sublivion let out a deep, sinister chuckle.

However, it failed to faze Corboir. He stood perfectly still, patiently awaiting his reply.

"Jugh hold me captive as vhelgh. That not be right, either," Sublivion replied.

Corboir lacked the words to speak. After a short pause, he sighed angrily once more. "I'm not convinced your desire to stay with him is a *healthy* one."

"Vghoo be jugh even? Vaigh jugh care vaght happen to me?" asked Sublivion.

"We were...close..." said Corboir, averting his gaze. "Part of your anima used to belong to someone I knew...back when I was human."

Sublivion remained silent and almost motionless.

"Do you remember the name...Julien?" Corboir inquired, his voice trembling.

For a moment, Sublivion's mask faced downward, still breathing out silence. Then he answered, "No."

Corboir's face sunk, but there was still a glimmer of hope left in his eyes and on the tip of the smile he was trying so hard to conceal along with his tears. "You were my father's butler, and I was his bastard." He paused to wipe the tears off his face and take a deep breath, trying to force the words out of his mouth. "My father was...cruel. Your job was to lure guests down to the wine cellar and kill them so he and his companions could feast." He cleared his throat. "On his fiftieth birthday...they let all the servants help themselves to the wine. Once

everyone was liquored up, he came down with his guests... He...they brought knives and..."

Sublivion's mask turned to face Corboir.

"Y-you..." Corboir sniffled, "you threw yourself on top of me...so they wouldn't find me...when the bodies started dropping..." He gripped the cell bars, barely able to hold his own weight. "Animadre came and killed what remained of Father's followers, but you were..."

"I feel...sadness for jor loss..." said Sublivion.

Corboir straightened his back a bit and managed to regain a small piece of his composure. "Xar's acolytes came not too long after that. Out of every dead man and woman there, for some reason, they demanded *your* body," he explained. "I was too badly wounded to do anything. Animadre took every last speck of anima left in me and turned me."

"I am sure Zargh had reasons..." Sublivion told him.

"And now we *know* the reason," Corboir replied as he continued to stare at the floor. "You had powerful anima. He wanted it for his newest creations." He then hit the wall with his fist, almost puncturing it. "Then he just...gave you away to that...*monster*..." he growled.

"He didn't..." Sublivion confessed.

Corboir looked up, his teary eyes wide open, and his lips parted.

"He let us choose," said Sublivion. "I choose Venon. I not knowh his true nature back then."

"If he was such a good father, shouldn't he have given you the choice of *neither* of them?" asked Corboir, glaring at Sublivion.

"I cannot speak for Zargh," he replied, "but I trust him. Zargh's vurghds be kindness. Zargh's vilgh be the good. I understand happiness cannot be vidghout suffering."

"No, you *don't* understand!" Corboir shouted. "Don't you get it? You never *had* to suffer! We could have been happy *together*! P-perhaps I can't ask to have the past changed for *me*, but—"

"Someone else vulghd have still suffered," said Sublivion. "There be no perfect path. There be no perfect choice. If there eghsist vulrdghs vhere the past and future be different, nothing vulghd change but the *people* vghoo suffer and *veghn*."

Corboir's heart pounded uncontrollably. He prayed. He prayed so hard Sublivion would suddenly jump up and pull him into his arms.

He'd dreamed the next time he opened his eyes, he'd be able to kiss Julien's face like so many years ago. "I just want you back..." He gripped the bars of the cell. "Don't you see? We've been given a second chance! We can finally be happy! Together!"

Sublivion turned his head downward and to the side.

As the moment passed, Corboir's eyes only drowned further in sorrow. He slammed the cell door open. He approached Sublivion and pulled up his mask. He knelt before him, grasped his head in his palms, and kissed him like trying to breathe life back into him.

Sublivion didn't flinch or close his eyes. There was no trace of emotion on his face.

When Corboir pulled back, seeing how he couldn't invoke a reaction in him, he shut his eyes as hard as he could, shaking his head as his face was sinking. "No..."

Sublivion stared at him with grief in his gaze.

"No...no...no!" Corboir screamed, digging his nails into his arms.

"Maigh apologies..." Sublivion told him, pulling down his mask. "If I once be this person, I be no longer."

Corboir stood up, concealing his eyes with the back of his arm as he trudged out of the cell, opening up the ones that held Domino, Starabey, and Ken.

"Wait—they weren't locked?" asked Domino.

"Go!" Corboir shouted at them. "Leave! All of you!"

Without questions, the SPANK team hurried up the staircase.

Domino looked back before reaching the top. He stared at Corboir with sorrow-filled eyes as Ken pushed him forward.

Corboir leaned against the wall at the foot of the stairs as silence smothered the sounds of their fading footsteps. He glided to the floor, sobbing into his robes. The dim lights from the candles inside the cells barely reached him. He was like a lost child—helpless, alone in the dark. "You bastard..." he growled, clenching his sleeves. "Why did you have to die?"

Faint sounds of feet slowly padded against the stone floor. The closer they were, the louder they became, and the echoing faded away.

Corboir didn't even bother to look at the person now sitting next to him and stroking his back.

"What I'm wondering is," said Porthos with a gentle, happy tone, "why do you think he even *left*?"

"It's not him..." Corboir sniffled. "He doesn't remember."

"Eee!" shrieked Porthos as if trying to recreate the high-pitched call of a goat.

Corboir lifted his head abruptly, staring back at him with an annoyed, puzzled look on his tear-covered face.

"There's a whole eight point three *percent* of Julien in there," Porthos explained.

"But he doesn't *remember*!" growled Corboir.

"So? Why's that a problem?"

Corboir closed his eyes as he let out an angry huff of hot air through his nose. "He's in love with *Domino*."

"Okaaaaaay...so, no more kissing and boinking. Anything else?" Porthos teased him.

Corboir looked back at him with a confused gaze, unsure whether to take him seriously on account of him deciding to convey his message via such a crude joke for a time like this.

"What made you most happy when you were together?" asked Porthos.

Corboir faced forward, losing himself in his thoughts almost immediately. He didn't want to reminisce. He didn't want to remember, for it only made his chest hurt and his arms shake more—like that of a substance addict going through withdrawal. But images of the past kept showing themselves to him without his permission. It was enough to make him want to gouge his eyes out. He cried into the sleeves of his robes once more, his voice muffled. "When he'd smile... When we'd take walks by the lake..."

"See?" Porthos exclaimed. He tilted forward so as to get a better look at Corboir's face, and smiled at him. "Look, he may not love you the same anymore, but nobody can stop *you* from loving."

Corboir slowly proceeded to lift his head up as Porthos continued to speak.

"I'm sure Julien would wanna see you move on and be happy—*all* of Sublivion would," he said. He tilted his head down as he closed his eyes,

still smiling. "I'm not a very moral person. I didn't deserve your forgiveness."

"You had nothing to apologize for," said Corboir as he turned to face him. "I've never blamed you for letting them take Julien away from me. It was...for the best..."

"Even if it won't make up for what I did...I hope you'll love your present."

Corboir lowered his head and took Porthos's hand into a tight grasp, holding it between his palms. "Thank you...Animadre..." he whispered.

"Oh! My pleasure!" Porthos chuckled as he pushed himself back onto his feet and pulled Corboir up alongside himself. "Now, go. I need their measurements."

Corboir bowed his head with a smile and made a run for it up the steps.

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"Wait!" shouted Corboir, running after the SPANK team in the square in front of the Cathedra of His Celestial Radiance. He was wearing his black pants with red suspenders, pointed black shoes, and lace around his neck and wrists just like he did back in Balalaca where they'd first met him.

It was quite late in the evening, and almost all other citizens of Gothiens were fast asleep in their homes.

Domino, Starabey, Ken, and Sublivion were just passing by the cathedra when they turned around with puzzled expressions on their faces.

"Fuck! He changed his mind!" shouted Domino, his face stricken with terror. He grabbed Sublivion's hand and proceeded to run. However, as Sublivion remained in place, his feet glued to the ground, Domino slipped and fell face-first with a loud screech escaping his throat when he tried to pull Sublivion with him.

Starabey quickly reached out to Domino to help him up. "Shit—you okay?"

However, Sublivion immediately picked up Domino into his arms, hugging him and stroking the back of his head. "A-apologies!" he said. "Are ju all right, maigh love?"

"Nobody look at me!" Domino shouted as he buried his face into Sublivion's shoulder and waved his hand at his teammates.

"He should be fine," Corboir commented.

Domino peered from behind Sublivion's bicep and screamed and flinched when he saw Corboir's face right in front of him.

"No signs of a broken nose," Corboir continued.

"Just broken pride," Ken added.

As Sublivion let Domino out of his grasp, Domino dusted off his coat and glared at Corboir. "Look, I'm sorry for what happened to you, but Sublivion already *told* you what he had to say."

"And I respect that," Corboir replied. "If he is truly happy, then I don't wish to take that away from *either* of you."

Ken crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "Then what exactly *do* you want?"

Corboir met his gaze with a stern grimace. "I wish to join you," he said. He turned back to Domino and Sublivion. "Even if Sublivion doesn't feel any affection for me, I want to be there for him."

Domino and Starabey glanced at each other, and then the both of them glanced at Ken together.

"What makes you think we'd want to accommodate the likes of *you*?" growled Ken. "Regardless of your reasoning, you still held us prisoner."

"I'm sorry I couldn't have waited for you back in Kitaria," Corboir told him. "Animadre instructed me to keep an eye on you, but I was also trying to take care of my own personal business, which is why I had to remain hidden from him at the cottage."

"I—I—" stuttered Ken, his angry gaze jumping around and his cheeks blushing. "That's not—"

"I hope you can understand. I didn't wish to burden him with my personal problems on top of everything else he has to deal with at the moment. Until I realized I required his help after all, that is."

"I mean—he kinda fights better than *any* of us," Domino explained with annoyed reluctance in his voice, crossing his arms and shrugging.

"I say we let him join," said Starabey with a warm, friendly smile. "Fuck it—everyone deserves a second chance."

"Your call," Domino told Sublivion.

After a moment of silence, Sublivion nodded toward Corboir.

Corboir nodded back with a light smile. He then turned to Ken.

With his cheeks still blazing with redness, Ken held his gaze to the side. "Fine," he said as he glanced at Corboir. He looked away once again and grumbled under his breath, "Go fuck yourself."

"Thank you," Corboir told them. "I'm truly grateful."

"Welcome to the team!" Starabey exclaimed. He gave him a manly hug with a firm pat on the back.

"Yeah, yeah—good to have you and all that crap," said Domino, placing his hand on Corboir's shoulder as his lips curled up into a malicious grin. "Now, let's talk about your entry fee."

"Congratulations... You now get to suffer with the rest of us..." groaned Ken as he used only his index finger and thumb to shake Corboir's hand.

"Thank you," Corboir replied with a sly grin. "And I'm flattered you feel anxious around me due to your growing infatuation."

"Mother—!" barked Ken and lunged at Corboir with clenched fists.

"H-hey!" Starabey shouted in surprise, wrapping his arms around Ken's stomach and pulling him back.

Corboir remained perfectly still, resting his hand on his hip as he watched Ken thrash around in Starabey's arms.

Sublivion was chuckling alongside Domino, who'd been laughing his heart out.

However, none of them were aware that Bowie had been standing just around the corner the entire time, observing them. He couldn't remember the last time Domino, Sublivion, Ken, and he had shared a moment like that together. Sublivion would just keep quiet and obey orders, Ken and Domino would always bicker...but ever since Starabey and now that Corboir guy from the coliseum came into the picture, things were changing for the better. Maybe that animadroit by the entrance to Santana's headquarters was right. Maybe Bowie himself was keeping everyone from enjoying their friendship as they should have.

“Well...*they* seem to be having a lot of fun,” Enzo commented. “Looks like they’ve made a new friend.”

“Yeah”—Bowie sighed—“I guess they did.” A light smile rested on his face. He looked down at his left hand, at the pouch full of gelatinous candy that resembled heart-shaped locks.

“Little Firecrotch?” said Enzo with concern in his voice.

A small tear surfaced in the corner of Bowie’s eye. “It’s okay,” he replied. He dropped the pouch on the floor and ran to his teammates. “Guys,” he exclaimed, “wait up!”

Chapter Ten

The Performance Art of War

Daylight shone upon a mighty fortress on the edge of the cliffs of Hengendepikkinord—the seat of the A-grade demoness Erika. Birds had already ceased with their morning chirps, and the fresh highland morning air carried with it the salt of the glimmering ocean.

Inside the spiral innards of one of the towers, the SPANK gang trudged their way to the top of the stone stairway.

“Oh my *Xar*,” Domino groaned as he allowed his body to go limp and fall, pulling the skin on his face downward with the tips of his fingers. “Why haven’t they *outlawed* stairs yet?”

“Are you questioning our lord and savior President Pumpkinhead?” Ken chuckled as he and all but Sublivion passed Domino.

“I’m questioning the life choices that *brought* me here,” Domino growled.

Sublivion picked him up into his arms and followed behind everyone.

“What? N-no!” shouted Domino, thrashing his arms and legs around. “Look—I was just taking a break! You don’t have to—”

“I vaghnt to,” Sublivion replied in a low, sensuous tone.

Domino’s cheeks burned red as he averted his gaze. He crossed his arms, trying to hide his head away between his shoulders, and crossed his legs as well, pressing them against his abdomen.

Meanwhile, Ken was climbing the stairway by himself. He turned his head and peeked behind himself from the corner of his eye.

The entire time, Corboir’s expression was tireless and determined as he was climbing each step with his back straight and his hands locked behind it.

"I truly admire your unyielding composure. Especially since you have to watch Sublivion and Domino's rather *inappropriate* public displays of affection," Ken commented.

"I can't say it doesn't hurt, but I can at least take comfort in the fact that Julien is in a better place now," Corboir explained, still facing forward. "Perhaps an even better one than *I* could have provided. My happiness for him will overcome my envy. It's only a matter of time."

Ken kept glancing back at Corboir as they climbed, his gaze softening.

Corboir looked at him with a light grin on his face.

When Ken's eyes met his, Ken turned his blushing face away, brushing his palms against his robes. He then looked back toward Corboir with an unrelenting glare.

Corboir continued smiling at him with a sly grin and a gentle gaze.

"I really should thank you," said Ken. "Now that you've made your intentions clear, I no longer have to feel fear or shame."

"Too bad," said Corboir, chuckling. "At the very least, it's been amusing while it lasted."

"Ahahaha..." groaned Ken, rolling his eyes and focusing his glare back on the stairs in front of him.

"Ken's just angry 'cause he's not the coolest guy in the group anymore," Bowie commented with a smile as he and Starabey climbed the stairs a little farther from them.

"Just goes to show that anything's possible," Starabey replied with a smirk.

As the SPANK team arrived at the top, a young demoness turned around and greeted them with a bubbly smile. "Oh my Xar!" she gasped. "Hi! Welcome!"

Her warm-beige ponytail whiplashed the air behind her from the winds blowing against her round, pearly, childlike face and chain-mail bikini. The chains around her waist forced her muffin top to be even more exaggerated than it already was, and her large, slightly sagging breasts seemed as though they would break through the armor if she moved ever so slightly. Even her strong, plump legs were having trouble fitting into her metal boots. While she looked like a human in almost every way, she had large claws and soft beige fur on her hands and arms; big, curved white spikes peering from underneath the hair of her

ponytail; and black irises that turned into rainbow rings every time a cloud blocked out the sunlight.

Her guards in leather-and-fur uniforms stood behind her, leaning against the edge of the tower and relaxing in the sun's warm rays—a dark-skinned man and a Balalacan with gray skin and an olive-colored mane that was sloppily tied up in a bun atop his head. They hadn't even bothered to so much as glance at the newly arrived guests.

"Your Radiance," Ken replied with a slight bow. "Erika, I presume?"

Sublivion placed Domino back onto his feet.

"The guards downstairs opened the door for us," said Domino, "so, we're technically *not* breaking in."

"Yeah, that's me! You're here about my ad, right—brothers fucking while I watch?" asked the demoness. "You don't have to *literally* be brothers, though. You can just pretend."

"Not quite," Ken answered.

"We would like to ask that you allow us to borrow your elemental horseman," said Corboir.

Domino stood in place, frozen in the same position he was in, glaring at Corboir from the corner of his wide-open eyes.

Meanwhile, Erika's Balalacan guard lifted his face and focused his contemplative gaze on Starabey. "Hey, glitter tights! You're Starabey, right?"

Starabey turned to him with a puzzled gaze.

"It's me! Armin! You were born five years after me!" the guard added. "I used to give you a smacking whenever you cried!"

"You're shitting me!" Starabey laughed. "I hope you at least gave Kolyatch some, too, while you were at it!"

"Hey—how *is* golden boy anyway? Dad still sucking his dick?"

Erika groaned. "Please, just go over there and have your family reunion a little more quietly!" she told Starabey.

Starabey approached Armin and the other guard. After a quick introduction, they continued their conversation.

"Sorry—you were saying something about borrowing Sadonage?" asked Erika.

Enzo floated out of Bowie's hand and hovered in front of her. "You seem to be quite fond of *voyeurism*, correct?"

"Straight to the point, eh?" Erika giggled, rubbing her hands together. "Okay—I'm listening."

"Well, perhaps you'd be interested in observing us engage in sexual relations," Enzo suggested. "Ken and Corboir are two very strapping, single young men. Well, young-*looking* at least."

"You're dead to me," growled Ken as he glared at Enzo.

"Excuse me, I think you're forgetting who the *real* cutest couple in this group is," Domino argued, placing his arm around Sublivion's waist.

"I would just like to know how you got to this conclusion that Corboir and I were in *any* way interested in each other," Ken argued with Enzo. "The man is still in mourning over the loss of his lover. Please show at least *some* shred of respect."

"I would like to propose something I believe would be more exotic to your tastes," Corboir told Erika.

"What the bloody *fuck*?" Ken barked at him. "You ungrateful piece of sh—"

"You seem rather young. I'm guessing you've never had a chance to fuse with anyone yet," said Corboir, still talking to Erika in the same calm, determined tone of voice. "Would you like to?"

"Why would I wanna fuse with some random stranger?" she answered as she gazed at him with her eyelids lazily dropping over her eyes. "Fusing doesn't work like sex."

Domino stepped forward. "Okay, but how would you like to *witness* it?" he asked with a wide grin spread across his face, clutching his fists for dramatic effect. "Two beings coming together as one into the ultimate manifestation of love, kinship, and brotherhood! You melt into each other until you can't tell what part of your body is yours anymore! Can you imagine what that looks like on the outside?"

Erika stared at him with a blank gaze, her jaw slipping toward the floor. She slapped her plump cheeks with both hands. "Yeeeeeeeeesssss!" she exclaimed. She then rushed down the stairway from which the SPANK team had come like she was fleeing for her life.

Domino, Ken, Bowie, and Corboir took a moment to glance at each other with puzzled gazes and proceeded to follow her down the stairs—Starabey included. After ascending a few floors down and a having

taken a turn or two through the dark torch-lit hallways, they arrived at a heavy wooden door next to which Erika had been waiting for them.

She grasped the metal handle and budged the door open, revealing a room with sky-painted walls and a rug-covered floor. There was a large bed with a luxuriant fur blanket and a silken pillowcase. A wooden box full of rag dolls lay in the corner, with some more torn dolls scattered across the floor. There were no windows—only blazing torches on the walls to provide the light.

In the middle sat the elemental horseman Sadonage, wearing a metal collar that chained him to the wall. The second the SPANK team locked eyes with him, he snarled like a wild animal, revealing his white fangs. His skin was a rusty-red color, and so was his braided mane that flowed down from the top of his head, between his horselike ears, and all the way down his upper back. His eyes were as large as Sublivion's, with the pupils being almost black, the irises swirls of scarlet and chocolate, and the scleras a paler shade of ruby. Just like his brethren, he had no nose, no toes, and claws big enough to rip through iron. However, apart from them, he had the unique feature of having long string patterns on his skin that were a slightly darker color. It made it seem as though his entire body had been tightly strapped in thorny vines for several days, and those were the imprints they left on him. He was completely nude, having only his clawed hands to cover his genitalia as he sat on the rug, glaring at Erika and her guests.

"Heeeeeeeey, Sady!" Erika squealed as she approached him.

"Hi, doggy!" Bowie exclaimed, smiling and waving at him.

Erika fell to her knees and smothered Sadonage with her embrace.

His snarls loudened, and his glare sharpened.

"How's my favorite boy doing?" cooed Erika, petting his soft mane.

The entire time her hand was gliding over him, Sadonage kept gnawing at it and snarling like a rabid dog, but Erika continued to pet him like she hadn't even noticed.

Ken, Domino, and Starabey all stared with disturbed looks in their eyes.

Domino couldn't decide what he found more eerie. The fact that Erika was treating a B-grade demon, an elemental horseman no less, as a

house pet, or that she failed to notice that Sadonage looked as though he was trying to bite her fingers off the entire time she was stroking him.

"Your Radiance," said Ken, clearing his throat with a gulp, "we're grateful for being able to see Sadonage in his...natural environment, but...I'm sure Sublivion and Domino would do a much better job of fusing in a more *relaxed* atmosphere."

"Oh, no." Erika chuckled and pointed at Sublivion. "Just him."

"This wasn't part of the deal," argued Corboir, his expression remaining stern yet composed.

"Sady's been feeling lonely lately," she explained, nuzzling Sadonage. "He needs some brotherly love—*don't* you, Sady?"

"No," said Domino, stepping in front of Sublivion with a determined gaze.

Erika shrugged. "Then no deal."

"Your Radiance, I'm sure we can work something out," Ken added. "If you could just—"

"Don't bother, Ken," Domino told him. "I'm not letting Sublivion go *near* that thing."

"Please, maigh love," said Sublivion. "I can bear through this."

"We've already got two other horsemen. We'll manage," Domino replied. Gently, he pulled Sublivion closer by his wrist as much as the demon reluctantly allowed, and he marched back toward the hallway. "Let's go."

Corboir gazed at Domino, his eyes softly widening in surprise.

However, as Domino was about to take Sublivion away, Starabey spoke out and chuckled nervously. "Okay, everyone just calm down for a second."

Domino, and in extension Sublivion, stopped to hear what he had to say.

"Erika, look—is it really that big of a deal whether it's two *brothers* fusing?" asked Starabey. "Are you doing this for you or for Sady?"

"Don't call him that. That's *my* nickname for him. It just sounds dumb when you say it," she argued. Then, her eyes widened and a smile spread over to her plum cheeks. "But you're right!" she added and unlocked Sadonage's collar with the key she took out from between her

big, jiggly breasts. "It's Sady's gift, so it's only fair *Sady* gets to pick!" She lightly patted Sadonage's naked behind. "Go on, boy!"

Starabey took a step back, following Sadonage with terror-filled eyes.

"Whoa, *whoa!*" shouted Domino, hunching over and covering himself with his leg and arms. "What the *fuck*? Don't release him!"

"Don't worry. He doesn't bite for real," Erika assured him. "He's just playing."

Corboir, Sublivion, and Bowie remained unflinching as Sadonage slowly approached them, prowling on his hands and feet while snarling.

Ken seemed fearless enough, but the beads of sweat traveling down his face gave his true feelings away.

Sadonage then approached each one of the SPANK members, sniffing and circling them. In the end, he stopped in front of Domino, snarling even louder as his glare was piercing through Domino's eyes.

"Good boy, Sady!" Erika giggled, patting Sadonage's lower back.

"Fine," growled Domino, swinging his arms up and turning his head away.

"So, how does it work?" asked Erika. She pulled Sadonage by his braided mane into her arms to pet him some more as she was squatted. "Do I get you some beer or something first?"

"We can start with you creating a promise mark," said Ken.

Erika's finger glowed a rainbow color as she scratched a cross onto the skin of her breast that disappeared almost as quickly as it had been drawn.

In the meantime, a bulbous erection peered from between Sadonage's legs while he continued to snarl at Domino.

Erika gasped once she caught sight of it. She stood up and started smacking Sadonage on the back of the head. "No! Bad Sady! No precum on the floor!"

What's more, drool oozed from between Sadonage's teeth and down his chin as his eyes followed Domino.

"I would like to request you allow Enviedhieri a few moments to prepare," said Corboir. "You seem to have your hands full either way."

"Sure, sure—do what you gotta do," she replied, her eyes still focused on Sadonage as she was struggling to discipline him.

The SPANK team back down the hallway posthaste.

"If I weren't completely freaking out right now, I'd kiss you." Domino chuckled nervously, placing both hands on Starabey's cheeks.

"Glad I could help, but...what are *you* gonna do?" Starabey replied with a light smile, though his eyes were plagued by worry.

Corboir placed his hand on Domino's shoulder for a brief moment and proceeded to stroll farther away. "I need to talk to you in private," he said.

Domino glanced over the others' puzzled faces and rushed to catch up with Corboir.

They turned the corner together and stopped when they were certain no one could hear them.

"Deep breaths," Corboir told him.

"I can feel my heart racing," Domino panted. "I think I'm gonna have a stroke. For *real* this time."

"I'm not going to lie—after today, this will have been one of the hardest things you've ever had to do."

"Wait—I'm *supposed* to be this scared?" shouted Domino, his voice trembling and his eyes gazing at Corboir, begging for some form of mercy. "Don't tell me this shit—I'm only gonna feel worse!"

"If you let Sadonage dominate you within the fusion, he will break you beyond recovery," Corboir explained. "Today, you'll have to make your final choice. Are you strong enough to remain in one piece? Are you powerful enough to conquer Sadonage and make him submit to you?"

"I—I don't know!" Domino answered, his wide-open eyes riddled with terror. "You tell *me*!"

"Do you really think so lowly of yourself?" Corboir asked him, staring into his eyes with a stern yet warm look. "Look at what you've accomplished so far. Look at how far you've come. Are you truly saying all of your struggles meant nothing?"

"Because they *were* nothing!" Domino barked, averting his glare. He walked a few paces away. "Anyone could have done it. That's why nobody praises me. It's expected of me to do so much. To try so hard..."

Corboir let out a huff of hot air through his nostrils. "There is a word for people whose worth is determined by others, and they're called *slaves*," he argued.

Domino flinched and turned his head to stare at Corboir with a confused, almost fearful look in his eyes.

"Why is it so important for you to gain someone else's approval? I know where that path leads, and it's *not* happiness," Corboir told him. "I was born a bastard, and all my past life I did nothing but try to impress my father and show him I was worthy of carrying his name." His face sunk and he closed his eyes as he sighed. With a stern gaze, he then looked back up at him. "Domino...if the people you want to impress aren't proud of you already, then they never will be. I *understand* what it feels like to want someone's approval and praise. I *know* how much it hurts when you work so hard your whole life and people don't treat you any different from anyone else—sometimes worse. You have to believe me—it's not *worth* it. My father treated me and Julien like cattle, right down to wanting to butcher and consume us in the end. Yet, somehow, I still felt I needed to impress him."

Domino turned his body around to face him completely and glared at him without a word.

"You're the *only* one who can say what you're worth," said Corboir. "I've followed you and the others long enough to have been afflicted with your emotions myself. You feel compelled to do what others say is right in fear of being called stupid or naive. So much so that you don't dare question the fact that those people might not even have your best interest in mind, nor that they might know less about the subject than you. Or worse yet, you feel as though you owe it to others to take everything they tell you to heart and treat their words like facts. You don't have to keep living your life this way. You have the right to pursue happiness. Not theirs. *Yours*. It's not your duty to live someone else's life for them. You owe nothing to no one."

Domino remained silent for a few moments, clenching his fists and shutting his eyes. "Yes...I do," he announced with a determined tone and proceeded to walk back toward the rest of his team. But before he turned the corner, he looked at Corboir one more time. "I owe something to *myself*..."

Once the two regrouped with the others, the SPANK team returned to Erika, who'd been waiting for them by the door to Sadonage's room.

Domino stopped in front of Sublivion, gazing up at his masked face.

Sublivion tilted his head down toward him.

"I won't give you another order, but..." Domino sighed as he glanced down. "Jai molghjiti tai, itchiti gorghje." He pulled up Sublivion's mask just until it revealed his mint-green skin and mouth. He rose up onto his toes and gave him a gentle kiss. Once he pulled his mask back down, he smiled at him and turned to face Erika.

Sublivion suddenly grabbed hold of Domino's arm. "Dodhjiti natraghj premghja jai," he told him. As he made his way down the hallway and turned his head back, he added, "*That* be an order."

Domino looked at the ground and let out a light chuckle as his lips curled up into a smirk.

With an excited grin on her face, Erika opened the door.

As was expected, Sadonage just sat on the floor, glaring at Domino and growling like a wild animal.

Domino stepped inside with an emotionless expression.

The heavy wooden door creaked behind him as it closed.

Once the lock clicked, Sadonage stretched his arms and sat back, leaning onto his palms as he observed Domino with a drowsy smile. "Come—sit with me," he said as he nudged his head toward the ground.

Staring back at him with a confused and suspicious look in his eyes, Domino obliged.

Sadonage then shifted his position as he sat, crossing his legs and placing his elbows onto his knees while his knuckles provided support for his head. "From what I've heard, you want me to give you my seal. Is that right?" he cooed. Though his voice was deep and thundering, as was that of all the other elemental horsemen, he still spoke in a very gentle and mellow tone.

"Yes," Domino replied, keeping his eyebrows sharp so as to not show a sign of weakness.

Sadonage averted his gaze and smacked his lips, his smile turning into a disappointed frown. "I see..."

Domino sat in silence, pushing out any notions of fear that tried to creep into his mind.

Soon enough, Sadonage looked back at him with a sly grin. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but...I have the strangest feeling—a suspicion, if you will—that you're...how do you say—*afraid* of me?" Sadonage confessed,

revealing a slight accent with his *H*'s and *J*'s—reminiscent of the tongue-breaking, mucus-gargling sounds made when one spoke Deghmonghnjichki.

"Well, your feelings are wrong," said Domino, refusing to look away from him or even to blink.

Sadonage chuckled at the remark, his eyes darting across the room. "Emotions really *are* the plague of demon kind," he commented. "We know so many things, but our emotions are blind to any and all knowledge. What you say may be true, but I can't help the way I feel."

"Can't you just fuse with me so we can get this over with and be at peace?"

"Only the dead are at peace, Lord Enviedhier."i."

Domino groaned internally as he struggled to keep his eyes from rolling to the back of his head.

"And besides, I find peace...rather boring." Sadonage sighed. "We create conflicts when we're bored. We enjoy hearing about the conflicts of others. It's sad, I know...but we can only try to make the best of what Xar gave us."

"Okay, I gotta ask—why the pretending?" Domino questioned him. "Why act like an animal when Erika's around but be kinda normal other times?"

"For the most part, I find it entertaining, and it pleases my mistress," Sadonage explained, his tone becoming ever more eerie and frightening as he spoke. "But we *all* want to be more than ourselves, Your Lordship. Why do we fall in love? Why do we seek to fuse ourselves with another? It is the underlying desire of everything we do in life. Though we are the most intelligent beings on this earth, we have an urge *none* of us can resist. The urge...to become many. To become...*legion*..."

Domino brushed his fingers against his sweaty palms, still staring into Sadonage's eyes, desperately trying to mask the anxiety that was slowly creeping under his skin.

Sadonage stood up, staring down at Domino with a manic look in his eyes. His razor teeth were showing from inside his smiling maw. He extended his veiny, muscular arm toward him, pointing at him with his finger. He chuckled with booming yet hissing volume. "Are you prepared?"

Domino pushed himself off the floor and onto his feet without breaking eye contact.

Sadonage pressed his stomach against Domino's chest, sensually gazing back into his eyes. "I'm ready to be...amused..." he purred.

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The glimmering bruised-red and hot-pink walls of the anima cocoon slowly pulsated in the darkness. The vision was blurry. There were whispers in the quiet.

"Your own opinion of yourself is worthless." Sadonage chuckled, his voice echoing throughout the cocoon. "I agree. You can't expect someone to be objective about their own creation. They made it—of course they will praise it."

The whispering voices were getting louder by each passing moment Sadonage spoke, but they weren't quite loud enough for Domino to make out what they were saying.

"Zephyr," said Sadonage, "*he's* the cause of all your suffering...isn't he? Oh...what a hero." His voice morphed into a union of both his and Zephyr's to create an echoic, distorted one to use as he continued to speak. "Don't worry, friend. If you work harder, maybe someday you'll be just as good as me!"

"I'm *already* working harder than you," argued Domino, struggling to suppress his rage and remain civil. "I deserve everything you get and more."

"So *easy* to speak of deserving things, isn't it?" Sadonage cooed, his voice remaining an amalgamation of Zephyr's and his own. "If you were good enough, you would have already gotten what you claim you so rightfully deserve."

"I've worked harder than you."

"How would *you* know how hard I've worked? How would *you* know how much *I've* sacrificed?"

Domino's hands twitched with anger. No. No—it wasn't fair! Everyone would always say that, but at that point, he was sick and tired of it being used as an argument against him. No. There was just no way. Nobody could tell him they worked harder than him anymore. He'd

seen other people's efforts, and he *knew* he'd done more. Nobody had the right to tell him he didn't work hard enough.

Pain like fire accumulated inside the body's chest. Constant, dull pain.

The voices—they were just a bit louder this time. They kept whispering. It was like a chorus of crickets, but if one listened closely enough, they almost sounded like...words.

"I *know* I've worked harder than you! Don't you *dare* tell me that's not true!" Domino protested. "Everyone thinks you're this amazing hero that always does the right thing, but you're the most selfish person I've ever met!"

"It's all right, friend." Sadonage chuckled. "You don't have to explain yourself to me. I've already forgiven you."

"I didn't fucking do anything wrong! Nothing!" screamed Domino. "Ask *me* for forgiveness! Ask me!"

"For what?" Sadonage laughed. "For not being thankful when your parents and the world were kind enough to praise me for my accomplishments? For not thinking about spoiled little Domino who wanted to be told he did a good job?" His voice suddenly shifted toward a more condescending, hostile tone. "You're not going to be patted on the back for every shit you take. Grow up."

Like strikes of lightning, pain bolted through the body several times. Hands were trembling out of control. Eyelids were heavy. The pressure on the chest only kept growing.

"Worthless," the voices whispered.

"That was never my problem, and you know it!" Domino argued. "They said I should have been more like you, even though I worked harder than you! My parents would have just told me I was envious if I said anything, but *you* could have told them! You could have just told them I was good, too! Why didn't you? Why didn't you save me! It only took one fucking sentence, and you didn't even want to bother with that! A-and even today, you fucking keep taking credit for all the things I do! I played as your sidekick in that fight at the club so we could beat that demoness, and you let everyone believe you were the only one responsible! I could have let you struggle! I could have even *sabotaged* you! But no—I did the selfless thing and you never even gave me so much as a 'thank you'!"

"This is exactly why you will never surpass me, friend," Sadonage told him. "No one deserving of praise ever asks for it."

"I'll fucking *kill* you!" Domino shouted with all the hatred he held in his heart. "When I see you next time, I'll—"

"Kill me, yes...I know." Sadonage chuckled and changed his voice to sound only like his own again. "Don't worry. *I* would never compare you to Zephyr. Really—what would be the point?" He released a bellow of laughter. "I honestly don't understand why you're still doing this. Even with my brothers and myself at your disposal, you'll *never* be better than him."

There was no convincing Sadonage of anything. No matter what Domino said, Sadonage would always find a way to make him out to be the bad guy. Domino was drowning in a box made of glass. Escape seemed just out of reach. His feelings and arguments felt valid, but Sadonage always found a way to contradict him. That demon didn't even care about the truth. Winning the argument was all that mattered to him. Being able to disagree. Being able to blame someone else. How could Domino ever beat that? How come everyone else always managed, but Domino couldn't?

Muscles ached. Electricity was running through the limbs. It was as if the body was being beaten on day-old bruises. At one point, the pain was dulled, but it never ceased.

"Stop..." sobbed Domino. "Please..."

"Domino, I'm not the villain here," Sadonage told him, his voice being joined by a female one that sounded like Domino's mother. "I'm doing this for your own good. I know it hurts, but you can't expect to be praised just because you did your best. You need to know the truth, and the truth is that you don't really deserve as much praise as you think."

"What do I have to *do*?" Domino shouted. "What else is left? Just for fucking once, tell me I did a good job!"

"Let me take over. I'll lead you onto a *better* path."

"I was ready to go to law school for you! I sacrificed my own wishes so I'd get the best grades and save most of my allowance...for *you*!" Domino continued.

"I know best," said Sadonage in unison with the voice of Domino's mother. "Let me take over. You'll never have to worry about doing the wrong thing in my eyes ever again."

Relentless, overwhelming pain shook the body. It kept piling up, without a single outlet for it to burst through.

"Worthless!" the voices continued whispering, louder and louder.

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Outside the door to Sadonage's room, Erika was peeking through the keyhole with a puzzled gaze. "Hey, is this...normal?"

"What is?" asked Ken. He took her place to peer inside the room.

The red-and-pink flower bud of a cocoon was pulsating violently. With the lit torches on the walls providing backlight, the shadow of the tormented, squirming body inside revealed itself, floating in a half-full container of liquid that continued to fill up.

"*Domino!*" Ken shouted, fear shooting through his limbs like lightning.

"What's wrong?" barked Starabey.

"Open the door!" Ken ordered Erika.

"Okay, *okay!*" she groaned. "You don't have to shout." She took out the key from her cleavage and did as was requested of her.

That very second, Ken rushed inside and threw himself fists-first onto the magical, glimmering cocoon. "He's gonna drown!" he yelled, glancing at the others with a terror-filled look. "We have to get him out of there!"

Bowie attempted to break the cocoon with Enzo's blade, but it bounced right back, like the whole thing was made of a kind of rubbery material. "It's not budging," he said while poking it with his finger.

"Ken, just calm *down*," Starabey told him, holding his palms out in front of him as if he were approaching a rampant animal.

"Your hysteria is only going to make this more difficult," Corboir warned him.

"Why are you all just standing there?" Ken shouted at them. "Do something!"

"Okay, stop!" Starabey argued as he grabbed hold of Ken's shoulders. "Nobody's gonna drown! Think! Sadonage controls fire! That *can't* be water in there!"

"He's bleeding anima." Corboir sighed, closing his eye. Tears slid down his cheeks. "Sadonage is trying to make space for himself by force."

Ken turned back to the cocoon with a worried gaze, his chest heaving.

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Within the cocoon, inside the fusing body, Domino could still hear the screeching voices filling his ears.

"Worthless!" they hissed. "*Worthless!*"

Sadonage sighed. "Give up, Domino. Don't continue to be a disappointment."

"I'm did what you wanted me to, even though I hated it! Isn't that *enough?*" Domino cried.

"I know it's hard for you to know which decision is the right one every time. If you'd just let me *guide* you—"

"I don't...*want* to!" Domino shouted, his voice trembling.

"You're going to end up miserable," said Sadonage. "I just want what's best for you."

"I'm *already* miserable!" Domino replied. "I'm working toward *your* dreams even though I hate it, and you don't give me the one fucking thing *I* ask for! You want me to live your life *for* you and you want me to smile while doing it! Why did you give me life if you were just going to take it from me?"

"*Domino,*" Sadonage growled while chuckling as the female voice that had been speaking in unison with his was slowly fading away.

"I'm not some doll you can dress up and parade around!" Domino continued. "I didn't ask to be born! I didn't ask for the life you gave me, but I've been paying for it with blood, sweat, and my own happiness because you called me ungrateful otherwise!"

"Worthless..." the whispers sounded, their voices gradually growing weaker.

"I've been the perfect kid, but that wasn't enough for you! Well, I'm done! I'm done being your slave! I'm done feeling guilty! I—"

"I told you to *submit*, you insolent pig!" roared Sadonage.

Domino screamed as a bolt of sharp pain passed through the body.

"You're worthless! *Useless!*" shouted Sadonage.

Two more times, the body was struck by painful lashes from within.

Domino yelped and continued to cry.

"Everything you do is wrong! *You* are wrong!" Sadonage shouted.

"You're a shame and a disgrace! You're a fool, and you will suffer for it!"

Domino let out muffled moans of pain as the torture continued.

Sadonage took shallow breaths. "You're in agony! Why won't you *yield?*"

"I've already wasted half my fucking life letting people live theirs through me," Domino growled. "It's *my* turn!"

Soon enough, the anima the cocoon was made of began to evaporate into the surrounding air and open up like flower petals.

Corboir wiped the tears off his face and smiled with his brows remaining titled and stern. "Not bad, Enviedhier."

The demonic fusion walked out of the cocoon, swinging his hips and chuckling. His skin was a rusty red just like Sadonage's. It was as if Domino had submerged himself in a pool of blood and grown fangs. His irises were now a mixture of pink and ruby swirling around one another like wet paint on an artist's palette. The hairstyle remained the same, but changed color from blond to Sadonage's signature color of dark flames. It was Domino's face and smile, but horselike ears were now peering from out of the sides of his head. He had long, large claws and wore the same black leather pants, boots, and coat Domino came into the room with before the fusion took place. He was grinning toward the awestruck A-grade demoness and his confused, surprised teammates, standing there with his chest puffed up and his hand on his hip, shaking his soft, flowing velvet hair like he'd just walked out of the ocean.

Erika screeched, clasping her hands together and hopping from one foot to another. "Well? How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted." The fusion sighed, smiling. He strolled past Erika with his hand gently touching his chest, tilting his head back as his sensual

gaze met hers. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've been through *excruciating* pain for the past half hour and am in *dire* need of a hot bath."

"W-wait!" Ken cried out as he rushed after him.

The others followed soon after.

"Don't worry, Ken," said the fusion, smiling at him. "I'll ask for the seal *after* I've rested."

"It's not that... It's just..." Ken closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He looked at the fusion with a light smile having snuck its way onto his face. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Aw...*Ken*..." the fusion cooed as he pulled him into a tight embrace. "You *do* care about me!"

"No, no, *no*!" Ken shouted while thrashing his arms and legs. "I thought you were going to *die*! It was a moment of weakness!"

Starabey let out a chuckle as he observed them.

The fusion then abruptly let go of Ken, causing him to almost fall over. "Oh—I have to fetch my darling Sublivion first." He placed his palms on his chest and sighed as he smiled at the ceiling. "I cannot bear another day without feeling his skin on mine."

"Too much information..." groaned Ken as he rolled his glaring eyes.

"Can I watch?" Erika asked with a giddy smile.

The fusion gently stroked the bottom of her chin with both hands, leaning his face closer to hers. "Of course, my little muffin top."

"Yay!" she exclaimed, hopping in place and clapping her hands.

Chapter Eleven

The Requisites of Villainy

The starry night enveloped the Kitarian sky above Porthos's cottage in the outskirts of Kumkurda. The branches of the trees rustled to the melody of the cool breeze.

"I can't believe it's just been a week since we were last here," Starabey commented with a smile. "Feels like we've been away *forever*."

Corboir stepped in front of the wooden door and walked four paces to the right. He then dug out a key from the shallow dirt with his hands.

"So, where does Porthos *really* live? Here or in Gothiens?" Bowie asked him.

"Mostly Gothiens," answered Corboir as he was unlocking the front door. "This is his vacation home. He holds some of the gifts he's received for his kind deeds here. In our home in Gothiens, we don't keep around material luxury unless it brings us joy whenever we look at it." He pushed the door open and turned to Bowie. "If an item has no practical use, or you barely even notice its presence, it's trash."

"Why are you guys so hard on yourselves?" asked Starabey as they all entered the cottage. He immediately threw himself into one of the armchairs, stretching his legs and placing his hands behind his head. "You make life sound like a chore. Just *relax*. Have *fun*."

"You speak as if you've never met Animadre," said Corboir, smiling back at him. He took some matches and candles out of one of the drawers and started lighting and placing them around the room. "Outside, we are free to do as we please as long as we are not causing anyone harm. But at home, we are trying to learn how to live sustainable lives without having to depend on the happiness of others. Animadre is teaching us to feed by giving, not by taking. We can still form emotions

of our own, and we should use them to spread love, joy, and kindness. Though they may dominate the food chain, parasites live unsustainably. Their reign can never truly last. Leeches, without providers, are nothing. Providers, with nothing, are *everything*."

"That is such a beautiful philosophy of life," Enzo added. "It almost reminds me of something our dear President Pumpkinhead would have come up with."

Corboir chuckled, averting his gaze. "Of course he would."

Domino followed Sublivion to the sofa. He lay down with his legs dangling off one of the armrests and rested his head on Sublivion's lap. "Hey—I just remembered something," he said. "When I was alone in the room with Sadonage, he told me everyone wants to become this thing called 'legion.' The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Sublivion turned his masked head in several different directions, as if searching around the room for something. "Um...vhelgh..."

"He *told* you that?" Ken asked, his face both appalled and surprised. "I was under the impression that he was unable to use the bathroom, let alone be capable of speech."

"No, he's just a retard with way too much free time," Domino scoffed.

"A legion is the closest thing to becoming almost as powerful as Xar himself. Perhaps even more," Corboir explained. "Though, it is only a concept."

"Zargh not be a fusion. His anima be made of menghi more anima—most in the vhole vorld—but his anima not have bodies of their ovghn to return to. Theigh be a part of him. Justgh like maigh anima be made of other demons' and humans' anima veghn he create me," Sublivion added. "That is vaigh ve seigh a demon is C-grade, B-grade, and such. It depend on number of anima that make up theirs and hovgh poverful theigh be."

"It is said that the need to fuse comes from the need to become closer to Xar, the creator. As they say, two heads think better than one. That is the basic principle. Let us fuse together so that we may become like Xar," Corboir continued. "And whereas humans and demons each have *one* magical power, a fusion can have as many as the number of people that fused into it. If enough people fused, they could in theory create the most powerful being in all of existence. Legion—that's what they call it."

"Well," said Starabey, yawning and stretching his arms and legs. "I think I'm gonna go hit the sack." He pushed himself off the armchair, grabbed one of the candles, and walked toward the hallway. "I've already done my time in college. That's enough lectures for me today."

"You'd best get some rest, too," Corboir advised the others. "Animadre is coming tomorrow morning to deliver your new attire."

"Let's get a move on, Little Firecrotch," Enzo told Bowie, pulling him in Starabey's direction. "We must claim our bed, lest *you* end up sleeping on the floor this time."

"Okay, but Horatio's clothes stay with *me*," said Domino as he was getting up from the sofa. "It's a family heirloom now."

"You needn't worry about that," Corboir told him, a light chuckle escaping his lips.

Domino glared suspiciously at him as he and Sublivion left the room with one of the candles.

Corboir then proceeded to stroll around the room, observing all of Porthos's trinkets and treasures on the shelves, holding his hands behind his back.

"What about *you*?" Ken asked.

"I'm an animadro," Corboir replied. "My needs to eat, drink, and sleep have *long* abandoned me."

"But you still need someone with anima around."

"I will come by your doors if I am feeling faint," he elaborated and turned to Ken with an amused grin on his lips. "Don't worry about me."

"I'm *not*," Ken scoffed, holding his arms crossed as his gaze darted around the room. "I just don't need as much sleep as everyone else, either, so I thought—" He rolled his eyes and groaned as turned his back to him. "Never mind. I'll go find something to drink."

As Ken was about to leave the room, Corboir spoke in a more serious tone. "You've been growing more afraid the closer we approach tomorrow."

Ken turned around to face him with a glare. "I apologize if it's *bothering* you. In case Porthos hasn't already told you, tomorrow, it will be decided whether I live or die. I hope you understand I can't exactly help it."

"When we were last here...you wished to show me something before I fled," said Corboir.

With a sigh, Ken slid off the top part of his robes, revealing large purple-and-black marks on his stomach that resembled more rot than bruising.

Corboir looked down to inspect the afflicted area and then gazed back at Ken with a stern look on his face. "I'm sorry for what's happening to you."

"It's all right," Ken replied as he pulled the top part of his robes back up. "It's my own fault anyway."

"How so?" asked Corboir.

"There's not much to say," Ken replied. "There came a day when my father grew too old and decided it was his time to return his anima to Xar. I tried to stop the process and ended up having his anima absorbed into my body. Once I figured out my body couldn't support it, I went looking for Santana...to see if he could grant me a wish..."

"But you feel guilty..."

Ken stared at the floor, nodding.

"Of what?" Corboir inquired.

With stern brows, Ken closed his eyes and exhaled. Then he looked at Corboir. "Why me?"

"Didn't you just say you attempted to save your father by your own choice?"

"No...I meant..." Ken sighed and gazed into Corboir's eyes with a look full of sorrow. "There are so many people out there who are more deserving of a wish—you, for instance. Why accept *mine*?" He let out a chuckle as he looked toward the darkness outside the nearest window. "I want to live...hmph..." He glanced down with one eyebrow raised and crossed his arms. "I don't think he's ever been asked to grant a more selfish request."

"Animadre has a good heart, but...he cannot create a perfect world," Corboir elaborated, browsing around through the shelves, casually inspecting their contents. "No matter how much good you try to do, someone else will suffer because of it somewhere down the line. I realize that now." He stopped and turned his head to look at Ken with a relaxed

yet serious expression. "I suppose...your wish fits into his plan for some greater good. That's why he agreed to help you."

A smile surfaced on Ken's face as he gazed back at him. "Thank you," he said. "That...actually makes me feel better."

"I'm glad," Corboir replied with a returned grin. He pulled an old, dusty wine bottle off one of the shelves, stroking his palm along the surface before turning it around to find the label. He gazed back at Ken from the corner of his eye with an impish smile. "As you may well know...I've had a very rough couple of days." He turned his entire body to face him, holding up the red wine. "Would it be rude of me to ask that you return the favor?"

Ken's eyes widened in surprise and anxiety as his face turned red. He marched over to him, glaring at the floor, and grabbed the bottle. "Give me that."

• • • •

The sun was shining through the windows of the cottage that morning. Everyone was already up due to Porthos's five o'clock arrival. However, because he'd brought some generous compensation for having pulled them out of bed so early, they forgave him soon enough.

Especially Domino, whose sparkle of excitement in his eyes was more than enough to mask the slightly dark circles beneath.

"Well? What do you think?" exclaimed Porthos as he sat on the edge of an armchair, wearing his red latex Santana costume with black high-heeled boots and abundant white fur around his neck and wrists.

Domino eyeballed his reflection in a tall mirror with an amorous gaze, turning around and twirling his limbs to see every part of his new costume. He posed with his arms stretched out and his legs shifting positions so he could admire their elegance. His body was covered in a tight black latex jumpsuit up to the shoulders—arms included. His chest, however, was left exposed due to the large triangle-shaped cut with hot-pink edges down the middle of the suit. He wore tight gloves with pink edges to match—though, they spread outward into a wide cone past the wrists. On his feet were a pair of black high-heeled boots with pink soles. And finally, he sported on his back a giant cape with a

huge pointy collar—black on the outer side, pink on the inner. “From now on, I’ll be posing for all my portraits in *this*,” said Domino.

Meanwhile, Sublivion had been standing beside him, his masked head following Domino’s every move.

Corboir then walked through the front door. “I’ve sent the messages,” he announced. “Zephyr will be waiting for you in the Sirena Sposa Square. The demon horsemen should be able to track you on their own.”

And shortly after, Starabey proudly strolled over to the rest of the group from out of one of the rooms. “Sorry it took so long. My legs got sweaty halfway through putting the pants on.”

His tight light-blue low-rise leather pants were cut apart on the sides and then laced back together in a zigzag pattern. They enveloped his gray skin as tight as wet cloth and revealed a blue bush of luxuriant pubic hair overgrowing the upper area of his crotch. His frizzy electric-blue mane flowed over his enormous silver-feathered collar and sparkling, sleeveless, unzipped silver leather jacket. He even had two shimmering silver lightning bolts painted over his eyes and cheeks. And to complete the extravagant new costume, he wore glittery silver platform boots on which the upper parts of the sides were cut in the shape of lightning bolts just like his face paint.

“Not bad,” Domino commented with a smirk.

“I love it!” shouted Porthos, giggling and wriggling around in his armchair. “Oh my Xar—I can’t believe how *good* the laces look!”

Ken gritted his teeth and held the back of his hand over his eyes, squinting.

“Thanks.” Starabey chuckled and turned toward the hallway. “Come on, Bowie! What’s keeping you?” he shouted.

Bowie soon walked into the living room with Enzo in his right hand. He wore a tight brown leather top that covered the upper part of his chest and the entirety of his arms and pants. The pants were low rise at the front, but high rise at the sides. Along with the top part of the ensemble, they were enveloped in numerous leather belts with gilded buckles. The only parts of his body that were left exposed were his head and his stomach. His boots featured quality mountaineering soles, and lastly, as he was walking toward his teammates, he put on a pair of brown leather gloves.

Starabey smiled at him. "Looking good."

"It fits!" Porthos squealed. "Perfect!"

"I *suppose* it's all right..." Enzo grumbled.

Bowie merely shrugged.

"I'm so glad you like it!" Porthos shouted through his teeth as the corners of his smiling mouth twitched.

Ken sighed while sitting on the sofa, drinking water from a tall glass. His brows formed wrinkles on the root of his nose as he glared through his closed eyelids.

"Want me to go get the weeds?" Domino inquired.

"Maybe you should up the dose," Starabey added. "It could be that your body's starting to develop an immunity to them."

"I don't think they'll work on headaches of *this* kind..." Ken replied, massaging his temples with the tips of his fingers.

"You mean: hangovers?" asked Bowie.

"Hey—you found my gift wine!" shouted Porthos with a wide, cheerful grin on his face.

"It's *my* fault, Animadre," Corboir confessed, taking a step forward. "I was the one who requested Ken intoxicate himself."

"Their laugh-screaming scared me awake five times..." Enzo commented.

Porthos gasped and leaned closer to Corboir by arching his back over one of the armrests as he kept glancing between him and Ken. "*Really?*" He giggled.

Corboir averted his gaze while an involuntary smile curled onto his lips. "You're being ridiculous."

"Oh my Xar—why?" Ken grumbled as he held his head and kept his eyes shut.

Domino walked over to one of the windows and gazed out into the sunny green yard.

"So, you guys ready?" asked Porthos.

Domino's companions all collectively voiced "yes" while he kept silent.

"Domino?" said Porthos.

"Something the matter?" Corboir inquired, his voice stern but relaxed.

“Okay—what’s wrong?” Starabey sighed, though his tone remained warm and cheerful. “Talk.”

But Domino just continued glaring out the window. After a long pause, he exhaled. “What if I’m just kidding myself?” He glanced at the ground. “What if I’m just delusional in thinking I can beat him?”

Ken joined him by his side. “Domino...none of us here are going to tell you whether you can do it or not. None of us know just *how* powerful you are. Only you know the answer to that.”

Domino turned his head toward him and gazed into his eyes.

“I’m asking *you*,” said Ken, “are you strong enough to defeat the man who’s been robbing you of your happiness all these years?”

Domino turned back toward the window and closed his eyes. Images of the past flooded his mind. How he worked himself over his limits to be a good student, how he did everything his parents told him, how they admired Zephyr instead of Domino when they met him, how Zephyr never even tried to tell Domino’s parents how great their son was, how Zephyr always got more attention for his accomplishments even when Domino’s were almost on par, how even when Domino decided to be a team player for the sake of defeating that rampant demoness in Cazzo Grande, Zephyr still got all the attention and praise that he didn’t share with Domino, and worse yet, how even when Domino confronted him about his behavior, Zephyr still didn’t acknowledge the wrongs he’d committed. Domino clutched his fists and turned around to face his companions with a determined, devious grin on his face. “I’m gonna enjoy this.”

• • • •

Since that morning, the sunny Sirena Sposa Square had been filled with an ocean of excited and impatient sweaty bodies once again.

Zephyr stood on the wooden stage with a big smile spread across his face. He was wearing his silver-plated armor and an additional helmet covering his head and cheeks. His black iron sword remained sheathed on his back in a gray leather scabbard that was fastened tight around his torso.

The crowd was growing quieter and quieter. All of their inquisitive eyes pointed away from him. Slowly, they moved to the sides to make way for the approaching challengers.

Between the parted sea of people, Domino strolled down the granite path with a devilish smirk from ear to ear. His golden ponytail danced in the cool breeze along with his magnificent cape.

The rest of the SPANK team walked beside him, their eyes focused solely on the way ahead. They approached the wooden podium with resolute, confident steps.

Sublivion lifted Domino onto the stage.

The entire time, Domino stared right into Zephyr's eyes, smiling. He then turned around to face the curious crowd. "People of Kumkurda!" he shouted with a smirk. However, his proud grin quickly transformed into a menacing frown. "Your hero...is a *fraud!*"

The people chattered and whispered among themselves while Zephyr was looking at Domino with confusion oozing from his lamblike gaze.

"He who's vowed to protect others is the reason for my lifetime of misery!" Domino continued, pointing and glaring at Zephyr.

Zephyr grabbed him by his shoulder and turned him around. "What are you talking about, friend?" he asked with great concern in his voice.

"Don't touch me!" Domino snarled as he violently shook Zephyr's hand off himself. "You're no more of a hero than me! Your head is so far up your own asshole that you can't fucking figure out someone needs help unless they're choking on your dick!" He took a step closer—so close, he was almost touching Zephyr's face. "Why didn't you do anything when my parents were telling me what a piece of shit I was compared to you?" he shouted. "You were right fucking *there!* You could have told them I worked at the very least just as hard as you, but you kept your selfish swine mouth shut! If you really cared for me, you would have fucking noticed when I was getting trampled over by your fans who were praising you for something *I* did! *I* helped you beat that demoness in the club! *I* decided to help you instead of taking care of everything by myself!" Domino's voice cracked, and tears formed in his eyes as he stared at Zephyr with hatred pouring out of his heart, burning all the way through to his arms. "Why didn't you just mention my fucking *name?* *Why?* Fucking answer me!"

Zephyr closed his eyes and hunched his shoulders. "I don't understand what I did..." he said, holding his head down. "But in whatever way I may have wronged you, I am truly sorry for it..."

Domino tried to keep himself from smiling, but ended up laughing manically as he backed away.

Not a peep escaped from the crowd. They simply stared at Domino with their puzzled faces.

Domino laughed and wheezed. He held on to his stomach while tumbling around the stage, barely able to keep his balance.

Starabey glanced at the other SPANK members with a deeply dumbfounded and shocked grimace while Ken raised one eyebrow as his eyelids rested halfway over his eyes.

Once Domino's laughter died down, he returned to his previous frowning, glaring expression and grabbed hold of Zephyr's neck, clutching it with his fingers and violently pulling him closer. "In whatever way you may have *wronged* me? Did you even fucking listen to me?" he shouted at him and then let out a few more breaths of laughter. "Oh my Xar—you...you still fucking believe you did nothing wrong!" He pushed Zephyr away and backed up a few paces, trying to burn a hole through him with his glare. "You pick the place," he snarled. "I want you to have nowhere else to look but in my eyes when I bash your skull in."

Zephyr turned to the crowd, his sorrowful gaze requesting assistance.

One of the spectators, a demon, climbed up onstage next to Zephyr and held his hands out as Zephyr whispered something to him.

In a burst of colorful, ethereal, sparkling mist, Zephyr and the SPANK team disappeared from sight and reappeared in the middle of a windy desert. Particles of sand danced around their feet as they faced each other in complete silence.

The sun was at its peak, and nothing else was in sight but the ruins of an old stone tower, sandy dunes, and the clear blue horizon.

Zephyr tilted his head up slightly, his eyes drowning in sadness as he stared back at Domino, who'd separated himself from his team members by several meters of sand. Domino continued to glare relentlessly into Zephyr's eyes. His cape flapped loudly in the wind. He'd never felt

more ready in his life. There was no fear. No regret. Only fury and determination.

Chapter Twelve

Times Have Changed

The desert sun's gleaming rays covered the unsullied battlefield and reflected off Zephyr's bulky silver-plated armor.

He kept his eyes closed and his head down as he pulled out his black-iron sword—as heavy as his very heart. “If this is your desire, friend... then I will do my best to try and please you,” he said.

Sublivion joined Domino by his side, and the both of them turned around toward the rest of their teammates, waiting to see who else wished to join the fight before it commenced.

Starabey hoped to get closer as well, but Ken immediately placed his arm on his chest, stopping him in his tracks.

Starabey shook his head. “Ken...” He chuckled.

“This is *their* fight, not yours,” Ken argued.

Regardless, Starabey took a step forward and looked back at him with an impish smirk. “We take care of our own.”

Corboir followed him shortly after, giving Ken one last silent glance as Ken glared at the two of them.

“I’m coming, too,” said Bowie.

Ken grabbed hold of his shoulder before he could walk past him. “No. I need you to stay.”

“*Why?* I can hold my own now,” he said sternly. “I can fight. I *have* to.”

“I know you can.” Ken sighed. “But I can’t climb this tower on my own...”

Bowie’s gaze quickly transformed into a glare of resentment.

Ken stared at him with sorrow, a plea for compassion glistening in his eyes. “Bowie...”

"No! Shut up! You can't make me do this!" Bowie argued. "I'm not going to be the one dragging the team down anymore!"

"Please..." said Ken, his eyes trying to mask his sadness and worry with a stern gaze. "I need you."

Bowie continued to glare at him. He then shut his eyes, tossed his head to the side, and let out a painful grunt. He squeezed Enzo in his hand. Then, suddenly, a chuckle escaped Bowie's lips.

Ken stared at him with squinting, puzzled eyes.

"Okay...I'll be the anus." A light smile curled upon Bowie's face as he gazed back at Ken. "Just this once."

"Excuse me?" Ken asked, cocking his head back in surprise.

Without warning, Bowie ran past him and pulled him along as he rushed toward the tower ruins.

Domino turned back around to face Zephyr with Sublivion, Starabey, and Corboir by his side.

Zephyr shifted his posture into a semi-crouching stance, leaning back onto one leg while placing the other one out in front of him. He observed Domino and his allies with a sorrowful yet relaxed gaze. He let out a deep sigh and shut his eyes as his body released a cloud of sparkling pastel-green energy that transformed into three identical copies of himself, along with all his armor—everything but his sword.

Starabey swung his guitar to his chest.

Corboir bent his knees with his legs apart—front and back—holding his clenched fists in front of his face.

Sublivion enveloped his arms in water.

Four sparkling, magical pink tentacles appeared out of Domino's back, wriggling around in the air.

Zephyr and his clones charged forward in disturbing silence, and so did Domino, Corboir, Sublivion, and Starabey.

As Zephyr swung his sword horizontally at him, Domino pushed himself off the ground with his magical tentacles, holding his legs as close to his abdomen as he could while Zephyr's sword passed beneath him without touching him or his ethereal appendages. Midair, before Zephyr resisted the inertia created by the swing of his sword, two of the magical tentacles latched on to Zephyr's body and propelled Domino

toward him, while the other two transformed into curved blades, aimed to slice through Zephyr.

However, just before Domino could reach him, Zephyr used his sword to block the attack.

The metal clinked loudly as Domino hit it with his tentacles. He was pushed back by the force of the impact but managed to land on his feet, squatting as his tentacles held most of his weight against the soft, unstable surface that was the sand. He was panting for air, and his face was already dripping with sweat, but he kept glaring at Zephyr with a wide smile on his face.

"Have you become *immune* to the sword's power since we last battled?" Zephyr asked in a surprised tone, lightly crouching into a battle-ready stance once again and gripping the hilt of his sword tighter.

Domino chuckled. "Pain can wait," he said. "But *I* can't." He charged toward Zephyr, turning his tentacles into hammers and maces.

With a loud roar, Zephyr swung his sword at Domino's head.

Meanwhile, Corboir dove onto the ground and rolled underneath one of Zephyr's clones.

Before the clone turned around and punched him, Corboir knocked him off his feet with a spin kick. He then grabbed him by the legs and tossed him onto the other Zephyr clone that was charging at him.

The clones turned back into magical mist, but from it, four more clones took the others' places.

Starabey strummed his guitar and was releasing electric currents at the enemies left and right, zapping the clones out of existence.

Unfortunately, they simply kept popping back in greater numbers with each kill.

"He's not trying to defeat us," Corboir explained. He jumped over to Starabey's side and high kicked one of the clones in the jaw, sending him flying. "It's a diversion."

"*Fuck!*" Starabey grunted, continuing to shoot up the clones with lightning from his guitar. "How's he able to make so *many*?"

"He shouldn't be able to keep up with Domino if he's using this much *magica* just to deal with *us*."

"So, the more clones there are, the weaker *he* is, huh?" Starabey concluded, his lips widening into a sly grin. He turned up the round knob on his guitar to the maximum. "Get behind me."

Corboir pressed himself against him back-to-back.

With a manic grin and shrunken pupils, Starabey violently strummed his guitar, charging it up before the clones got to them. Sparks buzzed and flashed all around his hands. Jagged waves of electricity spun around the strings like snakes.

The clones were closing in.

Starabey pressed the button at the top, releasing a surge of lightning upon his enemies so huge that the flash of blue light painted the sky over, frying the bodies to crisps.

Only the ethereal mist of the dissipated clones was left, surrounding Starabey and Corboir like a pastel-green fog.

While Starabey was basking in his triumph, an entire army of clones was reforming from Zephyr's magica.

"That should be enough," said Corboir. "We just have to keep them occupied now."

Starabey nodded with a smile, swung the guitar onto his back, and tightened the strap.

"Follow my lead," Corboir told him. He leaped into the swarm of Zephyr clones from high up in the air, performing a double spin kick and knocking out a couple of them before landing into a crouching position. "Hup!" he grunted. He raised his leg above one of the clones that was trying to tackle him, then pulled it back down, smacking the clone's head against the ground with his heel. He roared, "Huah!" and spun downward while kicking a number of other clones off their feet.

As Corboir was battling the clones using his extensive knowledge of martial arts, Starabey was trying to subdue them by flailing his fists around without coordination, swinging his head back with each swing. His feet were constantly on the move.

"Lean into it!" Corboir shouted. "Stop wasting so much energy running around!"

"Give me a break! I only used these hands for jerking off before this!"

Sublivion had also been hard at work with his own batch of clones farther away from Starabey and Corboir, helping sweep and control the

density of the clone crowd with forceful waves of clear water crashing against them.

In the meantime, Domino and the original Zephyr remained trapped in a battle with no victor seeming to arise anytime soon.

Zephyr continued slashing his sword at Domino, his stare growing more intense for every time he failed to hit him.

"Listen to me! He's using his pain as a source of strength now!" the sword hissed at his master, Zephyr. "My powers go off on their *own* when I touch raw anima—you have to keep me away from it!"

Domino snickered as he kept his manic glare pointed at Zephyr. "All my worst pain came from moments that made me angry. But here, I don't have to hold it in!" He turned one of the tips of his magical tentacles into a hand and grasped Zephyr's sword with it.

Zephyr's eyes widened, his face drenched in cold sweat as he stared at it and struggled to pull his sword back.

"It hurts," Domino panted. "But it hurts so *good*!" He launched his other tentacles at Zephyr, making the tips merge and spread into a flower filled with sharp needles on the inside, hungering to latch on to Zephyr's face.

With a terror-drowned expression and eyes fixed on the impending doom, Zephyr ducked down backward, barely avoiding the ethereal monstrosity by millimeters.

Domino let go of the sword with the first magical tentacle and separated his other one back into three. "Are you even *aware* of what a fucking retard you are? You rely on others to win your battles for you and then you just take all the credit for *yourself*." He chuckled. "One of your hero friends turned Venon into that sword, and the only reason you're still standing is because of *him*." He then released an onslaught of thrusts of his sharp-tipped tentacles upon Zephyr.

Zephyr pushed himself off the group and used his sword to swiftly block the attacks from any and all directions. His face was serious and contemplative, but his grunting and sweat gave away how much strain he was under from having to block and dodge a barrage of giant pink needles.

"Still not gonna answer me?" Domino asked, slashing at Zephyr with two tentacles aiming for his head and the other two for his feet.

Zephyr jumped forward, stretching out his body, and held his limbs close together as he spun in the air horizontally between the two sets of tentacles. Upon landing into a kneeling position, he swung his sword upward.

The metal clashed with one of Domino's magical appendages, but Domino merely grunted and took a step backward from the almost subdued flinch. His smile remained intact. "This is the *last* time I'll be ignored," he growled. With a menacing look pointed at Zephyr, he retracted his four tentacles and used them to push himself into the air. As he flew above Zephyr for that brief moment, he whipped the tentacles at him with full force.

Zephyr dove to the side and rolled away before they reached him.

The sand was lifted off the ground as the tentacles lashed against the surface. The gust of wind it made upset the surrounding dunes.

• • • •

While the fight continued down below, up in the ruins of the old, abandoned tower, Bowie and Enzo were helping Ken climb up the broken stone stairs.

Ken attempted to cross a large hole in the stairway by walking over Enzo's shaft that served as a makeshift bridge while Bowie had already been standing on the other side, holding his arms out. He took a few steps and threw his body forward to grab hold of Bowie's hand. As Bowie pulled him closer, he stepped onto solid ground.

"You no longer have the right to feel like the deadweight of the group," said Ken with a sigh of relief as they continued climbing the stairway.

Bowie chuckled in reply and gazed at the hole in the ceiling of the tower with a light grin.

A gleam of light was shining through, illuminating the interior and the sand particles that were being carried around by a gentle breeze.

"I've just realized...you've never said *why* you needed to get to the top of this tower," Enzo told Ken.

"If all goes well, I'll be sure to explain everything when this is over," Ken replied.

"Even whether you and Corboir banged last night?" asked Bowie with a puzzled, relaxed expression.

Ken glared at him with his eyelids drooping over his eyes and his frown oozing down the sides of his chin.

"I am *also* curious about that," Enzo added.

While keeping his mouth, eyelids, and eyebrows in the same exact positions, Ken rolled his eyes.

The group trudged their way onto the top of the tower, hissing and wincing as the heat and sunlight bombarded them. After their visions cleared, they leaned slightly over the tower's edge.

Two tall figures emerged from thin air down below, and a darker-skinned one flew in from above, surrounded by gusts of powerful winds that disturbed the sand beneath him.

• • • •

"Sincerest apologies for the delay, master," said the red-skinned elemental horseman Sadonage as he approached Domino from behind, grinning.

"You seem to be doing well enough on your own," Pleito commented with a smile. "Are you sure you need help?"

"How does it feel...friend?" Domino chuckled, retracting his magical tentacles back into his body. "These guys are gonna fucking *slaughter* you, and I'm gonna let them." He strolled around in a circle with his arms behind his back. "I mean—I *could* just tell them not to. It'd be no problem for me." He stopped and gazed at Zephyr with a leering smile. "But, you know...in whatever way I may have wronged you, I am truly sorry for it..."

Zephyr's eyes stared deep into Domino's. Slowly, he panted for breath. Though he readied his sword, his eyes showed no aggression. Only sorrow.

The three elemental horsemen, and their brother Sublivion, who'd left Corboir and Starabey to deal with the rest of the clones, rallied around Domino, pressing their bodies against him as they gazed back at Zephyr.

A glowing, colorful wave of anima swallowed them from beneath. Slowly, the cocoon of swirling reds, light greens, yellows, and purples grew, meter by meter, wriggling and pulsating.

Zephyr thrust his sword into the sand and knelt down. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead onto the hilt of the sword. A thin veil of pastel-green, lavender, and vanilla-colored anima enveloped him.

His clones ceased fending off Corboir and Starabey and ran toward the cocoon that was holding the original Zephyr. They turned back into pure green anima as they jumped into it, allowing the bud-shaped formation to grow taller than the tower ruins, matching the other one's size.

Suddenly, the cocoons blossomed open, releasing a rain shower of glimmering particles of anima and birthing two giant demons.

Domino and the elemental horsemen had fused into a towering monstrosity with two sets of arms; dark-blue skin wrapped in Domino's black latex suit; eyes with two pools of swirling yellow, red, and purple for irises while his pupils were pink and mint-colored; and a wavy hot-pink ponytail. His wide grin and relentless gaze stared into the eyes of the creature Zephyr had turned into.

Zephyr's fusion's white skin glowed in the sunlight. He had two pairs of eyes both with irises made of spiraling pastel-green, light-yellow, and lavender colors. He was adorned with Zephyr's silver armor, and his right hand was no longer made of flesh but was Zephyr's sword itself.

The two giants looked like twisted, almighty versions of Domino and Zephyr respectively. They stood above the rest of the world, ignorant to anything but each other.

"Behold the majesty of your demise!" shouted the dark-blue fusion in his deep, demonic voice, spreading his arms and giving his opponent a menacing grin.

"How do I make this right?" asked the white fusion in a lower, more distorted voice. "Domino...I..."

"There *is* no Domino," the dark-blue fusion replied, "only Equidom."

The white fusion gazed at him with sadness in his eyes. "I'm trying to make up for what I did. Why won't you *let* me?"

"Worry not, I won't be making *that* mistake again." Equidom chuckled. "Your words will not sate me. Your tears will not sate me. If you give me your life, it will not sate me." He took a step closer, almost

touching the white fusion's face with his own. "I want to look into your eyes after you've used all of your might to defeat me but still failed. You may repent by giving me a fight with which I will prove my worth."

The white fusion sighed with a drowsy, sorrow-filled look in his eyes. "I do not wish to fight... I'm only doing this to please you," he said. "I've always held you in high esteem. My heart weeps, for you are the *last* person on this earth I wish to harm."

"Good," Equidom replied. "I've broken your heart. Now I'm going to break the rest of you."

A light smirk crept onto the white fusion's face as he shook his head. "Nothing you do...could make me love you any less..." he said, gazing into Equidom's eyes like trying to touch him through them.

But Equidom's expression only turned into a menacing glare. "Enjoy this moment," he growled, "because this is as close to my affection as you will get." He drew back his massive clawed hand as he enveloped it in water. Within seconds, using his newfound power over the wind, he cooled it down until it became a frozen spiked mass.

"Sublivion..." said the white fusion. "I know you can hear me in there. Don't do this. The Sublivion I know would have never hurt his master."

Equidom's eyes opened wide and his pupils shrunk in surprise, though his brows remained sharply facing the root of his nose.

"You remember me, don't you?" asked the white fusion. "It's me—*Venon!*"

Equidom's eyes immediately narrowed back down, his lips trembling as he snarled. He lunged toward the white fusion, swinging his ice-covered claws at his face with a powerful roar.

The white fusion blocked the attack with his armored forearms.

The sound waves of the impact forced the earth to tremble and lifted the sand up from the ground, creating a dusty mist between the two giants. The ice broke into small particles, flying toward the ground like hail.

Equidom continued to bombard the white fusion with various hazardous elements. He blasted molten lava from his palms, shards of ice, flames, and flesh-tearing winds, but every time, the white fusion managed to either block or dodge the attack.

"Domino, this isn't you!" shouted the white fusion. "You've been possessed!"

"There is no emotion in me I haven't felt before!" Equidom replied.

"I refuse to believe that!" the white fusion argued. "This is not my Sublivion! My Sublivion would *never* do this! The Domino I know is nothing like this monster before me!"

"Fool!" Equidom laughed. "Don't you get it? I am the one who's possessed the *demons*! They serve *my* will!" He pulled back his arms, positioning his claws in the forms of gut-ripping hooks while staring back at the white fusion with a manic glare. "I am the pestilence!"

Equidom's and the white fusion's arms clashed once more, creating a booming sound that spread across the desert.

Equidom used his magica to levitate sand off the ground and slashed it at the white fusion like diamond blades—thin, unbreakable.

With each clash against the white fusion's silver armor, the desert sounded with terrifying screeches and lashes of air. However, the white fusion dodged what he could and blocked the rest with his sword-infused arm.

"Why didn't you just *say* something?" roared Equidom. "Why did you *do* this to me?" he screeched, pulling two of his arms away and swinging them forward, releasing a deadly jet of scalding water from his palms.

The white fusion stepped to the side, just barely missing it. His dread-filled eyes stared blankly out into space as the gushing stream of water passed by his face.

The hissing of the steam spread throughout the desert but left the white fusion unscathed.

Once the water passed him and evaporated, immediately, the white fusion threw himself onto Equidom, pinning him to the floor. He stared back into Equidom's glaring eyes as he held his sword arm against Equidom's neck. "You need to be purged of this darkness..." said the white fusion, his voice shaking.

Meanwhile, Starabey and Ken had just climbed up to the top of the tower, where Bowie and Ken had been waiting.

"Everyone okay?" asked Starabey.

"Zephyr's fusion is too resilient," Ken explained, glaring at the white fusion. "He'll never yield."

"True..." Corboir commented as he walked over to Ken and crossed his arms. He looked down from atop the tower at Equidom, his lips forming into a smirk. "But neither will they."

The white fusion shut his eyes tight. "You just don't understand..." he growled. "I *have* to be cruel. I have to *help* you."

"I've *felt* suffering for my own good," Equidom hissed. "Just not with you."

"You're talking nonsense," said the white fusion, gazing into his eyes with awe and concern. "Only *I* can save you. You need to be shown your own flaws so you'd wish to improve."

Equidom glared back at him, chuckling. Then he laughed louder and louder. He pressed his throat against the white fusion's blade arm, allowing the long edge to seep into his flesh. Deep enough to let his blood flow down his chest, but just shallow enough to keep himself in the waking world.

The white fusion stared down at him with his eyes wide open and his hand and blade arm shaking.

"You think you know suffering?" shouted Equidom as he pushed the blade away with the back of his arm as blood spilled down his chest. "You think you know *compassion*?"

The white fusion fell back as Equidom rose to loom over him. He stared up at him, his lips trembling.

"If you have to justify your cruelty to me, then part of you knows you do it for yourself and no one else," Equidom explained. "You've always thought you knew best. You can't even comprehend just how blind you *really* are. You claim you've been trying to help me... *Look* at what your actions have brought." He spread his arms. "Behold! Your creation!" Equidom roared, smiling.

The white fusion stuck the tip of his blade arm into the sand and struggled to stand himself up. "I never wanted this..." he said with a thin breath. "But I swear to you, I *will* save you..."

"No," said Equidom, shaking his head. He lifted his face up and smiled. "I will be the hero this time." With his eyes closed, he took a deep breath.

A colorful veil swallowed him from beneath, forming a cocoon around him. Wriggling, the cocoon shrunk down to two meters high and

bloomed into a ring of petals, revealing Domino and the elemental horsemen in their original forms, but with cut wounds on their throats and drying blood on their chests.

"We're done here," Domino told the demons. "You can go back to your masters now." As he spoke those words, the seals of the elemental horsemen he bore on his forearm disappeared.

Massire merely nodded while smiling at him.

"*That's* disappointing..." Sadonage sighed. "You could have at the very least let us stick around for the finale."

Pleito shrugged, keeping a sensual gaze focused on Domino as he was turning around. "Good luck, Domino." He then faced Sublivion and nodded at him.

The three elemental horsemen took their leave, walking off into the endless horizon.

"You don't suppose you could give us a lift to the nearest portal, dear brother?" Sadonage asked Pleito.

"That depends." Pleito chuckled. "Let's make a deal."

Once the three elemental horsemen were out of sight, Domino turned to Sublivion with hope-filled eyes and a warm grin. Gently, he took the demon's hand.

Sublivion remained still, though his hands trembled lightly.

"Sublivion..." said Domino. He took a step closer, their chests almost touching. He gazed into the demon's black mask. "I can't win without my better half," he told him.

After a moment spent in silence, Sublivion started nodding without rest.

Domino removed his glove and held his finger up, gazing curiously at the pink glow.

In turn, Sublivion took off his mask to reveal his smiling lips and teary eyes.

The mask slipped from his hand onto the sand.

"What are you *doing*?" roared the giant white fusion.

Domino pulled down the latex hugging Sublivion's neck and drew a glowing pink symbol onto Sublivion's mint-green skin, just above the cut wound.

Sublivion used his powers over water to wash away the blood off Domino's chest and then drew a glowing mint-colored mark onto it.

A black mist slithered its way to the surface and swallowed Domino and Sublivion into a dark cocoon.

The white fusion's eyes widened in terror and confusion.

Like a flower, the black veil opened up to reveal a fusion with mint-green skin wearing a loose-fitting tankini made of white cloth, with pink water wave illustrations spanning from the crotch upward. His wavy golden hair spanned all the way down to his calves, with a pink band tying it into a ponytail situated at the length of his lower back. He had six sparkling black tentacles protruding from his back, and two black waterfalls endlessly flowed from his glassy eyes with black irises. He had claws for fingers and toeless feet. Equine ears protruded from the top of his almond-shaped, smooth, noseless face. He was three meters tall, but an insect compared to the mountain that was the white fusion looming over him.

Atop the tower ruins, Bowie, Starabey, Ken, Enzo, and Corboir observed the transformation with intrigued and surprised gazes.

"Is that...*Subidom*?" asked Bowie, straining his eyes and leaning against the edge of the tower.

Corboir stared down at the newly formed creation with a stern gaze and crossed arms.

"No..." Ken answered. He walked over to Bowie, placing his hands onto the warm stone of the tower's edge. "Domblivion..."

Down on the battlefield, the black riverlike tears spilling over Domblivion's body took the form of two wriggling tentacles. He smiled up at the white fusion and reached out to him with his clawed hand. With a graceful bow, he took a step forward. Then a step to the left. Then backward. All while holding his arms behind his back, keeping his eyes closed as he twirled.

The white fusion stared at him with a puzzled look. He reached out to grab him, closer, and closer.

Once the white fusion's fingers got close enough, Domblivion opened his eyes. Like lightning, his water tentacles rushed up the white fusion's arm, growing and spreading over his body, from the stomach and over to his crotch.

Before the white fusion could react, he was already trapped in the water, almost completely immobilized.

Domblivion's stream of tears swung the giant over to the other side, slamming him face-first into the sand.

"Yeheah!" cheered Starabey.

"Yes!" shouted Enzo as he flew out of Bowie's hand.

Corboir's head sunk toward the ground as he smiled.

"Everything all right?" Ken asked him.

"Yes..." Corboir replied. He lifted his face back up, gazing down at Domblivion. "Everything is as it should be..."

The giant white fusion let out a moan of pain as he was lifting his head out of the sand. His eyes darted toward Domblivion, who was dancing by himself again. He shoved his humanoid arm into the ground, and at the same time, he swung his sword arm at him.

Domblivion kept twirling around until the very last second.

The white fusion's blade touched his back, and a horde of silver-plated gloves reached for his legs from underneath the sand. But before either could harm him, he used two of his shimmering black tentacles to spring himself high into the air.

The Zephyr clones that had dug their way to the surface turned back into pastel-green energy and returned to the white fusion as he pushed himself onto his feet. He swung his sword arm down at Domblivion, slicing through the air and the grains of sand that flew around it.

However, Domblivion simply allowed himself to be blown away by the air current created by the white fusion's blade, dodging the hit. In an instant, he launched himself up once again, this time with the waterfall of tears flowing from his eyes that he'd bent into the shape of tentacles. He hopped onto the white fusion's sword arm as it retracted.

The white fusion swung his arms around and thrashed as if trying to swat an annoying mosquito that was moving too fast for him to reach.

Domblivion was running all over the white fusion's body and cutting his skin with the black water flowing from his eyes and the magical black tentacles on his back. Cut after cut, Domblivion created more wounds, slashing through the small openings on the white fusion's silver armor all the way to his flesh.

As droplets of red blood trickled down his skin, the white fusion summoned an army of human-size Zephyr clones on his body.

Running, sliding, and crawling, they swarmed toward Domblivion with cocked fists.

Domblivion turned the tips of his ethereal tentacles and the tentacle-shaped water from his eyes into curved blades and hammers respectively.

The enemies were close approaching, and the giant white fusion was about to swat Domblivion with the flat side of his sword arm.

With nimble jumps and flips, Domblivion swung his weaponized tentacles at each Zephyr clone that rushed at him with calculated precision. It was as though he could already predict where each clone would be after slashing them back into green magica one by one. He kept landing direct hits onto each clone, either by slamming them into the abyss with a hammer-transformed tentacle or slicing through them with the blade-sharp ones. As the white fusion's sword arm was fast approaching, Domblivion hopped off before it could even touch him, landing on his liquid tentacles with a splash.

The white fusion let out an earth-trembling roar and swung his sword arm upward, lifting the sands as the tip of the sword glided against the surface of the desert before pointing to the sky.

The particles of flying sand that got trapped in Domblivion's aquatic appendages slipped right through, keeping the dark water clear.

As the white fusion held up his sword arm, he cast a huge shadow over Domblivion.

Domblivion's black irises and both the magical and water-formed tentacles changed color in an instant, glowing and glimmering bright in all the colors of the rainbow. He extended his arms in front of himself and released a powerful beam of sparkling rainbow magica at the white fusion.

The loud buzzing noise echoed through the desert. The brightness of the beam's glow blinded the sun itself.

However, the giant white fusion blocked the beam with his sword arm before it could reach him.

In response, Domblivion kept on thrusting more and more energy at the white fusion.

Powerful winds fanned away the sands. The tower began to crumble under the incredible strength of the ongoing blast.

The wind had pushed Ken, Starabey, Bowie, and Corboir all the way to the other end of the tower's top.

As he struggled to resist the gust of the sandstorm, Ken attempted to return to the edge of the tower closest to Domblivion and the white fusion by crawling on the ground and grabbing hold of every nook and cranny in the stone floor for support. "I can't...reach!" he shouted.

Brick by brick, the tower slowly collapsed under the pressure.

Corboir crawled in front of Ken to lessen the winds' blow with his body.

Nevertheless, Ken was slipping further and further away from his goal, lying on the floor, latching on to even the smallest crevice he could find.

Corboir stood up in spite of the winds' power with great struggle and pulled Ken off the floor.

As Ken stood there with a confused stare, Corboir held him in his arms, keeping him from being blown away. "Think of something that makes you happy!" he ordered him.

"What?" asked Ken, raising his eyebrows in disbelief.

Corboir shook him. "What makes you happy? What *excites* you?"

"I don't *know*!" argued Ken. "Why are you asking me all these questions? I don't have time for this!"

"Think of your favorite thing! Pet! Idol! *Anything*!" Corboir shouted in his face.

"I don't *have* any!" Ken yelled back.

Corboir gripped the hair on the back of Ken's head, closed his eyes, and pressed their lips together with immense force.

Ken's face was flushed with hot blood, spilling color over his cheeks. His eyes remained wide open as he stared at Corboir with an awestricken gaze.

Soon enough, Corboir straightened his back as if the wind had become but a light breeze.

With a loud pop, their wet lips parted, leaving Ken staring at Corboir with blinking eyes and a forever-gaping mouth.

Corboir grabbed him by his shoulders and pulled him in the direction of Domblivion and the giant white fusion.

With Corboir's help, Ken walked several paces forward, reaching the edge of the tower within moments. "W-wait!" he shouted as he was pulling away.

"We can discuss it later," Corboir told him, smiling. Without a second warning, he pushed Ken off the edge, straight into Domblivion's rainbow energy beam.

Ken's screaming ceased upon immersion. Over the course of several seconds, his body disintegrated into finely ground blue and purple dust that made its way onto the sands beneath.

"Finally." Domblivion sighed with a light grin on his lips.

Zephyr's fusion focused his glare onto him as sweat trickled down his face.

Domblivion thrust his arms forward once more and released an awesome and even more powerful surge of magica onto his opponent.

The white fusion was forced back a few steps by such tremendous power. His hands shook as he struggled to keep pushing at the energy with his sword arm.

Domblivion remained standing firm, smiling at the white fusion.

At one point, the white fusion spread his arms.

The energy beam enveloped him and turned black as sunlight washed over it. When it ceased, it revealed Zephyr lying on the ground with a smile next to his sword.

Black energy covered Domblivion and formed a black cocoon. It shrunk and revealed Domino and Sublivion in their original bodies.

Domino approached Zephyr's motionless body with a stern grimace on his face and picked up the black iron sword off the ground. He put his high heel atop Zephyr's chest and pointed the tip of the sword at his throat. "Hey...look at me..." he said.

Zephyr gently opened his eyes, and they darted around aimlessly.

"Look at me," said Domino with an angry frown, tilting Zephyr's chin up with the sword.

Zephyr gazed into Domino's eyes with a smile and then closed them back up.

"Do you know why I'm stronger than you?" Domino asked him. He stuck the sword into the sand beside Zephyr's head.

Zephyr's face turned into a look of confusion as he opened his eyes once more and looked at the sword just centimeters away from his face.

"Because I'm stronger than myself," said Domino.

Zephyr sat up, staring at him with a puzzled look in his eyes while Domino was already walking away.

Soon enough, Corboir, Bowie, and Starabey rushed down from the tower to be reunited with Domino and Sublivion.

Starabey pulled Domino into a strong embrace and spun him around. "You motherfucker!" He laughed. "That was some messed-up shit you pulled back there! You almost gave me a fucking heart attack when you leaned into that sword!"

Domino chuckled and patted Starabey's shoulder as he put him back down. "Don't worry, it probably hurt you more than it did us."

"I'd ask how you were feeling, but...I believe your smile speaks for itself," Corboir commented as he smirked at Sublivion.

Sublivion chuckled and averted his gaze toward the ground.

"Hey—where's Ken?" asked Bowie.

All of a sudden, high-pitched cries screeched through the desert.

Domino turned his head left and right. "The fuck?"

"I hear it, too," Starabey added.

"Is that...a *child*?" asked Enzo.

Sublivion faced the east and led the group forth toward a strong glow of blue and purple anima.

The cries came from a nude, one-year-old-looking demoness with short white hair; furry white horse legs; a long white tail with long fur on the tip; a stubby white horn protruding from her forehead; and black irises in the center of her glistening eyes.

Holding her in his arms was a humanoid being of an otherworldly appearance. It had no face, hair, or genitalia—just a head, a torso, two arms, and two legs. His body was made entirely out of sparkling, ethereal blue and purple energy. He shushed and straddled the baby in his arms.

The baby calmed down just as the young men approached him.

"Glad you could join us," said the ethereal being. He then walked over to Sublivion and handed him the baby. "Hold this, please."

Sublivion looked down at it in confusion as the little demoness stared back with unenthused eyes.

As he loomed over her and cast a shadow, the baby's irises turned into two glimmering rings of rainbows.

"Ken?" Domino barked, squinting his eyes while inspecting the creature.

"Yes, Domino," he answered. "Don't worry. I'm just a demon now—that's all. Except my body is made entirely out of anima, thanks to your *magica*."

"Wait—I did that?" asked Domino, staring at Ken in awe.

"Well, you and Sublivion. Your anima alone could never have become powerful enough to do the things it did just now," Ken explained. "You had to be fused with a demon. And this last fusion of yours was *seamless*. So much so that your and Sublivion's anima became a homogenous mixture instead of a heterogeneous one like all those other times before. Not only that, but it also managed to become A-grade demonic anima just like we'd hoped."

Starabey glanced around at his teammates. "Who's 'we'?"

"And how are you talking to us right now if you have no mouth?" asked Bowie.

"Right..." Ken sighed. "I've been dreading this moment...among other ones we've been through, of course, but...I've withheld some information from you...once again..."

Domino raised an eyebrow, staring at Ken with a puzzled gaze.

"Ken is just my nickname..." he said. "My full name is Kenketsu di Gommanera. In my youth, I was adopted by an old demon named Laplace. Years later, he was going to die by Xar's hand upon his own request, and in my attempt to stop the process, his anima infused itself with my body. It was slowly killing me, and so, I went looking for the infamous Santana...or...well...Porthos. I didn't want to die, so I asked for his help. Then...he sent me to find *you*. The rest is history."

Domino took a deep breath through his nose, staring at Ken with an intense gaze.

"I've betrayed your trust for a second time, I know that...but..."

"You had a good reason for it." Domino chuckled, his expression having become softer and warmer as he smiled.

"I—I..." Ken mumbled.

"You used me, but...the fact that you're still standing here, explaining this and trying to apologize tells me you care. That's what friends *do*. They use each other, but the appreciation is what makes all the difference. That's all I ever really wanted..."

There was a moment of silence among them.

Then, soft laughter escaped Ken's nonexistent mouth. "Sorry... I'm smiling right now...in case you can't tell..."

"So, you'll be okay now, right?" Domino asked.

"Yes—thank Xar. And Domblivion, of course," Ken replied. He raised his arms and walked past them. "I have finally been liberated! No more migraines! I can see *everything*!"

"Hold on. We still need to approve that name," Domino added with an annoyed expression. "But what do you mean you can see 'everything'?"

Ken turned back around to face the group. "*All* of it! Past, present, and future!"

"I'm curious... Were you a different person back when you didn't have Laplace's anima?" asked Corboir. "Since you've gained his magical power instead of having kept your own, I'm assuming his anima would have also dominated *personality-wise*."

Ken swiftly turned his face toward him. "I am telling you *nothing*!" he argued. "At least not until you apologize for assaulting me the way you did back there."

"Ken...you don't have to feel so flustered over something so trivial," Corboir replied, smirking as he gazed at him. "I only did what was needed to make your wish come true, as Animadre requested."

Ken suddenly went deathly silent for a moment. "Yes," he said, his voice resolute while he remained standing unnaturally still. "Thank you."

"Did *what*?" Domino interjected. "Can someone please fill the rest of us in?"

"I had my eyes closed the entire time 'cause of the sandstorm," said Bowie.

Enzo, however, spoke up. "In essence, Corboir—"

While approaching Ken, Corboir grabbed Enzo from Bowie's hand and shoved his blade into the sand before he could speak another word. With a sly grin, he came face-to-face with Ken.

Ken's face followed Corboir's, his entire body's colors swirling around at a swifter pace.

"If I'd have meant it as a display of affection, I would have done it differently," Corboir elaborated, enveloping Ken's body with his arms. He pressed him against his chest and his lips disappeared as he sunk them into Ken's ethereal mass that represented his head. He closed his eyes, his mouth being filled with thick anima as he aggressively swirled it around with his tongue.

Ken remained perfectly still. His anima's movement quickened exponentially while still retaining the shape of a human being, mixing around almost like someone was relentlessly shaking a bottle of dark water full of glitter.

"Whoa—slow *down*, guy." Starabey chuckled. "He *already* looks like he's gonna explode!"

Domino kept tapping his foot and crossed his arms as he pouted.

In the meantime, Enzo had released himself from his sandy prison and floated over to Bowie. "Oh my *Xar*!" he gasped. "Ken doesn't have a penis anymore!"

Corboir finally let Ken out of his grasp and placed his hand on his own hip as his lips curled into an impish smile.

"So, then..." Ken mumbled and cleared his throat. "Would you be... willing to be Xara's guardian?"

"You're asking me to help you raise a child and you won't even let me vote on the name?" Corboir chuckled, crossing his arms.

Bowie turned his head toward the vast desert while the others continued discussing the newly created demon baby.

"It's to honor *Xar*," Ken groaned. "Though, I may have gotten it from looking into the future just now."

Corboir took the baby from Sublivion into his arms. He smiled at her and stroked her little head. "She's beautiful..."

"Guys, I think Zephyr wants to talk," said Bowie, pointing at Zephyr, who appeared to have been standing nearby the entire time with a light smile on his face. "I don't think he's blinking."

Domino waved his arms around frantically, gathering everyone closer and pushing them in one direction. "Let's go! Hurry! *Hurry!* Nobody look at him!"

Suddenly, out of thin air, Porthos appeared before Domino in his red latex and white fur suit, along with a young magician he'd paid to teleport him to the desert.

"Hey, guys!" Porthos exclaimed.

"Oh, good—help." Domino sighed. "You won't count this as my present from you, right?"

"No, don't worry," said Porthos as he waved over to Zephyr. "Hey! Come with us—we'll give you a lift!"

"Uuuuuuugh..." groaned Domino as he glared at Porthos.

Zephyr walked over to the SPANK gang with his sword in hand and a smile on his face. "Thank you," he told Porthos. "I was starting to get worried I'd be left stranded here."

Domino turned away, covering half of his face with his hand.

"Friend..." said Zephyr, but stopped himself and sighed. "I mean... Domino..."

Before he could say anything more, Domino shushed him and placed his finger on Zephyr's lips.

Zephyr's eyes widened and his jaw lightly dropped.

"You're a great hero..." Domino told him as he gently punched his shoulder. "Just...try to put yourself in *others'* shoes from time to time. Okay?"

With a quiet but deep exhale through his nostrils, Zephyr smiled as he gazed into Domino's eyes.

"Maybe someday we can have a rematch. You gave me *way* too many chances, so it's only fair," Domino told him with a chuckle. He then placed his arm around Sublivion's waist and pulled him against his side. With a warm smile, he gazed up at him. "But...right now, I wanna settle down for a bit."

Sublivion's lips curled up into a bashful smile as he turned to Domino.

Zephyr closed his eyes and faced the ground, smiling. He tilted his head back up and looked at both Domino and Sublivion. "You are both very lucky to have each other."

"Thank ju," Sublivion told him with a light nod.

Enzo floated over to Domino and leaned closer to his ear. "When do we burn his armor?"

"I don't give a shit—do what you want," Domino groaned.

"Hmph," scoffed Enzo, then returned to Bowie. "Perhaps I *will*."

"So, you guys ready to go?" Porthos asked them with a wide grin across his face.

"Go *where*?" asked Bowie.

Porthos shrugged, still keeping on his smile. "I dunno. Home?"

Domino's eyebrows rose in surprise and his lips parted slightly as he stared at Porthos.

"You feeling okay?" Starabey asked him.

"Y-yeah..." Domino replied, sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "I'm fine..."

"I've already paid to have us teleported back," said Porthos. "Where do you wanna go?"

Domino gazed at Porthos with glimmering eyes and a warm smile.

Chapter Thirteen

Parsimonious Son

Domino knocked on the wooden door as the sun was setting behind him. He stared at it full of dread and uncertainty. His palms were drenched in sweat inside his black gloves, and his chest was burdened with the weight of twelve horses.

Sublivion snuck his fingers between Domino's as he stood beside him.

A light smile crept onto the Domino's face as he looked up at the demon.

The door's lock clacked.

Domino faced it and let out a long, heavy sigh.

"It's okay, Holly! I'll get it!" a woman shouted from inside the house. "It's probably Sofia!"

The door swung open. A middle-aged woman with hazel hair stood in front of them—her eyes wide open and her lips trembling.

"Mom?" Domino uttered.

Lady Enviedhier shut her mouth with her palms, just staring at Domino for the longest time. Slowly, teardrops ran down her smiling cheeks. She threw herself onto her son, locking him in a tight embrace.

Domino remained standing still, his eyes unblinking. The situation wasn't playing out nearly the same way as he'd imagined. When he'd started his journey, he'd thought he would have walked up to his parents' door, told them how wrong they were about him, and ridden off into the sunset on Sublivion's shoulders. But when he saw his mother's eyes light up at the sight of her only son having returned home after two years, he couldn't deny the horrid aches of his melting heart. "Mom...it's okay..." he told her, gently pushing her away so he could look her in the eyes with a smile. "I'm home..."

"T-the guards said they couldn't make you come home unless you wanted to," she whimpered. "A-and then I saw you at the picking...but President Pumpkinhead had you taken away when that shovel hit you... I..."

"I'm sorry...for everything I put you and Dad through," said Domino, his face sunken from shame. "I'm sorry for hurting you." He then looked back up at her, his eyes shimmering. "But I'm not sorry for leaving."

Domino's mother sniffled as she wiped the tears from her face, staring at Domino with a puzzled gaze.

Domino chuckled. "I-in fact...leaving was the best thing that could have ever happened to me! Mom, I've been places you wouldn't *believe*! I've trained to become a master magician and I've commanded the four elemental horsemen of Xar!" He moved to the side to reveal the rest of his companions, who'd been standing a few paces behind Sublivion and himself: Starabey, Bowie, Enzo, Ken, and Corboir with the baby. "I've even made *friends*! *Real* friends! Friends who've stuck by my side no matter *what* shit I put them through!"

Bowie waved at Domino's mother. "Hi, Mrs. Enviedhier!"

"*Bowie*?" she gasped. "W-wait...is that a *baby*? You've been traveling with a *baby*?"

"No, she was created an hour ago," Domino answered. "But that's not the point!"

"Oh my Xar—is that a *cut* scar on your neck?" Domino's mother shouted.

"Look, it's nothing!" groaned Domino. "Zephyr was holding his sword to my throat, and I pushed myself onto it."

"What are you talking about?" his mother continued. "You cut yourself on his sword on *purpose*? Why would you *do* that?"

"Ugh! I was fused! It didn't—" argued Domino, but he stopped himself before he said anything more. He raised his hands up and sighed with closed eyes, yielding his previous thought. "You know what—can we go inside and sit down first? I've been walking over sand in high heels all day."

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Some time had passed since the SPANK team found themselves in the gilded halls of the Enviedhieri estate telling the tale of their epic yet exhausting journey to Domino's parents, Lord Dante and Lady Paola Enviedhieri.

Domino's father sat cross-legged on one of the high-end sofas, nodding, though his face spoke of only confusion. Once the group was finished telling their story, he sat in complete silence and then scratched his curly graying-blond hair as his eyes darted around the floor. "Wow..." he said. "I...I honestly don't know how to react to *any* of this..."

The house servant approached Corboir holding a cow horn filled with freshly bought breast milk and sealed up at the narrow end. She handed it to him and took her leave with a light bow.

Corboir leaned the horn horizontally so as to keep the milk flow slow and took off the seal as he placed the tip into Xara's mouth to feed her, making sure to keep it from spilling onto her frilly, little white dress.

"All right, I have a question," Paola added. "If you were all dressed like...*that*...where have you been carrying your things all this time?"

"Poor choice," Ken commented.

Sublivion leaned his head forward and held his palms under his gaping mouth. A thin cloth sack suspended in a large body of clear water oozed out of his maw and fell into his hands.

Paola's and Dante's expressions were distorted due to the sheer amount of horror and disgust their faces were trying to express.

The water flew away into a nearby flowerpot, leaving Sublivion with a dry sack of coins.

"A-all right. I think I've seen enough," said Dante, covering part of his mouth with the side of his tightly clenched fist.

Sublivion attempted to swallow the bag back.

"D-don't," Dante ordered him, wincing, raising his palm, and shutting his eyes.

"I just don't get one thing..." Domino told his parents with upward-tilted eyebrows and frowning lips. "Why did you praise Zephyr so much all those years ago and talk like I should have been more like him?"

"Believe us, sweetheart, we *never* wanted that," Paola replied, her eyes stricken with sadness.

"You've always had the best grades in school. Getting a lower grade or anything other than first place was just so *unlike* you," said Dante. "We had no idea how hard you had to work for all those things. In the back of our heads, we must have just thought it was easier for you to be such a good student than it was for everyone else. That's why we praised Zephyr." He leaned back, his gaze traveling around the room. "His parents were constantly complaining to us at parent-teacher conferences about how little passion Zephyr had for *anything* in life. Then, at one point, it was like a one-eighty turn for the better." He looked back at Domino. "We *had* to praise him. We had to show him he was on the right track—so he'd stay that way, hopefully."

"But when *you* would get a bad grade... I don't know about Dante, but I would always think, 'I have to discourage this as much as possible before it gets worse,'" said Paola, biting her lip as she gazed down at the floor with grieving eyes. "I was just scared that...you would stop being as good as you've always been. Maybe someday you'll understand when *you'll* be a parent. Some things just...become the norm...and you notice only the differences and changes from then on."

"Domino, we've *always* loved you," Dante told him. "And we've always been so incredibly proud of you."

"I did so many things just so I'd get your approval..." Domino sighed. "I *hate* politics. I wanted to apply for a business and management major, but I applied for politics because you'd think I was dumb and naive if I didn't. And then, when I came home with the acceptance letter that day...you just brushed it off like it was no big deal. Not even a 'thank you.'"

"I'm...sorry you thought we didn't appreciate everything you were doing," said Paola. "But...we only really wanted you to be happy in the long run. We already have family in the government to help you transition easier. Business is a harsh and unforgiving career choice. You have to be armed to the *teeth* to make it in there. We just...didn't want to see you miserable in the end."

Domino nodded, staring at the floor with a disappointed frown.

"Sweetheart...can you please forgive us?" Paola asked him, gazing at her son with pleading yet hopeful eyes.

Remembering the past, thinking about everything that had happened, Domino kept gently nodding as a smile formed on his face. He looked up at Paola and Dante, then stood up from his chair with open arms.

The married couple smiled back at their son, and the three of them entered a strong embrace.

"Does this mean...you're coming home?" Paola inquired.

Domino looked back at his teammates. "Well..."

"Paola, what about our summer house in Quattro Coralli?" said Dante. "We don't go there as often anymore. They could all live there *together*! Everyone could have a separate apartment!"

"You're *right*!" she replied.

"What do you say?" Dante turned to Domino with a smile. "We'd keep out of your hair, but still be just a portal away if you needed anything."

Domino turned around to face his friends with his entire body and shrugged as he smiled nervously. "Um...what *do* we say?"

"I vulghd like that for us..." Sublivion told him, smiling.

Starabey pushed himself up from the sofa and swung his hand onto Domino's shoulder. "Please let me live with you," he said.

Ken chuckled. "If Corboir's all right with it, I'd hate to leave after I've put so much effort into trying to like you."

"I'd already made my choice when I joined you and your cause," said Corboir with a light smile gracing his face. He looked down at the little white-haired demoness in his arms. "Besides, I'd like Xara to grow up in a large family since she has the opportunity."

Everyone then turned to Bowie.

He just smiled at them and looked down at Enzo in his hand. "Thanks for the offer...but I'll pass."

"*What?*" barked Domino with a worried frown. "What do you mean?"

"Domi, I'll always be thankful you brought me along when you ran away. But like you said...I never really treated you the same way you did me. I don't help out or do favors unless someone asks me to. That's just not how I work," Bowie explained. "Trust me, we'd both be better off if we weren't friends. And you deserve to be happy."

Domino chuckled anxiously. "Y-you can't be serious. We've been through so much! I—"

Bowie shook his head, smiling. "Let me at least try and make it up to you... Please, Domi..."

Domino's lips trembled, and his eyes filled up with tears. He threw himself into Bowie's arms and held him tight as he quietly wept into his shoulder.

Bowie patted his back and leaned his head against him.

After one last squeeze, Domino pulled back and rubbed his nose with his hand as he sniffled. "You...you guys wanna stay for dinner...before you go?" he asked.

"Sure!" Bowie exclaimed.

"I can't digest food, but still, thank you for offering," said Enzo.

"Then it's settled!" Dante added. He clapped his hands together as he stood up from the sofa. "Come on. Let's move over to the dining room. I'll pop open a bottle of Uve-Blu."

"Round two?" Corboir asked Ken, smirking at him as he followed Dante into the next room, along with everyone else.

"Sorry to have to spoil your fun," Ken replied with an impish tone of voice, "but I'm afraid I no longer possess organic tissue."

Corboir only laughed as he passed by him and through a large wooden door.

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It had been several months since Domino and his friends moved into his parents' estate in Quattro Coralli, the most beautiful and popular town by the ocean in all of Kitaria.

Domino had opened his very own night club in the heart of the cliffs on which the town was situated. Through an underground entrance, the residents were flooding the stone staircase. Colorful flaming torches were lighting up the main room. Pole dancers wearing rainbow-colored fishnets were grinding against metal bars on the stage. Guests were drowning in alcohol and swinging their arms around to the beat of the band's music, and Domino, Sublivion, and Ken were sitting in the VIP balcony booth on the upper floor.

"I can't believe you managed to talk him into this!" Ken shouted into Domino's ear.

Domino took a swig of beer from his stone stein and kept pinching his white buttoned-down shirt to let some air in. "I *didn't*! He said he was gonna work so you can take care of Xara!"

The sparkling blue and purple colors that made up Ken's ethereal body swirled faster but still retained the shape of a faceless genitalia-devoid human body. "He said that?"

"Hold on. It's starting!" said Domino.

Ken turned his head toward the stage just as the music was changing its beat and melody.

Corboir strutted onto the stage in a bright-orange thong with four empty coin pouches hanging from the sides of his hips. He was covered in a loose yellow fishnet robe and wearing orange stilettos that clashed with his unimpressed frown. He jumped onto the pole and spun around in a circle until finishing his opening move by hanging upside down while holding on to the pole with his legs.

The guests were already shoving each other around and clawing their way to the stage to fill the coin pouches on Corboir's hips with givits.

"At least he'll never get bored, right?" Domino chuckled.

"Neither will I," Ken replied.

Sublivion stood up from the table, straightening his loose, lightweight yellow poncho. "I vilgh go get another drink," he announced. "Ju need enithing?"

"No, thanks!" Domino yelled out.

Once Sublivion was gone, Domino turned to Ken. "You really think it was a good idea to leave Xara at home with Starabey and his groupies? They could be letting her taste alcohol," he teased.

Ken sighed. "Sadly, they won't have anything at that party she hasn't already tried."

About the Author

Klara Raškaj is an author of eerie and eldritch erotica. A sizzling romance with an otherworldly creature, a dash of bone-chilling horror, and a pinch of mystery is her not-so-secret recipe for a delectable literary treat. Her lifelong love for writing sexual tension between characters is second only to her obsession with hazelnut milk and artisan soap.

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