



**Trials
and
Tribulations**

Vengeance and Forgiveness Series

Tejah Brawley

Trials and Tribulations

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Book Three

Tejah Brawley

Warning and Copyright

Hello!

Welcome back to the world of Vengeance and Forgiveness! Before we dive back into this crazy story, let's get the warning and copyright out of the way. This series is rated M for Mature. There will be explicit language, blood, gore, and sexual themes. There will also be very touchy subjects touched upon throughout the story. In other words, your child shouldn't be reading this book right now. DO NOT give them this book for a birthday gift or Christmas gift. This series may be filled with magic and wonder, but the situations our friends and foes get themselves into are not for kids to see at their age. So, keep these books far away from them! I would hope you know that already, though, since this is the third book. If you're a newcomer, you might want to read the first book before coming here.

Now let's get into the Copyright information!

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Okay, now we got that out of the way, we can get into the story! Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope that you will enjoy the story, and hang tight... It's going to be another bumpy ride.

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Intro

Ideya intended this universe to be a never-ending cycle of life and death, good and evil, and relief and pain. We cannot have one without the other for Ideya has made it impossible. Even Maza and Umu experience ups and downs for they all fear the same thing Gaians do... transcendence, or I guess I should say "death". I hear about it all of the time. Malaikis and Peonis cry and beg for mercy when it is time for them or their neighbor to reincarnate. It can get ridiculous at times, but the species that does the most to avoid transcendence is humans. Eons later, and I still question why Ideya created such creatures and appointed my brothers and I to be the few Quphantos that monitor them. Nonetheless, it is what it is, and like with every universe, there will be Laws to abide by... though I'm sure that someone will try to bend them. Regardless, Gaians, Mazans, Umuites, and spirits that wander throughout Umoyaoho-Indawo, heed by mine Spiritual Laws for if ye don't, thine lives will forever be bombarded with consequences.

- 1. Dear Spirits, ye must never intrude domains that art not thine home domain unless it's for business purposes.*
- 2. Dear Spirits, ye must never bring Gaians into the Spiritual Realm for their vessels are made of flesh, and they will not be able to handle such a spiritual atmosphere. They must transcend in order to have access to our domains.*
- 3. Dear Spirits, if ye choose to have relations with the Gaians, thine offspring must stay in Gaia until it is time for them to transcend.*
- 4. Dear residents of all domains, ye must never travel through thine timeline or universes that art not thine home universe. Doing so will unravel the threads of time and the tampered universes will be forced into a reset.*

Do not question mine laws for they are what kept this universe in order... for the most part. If anyone dares to disobey these Laws and can't think of a proper consequence, a representative from Maza or Umu will have to report to me.

-Karma, Quphanto of Order and Judgement

Prologue

July 2017

Night

BOOOOOM!!! Rumble rumble rumble rumble. Dark, ominous clouds terrorize the sky, leaving no room for the stars to share their light with the world. Strong winds and heavy amounts of rain push and shove the innocent trees, their leaves are yanked off of their branches, and their branches slowly lose their strength and break away from them. The trees are forced to applaud the lightning that dances throughout the sky, their dancing accompanied with the sounds of rain and thunder. A new musician joins the rambunctious orchestra as he plays his shimmery, bronze recorder, letting his minor-keyed notes fill in the segments where the thunder is quiet. Even though the rain drenches the sinister musician's body, from his red hair to his business-casual shoes, he still plays his recorder with much passion.

The beige-skinned Upendeoni continues playing his recorder, not bothered by the thunderstorm taking place, then suddenly *meow. Meow.* Monotone meowing from a cat interrupts the musician, and he stops playing his recorder to tilt his head down and see a black cat with purple eyes. His eyes widen while his hands fumble for his pouch and place the recorder back in its home. He grabs hold of the drenched cat and keeps her close to him. The Upendeoni mutters, "We only got a few minutes before the enchantment wears off. Where is he?" He looks at the mansion where the black cat made her exit, knowing that his leader is in there doing who knows what. Then, *BOOOOOOOM!!! Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble.*

Meow. Meow. The cat continues to meow in the musician's arms, not showing any signs of retaliation. In a few seconds, a cloud of dark mist approaches the Umuite and cat while carrying a caramel-skinned lady with frizzy blue-green ombre hair. The Upendeoni's eyes widen when he realizes who his leader had picked up. *No...* he thinks, *No no no, what is he doing with her!?!*

The dark mist takes form of a tall, average-build, brown-skinned Upendeoni exposing his pitch-black Peoni horns adorned with chains that have jewels hanging off of them; a black tuxedo and dress pants; and golden and bronze necklaces and chains bedazzled with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. He looks down at the young lady he's carrying, his red-orange-yellow ombre eyes sparkle joyfully and a smile grows on his face. He looks up to examine his Upendeoni follower and the cat he's holding, and a giggle escapes from his sinister grin. "Oooh goody," the Upendeoni hisses out, "Good job, Pierre. I thank you so much for capturing 'Amethyst'. You are such a good animal caretaker. Let's go home~"

Pierre looks at him with uncertainty and says, "But wait, my lord... Where's Kendo? Isn't he-"

"Don't worry about him," Aidoneus interrupts, his slit pupils wanting to stab Pierre's soul yet his joyful smile stays apparent, "It'll all make sense, soon. For now... let's just get back home before these two wake up~" Aidoneus continues to snicker to himself as he conjures up a portal back to Umu, the portal's murky colors swirling in random directions. Aidoneus and Pierre walk through the portal while holding onto their hostages, leaving behind the damage they have caused.

...

Inside Aidoneus' castle, Peonis and Upendeonis continue doing whatever tasks they were assigned as if nothing huge is going to take place. Some workers walk around with stacks of paper in their hands while a few others lounge around and gossip. "Hey, I heard that Boss Man is gonna be puttin' his son through the ringer," one of the Upendeonis says, drinking coffee mixed with alcohol from a styrofoam cup.

"Shiiiiit, he already does by havin' him in that one room all century long in that funky ass straitjacket," the coworker chuckles out while inhaling toxic fumes from her cigarette.

“Yeah, but it’s supposed to be somethin’ *big*,” the Upendeoni replies.

“Well I don’t see how it could get any worse. The dude is forced into a straitjacket in an empty room with nowhere to shit, piss, or bathe,” another Peoni joins the conversation, “Hell, I get happy whenever Anti escapes. That means I don’t have to keep cleaning up that shithole. Do you know how hard it is to get them stains out?”

“Ew, you mean he goes to the bathroom on himself,” another joins, and more workers just add themselves to the conversation.

“Uh, yeah!! Aidoneus doesn’t even give us a raise, what made you think he is nice to his own seed?”

“So every time Anti is brought back here, he’s forced to be in the same isolation room... wearing the same straitjacket...”

“Having nowhere to do his business and having to sleep in it.”

“That’s fucked up...”

“That’s Aidoneus for ya. He loves to make it seem like he’s for everyone, but we all know he only thinks about himself.”

“But I mean he helped us, though... Umu wouldn’t be what it is now if it weren’t for him.”

“Oh please, so what if he shared some ideas to the Quphantos, he’s only getting this much hype because he’s a Mazan gone bad.”

The group of sinister beings continue to maliciously talk about their leader when a beautiful, chubby Peoni wearing a purple pantsuit and knee-length skirt walks into the break room, her piercing green eyes with slit pupils scanning the room full of news mongers. She adjusts her red cat-eye glasses, the gold accents glisten against the light, and she says in a monotone voice, “Lord Aidoneus will be here at any moment. I advise you all to get back to work.”

“Oooh nooooo, it’s Aidoneus’ favorite *pet*,” one of the Peonis snarls.

“I thought that was Cerberus,” another one adds.

“I can care less about what you imbeciles think of me. Lord Aidoneus will be holding a meeting with the Quphantos and Cerberus. Please keep your useless chatter at a low volume,” the immovable Peoni declares, keeping her composure and keeping her back erect, distracting some of the Peonis with her ample bosom. She clears her throat, startling some of the oglers, and she says, “Also... Anti will be coming back.”

The Peonis groan out of disappointment and frustration, not wanting to monitor Aidoneus’ son once again. Before the green-horned Peoni can continue explaining, Aidoneus walks up behind her, making the entire crooked staff freeze in fear. He rests his hands on his assistant and says calmly, “Aah, Morgana~! There you are, my dear~! I need your help with something. The rest of you...go home.”

“HUH?” Everyone exclaims simultaneously.

“Yeess, go back home~! You’re free to go~” Aidoneus giggles out, “Take a break~! Go have some fun~! You all deserve it~ You have all helped me for so long, and I appreciate your work~”

“What about our paychecks?” one of the Peonis asks.

“Aaah yes... I’ll be sure to have them sent to you all shortly. And get ready... because it’s gonna be a huge one~” Aidoneus sings out.

After saying that, Aidoneus, while clinging onto Morgana, steps to the side so that all of the workers go rushing out of the break room, running and flying back to town and into their homes, enjoying their freedom. Morgana looks at her boss and says, “But sir, what of the other-”

“I’ve already told everyone else to go home,” Aidoneus interrupts, “It’s just you... me... the Quphantos... and two other guests~”

“Two?” Morgana questions, and her heart starts skipping multiple beats. Her cheeks start to warm up as she thinks about her lover, painting a picture of him in her mind. She softly smiles as she envisions his messy, black waves of hair that perfectly frame his caramel face. His medium-big nose, luscious lips, and jasper gems for eyes makes her want to shower his face with kisses. *Oh Kenny~*, she thinks to herself, *Finally, I’ll have you in my arms~ We can finally be together forever~*

However, as Aidoneus and Morgana walk down the hallway and to the throne room where the two mystery guests wait, Morgana senses something odd. *Wait*, she thinks, *This isn’t Kendo’s aura I’m feeling. I expect the cat’s... but...* They get closer to the throne room, and she sees Amethyst still in her cat form, purring while just laying down, her eyes having no shine to them, and she is locked in a cage with a purple bow on top that rests on Aidoneus’ throne chair. Then, Morgana looks to see a Samaka-human hybrid girl laying in a hospital bed, drenching the sheets with her body wet from the Gaia rain. “...Who... is *this*... Lord Aidoneus,” Morgana bluntly asks, all excitement in her soul replaced with despondency.

“Our guest,” Aidoneus answers, still smiling despite sensing the tension from his assistant. “Now, I know, you were hoping to see ‘Kendo’, and you will~! Just help me with this one thing, and I can guarantee he will be here~”

“...” Morgana chooses to not say anything.

“I need you to cut off those shorts of hers, my dear,” he requests.

“Huh?”

“*Cut them*, Morgana. That clothing that she’s wearing on her lower half body? They’re in the way. Go grab some scissors and cut them off of her.”

“But... sir, what are you going to do with her?”

“I just want to make her feel more at home, that’s all.”

“Oh...O-Okay? What about the cat??”

“I gave her some catnip to soothe her~! She was a little frightened, which is understandable, so I was just being a good host~.”

“Oh, so you offered her some and she accepted it, correct?”

“...Hmhmhmhmhm~ The scissors, my dear. Please~ How can our *Samaka friend* be comfortable in her temporary home?”

“Oh.... right... Yes, sir, right away.”

Morgana doesn’t question her master anymore as she goes to another room to find some scissors. Meanwhile, multiple footsteps echo throughout the throne room, and Aidoneus looks to see his seven companions walk in from the other hallway, most likely coming from their guest rooms. He stands near the entrance, wanting to greet his friends as they make their way to the throne room. He plasters on a serene smile, nodding his head to greet them all, but the Wrath Quphanto(Abigor), as his tiger ears flinch out of curiosity, walks past Aidoneus without saying anything, too busy analyzing the cat and the girl. The Gluttony Quphanto(Alphonse) stops in front of Aidoneus and giggles out, “Oohohohoho~! It is so nice to see you again, Aidoneus! Ooooh, I can’t wait to share what my challenge is!”

“It is a pleasure to see you too, Alphonse,” Aidoneus greets back, ignoring the abhorrent scent coming from his mouth and the sight of yellow staining his bottom fangs, and Alphonse stampedes to the two guests, and his happiness is instantly replaced with bewilderment.

The Greed Quphanto(Demona) crawls past Aidoneus with her golden spider legs along with the Envy Quphanto(Nasir) who adjusts his pants to make sure his diamond studded boots were showing as he fans himself with a handheld feathered fan with emeralds and sapphires

decorating it. They see the cat and a girl, and their eyes widen. “Wait, you brought back *two* *Gaians!*?” Demona exclaims.

“Ugh, disgusting,” Nasir says with his lips curled up and his peacock feathers shimmying in disgust, “Aidoneus, you said you’d bring Anti and Carnation here, not some Gaia riff raff.”

The Sloth Quphanto(Ophelia) walks to where she stands next to Demona as her long sloth arms drag across the floor and she lets out a yawn, exposing her fangs. She looks at the two guests and says, “Ooooh yaaaaaaaay. Neeeeeww friiiiiieeends!”

“Ophelia, sweetie, no,” Demona gently holds onto Ophelia, “We are *not* befriending these *things!*”

“Aaaaaaaaawwwww,” Ophelia groans out sadly.

The Lust Quphanto(Kal) slithers into the throne room as he comforts the Pride Quphanto(Vanity) by rubbing her back, his heart aching to see his friend’s panther tail not high in the air swaying with high self-esteem. They look to see what their associates are looking at, and immediately Vanity’s slit pupils dilate, and she boosts past everyone straight to the caged cat.

“CARNATION,” she cries out, “OOH, MY BEAUTIFUL CARNATION!!”

As Vanity examines the cat, the Quphantos take a step back, giving her room, shocked at the revelation. Kal turns up his nose and says, “Hold on... *that’s* Carnation? She looks... no offense, Vanity, darling... but she looks underwhelming. She looks nothing like her.”

“That’s because my poor baby had to go through that *wretched* reincarnation process, and now she looks like that,” Vanity growls out, “She probably doesn’t even remember me... or our home. But it’s okay... we’ll fix that.”

Before saying anything else, Morgana walks back into the throne room with a pair of red scissors. She walks towards the hospital bed where the Samaka-human hybrid still lays

unconscious. The Quphantos notice this and watch her observantly. Aidoneus gathers with his friends, unlocking the cage and holding the stunned black cat. As Morgana cuts away the hybrid's shorts, *snip snip snip snip*, Aidoneus hands Vanity the cat, and she begins nuzzling her, purring loudly. Abigor looks at her and mumbles, "How can you be so sure that it's her?"

"A mother can always sense her child's presence, no matter what form they take," Vanity explains as she rubs her cat's head. Abigor asks no further questions and goes back to watching Morgana strip the hybrid of her pants.

Not wasting time, Aidoneus picks up the hybrid bridal style and motions everyone to take several steps back and Morgana to get rid of the hospital bed, and he creates a ginormous fish bowl in the middle of the room. He then politely says, "Kal, fill it up with water, please, kind sir." Even though the lustful Quphanto wants to question the Upendeoni, knowing how punctual he is, Kal goes on ahead and wriggles to the rim of the bowl to fill it with fresh water he summons, making sure to only fill $\frac{2}{3}$ of the bowl. Aidoneus spreads his pitch-black, leathery wings and flies upward. He hovers over the fish bowl, and suddenly, the hybrid girl's eyes struggle to open. She lets out a soft groan, trying to regain consciousness, and before she can completely open her eyes, Aidoneus drops her into the bowl. *Splash!!*

The girl's light yellow eyes shoot wide open, and her limbs begin flailing as if she is a cat trying her best to get out of the water. She tries to swim to the top, but she sees that the exit is too high for her. Her heart races, looking for a solution, but nothing comes to light. Aidoneus, the Quphantos, and Morgana watch the girl as her exposed lower body glows and transforms into an orange-yellow ombre fishtail with fish fins on her hips. The girl notices this and she dives into the water to see where she is as her ears disappear and are replaced with orange-yellow fish fins that take over the sides of her face; her round pupils become slits; her teeth become multiple

sharp teeth; her fingers become webbed; and gills form on her waist and inside her nostrils. Glitter dances around her fishtail, fins, and webbed fingers as she swims around, panicking while her gills work and bring air into her body. All she sees is a room with a black-and-white checkered floor with a red carpet leading to a black and gold throne, and she looks up to see multiple crystal chandeliers. She begins whimpering, now knowing that she's not home, and she sees strangers in front of her and cries out, "W-Where am I!? Who are you people!?"

Aidoneus walks up the fish bowl with a smirk, and he looks at the hybrid and says, "Welcome, Nermal Calista~! You are in Umu, and I am Aidoneus~" Nermal swims closer to the glass to get a better look at Aidoneus. Aidoneus continues, "Oh wait. You probably know me as 'the devil'. Well, now you know my real name, hmhmhm~! And these are my friends, the Umu Quphantos, and my best assistant, Morgana~!" Even though he gives the Umuites their introductions, they say nothing to her, still stunned by the decisions Aidoneus is making.

Nermal doesn't even acknowledge the eight other spirits, only examines Aidoneus. She looks into his eyes, and as the words 'the devil' echoes in her mind, she lets out a gasp and says softly, "You're Kendo's dad..."

Aidoneus raises his eyebrows, intrigued by Nermal's familiarity with his son. He lets out a snicker and says, "Yes~... I am."

Nermal doesn't say anything else, knowing that there's nothing she can do right now. She looks at the Quphantos, their faces scrunched up except for Ophelia's whose eyes are bright from curiosity, her head tilted. Nermal sees Vanity and the black cat in her arms and she yells, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH AMETHYST!?" Vanity notices that the hybrid is talking to her, but she instantly turns away, continuing to cuddle the unconscious cat. Nermal starts banging at the glass screaming, "HEY!! ANSWER ME!! WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER!? WHY IS SHE

KNOCKED OUT! AMETHYST!! AMY, WAKE UP!! WAKE UP!!” She fills the throne room with her cries and pleas, completely ignoring the mastermind that’s in front of her, wanting her friend to wake up and do something about this, but it’s to no avail. Aidoneus continues looking at her, seeing her blue and green hair fight against the water as its remaining straight strands slowly transition to waves and curls.

Aidoneus clears his throat and says calmly, “If you would just take a deep breath, I can explain to you what’s going on.”

“I DON’T WANT TO HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY,” Nermal roars out, “I KNOW WHO YOU ARE, AND YOU’RE NOT UP TO ANY GOOD!! LET ME AND AMETHYST GO!!”

“But don’t you want to know *why* you’re here, my dear,” Aidoneus asks, tilting his head, maintaining his smile.

“IF I COULD SPIT SOME WATER AT YOU, I WOULD!! NOW LET!! ME!! OUT!!” Nermal continues ranting and raving like a shark struggling in a fishing net, banging against the glass, screaming and hollering to the point she begins wailing. *Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!* She knows her Samaka abilities won’t work against these spiritual beings, and she doesn’t believe she has the strength and agility to hop out of the fish bowl. *Thud! Thud! Thud...thud...* She slowly stops trying to break the glass and begging for her escape, and she curls up at the bottom of the bowl and continues her crying, her tears mixing into the water.

Ophelia walks up to the fish bowl, Demona and Kal not wanting her to get close. The lethargic yet energized Quphanto lifts her sloth arm and rests it against the bowl, watching the hybrid wallow in her sorrow. “Pleeeeeeeaaaaaaase doooooooooon’t cryyyyyyy, liiiiittle oooooone,”

Ophelia says gently, then she looks at Aidoneus and whimpers out, “Yooooouuuuuu maaaaade heeeeer cryyyyyy, Aaiidooneeeuuus. Whyyyyyy?”

“Because it’s Aidoneus.” A familiar voice rings out across the throne, and everyone except Nermal turns to see the Cerberus Bros. standing at the entrance. Alpha, with his eyebrows furrowed and fangs showing, marches towards Aidoneus, his younger brothers, Beta and Gamma, following behind him, nervous and frightened from their brother’s attitude. Alpha continues, “Aidoneus, this has gone on long enough. Why are you going to such lengths for *one* person?” Aidoneus looks at Alpha, keeping his smile, but not answering. Alpha barks out, “We have allowed you to keep Anti here, kept him a secret from the rest of Spirit Realm, as well as forcing Ubokufa to not have you reincarnate for so many eons. We even allowed you to bring back the Gaian who possesses Carnation’s soul, but *THIS?* Dragging an innocent *Gaian* here!?”

“Did you really think that I’d back down from what I was planning,” Aidoneus says, “I already told you before that I can afford breaking the rules.”

“How are you even having these two here!?” Alpha barks once again, demanding for Aidoneus to explain himself.

“Yeah,” Beta jumps in, “They’re Gaians who clearly haven’t seen death, yet.”

“We could say the same about Anti, as well,” Gamma joins, “And yet, their fleshy vessels are still intact.”

“Aaaah, yes,” Aidoneus coos out, “Their vessels, hmhmhm~ The one thing keeping them from ever staying in the spiritual plane for long periods of time. With Nermal and Carnation, I was able to conjure up some potions in my lab that protects their bodies~! I made the conditions to where as long as they’re here in Umu, they will never have to worry about anything bad happening to them. Once they step out of this domain, the potion will stop working. Oh...

right...” Aidoneus stops speaking and looks at the defeated Nermal and says, “Forgive me, dear. I had to give you and your friend the potions while you were knocked out. I hope you understand~ Oh, and I apologize for knocking you out with a cloth soaked in some solution I made to put you to sleep. It was the only *ethical* way of transporting you without creating any more issues.”

“Tsk, ethical,” Alphonse scoffs out and sarcastically says, “And my food is good for everyone’s health, ohohohohoho~!”

Alpha stands next to Ophelia, both looking at Nermal transitioning her cries to sniffles. Ophelia looks at Alpha, silently pleading him to do something about all of this. Alpha’s face scrunches up in frustration as his mind runs around in circles, digging for the best solution. Nasir rolls his eyes as he closes his fan and says, “So what now? You’ve brought Carnation’s reincarnation and a salty pest back home. Is this supposed to bring Anti back?”

“That’s exactly what’s going to happen,” Aidoneus confirms, “Morgana will be sent to Gaia to announce to Anti and his little earthly friends that their two buddies are here trapped and alone. They will come here, we’ll have our entertainment, and hopefully, Anti will realize that he has no choice but to come back home.”

“And if he doesn’t,” Abigor asks.

“He *will*,” Aidoneus snaps as he begins pacing around his throne room unveiling his plan, “He’s going to see that his friends are being put through multiple challenges, *your* challenges, that could possibly kill them *on top* of the fact his dearest friend, Nermal, is in my possession and their cat friend is no longer who she is, and *it’s all his fault*. The guilt will be unbearable~ He will break into multiple pieces, and Morgana and I will be the ones to fix him, isn’t that right, sweet pea~?” Morgana chooses not to say anything, focusing on the fish bowl, unpleasant

thoughts standing around in her head as she stares at Nermal. Aidoneus continues, “And if he still chooses to refuse and try to have things go his way... well then he’s just like me at that point, isn’t he? Hahahahahahaha~ HAHAHAHAHAHAHHA~!!” Aidoneus’ laughs fill the entire castle, making Nermal tremble and Ophelia’s heart ache. “Now,” Aidoneus calms down, “My dear friends, go and prepare for the big event! Get pretty! Get handsome! Do whatever you have to do! We got a show to broadcast!!”

Not saying anything else, six of the seven Quphantos walk and crawl out of the castle, heading back to their home districts. Vanity, however, stays behind, caressing the black cat that still shows no sign of bouncing back. She walks towards Aidoneus, and Aidoneus looks at her with seductive smugness. Her black panther tail sways to and fro as she swishes her hips, and she stands in front of the Upendeoni as she nuzzles deeply into his neck, purring loudly. Aidoneus returns the affection by nuzzling her back. He whispers to her, “*I told you I’d get her back.*”

“Took you long enough,” Vanity whines while walking away, “I was just reconsidering everything.”

“My Quphanto, I always keep my word,” Aidoneus says as he gets close to her again and tilts her head gently with his finger, “And you know that out of all the Quphantos, *you* are the one I always aim to please~”

Vanity softly smiles as Aidoneus gasses her up with compliments and praises, and she says, “Well... Now that Carnation’s vessel is in my arms, I can go ahead and try to bring her back.”

“Will you need any help, my Quphanto? Carnation is still ‘Amethyst’ after all, and she will continue being ‘Amethyst’ for as long as she’s like that. Change her appearance all you want, but her memories will most definitely remain the same.”

“You *dare* question my abilities, Aidoneus?”

“No, hehe... Of course not, Vanity~”

“Hm... I had Ubokufa give me something that should help with the process. He felt some guilt for taking my baby away. If everything goes right, this will all be smooth sailing...” Not saying anything else, Vanity struts to the exit holding the black cat, and she coos out, “Come on, Carnation. Nothing like a makeover and electroshock therapy to bring you back to your best self~” She continues looking at her daughter, but before she leaves the building, she looks back at Aidoneus, seeing that he’s watching her make her exit. She then asks, “Are you sure you want to continue doing this... Aidoneus?”

“Doing what,” Aidoneus questions her.

“*This*...the event for your son. Surely, there must be another way... I would hate to see you get into trouble with... *her*...”

“Yes, I’m positive that I want to continue commencing this. Sure, the Mazans are probably getting the word about my son now since some Upendelaikis ran into Cerberus, but it’s too late. By the time they do anything about it and try to get *her* involved, I would have already won~ You’ll see~”

“...Very well, then...”

Not sharing anymore words, Vanity finally leaves, leaving only Cerberus, Morgana, Aidoneus, and Nermal. Aidoneus looks at Alpha and cheers, “Hey, shouldn’t you be following Vanity~? She’s about to bring back your lover, you know~!”

However, the enraged Alpha storms out of the building, not saying anything to his leader. Beta and Gamma notice this and they follow him, now trying to figure out how to calm him down. Aidoneus scoffs at the Cerberus Bros.’ rude exit and says, “Well, anyway, Morgana, my dear, call up a camera crew~ I need to let the entirety of Umu know that they’re in for a treat~”

And while I'm doing that, head for my lab and grab a bag of those potions I mentioned earlier. They should be laying on my desk already sacked and ready to go. I'll have a portal ready for you and it should take you straight to Anti. Can I count on you~?"

Morgana continues looking at Nermal, and Nermal finally looks up to see the Peoni staring at her. Aidoneus snaps his fingers, *snap snap snap*, and Morgana flinches and looks at her boss.

"Can I count on you, Morgana?" Aidoneus says again, but with less kindness.

"Yes sir," Morgana says with a monotone voice, "I'll get to it."

"Good~!" Aidoneus snaps back to his kind persona, "And *you*, sweetie," he says as he points at Nermal, "Swim around and look pretty~ I'll have some food ready for you in a bit~ Get comfy~!" Nermal doesn't say anything to her captor, but the Upendeoni shrugs and walks back to his bedroom, humming a light tune and pondering what jewelry and clothes he should wear for the occasion.

Chapter 1

July 2017

Night

BOOM!!! “SHE’S GONE!!!! MY PRECIOUS AMY IS GONE!!!!” The heartbroken Upendelaiki with ocean blue eyes filled with salty tears screams at the top of his lungs, wailing out his sorrows to his social circle that are frozen in shock in the mansion and the universe. His heart attempts to break out of his body to run back into the harsh thunderstorm and find his love, but he stands there still waiting for a response.

Three girls look at the broken Upendelaiki, and one of them, the light-skinned woman with milk chocolate brown eyes and her poofy, brown hair going down her back, speaks up and says, “Bruh, what do you mean she’s gone!? She was *just* right here with us! Her *and* Nermal were here!”

The pale woman with long, straight, white hair and peridot-green eyes squeals out, “Okay, so like, what the fuck is goin’ on here!?! Two people are gone and our powers are acting up!!”

The beige-skinned woman with light brown hair and emerald-green eyes joins her friends in the panic and says, “It’s like someone just snuffed everything out!!”

A brown skinned man with a brown, curly ponytail then says, “A powerful spirit had come through here, that’s for sure... I thought it would be the work of a Quphanto, but Kendo sounds like he was about to suggest something else... Speaking of which...” He looks at Kendo, the Upendeoni-human hybrid that rests on a caramel skinned woman’s lap, and he notices Kendo’s eyes rolled back and extremely dark circles taking over his eyes, low chuckles escaping from his drooly mouth. The man kneels down and asks the woman, “How in the hell did he get like that? Do you know, Rose?”

“Issei, I’m just as confused as you are,” Rose answers, worried about Kendo’s condition. Then, she sees on Kendo’s neck a red dot, and she says softly, “*Is that blood...?*” Issei notices

what Rose is looking at, and he starts sniffing, *sniff sniff sniff*, the faint smell of blood tickles his nose.

“Oh yeah, *definitely* blood,” Issei confirms, “He must’ve been pricked then...”

“Oh my goodness,” Rose says, her heart hurting from seeing Kendo’s current state. She begins clasping her hands, whispering something to herself, and a lime green leech appears, lowering itself onto Kendo’s neck and sinking its teeth into his flesh where the spot is. Rose’s heart flutters in temporary happiness as she realizes that her powers are back.

“*I have to go find her... AMYYYY!!!*” the Upendelaiki cries out, not wasting any more time as he booms out of the mansion and dashes through the heavy rain, trying to find his lover. The three girls and Issei see this, and the Malaiki-Ludamu hybrid lets Rose nurse Kendo back to health so that he can go find the distressed Mazan outside in the pouring rain. Rose continues to watch the leech suck away whatever substance is causing the chaotic jokester to be out of it. Her three friends sit down with her, Kendo’s chuckles sending chills up and down their spines.

“Is he gonna be okay?” the light-skinned goth asks Rose, her face scrunching up from concern.

“I’m hoping so,” Rose answers, then she looks at her friends, “But while we wait on Kendo, let’s see if your powers ever came back. Tenacity, you go first.”

“I’m seeing that you’re using your powers, so mine *better* be back,” Tenacity says as she holds out her hand and closes her eyes, trying to paint an image of fire in her mind. Within a few seconds, *fwoosh!!* Orange-yellow flames appear in the palm of her hand, making her friends gasp softly.

“O-Okay, progress,” Rose exclaims, “Jacqueline, you next!”

Jacqueline holds her pale hand up next, closing her eyes to visualize snow and icicles. Suddenly, her hand is surrounded with a light blue and white aura, sounds of snowflakes twinkling within the icy energy. “Awesome,” Rose cheers, “And finally, Melissa?”

Melissa does the same thing Tenacity and Jacqueline does and holds her hand out, trying to see air swirling around her hand in her mind, and in a few seconds, a white aura surrounds her hand, apparent winds dancing around, making Rose’s soul grab some sort of positivity from the grave situation.

Tenacity lets out a sigh of relief and says, “Okay, so we got our shit back... but why weren’t they working during the black out?”

“Better question is where did Nermal and Amy go!?” Melissa asks frantically.

“That’s what I’m saying!” Jacqueline whines, “They were *just* next to us!!”

Poor Alex, Rose thinks to herself as she watches her creation continue to help Kendo, I wish I could go out there and help him find Amethyst...

Meanwhile, a tall, brooding, very dark-brown man wearing a cloak along with a light-skinned woman with curly, brown hair and fuschia-purple eyes hold seven unconscious bats, their hearts shattering from the sight. Rose looks up to see the two adults, and she says, “Momma? Daddy? Are the aunties okay?”

Usiku looks at his daughter, trying to have a stoic face but his soul crying out of anxiety shows through, and he mutters, “*I don’t know... I... I don’t know...*”

Delilah tries to console her soulmate, though even she feels her own self wanting to break down, and says, “Honey, *surely* you can sense that they’re alive, right!? I mean they’re just as powerful, if not more powerful, than you!”

Suddenly, one of the bats start twitching, and the other bats twitch along with her, and then *fwosh!* All of their eyes pop open, showing their glowing rubies for eyes and slit pupils, and they all fly out of Usiku and Delilah's arms, making the soulmates' hearts fly with them in momentary joy. "Oh thank goodness," Delilah exclaims, "I'm not ready to see you guys go...!"

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!!

Usiku softly smiles watching his sisters fly energetically. The bats continue squeaking at their youngest brother, and Usiku's face expression switches to serious mode. Delilah looks up to him and says, "What are they saying, Usi?"

"They couldn't tell who it was that came around here," Usiku translates, "They never witnessed such power from a soul that wasn't a Quphanto..." After taking the time to connect the dots, Usiku asks his sisters, "*Are you implying that the devil came here?*"

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

"..." Usiku is silent from the bats' confirmation.

"Usi?" Delilah asks, resting her hand on his back.

Before Usiku can say anything, the lime green leech on Kendo's neck disappears. Kendo stops chuckling and his eyes begin fluttering, his jasper gems for irises come back, making the girls gasp in unison.

"Ken!" Rose exclaims, "Oh thank goodness!"

Kendo looks around to see he's surrounded by the girls who fought the Cerberus Bros. and Pierre for his freedom. He feels his drool invading his chin, and he lethargically wipes it off with his sleeve while he tries to remember what happened before he was pricked. "And good morning to you, cherry lips," Kendo groans out to Rose, making her slightly blush from the nickname. He

sits up, but his head starts feeling like it's filled with water sloshing around, making him hold his head from the discomfort.

"How are you feeling?" Melissa asks Kendo.

"I just need a minute," Kendo mumbles out, his head and heart pounding at different beats.

"Well, don't take your precious time," Jacqueline whines, "We're in some *serious shit* right now!!"

"Tell me something I don't know, snowcone," Kendo groans, a little annoyed as he slowly regains control.

"Kendo." The four girls and Kendo look up to Usiku approaching them, and Usiku looks at the Upendeoni-human hybrid with his eyebrows furrowed and a frown. "Get to explaining. Why would your father take Amethyst and Nermal?"

"What...?" Kendo asks, his face scrunches up, and his head starts jerking in different directions trying to find Amethyst and his new friend, Nermal.

"Yeah," Tenacity confirms, "While you were knocked out, someone came through and snatched up Amy and NeeNee..."

Kendo's heart freaks out from the news, running around and panicking, but his brain stays calm, trying to organize his thoughts. *Then it's true*, Kendo thinks to himself, *He really did drag his ass out of his castle and came all the way here... just to continue torturing me. And now he's getting other people involved? He's getting desperate...*

Meanwhile, Issei tries to look for Alexander, but everything is cloaked in darkness thanks to the thunderstorm clouds, the only source of light he has is the mansion's porch lights. "Alex!!" Issei calls out, trying to figure out where the Upendelaiki could be. He closes his eyes, trying to

sense Alexander's spiritual aura, but struggles as the rain and his thoughts running at high speed trying to get this issue resolved distract him.

Alexander frantically runs around, calling and searching for Amethyst; however, the storm drowns out his voice. He continues to run through the ocean of heavy raindrops, not caring how far away from the mansion he is. Before he could go any deeper into the forest area, a hand grabs his shoulder, and Alexander turns around to see Issei. "Alex, come on, man," Issei yells out through the booming storm, "There's no way we're going to find Amethyst out here like this!"

"But she has to be here, somewhere!!" Alexander cries out, "I can't stop looking for her!!"

"Look, I understand the urgency," Issei says, "But are you really sure you're about to try and find her with the storm this heavy!?"

"She couldn't have gone far!!"

"I'm starting to think she *did*, Alex!!"

Before Alexander can try to convince Issei on why he should continue his endless search for Amethyst in an extremely dangerous setting, a portal in Spirit Realm opens, its bright, rainbow colors dancing together and blending into each other as sparkles twinkle all over it. Alexander and Issei senses the portal's heavenly presence and turn their heads to see that an Upendelaiki that looks just like Alexander except with much longer hair walks through the portal. The Upendelaiki looks around, examining the area, and he sees Alexander and Issei standing away from the mansion. *Huh*, he thinks to himself, *What are they doing out here?*

"Thomas?" Issei asks with his face scrunched, "Where have *you* been?!"

"That's none of your concern, *Peoni hunter*," Thomas answers bluntly.

Alexander gets in between them and says, "Thomas, you *have* to help me!"

“What’s going on!?” Thomas asks, trying to stay calm. He realizes he’s still in Spirit Realm, and closes his eyes as he speaks a chant in his mind and exits the realm so that he can be physically present. Then he realizes... *Wait, Alex could see me in Spirit Realm*, he asks himself, *Was he able to do that before??*

Alexander grips onto his younger twin brother’s shoulders, distracting him from his curiosity, and he says, “Amethyst is gone!!”

“What!?” Thomas yells, his heart skips a beat and his brain tries to rewind to hear what his brother said.

“AMETHYST WAS TAKEN AWAY, THOMAS,” Alexander whales out, *“AMETHYST AND THE GIRLS’ FRIEND, NERMAL, ARE MISSING!”*

Thomas takes in the information that has been relayed to him, and the calm that he was feeling before getting back to Gaia quickly washes away with the rain and is replaced with unease. He tries to grab back his focus and says, “Let’s get out of the rain, first!! Come on!!” It takes for his brother to finally convince Alexander to stop the search for now and walk back to the entrance of the mansion along with Issei and Thomas. They stand at the porch, the yellow light from next to the door revealing how drenched the three people are, as if they just came out of a shower while clothed. Thomas takes a deep breath, and he starts talking calmly, “Okay... I was hoping that by the time I got back, everything would still be at peace for the most part... I see I was wrong...”

“Very wrong,” Issei says, *“While you were gone doing whatever, I was doing research on the situation. Turns out that the devil is most likely trying to bring the end of this world, and now there’s a chance that he took away Amethyst and Nermal... for whatever reason.”*

“Which doesn’t make sense,” Alexander joins in, his eyebrows furrowing, “He was wanting Kendo, right? It’s already confusing that he was wanting Amethyst, but why would he take *Nermal* of all people!?”

Thomas sighs out, “Well, I went to the High Court about this situation.”

“What exactly did you tell them?” Alexander asks.

“I told them what I knew,” Thomas answers, “I told them how Aidoneus has been having Kendo trapped in Umu when he’s half-human and needs to be in Gaia and that he’s trying to drag another Gaian into Umu. Because Aidoneus is breaking the Spiritual Laws, the High Court will try to get in touch with Karma and see if she can do something about this.”

“What a load of shit,” Alexander bluntly says.

“Alex!” Thomas exclaims, still being baffled by his brother’s somewhat vulgar language.

“What the hell is Karma going to do?” Alexander asks as frustration starts taking the place of his desperation, “She always does things on her *own* time, and I don’t know if you couldn’t tell, her clock isn’t aligned with ours. By the time she comes around and does something, Aidoneus would have already won.”

“You have to trust Karma, Alex. She may not do things the way that we expect her to, but when she does deliver, it’s worth the wait.”

“*No*. I’m not about to sit here and twiddle my thumbs while *my Amy* is out there and only Ideya knows what’s happening to her.”

“Are you implying that you’re going to the devil yourself,” Issei questions the Upendelaiki.

“That’s *exactly* what I’m saying,” Alexander answers the Malaiki-Ludamu hybrid, and before Thomas could try to convince his brother otherwise, Alexander barges back into the mansion, startling everyone.

“Oooh Alex,” Delilah whines out in worry, “Did you find Amy, yet?”

“No,” Alexander answers coldly, “But it’s becoming very clear that the devil came around and did this to us.” He then looks at the now standing Kendo with a sour look. *And it’s your fault*, Alexander thinks to himself, wanting to curse the chaotic jokester for bringing all of this drama to them, but he chooses to bite his tongue. Kendo stares back at him with his eyebrows close together and his nose almost wrinkling up as if he can smell the blame being placed on him, and even though he wants to argue why none of this is his doing, he chooses to look away from Alexander, looking at the floor instead.

Tenacity crosses her arms, tilts her head, and says, “So what now? I know we’re not ‘bout to just sit here and pray for a miracle.”

“Not at all,” Alexander confirms, “We’re going to him ourselves.”

Everyone’s eyes widen after the Upendelaiki proclaimed his plan. Thomas steps in, holding his hands out as if he’s trying to stop them from going anywhere. The concerned twin says, “No, we’re not!”

“And why not?” Tenacity asks, an eyebrow raised.

“Right, our friend just got kidnapped, the fuck?” Jacqueline jumps in.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, Thomas, but we can’t just sit here and do nothing if Amethyst and Nermal are really where he is,” Melissa adds, anxiety taking over her face.

“There has to be a way that we can go to *them*, right,” Rose asks, “I’m sure it’ll be difficult, but I know that there has to be a possibility of us succeeding.”

Usiku looks at his Rose, seeing how determined she is to help. Although his heart begs for him to try and convince her to not get involved, he finally realizes that it’s too late and that his daughter has already made her decision.

“Listen, I understand why you all are wanting to go to Umu,” Thomas says, “But this is something only us spiritual beings need to handle.”

Alexander marches to Kendo, getting close to him and says, “And because this is *your* father we’re talking about, you’re coming with us.”

Kendo rolls his eyes and mean-mugs Alexander, and he asks, “And who says I was going to leave you guys hanging, vanilla bean?”

“Tuh! From what I’ve seen from you so far, I wouldn’t be surprised if you *did* try to sneak yourself out of this situation,” Alexander says, squinting his eyes.

“Well, I’m not, so you can pull your panties out of your ass crack,” Kendo hisses back.

“Guys, can we focus,” Issei jumps in, trying to put a stop to the bickering.

“Get onto *him*, chocolate drop~” Kendo whines, “*He’s* the one that’s been antagonizing me~”

Before anyone else can express their train of thought, a portal opens near the staircase, its dark, murky rainbow colors swirling around in different directions, not mixing together. Alexander, Thomas, Kendo, Issei, and the seven bats notice the portal, directing their attention to it. Usiku, Delilah, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa try to see where they are looking, but while the ladies don’t see the phenomenon, and although Usiku can’t see the portal, the Quphanto/human hybrid can still sense the portal’s aura. As they look at the portal’s direction, after a few seconds, a chubby Peoni with long, maroon, and kinky hair exits the portal, and she adjusts her cat-eye glasses and flutters her leathery wings, the mansion’s lighting bouncing against her dark-green Peoni horns. As she walks closer to the group while holding a bag, she closes her eyes and leaves the Spirit Realm, now exposing herself to the people who couldn’t see her before. Everyone but Kendo gets in a defensive stance, ready to pull out whatever weapon they can think of, but the Peoni continues walking calmly.

Kendo takes a few steps forward, standing in front of everyone, and he looks at the Peoni with a distraught expression, his heart breaking from seeing the familiar soul. "...Morgana," Kendo croaks out, making Morgana's heart want to leap out of her chest.

She keeps her composure, maintaining her stoic expression, and she speaks in a monotone voice, "Hello, Kendo. You... along with everyone else here, are invited to Lord Aidoneus' event taking place in Umu."

Chapter 2

July 2017

Night

Morgana scans the room to see what she's dealing with: three humans(Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa), five hybrids(Kendo, Usiku, Delilah, Issei, and Rose), and two Upendelaikis(Alexander and Thomas). She stands in front of them still holding onto a bag filled with items that clink against each other. She keeps her gaze on the party, waiting for them to respond after telling them that they have been invited to Umu. Thomas is the first to speak, asking her, "What do you mean we've been invited to Umu? Are you including the *Gaians*?"

"Yes," Morgana answers, "You all are looking for a black cat and a Samaka-human hybrid, correct?" At that instant, everyone's hearts jump, their eyes slightly widening together. The Peoni continues, "Lord Aidoneus has taken them back to Umu for an event that he's holding there. If you wish to see them, you all have to accept the invitation and come with me."

Kendo feels his irritations towards his father boiling up, but before he can express it, Thomas says, "That's simply not possible. I don't even have to explain why, I know that you are sensing everyone's spiritual energy here. These three humans have *no* way of entering the spiritual domains. And even though we have hybrids that have spiritual beings in their family tree, only two of them can go in and out of Spirit Realm, but they're not allowed to go into Umu."

"Lord Aidoneus figured that you would point out those concerns," Morgana says, still keeping her stoic face and holding out the bag, "Which is why he wanted to give the humans and the hybrids that struggle entering Spirit Realm these potions." After saying that, she gently places the bag down onto the floor, and she grabs out a potion bottle that is filled with black liquid that fizzes, showing the Gaians what they are going to consume, making some of them cringe. She hands a potion bottle to Usiku, Delilah, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa. Before they indulge in the beverage, Aidoneus' straightforward assistant explains, "By drinking

the potion, you will be allowed to stay in Spirit Realm and in turn Umu for a year without having to worry about your vessels being in the way. However, you will need help *entering* the spiritual domains. I see that you have befriended spiritual beings who can help you with that so that's one less thing to worry about."

As Morgana explains the potions, Thomas' face only scrunches up more and he can't help but shake his head and hold his hand out as if he's signaling the Peoni to slow down and he says, "Wait a minute, I don't understand. I know that potions can do a number of things, but *giving Gaians access to Spirit Realm?* How is that possible?"

"Shoot, never mind that, why would we ingest some shit from *the devil*," Tenacity jumps in, sneering at Morgana.

"Yeah, are we gonna, like, *die*," Jacqueline asks, looking at the potion.

"How do we know if there's some secret information about these things that you're not telling us," Melissa questions, her eyes narrowing at the Peoni.

"And what will happen if we decide *not* to drink this," Rose asks.

Usiku and Delilah decide to say nothing to Morgana, waiting for her to explain the questionable substance she has offered to them. Alexander and Issei look at the potion in their allies' hands, a mixture of emotions swirling in their hearts. Kendo continues staring down at Morgana, imagining himself walking up to her and shaking her violently for wanting to continue working for his father despite all of the torture he's put him through.

Morgana lets out a sigh, her body tensing up from the number of questions being thrown at her at once from souls that are not from Umu. Nonetheless, she takes a breath, and she says, "Unfortunately, I cannot disclose how my boss created the potion. With that being said, I can understand why your skepticism will only increase. However, I can confirm that you will not die,

and your body will not suffer from any negative effects, although you may feel weird when entering the spiritual plane. It is 100% your choice on whether or not you drink the potion, but understand that by choosing not to drink the potion, you are not only declining the invitation, but you are also choosing not to go see the two souls that you all have a connection to.”

Issei tilts his head and asks, “So if they choose to not drink the potion, the two lackeys, Kendo, and I just can’t come to Umu in their place?”

Morgana shakes her head. “I’m afraid not,” she says, “You *all* have to come to Umu, or you will not see the cat or Samaka.”

“I... know that I offered that they could come to Umu with me because I really do need to get Amethyst back,” Alexander says, “But this right here isn’t even really an invitation. You’re kinda not giving them a choice.”

“***Why...?***” Kendo growls out towards Morgana, startling everyone, “***Why are you doing this, Morgana...?***”

Morgana looks at Kendo, his red-orange-yellow gems losing their shine, the dark circles that take over his eyes making her soul tremble from fear and guilt. “I’m only doing what I’m told, Kendo,” Morgana says, still keeping her monotone voice controlled.

“***But how does this benefit YOU!?***” Kendo yells out, “***What are YOU gaining from this!?***”

“...” Morgana chooses to not say any more to the enraged Upendeoni-human hybrid. Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa look at the potion in their hands, and they look at each other. Then, they think about their best friend, Nermal, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh and sing, and being in her cheerful presence. Their souls begin to cry together, and they come to a silent agreement that they need to do whatever it takes to get her back even if it means accepting something the devil himself concocted.

Tenacity is the first to remove the cork from the bottle, *pop! Fizz fizz fizz fizz!* The bubbles in the liquid pop more rapidly, and she lets out a long sigh. Not wanting to leave her behind, the three other ladies open their bottles. They take a deep breath, and Jacqueline whimpers out, “Bottoms up...” And in seconds, they hold their noses and drink the potion, the liquid feeling like static as it traveled down their esophaguses. The flavor is a mixture of metallic blood, salty tears, and bitter grapefruit, making the group cringe and whine out of misery. Usiku and Delilah notice their daughter and her friends accepting the invitation, and they follow suit, opening their potion bottles and drinking the otherworldly substance, Delilah trying to stop herself from puking it back up and Usiku comforting her.

Kendo, Alexander, Thomas, and Issei witness what’s happening, and unease settles in their hearts. Alexander asks them all, “Are you all okay?”

“Well... it doesn’t feel any different than the first time we took a potion,” Tenacity answers.

“I think this is, like, the nastiest one, so far,” Jacqueline whines.

“This better do what it’s supposed to,” Melissa says.

“Anything to get Nermal and Amethyst back,” Rose reassures her team.

Thomas huffs and puffs, not wanting to believe that what happened in front of him really transpired. *This is so wrong*, he thinks to himself, *I don’t know exactly what Aidoneus is trying to do, but this needs to be put to a stop **now**.*

“Is everyone ready,” Morgana asks the group, not wanting to waste any more time and keep her boss waiting, and everyone nods their heads, nonverbally letting the Peoni know that they are ready to go through the portal that will take them somewhere that they never imagined they would be going to, dead or alive. “Then follow me,” she says, and she turns herself around and goes back into the Spirit Realm in order to walk through the portal.

Kendo looks at the portal that Morgana walked through, his breathing becomes heavy and his fists clench so tightly that sweat was forming, as if fire was about to form at any minute from the wrath-filled heat. Everyone can hear the chaotic jokester's iration throughout the mansion's living room. Alexander wants to talk down to him, make the hybrid feel like this is all of his fault, but he decides to bite his tongue and let a host of Malaikis hold him back for he knows that there are bigger matters at hand. Rose is the one that approaches Kendo, gently resting her soft hand against his shoulder, and he looks down at her, seeing worry flourishing on her face. "Ken," she says gently, "It's going to be okay..."

"Is it?" Kendo curtly asks.

"Yes," Rose says as she stands in front of him, locking her ruby eyes onto his jasper ones, "As long as we stay focused, we're going to get Nermal and Amethyst back, and you're going to be free. But you *have* to stay focused, okay?"

"...Okay," Kendo dryly says.

"I don't know the full story of what's going on... but I'm going to help you," Rose reassures him, "*We're* going to help you... because you're our friend, now."

"*And* because we're the Special Six," Jacqueline jumps in, making Kendo turn around to look at her and everyone else.

"And we're gonna beat your dad's ass," Tenacity says, folding her arms.

"Well, let's not waste time," Melissa jumps in, "Who's gonna take us to Spirit Realm so that we can take care of this?"

"Issei, Kendo, and I will," Thomas answers, "Although I don't feel right doing so..."

"We don't have a choice anymore," Alexander steps in, "Come on, let's go."

Issei shakes his head and exhales, and he says, “This is about to be some bullshit...” as he adjusts his ponytail.

“Let’s get in a circle everyone,” Thomas instructs, and he holds his hands out, waiting for everyone to do as he says. They all get in a circle, holding each other’s hands tightly, their hearts becoming a band as they beat loudly to the point where it seems like the whole city could hear them. *BOOOOOM!! Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...* The thunder rolls around and the rain pitter patters against the mansion, filling in the intense silence. “Close your eyes tightly,” the calm Upendelaiki says, and everyone closes their eyes, now seeing darkness. Jacqueline tightens her grip on her friends’ hands, and Tenacity, Melissa, and Rose tighten theirs, letting her know that they’re just as terrified as she is.

After a few seconds, the girls and the soulmates start feeling like static was taking over their bodies while also being tightly wrapped in a warm, thick blanket. The excruciating yet plush feeling takes over them for a couple of seconds, and it abruptly dissipates, leaving the group feeling chilly all over. “You may open your eyes now,” Thomas says, and everyone opens their eyes, seeing that they’re still in the mansion, but they now can see the portal that Morgana walked through. The girls look at their arms and everyone else, seeing that besides the portal and the feeling of constant chilliness taking over their bodies, nothing else seems different. Thomas notices their curiosity and confusion and says, “Yes, you are now in Spirit Realm. Not much will look different, but trust me if someone were to walk in here, they would not be able to see us or hear us unless they were spiritually powerful.”

“Let’s go,” Kendo says, not letting anyone say anything else about being in Spirit Realm, and he storms off into the portal.

Before anyone follows him, Thomas looks at everyone and says, “Now when it comes to walking through portals, just keep walking straight to the light. Don’t stop. Keep moving.” Although they all scrunch up their noses and furrow their eyebrows, they all reluctantly walk through the portal, leaving behind the portal and Usiku’s bats, now seeing everything being engulfed in darkness, the colors of the rainbow still swirling around. They all continue walking straight down the mind-boggling road until they see a small beam of light waiting for them. They continue walking for what feels like hours.

“This is crazy,” Tenacity says softly.

“I know right,” Melissa asks, “I didn’t think that any of this would exist.”

“We are really being superheroes,” Jacqueline says, trying to lift her spirits.

“Try to take this a little seriously, Jackie,” Issei bluntly says, “This isn’t about to be what it was like back at the forest with Cerberus and Pierre.”

“Have you ever gone to Umu, Issei,” Rose asks.

“No, like the Arch said, I’m not allowed to,” Issei answers, “Quite frankly, I don’t think I’m supposed to be in Spirit Realm period. Then again, I never really caught wind of these Laws Thomas keeps mentioning.”

“How many are these Laws,” Delilah finally speaks as she links up with her soulmate. Usiku does not pay attention to the conversation being held at the moment. Instead, his eyes stay stuck on his daughter, Rose, and his mind keeps bringing back images of his dream, the vision potentially warning him of his daughter being harmed or worse. As much as he wants to tell Rose why she shouldn’t try to participate in whatever Aidoneus has planned, he knows that it’s too late, and his heart begins to cry, his brain begins to hyperventilate, and his soul begins to punch the air.

“There are 4 Spiritual Laws,” Thomas begins elucidating, “The First Law states that Spirit Realmers must not enter in other domains they don’t belong in unless it’s for business purposes.”

“...So basically, every spiritual being that decided to *stay* in Gaia broke that law,” Issei states.

“Pretty much, yes,” Thomas confirms, “And as punishment, they are to never be allowed back into their homes because of the possibility of Gaia influencing them to the point that their values don’t match up with their home’s.” He glances at his older twin for a second, sorrow and anger poking at him, but he continues. “Of course, you’ll have some of us finding some way to get back inside. That mostly happens in Umu. The second and third laws go hand-in-hand. Second Law, again, states that all Gaians are not supposed to roam around Spirit Realm, Maza, Umu, or pretty much any domain that is heavily spiritual because your vessels are made of flesh, and flesh is what separates you all from us.”

“And if we were to jump into these spiritual domains with no potion protectin’ us,” Tenacity asks.

“I... I honestly don’t know,” Thomas answers, befuddled, “I’ve never heard of a Gaian making such a risky decision. My best guess is that you’d become us... losing your flesh vessels and being left with your soul.” Shivers go up and down the girls’ spines, not wanting to know what losing their physical bodies feels like. The Upendelaiki continues, “The Third Law says that if a spiritual being decides to create children with a Gaian, then the children have to stay in Gaia. Even if they manage to learn how to go back and forth from Gaia and Spirit Realm, they’re not supposed to.”

“...Whoops,” Issei says while scratching the back of his head, “Sorry about that, but it’s the only way I can do my Peoni hunting job.”

“I think that as long as you stay away from Maza and Umu, Karma doesn’t cause too much of a ruckus,” Alexander jumps in, “I mean she can’t fault you too badly for knowing a skill your parent is a master of.”

Thomas continues, “And then the Fourth Law is that *no one* must travel through time or alternate universes. If anyone were to ever do that, then Karma will have no choice but to reset everything.” The people take in the new information that Thomas laid out to them, and like firecrackers, the girls start asking multiple questions.

“Who the fuck is Karma,” Tenacity asks.

“What made her want to make these laws,” Melissa joins.

“Did Devil Dude break *all* of those laws,” Jacqueline asks.

“What made her want to create the last one,” Rose asks.

Thomas takes in the questions, and he answers, “Karma is the Quphanto of Order and Judgement. She is tasked to watch over everything and deliver different sentences to every soul in this universe as she sees fit. She is basically the soul responsible for either rewarding or punishing souls, depending on their actions and intentions. She created these laws to make sure that this universe isn’t completely taken over by chaos. As of now, Aidoneus has broken *three* of her Laws, which makes him a huge threat to not just his domain or Spirit Realm, but to this *entire* universe. Even though I can think of a reason for her first three laws, no one knows why she created the last one. However, there are theories out there that believe that someone managed to do it before, and it did not end well.”

“You think Aidoneus might have done that,” Issei ponders.

“At this point, maybe,” Thomas answers, considering the possibility of the theories being true.

“We’re about to be in Umu,” Usiku finally says, seeing the beam of light become larger in size, indicating that they are getting closer to the exit.

“Okay, everyone be prepared,” Thomas commands, “I have never been to Umu before, but... just stay close to each other...”

Silently understanding, the team walks into the light, and after a few seconds they are taken to Umu and stand at the entrance of it, greeted by the intense heat and the seven moons that hang in the pitch black sky, giving light to the domain along with the lights that illuminate from the different buildings and houses that populate the area. They make their way to civilization and see a herd of horned, leathery-winged people make their way (either on foot or in a carriage) to a colossal Colosseum made of a mixture of rusty-red and tar-black stone and concrete that rests a few miles outside of town.

They abandon the portal and see Kendo marching to the Colosseum. The team proceeds to follow him, not sure if they want to talk to him since he’s exposing a side of himself they have not seen up until now. Rose walks up to him, making her friends and father ponder her actions. Rose does not know who Kendo is. All she knows is that he’s Aidoneus’ son who wants to be free to do whatever he pleases. Is it the fact that he has some history with Usiku that makes Rose feel like she can just easily approach him? Or perhaps she’s just being the kind soul that she naturally is and wants to give Kendo some sort of indication that she’s still on his side and give him a shoulder to lean on. Knowing their sweet friend, the girls assume that it’s because Rose just wants to be a good friend and give Kendo hope.

“...What’s up, cherry lips,” Kendo greets Rose in a blunt tone.

“Just wanting to check on you,” Rose answers.

“Well, I wanna strangle my father, so there’s that,” he says.

“Do you have any idea of what he’s doing right now,” she asks.

“He’s trying to punish me...”

“But why does he feel the need to drag us into it?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Hmmm... We’re going to figure this out together, Ken. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worrying about shit... I’m just pissed.”

Before Rose can say anything, Kendo eyes Morgana that waits for them at the side of the Colosseum, away from the crowd. Morgana stares at Rose walking next to Kendo, feeling her heart burn in rage, yet she maintains her stone cold expression. The team stands in front of Morgana, waiting for her to inform them what’s about to happen. The Peoni says, “Lord Aidoneus will explain to his people what is going to take place here. You will wait here at this side entrance, and when he makes your presence known, you will walk into the arena. You’ll get the rest of the information then. Enjoy your stay.” As soon as she gives the team instructions, a carriage arrives behind all of them, waiting for Morgana to hop in.

The Peoni walks past everyone, getting into the carriage and not saying anything else. The carriage trods away and heads for a huge castle that resides miles away from the Colosseum, leaving everyone in the dust. Before the team could share their opinions on Morgana, a loudspeaker wails throughout the domain, piercing everyone’s ears, only to calm down after a few seconds. A man clears his throat and says, “Hello hello hello hello~ Can everyone hear me~?” His sultry, tenor voice echoes throughout the Colosseum, and thousands of voices begin cheering. While everyone questions who the speaker is, Kendo’s face crumples up even more and his pupils contract, knowing exactly who the speaker is. The voice continues, “Good, glad that I have everyone’s attention~ I’m so happy that you all could come out to see this big event

unfold in front of your very eyes! And as your host, I, Lord Aidoneus, will make sure that you're all having a good time~! So now...fellow Peonis, Upendeonis, and Tansis, welcome to 'Deal or Torture'!!" The crowd screams like they are being chased, making sure that the entirety of Umu knows that they are there. "Now I'm sure most of you are asking 'Lord Aidoneus, what is Deal or Torture?' Well I'm glad you asked~ You see, for a while now, my son, Anti~"

BOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!! The wicked crowd shout out their dislike for the rebel and all the trouble he's caused.

Kendo rolls his eyes at the reaction and growls out, "***Yeah, fuck y'all, too. I didn't want to be here.***"

"Noow noow, settle down! Let me explain before you start throwing ruby tomatoes~! Now, as I was saying, my son, Anti, *loves* to play games. He *loves* being challenging and to be challenged~. We've been playing this game of chase for *decades*, and I think he's getting tired of that game. ***I know I am.*** Now, I'll be frank, I don't want this game to last too long. I'm actually very exhausted. But, being a good father, I want to give my son what he wants and give him a playtime he'll never forget~."

"I want my freedom, you jackass..." Kendo scowls out.

"Now because I never held this event before, I'll explain what's going to happen. Anti and his team will be going through various challenges. Now, he doesn't *have* to go through with them. All he has to do is accept a deal that I have for him, and when he does that, we can all go home and pretend that none of this ever happened. But of course, Anti wouldn't be my son without being a *little* stubborn, so there's a chance that he'll decline my offer, go through a challenge, and we'll have to keep repeating the cycle until we run out of challenges for him to get through, and then I'll have no choice but to let him go. So without further ado, let's introduce him *and* his

teammates~ Yess, he's not going to be alone this time~! Give it up for Anti, his Upendelaiki friends Alexander and Thomas, and his Gaia friends Usiku, Delilah, Issei, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa~!!”

After announcing the team, the Umuites scream, shout, whoop, and holler, wanting to see the people that will entertain them. The team walks into the Colosseum and straight to the arena, bombarded by the sight of the majority of Umu cheering for them and the endless amount of flying Peonis holding cameras and pointing them at the visitors and the stands. They look around, trying to calm their nerves, but Melissa yells, “Guys, look!!” as she points up, showing the team that at the first tier of the structure rests the huge emperor box where the seven Umu Quphantos sit in their thrones staring at them and Aidoneus stands from his, giving the visitors a smile, a golden head mic attached to him.

Alexander scans every soul in the box, and his eyes lock onto a black cat with glowing purple irises with a light purple color taking over the rest of her eye and white slit pupils along with galactic patterns taking over the tips of her ears, tail, and paws. Drums begin to bang loudly in his ear as he recognizes that soul being Amethyst although her vessel has taken on a different look. “AMETHYST,” he cries out, and his eyes become light blue, and his large, feathery wings expose themselves. Immediately, he flies towards the emperor box, but then he makes contact with a purple force field electrocuting him. The team gasps at the sight, horrified at seeing Alexander get treated like a fly getting caught in a bug trap, and they run up to him.

After a couple of seconds, the electrocution stops, making Alexander drop to the ground, now his wings and hair are ruffled. Alexander struggles to get up so Thomas and Usiku help him.

“My my~” Aidoneus finally speaks, “I see that you all are *very* eager to start the show~”

Alexander recovers from the shock, making his wings disappear, and he looks up to the Aidoneus and yells, “GIVE ME BACK AMETHYST!!”

“Who??” Aidoneus asks, tilting his head.

“DON’T ACT STUPID! THAT CAT OVER THERE IS AMETHYST! GIVE HER BACK,” Alexander pleads.

“Hahahahaha~!! Silly Upendelaiki, I believe that you’re confused. That’s not Amethyst. That’s the Pride Quphanto’ companion, *Carnation*~”

“What?! No! You can change up her look, but that’s *still* Amethyst!!”

“Hmmmmmmm, Carnation? Do you know this Mazan?”

The Pride Quphanto, Vanity, places the cat down on the ground next to her throne chair, and a purple glow surrounds the cat’s body. The cat shape shifts into a human body, and the glow disappears, revealing the cat to be now a chocolate-brown skinned woman with extremely long, feathered, black hair, her eyes remain the same, her cat ears and tail are still apparent, and her face is now covered in sparkly purple markings, a few of the markings being reminiscent of whiskers. The woman leans on the railing to look at the Upendelaiki closely, the glitter on her knee length dress dances. Alexander feels butterflies along with the electricity he just encountered dance together within his stomach and diaphragm, and the electricity surges through his heart, causing it to beat rapidly. “Amethyst,” Alexander whimpers out, looking at her like an abandoned pup.

“Hmhmhm, I don’t know this *cloud hugger*,” Carnation snickers out, “I’ve *never* seen him a day in my nine lives~” The crowd laughs and cheers for Carnation’s response, but Alexander’s soul shatters like glass.

“Well, it’s nice to see that our beloved Carnation has a fan from Maza~” Aidoneus coos out.

“Amy...” Alexander croaks out, his eyes watering.

Thomas witnesses his brother trying to keep himself together, but he can already tell that he’s going to collapse like a house of cards. A worker-Peoni flies to the group and holds a microphone close to them so that everyone in the Colosseum can hear them. Thomas looks at Aidoneus with a serious face, gently grabs the microphone from the Peoni and he says, “Aidoneus, I have already informed the High Court about your crimes, and they’re going to get Karma to take care of this! I suggest you end this now!!”

“Hahaha!! Oh please,” Aidoneus laughs out, “What makes you think *she’s* going to help you~? She works on her own schedule.”

“You still need to let our friends go, jackass!!” Melissa yells out, grabbing onto the microphone, Jacqueline and Tenacity joining her.

“Yeah, where’s Nermal!?” Jacqueline screams.

“Yeah, you’re not supposed to be doin’ this,” Tenacity jumps in.

“Awwww, I wish I could just give you Nermal,” Aidoneus says calmly, “But unfortunately, that’s not how this event is going to go down. Like I said earlier, Anti has to accept my deal~ If he accepts my deal, you all can go home, *and* you can have Nermal back~ But if he declines it, then you all will have to go through a challenge and repeat the process until Anti considers my deal. So your fate depends on *him*.”

Alexander grabs the microphone. “But what about Amethyst!?” Alexander shouts out, veins popping out of his neck.

“*What about Amethyst?*” Aidoneus asks while tilting his head, “There’s only *Carnation*. This Amethyst you’re looking for is not here.”

“BULLSHIT,” Alexander growls out, making everyone in the stands gasp, shocked to see an Upendelaiki use such explicit language.

“Ooooooooooooooooooooo” the Peonis and Upendeonis say in unison, and they all start babbling different taunts at him, trying to get more of a rise out of him.

“*Sighs* There’s no point in talking to you anymore,” Aidoneus sneers as he rolls his eyes, feeling his patience wear thin, “I’m going to be speaking to Anti from this moment on.” Kendo looks at his father, feeling his wrath take his face and crumple it up some more to the point he can feel tension taking over his head, the ruckus being caused by the crowd taking the form of hammers banging close to his ear. Everyone looks at Kendo as they wait for him to say something to Aidoneus, and Kendo grabs the microphone from Alexander and waits for the mastermind to ask the question, ready to slap him with the same answer he’s been giving him for the past seven centuries. “So, *Anti*,” Aidoneus says through the commotion, “The deal is this...” The crowd gets quiet so that they can hear the offer, and one of the camera-Peonis do a close-up on Aidoneus while another camera-Peoni gets a close up of Kendo. Aidoneus then says, “You come back home, I’ll shut down this whole thing, and Nermal, along with her *earthly* friends, can go back to *their* home. Do we have a deal-”

“*No*,” Kendo cuts him off, “***Here’s a better deal. You let Nermal go, bring Amethyst back and let HER go, and let ALL of us go back to Gaia, and you can sit your haughty ass on a prickly porcupine, hopefully one of its spines gets stuck in your rectum.***” GASPS. Everyone but Aidoneus sucks in the hot air around them as they try to recover from Kendo’s blunt comeback. Aidoneus stares at his son for a few seconds, the corners of his mouth slightly twitch.

“...*Looks like Anti wants to play the game everyone~!!!*” Aidoneus announces happily, a smirk instantly replacing his frown, and the audience goes crazy. “Cerberus, could you please escort

Usiku and Delilah and have them sit at their VIP seats,” he requests, and he points at four seats with seat cards on them that rest on the first tier.

Suddenly, *ahem*. The team turns around to see three 7’3” men, and they realize that they’re Alpha, Beta, and Gamma.

Delilah takes in the appearance of the Cerberus Bros., seeing that they’re wearing tuxedos, Alpha in silver, Beta in white, and Gamma in black. Usiku looks at the brothers with a straight face, sending harsh chills up and down their spines as they remember the last time they encountered him. Alpha tilts his head back, signaling the soulmates to follow them, and they start walking towards one of the exits. Usiku and Delilah follow behind, and Usiku looks back at Rose, his heart tightening up. Rose gives Usiku a soft smile trying to comfort him, but it only makes Usiku more anxious. While Usiku and Delilah make their way to the stands, Issei looks at Aidoneus, Kendo noticing that he wants to say something so he gives him the mic, and the Peoni hunter shouts, “And why are *they* being excluded from this?!”

“Because it’s not fair,” Aidoneus answers, “Where’s the fun in having a half Quphanto help you~?”

“But we have his daughter, goofy,” Tenacity yells out.

“Hmhmhmhm~ Please, compared to her father, she’s nothing but a mydas fly~ She doesn’t seem much, but hey... go ahead and prove me wrong, Ms. Rose~”

“...” Rose decides to not say anything, not wanting to entertain the evil host, though her soul flares up as the determination to prove that she can be useful to her friends grows inside her.

“Well, let’s not waste any more time,” Aidoneus continues, “I’m going to take my seat now, and I’m going to let two *lovely* Tanasistake over and bless us with their commentary. Take it away, ladies~!”

As Aidoneus takes his seat, loud music starts playing, the worker-Peoni takes away the microphone and flies back to his crew, and two identical, dark-indigo tansi with glittery purple horns and wings fly into the Colosseum and stand on top of the emperor box. Although they look alike, one Tansi has cotton-candy-pink, curly hair and wears a short, gold, and sparkly dress with clear platform heels while the other Tansi has grape-purple, curly hair and wears a short, silver, and sparkly dress with black platform heels. They pose for the camera and adjust their silver head mics, and they wave at the crowd.

...

The Tansi Twins, Chelsea (pink hair) and Fuschia (purple hair) stand on top of the emperor box, letting the electronic music that blasts throughout the Colosseum keep their energies up.

Chelsea

Hello, Umu~!

Fuschia

Wassup, Umu~! Are you all ready to watch some Gaians get fucked up?!

The audience applause while the visitors from Gaia stay silent.

Chelsea

And for anyone that doesn't know us, first of all, fuck you, second of all, what's up~? I'm Chelsea.

Fuschia

And I'm Fuschia~!

Chelsea

And we'll be your sexy commentators for this amazing event called "Deal or Torture" which is brought to you by the Lava Pits~! If there's one thing to be grateful for it's the dumbass souls that threw their lives away for our entertainment and are now energizing our beloved domain~.

Every screen in Umu that is broadcasting "Deal or Torture" shows a picture of the thousands of lava pits that scatter throughout the desert near Aidoneus' castle. Screams from the souls being burned echoes throughout the domain, only for the response to be the Peonis and Upendeonis laughing and cheering. The screens change back to Chelsea and Fuschia giggling.

Fuschia

Now, Lord Aidoneus has gathered us all here today to watch his son, Anti, be punished for all of the trouble he's caused, and the only saving grace that he has now is accepting the deal that our beloved leader has suggested.

Chelsea

But because Anti has declined the deal, now one of the Quphantos must begin the first challenge, and Anti along with his earth bitches will have to go through them. Fuschia, what do you think is going to happen?

Fuschia

I think they're going to die~.

Chelsea

(giggles)

I think so too~ Well, what are we waiting for?! Let's start our first round of..

Chelsea and Fuschia

DEAL OR TORTURE~!!!

The program shows the title card, the event's title "Deal or Torture" in bold, red Papyrus font taking over the screen.

Chapter 3

The "Deal or Torture" title card moves out of the way, and the screen shows the Tansi Twins once again.

Chelsea

Now before we get into our first challenge, this section of the "Deal or Torture" has been brought to you by "High Road 666".

Unleash your rage with a shot of Lord Abigor's favorite beverage, High Road 666~!



The image of the sponsor shows up on the screen while the sound of a tiger roars. Then the screen goes back to the twins.

Fuschia

So here we are, making a lot of noise at the Colosseum, and we're dying to see what Anti and his earth bitches are going to be doing.

Chelsea

Will they all survive and be given a chance to reconsider their decision? Or will they die before they even get the chance to beg for mercy?

Fuschia

Judging by how inexperienced those three humans seem, I doubt that they'll even get the chance to panic!
(laughs)

Chelsea

I will feel second-hand embarrassment if the Peoni hunter, two Upendelaikis, and a Quphanto descendant can't come to their rescue~
(laughs)

Fuschia

Without further ado, here's Lord Abigor, Quphanto of Wrath, about to announce the first challenge, "Alive or Dead"~!!

The crowd goes crazy as the camera switches from the Tansi Twins to Abigor who's standing up from his seat and his arms behind his back.

...

Everyone shifts their attention to Abigor, the fair-skinned man with wavy, dark red hair, seeing that he's wearing a black turtleneck shirt with a dark red suede blazer and his tiger legs for a lower body exposed. His tiger tail slowly sways, and his pointed tiger ears twitch as he looks at the contestants with his deep, garnet-red eyes and slit pupils.

The team stares at him in awe, and Jacqueline whispers to her friends, “*Okay, but like, he’s kinda hot~*”

“*Jackie, focus,*” Rose whispers back to her.

“*You’re gonna be a pain, ain’t you,*” Tenacity asks, muttering out her irritation.

“***Gaians and Mazans,***” Abigor growls into his golden head mic, making everyone’s souls tremble, their ears picking up sounds of a tiger growling as the Quphanto speaks. “***You are here to prove that you are worthy of your freedom. Are you going to fight through this challenge to see another rotation, or will you be nothing but tenderized, bloody meat sacks? The rules are simple: All you have to do is go through four rounds of the toughest Onis in my District, and if you get through all of the rounds in one piece, you will be rewarded and will move on to the next challenge. Are you ready?***”

“Hah! Are you kiddin’,” Issei scoffs at Abigor, “This will be a cake walk!”

As the crowd goes crazy, Rose wastes no time and clasps her hands together, summoning three glowing red wasps, and they sting Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa and amps up their strength. The team summons their selective weapons: Alexander with his light nunchucks; Thomas with his light spear; Issei with his silver handgun with ice bullets; Tenacity with her twin fire guns; Jacqueline with her icy chainsaw; and Melissa with her bladed air fans. Rose sees her team preparing themselves, and she suddenly starts feeling like an orange in a basket full of apples. She’s never seen herself having to fight, yet here she is. Not wanting to leave her friends out of this battle, she clasps her hands together, closes her eyes, and whispers to herself, “*Help my friends attack the Onis,*” summoning a huge swarm of blood-red Asian giant hornets. The hostile hornets buzz and buzz, startling some of the girls before they realize that it’s Rose’s doing.

Usiku and Delilah, sitting at their seats, look at everyone with anxiety and despair taking over their souls. To comfort each other, Delilah holds Usiku's hand, and their hands hug each other tightly, praying that everything is going to work out. Kendo's eyes look at the couple, then they shift back to the Quphantos and Aidoneus, and they start scanning the exits, knowing that if he even tries to leave, his father will do something to Nermal if he hasn't already. *No way of gettin' out of this one*, he thinks to himself, *As much as I'd dip, I don't know what he's gonna do with Nermal if I try. And for once, I don't wanna risk it. He really has us in a chokehold. I guess I'll just have to play along for now.* He gets into a fighting stance, preparing himself for whatever confrontations that are about to make themselves present, pondering how he should approach the situation. A part of him wants to get the challenge over with and become a huge animal that could wipe out the Onis easily since his dark and fire powers will not do much damage to the wicked beings; however, he sees his team ready for battle, and he starts thinking that maybe they should get some of the 'fun'. He looks at you, the reader, with a smirk, and he makes his final decision, transforming into a white tiger and licking his paw, making Abigor's ears twitch and his mouth show off his fangs as a low growl comes out.

"Time to show these sand swallows I'm the better pussy cat, Abi~!" Kendo says to Abigor, teasing him by swaying his tail, rolling on the ground, and purring, making the crowd go wild. The team looks at Kendo taunting the Wrath Quphanto, and a bead of sweat drops on the side of their heads as they get the idea that perhaps Kendo shouldn't be playing around right now.

"If it were up to me, I would have mauled you the moment you stepped foot in here, Anti," Abigor growls out, *"However, Aidoneus has put in a lot of effort into this pretentious event, and I would hate to cut things short. You are the special guest, after all. Besides, I'm sure that watching my Onis finish you off will be much more entertaining."*

“Mmmm, finish me off, how, big boy~?” Kendo purrs out, sticking his striped butt in the air and making his tail go to and fro.

“Ken, for real...?” Tenacity asks while sneering at him.

“Yeah, this isn’t the time to goof around,” Alexander says with his nose scrunching up.

“**ONIS,**” Abigor roars out, “**RIP THEM TO SHREDS!**” Not saying anything else, he storms back to his throne chair and sits in it, crossing his arms furiously, and the crowd cheers as they wait for the first wave of Onis to storm into the arena.

...

The crowd continues to scream as they prepare themselves to witness an epic battle. Chelsea and Fuschia sit on the edge of the Emperor’s Box, ready to describe the action to the audience at home.

Chelsea

Alright, everyone~! Looks like Anti has angered Lord Abigor so the Onis are DEFINITELY gonna sock it to him.

Fuschia

Ooh yes.
(laughs)

I hope that his teammates are okay with him being a pain in the ass because he’s for sure gonna keep doin’ this for the rest of the event.

Chelsea

Uuh-huh. Now here we go, it’s Round One, and the first group of Onis are Wrath District’s up and coming gangs, the Sandpapers, the Fumin’ Dragons, and the Heartbreakerz!

Onis flood into the arena wearing different clothing and holding different weapons. The Sandpapers wear tan and white colored Oni masks and street clothes that are mostly white, and their

preferred weapons are spiked bats and machetes made of either sand(which shows that they are nature magic users) or water magic. The Fumin' Dragons wear black, red, and gold Oni masks and leather jumpsuits that are green or red, and their weapons are either katanas or flamethrowers made of fire magic. Finally, the Heartbreakerz wear pink, red, and aqua-blue Oni masks that are decorated with broken hearts and street clothes and fishnets that are pink or red, and they hold mallets and wear brass knuckles made of dark magic and air magic.

Chelsea and Fuschia share their opinions on the gangs while the outsiders begin fighting the different Onis.

Chelsea

Honestly, if these Gaians got any experience, their chances of surviving might increase just a little bit. I already know that the Mazans will wipe most of the Onis out.

Fuschia

Yeah, I love my faves, the Heartbreakerz, but all they're good for is vandalizing shit. Sure, they can kick ass, but let's just say I personally wouldn't go to them to get a hit done.

Chelsea

I feel like out of these three gangs, the Fumin' Dragons will deal the most damage. They've been climbing up the ranks here at the Colosseum and have shown immaculate skill. Dare I say, they could become Top 10 soon.

Fuschia

Yeah, and the Sandpapers are really not that far behind them! However, they haven't been attending any of the tournaments that Lord Abigor has been holding. What was their reasoning again? Something about wanting to gain popularity their own way?

Chelsea

(scoffs)

I dunno, something about not caring for the tournaments and believing that they don't have to "prove that they're the best" to anyone. They're a bunch of cocky fucks basically.

Fuschia

Oh. Wait, so what made them agree to doing this?

Chelsea

They didn't have a choice. NONE of these gangs had a choice. They were all handpicked by Lord Abigor himself.

Fuschia

Ooh! Oh wow! Well, this is their chance to prove to the entirety of Umu that they truly are "the best".

The crowd goes crazy watching the gangs put their all to kill the outsiders, but the outsiders put in much effort to stay alive and fight back. *SLASH! BANG! BOOM! FWOOSH!* Bullets fly, fire spews, swords cut through the air, and punches and kicks are thrown.

Chelsea

And it looks like the Gaians are holding their ground! The two Upendelaikis, Thomas and Alexander, of course are forcing most of the Onis to reset with their nasty light magic.

Fuschia

The Peoni hunter, Issei, isn't too bad himself. It's headshot after headshot after headshot from this guy. And he's using ice bullets? So cruel!

Chelsea

And there goes Anti offing some of the Heartbreakerz with his tiger claws. And awww, he's taunting in a cute way~!

Kendo, still in the form of a tiger, digs his claws into an Oni, making extremely dark red blood go everywhere before the Peoni

is forced to lose his form and is now a simple white flame on the ground. He then does various cute poses while swaying his tail and purring, making some of the Peonis in the crowd express admiration and irritation while infuriating the Onis even more.

Chelsea

Well, that's Anti for ya', always trying to get under someone's skin. Now, let us shift our focus on these newcomers from Gaia. I've heard of humans being able to gain magic, but I've never seen it in first-person.

Fuschia

Right!? I thought that was just a fairytale. Now, if you ask me, I think Tenacity will be the weakest link. Yeah, I'll admit, her marksmanship ain't half-bad, I've seen her take down a few Onis, but using fire magic is a waste of energy if you're asking me. You're better off just usin' your fists.

Chelsea

I dunno about that, Fusch, some of our Peoni pals may love the heat, but they can't stand the burn. Now if she were to use DARK magic, then yeah, she'd be toast. THAT'S when she might as well use her bare fists.

Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa make sure that they have each other's backs during the battle. Tenacity shoots up as many Onis as she can with her fire guns, Jacqueline recklessly swings her ice chainsaw around, sending intense shivers down the Onis' spines before they reset, and Melissa swings her bladed air fans and cuts away at their enemies. The crowd gives the girls' performance a mixed reaction, some boo while others cheer for them.

Fuschia

These humans seem to be gainin' some fans~
(giggles)
They're slowly winning my heart, too, especially pinky over
there~

Chelsea

Yeah, I love Melissa's weapons. I'll admit I'm a lil' biased
because I always was interested in air weapons.

Fuschia

Jacqueline will DEFINITELY be a problem for our beloved Onis. I
don't know if I wanna experience those freezer burns. How the
fuck are they able to create weapons out of magic
anyways?

Chelsea

Well, according to the lil' info Lord Aidoneus had given us,
these three humans took potions to get the powers, but for some
reason, Jacqueline is able to use ice even though the potion she
took was supposed to just give her water magic.

Fuschia

Is she a hybrid perhaps?

Chelsea

Mm-mm, she's a full human! That's what's so mysterious about
her. But it's not just the potions giving them these powers,
their half Quphanto, half Tansi friend, Rose, has something to
do with it, as well.

While the three girls fight the Onis, Rose stays close to them
with several glowing blue beetles on her shoulders to give
herself a strong shield while she continues summoning glowing
blood-red hornets that carry a massive punch and cause immense
damage to their rivals. *Buuuuuuzzzz buuuzzzz buuuuuzzzzz!* The
hornets' aggressive warcry and bright appearance terrifies the

Peonis and they try to swat away the insects, giving the girls a chance to end their lives, leaving behind numerous white flames.

Fuschia

Ooouuu, Rose is an interesting gal, and she would be a scary person to deal with if she really put her all into how she attacks.

Chelsea

For real, bein' a descendant of Ubokufa, the Quphanto of Life and Death, she already has a lot of potential of being a force to be reckoned with. I don't know why she's holding back.

Fuschia

And then her father is the Louisiana Reaper HIMSELF?
(sighs)

That woman of his is SO lucky. I always wondered what Quphanto dick felt like~

Chelsea

Fuschia, calm down, we haven't even got to our District's challenge, yet.

Fuschia

(giggles)

Sorry about that~ Despite the Louisiana Reaper's history, you have to admit that he's a looker~

The camera switches to Usiku and Delilah in the audience, but Usiku doesn't pay attention as he watches his daughter trying to survive. Delilah notices the camera, looking at it for a while, but Usiku is seen saying something to her. She then shifts her focus back onto the battle.

Fuschia

(whimpers and coos)

Just look at him~! Aah, he's getting me so hot with those locs and strong cheekbones~!

Chelsea

First of all, bitch, we have a boyfriend. Second of all, this section isn't about the Louisiana Reaper, we're supposed to be focused on the fight.

Fuschia

Right, right, sorry~!
(giggles)

The camera switches back onto the fight, the majority of the Onis wiped out, but the outsiders have gotten a few wounds themselves.

Chelsea

And it looks like the outsiders are about to end off the first round with a win!

Fuschia

Thank badness, I'd hate to end this event so soon. Chels, if you had to determine who carried this round, who would you pick?

Chelsea

It's a three-way tie for me between Alexander, Thomas, and Issei, but if I just HAD to pick one, I'd pick Issei because even though Alexander and Thomas' light magic is harmful, dealing with ICE is THE WORST, and Issei getting headshots is just insult to injury.

Fuschia

I agree! I'd say Anti is highlight worthy with all of those taunts he was doing and was still able to kick ass afterwards.
The girls aren't half bad themselves~!

The outsiders manage to fight off the Onis, and Thomas, Issei, and Kendo kill the remaining Peonis standing. The crowd cheers and taunts the team, wanting to see more action.

Chelsea

Well, let's not waste any time and get into Round 2~! Fuschia, care to tell our beloved viewers who these lucky bitches are goin' against this time?

Fuschia

With pleasure~! For Round 2, the outsiders have to go against Wrath District's more popular gangs, the Rollin' Rubiez, the Silencers, and the Blue Moons!

The crowd start whistling and applauding as more lightweight Onis come into the arena. The Rollin' Rubiez wear ruby-studded Oni masks and business casual clothes that are red, and their weapons are AR-15's made of lava(which indicates they are fire magic users); the Silencers wear silver Oni masks and black tuxedos, and they carry Nimcha swords made of air; and the Blue Moons wear dark-blue and platinum Oni masks and street clothes with dark blue kimono jackets with the full moon and ocean waves on the back, and they carry spears made of water.

The Onis charge towards the outsiders, ready to give them a tough time while Chelsea and Fuschia continue their commentary.

Chelsea

Now this round may pose a problem for our outsiders because these Onis, while still aren't the strongest out there, are popular for how they go about taking souls out.

Fuschia

Yep! The Rollin' Rubiez may be lookin' sharp, but things can get EXTRA messy when they pull out their guns. And then the Blue Moons get a kick out of impaling folks with their cold-water spears. Don't get me started with the Silencers.

Chelsea

Aaah yes, the Silencers, known for their way of taking care of business, not sayin' shit and instead, talk with their swords. What's cool is their swords are made of air, so you might not even be able to see it coming at ya' in time.

The Onis continue attacking the team, and the crowd doesn't stop cheering for their fellow Peonis and Upendeonis. Alexander and Thomas get into a more defensive style and use their large, feathery wings to create a shield of light for themselves in order to deflect the fiery bullets the Rollin' Rubiez shoot at them. Tenacity and Issei become the Upendelaiki's offense as they shoot at the Onis, getting rid of most of them, although a few of the bullets graze their bodies.

Fuschia

And it looks like our Upendelaikis are at a lil' disadvantage with the Rollin' Rubiez~ The Gaians have to be their saviors this time around.

(laughs)

Chelsea

Oop! Rose's insects are now coming to the rescue, messing up the Oni's shot!

Rose summons more hornets that sting and scare away the Rollin' Rubiez, giving Tenacity and Issei an advantage. Rose summons green dragonflies to heal their wounds, and Alexander and Thomas take the chance to focus on the Blue Moons. Jacqueline and Melissa take turns attacking the Silencers along with Kendo. Melissa and Jacqueline defend themselves with their weapons against the Silencers' swords and attacking when an opening made

itself known, and Kendo takes the slashes as he runs his claws through the Onis' chests and faces, ever so often letting his fangs sink into their necks if he's successful in making them lose their balance.

Fuschia

The Blue Moons are making waves, but the Upendelaikis are not here to sightsee. Thomas' spear dances with theirs, and it's a lovely duo between water and light. Unfortunately, because of Thomas' immense skill, he's wiping them out one by one. Alexander's nunchucks are having no problem whatsoever figuring out their moves and finding the perfect opening.

Chelsea

Speaking of dancing, Jacqueline and Melissa sure do make lovely partners, who'd have thought that a chainsaw and fans would be on the same dance floor and kickin' ass?

Fuschia

You would think that because Anti is a tiger, he'd go play in the water with the Blue Moons, but I guess he said "Let's go run and feel the breeze instead," taking a chance to earn some more stripes from the sharp winds.

Chelsea

Oh he's DEFINITELY earning some more stripes. That playful attitude of his is gonna have to disappear when dealin' with the Silencers. Those Onis do not play around.

Fuschia

Then again, does he HAVE to get rid of the playfulness? He is standing his ground well, and he's not having any sort of issues laying the claws on 'em.

Chelsea

Well, that is true.

Tenacity and Issei manage to kill the majority of the Rollin' Rubiez with the help of Rose's bugs. Alexander's nunchucks and Thomas' spear get rid of the Blue Moons, and they lend a helping hand to the others.

Fuschia

(groans)

Aaaand there goes the Blue Moons being wiped out first.

(whines)

I didn't want them to go out first!

Chelsea

Yeah, but unfortunately, they didn't stand a chance against skilled Upendelaikis. And it looks like they're about to get rid of the Silencers next.

Fuschia

(whines)

No no no no! And the Rollin' Rubiez are in a bind, too! If it weren't for Rose, those two marksman would be done for!

Chelsea

Mmhmmm. And it looks like Anti is saying "bye-bye" to the Silencers and goin' to the Rollin' Rubies, wanting to bloody up THEIR attires and ignoring the bullets that are piercing his flesh. I know they have to hurt.

Kendo carelessly charges towards the remaining Rollin' Rubiez, letting the adrenaline cover up the scorching pain he feels from the bullets going through his shoulders and sides and grazing against his cheek. Tenacity and Issei shoot up the Onis that harm their ally, and Kendo manages to take the Peonis down.

Jacqueline and Melissa take a few cuts, big and small, from the Silencers' swords, but the sting from Rose's wasp in the

beginning of the challenge numbs the pain slightly. Alexander and Thomas help them and attack the quiet Onis. After a couple of minutes, they manage to defeat the last Onis, ending the second round. The crowd begins roaring at the outsiders in excitement and disbelief.

Chelsea

And just like that, Round 2 has ended, and our outsiders triumph, once again.

Fuschia

Uuuugh, I was hopin' for at least ONE of them to die from that one. They were a lil' more on edge for this round.

Chelsea

Who were you hoping to get killed off?

Fuschia

Either one of them, though seeing the feathery throw pillows get killed would definitely be satisfying.
(giggles)

Chelsea

(giggles)

I agree. I can't deny, the Gaians are doin' much better than I expected. They better be thankful that Tenacity and Issei are with them because if it weren't for them applyin' pressure towards the Rollin' Rubiez, they would have definitely been at a disadvantage.

Fuschia

Yeah! And again, Alexander, Thomas, and Rose bein' on their team gives them such an advantage already, it's almost not fair to our homies.

The camera shifts from the exhausted fighters to the Tansi Twins still sitting on the edge of the Emperor Box.

Chelsea

Well, perhaps the next round will bring in much more excitement, but first, we have to have a quick commercial break. When we get back, we will have a quick chat with our special guests and continue "Alive or Dead".

Fuschia

See you guys in a few~!

The twins smile at the camera, and Fuschia waves at it while Chelsea uses her compact mirror to check on her face and fluffs her hair. The camera then shifts to the team regrouping and talking to each other, trying to catch their breaths. Then the screen goes black for a second, and the commercials begin playing.

Chapter 4

The commercials begin playing on the T.V screen, advertising the different products in Umu, from guns, to drinks, to adult toys, to bars, to clubs, and to movies being premiered. While they play, Pierre gets up from his couch to grab himself a snack. His indoor pets, Adessa the fiery, orange akita; Evros the deep-blue giant centipede; Shadow the black sphynx cat; and Samael the emerald-green king cobra, stay on and around the black, leathery couch, focused on the advertisements that play in front of them on a large flatscreen T.V. that hangs on the wall. Pierre walks into his dim-lit kitchen, his bare feet tapping against the clean, brown wooden floor, and he opens the silver refrigerator, grabbing out a small carton of vanilla ice cream. He then goes to one of the wooden drawers and grabs a silver spoon, and he walks back into the living room, his feet being comforted by the warm, fuzzy, and dark red carpet.

He sits back onto the couch, his body sinking into the leather, and he eats his ice cream while waiting for the commercials to end. Adessa rests her head on Pierre's lap, and her fuzzy tail wags, the harmless flames on the tip of her tail brighten. Shadow sits on Pierre's left shoulder, nuzzling and purring against the side of his owner's head. Evros crawls onto Pierre's chest, and the Upendeoni tries his best to keep eating his food while not laughing from the tickling sensation from his bug-friend's numerous, long legs. Samael keeps his space, taking over the opposite side of the couch, his glossy green-yellow ombre eyes glued onto the T.V.

As Pierre continues eating his ice cream, he hears *neeeiiiiighh!* He lets out a sigh and says, "Okaay, Chidike! Hold on!" He gently gets off of the couch, giving his friends a chance to get off of him, and he walks to one of the windows and lifts it open. Seconds later, Chidike the black and smoke-gray horse, peaks his head out into the house, wanting to watch the show with his family members.

Bhishma the black, light-blue, and white cassowary also peaks her head into the room, heavily croaking happily. *Crooooooaaak!* Pierre sits back on the couch and eats the vanilla ice cream.

Arf arf arf!

“Nothing’s bothering me, Adessa,” Pierre answers his akita.

Mrrroooooow...

“...*sighs* So maybe I *am* a bit concerned about Lord Aidoneus doing all of this, but... there’s nothing I can do, Shadow,” Pierre reluctantly says.

Tskskskskskskskskskskskss!

“Evros, I don’t want to hear it! I did what *I* needed to do just so you guys can still be taken care of, alright? I didn’t know that Aidoneus was gonna pull this shit. Lemme remind you that you’re a centipede on my chest, and I can just flick you off at any time.”

Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii...

“Yeah... I hope that they’ll win this, too, Samael... They have those Upendelaikis, and Rose is half Quphanto so... *surely* they can get through this, no problem.”

Neeeeiiiiiiiiighhhh!

“If you ask me, it will be a relief when Kendo gets out of here, and from what it’s looking like, *everyone* in Umu wants him out of here, too.”

Crooooooaaaaaaaaaak...

“That’s... messed up of you, Bhishma. I was irritated with this bunch of Gaians, but I wouldn’t say that I want to see them *die*. I guess we’ll have to see. I hope they’ll be alright.”

...

“*Pants....pants...* That was just *two* rounds,” Tenacity groans out, sweat invading her face, ignoring the waves of Peonis and Upendeonis talking in the crowd along with the numerous Reapers that come around to collect the souls that have been slain so far.

“Doing this kind of workout in this kind of heat... this is *truly* Hell,” Melissa sighs out, trying to catch her breath and wiping the sweat off her head and chest.

Jacqueline whines out, “And this is just *one* challenge!? Out of *how many!*?” Tears start to slowly form in her eyes as her blood pumps heavily through her arms and legs, and she softly whimpers.

“If you’re like this after just two rounds, then we’re in trouble,” Issei says, some sweat rolling down the side of his head, but it doesn’t faze him.

“Guys come on,” Rose jumps in, “You’re all doing a good job, right now, you can’t give up!”

“Rose, I love you, but shut up,” Tenacity says, “Give us that speech when we get done with the challenge.”

“Hey! I’m only trying to do what I can,” Rose huffs out.

“*Focus,*” Thomas sternly says, and he flaps his large wings to cool down his teammates, making them sigh in relief and enjoy the feeling of the stiff heat becoming a warm breeze. “Rose is right. For humans who aren’t supposed to be involved in *any* of this, you are doing an excellent job.”

“...Not gonna lie, but that sounded like you’re talking shit,” Melissa says.

“The point is you cannot lose sight of the goal, now,” Thomas says, “You have your friend Nermal to rescue, and Alex has to get Amy before we can throw in the towel.”

Alexander does not join the conversation, his ocean-blue eyes looking at Carnation in her cat form nuzzling Vanity, and Vanity rubs her back, making her cat tail sway. Kendo, still in his

white tiger form, stands around, looking at his team, hearing their cries, but he decides to say nothing.

“We’re not sayin’ we’re givin’ up,” Tenacity says, her face crinkled up, “We’re just sayin’ that this shit is more than what we were expectin’.”

“Okay, as long as I don’t hear the words ‘I give up’ come out of any of your mouths, I’m completely fine with you complaining,” Rose says, and she summons more wasps to sting her friends, giving them more energy, “Now listen, I feel like these next Onis are going to be tougher than the last ones. So I believe that you guys need to get creative with the weapons you’re using. Jackie, I think your chainsaw is wearing you out more than you’re noticing, so use something else and only have the chainsaw out when the situation is getting sticky. I’ll continue using my hornets to help out as much as I can.”

“You know, it’d be interesting if you could throw hands,” Issei says while scratching his chin.

“Yeah, like, can you do other shit *besides* create bugs out of light,” Jacqueline questions.

“I don’t think right now is the perfect time to figure that out, Jackie,” Rose says.

“Uummm, yes it is,” Jacqueline argues back.

But before they can continue their conversation, loud EDM music starts playing, indicating that the break is over.

...

The camera slowly fades back into the Colosseum, transitioning to the Tansi Twins sitting on the emperor box, their bright, white smiles shining.

Chelsea

Welcome back to “Deal or Torture”~! We have gone through two rounds of the first challenge, “Alive or Dead”, and now it’s time to go through two more.

Fuschia

But first, let's have a quick chat with our new "friends"~!
(giggles)

Some Peonis give Chelsea and Fuschia a microphone, and the sisters use their glittery wings to fly towards the team, their tails swishing in excitement. They stand in front of the team giving them sinister smirks.

Chelsea

Well, hello there, Anti, Maza scum, and Gaia skanks~.

Fuschia

You're all doin' a great job out here~. I'd say you're repping your homes rather nicely, BUUUT a certain someone can't stand the sight of their home right now, isn't that right, Anti?

Fuschia holds the mic towards Kendo.

Kendo

Quit talking to me and get this shit started.

Chelsea

Nuh-uh-uh, Anti~ We're the hosts here. We get to decide how shit goes down.

Fuschia

Yeah~
(giggles)

And we wanna talk to you all before we start the third round~ So
now,

(starts cooing)

Anti, how long are you gonna stay in this cute wittle pussycat form, huh~?

Kendo

...I'll stay like this for the rest of this challenge.

Chelsea

Awww, c'mon, Anti, where's that spunk you had earlier~?

Kendo

It's gonna be in your ass if you keep talking to me.

Fuschia

(moans then giggles)

Be careful talkin' to us like that~

(giggles some more)

Chelsea

Well, we see that Anti isn't bein' much of a talker this time around. Let's go to his light suckers for friends. Alexander and Thomas~! How are you enjoyin' your visit in Umu so far?

Thomas

You'll have to forgive me, but I'm not up for interviews at this moment-

(gets shoved by Alexander)

H-Hey!

Alexander

This is the worst place to be!! It's dark, the air is hot and stiff, and the people are asshats!

Fuschia

Oof, well, no one told you to come here, softy.

Alexander

I had no choice! Your leader took my girl!!

Chelsea

Is she even your wife? As far as we know, she was just some soul you got obsessed over. No "love" was reciprocated.

Fuschia

"Love"

(gags)

Lust is so much more fun~

Alexander

She's... She's... not my wife, but she is my partner, and I am going to get her back!

Chelsea and Fuschia

(laughs and snorts)

Chelsea

You're funny, Upendelaiki. Let's go to the Peoni hunter~.

Fuschia

So, Issei, this whole ordeal is really nothin' new for you. You're out here slaughterin' our kind like it's the only way for you to breathe.

Issei

Well, I mean, I do make a living out of it, but Peoni hunting ain't the only thing I do.

Chelsea

What emotions go through you when you're out here killing Peonis and taking a piece of us to prove that the job is done?

Issei

Well, I'll admit, there's times when I have fun on my missions.

However, there are a few of you I be feelin' terrible about offing. I'd get into detail, but I'll tell those stories another time.

Fuschia

Interesting! Very interesting. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to tell us your stories after you die~
(giggles)

Issei

Uummm, I highly doubt that'll happe-

Chelsea

Let's move onto the girls~ Ladies, you are the virgins in this situation. How does it feel gettin' your battle cherry popped~?

Tenacity

Uuuuuh, you couldn't have worded that differently?

Rose

W-Well, uuuh...
(blushes and looks away)

Melissa

Pffft!
(laughs nervously)
"Getting our battle cherries popped". Uummmm... Well, it's been interesting so far-

Jacqueline

HORRIBLE! THIS IS, LIKE, THE WORST EXPERIENCE I'VE EVER HAD SO FAR! MY FEET HURT, MY ARMS HURT, MY EVERYTHING HURTS!

Tenacity

Ain't you the same chick that wanted to be a superhero?

Fuschia

Her? Bein' a superhero?
(giggles)
I'm sorry, but if it were up to me, the only place you'd even be considered a legend is in the public bathroom stalls~
(laughs)

Jacqueline

At least it's my name on the walls and not yours.

Chelsea

(snortles)
Didn't you guys have a team name or somethin'?

Fuschia

Wasn't it the Sleazy Six or somethin' like that?

Tenacity

You're funny. We're called the Special Six.

Rose

Yeah, there's only four of us right now, but we're going to get our other members back before you know it.

Chelsea

How did you guys even come up with the title?

Melissa

I actually came up with it on the fly! It's pretty simple, I know, but who says we had to be extravagant?

Jacqueline

Nothin' wrong with a straightforward answer, honestly. There's six of us, and we're all special in our own way~!

Fuschia

Mm, well change the name, babe, it's too corny.

Chelsea

Right, who the fuck about to call y'all to save the day?
(laughs)

Special Six

(silently stare at the twins in different forms of embarrassment)

Chelsea

Help~! Help~! Someone save me~!

Fuschia

Have no fear~! The Special Six are here~!

Chelsea

Ew, I'm lookin' for heroes, not some tweens that got inspired by the paralympics.

Chelsea and Fuschia

(cackles)

Special Six

...

Chelsea

(sighs)

Thanks for the good laugh, girls. It's all just jokes, by the way.

Fuschia

Teehee, no it's not~

Chelsea

(laughs)

Yeah, I lied~

The Tansi Twins fly away from the group and stand on the emperor box once again.

Chelsea

Well, we've wasted enough time. Let's get into Round 3~! This time, the visitors are going to be fighting some of Wrath District's more savage gangs. Say hello to the Saber-Toothed Tigers, the Huntresses, and the Terra Riserz!

The Oni gangs flood into the arena, making the crowd go crazy. The Saber-Toothed Tigers wear black leather jackets, black ripped jeans, and black and gold Oni masks that have a hint of tiger features(tiger ears, tiger nose, etc.), and they wear long-clawed gauntlets made of white flames(fire magic). The Huntresses wear brown hooded robes with white and silver Oni masks that have bloodied deer antlers, and they carry multi-sectioned spears and bows and arrows made of dark magic. The Terra Riserz wear ghillie suits and brown and bronze Oni masks covered in dirt, and they carry hatchets and sickles made of stone(nature magic).

Chelsea

Now this is going to be interesting. These three gangs specifically are known for spendin' most of their time OUTSIDE of Umu and chillin' someplace else in Spirit Realm.

Fuschia

Yep, these guys tend to do a lot of their trainin' away from us.
(pouts)
They think they're "one of a kind".

Chelsea

I mean, honestly, they are. You rarely see any Peoni or Upendeoni using white flames like the Saber-Toothed Tigers. And then the Huntresses tend to be in Gaia most of the time, terrorizing the humans that think it's fun to be in the middle of nowhere with barely any resources.

Fuschia

Aren't the Terra Riserz just a bunch of pathetic saps that get their satisfaction from throwing their stones at folks?

Chelsea

Yeeah, they hang around the Ichukis alot, and I've heard through the grapevine that they're tryin' to learn how to use poison like the Hatred Quphanto does.

Fuschia

For the ignorant fucks, Ichukis are followers of the Hatred Quphanto, Aconite. They live somewhere in Spirit Realm, and they're all just a bunch of bitches. Even WE can't stand them, and we're Umuites.

Chelsea

Ugh, yeah, fuck 'em. But anyway, let's not talk about them for too long, let's get back into the battle.

The Saber-Toothed Tigers growl and charge for Melissa, Rose, and Jacqueline, completely ignoring the hornets Rose sends out. Jacqueline tries to use her ice staff, but one of the tiger-like

Onis breaks it in half on impact. Then Melissa tries to swing her air fans, but the white flamed claws make the fan's air particles dissipate, shocking Melissa. Rose quickly summons blue beetles to protect Melissa and Jacqueline for a short time while they summon another weapon. *SLASH SLASH SLASH!* The Saber-Toothed Tigers chase the girls while punching at the shields.

Fuschia

FINALLY! Somethin' to make me be on the edge of my seat! The Saber-Toothed Tigers are giving the Earth Bitches a run for their money!

Chelsea

Jacqueline is saying goodbye to the basic ass staff and bringin' back the chainsaw, but even the chainsaw is having a hard time making contact with our favorite cats~!

Fuschia

Rose is gonna have to come through with some other creepy crawly if she wants to not become dead weight. Ouuu, and Melissa is bringing out the bow and arrow~! Tryin' the be like the Huntresses, I see~
(giggles)

Chelsea

Speakin' of the Huntresses...

The Huntresses separate into two groups: the members with the multi-sectioned spears stay on the ground to attack Tenacity, and the members with the bow and arrows fly in the air to shoot rapidly towards Issei, Alexander, and Thomas. Alexander tries to stay on the ground to help Tenacity fight off the aggressive Onis, hitting them with heavy streams of boiling-hot water, but

the Huntresses in the air hit him with a few arrows before Thomas flies up there with them and swings his light spear, startling them. Issei struggles to aim his gun at any of his enemies, noticing that they keep deflecting the bullets, so he grabs out his katana, reveals his Malaiki wings, and flies upward to help Thomas.

Chelsea

Our girls are makin' it known that they are a problem. Their arrows are TOO overwhelming for Tenacity and Alexander. I bet Tenacity forgot she even has a gun in her hand~!

(laughs)

And then Thomas and Issei are trying to help out, Issei throwing everyone off with his katana.

Fuschia

I was honestly wonderin' when he was gonna pull it out

(snickers)

"Pull it out"~

(snickers again)

Chelsea

Fusch, focus. Yes, the Huntresses are very well known for their incredible speed. Forget a crossbow, they ARE the crossbows! Forget having shields, their spears are enough!

Fuschia

And it looks like until Thomas and Issei can calm down the rain of arrows, Alexander has forced himself to use his wings to create a shield for himself and Tenacity.

Chelsea

And it seems the Terra Riserz are having their own fun with Anti~!

Kendo tries to keep the Terra Riserz from attacking anyone else, but he suffers a few wounds from the hatchets being thrown and

the slashes from the sickles. He kills a few of the members, but the wounds slowly put him into a stop. Rose notices this, and she summons a few yellow wolf-spiders that take a few jumps towards the Terra Riserz, and *chomp!* They bite into some of the Onis and paralyze them, giving Kendo a chance to recover his footing and continue his routine, slashing them into oblivion.

Fuschia

Seems like his girlfriend tries to help out with her spindly spiders, and she starts sending them to the rest of the Onis, as well.

Chelsea

..Girlfriend?

Fuschia

Yeah, I'm shippin' them~!

Chelsea

..Why?

Fuschia

Well, they seemed close on their way here, soooooo..

Chelsea

..Not really a solid foundation, but carry on.

Fuschia

(scoffs)

Anyways, Rose is summoning some spiders, and it looks like she's throwing some orange scorpions in the mix. Sadly, these insects are causing havoc for these gangs.

Chelsea

Yep, the bugs may not be in huge swarms, but they're enough to get the Earth Bitches to recover and remind us how they got this far in the challenge.

The yellow wolf-spiders paralyze most of the three gangs, and the orange scorpions hop on a few of the gang members as well and weaken their victims. The Saber-Toothed Tigers start to lose their spark, the Huntresses' arrows begin to slow down, and the Terra Riserz' swings aren't so quick and sharp, and the team begins to fight back. Melissa continues shooting air arrows at the Saber-Toothed Tigers, giving Jacqueline a chance to swing her ice chainsaw around and slicing them down to shreds.

Tenacity takes the time to create a fire sword and starts swinging at the Huntresses, and Alexander summons his light nunchucks to help finish the job. Thomas wastes no time impaling some of the flying Huntresses and knocking them out of the sky for his brother and Tenacity to kill, and he signals Issei to go help Kendo get rid of the Terra Riserz.

Issei flies to where Kendo is, and he uses both his katana and gun to kill the gang members, and Kendo lends a paw in taking them out.

Chelsea

The fact that Rose had to even bring out those insects lets us all know that they would all be dead without her.

Fuschia

If not dead then they'd definitely be damaged to the point of not moving forward.

Chelsea

Hopefully, our next gangs on this final round will take note of that and use the info to their advantage.

Fuschia

Well, clearly, the outsiders have won the third round, though they can't say that it was easy for them.

Chelsea

Nope, not at all. The Huntresses definitely gave them a run for their money, and the Saber-Toothed Tigers and Terra Riserz weren't too bad themselves. I think the MVP for this round is Rose given that her bugs had to be the ones to give her teammates even a chance to breathe. Thomas and Anti were on their toes, too, especially Anti, taking on a whole gang by himself for a while.

The Umu crowd cheers as the team reunites at the center of the arena, Issei seeming to share a few words with his teammates, but Jacqueline barks back. Alexander joins the bickering, Tenacity throws her two-cents in, and Thomas and Rose are the ones standing in the middle trying to calm their comrades down while Melissa tries to move her arms around, trying to calm the flames. Kendo rolls his eyes and joins the conversation, but Alexander starts arguing with him, and they go back and forth.

Chelsea

Uh-ooooh, looks like the team is havin' their first quarrel~!
(giggles)

Fuschia

Chels, should we give the Earth Bitches a break so that they can figure out their differences~?
(giggles)

Chelsea

(giggles)
Nope~. Let's go ahead and get into the final round~!

Fuschia

Okie dokie~! Everyone, for the final round, the Earth Bitches are going to be going against Abigor's personal favorites, the Onis that will forever be respected in and out of the Wrath District, the Eclipses, the Voids, and the Rattlesnakes~!

The last Oni gangs come out, and the crowd lose their heads from the anticipation of the outsiders' deaths. The Eclipses wear black Oni masks that have the eyes and teeth glowing in a neon orange color and bullet-proof vests over orange sweaters along with black military pants, and they carry huge ring blades made of light magic. The Voids wear purple Oni masks with a swirling design in shades of purple and black and have on metallic-black full-body armor, and they carry miniguns made of dark magic. Finally, the Rattlesnakes have metallic gray Oni masks that have snake scales and wear gray steel armor while carrying whip-swords that are made of ice magic.

The outsiders prepare themselves for a final battle, Thomas seeming to say something to his teammates, and both teams lunge at each other while Chelsea and Fuschia commentate.

Chelsea

Not gonna lie, I'm a lil' nervous about these Earth Bitches going against the Top 3 gangs of Wrath District.

Fuschia

Right!? They're Top 3 for a reason! The Eclipses use light magic, the Voids are good with their miniguns- not as good as Gamma, of course- and then the Rattlesnakes use ICE magic! With those types of stats, you're bound to be feared by almost everyone in Umu! The Earth Bitches might actually become meat bags!

(whimpers)
I don't think I can watch!
(covers her eyes, but then uncovers them again, giggling)
Kidding~! I'm gonna keep watching~!

Chelsea

And from what we're seeing, the outsiders seem to be more organized this time around. Thomas, Jacqueline, and Melissa are going for the Eclipses. Alexander and Issei are gunning for the Voids. Finally, Anti, Tenacity, and Rose are dealing with the Rattlesnakes.

Fuschia

Now this is gonna be interesting. How in the world are they going to try and defeat our feared Onis? With them only having one of two of their marksmen dealing with the Voids, it already seems like the Voids are gonna be an issue for them.

Chelsea

Well, just like everyone else, the Voids are gonna have to take quick breaks from spraying. Magic, depending on how it's used, can take a lot of energy, ya' know, *spiritual* energy to be more exact.

Fuschia

Yeah, that type of fatigue can really wear someone out. I'm surprised that the humans are still goin'.

Chelsea

Well, they were complainin' earlier, but I guess their half-Quphanto friend's bugs are what's keeping them goin'.

Fuschia

Okaaay, buuuut, they're gonna feel that numbed up exhaustion sooner or later. Those bugs' effects don't seem to last long.

Chelsea

Yeeah, that's true.

The Eclipses aggressively swing their ring blades towards Thomas, Jacqueline, and Melissa, but Thomas keeps space between himself and the Onis with his spear while Jacqueline matches with their blunt approach by using her ice chainsaw. Melissa fights with grace as she dodges and blocks the ring blades with her bladed fans.

Fuschia

Hmmmmmmmm, I wonder why they didn't let their shooters go against the Eclipses.

Chelsea

Dumb-dumb, because the Eclipses have bulletproof vests on. The only person that would have a chance at taking them down with a gun would be Issei, but they already have the Voids trying to shoot at them, so his help is needed elsewhere in the battle.

Fuschia

Okay, but, like, the Voids are wearing FULL-BODY ARMOR!

Chelsea

Well, that's true, but you'll see why Issei and Alexander are dealing with the Voids first. Watch...

The Voids aim at Issei and Alexander, *bratatatatatatata!* The duo use their feathery wings to fly upward, and they zoom in different directions to throw off the Voids' aim. Issei begins to use his ice gun to start shooting at the Onis, getting multiple headshots and injuring a few. Alexander uses his water magic and shoots jet streams of boiling water at them to knock the Onis' balance off and weakens their armor, and he takes the opportunity to dive down and put a dent to their skulls or faces

with his light nunchucks. Issei also takes the opportunity to shoot up the drenched Onis, not having to worry about getting headshots, now.

Fuschia

Ooooooh... I don't get it.

Chelsea

(sighs)

Alexander's water WEAKENS their armor. Their armor is meant to protect them from bullets, but gettin' them wet only weakens the material, making it easier for bullets to penetrate.

Fuschia

Ooooooooooooooh... So then why didn't they have Alexander help out with the Eclipses!?

Chelsea

Because which would you rather get rid of first? The gang with the blades, or the gang with fuckin' miniguns?

Fuschia

Fair point.

Chelsea

Now that we're talkin' about this, it makes me wonder if they wish they had more water folk in their team because the Rattlesnakes have on armor as well, and neither Anti, Tenacity, or Rose have any water powers.

Kendo, still in his tiger form, pounces around, dancing with the Rattlesnakes as the armored Onis swing their whip-swords to keep him from getting close. Tenacity calls out to the Rattlesnakes and summons her fire sword, and she lunges towards them, swinging her sword in different directions. The Rattlesnakes try to defend themselves, but Tenacity's flames make their weapons

disappear, giving her a chance to summon her fire handgun and pierce their armor with her bullets.

Fuschia

WHAT'S THIS!? Our flamin' girl is able to melt through their ice weapons!?

Chelsea

It's that wasp Rose gave her earlier, I'm tellin' ya'.

Rose summons her orange scorpions and yellow wolf spiders again, and they attach themselves onto the Onis, weakening and paralyzing them. This gives Tenacity and Kendo a chance to kill some of them off. Suddenly, a voice roars out to the arena, startling the Tansi Twins and the people in the arena.

Abigor

(growls and roars)

YOU FOOLS!! KILL THE DESCENDANT!! KILL ROSE!!

The camera shows Abigor standing from his throne chair, banging his fists against the railing while yelling. The crowd lose their heads and start repeating what Abigor said, and the Onis obey, spreading their leathery wings and flying past their opponents to aim for Rose. Rose's eyes widen as she quickly summons a bunch of blue beetles to give herself a shield while her friends try to get back to her and fight the Onis off. Chelsea and Fuschia stand from their seats, their eyes staying open, not wanting to miss anything.

Fuschia

It looks like Lord Abigor's outrage has given the Onis their fire back! They're trying to get to Rose, but her friends aren't making it easy for them!

Chelsea

WAIT! SOME OF THE ONIS MANAGE TO FLY THROUGH THE PROBLEM AND ARE GETTING CLOSE TO ROSE!

Fuschia

CAN HER SHIELD HOLD FOR LONG!?

Chelsea

WE'RE 'BOUT TO FIND OUT!!

Fuschia

OH MY GOD OH MY GOD!! ROSE IS TRYING TO RUN AWAY, HER SHIELD STILL ACTIVE! HER FRIENDS ARE NOTICING, BUT THEY CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH!

Chelsea

IT LOOKS LIKE THOMAS AND ALEXANDER ARE THE ONES THAT DECIDE TO COME TO THE RESCUE! THEY'RE FLYING IN SONIC SPEED, TRYING TO GET TO ROSE BEFORE THE ONIS!

Fuschia

ONE OF THE VOIDS ARE AIMING THEIR MINIGUNS!!

...

Chelsea and Fuschia's commentary echoes throughout the Colosseum, but no one in the arena is paying attention to it. Alexander and Thomas race against the Onis to get to Rose, trying to bump into any to mess them up. One of the Voids aims their minguns towards Rose. The Quphanto/Tansi hybrid keeps running with the beetles resting on her shoulders, keeping the blue shield active, and she looks back to see the Oni ready to fire. *BRATATATATATATATATA!!!* Bullets begin to fly towards her, and although most of them miss their target, a few hit her shield, making sparks fly and Rose shriek. Usiku, Delilah, and Alexander see this, and their hearts

simultaneously drop. “NO,” Alexander and Usiku cry out simultaneously, Delilah can’t do anything but muffle her screams with her hands, and the Upendelaiki increases his speed.

Boom! Alexander shoulder bumps the Oni shooting at Rose, stopping the rain of bullets, and he makes it to Rose. “Let go of your shield,” Alexander shouts out to Rose, and she obeys, letting the beetles disappear and him grab hold of her. He covers himself and her with his wings, creating a Light Barrier for them both, and they try to catch their breath, their lungs burning. She tightens her hug with Alexander, shaking rapidly from the chaos. “It’s gonna be okay,” Alexander huffs out, “You’re gonna be okay.”

“Alex,” Thomas yells out while using his spear to fight off whatever Onis he can, though he gets a few bullet wounds and cuts. Everyone else tries to help, but the Onis are in the air, flying around Rose and Alexander, trying to get to them while also fighting off the outsiders that stand in their way. Melissa brings back her air bow and arrows and Tenacity aims her dual fire guns, and they both fire at the Onis, trying to stop them. The Voids waste no time surrounding the two souls in the light shield and start trying to break through the shield with their bullets, but Thomas comes through to disrupt some of them. He continues fighting the Onis while yelling at his brother, “You need to come help, Alex!!”

Alexander looks at his brother fly around while holding Rose, seeing the bullets hit his shield, and he yells, “Are you crazy!? You see these Peonis surrounding us, I let go of Rose, it’s over!!”

“I’ll protect her,” Thomas shouts, “Your water is needed in this battle!!”

“H-He’s right, Alex,” Rose whimpers, “D-Don’t worry about me-”

“No,” Alexander growls out, “I’m not moving until these bastards stop spraying!”

Issei flies around the Onis, shooting them in the head, *bang bang bang!* Frost blasts through the Peonis' and Upendeonis' heads, making their souls fall to the ground. Jacqueline and Kendo stand around not sure what to do. Issei looks at Jacqueline and screams. "Aye, Jackie!!"

Jacqueline perks up and yells out, "Huh!?"

"What are you doing," he shouts out.

"I can't do anything! They're all in the air," she complains.

"Chainsaws and staff aren't the only thing you can make, you know that, right!?"

"But I'm bad with guns!! And don't ask me to make a bow and arrow!"

"Well, it's time that you get good!! Start with a handgun!!"

"*Whimpers* I don't waaaannaaaa..."

"Do it or I'll shoot *you*," Tenacity roars out.

"Come on, Jackie, we don't have time for this," Melissa yells out.

"Fiiiiine!!" Jacqueline whines out, and she uses her ice powers to create a handgun and tries to aim at the Onis, but she misses every shot. One of her bullets almost hit Issei.

"Watch it," Issei yells, distracted by the friendly fire, and one of the Eclipses cuts Issei with their ring blade. *Slash!* "*Shit*," Issei hisses out, and he uses his katana to fight with the Oni then ends it with an ice bullet from his gun.

Kendo looks at Jacqueline not even looking at what she's doing, and he says, "Oye! Open your eyes, snow cone!" However, she doesn't listen, the sounds of the bullets and her heartbeat overtaking her ears. Kendo then looks to see Thomas struggling with the majority of the Voids and other gangs trying to get to Alexander and Rose. His head starts sprinting towards different file cabinets in his brain, trying to look for the perfect solution, and within a second, *ding!* A light bulb lights up above his head. A smirk creeps on his fuzzy lips, and he prances to a spot all

of the Onis will see him. The cameras notice and turn to him, curious about what he's about to do.

...

Chelsea

This is not looking good for our Earth Bitches. They're in an interesting predicament, now trying to protect Rose while not losing their own lives. Some of the teammates don't seem to be very helpful right now, either.

Fuschia

It looks like Anti is gonna try and do something to alleviate the problem at hand. What is he plannin' to do?

Kendo looks at the Onis and he yells out for their attention, and the majority of them look at him along with his teammates.

Kendo

Don't go for Rose, boys! After all, she's not the one that said that you all are nothin' but a bunch of Abigor's bitches who suck him off and swallow his spunk afterwards! You're nothin' but a bunch of bottom feeders!

Everyone hears his statement, and the Onis immediately take great offense and confusion to what Kendo just said, and they start flying towards him. The Voids stay in the air trying to shoot at him while the Eclipses and the Rattlesnakes land and start trying to attack the chaotic jokester.

Chelsea

And just like that, the Onis have lost sight of their true threat, letting their egos and wrath push them back to square one!

Fuschia

The Earth Bitches catch up to the commotion, putting up a good fight. The twin Upendelaikis switch spots, and Alexander joins the battle, washing away our wrathful homies.

Chelsea

It's a good thing that Thomas doesn't leave Rose's side because some of the Onis remember what they're supposed to be doing, and they fly back trying to finish the job.

Fuschia

They try to break away the shield, but to no avail. Uh oh, and it looks like Issei flies in, putting up a good offense. He freezes them with his gun, making it safer and safer for Rose to come out of hiding.

Alexander's water streams help end the battle, all of the outsiders managing to defeat the Oni gangs. Issei kills the last Oni, and Thomas lets up his shield, letting go of Rose. The crowd shouts, screams, and hollers.

Chelsea

(sighs)

Well, there you have it, everyone. The Earth Bitches triumph, ending the challenge "Alive or Dead". Though I will admit, this round was a rollercoaster. I thought someone was gonna die for sure.

Fuschia

Most definitely thought they were done and over with! But we can easily say that it was thanks to Alexander and his water that they were able to take care of the Eclipses and the Voids. Big shout out to Tenacity for being able to pierce through the Rattlesnakes' armor and Anti for comin' up with a diss good enough to mess up all of the Onis.

Chelsea

And now, a word from Lord Abigor...

...

Everyone regroups, trying to regain themselves. Kendo lets go of his tiger appearance and transforms back into his human form, the dark circles taking over his eyes still apparent. Before they can even talk about what just happened, *grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!* They look up to see Abigor standing up once again, his garnet-red eyes glowing, showing off his fangs. “**You,**” Abigor growls out, “*You meddling children... The only reason you won was because of your little feather dusters you call ‘protectors’ and that damned Peoni hunter. If it weren’t for them, your souls would have most definitely left your putrid vessels.*” Tenacity, Melissa, and Alexander want to say something to him, but their friends gently grab onto them, silently urging them to not say anything. Abigor lets out a sigh and continues, “**Regardless...** You have won... You have passed my challenge... Congratulations. Here is your reward. Keep it close to you, and remember the treacherous battle you had to overcome just now to get it.”

He goes through his pocket and grabs out a 0.25 carat old european cut garnet, and the gem floats out of his hand and descends to the team, Rose is the one grabbing hold of it, looking at its resilience and soft glow. Thomas remembers that he has a pouch with him, seeing that he has a few snacks inside and realizing that it could be a good place to keep the gem. Before anyone can say anything, Abigor says, “If I were you all, I’d have a serious discussion with your Quphanto descendant friend... Her becoming a coward almost cost you... I’d make sure it doesn’t happen again. At this point, I’m finding it hard to believe that she’s the Louisiana Reaper’s daughter.” Rose looks down in embarrassment, her face heating up and her hands gripping the gem tightly.

Usiku listens to every word Abigor says, and Delilah can hear his breathing become heavy from the anger building up. Who is he getting angry at, she can only imagine, but instead of questioning him, she wraps her arms around his, nuzzling him. “*Be glad that she’s okay, honey,*”

she whispers. However, he doesn't say anything in return. He wants to lunge out of his seat and attack the Quphanto for saying such things towards his daughter, but he reminds himself of what happened with Alexander when he tried to grab Amethyst, knowing that it would be pointless to attempt.

Abigor says nothing more and sits back down, crossing his arms and closing his eyes.

...

Chelsea

And that was the Quphanto of Wrath, everyone. What will the Earth Bitches be goin' through next?

Fuschia

Ooouuu, I can't wait to see what our other beloved Quphantos have in store for them~! It's only gonna get more interestin' from this point on~!

Chelsea

Now, we have to remember, this is if Anti declines Lord Aidoneus' offer again. Is he gonna actually accept the offer this time, or is he gonna put his friends through more hell? We'll find out after a quick commercial break~!

Fuschia

Staaaay tuned~!
(waves)

Music starts playing while the twins talk to each other. The team starts discussing their performance while Usiku and Delilah talk to each other. The screen then fades into black, rolling the commercials.

Chapter 5

As the program runs the commercials, numerous Reapers roam around the arena, picking up the many souls that the team has slaughtered. The team take a few glances at the grim spirits as they rest on the sandy ground, preparing themselves for their second challenge. Rose looks at the little garnet that Abigor gifted them, getting lost in the cut design. Thomas notices and remembers his pouch, and he grabs it out and looks inside, seeing that there are honey-glazed walnuts. He softly smiles and says, “Hey, does anyone want some food?”

“Ooouuuu, you brought some,” Jacqueline asks with glee, “What you got?”

“Honey-glazed walnuts,” Thomas answers.

“...Ewww, no thanks, I’ll pass,” Jacqueline declines.

“Well, shit, more for me,” Tenacity says.

“Yeah, I’ll take some, too,” Melissa jumps in.

“Anyone else wants any,” Thomas questions the rest of his team before giving the snacks away.

“No thanks,” Alexander says, his mind being elsewhere.

Kendo, Issei, and Rose simply shake their heads to answer the question, giving Thomas the opportunity to happily split the walnuts to where Tenacity and Melissa will have the same amount. He sees that his pouch is finally empty, and he looks at Rose who still gazes at the dark-red gem. “Rose,” he says, making her head perk up. “I think it’ll be safe if we put that gem in here,” he continues, opening his pouch, “That thing is almost microscopic, and we wouldn’t want to lose it.”

Rose places the garnet into the pouch, and Thomas places the pouch back into his pocket. He looks at her and sees that she still decides to look at the sand and not at any of her friends,

making different patterns within the ground. He lets out a sigh and says gently, “Hey, don’t let what Abigor said get to you. You were doing great out there and helped out a lot.”

“But he was right,” Rose softly whimpers out, “The moment those Peonis went for me, I panicked and messed everything up.”

“But what matters is we were there to help, and look, we’re all still alive and one step closer to getting our friends back,” Thomas reassures Rose as he rests his hand on her shoulder, “Now’s not the time to let self-doubt take over. You have to continue thinking positively and-”

“Ugh, spare the Malaiki talk, Lackey,” Issei groans while rolling his eyes.

“*Excuse me,*” Thomas asks, sneering at Issei.

“Abigor is right,” Issei says, “Let’s say we get into a predicament where *we’re* the ones that are gonna need help, and Rose is the only one to do something about it? Is she gonna chicken out then, too?”

“Well, clearly, she knows that she’s messed up,” Thomas bites back, “It was just one incident.”

“One incident in *one* challenge. We got who knows how many challenges left, which means she’s bound to make that mistake again.”

“Alright, lay off, Issei,” Tenacity jumps in, finishing off her snack, “I think she gets it. I think she got it the moment the Quphanto said it.”

Kendo lets out a sigh and says, “If we’re going to get onto anyone, it should be Jacqueline.”

“Huh!? Why *me,*” Jacqueline exclaims out, pointing at herself with her eyes widened in shock.

“Are you kidding,” Melissa says, “Jackie, your whining has been like nails on a chalkboard... no offense.”

“And plus, Jackie, you ever noticed how we all have at least one weapon that’s for up-close combat and a weapon for long range shit,” Tenacity asks her party-loving friend, cutting her eyes at her, “You know, something that *you* don’t have?”

“And you ever notice that *Rosie* does nothin’ but summons a bunch of bugs,” Jacqueline snaps back, “At least *I’m* fighting, what the fuck is *she* doing!?”

“Look, can we just reflect on our performances *quietly*,” Alexander finally says, his irritation boiling over, “Bickering back and forth isn’t gonna do shit for us. Save that energy for this next challenge.”

While the team goes back and forth, Usiku and Delilah talk to each other. “***The next time they try to harm Rose, I’m jumping in there,***” Usiku growls out.

“Honey, you heard Aidoneus,” Delilah says, “You can’t help them-”

“***Forget him,***” Usiku retorts, looking at his soulmate with flames in his eyes, “***Take away that pathetic title of his, and he’s nothing but another Peoni.***”

“Oooh, I wouldn’t think that, if I were you, Usiku,” a voice chimes in, startling the couple, and they look behind them to see Aidoneus leaning close to them, “After all, I didn’t get the name ‘the devil’ for no reason, hhmhm~” He then sits next to Usiku, wrapping his arm around his shoulder, “Just like how you didn’t get the name ‘The Louisiana Reaper’ for no reason, hahahaha~!”

Usiku doesn’t say anything to Aidoneus as pins and needles begin to poke and pry at his soul as the Upendeoni keeps his arm wrapped around him as if they are buddies. Aidoneus continues to talk to Usiku, “Now, listen. I know that it must be very difficult watching your daughter go through such a treacherous time, but this was *her* decision. *She* decided to take on this challenge along with her friends to help Anti with his selfish cause. If there’s anyone you should be upset

with, it's *him*. But hey, perhaps we can look at this as character development~! You sheltered your daughter for so long, the only time she's useful is when she's in a Quiz Bowl. It's not your fault, however. I know what it's like, wanting to protect your child from the evils of Earth Real-"

"Is there a reason you're talking to me," Usiku asks, wanting to snatch Aidoneus' soul straight from his chest.

"Yes, my apologies for the small talk," Aidoneus says, smiling softly, "I'm here to tell you that I intend for you and your soulmate to *stay* here and continue watching your daughter, not getting involved whatsoever. I'm a stickler for details, you see, and I want you two to not move from the spots I've given you."

"And if I intend to add myself to the equation and help my daughter?"

"Then I guess your worst nightmare will come true...*haha*, but who am I kidding, it's going to happen regardless. You jumping in there will just make it happen much more quickly~"

"...What are you talking about?"

"Ooh nothing~ I was just referring to that one dream you keep having about some *flowers dying*. It was a meadow filled with *roses*, was it not?"

Without thinking, Usiku grabs Aidoneus by his neck, startling Delilah. Aidoneus strains and struggles, and suddenly, *snap!* As soon as Aidoneus' neck breaks in Usiku's grasp, his body becomes black mist that dissipates into nothingness. After the mist disappears, Aidoneus walks up to the railing of the Emperor's Box unscathed as he looks at the arena with a devious smirk, leaving Usiku and Delilah confused. "Hmmm," Usiku mumbles, "A copy?" He settles down in his seat again, now curious about Aidoneus' abilities while anxiety creeps up on him with the reminder of his vision. "He's a coward for hiding behind that cursed barrier," he grumbles, remembering the barrier that stopped Alexander from getting to Amethyst, and he returns his

gaze to Rose. Suddenly, loud EDM music begins playing, letting everyone know that the commercial break is coming to an end.

Delilah looks at her lover, sensing his heart rate increasing and his hands becoming clammy. Her heart strings start getting pulled by her own anxiety along with the curiosity behind Usiku's nightmare. As much as she would like to ask him more about it, she knows that he wouldn't share much if anything at all. She then looks at their daughter, wanting to hug her tightly and tell her how much she loves her, the small possibility of never seeing her again plaguing her mind. Her eyes begin to drift to the two empty seats that are beside her, and she notices two seat cards resting there. She grabs the cards to look at the names on them, and *BA-BUMP!* As her heart plummets and her pupils constrict, she immediately puts the cards down, not saying anything to Usiku and hoping that holding his hand tightly will calm both of them down.

...

The screen fades back into the Colosseum, and the camera faces the Tansi Twins once again.

Chelsea

Welcome back to "Deal or Torture"~! The Earth Bitches have made it through the first challenge and are now ready to go through another one... IF Anti declines Lord Aidoneus' offer again.

Fuschia

Thaaat's right, Chels! Lord Aidoneus will be giving Anti a second chance at accepting his deal. If Anti accepts, then we can all go back to our homes, including the visitors. However, if he declines, then they'll have to go through more torture~!

Chelsea

Without further ado, let's give it up for Aidoneus~!

The crowd cheers as Aidoneus stands up from his throne chair, the camera showing the Upendeoni smiling and adjusting his tie.

He looks down at the team who gets closer to the Emperor's Box to go through the process for the second time. One of the worker-Peonis flies down to the arena and gives Kendo a microphone. The screen splits to where both Aidoneus and Kendo can be seen.

Aidoneus

Here we are again, back to square one~. Anti, how are you feeling, son~?

Kendo

Like shoving glass shards down your throat.

Aidoneus

Now now, don't be like that~ You know, you can just end all of this by accepting my offer. Come back home, and this event will be over, and your Earth friends can go home.

Kendo

Is Amethyst coming with them?

Aidoneus

She's not here, son.

Kendo

Then I guess it's still no deal.

Aidoneus

Very well, then. Ladies~?

As the camera shifts from Aidoneus to the Tansi Twins, the worker-Peoni takes the mic away from Kendo and flies back to his crew.

Chelsea

It seems that Anti is wanting to go through more torture~! So let's give it to 'em! But first, this next challenge is

sponsored by Hellacious Buffet~. Eat your cares away and shove your face into all kinds of delicacies at Hellacious Buffet~!



The image of the sponsor shows up on the screen while the sound of a warthog snorts along with a series of chews, slurps, and burps. Then the screen goes back to the twins.

Fuschia

(groans)

I'm getting hungry just thinkin' about being over there!

(whimpers)

Is there any way we can get some grub right now?

Chelsea

Fusch, we'll worry about that later. For now, let's hear it for Lord Alphonse, Quphanto of Gluttony, as he explains his challenge "Endless Dinner and a Show"~!

After announcing him, the crowd screams as Alphonse stands from his throne chair with a grimy grin.

...

The team takes a look at the Quphanto. Alexander, Thomas, and Kendo remember Alphonse's extremely pale skin; yellow-stained teeth and bottom fangs; orange citrine eyes; long, straight, and orange hair; and brown, fuzzy warthog ears and legs for his lower half. The team notices that the Quphanto isn't wearing anything for the occasion except a bronze head mic. "*Oh my god, he's naked,*" Jacqueline whispers to her friends.

"*So this is the guy that had Alex and Thomas captured,*" Melissa asks.

"*Yep, and watched us all fight Cerberus and Pierre,*" Tenacity answers, "*He looks like he stank...*"

Alphonse finally says, "Hellooooo, scumbags, ohohoho~! It's so nice to see you all *again*~! The last we've seen each other, you all fought Cerberus and that animal caretaker, giving quite a show. Are you ready to entertain me again~? The challenge is pretty simple and it might be fun... for me, that is, ohoho~! You see, I created this lovely wheel, and I think you'll like it..." *Snap!* He snaps his fingers, and an orange portal opens above the Colosseum, and a ginormous wheel plops into the arena, behind the team, startling some of them. Immediately afterwards, the portal disappears, and Alphonse leans against the railing, admiring the team's curiosity. They look at the wheel, taking in the flashing lights and vibrant colors of the options present, noticing that there are eight options in total. Rose squints her eyes and sees their names on each slot, and she sees a bronze podium with a bright, red button. As the camera-Peonis hover around the

wheel for the viewers watching to get a better sight, Alphonse continues, “All you have to do is spin the wheel, and when it lands on your name, your favorite food comes out to play~. So hey, in a way, we’re learning more about you walking bags of disappointment. Go through eight rounds of performing with your favorites, and once you do that, I’ll give you your reward, and you can move onto the next challenge. Sounds fun, doesn’t it~? Any questions~?”

Jacqueline raises her hand and asks, “Yeah, uuuh, how exactly-”

“No questions~!! Oh joy,” Alphonse says, chuckling while letting out a few snorts like a warthog, “Well, let’s not waste time, and get the party started~! Anti, do you have any *nice* things to say to me? It has been awhile.”

Kendo transforms into a huge, black warthog, trotting in place and wiggling his nose. He says, “The only pleasant thing I have to say to you is that I appreciate you being up there instead of down here. I’d hate to smell your breath. I bet it still reeks of ten cans of ‘bounce that ass’. In fact, *sniff sniff* Woo!! Yeah nah, I think I just got a whiff of it.” The crowd starts laughing and shouting at Kendo’s response, and Alphonse can’t help but to cackle and snort uncontrollably from the diss. His teammates look at him with a mixture of reactions.

“Ohohohohohoho~,” Alphonse laughs, “Still humorous, as usual, Anti~. Now let’s get the show on the road~! Pick someone to go spin the wheel to start the challenge. Haaaave fuuuun~!” Before Alphonse sits back on his throne chair, he summons a burger with four patties and different types of cheeses, and he takes a huge bite out of it, the cheese, mustard, and ketchup taking over the sides of his mouth. He finally plops back down to his seat, enjoying his meal, letting the Tansi Twins commentate.

...

The camera shifts from Alphonse to the Tansi Twins standing on the Emperor’s Box.

Chelsea

Well, you heard the playful and sloppy Quphanto! It's time to start the challenge, "Endless Dinner and a Show"! Will the Earth Bitches devour the monstrous calories with ease, or will they be needing huge ass coffins for their corpses?

Fuschia

Are they actually gonna eat the food?? Or are they gonna be fighting them?? How is this supposed to play out!?

Chelsea

Hmmm, I guess Lord Alphonse was a bit vague. He said "perform with" the foods, so I'm guessing they'll be fighting them. Now how is THAT gonna happen, I have no idea.

The team approaches the wheel, talking amongst each other while Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa take another hit of Rose's red wasps. Once they get to the wheel, Rose steps up to the podium where the red button flashes. She presses the button, and the wheel spins furiously. *Dingalingalingalingalingalingalinga!* The sound of the wheel going around and around echoes throughout the arena, making the evil crowd cheer in anticipation.

Fuschia

Ooouuuuu, I'm actually excited to see what these Earth Bitches be munchin' on~! I'm sure the Mazans only eat healthy shit.

Chelsea

Well, sis, we kinda have to eat healthy, too, if we wanna keep our stunnin' bods.

Fuschia

Yeah, but we tend to get some junk from time to time. I'm sayin' the Upendelaikis don't have junk, like, EVER.

Chelsea

Ooooh, well I mean Alex got a foul mouth on him, so hey who knows, he might surprise us!

The wheel slowly comes to a stop, and it finally lands on an ice-blue space with the name "Jacqueline" on it. The wheel plays a happy tune, and the camera catches Alphonse standing up from his throne chair, still eating on his cheeseburger.

Alphonse

(muffles)

Oooh goody~!

(snorts, continues muffling)

It landed on the frozen tart~! You wanna put that chainsaw to good use? Here you go~! Ohohoho~!

The gluttonous Quphanto snaps his greasy fingers, and a ball of orange light appears in the middle of the arena, and it starts growing in size, making the team prepare themselves and their weapons. After a few seconds, the light disappears and reveals a huge creature made up of scoops of vanilla, strawberry, chocolate, and matcha flavored gelato, frozen fruits poking out of its body in different places. It lets out a shrilling roar, revealing its teeth made of ice shards. Chelsea and Fuschia hug themselves tightly as the monster's cold aura takes over most of the Colosseum.

Chelsea

Ooouuuuu, it got a lil' nippy, all of a sudden.

Fuschia

(shivers)

Y-Yep! A-And this monster does not look like a f-f-friendly snow pal.

Some worker Peonis come around to give the Tansi Twins long, fuzzy coats.

Fuschia

(sighs in relief)

Thank you, pookies~.

Chelsea

(groans)

They need to go ahead and get rid of that thing!

The gelato monster approaches the team on all fours, ready to squish them with its large spheres of the cold desert for fists. Immediately, the team moves out of the way, and *BAM!!* The monster's fists land onto the ground, sending vibrations.

Fuschia

Gelato tries to give his opponents a brain freeze, but it completely misses. The Earth Bitches aren't using their guns or arrows, no no no.

Chelsea

Nope! Even Alexander has made his hot water into a claymore while everyone else summons their favorite bladed weapons, and they start slicin' and dicin'.

Fuschia

Meanwhile, Anti and Rose try to help in other ways.

Chelsea

Yep, Rose is summoning her yellow wolf spiders again, trying to make it easier for her friends. And Anti is eehh... eating the monster...

While Rose summons her arachnid buddies, Kendo runs up to Gelato, snorting while taking huge bites of the monster's feet. Alexander, Thomas, and Issei fly around the monster, distracting it from everything that's taking place below. The wolf spiders make it to the monster and bite at various spots. However, the monster continues moving, baffling Rose.

Fuschia

Uh-oooh~! Looks like Rose's insects aren't going to be helpful this time~!

Chelsea

Nope... huh... I wonder why- Ooooooh
(sighs in realization)
Because why would you try to paralyze FOOD?

Fuschia

Well, I mean it's ALIVE. Why WOULDN'T you try?

Chelsea

Just because it can move, it doesn't necessarily make it alive.

Fuschia

Chels, if it moves, it's alive.

Chelsea

So you see a ball of dirt move, does that mean it's alive?

Fuschia

Well... no, something would have to be-

Chelsea

Something else would have to be moving it. Exactly.

Fuschia

But there's nothing moving Gelato!!

Chelsea

SO THEN WHY DID IT NOT GET FAZED BY THE SPIDERS!?

Fuschia

I DON'T FUCKIN' KNOW, YOU FIGURE IT OUT. ALL I KNOW IS THAT IT'S ALIVE!

Rose hurriedly clasps her hands again and summons a huge swarm of yellow-orange winged rover ants, and they fly towards the monster and start eating it, burrowing into the desert, slightly melting its torso.

Meanwhile, Alexander, Thomas, and Issei use their weapons to cut away the gelato, *slash slash slash!* They cut at Gelato's arms and head while Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa try cutting at its legs.

Chelsea

They're making much progress breaking down Gelato. It's startin' to lean to the side, trying its best to fight back.

Fuschia

Gelato starts trying to spit out ice shards, and it looks like it got a few of the Earth Bitches. However, they're still cutting it down, ignoring the bone chilling cuts.

After a minute, the team finally manages to knock Gelato down, its joints and head scattered. The rover ants burst out of the chest, holding a small bowl with two scoops of ube gelato and a silver spoon. The swarm gives the bowl to Rose, making her tilt her head, and the team regroups with her while the crowd cheers.

Chelsea

Well, I guess that's it for Round One~.
(sighs, removes her jacket)
Thank badness, I was gettin' tired of wearin' this coat.

Fuschia

(removes her jacket as well)
Right? I swear, the fuzz was just irritating my sk-

Before Fuschia can finish her sentence, the gelato pieces start reuniting, and Gelato comes back, making the crowd squeal and shout. The team notices, and shock and bamboozlement splatters all over their faces. The monster keeps approaching the team, letting out another roar that echoes throughout the Colosseum, freezing the Tansi Twins from doing anymore commentary at the moment. Rose looks at the bowl, then at Gelato, and realization hits her, making her kneel down and talk to Kendo.

Chelsea

It looks like the Quphanto Descendant is using that big brain of hers and is... feeding Anti more gelato??

Fuschia

Awwwww, sweethearts~!

Chelsea

Fusch...

Rose continues kneeling down to where Kendo can easily devour the desert in a couple licks. After Kendo eats it, the monster stops in its tracks, and whimpers as its body melts away. The crowd cheers for the official ending of the first round.

Fuschia

Ooooooh, it was a puppet!... Being controlled by food??

Chelsea

No, it was a puppet being POWERED by food.

Fuschia

Uggghhh, same difference!

Chelsea

Either way, I told you it wasn't necessarily alive.

Fuschia

No! It WAS alive... just not sentient.

Chelsea

Can you even spell that shit?

Fuschia

Anyway!! So, now that the Earth Bitches have figured out what's really going on, these next rounds should go by super quickly, right?

Chelsea

Let's hope so, I'm starvin'. Let's see what's bein' served in Round Two.

The team approaches the wheel once again, coming up with a strategy for the rest of the rounds. Rose presses the button once again, making the wheel spin. After a short while, the wheel comes to a stop, and it lands on a bubblegum-pink slot with the name "Melissa" on it. The same happy tune plays, and Alphonse stands from his seat again while summoning a bottle of soda.

Alphonse

Ooooouuu, the pink taffy~! Ohohohoho~

(snorts)

You're not gonna feel as light as air after you've had this heavy meal~. Dig in~!

He snaps his fingers while chugging his soda, and two spheres of orange light appear. Like the previous round, they grow and grow, and after a few seconds, they disappear and reveal two different foods. One of them is a huge spider-like creature made of hot and crispy french fries, and the other is a large worm-like creature made of marinara-drenched spaghetti and meatballs. They both roar at the team, spraying marinara sauce and salt everywhere and emitting intense heat into the Colosseum.

Chelsea

(sighs in satisfaction)

Now THIS is the perfect weather~.

Fuschia

Mmmhm~! It's a much better feeling than earlier. Now here we go, a potato spider and a pasta worm vs. the Earth Bitches. I see Rose talking to her teammates on how they should go about taking care of those two.

Chelsea

Most likely taking a guess on where the cores could be located. Melissa and Jacqueline seem to be squeamish about goin' against these monsters, but Tenacity is givin' them a quick pep talk.

Fuschia

I honestly wouldn't wanna touch those things, either. I don't care if they're made of food.

Chelsea

And there they go, splitting into two groups while Rose summons more bug pals, Anti staying by her side.

Fuschia

Tryin' to save room for those cores I see. Let's hope that his pals will defeat Fry and S'ghetti.

Chelsea

...Fry and S'ghetti...

Fuschia

Yes!

Chelsea

...Okay.

The french-fry monster, Fry, spits balls of salt and acid at Alexander and Thomas as they fly around it, trying to get to the spot Rose told them to be. Meanwhile, Tenacity and Melissa distract the monster, attacking its legs, and the monster tries to stomp on them, only to fail.

Issei grabs one of Jacqueline's hands and carries her up in the air while Jacqueline holds her ice chainsaw with her free hand. They fly towards the spaghetti monster, S'ghetti, who tries to spit its marinara sauce at them.

Fuschia

The Earth Bitches aren't wasting any time trying to get to the cores of the monsters.

Chelsea

Nope, and I see Rose's creepy crawlies already anticipating an entrance.

Fuschia

I'll admit though, they're moving like they know exactly where the cores should be. How WOULD they know??

Chelsea

That's probably where Rose came in. She seems to be the nerd of the group... a cowardly nerd, but we ain't gonna talk about it.

Fuschia

But you don't think Lord Alphonse would put THAT much thought into where the cores would be located, would he?

Chelsea

Well, just 'cuz he's an ass, doesn't mean he's simple-minded. He clearly put in some thought in these monsters' design.

Fuschia

Truuuue.

Alexander and Thomas manage to get into position, and they take their light spear and water claymore and dive downwards, stabbing Fry in its abdomen. *SCREEEEEEEEEEEE!!* The heavenly twins break through the greasy shell, and they see a large pack of french fries. Rose's rover ants retrieve the food and bring it back to Rose, and she feeds Kendo the fries, defeating the monster, the multiple fries falling apart and disappearing.

Issei flies around with Jacqueline to avoid the marinara being directed towards them. As soon as S'ghetti tries to prepare another load of sauce, Issei goes straight for the monster, giving Jacqueline a chance to drag her icy chainsaw across the top of its head, splitting it open. The monster falls to the ground unconscious, and Rose's ants search the area Jacqueline

opened and find a bowl of spaghetti. The crowd cheers as Rose feeds Kendo the last dish, defeating S'ghetti, the noodles unraveling and disappearing while the marinara sauce simmers away.

Chelsea

Welp, that was the end of Round 2.

Fuschia

Boooooooooo, that was too quick!

Chelsea

Well, unless the hungry Quphanto has something up his sleeve, I think all of these rounds are about to be quickies.

Fuschia

Well, let's see what Round 3 is about to look like.

The team goes to the wheel once again, letting Rose press the red button to spin it. The wheel spins and spins, and finally, it lands on the scarlet-red spot with the name "Rose" on it. Alphonse finishes his soda, laughing and snorting.

Alphonse

Ohohohoho~! Sooooo, we get to see what the Quphanto BRAT munches on when she's not playin' with her bugs. Hope your sugar levels aren't sky high~. Oohohohohoho~!

(snorts)

Alphonse summons a strawberry milkshake and starts slurping away as he snaps his fingers and brings two orange lights into existence. The lights grow and reveal two new monsters: one giant monster taking the form of a hermit crab, its shell being a cinnamon roll drenched in cream cheese frosting and its body

made of gooey cinnamon filling; and the second giant monster taking a form of a two headed giant, one half made of sugar cookie dough and the other half chocolate-chip cookie dough. The cinnamon roll monster hisses while the two-headed cookie giant growls, and they slowly approach the team. Rose explains the plan to the team once again, and they charge for the two monsters.

Chelsea

Welp, time to fly through another round. Rose and Anti wait for their next meal, and Rose has her ants fly around, waiting for the cores to be exposed. The team is pretty much using the same tactic, again. Fusch, what are you naming these monsters.. not that it matters.

Fuschia

The cinnamon monster is Cinna, and the cookie monster is Cookie!

Chelsea

(sighs and rolls her eyes)

Figures... anyway, Tenacity and Melissa distract Cinna while Alexander and Thomas try to pull its shell off. But that thing is huge, can they really lift that thing??

Fuschia

Hmmmm, I'd be surprised if they were THAT strong. Then again, I'd think cinnamon rolls are pretty light anyways.

Chelsea

Okay, but THAT cinnamon roll is GIGANTIC. And then Issei gets Jacqueline to where she can cut Cookie open. Uh oh, but wait, these monsters are a lil' feistier than the previous ones.

Issei carries Jacqueline towards Cookie, but the monster roars and swings its arms around, trying to knock them out of the air

like they were flies. Meanwhile, Alexander and Thomas try to remove Cinna's shell, but they struggle as Cinna moves around frantically and attacks Tenacity and Melissa with its hot, gooey claws. The girls barely dodge the claws and lose their balance for a second.

Fuschia

It's getting tricky out there for our Earth Bitches. I don't think they can split up like they could in the previous round.

Chelsea

Nope, they're gonna have to come up with somethin' different and fast.

Rose and Kendo notice their teammates struggling to get to the cores. Kendo tells Rose something, and she nods her head, clasping her hands together and summons a swarm of glowing brown termites. The termites fly to Cinna and start breaking down the cinnamon roll shell. *SCREEEEEEEE!!* Cinna screeches, noticing its shell disappearing and leaving them vulnerable, but before it can try to swat away the pesky insects, Alexander and Thomas see the core in the monster's transparent body. Cinna still tries to attack the Upendelaikis and two human girls despite being exposed, swinging its claws around and attempting to pinch its enemies, but the termites start digging into its body, consuming the gooey cinnamon structure to get to the large cinnamon roll. Issei and Jacqueline notice their team dealing with Cinna, and the Malaiki-Ludamu hybrid flies towards them, completely

abandoning Cookie. Cookie tries to get them, but some of the termites ambush it, eating at its fists.

Fuschia

And there goes Rose again, saving the day with her nasty bugs.

Chelsea

Now now, don't go giving her TOO much credit. You know that there's gonna come a time when she gets scared again.

Fuschia

(giggles)

Truuue~. Can't really count on her when the going gets tough.

Chelsea

The termites are eating at Cinna and Cookie, and it seems like Alexander and Jacqueline are given the opportunity to cut them open and expose the cores.

Fuschia

Yep! Alexander swings his water claymore at Cookie and slices it down the middle, and Jacqueline with her chainsaw beheads Cinna.

Now, it's Anti's turn to devour more goodies.

The monsters fall over, not moving for a minute, and Rose's ants and termites retrieve the two cores: a plate with a large cinnamon roll and a plate of sugar cookies and chocolate chip cookies. They give Rose the plates, and she feeds the desserts to Kendo who opens his warthog mouth wide. Kendo finishes the food, and the two monsters melt away, making the crowd cheer.

Chelsea

(sighs)

Well, there goes Cinna and Cookie making their exit. Anti eats up the cores like they were nothing, ending the third round.

Fuschia

Do you think Anti is going to be able to eat up ALL of these cores by himself? They got, like, FIVE more rounds to go through.

Chelsea

I have no idea. I'm sure that eating some sweets and pasta ain't really a good combo to have in your stomach. But hey, we can DEFINITELY ask him how he's feeling when we come back from the commercial break.

Fuschia

Aawwww, do we HAVE to go to break noow?

Chelsea

(giggles and coos)

Yeah, let's give Anti a wittle break. We'll see you guys in a bit~!

The Tansi Twins wave at the camera as it backs away from them, and it shifts to the team grouping back together, recovering from the rounds they just went through. Then, the screen fades into black, running the commercials.

Chapter 6
July 2017
Early Morning

Riiiiing! Riiiiing! Riiiiiiiiing! The phone rings and rings, but then a voice says, “We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.”

The brown-skinned man ruffles his dark-brown afro and rubs his face as a sigh of frustration escapes his lips.

While the man recalls the number, letting the sounds of his phone ringing fill the room, a brown-skinned woman with chocolate-brown curls going down her mid-back folds up her clothes and places them in her suitcase. She looks at the man attempting to call someone for the umpteenth time, which makes her roll her eyes and sigh out, “Pooh, quit tryin’ to call Rose. She clearly doesn’t want to talk to you. You already left her a voicemail.”

Shandon smacks his lips and says, “I just wanna check on her, Suga! She never returned my call! You don’t think she blocked me, do ya’?”

Zeena answers, “Well, after the bullshit you pulled not too long ago, bringin’ up old shit, not to mention *POINTING A GUN AT YOUR NIECE’S FATHER*, I think I’d have blocked yo’ ass too!”

The phone stops ringing and plays the same message again, making Shandon groan out his worries, “Delilah ain’t pickin’ up either. I swear if Usiku told them two to block me on some bullsh-”

“There you go again- *Uuughh!!* Shandon!”

“*What!?*”

Zeena stops packing her things to look at her uptight husband sitting on the edge of the hotel bed. Their cheerful chocolate lab for a ‘fur daughter’, Cocoa, wakes up from her slumber, and

she hops onto the bed to sit next to her father, rubbing against his arm with her head. Shandon notices the notion and rubs the top of her head, letting some of the anxiety he's experiencing slightly dissipate. Seeing her heart in dog form now awake, Zeena says in a more calm tone, "You need to just lay off on the callin' for now."

"I *would* lay off if it weren't for big jungle fiend talkin' 'bout some '*Hey, let's talk shit out*'," Shandon says, imitating his older brother's deep voice at the end of his statement, "You know that shit's supposed to happen today, right? How am I supposed to know what's goin' on if there's no way fa' me to contact these folks, huh?"

"They prolly changed their mind, Pooh," Zeena says, "They're inclined to do so."

"*Tsk, Zee*, you were the main one that pushed the idea of me talkin' to Usiku, all civilized and whatnot," he says, looking at his wife with his face scrunched up like a crumpled up piece of paper.

"Okay, and like I said, *genius*, they probably changed their minds," she explains while twisting up her face, "I'm not about to force this shit on them if they don't wanna go through wit' it." She gets up from the bed to continue packing her things. Cocoa follows her mother, wagging her tail from the excitement of going on another car ride. Zeena notices this, and she smiles at her and coos out, "Awwww, my baby says she's ready to feel the wind blow against her fur~! You ready to go, suga-boo~?"

Arf arf! Arf arf! Cocoa happily answers Zeena as the woman caresses the top of her head and gently scratches underneath her chin. Zeena continues to baby-talk Cocoa while Shandon looks at his phone. His mind continues to get lost in the thoughts that provoke his soul. Soon, he starts feeling his disdain towards Usiku create sentences he wants to say out loud. *One more time*,

Shandon thinks to himself, *Just one more time I wanna see his ugly face. He thinks he can easily get rid of me, he's sorely mistaken.*

While in a shrouded forest filled with resentment, Zeena finishes packing up everything and grabs the keycards to the hotel room. "Let's go, Shandon," Zeena says while looking at her husband in subtle exhaustion, "I already packed yo' shit up. *I'm drivin'.*"

"Can we at least go see them befo' goin' back," Shandon asks while pushing himself to get up.

"...sighs No," Zeena hesitantly answers.

"And why not," he asks, huffing out his irritation.

"Because *I said so,*" she says firmly while going up a few octaves and stands in front of him with her hands on her hips, "I'm not gonna do this back n' forth bullshit wit' you!"

"Now how the fuck you get to grovel and beg for Delilah's friendship after the shit *you* pulled wit' her, but I-"

"Oh don't you even go there! *I* genuinely wanted to fix things wit' her. *YOU* just want to stir some more shit! And don't lie, I can smell the immaturity in ya' breath."

"That's yo' juices you smellin', babe."

"Ugh! Shandon you-.... You're unbelievable."

"Look, at least try callin' them from yo' phone, then."

".... I'll shoot a text..."

Zeena grabs her phone from her white designer purse, and Shandon waves his hands around frantically. "No no no," he exclaims, "Don't send a text! They ain't gon' see that! Hell, they'll prolly leave yo' ass on 'read'!"

“Shandon, I’m just gonna tell these folks that we’re gonna stop by one last time befo’ goin’ home. The last thing I need is you on the phone talkin’ ‘bout some-”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak! The conversation is interrupted by disorderly squeaking, and it makes Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa jolt. Cocoa turns her head to see seven bats flying near the balcony window and starts barking. The couple sees what their fur-daughter is looking at, and Zeena gasps when they see seven pairs of glowing red eyes staring back at them, the lack of sunlight not making the view any more pleasant. Shandon instantly feels his soul wanting to soar out of his body thanks to the bats’ appearance, them coming here leading him to believe that there’s still a chance to contact Rose. He approaches the balcony and slides the window to where they can fly in, squeaking away. *Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!*

“Aye,” Shandon starts, “Perfect timin’. I need y’all to gon’ ‘head and teleport us to Usiku’s place. I know that y’all know what’s up.”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

Though he doesn’t quite understand what they are saying, he refuses to waste time and gathers his stuff along with Zeena’s and Cocoa’s. Zeena and Cocoa stand next to Shandon, not sure what’s about to happen. “Shandon,” Zeena says in a perplexed tone.

“Just close ya’ eyes and don’t move,” Shandon directs to his wife, holding her close to him. Not asking anymore questions, Zeena does what he says and closes her eyes, holding Cocoa close to her as the pampered dog closes her eyes as well. The bats start swirling around the family at light speed, red sparkles surrounding them and the suitcases. And in a blink of an eye, the room becomes vacant, no soul left in it to give it life.

After a few seconds, the bats along with Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa teleport somewhere that is not Usiku and Delilah’s home. Along with the unfamiliar setting, the only people there start

experiencing a chilly sensation taking over their bodies. Shandon opens his eyes to see that they are in a large living room within a mansion, and his heart drops. He sees the bats flying in front of them and yells, “Ayo, what gives!? This ain’t Usiku’s place!”

The bats choose to stay silent, looking at the problematic Quphanto/Upendelaiki hybrid unfazed. Zeena looks around the place and says softly, “Wow... it’s so beautiful here.” Then she looks at her sister-in-laws and continues, “But yeah, what Shandon said, this isn’t where we needed to go.” The couple hopes that the bats squeak something; however, the bats continue their silence, not squeaking a single squeak. A few of the bats fly around the suitcases, and they swirl around them, disappearing to who knows where. Shandon and Zeena’s eyes widen, and steam comes out of Shandon’s ears. He looks at the bats remaining in the room and barks out, “Alright, what the fuck is goin’ on!? I don’t know what kinda bullshit Usiku is on right now, but if he’s around here hidin’, then he can bring his Czar Kong lookin’ ass-”

Arf arf arf! Arf arf! Cocoa interrupts her father as she looks at a swirling portal made of murky colors. Zeena looks at what Cocoa is bringing attention to, and her heart skips a beat from the sight. Shandon turns his head to look at the portal, his eyes squint in astonishment.

“*What... in the hell,*” Shandon mutters. The bats that took away the suitcases appear again, and the seven flying souls dive into the portal, leaving behind the family.

“Pooh,” Zeena says, “I think they want us to walk through that...”

Shandon scoffs, “Pssh, like I’m ‘bout to walk into th- *COCOA!*”

Without a second thought, Cocoa runs into the portal, and Zeena’s heart drops. “*COCOA,*” Zeena cries out, and she clutches her purse and runs towards the portal, not caring that she’s wearing high cork wedges. Shandon follows behind her, his mind becoming a blur. What is even happening anymore? Why is a portal in the middle of a room, and why are they running in there

with no hesitation? All of these questions dance around Shandon, but he cannot sit around to find the answer as he runs through a long pathway filled with swirling colors, trying to keep up with his wife who keeps calling out to Cocoa. He sees Cocoa still running straight, and he notices that they are getting closer and closer to a beam of light.

After a couple of minutes of running, the family finally gets through the light, and they exit the portal, seeing that they are in a completely different place and are being welcomed by an intense wave of heat. Cocoa looks around trying to find the seven bats, meanwhile Zeena and Shandon scan their surroundings, taking note of the sandy ground and the seven full moons above them along with the dim lights coming from the town ahead of them being the only sources of light. “*What in the world,*” Zeena whispers, her jaw almost touching the ground.

Shandon lets out a long sigh as he summons a blunt filled with Malaiki Cabbage. He places the blunt upon his lips, and he grabs his lighter to light it up. *Inhale. Exhale.* The herb in smoke form takes over his lungs and escapes through his mouth. “*Usiku,*” Shandon grumbles, “*What did you do now?*”

...

Uuurrrrrrrrrk!! The food that Kendo has devoured so far exits his mouth in a foul liquid form with a few chunks. Rose rubs his fuzzy back as she looks away from the sight, trying to not make herself puke. Jacqueline and Melissa cringes from the sight, looking away and covering their ears, Issei looks at the crowd of Peonis waiting for the challenge to continue, Alexander stares longingly at Carnation, and Thomas looks at the huge wheel that is part of the challenge. Tenacity looks at Kendo puking out the chunks of cores he devoured not too long ago, knowing that eating so much in a short amount of time and experiencing the different types of foods not really agreeing with each other isn't a fun time. She stands in front of him and kneels down to his

level, seeing drool and bits of vomit rest on the corners of his mouth, and she says, “Are you sure you’re gonna be alright doin’ this? We got *five* more rounds of this to get through...”

Kendo spits out whatever remaining waste he has inside of his mouth and groans out, “*Yeah... pants pants pants... I’ll be fine...*”

“But you can’t just keep doing this, Ken,” Rose says, worried, “You keep eating like this, you might not be able to give your best performance for the next challenge.”

“*Heh, yeah well unless someone’s willing to pig out, I **have** to keep doing this,*” he strains out, trying to talk through the burning sensation that takes over his esophagus.

Thomas turns to his team and says, “Everyone but Jacqueline, Melissa, and Rose, what are your favorite foods?”

“Trying to see how much worse it gets, huh,” Issei says, “Well, I like enchiladas, mozz sticks, and hot wings.”

“Sounds like a bunch of heart problems,” Tenacity says while standing back up and crossing her arms.

“Oh, and I’m sure *your* favorite is any better,” Issei says sarcastically while smirking.

“Well... *sighs* no, it’s not. I love chocolate,” she admits.

Kendo chuckles dryly and hisses out, “*I’m ‘bout to die...*”

Thomas looks at the chaotic jokester and says, “Well, if it reassures you, my favorite is actually parfait!”

“Isn’t that a dessert,” Issei asks, tilting his head.

“Yes, *but* it’s a rather healthy choice of dessert,” Thomas answers, “Fruits, yogurt, some whip cream on top, I’m sure it’s something Kendo will want!”

“*And what’s the other vanilla bean’s favorite,*” Kendo asks.

Alexander doesn't hear Kendo's question towards him, his mind drifting to other places. Kendo, still in his warthog form, approaches the Upendelaiki and nudges his leg while snorting loudly, startling him. Alexander looks at Kendo with a ruffled expression. Kendo asks again, "Oye, what's your favorite food?"

The Upendelaiki thinks about the question. Ever since he's decided to live in Gaia, he's found something good to say about every dish he's ever tried. When it comes to food, he doesn't play favorites. "I... I don't have a favorite food," Alexander answers.

"Huh... Well, at least we have *that* in common," Kendo chuckles, "I don't have a favorite either~!"

"Don't think that this makes us buddy-buddy," Alexander says, his words sharp as knives.

"Awwww, still mad at me for shit I'm not responsible for~," Kendo asks while swaying his warthog tail.

"Hol' up," Tenacity interrupts the two, "What do you mean y'all don't have a favorite food?"

Kendo walks up to Tenacity and says, "It means that we'll eat whatever, black tea~"

Melissa jumps into the conversation and says, "So wait, what happens if the wheel lands on you guys??"

"That's a good question," Thomas points out, "Because if Alphonse is gonna pull the trick I think he has up his sleeve, then we're in *big* trouble."

"So what *I'm* hearing is we need to put this challenge to a halt," Issei concludes.

"But how are we gonna do that," Jacqueline asks, "There's no way to stop it other than complete the challenge, right?"

"Unless we destroy the one thing that's keeping this challenge going," Alexander says, looking at Alphonse's wheel.

Rose thinks about how exactly they would destroy the wheel, and she realizes what Alexander is going to try to do. “Do you think it will work,” she ponders, “I would think that he’d make it to where it’s indestructible.”

“Only one way to find out,” Alexander answers, “As soon as the break ends, we’ll-”

“Play a couple more rounds,” Kendo coos out.

“*What,*” Alexander exclaims, snapping his head towards the hog.

“C’mon, just to get our momentum back,” Kendo suggests, “I don’t know how Alphonse is gonna react to you ruining his shit right off the bat.”

“Tsk...Fine, but you do realize that you’re taking the risk of the wheel landing on you or me, right,” Alexander says, raising an eyebrow.

“And then mine is sorta vague, who knows what kind of shit he’ll make appear,” Tenacity adds.

“HMMMMM... just one more round then,” Kendo concludes, “And if it lands on either one of us, then you have my permission to kick my ass.”

Before they can continue their conversation, music starts playing across the Colosseum, letting everyone know that the break is over.

...

The camera fades back into the Colosseum, and it zooms into the Tansi Twins who smile and wave at the audience at home.

Chelsea

Welcome back for more “Deal or Torture”~! For those that have no idea what’s going on, we are in the middle of the second challenge called “Endless Dinner and a Show”~.

Fuschia

The Earth Bitches have been fighting off their fave foods in monstrous forms, and Anti has been the one to make sure that the

monsters are gone for good~. Will he be able to keep this up, though? They have five rounds left.

Chelsea

Why don't we go down there and-

Alphonse

NO! NO INTERVIEWS! JUST GET THE SHOW GOING! OHOHOHOHO~!
(snorts)

The sisters jump from the Gluttony Quphanto's interruption. However, they quickly regather themselves and continue the show.

Fuschia

(giggles)

Well, you heard the Quphanto~! Let's get started with the fourth round~!

The crowd cheers as the team walks to the wheel to resume the foodie fiasco. Rose approaches the red button and presses it, making the wheel go crazy. There's only five options left lit up. The wheel's spinning begins to slow down, and it lands on a misty teal slot with the name "Thomas" on it. Alphonse stands from his throne chair and summons a chili dog.

Alphonse

Hmm! It's funny how when we first met, you refused to let me be a good *friend* and give you whatever dish you wanted to eat.
Well, ohohoho~, I hope that you'll enjoy my treat~!

He takes a bite out of his sloppy chili dog, and he snaps with his free hand to create a ball of orange light. The light grows and grows, and it reveals a monster taking the form of a pegasus, its body made of greek yogurt, strawberries, mango

chunks, chopped bananas, kiwis, blueberries, and honey-covered granola, and its horn is made of whip cream. *NEEEEEEEIIIIIGH!!* It neighs loudly as its yogurt drips onto the sand, and it gives the team no time to think as it charges for the team.

Fuschia

So here we go, Parfait is ready to participate in some horseplay and tries trampling on the Earth Bitches~!

Chelsea

The Upendelaikis and Peoni hunter get their wings workin' as they drag Jacqueline, Melissa, and Tenacity out of harm's way. Rose uses her blue beetles to protect her and Anti as they make some distance, too.

Fuschia

It seems like Rose is trying to yell to her friends where the core could be. I hope they can hear what she's sayin' through the loud noises Parfait is making.

Chelsea

Can't you get any more creative with the names...?

Fuschia

See, now you're just bein' bitchy towards me for no reason! What's wrong with Parfait!?

Chelsea

How about *I* name it this time? Let's call it Kiwi.

Fuschia

No! Parfait is much prettier!

Kiwi/Parfait continues trying to attack the team, stomping its hooves, trying to take a bite of the Upendelaikis and Issei. Tenacity manages to use her fire sword to cut one of the monster's ankles, making Kiwi/Parfait lose its balance.

Jacqueline and Melissa try to follow her lead with their bladed weapons.

Chelsea

It seems like the humans are picking up the slack~! Kiwi is getting so distracted by the feather dusters in the air, it completely forgot about the fleas fuckin' up its legs.

Fuschia

Alexander, Thomas, and Issei swing their weapons around as well, chopping up Parfait into multiple pieces.

Chelsea

Goddammit, Fusch, it's KIWI!!

Fuschia

Nooo, PARFAIT!!

Chelsea

KIWI!

Fuschia

PARFAIT!

Chelsea

YOU ALREADY NAMED THE OTHER MONSTERS, LET ME NAME THIS ONE!

Fuschia

YOU CAN NAME THE NEXT ONE!!

The team manages to chop up the pegasus monster, letting Rose use her rover ants to retrieve the core, but the core is revealed to be a decorative cup container holding eight tall cups of different parfait, a silver spoon placed inside for each one.

Fuschia

(gasps)

WHAT'S THIS!? IT'S NOT JUST ONE, NOT TWO, BUT *EIGHT* CUPS OF PARFAIT!?

Chelsea

And they're some huge servings too... yikes.

Alphonse

(muffles)

OHOHOHOHOHO~!

(snorts)

EAT! EAT IT ALL AND DON'T LEAVE A CRUMB, YOU WASTE OF SPACE~!

OOOOHOHOHOHOHOHOHO~!

As Alphonse laughs at the team's predicament with a mouth full of food, the ants give Rose the cups of dessert, and Kendo opens his warthog mouth, preparing to devour more food even though he's still recovering from his previous rejection. However, the camera catches Rose saying something to him, causing him to say something back, and they go back and forth.

Fuschia

Awwwww, a lover's quarrel~!

Chelsea

Aaaand it's lookin' like Rose isn't feeling right about giving Anti all that sweet shit, but Anti is telling her to give it all to him.

Fuschia

Well, whatever they're trying to do, they better do it fast before Parfait comes back around!

Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa notice the conflict and run to their friends, and they try to talk through the discourse. Kendo

starts stomping on the ground, kicking up some dust, showing that he's had enough of the conversation. Tenacity shows irritation as well, and she snatches one of the parfait cups and starts digging into the sugary dessert, making the Peonis in the crowd scream and holler. Melissa grabs a cup as well and starts eating, and she looks at Jacqueline and demands her to take a cup. Jacqueline shows that she's disinterested, but then the monster slowly comes back, its yogurt, fruits, and granola swirling around.

Chelsea

It looks like Kiwi is slowly making its comeback~!

Fuschia

C'MON, EARTH BITCHES! CHEW, CHEW, CHEW!

Chelsea

Jacqueline is finally accepting the extra calories!

(mutters)

She most definitely needs it...

(speaks up again)

And Alexander, Thomas, and Issei dive down to join the "festivity"~!

Fuschia

They are all deciding to lend a helping hand in eating Alphonse's creations, leaving just one cup for Anti to devour.

The team tries to eat the parfaits quickly, ignoring whatever brain freezes come their way, and Kiwi/Parfait completely comes back. *NEEEEEEEIIIIIIIGH!!* It eyes the team trying to devour its core, and it spits yogurt at them. The team notices, and they

start running and flying in different directions. Issei and Alexander quickly finish their cup of parfait, and they fly around the monster to distract it from everyone else.

Chelsea

Ooouuu, Issei and Alexander finished their food with the quickness~

Fuschia

Tenacity is not far behind~ She's eating it like it's her last meal~!

Chelsea

(giggles)

I mean, it might be~

Fuschia

(giggles)

True~!

Chelsea

Aaand that's Tenacity's parfait gone~! Thomas finishes his as well. The two go and help the Peoni hunter and Upendelaiki while Melissa and Jacqueline struggle getting through theirs, and Rose is almost done.

Fuschia

Boy, aren't they fighting Parfait with all of their might, slicing and dicing, trying to break it down so that it doesn't harm their teammates!

Chelsea

I'd honestly get hungry again after doin' all of this moving.

Kendo roots for Rose to finish her cup, and Rose hears him, making her finish her parfait in a few huge chomps. Then he sees Melissa completing her task, and Jacqueline having a couple of bites left. They finally finish the parfaits, and Kiwi/Parfait

melts away, everything that made its body disappearing. The crowd cheers for the team as they regroup. Chelsea and Fuschia are going to commentate, but then Alphonse starts cackling and snorting to where it echoes throughout the establishment.

The camera shifts from the Tansi Twins to the Gluttony Quphanto as he licks the chili from his now non-existent chili dog off of his fingers. He leans over the balcony to get a better look at the team, and gives them a sloppy smile.

Alphonse

Ohohohohoho~! You're doin' a good job, you sacks of shit~! I'll admit, I didn't think you'd get this far~ How does it feel making it to the halfway point~?

A worker Peoni approaches the team with the mic. Issei grabs it.

Issei

Like you need to c'mon and let us continue! You're the one wanting the show, right?

Alphonse

Aaah, fair fair~. I'll admit, you may be half cloud hugger and half tampon sucker, but you know how to keep the party going~. Please, proceed~! Ohohohohohoho~

Issei visibly flinches at Alphonse's remark, but he gives the mic back to the Peoni, and the team and he start making their way to the wheel. The Tansi Twins take this moment to get back into their groove and begin commentating once again.

Chelsea

Well, it seems that Lord Alphonse is enjoyin' himself.

Fuschia

Yeah, to the point that he has to shit talk them real quick.

Chelsea

I guess he wouldn't be the Gluttony Quphanto without giving his serving of beating someone down.

Fuschia

I'll admit, that last core he made them take care of was unexpected. I was thinkin' it'd be just one serving. But EIGHT!?

Chelsea

Yeah, so whatever the next person's favorite food is, it better be somethin' light if they want a bigger chance of completing this challenge.

...

The team starts walking towards the wheel as the Tansi Twins talk to the audience, and the crowd continues rooting and saying their positive and negative remarks towards them. Kendo gets close to Alexander and asks, "Alright, how exactly are you about to destroy this thing?"

Alexander answers, "By giving it something that this domain seems to lack... hydration..."

"Oh...Ooh?...*gasps* Ooooooh~," Kendo says, realizing what the Upendelaiki is implying.

"Once Rose presses the button, I'll go ahead and give it a good washing. It should short circuit, and Alphonse will have no choice *but* to end the challenge."

"Let's hope that your plan works, vanilla bean," Kendo snickers, "This is gonna get interestin'..."

They make it to the button, and Rose and Alexander share glances with each other and nod their heads, understanding exactly what they are going to do. She places her hand onto the flashing button and presses it. *DINGALINGALINGALINGALINGALING!* As the wheel spins, Alexander reaches his hands out towards the machine, and streams of hot water escape his palms

and hit it. As water seeps into the machine, the lights become brighter and flicker at a faster speed. It goes faster and faster, losing control, and electricity starts dancing everywhere, making the team back up. Soon, *kaput!* The machine breaks and slows down to a stop, causing the Umu crowd's rowdy cheering to become waves of gasps and shouts of disapproval.

“OOOH NO NO NO!” The team jumps from Alphonse's outburst and series of snorts, making him sound like a struggling engine about to give up on a vehicle. They look at Alphonse as he grits his teeth and yells, “YOU TUBS OF REGRET! ALWAYS TRYING TO FIND A WAY TO SUCK OUT THE FUN OUT OF EVERYTHING! *Snort snort!!* CERBERUS AND THAT ANIMAL CARETAKER MAY HAVE WENT EASY ON YOU EARTH SNOT, BUT UNLIKE THEM, I COULD CARE LESS HOW YOU WIND UP DEAD! YOU'RE NOT EVEN SUPPOSED TO BE HERE, OHOHOHO *snort snort snort!!!*” He snaps and then creates an orange portal in front of the team and sings out, “OOOH PROSCIUTTOOOO~!” As soon as he says his pet's name, Prosciutto the brown, fuzzy warthog prances out of the portal, his yellow-orange eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“AAAAWWWWW,” the crowd shouts out, and the team looks at the warthog, not sure how to react to him just yet.

Snort! Snort! Prosciutto looks at the team, wiggling his nose.

“PROSCIUTTO,” Alphonse shouts, “SEE THOSE WALKING ASSORTED RAG DOLLS IN FRONT OF YOU? THEY'RE EDIBLE~! THE FLESHY ONES'RE FILLED WITH A LOT OF CHERRY FILLING, AND THOSE FEATHERY ONES GOT RASPBERRY FILLING! SO GO ON, BOY, DIG IN!!”

BRRRRRT BRRRRRRRT!! Prosciutto releases a thunderous roar, and Alphonse creates a strawberry cupcake and throws it down for Prosciutto to eat. The warthog eats the cupcake,

devouring it in one bite, and a glow surrounds him and grows larger and larger. After a few seconds, the glow disappears and reveals Prosciutto to be much larger in size, and he looks down at the team with drool escaping his lips and glowing eyes, his pupils dilated. *WHOOOOSH!* Prosciutto blows hot air at the group through his moist snout, the subtle hint of sulfur hitting everyone's nostrils.

"... Huh... Wasn't expecting him to bring *you* out here," Kendo says loudly towards Prosciutto.

Prosciutto wastes no time and opens his mouth, about to eat the team whole. Alexander, however, surprises the giant warthog with his intense streams of hot water, slightly burning his mouth, *SQUEEAL SQUEEAL!* Prosciutto wiggles his head around, trying to recover from the surprise attack, but when he gets back to trying to eat his snack, he sees that the team is not in the same place. He looks around the arena, hearing the Peonis and Upendeonis in the crowd try to help him, and he sees the team running to the other side of the arena. *Snort snort snort!* Although he knows that his owner wants him to eat them hastefully, he decides to take his time and walks to the team, knowing that they can't go anywhere else. *Thud thud thud thud*, the sound of his hooves hitting the ground echoes throughout the area.

"Okay, so we got a huge ass warthog wantin' to eat us! What's the plan, now!?" Tenacity exclaims while running with her teammates.

"We chill it out while Rose finds a way to be useful," Issei exclaims while flying upwards and towards Prosciutto, aiming his ice gun towards him. *BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!* Prosciutto roars ferociously from the bullets piercing his back, sides, and face, and he starts trying to catch Issei.

Rose feels her face heat up from Issei's remark, not sure how she should take it. Alexander then yells out, "Thomas and I will help Issei beat down Prosciutto!" Thomas nods his head, agreeing with Alexander's plan, and they fly towards the warthog, Alexander using his hot water and Thomas using his light magic to create a crossbow, shooting multiple arrows at Alphonse's pet.

Everyone else stops running and looks at their winged team members fighting Prosciutto as best as they can. Melissa stands in front of Rose and grips her shoulders tightly, making sure her emerald-green eyes are locked onto her friend's ruby-red ones. "Alright, Rose," she says, "We need you to tap into your Quphanto side, *now*."

"Yeah, before we came here, we hyped the fuck outta you because your daddy wouldn't let you fight with us," Jacqueline jumps in.

"Aye, less pep talk, more creatin' bugs," Tenacity says while snapping her fingers.

"Guys," Rose says, trying to keep her breath steady, "I don't know if my bugs can really take him down..."

"Cherry lips," Kendo snorts, "Prosciutto is a simple Umu warthog, does nothing but eat shit with that other slob up there. *You're* a half Quphanto-" Then, he stops himself and smacks his lips and exclaims, "*Mmcht*, Black tea is right, Rose, put that fucker to sleep or something!!"

Rose looks at Kendo and stutters, "I-I don't know if I can-"

"WELL DO SOMETHING!" her friends simultaneously shout out.

Rose feels the pressure rain down on her like a waterfall of rocks and pebbles. She looks at Prosciutto still being distracted by the Upendelaikis and M-Hybrid. She looks at the large creature, her confidence becoming as small as a tick, but she tries to push herself to take her first step in exploring her abilities. She reminds herself of the times she'd take on the leader role

when attending Forestopolis Academy, and she recalls the time she came up with a strategy to fight the Cerberus Bros. and Pierre. She has always been the one to keep an optimistic mindset and eager to find the solution to everything. Even when faced with failure, she'd get back to try again. *I have to get my head in the game*, she thinks to herself, *My friends need me... Nermal needs me*. A fire filled with passion and determination ignites within her heart, and she clasps her hands and whispers to herself as she thinks of the insect that'll end this segment of the event for good.

Kendo, Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa watch Rose trying to work her magic, and after several seconds, a huge bright light appears, and it then takes the form of a large, glowing, blue-purple iridescent goliath birdeater. Although it's much bigger than the team, it's still slightly smaller than Prosciutto. Jacqueline and Melissa squeal at the sight, Jacqueline clinging onto Melissa tightly. Tenacity and Kendo look at the creature, and they can't help but to gawk at it, now questioning Rose's limits if she could have created a spider at such a large scale this entire time. "Ugh, really, Rose," Jacqueline whines, "Another spider!?"

"Never mind that," Melissa says, "You can make your insects *HUGE!*?"

However, Rose doesn't say anything to the two ladies as she continues keeping her focus on her creation. The goliath birdeater hisses and starts approaching the occupied warthog. Prosciutto continues trying to attack Alexander, Thomas, and Issei, but he has been unsuccessful at laying a single attack on them. Alphonse leans against the railing of the Emperor's Box, snorting furiously. "UUUGH, COME ON, PROSCIUTTO," Alphonse honks out, "USE THOSE STUBBY LEGS OF YOURS AND-" However, before he can finish his sentence, his eyes catch Rose's blue-purple goliath birdeater approaching his pet, and his round pupils constrict. "*Well now,*" Alphonse mutters to himself, "*It's about time she started to wake up...*" He then starts

yelling at his pet once again, “NEVER MIND THE GNATS, BOY, DEVOUR THE TARANTULA OVER THERE!”

Prosciutto listens to his friend, but as soon as he turns his head towards the direction Rose’s goliath birdeater is coming from, the spider leaps and lands on Prosciutto’s face. *SQUEEAAL SQUEEAAL!!* The warthog wiggles and jolts his head around, trying to shake off the arachnid, but he fails as it crawls onto his head and onto his back. Prosciutto shakes and shimmies, squealing in terror, but Rose’s spider continues having a good grip onto his body, and then *chomp!* It bites into Prosciutto, seeping its fangs into his warm, hairy hide. Instantly, the warthog feels an immense wave of warmth as if he was burrowing into a huge serving of hot mashed potatoes drenched in gravy. The solace feeling overwhelms the warthog, making his eyes roll back and fall onto his side. *THUD!* Dust flies around as Prosciutto’s body plops onto the ground, and loud snores escape his trout.

After fulfilling its purpose, the goliath birdeater disappears, and Rose immediately starts feeling a surge of pain pounding against her head. She groans and holds onto her head. Tenacity takes notice of this, but before she can express her concern, Alphonse starts laughing and clapping and the Umu audience cheers and shouts, seeing that the challenge is officially over. Alexander, Thomas, and Issei reunite with their group, relieved that Rose helped out. Before anyone can say anything, “*Ohohohohoho~*,” Alphonse cackles out as he looks at his pet, his laughter echoing throughout the Colosseum, and then he coos out, “Wook at my wittle baby sweeping wike he ate a twelve course meal~ *Ooohohoho~*” Then, he looks at the team with a smirk, and he says, “Congrats, slugs. You ruined my wheel, and now my Prosciutto is fast asleep. *But*, because you were entertaining during the first half *and* your puny Quphanto *slut* down there pulled a new trick out of her plump ass, I’ll let you proceed to the next challenge~. Perhaps the

stubby flower isn't dead weight, after all~ Now get over here and get your tiny reward, something that will always remind you that you're not 100% worthless! *Snort snort!*"

The team gets closer to the gluttonous Quphanto, and he digs his fingers into the crack of his behind and grabs the 0.25 carat old european cut citrine his fuzzy cheeks were holding in storage for him. Everyone notices this and cringe, the sounds of revolt fills the area. Alphonse holds out the orange gem, and the gem floats to the team, hints of sweat and other unworldly scents reek out of it. Rose refuses to grab this one so Alexander summons a sphere of hot water, letting the gem fall into it in hopes that the water can clean out whatever impact Alphonse has on it. "Well, that's it from me," Alphonse says playfully, "Have fun with that thing, and try not to die~! Ohoho~!" Alphonse summons a portal underneath the snoozing Prosciutto and destroyed wheel, and they sink downwards, leaving the Colosseum to make room for the next challenge. The portals disappear, and Alphonse sits back down on his throne, letting the Tansi Twins commentate.

...

Chelsea

And there you have it folks. The Earth Bitches surpassed the Gluttony Quphanto's challenge and are now able to move onto the next one~!

Fuschia

It looks like our lil' Rosie-Posie is gettin' in touch with her powers finally~! Do you think the challenges are gonna be much easier for them now?

Chelsea

Hmmm, not sure, it's too early to tell. It'd be cool if she does manage to help her friends fly through this shit, but that was her first time showin' us a trick so grand.

Fuschia

Well, when we get back, Aidoneus will ask his son once again if he wants to accept his deal finally, but let's be honest, we know he's gonna decline again.

Chelsea

Yep, exactly. Well, you lovely folks at home, get your refills, take a piss, and go ahead and get in a quickie~ We'll be right back~!

Fuschia

See you in a bit~!
(giggles and waves)

EDM music starts playing while the Tansi Twins talk to each other. The camera pans to the team talking to each other, Alexander releasing the cleaner citrine gem from his water sphere, and Rose grabs it. Thomas gives her the pouch, and she places the citrine inside it, the gem joining the garnet they earned from the first challenge. Then the screen fades to black and the commercials start.

Chapter 7

The commercials run while the Umu denizens take care of their needs so that they can be comfortable for the rest of the event. The team sits on the sand, mentally preparing themselves to go through more torturous challenges. Jacqueline stretches and whimpers in agony, and she asks, “What time is it? Do you guys *not* get tired?”

Issei notices Jacqueline’s lethargic nature coming around, and he says, “Awww, looks like someone isn’t ready for that ‘hero’ role. Aren’t you the main one that wanted to get into shit like this?”

Jacqueline says, “Okay, but, like, even heroes need their beauty rest! My body feels like it’s gonna wither away if I keep going!”

Melissa then says, “Not gonna lie, but I’m feeling a lil’ exhausted myself.”

Tenacity lets out a long sigh and says, “I’d hate to admit it, but a soft bed with some blankets does sound nice, right about now, *but* the fact that Nermal is bein’ held hostage is what’s keepin’ me from noddin’ off.”

“Yeah,” Melissa says, “*sighs* I’m missing our NeeNee... she’d be here pumping us up and telling us to keep going.”

“Ugh, right,” Jacqueline joins, “this is such bullshit. *whines* I wanna get Nermal back and go hooooome!”

Thomas lets out a sigh and explains, “I see that even though Aidoneus’ concoction has given you all the ability to be inside the Spirit Realm, your bodies still function like they belong in Gaia.”

“Well how come Issei isn’t actin’ like we are,” Jacqueline asks like a fussy child.

“Because I do this shit for a livin’, duh,” Issei mocks Jacqueline’s tone, “Plus, you forget I’m half Malaiki and half Ludamu, so this shit is nothing to me *naturally*. Why do you think Aidoneus only gave *y’all* the voodoo juice?”

Thomas explains, “Yes, as beings who spend most of their lifetime in the spiritual plane, we can go on for days, months, even *years* without rest. However, with that said, we do become exhausted and require occasional rests if we want to perform at our very best.”

“Sooooooo, with the whole ‘time’ thing,” Tenacity joins in the conversation, “Do you guys even have that really? Like would you be able to tell us what time it is now?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Thomas begins, “Although time *does* exist in our domains, there is not necessarily a concept behind it. We don’t tell time like how you humans tell time. All we do is basically live our lives, fulfilling our purposes until it is time for us to incarnate or *reincarnate*, depending on our scenario. We’re never too early, too late, or right on time to something. We’re just here.”

“Huh... a world where time practically doesn’t exist,” Tenacity says softly, “That’s one less worry for you guys. You don’t have to worry about feeling rushed.”

“Mhm, so if you asked me what time it was right now, I honestly wouldn’t be able to tell you, hmhm,” Thomas chuckles.

“*That must be the dream,*” Tenacity whispers to herself.

Thomas hears the goth girl’s quiet wish, but he decides to not press the topic anymore. Kendo listens to the conversation, transforming back into his human form, and he looks at Rose who is staring into the orange gem and red gem they have earned. He smirks at her and says, “You know, you’re pretty brave to be holding that doodoo gem.” Rose hears Kendo and smiles softly,

but she chooses to not say anything. He tilts his head, curious of what's going through the Quphanto Descendant's head, and he asks, "How are you feeling, cherry lips?"

"Um," Rose begins, "I'm... okay... summoning that big spider really did a number on me, but I'll be alright. What about you? Are you feeling better?"

"Well, my mouth is begging for some mouthwash, but hey, at least you won't have to worry about me begging for a snack any time soon," he says, making Rose giggle.

"Yeah, that is true," she says while placing the small gems back into the pouch and giving the pouch back to Thomas. She lets out a sigh and says, "I wonder what these gems are for... Why are they giving us rewards like these?"

Kendo shrugs and says, "Beats me. The Quphantos here never were the hospitable type if you couldn't tell... so I'm just as confused as you are."

"HmMMMMMM..."

"Although, I'll admit, out of all of them, I would have figured Ophelia would have given us a reward... and maybe Kal..."

"Who are they?"

"Oh, you'll see them soon. Ophelia is the Sloth Quphanto, and Kal is the Lust Quphanto. If they're anything like I remember, I'm sure their challenges won't be too difficult."

"So you've had a relationship with these guys?"

"Pffft, of course. I was raised here for most of my life. The Quphantos and I were pretty tight at one point... not as close as they are with Pops, but ya' know what I mean."

"What was your life like here before you came to Earth?"

"Hmmm... *before* visiting Earth?... It was okay..."

"Just okay?"

“Yep, I’d go into details but, uuuuh, let’s get through this first.”

“Very well, then. When we get out of here, you owe me a story time.”

“Hahahaha! Cherry lips, is this your way of saying I owe you a date~?”

“H-Huh!? N-No, I just said you owe me a ‘story time’!” Rose looks away, her cheeks becoming a rosy-red color, and Kendo chuckles at the sight.

“Hahahaha! I know, I know, I’m just teasing you,” the chaotic jokester says, resting his hand on her shoulder.

Tenacity notices Rose and Kendo talking, her protectiveness wanting to get in between them. However, the possibility of the protectiveness being jealousy in disguise comes to mind, and she starts to slightly question herself for a second. *Surely, I’m not hating, am I*, she thinks to herself, *I’m only worried because she’s getting a lil’ too close with someone that doesn’t seem to have her best interests at heart. I mean I know I don’t really know Kendo like that, yet, but with how he’s been behaving so far, I wouldn’t be surprised if he offered to lay with her right then and there and then not pursue a deeper relationship afterwards.* Instead of interfering with them, she shakes off this negative feeling and bites her tongue. *Maybe this place is gettin’ to me. Surely, Rose knows not to go catchin’ feelings for a guy like him at a time like this... right?* Meanwhile, Alexander doesn’t pay attention to any of his teammates as he continues to long for Amethyst to come back.

While Usiku waits for Delilah to get out of the restroom, he notices his daughter and Aidoneus’ son talking to each other. He can’t help but feel like he should interfere and start questioning what they are doing, but he keeps his behind planted to his seat. About a minute later, Delilah comes back and sits next to her soulmate. “Ugh,” she groans out, “I swear these are *the worst* restrooms I’ve ever been to! Never mind the smell of shit taking over my nose, it’s the

fact that I walked in and saw two Peonis going at it right there at the sinks! It was enough to make me consider holding my pee!”

“Hmm,” Usiku mumbles out, not paying full attention to Delilah’s restroom woes.

“And I mean they were just rawdogging,” Delilah continues, “Usi, imagine having to use the bathroom while hearing someone get backshots. I have never felt so uncomfortable... but I betcha Shandon wouldn’t mind it.”

“Hm,” Usiku replies.

“...Are you even listening to me?”

“Mmmhm...”

“What did I say then?”

“You hate the bathrooms here, Peonis fucking, and Shandon being Shandon.”

“Hmm... Okay, good, you are listening for the most part~... But honey, eye contact would be nice...”

Usiku slightly winces from Delilah’s sentence, and he finally looks at her, seeing her pout at him for not looking at her or adding much to their conversation. He finally says, “*sighs* Sorry, my love...”

“Are you thinking about what Rose just did out there,” Delilah asks, “I’ll admit, it was something amazing!... But I hope that she’s not hurting herself doing that...”

“I didn’t think that she’d be successful in accomplishing such a feat,” Usiku says, looking down at the floor. He then goes back to looking at their daughter, seeing her still talking to Kendo, and that same feeling of wanting to monitor their conversation bothers him again. *Where are those bats when I need them*, he thinks to himself.

Delilah notices Usiku's disconnectedness and takes the time to really analyze what's truly bothering him besides the revelation of Rose being able to summon insects and make them so huge. She follows his gaze and sees the same thing he's seeing, and automatically, it all makes sense. "Usi," she sighs, "Please don't tell me you're worried about our Rose getting into some boy trouble right at this second..."

"*You know how she is, 'Lilah,*" Usiku mutters to her.

"... What's that supposed to mean," she sneers out, tilting her head and squinting her eyes whilst crossing her arms.

"I mean she's gullible."

"*Scoff!* Usiku!!"

"It's true. Look, I'll commend Rose for staying focused most of the time and being a smart and kind soul. But... once someone slithers into her social circles and gives her even a microscopic dosage of flirtation or affection, she'll take that and multiply it by 10."

"How the hell did you even come up with that conclusion!? She's only encountered *one person.*"

"You never noticed how she would act with her crushes?"

"Huh? *What* crushes!? After *that* incident, she never spoke about her social life to us for a couple years unless it was about school events and what she was doing as Class Vice President."

"..."

"...Usiku, don't tell me you had your sisters *spy* on our daughter."

"...Anyways-"

"*Usiku...*"

“What did you expect me to do, Delilah!? Just continue sending my daughter off to the place with no type of surveillance knowing damn well that there were more creeps out there waiting to snatch her up? If anything were to have ever happened to her again, I made sure that I’d be the first to know.”

“*sighs...*”

“Don’t start viewing me as some villain, ‘Lilah. I did what I thought was best for our daughter at the time. She wanted to continue going to that school, so I found a way to put my mind at ease.”

“Look, I understand the sense of urgency and wanting to make sure Rose was okay. It was heartbreaking knowing that she was being used and kept it under wraps from us. It was even more gut wrenching when she thought that it was all love... But honey, that incident wasn’t *her* fault. It was *that monster’s* fault. But by spying on *her*, it just seems like you didn’t trust her...”

“Babe, she was a teenager in a school filled with freaks. It’s not that I didn’t trust *her*, it’s that I didn’t trust *the people she was around*. My point is... I was protective of Rose back then, and I’m going to continue being that way, even now.”

“Usiku, she’s-”

“I’m worried that the longer Kendo interacts with Rose, the easier it will be for her to lose her focus and start mixing up her priorities, and I will have to step in to stop it.”

Seeing that her lover is dead set on monitoring Rose closely, Delilah decides to stop entertaining the conversation, and she keeps her arms crossed and now crosses her legs, her eyes looking at anything else that is not Usiku. Usiku notices Delilah disconnecting, and he says, “Babe?”

She stays silent.

“*Sighs* Delilah, come on, don’t do this,” Usiku pleads, “Was it something that I said?”

“...”

“Was it the statement about monitoring Rose?”

“It was *everything*. From you wanting to watch Rose like a hawk even when she’s an *adult*, to you calling her gullible, like my baby doesn’t know any better, and you don’t trust her judgment. I understand thinking like that when she was in school, but Usiku, she’s grown up and has gotten wiser.”

“*What are you-* Delilah, I was hoping that you’d see this concern the way that I see it. You went through it before, do you *want* to see Rose go through what you experienced? You can’t deny that you too were-”

“*I trust that my daughter will not go down the path I was once on and make the right decisions.*”

“Babe-”

“Usiku, can we drop this and focus on the matter at hand!? ***Rose could possibly die at any moment in these challenges!***”

“...”

“Our daughter is *pushing* herself to new heights, doing shit that she’s never done before, and instead of acknowledging the fact that *you* did not properly prepare Rose for situations like these, you’re getting your boxer shorts twisted up over the thought of her catching feelings?!”

“Delilah-”

“*Hmph!* Get *your* priorities straight.”

Delilah says nothing more, and continues giving Usiku the silent treatment, even kicking it up a notch by scooting away from him. Usiku’s heart drops from his soulmate’s frustration, but he

knows that he can't say or do anything now to calm her down. Instead, he just releases a long, depleted sigh, and he waits until the commercial break ends.

...

EDM music starts playing, indicating that the commercial break is finally over and the event can continue. The camera goes to the Tansi Twins as they wave and smile at the audience at home.

Fuschia

Aaaand welcome back, you heathens~! It is time for some more "Deal or Torture"~!

Chelsea

We have gone through two challenges so far, and the Earth Bitches are still kickin'. Will the third challenge be the one to end their lil' adventure? Will there even BE a third challenge?

Fuschia

Oouuu, that is true, Chels, because Lord Aidoneus still has to check in with Anti and see if he's still declining his deal.

Chelsea

With that said, let's not waste time and give the floor to our beloved leader, Lord Aidoneus~.

The people of Umu cheer as Aidoneus sits back up from his throne chair, ready to repeat the cycle, once again. The team makes their way to him, already knowing Kendo's answer. The screen splits into two screens, showing Aidoneus and Kendo. A worker-Peoni, once again, gives Kendo his microphone. The crowd calms down to hear the conversation.

Aidoneus

Hello, again, son~.

Kendo

Just get the challenge started, Pops.

Aidoneus

You're really not considering my deal, huh...?

Kendo

I told you, change it up to where both Nermal AND Amethyst get to go home with their friends, and then I would consider.

Aidoneus

(slightly laughs)

Son, be serious. Even if I were to sweeten the deal somehow, you'd still find a way to defy me because you know you'd be sacrificing your so-called "freedom".

Kendo

Hmmmmmm, you don't know that~. I might actually let you have your way just for shits and giggles.

Aidoneus

Ooooh Anti~

Kendo

Yeah?

Aidoneus

(monotone)

I'm not one of your pathetic human toys. You cannot play with my emotions so easily.

Kendo

Awwww, are we getting frustrated now~?

Aidoneus

(chuckles)

Far from it, actually~

Kendo

Alright, well, it's still a no.

Aidoneus

Hmmmm... ladies?

The camera shifts to the Tansi Twins.

Chelsea

Yeeah, we knew Anti was gonna say "no deal". Let's waste no more time and get into the third challenge.

Fuschia

But first~! This challenge was brought to you by Platinum Paradise~! Surround yourself with fun and possibly get rich or fuck you and your family over at Platinum Paradise~!



An image of the sponsor takes over the screen as sounds of a spider crawling can be heard along with the sound of slot machines, dice being thrown down, and casino chips scattering.

Chelsea

Aaah the casino, and not just ANY casino~ This is THE BEST casino here in Umu~ And of course, let's give a round of applause for the Quphanto that made the casino a reality~! Give it up for Lady Demona, the Greed Quphanto, here to tell us about her challenge "Raining Halos"!

As soon as Chelsea introduces Demona, the crowd applauds, and the camera focuses on the Greed Quphanto as she stands up from her throne chair, making some Peonis and Upendeonis whistle at the sight.

...

The team looks at Demona in awe as they take in her glistening appearance, noticing that the tan woman has the lower half of a golden spider. Her topaz-yellow eyes sparkle and slit pupils constrict in excitement, and giggles escape the sparkling, gold mask that covers up most of her face. She then fluffs her gold, wavy hair, making sure that the crowd can see her upper body being covered by silky, silver spider web. The spider web makes it look like she's wearing a translucent, long-sleeved top with a deep v-cut. She then adjusts her platinum head mic, making sure that her face mask wouldn't cause any problems with it.

"*Goddamn,*" Jacqueline whispers to her friends, "*She's hot, too~!*"

"*Jackie, not now,*" Tenacity mutters.

Demona leans against the railing while eyeing Kendo and she says cheerfully, "Hellooooo, Kendooooo~,," while wiggling her fingers to greet him, showing off her platinum claw rings decorated with pristine white diamonds.

"Aah, finally," Kendo says while crossing his arms and smirking, "A person who gets my name right~!"

"Of course I got your name right, silly, teeheeheehee~," Demona giggles, "You always were my *favorite* person to play games with. The least I can do is call you by your name~"

"Well, it's nice seeing you again, Demona," Kendo says, "How are the kids?"

"Awww, my babies are doing just fine~! Actually, they will be helping me with this *lovely* challenge I've created for you and your friends!"

“...O-Oh yeah?”

“Mhmmmmm, hmhmhm~! Lemme show ya’~!”

After saying that, Demona crawls out of the Emperor Box, making the crowd lose their minds, leaving them wondering what she’s about to do. The team is about to get their weapons ready, but the greedy Quphanto hums in a light tune as she towers over them and has her hands dance in the air to show that she’s not trying to attack them. Kendo looks at his teammates and shakes his head at them, nonverbally telling them to relax. They do as he says and eases up, though they still feel like something is crawling all over their intestines as the Quphanto stands near them.

Kendo looks up at Demona and whistles, and he sighs, “Man, you’re really trying to kill me with your beauty right now, huh~? Ooh Demona, it’s already bad enough that you’re wearin’ my favorite color, but now you’re wantin’ to invade my space~? *Sighs* I think I’ll drop dead right here, right now~”

“Teeheeheehee, oh you flatter me,” Demona chimes out.

“No seriously,” Kendo coos out, “With your long, slender legs, your big, shiny butt, and your ample chest treasures sittin’ nicely in all that web, I sometimes wonder why *you’re* not considered the sexiest Quphanto~!”

“Ahahahaha~! Awww, Kendo,” Demona sighs, “You’ve always been a charmer, but I’m afraid sweet talking me won’t change up anything~”

“*Aren’t you buttering her up a little **too much**, anyways,*” Issei whispers to Kendo, “*We don’t even know what she’s going to do, yet.*”

“Trust me, you’re gonna want me to butter her up because if her babies are involved, then we’re in some deep shit,” Kendo hisses out between his teeth towards Issei, making sure the microphone he’s holding doesn’t pick up either of their voices.

“Hey, it’s rude to whisper in front of a Quphanto, you know,” Demona scoffs.

“My apologies, Lady Double D,” Kendo says, trying to stay on Demona’s good side. His comment makes her giggle a little. Scratching the back of his head, he then says, “Soo, uuuuh, what’s the game we’re gonna play this time?”

“I’m glad you asked~!” As soon as Demona answers, she holds her hand out and a ball of yellow light appears, and the light grows and grows until, *pop!* The light turns into many sparkles, revealing a large, golden slot machine adorned with spiders that have been carved into the gold. Demona starts crawling closer to the machine that’s even taller than her, and the team follows her. The girls try to look at the machine for the challenge, but they can’t help but to look at Demona in a mixture of awe and fear, amazed by the Quphanto’s golden spider body and how she’s about as tall as an elephant. Demona then summons two podiums, each with a lever, but one of the podiums is larger in size than the other.

Demona then says, “Let’s see how lucky you guys are~! Unfortunately, money isn’t the reward, but I’m sure that getting closer to freeing Nermal is just as valuable, if not more, hmmm~ All you have to do is pull the lever and let the slot machine do its thing! You’re gonna want to land on a row of halos... get a row of halos *three* times, and you can go on to the next challenge~!” As soon as Demona says that, the slots on the machine start turning and turning until, *click click click*, it stops on a row of halos, and it plays a harp playing an optimistic tune. She continues, “*But* something will happen if you land on a row of either one of these *adorable* spiders~” The slot machine turns again, and *click click click*, it stops on a golden spider head

with diamonds for eyes, a rose-gold spider head with pearls for eyes, and a platinum spider head with sapphires for eyes. “Land on a row of gold, rose-gold, or platinum, and you’ll be going against a wave of my babies~!”

“So the game stops when we hit a row of halos three times,” Issei says, making sure he understands the goal.

“Mmmhmmm, that’s right~,” Demona confirms, “But every time you land on my babies, you have to fight them~ And that could go on *forever*, teeheehee~! Oh, and Alexander~?”

Alexander slightly jumps from his name escaping the masked Quphanto. He looks up at her, trying to keep his eyes onto hers, and he gulps and stutters, “Y-Yes?”

Demona hisses, “***Don’t get cute and destroy my slot machine... unless you want to feel my babies’ wrath...***” Her hisses sound like ones of a spider stridulating.

Alexander feels his throat tightening from the threat, but his motivation to get to Amethyst instantly reminds him of why he doesn’t have the time to cower. In order for him to get to the love of his life, and for Rose and her friends to save Nermal, he has to do what he can to push them forward, even if it means displeasing the Umu Quphantos. His face contorts into one with stubbornness, but before he could say something smart back to the Quphanto, Kendo wraps his arm around him, pulling him in close, and he chuckles, “Hahaha! You don’t have to worry about a thing, Demona~! We’ll play the game fairly this time around!” Alexander grinds his teeth as Kendo has the audacity to wrap his arm around him as if they are cool with each other when in reality, they’re the complete opposite. Kendo then stammers, “But uuuuh, *ahem*, c-could we put a limit on how many times we have to fight your babies? Hehe...”

“Hmmm? Now why would I do that~?” Demona questions the chaotic jokester, cocking her head to the side, digging into Kendo’s soul with her sharp gaze.

“I-It’s just that you have it to where we have to get a row of halos a certain amount of times, why is there no limit to the amount of times we get a row of spiders,” Kendo points out with a smile on his face, though a bead of sweat rolls down the side of his temple.

“Awwww... you don’t miss my babies, Kendo,” she asks while whimpering.

“Demona, this challenge is for me *and* the Gaians *and* Mazans. All I’m sayin’ is cut them a *little* slack.”

“But what’s the point of a game if the risks aren’t sky high~? Ooh... or are you saying their luck is nonexistent~? Teeheehee~!”

“What I’m saying is Abigor’s and Alphonse’s challenges had a limit-”

“And you didn’t bother getting through Alphonse’s~”

“I *promise* we won’t do anything to cut the fun short, my golden lady.”

“HMMMMMMMM... *fine*... 13 times~!”

“H-Huh!?”

“Either land on a row of halos 3 times or a row of my babies 13 times, and I’ll let you go~!”

“Huh... *sighs* Alright...”

“These puny souls have you on their side~ It should be no problem getting the halos three times.”

Thomas can’t help but notice the large lever that rests besides the smaller one. He grabs the microphone from Kendo and says, “Excuse me, but what is the other lever for?” He points at it, and Demona looks at the lever as well, not stopping herself from snickering.

“Oh,” Demona starts, and then she happily announces, “This lever is for *me*~!” Suddenly, *BA-BUMP!* The team’s hearts simultaneously sink. She then says, “Teeheeheehee~! That’s right~! I’m not about to sit around and watch you the whole time. *I* want to *experience* the thrill

along with you~! I want to feel the weight of *your* outcome resting upon *my* shoulders~! So we'll take turns~! You pull your lever first time around, then I'll go, and we'll just keep that pattern going~! Who knows, I might actually help you gain a row of halos, and I wouldn't be able to get annoyed with anyone but myself~!"

The crowd starts becoming rowdy, begging for the Quphanto to start the challenge. She instantly cackles at the audience's excitement. "Well, you hear your fans," Demona coos out at the team, "Let's get the fun started~! Oh, and *Keeendoooo~*"

"...Yes," Kendo reluctantly asks.

"No transforming into an animal this time around," Demona suggests, "I'm sure you're exhausting yourself doing that... and I need you to be energized if you're going to be playing with my babies, again, teeheeheeheehee~!"

"Heh...Hehehe....right," Kendo struggles to speak.

"Well, let's not waste any more time~! Chelsea and Fuschia~?"

...

The worker-Peoni takes the mic away from Kendo, and the camera shifts from the Quphanto and team to the Tansi Twins sitting on the edge of the Emperor's Box, Fuschia dangling her legs.

Chelsea

You heard the Quphanto~. She said she's here to have fun and potentially give her babies the meal of their lives~.

Fuschia

Will the Earth Bitches manage to get the rows of halos? Are they gonna have to fight for their lives? Will they make it through this challenge in one piece? Start placing your bets~! My money is on the Earth Bitches dying!

(giggles)

Chelsea

Hmmmmm, my money is on them getting the halos. Anti always played with Demona, and if you're playing with her, your luck must be insane.

Fuschia

Either that or you have a death wish!

The camera then shifts to the Demona and the team, and Demona is seen clapping her hands, clearly wanting the team to play their turn. Kendo is the one to pull the lever, and as soon as he pulls it down with all of his might, *blingalingalingaling!* *Click! Click! Click!* A harp plays a cheery tune.

Chelsea

Ooouuuuu, and Anti managed to win a row of halos for his team!

Fuschia

Two to go~!

The Greed Quphanto claps very quickly, applauding Kendo as her giggles echo, and then she instantly rests her hand on her lever and abruptly pulls it down. The slots go around and around, and then *click! Click! Click!* The sound of a harp plays again.

Fuschia

Oh wow~! Demona gave the Earth Bitches another row of halos!

Chelsea

They just need one more row, and they can end the challenge and move a step closer to the end!

Kendo doesn't waste time and pulls the lever in front of him, making the slot machine spin. They all watch the rows spin to the point that the icons are a blur. After a couple of seconds,

click! Click! Click! The sound of bells start chiming and spiders stridulating start playing. Demona starts clapping rapidly and laughing.

Demona

Teeheeheehee~!! Oh joy~! You get to play with my golden babies! She doesn't say anything else as she climbs onto the slot machine. She creates a yellow portal above the team, and hundreds of gold spiders with diamond eyes come falling into the arena, surrounding them. The team looks at the puppy-sized arachnids as they get their weapons ready while Kendo whispers something into Rose's ear, and after a few seconds, she summons dozens of puppy-sized emperor scorpions that glow a royal-purple along with her red wasps to sting everyone in the team to give them more strength.

Chelsea

Welp, this the first round of spiders that the Earth Bitches are about to suffer through. I hope they have a gooooood strategy because those things aren't gonna be easy to take down.

Fuschia

Here's hoping that Anti told them about their vicious bite and super hard shells. They're not the kind of spider you can just step on.

Chelsea

I think since Rose amped up her teammates' power, they should be able to pierce through those spindly treasures easily... although probably still not able to stomp on them.

The golden spiders start ambushing the team, but the emperor scorpions grab onto them and start ripping their metallic legs. The spiders not being attacked by the scorpions lunge forward, and the team uses their guns, bow and arrows, or crossbows to pierce through the shells. *BANG! BANG! PEW! PEW!* Sounds of bullets and arrows flying through fills the arena along with the crowd cheering.

Chelsea

It's guns-a-blazin' time with Issei and Tenacity using their guns, Melissa with her bow and arrow, and Thomas with his crossbow. Alexander uses his hot water to push the spiders back to give his team some more elbow room, and Rose's scorpions rip and tear their limbs and pierce them easily with their stingers.

Fuschia

We can't forget about our girl Jacqueline tryin' her best with her ice staff... although she's doing more whining and squirming than anything. I'm surprised a spider hasn't bitten her, yet.

Chelsea

Yeah, yet.

Fuschia

(laughs)

Look, sis! She's still trying to step on one of them!

Chelsea

Pffft, there might be a dent, but I can't see it from here.

Fuschia

Huh... that's interesting, Anti isn't really doin' anything..

Chelsea

Okay, so I'm *not* trippin'. I wonder what's making him stand around like a statue?

Fuschia

Do you think it's because Demona challenged him to not become an animal? Or is it that he's got arachnophobia?

Chelsea

I don't know, but he better get involved soon or he'll have to hear an earful from his friends. Even the pale thot is putting in some work.

Rose is seen talking to Kendo, but Kendo snaps back at her. The Quphanto/Tansi hybrid's face scrunches up and she's seen arguing with Kendo, and they go back and forth, only for Issei to snap them back into reality as he shoots down more spiders.

Fuschia

Awww, another lover's quarrel~!

Chelsea

Fusch, please..

Fuschia

Anti finally comes around and uses his fire abilities to create a pistol and starts shooting down whatever spiders are remaining~!

Chelsea

About damn time, I know that Demona's babies got a scary reputation, but c'mon, your freedom is on the line.

Fuschia

You hear that, Anti!? Now's not the time to be a pussy!!

The golden spiders continue putting up a good fight, giving the team a few close calls, but the team manages to stand their ground and shoot them all down, ending the round. The spiders' bodies disappear leaving behind their souls.

Chelsea

Well, there goes that round. It seems like Rose is becoming much more of a helping hand this time around, coming up with all of these different insects and giving them different abilities.

Fuschia

Right!? It's about time~! I can't wait to see more of her scorpions in the next round.

Chelsea

That's IF they land on the spider heads again.

The team walks back to the slot machine, and Demona crawls off of it to stand in front of her lever. Demona plays her turn and pulls her lever. However, she doesn't get a row. Kendo pulls his lever, but alas, he doesn't get a row, either. After a couple of turns, Demona pulls her lever, and she finally gets a row, and the sound of spiders stridulating and bells chiming plays.

Fuschia

Uh-ooooh~!

Chelsea

Okay, they might be in trouble now because that's-

Demona

My *beautiful* rose gold babies~!! Oooh, this is going to be interesting~! Teeheeheehee~!

Demona crawls onto the slot machine once more, and she opens a portal above the arena again, letting another batch of spiders fall into the arena to fight the team. The spiders are rose-gold with shimmery pearls for eyes. They glare at their food, hissing

at them, and they start lunging towards them, commencing the next battle.

Chelsea

Alright, second round of spiders, this time the batch of babies that might freeze up the Earth Bitches.

Fuschia

Don't the rose-gold ones paralyze you?

Chelsea

Yes. The golds just got a mean bite, rose-golds paralyze, and I won't even talk about the platinums...

Fuschia

What do the platinum spiders do?

Chelsea

I feel like it's only right that I wait until the Earth Bitches fight them~... IF they have to fight them.

Fuschia

Awww okie...

Chelsea

The Earth Bitches are not in the mood to disappoint us as they continue using the same method they used in the previous round. Bullets and arrows are flying everywhere, piercing through the spiders' shells, and Rose's scorpions are still giving them a snip.

Fuschia

Jacqueline and Anti are being helpful, too, trying to fight through their fear of the shiny fiends.

Chelsea

This will probably not take them too long to finish them off just as long as they keep those things at a good distance.

The team continues to fight the rose-gold spiders, getting rid of half of them, but then a spider sneaks up on Rose ready to bite her until Kendo sees it and pushes Rose out of the way and shoots the arachnid. By pushing Rose, she becomes flustered, and her ankle brushes against another spider, making her squeal and then *CRUNCH!* She instinctively stomps on the spider's head, crushing its shell effortlessly and killing it.

Chelsea and Fuschia

WHAT THE FUCK!?

Fuschia

Did she just kill that thing WITH HER FOOT? WITH NO PROBLEM AT ALL!?

Kendo looks at Rose with the same amount of shock, and he pulls her back as her scorpions come to her rescue and fight whatever spiders approach them. Kendo is seen saying something to Rose, but she snatches herself away from him and goes back to stomping on as many spiders as she can.

Fuschia

SHE'S A FUCKING PSYCHOPATH!

Chelsea

No kiddin', she's taking a risk of getting paralyzed, but I guess even Anti can't tell her anything as this newfound discovery is numbing her up already.

Fuschia

Alexander is coming around to wash away whatever spiders Rose can't get to at the moment.

Chelsea

I'll admit, I feel really bad for the babies. This place is out of their element.

Fuschia

Right? They're used to their prey bein' stuck in their web and strugglin', not free and are able to fight with whatever.

Chelsea

Makes me question why Lady Demona would even put them through this to begin with.

Fuschia

Well, her babies always did enjoy playing with their food, they probably didn't think that the Earth Bitches would put up a fight.

Chelsea

Well, I mean, if I looked at the roster of people I was going up against, I'd assume it'd be a cakewalk, too.

The team manages to kill off the herd of rose-gold spiders, Rose stomping on the last one. *CRUNCH!* The round ends, and the Umu crowd cheers for them. Demona crawls off of the slot machine clapping for them as well, giggling.

Chelsea

Alright, we're sensing a commercial break coming through soon, but let's see if we can squeeze one more row in~

Kendo and Demona take turns pulling their levers and not getting a match. There are few turns where they have close calls, only having two slots with halos or two slots with a spider head. It's Kendo's turn, and he pulls his lever, then *click! Click! Click!* Bells chime and spiders stridulate.

Chelsea and Fuschia

Uh...oooooooooh...

Demona

Teeheeheehee~! My golden and rose-golden babies were just warm-ups~! Let's see what you can do with my platinum babies~!

As she speaks to the team, she opens the portal once more, and a batch of platinum spiders with sapphires for eyes land onto the arena. They waste no time and jump high, startling the team, but the teammates with guns and arrows try shooting at them. Jacqueline and Alexander try to spray and swing the spiders away, and Rose quickly summons a bunch of blue beetles to protect her team from whatever spiders they couldn't get to.

Fuschia

The platinum spiders are literally THE LAST spiders anyone should mess with!

Chelsea

Yeah, one bite from them, and you might as well just lay down and wait for the Reaper to come retrieve you.

Fuschia

Rose's shield is protecting her team from the fiasco, but for how long? Anti seems to be telling them what's going on and how they should approach these feisty fellas.

Jacqueline is seen grabbing onto Melissa, whining to her, but Melissa shrugs her off and is possibly trying to motivate her. Tenacity steps in and snaps at Jacqueline, and the two girls argue. Then, Issei gets in between them, telling them to calm down and focus. Kendo talks to Rose, and Rose clasps her hands

and tries to summon another insect as the platinum spiders kill off the scorpions and slowly break down the barrier, the beetles on everyone's shoulders start fluttering their wings. Right before the beetles flutter away and disappear, Rose summons a bunch of cyan grasshoppers that hop onto everyone and *shwoop!* The team disappears, leaving the spiders confused. A second later *shwoop!* The team appears again still inside the arena but is now far away from the spiders. *GAAAASP!* The crowd inhales the hot air around them sharply, including Chelsea and Fuschia.

Chelsea

Ain't no way this girl *teleported* her friends!

Fuschia

WHERE WAS THIS IN THE LAST CHALLENGES!?

Suddenly, Rose rests her hand on her head again, and she loses her balance. Before she falls to the ground, Kendo catches her and says something to Jacqueline. With no hesitation, Jacqueline holds onto Rose as they sit on the ground while the rest of the team fights off the platinum spiders.

Chelsea

And it looks like Rose and Jacqueline are out of the fight for now! I guess summoning all of those bugs is tiring out our precious flower.

Fuschia

I don't even think she fully recovered from the last challenge when she summoned that big ass spider.

Chelsea

I already knew that Jacqueline would be taken out of the situation since she barely knows what she's doing.

Fuschia

I hope a spider bites her in her nonexistent ass sooner or later.

Chelsea

Right, they gotta fight these things 13 times? It's bound to happen.

Fuschia

Issei, Tenacity, Melissa, Thomas, and Anti are shooting away, and Alexander continues keeping the creepy-crawlies at bay.

Chelsea

I see some of the spiders treating the hot water like it's a hot shower though, and they push through!

Fuschia

They hop and hop and hop, Issei managing to shoot them down before they get too close.

The plan that has been used for the previous rounds still proves useful as the team doesn't lose focus or determination although the platinum spiders are more durable and Rose's insects aren't helping this time around. The spiders try to hit the team at every angle, some crawling while others hop, but the team is able to catch them and watch each other's backs.

Chelsea

I'll applaud the Earth Bitches for being able to keep themselves from bein' touched by the spiders for this long.

Fuschia

(sighs)

I'm on the edge of my seat anxious about these things biting them in their ankles. I just KNOW that it's gonna happen, I just know it!

Chelsea

Well, we're gonna have to wait a lil' longer for that to happen as this round comes to a close.

The team defeats the last of the platinum spiders, and the crowd cheers and Demona claps while the team hurries back to Rose and Jacqueline. The camera shifts from the arena to the Tansi Twins.

Fuschia

Alright, I think this is the perfect time to give them a break and let the commercials run.

Chelsea

Yep, when we get back, we'll talk to 'em for a lil' bit and then continue "Raining Halos"~. Will the team ever get their last row of halos? Or are they going to be fighting more sparkling monstrosities? Stay tuned to find out~
(waves)

Fuschia

See you all in a bit~!
(giggles and waves)

The Tansi Twins wave at the camera as it fades to black and starts the commercials.

Chapter 8

The lights within the throne room are dim, and the commercials play on the extra large tv that rests in the middle of the room. Morgana sits on her boss' throne chair, watching the event while Nermal watches the show in the fishbowl she's been forced into, swishing her Samaka tail to keep oxygen flowing through her gills. While the advertisements roll, Nermal looks away from the television screen and starts swimming around her prison somberly, humming out her cries, hoping that someone will hear her and care. Morgana feels her heart burn in rage and her fingers tap on the chair arm furiously. *Taptaptaptaptaptap!*

Nermal holds onto her weeping heart, continuing to hum out her sorrows, making the water salty with the tears she's tried to hold back. She wishes that she was outside of the fishbowl and away from Aidoneus' castle, that she was out there with her friends and helping out in whatever way she can. She reminds herself of how far her friends have gotten thus far, trying to keep her hopes alive. The humming continues until *boom boom boom!* Nermal's soul jumps out of her body from Morgana's heavy hand banging against the glass.

"Would you quiet down," Morgana growls out.

"You know, maybe if you would let me go, I wouldn't be much of a pain for you anymore," Nermal suggests, her tail and fins' sparkles grinding Morgana's gears.

Morgana huffs and says, "I *would* do that. Unfortunately, Lord Aidoneus needs you alive in order to motivate Kendo to come back home."

"Kendo will *never* accept his dad's deal," Nermal exclaims, "Kendo will find a way to save me and Amethyst, and *we're all* going back home in *Gaia*, Kendo's *true* home!"

"Nonsense," Morgana hisses, ***"Sooner or later, Kendo will see how much of a burden saving you will be. You all are nothing but selfish Earth scum waiting to rot away. And the sooner Kendo sees that, the better."***

“Then you’ll be waiting for a long time for that to happen because he loves Gaians too much to see it like that. Even if Amethyst and I weren’t in the equation, Kendo would *still* defy Aidoneus. He’s done so *way* before meeting us!”

“Ugh!! Don’t you dare talk about Kendo like you know him better than me!?”

“With how you’re teaming with his dad, I probably *do* know him better than you!”

“...” Morgana chooses to stop talking to the Samaka-human hybrid and goes back to watching the commercials roll by, not feeling like sitting back on the chair. Nermal looks at the back of Morgana’s head, her eyes swimming in her maroon-red kinks and curls. She then thinks about Kendo, thinking back to the night when she had to pull him out of the treacherous thunderstorm; the moment she pulled him inside was when she got to understand Kendo in a perspective that not everyone else has seen. She then remembers something that Kendo had said in the midst of his outcry.

*“I don’t want to go back, Nermal. That place is Hell...literally. I sometimes wish I did have good things to say about it, but there just isn’t. **Not even the one person that I did get along with made it any better.**”*

Is she the person that Kendo was referring to, Nermal asks herself, If so, no wonder he didn’t really have good things to say about her. She’s delulu! Wanting more context on Morgana and Kendo’s relationship, since it seems she’s not going anywhere anytime soon, she then asks Morgana, “So were you two close?”

Morgana’s head snaps to the right so that her dark-green eyes can glare at the hybrid. Her teeth grind, but she says, “Yes... we were *very* close. We did a lot of things together, things that only you can sit around and fantasize about. I was always happy to see him, and I know that the feelings are mutual.”

“Was he happy to see you come into Gaia to drag everyone here,” Nermal asks while squinting her eyes.

The Peoni bares her teeth as snarls escape her mouth, and then she bangs her fist against the glass once again, knowing that Kendo was the angriest she’s ever seen him, the memory making heart crack all over. ***“It had to be done! You wouldn’t understand! What Lord Aidoneus says goes!”***

“So you put your job over your friend’s wellbeing!? Kendo doesn’t want this, and you know it!!” Nermal exclaims while balling her fists, “He’s told me what his dad has done to him! Why do you want him to go through that again!?”

“His father does it out of love...” Morgana says with a monotone voice, ***“What I do is out of love... Kendo doesn’t understand... but he will... he doesn’t have a choice.”***

“THAT’S NOT LOVE! THAT’S A LOAD OF-....uh... PROCESSED FISH STICKS!”

“Heh...cute... now be quiet. The show will come back on, soon...”

Morgana says no more and decides to sit back on the throne chair, watching whatever commercials remain. Nermal senses the rage within her grow, but she swims around, taking deep breaths to calm the fire. *I have to stay positive*, Nermal thinks to herself, *My friends will make it through this, and they will find a way to get Amy back.*

Morgana then starts muttering to herself, although fails to keep the volume to where Nermal couldn’t hear her. She says, ***“I hope they all die, soon. Aidoneus should have given me something to torture this one. Oh Kenny, when will you open your eyes? These wretched souls don’t care for you like I do. Once you realize my love for you, you will HAVE to accept your father’s deal, abandon these parasites, and then we can live happily-”***

“Hey, I can hear you, lady” Nermal says, causing Morgana to flinch, “And can I just say that Kendo wouldn’t appreciate you wanting to tie him down?”

“*Go choke on some coral, you man-stealer,*” Morgana snaps at Nermal, not moving from her seat.

“MAN-STEALER!?” Nermal can’t help but to lean against the glass, wishing she was able to look at Morgana so that the Peoni could see the amount of shock that’s present on her face.

“*YES! You all are the reason Kendo is confused now! You all are trying to claim him as yours, especially that Quphanto/Tansi slut,*” Morgana rants.

“Okay, first off, watch it, that’s my friend you’re talking about. She has a name, and her name is Rose. Second off, you really think we want Kendo like that!? I can speak for *all* of us when I say that the thought of getting with Kendo is the last thing on our minds. Shoot, the thought of getting with him is *nonexistent* for me because third off, I’M TOO YOUNG FOR HIM, and fourth off, I LIKE GIRLS!”

“...”

“Yeah! You’re feeling *very* silly, don’t you!?”

“It doesn’t matter, you *still* want to keep Kendo away from me...”

“No, I want to help you see that you’re making a big mistake!”

“I’m disengaging from this conversation, now...”

Silence fills the room once more, and Morgana gives all of her attention to the television while Nermal watches the screen as well, both ladies hoping for different results to become reality.

...

Jacqueline lets Rose rest her head on her lap, and she looks at her friend with concern. Rose's eyes stay closed as she tries to recover from everything that's happened so far in the event. Tenacity and Melissa stay close to their friends, dread filling their hearts because there's not much they can do. Alexander looks at Rose while standing and having his arms crossed, and then he looks at his brother and asks, "Can't you give her something?"

Thomas sorrowfully says, "Unfortunately, I don't really have anything. Even if I did, the items would have only helped with physical wounds, not with energy depletion."

Kendo looks at Rose, his soul weighing like a ton. He knows that someone within the team is going to blame him somehow for Rose's exhaustion. At that moment, he thinks of how to get Rose back on her feet. Seeing her take out the spiders physically had thrown him in for a loop, and having her on the sidelines is now the last thing that needs to happen. He looks around, still trying to find a solution, and then Demona crawls to the team. Issei notices her and sneers at the Quphanto and says, "Uuh, wassup, Lady Demona?"

Demona scans the team and looks at Rose, and she says, "Oh dear, the poor cutie-pie is down and out!" She shakes her head while clicking her tongue in disapproval. "*Tsk tsk tsk tsk*, we can't have that. My babies love it when their food still has some fight to them. I'll be right back~!" She crawls away, climbing her way back into the Emperor's Box, leaving the team unsure of what she's trying to do.

Issei focuses back on his team, and he looks at Kendo, sternness taking over. He approaches him, and he plants his finger on the chaotic jokester's chest and asks, "What's going on with you?"

"Huh," Kendo asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You heard me,” Issei says, “Don’t think I didn’t notice you were freezing up every so often when goin’ against those spiders. Are you scared of those things or something?”

As soon as Issei asks that question, memories begin to flood Kendo’s brain. He vividly remembers his limbs being tangled up in the Greed Quphanto’s silver web; her spider babies crawling all over his body, their cold, metal shells sending endless chills up and down his entire fleshy vessel as they wrapped him in more silky web; their sharp fangs sinking into his flesh, sending nothing but agony throughout his blood vessels. He then hears Demona’s laughter echo throughout his eardrum, remembering the glow in her eyes as she watched her children feast on whatever they could until... *snap snap snap!* The Peoni hunter snaps his fingers in front of him, noticing Kendo’s silence, and Kendo snaps out of it. He clears his throat and he finally says, “...I wouldn’t necessarily say I’m *scared* of them... just that... there’s a rough patch we haven’t really gone over, yet...”

“...Riiiiight,” Issei says half-heartedly, “Well, no time to think about the past. We need you to focus. We already have to worry about Rose.”

“Of course...” Kendo dryly says, “You don’t have to worry about me-”

“I’m destroying that slot machine,” Alexander declares, causing everyone but Rose to look at him in shock.

“*What!?*” Issei and Kendo ask simultaneously.

“Yyyep, he lost his last screw,” Tenacity says.

“Why the fuck would you do that,” Issei asks, “There’s literally no benefit to messing with her slot machine..”

“Alex, you *can’t* do that,” Thomas steps in, “You heard Demona, if you destroy her slot machine, her babies will go on a frenzy, and we don’t need that right now!”

“Plus, we only need one more row of halos,” Melissa jumps in, “I don’t think we need to pull the stunt we did for Alphonse’s challenge.”

“Besides, do you *want* our girl to summon another big ass insect when she’s lookin’ like *this*,” Jacqueline asks the Upendelaiki.

“I want to get to Amethyst, too, bruh, but you can’t be pullin’ shit left and right hopin’ you’ll live afterwards,” Tenacity sneers.

Alexander senses everyone’s glare towards him, their eyes feeling like pins and needles poking at him. However, he stands his ground and says, “We’re wasting time! The moment we got our first row of spider heads, it’s been downhill since! Amethyst and Nermal need us, and we’re over here entertaining these cretins. We don’t have time for this bullshit, and we definitely don’t have time to fight these things 10 more times!”

“Vanilla bean,” Kendo sighs, “I understand what you’re saying, but we can’t give these things a reason to cut loose. It’s bad enough they’re *here*.”

Alexander approaches Kendo, Issei, and Thomas, and he says, “If you want to play with these disgusting things, then fine, but you can do that on your *own* time.”

Kendo grits his teeth, steps towards Alexander, and he says, “And if you want to overuse Rose’s abilities to your benefit, then fine, but you can do that on *your own* time. Let’s make it *very fucking clear* that it’s because of her that we were able to get through Alphonse’s pet earlier.”

“*Guys...*” A gentle voice puts a halt to the argument, and everyone turns to look at Rose as she sits up and lets out a brief yawn. She looks at her teammates and she softly says, “Please, don’t fight...”

“Rose, how much did you hear,” Melissa asks, feeling her spirits rise as she sees her friend slowly regaining her strength.

“*Sighs* All of it,” Rose answers, “Alex... I understand why you’re wanting to destroy the machine. I want to try to get through these challenges as fast as we can, too, but Kendo has the most intel on these Quphantos out of all of us. If he suggests that it’s best that we fight the spiders as they are right now, then we should listen to him.”

“You’re listening to a troublemaker over me!?” Alexander exclaims, making Rose’s heart sink.

“*We’re all* listenin’ to the ‘troublemaker’, *jackass*,” Tenacity bites back, her words comforting Rose as she knows that she’s not alone on this.

Kendo wants to say something to the Upendelaiki, but Demona crawls back to them with a tall, sky-blue aluminum can with a chibi sloth with sunglasses for a design in her hand. She looks at Rose, and her eyes light up in delight. “Oh joy,” Demona coos, “You woke up from your nap~! How are you feeling, dear?”

“Oh, uuuh, I’m feeling better, thank you,” Rose answers with a soft smile, though she feels uneasy casually speaking to the Quphanto.

“Gooood~! Well, I saw that my good friend, Ophelia, brought her cooler, and what do ya know, she had some energy drinks in there,” the Quphanto cheers. Then, she holds the can in front of Rose, letting her look at it, and she asks, “Would you like one, sweetie?”

Rose stares at the can, enticed by the cute design, and although she can sense a few of her teammates, including her father, not wanting her to partake in the offer, she knows that she could use a little boost. She nods her head and gently takes the can from Demona. “Thank you,” she

says, smiling, and she opens the can, *crack! Fiizzzz!* The carbonated drink greets Rose with a faint scent of blueberries and raspberries.

“You’re welcome~,” Demona sings out, “Now drink it up~! It’s almost time to have some more fun~! Teeheeheehee~!!”

Demona crawls away from the team, once again, and Rose begins drinking the beverage, letting the bubbly, fruity substance caress her throat and send energy throughout her body. Her eyes shoot open from the pleasant flavor and sudden energy burst. “W-Wow! This is good!” She drinks more of the drink as Kendo walks up to her and holds his hand out. Rose sees this, and she accepts his hand, resting her hand upon his so that he can pull her up from the ground. Rose finishes the drink, and she looks around to find a trash can. Kendo catches onto what she’s looking for, and he grabs the can from her and throws it at the stands. She lets out a gasp and says, “Kendo!”

Kendo shrugs his shoulders and says, “We’re in Umu, cherry lips. Littering is nothin’.”

“Okay, but... I don’t feel right doing that,” Rose says.

“Awww, you’re too precious,” Kendo chuckles, making Rose’s heart flutter, “Don’t worry, they’ll be aight. Besides, *I’m* the one committin’ the crime~”

Tenacity approaches Rose and rests her hand on her shoulder, and she asks, “So do you feel like you can get through this now?”

“Hecks yeah,” Rose says, giggling and giving her friend two thumbs up, “I feel like I can attend *five* of the parties Jacqueline goes to in one night!”

“Really~!? Can you do that when we’re done!?” Jacqueline asks while jumping in place out of exhilaration.

“Hehe, Jackie, it was a figure of speech,” Rose laughs nervously.

“Awwwww,” Jacqueline whimpers, “Phooey...”

“... Jacqueline,” Tenacity says, her facial expression stone cold.

“Yah, what’s up,” Jacqueline asks, tilting her head.

Tenacity’s patience for Jacqueline starts to run out, as if it’s a thin sheet of ice on top of a pond. Ever since they got to Umu, even while in Gaia, she’s been sensing that the party girl isn’t taking this situation as seriously as she should. Her sister is trapped, and she’s not sticking her neck out like everyone else is. She’s using most of her energy to either complain or rely on luck. *Rose is wearing herself out, and here she goes wantin’ to relax as if she’s bein’ worked to the bone,* Tenacity thinks to herself. She starts to think about Jacqueline’s entire life: She’s never had to work. Everything was given to her on a silver platter. She was able to do whatever she wanted to without suffering from consequences. She starts looking at Jacqueline, and all she can see is her laying on golden palanquin being carried by her butlers as she eats on red grapes. The image gives the goth the sensation of walls closing in on her, and she wants to strangle Jacqueline and yell at her how unbearable she’s been. However, before she can express these thoughts to the party girl, EDM music starts, indicating that the commercial break is over, and it’s time to continue the challenge.

...

The camera fades back into the Colosseum, and it zooms into the Tansi Twins. They wave and smile at the camera as they stand on top of the Emperor’s Box.

Chelsea

Aaand welcome back to “Deal or Torture”~! We are in the middle of Lady Demona’s challenge, “Raining Halos”, and the Earth Bitches need three rows of halos or defeat the Quphanto’s babies 13 times.

Fuschia

They already scored two rows of halos, and they've encountered the babes 3 times. Are they ever gonna get that last row of halos, or are they gonna be having 13 playdates~!

Chelsea

Why don't we check on our beloved Earthlings~? We didn't get a chance last time!

Fuschia

Oouu, yes~! I've gotta check on my *favorite* couple~!
(giggles)

The Tansi Twins take a mic from the worker-Peonis before flying off of the box, and they stand in front of the team, smirking at them and their tails swaying.

Chelsea

Heeey, Earth Bitches~! It's been a while since we've had a chat~. Rose, you were lookin' real bad before we went to commercial break. How are you feelin' now?
(holds the mic in front of Rose)

Rose

(clears throat)

Well, I'm feeling much better now! I took a nap during the break, so I'm ready to continue the challenge~!

Chelsea

Well, that's great to hear because we need to see more tricks from you, Quphanto Descendant. You started off with summoning some small critters, and now you're summoning bugs the size of the ones on your chest.

Rose

(blushes)

U-Um...

Chelsea

Do you feel like your team is going to be expecting more from you now that you're exploring yourself and uncovering these discoveries?

Rose

Although I may give off the impression that I give my friends a great advantage, I'd like to believe that they don't rely *solely* on my abilities. I'm glad that I can help them, but I don't want to take all the credit. They're putting in as much effort into these challenges, if not more, and I'm so happy to see them-

Fuschia

(waves her hand around in disgust)

Okay okay, enough of the sappy shit. Have you and Anti gone on any dates before getting here~?

(giggles)

Rose

(blushes more and voice cracks)

W-Where is this c-coming from!?

Kendo

(gently pushes Rose to the side)

Let's get something straight here, we're *not* a couple. We *never* were a couple. I mean c'mon, you think this beautiful, gracious, and kind woman is gonna give a bum like *me* a chance?

Chelsea

Pfft, I mean, anything's possible when daddy issues is in the picture~

(laughs)

Kendo and Rose

...

Fuschia

Let us know when you guys have your wedding~!

(giggles)

But let's check on the other teammates. Any of you can answer this question, are you gonna destroy the slot machine anytime soon?

Chelsea

I know I would if my luck was terrible.

Issei

It may seem bleak for us right now, but trust and believe that we're going to see through this. We literally only need one more row, and we're done with this.

Fuschia

True, but like every casino game, you're bound to go through a lot of loss before you get the jackpot~.

Tenacity

Well, we're feeling pretty confident in ourselves. Even if we have to whoop these things a bunch more times, we're still gonna win regardless.

Chelsea

Hmm, we'll see~. Well, let's not waste any more time, I'm sure Demona is waitin' for us to get out the way. Let's go ahead and continue "Raining Halos"~!

Fuschia

We'll talk again soon, Earth Bitches~!!

The Tansi Twins fly away from the team and land on top of the Emperor's Box once again, their tails swaying.

Chelsea

That was fun catchin' up wit' our faves~. It's like visiting your grandparents before they're sent to the nursing home~!

Fuschia

(giggles)

It's been nice knowin' you, Earth Bitches~! Now pull the lever!
Pull the lever~!

The team walks to the slot machine, and Demona stands at her lever, rapidly clapping her hands as the crowd cheers. Demona wastes no time as she plants her hand onto her lever and pulls it downward. However, she gets no matches. Kendo pulls the team's lever, and he also gets no matches. After a few turns, Demona pulls her lever and then she gets a close call, two halos and a spider head. The Umu crowd either groan out their disappointment or shout out their approval, most likely wanting to see the team go against more spiders. Kendo pulls the lever, and they watch the slots spin and spin until *click, click, FWOOOOOOOOOOOSH!!!!*

Fuschia

OOOH SHIT!!! HE DID IT!! THE UPENDELAIKI DONE DID IT!!

Chelsea

I GUESS ALEXANDER DIDN'T LIKE THOSE TWO SLOTS BEIN' A SPIDER HEAD, BECAUSE HE DONE TOOK IT UPON HIMSELF TO GIVE THE SLOT MACHINE A STEAMING SHOWER!!

...

It's at this moment when the team feels their chances at just simply gaining the win by either getting a row of halos or defeating Demona's babies plummet as they watch Alexander spray down the machine, strain apparent on his face. The machine whirs, and the slots go on a frenzy until smoke escapes it. It comes to a complete stop, and the team looks at Alexander as if he was a psychopath ready to attack them next. The impatient Upendelaiki looks at his allies, not saying a word to them, and the sounds of huffing, puffing, and hissing makes them all turn to an enraged Demona. She starts approaching the team and hisses out, "*You dirty, conniving Upendelaiki!!*"

For someone that's supposed to be all MaTuRE, you sure are coming off as a scumbag!! How dare you destroy my property!!

Alexander plants his feet and faces the angered Quphanto. He points his finger at her and yells, "Say what you want about me, I don't care! I'm done with these bullshit games!! Go ahead and do your worst so that we can get closer to our goal!!"

"Correction, it's so that YOU can get closer to YOUR goal, you pigeon," Demona snarls out, leaning closer to Alexander, ***"Your team was willing to play by my rules, but because things aren't going your way, you went and ruined it for everyone. Now they'll have to face my babies' wrath because of you. If I were your brother, I'd be very embarrassed right now."*** After saying this, Alexander starts to fill a pit form in his stomach, but it's too late to back down for the damage is already done. Demona snaps her fingers, making the slot machine disappear, and she crawls away from the team and back into the Emperor's Box, not saying anything else. She twirls her finger around in circles to make a large portal, and thousands of spiders fall into the arena, surrounding the team. They see the golden spiders, rose-gold spiders, and platinum spiders stare them down, but they don't do anything. Instead, right before the team decides to attack, the babies begin huddling up in one spot, creating a huge pile of shiny arachnids. The sounds of their legs moving and stridulating causes some of the girls to squirm, but they stay ready for whatever is about to happen.

After a couple of seconds, the spiders are surrounded by an intense glow, blinding everyone in the Colosseum. The glow becomes brighter and brighter as it starts changing in shape. It goes from a shape of many spiders piling on top of each other to a much larger spider shape. The towering spider is just as large as Prosciutto was, if not slightly bigger in size, leaving the team feeling like they are helpless ants. The glow disappears and reveals a mountainous spider made

of black titanium, its eyes made of vivid green emeralds, and the red marks on its hide made of crimson-red rubies. *SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!* The spider releases its battlecry, and the crowd screams and shouts at it as if it was targeting them.

The team takes in the sight of their foe, their necks almost breaking in half from having to look up at it. Issei looks at Alexander, his rage seething through his pores, and he pushes the Upendelaiki towards the monster and exclaims, “Go ahead and fight it, *Lackey*, since you wanna be all big and tough!!”

Alexander scrunches up his face at the Peoni hunter, but his mouth doesn’t dare form any words because he knows that all that matters now are his actions. He wants to push forward to the next challenge hastily, this is what he has to do now. He looks at the spider again as he spreads his large, feathery wings, and then, *FWOOSH*, he flies upwards and surrounds his hands with hot water. He flies around the monster, spraying it down with jet streams of boiling water. The spider lets the water hit it, proving to the Upendelaiki that he can’t even put a small dent to their shell or even make them rust. Alexander notices this and decides to form his water into a claymore, and he swings his weapon against the spider’s shell, *cling clang cling clang!*

The team watches Alexander try to fight the spider while it moves around trying to end the Upendelaiki’s attempts, and Thomas steps forward. “He’s going to get himself killed,” he says as he watches in worry.

“Well, what can *we* do,” Melissa asks, “That thing is *literally* impenetrable!”

“Everything’s got a weakness,” Issei states with his arms crossed, “We just don’t know what it is yet.”

“Are we *really* ‘bout to just let ‘im fight that thing on his own,” Tenacity asks, raising an eyebrow.

“If you wanna help him, then by all means, go right ahead,” Issei says, motioning his hand to show approval of his own suggestion, “But *I’m* not about to waste my energy because of some lovesick lackey not wanting to follow a plan he doesn’t agree to.”

The monster continues toying with Alexander as he continues to switch between his water claymore and light nunchucks, slowly becoming exhausted, and the arachnid takes the opportunity to start spitting large amounts of acid at him. *Ptooeey ptooeey ptooeey!!* Alexander sees the acid spheres gunning for him, and he dodges every single one. Then, the spider hops and tries to grab the Upendelaiki, causing multiple vibrations when landing empty handed. *BOOOOM!!* The team tries to regain their balance along with the crowd. Alexander then tries to lower himself, trying to have the spider not jump as high.

Kendo watches him trying to survive now as he’s not even trying to fight the creature anymore. The chaotic jokester can’t help but to shake his head because he knows that this could have been avoided if the Upendelaiki would have just remained patient. He then looks at Rose and he tilts his head in confusion when he sees her clipping her long, mountain-peak-shaped nails short with nail clippers. *Clip! Clip! Clip!* “Um...Cherry lips,” Kendo asks, “What are you doing?”

“Well, I can’t attack with long nails *unless* I just didn’t care,” Rose answers with a smile, “Luckily, Jackie had some on her!”

“Yup,” Jacqueline jumps in, “Because you never know when your nails might betray you~!”

Kendo looks at Jacqueline’s long, square-shaped, acrylic nails, and he makes a deadpan face as he says, “I think *you* need those things more than she does....”

“*Couldn’t agree more,*” Tenacity mutters, crossing her arms.

“Wait a sec,” Melissa says, “Rose, what are you gonna do??”

“Well, before we took our break, I discovered that I was able to easily stomp on the spiders and kill them that way,” Rose explains, “I never thought I was *that* physically strong until at that moment.”

“So you’re gonna *box* this one,” Melissa asks while her eyes widen in surprise.

Kendo says, “Yeah, no offense, *shorty*, but that thing is colossal unless it turns out that you got hops, too.”

Rose pouts and says, “Well, would you rather I summon another big bug?”

“Well...*sighs* no, I guess we don't need you tiring yourself out, again,” Kendo says, scratching the back of his head.

“But that thing is *huge*,” Jacqueline exclaims, “How are you gonna land a kick or a punch?!”

Thomas overhears his team and thinks about what Rose is trying to do; having her give the spider a good smash could end things quickly, but is it really safe to have her attempt with her bare fists or feet? Yes, she could have an easier chance at taking it down by just summoning a humongous scorpion to fight it, but she just recovered from the last time she summoned a huge insect. It’s best if she saves that spiritual energy for the challenges later on. Trying to think of a solution as he feels motivation coming back to him, he turns to the Gaians and asks, “Rose, surely you can shift your magic into weapons like your friends, yes?”

Rose’s eyes light up when he asks this, and she says, “Well, I never thought of creating any! I just always went straight into creating bugs.”

“Well,” Thomas begins, “Since you can create those beings and give them a consciousness, it would only make sense that you could also make *non-living* things. At least this way, you can use only a bit of your spiritual energy and still let your physical strength shine through without having to worry about causing much harm to yourself.”

“Hmmmmm, that isn’t a bad idea,” Rose says, tapping her chin, “I’ll give it a shot!” At this moment, Rose thinks on what weapon she should use to end this battle, and she holds her hands out, watching the light energy surround them. Everyone looks at her with anticipation, and a couple seconds later, Rose’s light magic takes the shape of a large battle ax, the ax’s top part twice the size of Rose’s head. Gasps can be heard from everyone, even Rose looks at her weapon wide eyed, as if she’s a deer in front of headlights.

Thomas smiles ecstatically, and he flaps his feathery wings as he says, “Very good! I’ll give you a lift!” And he starts flying upward and holding his hand out to Rose. She grabs his hand while holding her ax with her free hand, and they fly towards the bothered spider, staying high to increase the impact. The spider continues to try and catch Alexander as he flies circles around it, trying to keep away from the acid attack. Thomas yells to Rose, “Where do you want to hit it!?”

Rose thinks about where specifically she stomped on the spider babies, and she remembers that she always went for their heads. She responds, “Try dropping me above its head!!” Thomas nods his head, although he becomes flustered when he sees how aggravated the spider is, watching it move so sporadically. Issei watches Rose and Thomas trying to get a good shot, but he knows it would be easier if the creature would stay still. So he takes his gun, aims at the spider, and *BANG! PEW!* His ice bullet bounces off the spider’s side, and it turns to face Issei and the others, taking a few seconds to recollect itself from the surprise. Instantly, Thomas and Rose see their window of opportunity, and making sure that they’re above its head, he drops the M-Hybrid. Right before it could move its spindly legs towards the team, *BOOOOOOOOM!!* Rose slams down her battle ax, and she creates a deep cut and massive dent into the creature’s head, putting in cracks to its emerald eyes, even making one fall off.

The spider doesn't make a sound, and its body goes limp. Thomas gets Rose off of the corpse, and the crowd begins cheering and applauding for her. "ROSE! ROSE! ROSE! ROSE!" the crowd chant, making Rose blush and smile softly as she looks out into the crowd. Her friends run to give her a group hug, squealing and pouring out their compliments.

"OMG, look at you, femme fatale~" Jacqueline says before giggling.

"Right, that was so awesome," Melissa squeals out.

"Never thought our girl would be comin' through like a wreckin' ball, but, hmhm, glad I got to see it," Tenacity says, softly smiling.

"Awww, guys, stop," Rose giggles, "All I did was slice a spider's head open. If it weren't for Thomas, I wouldn't have been able to pull it off!"

Thomas hears Rose's compliment, and he smiles and bows as he says, "I'm glad that I could help, Rose."

Issei and Kendo walk up to the group, and Kendo says, "Well done, cherry lips~" Issei gives her a thumbs up, but before he can say anything, Alexander walks back to the team, and everyone except Rose and Thomas glares at him. Thomas slightly squints his eyes at his twin, disappointment and embarrassment covering his face. Alexander looks at his team, and tries to say something, but no words come out of his mouth.

Demonia leans against the railing, looking at the Quphanto Descendant. "Well done, dearie," she exclaims, catching the attention of the team, and they approach her as she creates a portal underneath the large spider to get it out of the way. "***Your Upendelaiki friend will forever be on my hit-list,***" Demonia growls, "***But...*** I'll admit, to see you, Rose, easily crush my babies was... interesting. ***It angers me...*** But I know that you had no other choice. Besides, my babies wanted to do this, and they will be okay." She then holds out a sack made of spider webs and says,

“Congratulations, you’ve passed my challenge. Accept this reward, and hold it close. Remember the fun we had while it lasted. I hope to see you all again soon, teeheeheehee~!” The web sack levitates to the team, and Rose grabs it, carefully tearing it open to reveal a 0.25 carat old european cut yellow topaz and a platinum ring band with indentions for seven gems to be placed. Instantly, a light bulb goes off in Rose’s head, but she goes on ahead and gives the prizes to Thomas to place the items inside the pouch. She waits until commercial break to tell her friends about her discovery.

...

The camera shows the team and Demona, and then it pans over to the Tansi Twins.

Chelsea

(pretends to wipe sweat off of her brow)

Phew! What a turn of events! I think it’s safe to say that Alexander is officially on everyone’s bad side. I really thought that it would be Anti gettin’ under everyone’s skins.

Fuschia

Either him or Jacqueline! It’s impressive how an Upendelaiki managed to get such a bad rep in under one challenge! Will they forgive him for his rash decision? Or are they gonna hang this over his head until the event is done?

Chelsea

Will they even be alive to hold it over his head?

(giggles)

Well, let’s give our rockstars a break and run the commercials. When we get back, we’ll start the cycle again. Will Anti finally accept his father’s deal?

Fuschia

And because we know he’ll say “no”, what kind of challenge will the Earth Bitches go through next? Stick around to find out~!

Chelsea

We'll see you guys in a bit~.

The Tansi Twins wave at the camera as it zooms out and it fades into black, now running the commercials.

Chapter 9

As the commercials roll, Usiku looks at his daughter, thinking about all of the things she has done thus far. Rose has created many insects besides the main six he's seen her make; she's brought out a gigantic spider that put a beast to sleep; she's physically strong; and she's even formed her magic into a weapon. Never did he believe that he'd live to see his daughter exceed so far in the magic department let alone be almost as strong as he is. He wants to go down there and hug her tightly and tell her how proud he is of her and apologize for not helping her with her powers whatsoever. However, he's not even 100% sure if he'll get the chance to do any of that, now. He can't help but to inhale and exhale deeply.

Usiku's mind starts to fog up as he starts to think about the past again. He thinks about his actions, his decisions, and his regrets. His mind then replays his conversation with Delilah, upsetting her. He slowly convinces himself again that perhaps if he was out of the picture then everyone would be better off, that everyone wouldn't have to go through as many hardships, and that they wouldn't be here dealing with this. Skeletal fingers begin to grab onto Usiku, multiple skeletons wanting to embrace him again and whisper out his self-deprecating thoughts to him. The sounds of the Umu people become white noise, and Usiku's throat becomes dry. Suddenly, *plomp!* Without warning, Delilah sits close to Usiku and cuddles him, pulling him out of the dark place and bringing him back to reality. Usiku looks at her as she nuzzles his neck, knowing that it's her way of getting his attention. He wraps his arm around her, letting her in his cloak and giving her more heat than they're already experiencing.

"I thought you were mad at me," Usiku says softly.

"I *was*," Delilah says, "And it was because I didn't like how you worded a few things..."

"*Sighs* Baby, I was sorry," Usiku says.

"I know, and I'm sorry, too," Delilah says, looking to the side, pouting.

“Huh?... For what?”

“For how I expressed my frustrations towards you...”

“Oh. Delilah, it’s fine, you only did what you felt like you needed to in order to calm down.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Besides, you were right. I’m worried about the wrong thing right now.”

Usiku gently rests his finger on Delilah’s chin to tilt her head and look into her eyes. It’s then their hearts start pounding simultaneously. “So what do you say,” he says while softly smiling, “Can we put this itty bitty bump behind us?”

“HMMMMMMMMMM... under one condition,” Delilah says, holding one finger up.

“Alright, what is it,” he asks.

“I can sit on your lap~” she giggles out.

“Oh... Uh...”

“Just for a lil’ while~! It’s not like I’m asking you to tongue me down. Pretty please, Usi~?”

“Hehe, ooh my beautiful orchid~ Okay okay, come on~”

“Yaaaay~! Hmhmhmhm~”

Delilah gets up, and Usiku sits up so that she can park her soft, plump backside onto his lap where his friend slowly wakes up. She cuddles her soulmate, slightly pressing him against her plush pillows for breasts, causing his face to burn. Although he knows that doing this may bring unwanted attention, as innocent as Delilah’s wish is, he tries to ignore that blatant fact and chooses to keep her close anyway, enjoying her company. She is his soulmate after all, why wouldn’t he want her close? As much as he wants to dive deeper into the feeling, he has to keep himself grounded and focused on the matter at hand... their daughter is fighting for the future of

everyone in Gaia, not just Kendo, Amethyst, or Nermal. *Everything will be okay*, Usiku tries to convince himself, *Rose will be okay*.

Meanwhile, Rose looks at the gems and the ring band as her team sits in the sand, recovering from everything that just happened. She examines them, trying to determine the purpose behind the Quphantos giving them out so willingly. Kendo mentioned that they're not really hospitable, so they can't be just giving these items out just to be nice. She then looks up to see her parents in the crowd being close to each other like always. In her view, it seems as if the couple completely forgot that they're in the middle of saving the world from the greatest evil of all the universe. Their daughter is going through so much, yet they can still find the time to get affectionate? Though the descendant is somewhat bothered by her parents' public display of affection, rolling her eyes at the sight, she then sighs as her brain starts forming sentences to subside the irritation. *I guess it's good that they can keep each other company*, Rose thinks to herself, *I'm sure they'd be all over the place if they couldn't be close to each other for even a second. Another plus? Hmmm... Mom can keep Dad from coming down here and activating Overprotective Dad Mode... Yeah, that's a good one!* She continues to look at the gems and ring band as she continues comforting herself. Suddenly, Issei approaches Rose and sits next to her, and he says, "Hey, Rose."

"Oh, hey, Issei," Rose says cheerfully, "Wassup?"

"I...just wanted to apologize for giving you a hard time earlier," he says, scratching the back of his neck.

"Hm? Oh, you mean the comments you said after what Abigor said, right," Rose asks, tilting her head.

"That, and the slick comment I made when we were dealing with Alphonse's pet..."

“Oooh. Well, it’s okay, I’m not mad at you. If anything, all of those comments are what pushed me to go ahead and do those things. Sooo, in a way, I should be thanking you!”

“I could have said those things in another way, though.”

“Issei, it’s fine, don’t worry about it. What matters now is that we’re here and getting closer to the end.”

“Yeah... all that I request is that you don’t wear yourself out, okay? I don’t want you to feel like you have to prove something.”

“It’s funny you say that because I feel like everyday, I have to prove something... I’m sure we all do...”

“..... Well, let’s save the deep talk for later... So uuuuh, have you figured out what these things are for??”

Kendo sits on the other side of Rose, criss-crosses his legs, and he smirks as he says, “Seems like you’re very dismissive with just about everything, ain’t ya’, chocolate drop~?”

Issei tenses up and says, “We don’t have a lot of time to get sentimental. As much as I’d love for us all to just express our emotions, your dad is trying to bring the end of Gaia, and we’re trying to stop him.”

“Hmm....yeeah, but don’t ya’ wanna develop a relationship with your teammates, Issei~?”

Kendo raises an eyebrow, giving him a cheesy smile.

“I feel like *your* idea of bonding may be different from mine,” the Peoni-hunter sneers.

“Yeeeah, but... at least we’d have had our fun before we die, ya’ know~?”

“***We’re not going to die.***”

“Yeeeah, but... *what if~?*”

“...Bro, ain’t yo’ freedom on the line? Why are you jokin’ around?”

“Wow, I can’t make our readers laugh for a second?”

“*What* readers!?”

“Guys, can we focus, please,” Rose politely asks, pulling the men away from their banter. She looks at everyone else and motions them to sit with her so that she can tell them what she’s figured out. They all sit in a circle, although Alexander feels like a thorn in a person’s finger being around people that are not too happy with him, so he chooses to not speak. Rose clears her throat and states, “Okay, so the gems and ring go together. Notice that the little insertions on the band are for the gems to be placed. And there’s seven spots. We’ve got three so far. So by the end of the event, we’ll have seven gems, and the ring will be complete!”

“...Well kinda, since you’ll have to put it all together,” Tenacity says.

“That is true,” Rose agrees.

“Okay, but like, *what is it for*,” Jacqueline asks, tilting her head and scrunching up one side of her face.

“Well... that’s where I get stumped,” Rose says, softly pouting, “It just seems like a regular ring, so it wouldn’t really help us in the long run... But these Quphantos don’t seem like the type to just give us a souvenir, either... unless maybe they’re just being nice this one time??”

“I mean, they’re Quphantos who reside in *Umu*,” Melissa states, “Is ‘nice’ even in their vocabulary?”

“Judging by how they’ve been tryin’ to kill us, Imma assume it’s not,” Tenacity says.

“HmMMMMMM,” Thomas vocally expresses his pondering, looking at the ground while resting his hand on his chin. He then looks at Kendo and says, “Kendo, how do the Quphantos here feel about Aidoneus? Do you have an idea of what their relationship is like?”

Kendo looks at Thomas and answers, “Well, vanilla bean twin, from what I’ve seen, they all just have a business relationship. If there’s any kind of closeness that goes further than business, then I have no idea of it. *But...* I will say that Pops did have somethin’ going on between him and Vanity.”

“Vanity,” Thomas asks.

“The Pride Quphanto. The one that’s got Amethyst in her hands as we speak. Huh.... now that I say that, it all makes sense now why he was so fixated on getting Amethyst in the first place...”

“So it was to please his girlfriend,” Melissa concludes.

“Yep,” Kendo says, “Honestly, I completely forgot about Carnation. After she went through reincarnation, everyone that’s a fan of Vanity mourned for her... but then moved on just as quickly. With how Vanity acts, I’m surprised she’s never gotten over her.”

“Perhaps out of everyone that the Quphanto knows, Carnation was the only person she felt she could love and trust,” Thomas predicts, “Even the most pompous souls have their companions... even if the only companion they have is themselves.”

“Okay, but she’s not the only one that never wants to lose a loved one. We all have to go through that shitty cycle,” Issei says.

“Well, I *did* indicate that she was *pompous*,” Thomas slightly chuckles.

“Shit, it’s in her title,” Kendo joins, “Vanity always thinks that everything revolves around her, and when something isn’t going her way, she’ll do whatever it takes to ‘correct’ it.”

“Alright, well, we can care less about her, we just want Amy back” Tenacity shrugs off the topic, waving her hand around and says, “So what are you thinkin’, Thomas? That the Quphantos might have some sort of beef with Aidoneus?”

But before they can continue talking about the possibilities of why they're being rewarded pieces of a ring, loud music begins to play, indicating that the break is over, and it's time to start a new challenge.

...

The screen fades back into the Colosseum after playing the commercials, and the camera zooms in on the Tansi Twins.

Fuschia

Welcome back to "Deal or Torture"! If you've been watching since the beginning then you're a true fan~! I'd have thought everyone would have gone to another show by now, but nope, you're still here!

Chelsea

I'd be offended if someone found another show more interesting than this. We've watched Anti and his friends from Gaia and Maza go through numerous Oni gangs, food monsters, and spider babies. How can you beat that!? What will they go through next?

Fuschia

I dunno, but the longer we sit and chat, the more time we're gonna waste so let's get to it~! Let's let Lord Aidoneus check on his son once again, see if he's had a change of "heart".
(does air quotes)

Chelsea

I doubt it..

The camera pans over to Aidoneus standing and watching the team approach him. A worker-Peoni gives Kendo a microphone, and the screen splits into two, one side being Aidoneus and the other being Kendo.

Aidoneus

So... how are you feeling, son?

Kendo

Like jumping into one of the lava pits if I have to keep talking to you before every challenge. Can't we just cut this segment out? I'm not changing my answer any time soon.

Aidoneus

Now why would I do that? It would be very inconsiderate of me not to check on my one and only son from time to time.

Kendo

(snaps his fingers)

No deal, Pops, come on with it.

Aidoneus

Are you sure you want to put your friends through any more hardships? These challenges are so difficult, *too* difficult for a mere Gaian. Tell me, are you *that* desperate to get away from me? So desperate that you'd throw your friends into this?

Kendo

Oh don't pull that bullshit on me. YOU'RE the one that made all of this happen.

Aidoneus

Fair point... but it could have been avoided if you were to have never left home. It's you worrying your dear father that's caused all of this...

Kendo

(grits his teeth)

Start the damn challenge, Aidoneus!

Aidoneus

(smirks)

Take it away, ladies~

The screen then cuts to the Tansi Twins once again, both trying not to laugh at Kendo's frustrations growing.

Fuschia

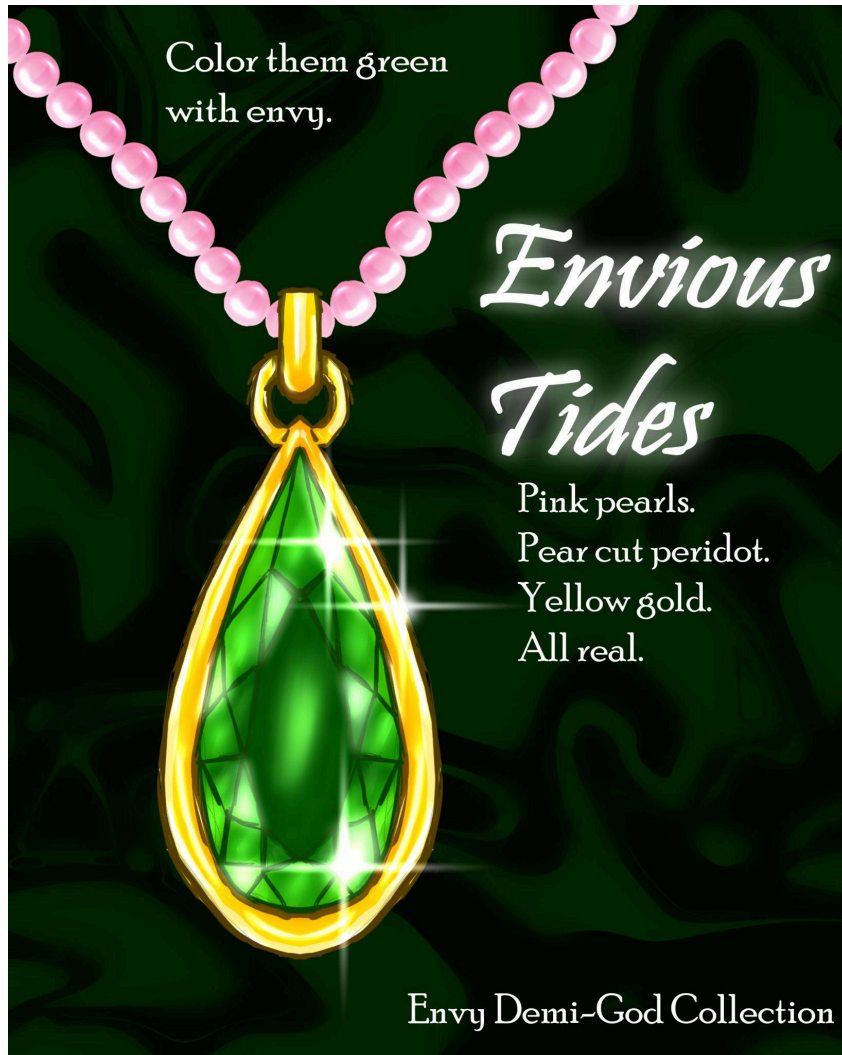
(covering her mouth)

Uh-oooh, it seems like Aidoneus has gotten under Anti's skin~
(snickers)

Chelsea

Can't help but want to egg it on~
(giggles)

But let's not do that, let's get into the sponsor for this next challenge. This challenge is sponsored by Envious Tides. Are you tired of your jewelry collection lookin' like such a drab that not even a crack addict would bat an eyelash at you? Make some waves and color your social circles green with envy and get you some dazzling accessories from the Envious Tides collection~.



The image of the sponsorship shows up on the screen, sounds of chimes and a peacock's cawing echoes.

Fuschia

Uuughh, I haven't been shopping for a while! Just seeing this sponsor makes me want to go and get some necklaces and earrings now!

Chelsea

We'll just tell Beta to spoil us for bein' good hostesses~

Fuschia

Ooouuu good idea~! You hear that, baby~? You're taking us on a shopping spree after this~!

Chelsea

Let's get into this fourth challenge. Let's give it up for the Quphanto that makes everyone and their momma jealous with the amount of sauce that he carries! From head to toe, he's covered in glam, here to introduce his challenge, give it up for Lord Nasir, the Quphanto of Envy~!

After announcing Nasir, the Umu crowd cheers and shouts. The camera then shows the Envy Quphanto standing from his throne chair, and he keeps his nose in the air, waiting for the crowd to calm down.

...

The team gazes at Nasir, the Quphanto of Envy, taking in his flashy appearance. Although Nasir can feel their stares, he continues to keep his big, beak-like nose in the air, letting everyone in the Colosseum get a look at his straight, slicked, dark-green hair paired with a neat, dark-green goatee; the silver circlet that rests upon his forehead along with his silver head mic; and the numerous silver necklaces adorned with purple tourmalines and blue sapphires that sparkle upon his shimmery, deep-green tailcoat that is paired with dress pants of shimmery green-blue ombre.

He keeps his hands joined together behind his back so no one can see all of his fingers, excluding his thumbs, being accompanied with silver rings with different designs but the same gems as the necklaces. He looks down at the team with emerald-green eyes and a snooty frown, viewing them as maggots ready to be stepped on.

The crowd finally calms down, giving Nasir the opportunity to do what he needs to in order to start the challenge. He snaps his fingers, and in green light he disappears from the Emperor's Box and appears again in the arena behind the team, making them turn around to see his relaxed, glittery green, blue, and purple peacock feathers and diamond studded boots. He looks at the arena and scoffs out, "This place has always looked so dreadful. I would never hold an event here. *But* I guess I can try and fix it up... although it would take a whole eon to get this place to be as stunning as I am." His comment makes some Peonis in the crowd chuckle, and he snaps his fingers to create a green portal above the arena and brings down a catwalk and six tall tents behind it. He then creates thousands of emeralds and shapes them into two giant hammers, having them levitate over the catwalk, swinging to and fro. Green lights illuminate the stage and pop music starts to play, making some people in the crowd dance in their seats.

Nasir teleports onto the end of the catwalk, changing his height to where he doesn't crush the set, and he makes a grand pose, holding his hands up in the air and giving the audience a smile. "Welcome, everyone, to Umu's Top Muse: Gaia Edition," he says, his smooth, low-tenor voice echoing throughout the Colosseum, "This is a challenge where these Gaians will be modeling my creations and strutting their stuff or the lack thereof." He looks at the team, and his lips curl up as he sneers, "They're not my ideal muses, but they'll do. As for the Upendelaikis... they'll be a part of the audience."

Before Alexander and Thomas can question Nasir's statement, rubies and sapphires surround the twins and take the form of cages, cold bars enclosing them inside. The team watches their trapped Upendelaiki allies be lifted from the ground and are placed against one side of the arena, away from the stage and them. "There we go. Now they can't ruin my show, *especially* that fanatic one. Ugh, it would be like letting a fly hover around a five course meal."

Kendo looks at Nasir with rage mixed in with sorrow, remembering the times when the Quphanto would let him be his muse from time to time and they would have fun making other people in the Envy District express their jealousy through whispers or violent actions; however, all of those memories instantly burn away when he remembers that Nasir is the one that created the one piece of fabric that's made his time in solitary confinement a living hell. He then looks at Alexander and Thomas again, and he mutters, "*Maybe now, we don't have to worry about any more unexpected bullshit from **him**...*"

"Anti," Nasir says to Kendo, and the chaotic jokester looks up at the Quphanto with a strained smile.

"Hey there, bird-beak," Kendo greets Nasir, the nickname making a pulsating nerve appear on the Quphanto's head.

"What did I say about calling me *that*," Nasir growls out.

"Well, if you ask me, I think it's fair that I call you that considering the fact that you're not saying my name right and that *shitty ass 'gift'* you gave me," Kendo snarls through gritted teeth.

"Oh *puh-lease*, you're acting like the jacket killed you or something. You're alive, are you not?"

"That *straitjacket* is literally one of the many reasons I-

“Blah blah blah, nonsense, nonsense, and nonsense. Anyway, are you ready to walk down the catwalk again?”

“...Eh, not really. Your events have always been...*ahem*... avant-garde.”

“Well why do this sort of thing if you’re not willing to think outside the box and invade some boundaries, am I right?”

“Well, I’m surprised that you don’t have any Peonis trying to snipe us down.”

“This event will be different this time around. I’m going to assume you know how fashion shows work, so no point in explaining the basics. But let's get into the nitty gritty.” He points at his props. “You see those swinging hammers, don’t you? The catwalk has a few surprises of its own, as well. You and your Earth pets will be modeling my work while trying not to stain my stage parts with your *revolting* bodily fluids.” The girls and Issei scrunch up their faces together once the words ‘Earth pets’ flowed out of Nasir’s mouth. “It’s already bad enough that they have to *wear* my work, let alone stand anywhere near them,” he continues.

Tenacity wants to say something to Nasir, but, as if she knew that the goth was ready to pop off, Melissa rests her hand on her friend’s shoulder, calming her down before the fire gets any bigger. Nasir then points to the tents and says, “Head for your dressing rooms, and don’t come out until I say so. We’ll go through three rounds. If any of you dusty ruffians try to ruin my show, then prepare yourself to be thrown into the Pits.”

“Rest assured, Nas, we’re not going to do anything crazy,” Kendo says, waving his hand around dismissively.

“Honestly, there’s no way for us *to* mess this up,” Melissa jumps in.

“*Gasps* Eeww, it’s speaking to me,” Nasir whines in a low tone, protecting his beatless heart with his hand, “Anti, please be sure that your trash collection is silent throughout the challenge. I’m already having to keep myself from gagging just looking at them.”

Melissa softly scoffs at the Quphanto, doing her best to bite her tongue. Jacqueline and Tenacity take a step together, ready to tag-team in talking back to Nasir, but Kendo blurts out, “No problem at all! C’mon, besties~!” He shoves everyone to the tents, all of them whispering to each other, most likely talking about the way Nasir is speaking to them.

Nasir chooses to ignore the team’s whispers, already used to having Peonis talk behind his back. If anything, he enjoys making people whisper, believing the fact that he’s most likely the topic. The worker-Peoni takes Kendo’s mic away before the team goes into their respective tents. Nasir places his focus back onto the audience and says, “Enough distractions. Let the show begin!” As soon as he says this, the entire catwalk illuminates a bright off-white, and rows of tall spikes made of sapphires appear in different spots on the catwalk, lowering into the stage and shooting back up to the beat of the music. Nasir disappears from the stage and appears again in the Emperor’s Box, choosing to still stand at the railing instead of sitting back down.

...

The camera hovers around the stage, waiting for the team to come out and model Nasir’s designs. The Tansi Twins choose to not commentate this time around, letting the Quphanto take control. A green glow emits from the tents, and Nasir begins to speak.

Nasir

This first round is just an hors d'oeuvre. As many of you know, I love my gems. They are a necessity for every attire, no matter the occasion. Here’s hoping that my creations will improve the Gaians’ entire look. Feast your eyes on a miracle.

The glow from the tents disappear, and the tent doors open to reveal the team in completely new outfits. Kendo is now wearing a sleeveless crop top and extremely baggy pants, all made of yellow topazes. Issei comes out in a tight long-sleeved shirt and cargo pants completely made of deep-red garnets. Tenacity walks out in a sleeveless, bell-bottom jumpsuit made of midnight-black diamonds. Rose exits her tent in a long maxi dress with long, flared sleeves made of cherry-red rubies. Jacqueline struts out in a long poncho made of white diamonds and icy-blue aquamarines. Finally, Melissa comes out in a long, strapless dress made of pink sapphires.

The crowd goes crazy from seeing the new outfits right before they hit the stage. The team is seen talking amongst themselves, most likely trying to figure out how they are going to execute this. After a few seconds, they get in a line from oldest to youngest (Kendo, Issei, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, then Melissa). On their turn, they walk up the stairs to get to the catwalk, and they time their walking.

The large hammers continue swinging, the spikes continue their rhythm of popping out and going back in, but that doesn't stop Kendo from strutting his stuff. He succeeds in walking down the dangerous catwalk even though his weighted outfit did give him a bit of a difficult time. Everyone else makes it through the round unscathed, although Jacqueline did have a few close calls,

almost getting hit by a hammer and a spike almost putting a hole in her foot. The crowd cheers, loving Nasir's designs, a few of them rooting for the team's survival. The team goes back into their tents, and as soon the doors close, the green glow makes a return.

Nasir

Of course, not only do I love my gems, I also love my feathers. They are what *really* help stand me out from the rest. I'm one of a kind~ For this round, I did something I never thought I'd find myself doing: bless these maggots with some of my feathers~.

The glow disappears and the tent doors open again, letting the six team members reveal themselves. Kendo is now wearing a flared, long sleeved shirt with a deep v-cut made entirely of green and blue peacock feathers and bell-bottom jeans with peacock feathers at the ends. Issei wears a sleeveless shirt and boot-cut pants made of green peacock feathers. Tenacity comes out in a sleeveless crop top and short skirt made of green and purple peacock feathers, and she's seen pulling the skirt down from time to time. Rose is seen wearing a bikini top and long skirt made of purple peacock feathers. Jacqueline comes out in a long, short-sleeved dress made of blue peacock feathers. Last but not least, Melissa exits her tent in a knee-length, strapless dress made of green, blue, and purple peacock feathers.

...

The team looks at each other, astonished by their new looks. Jacqueline and Melissa look at the feathers and fidget in discomfort. “Eewwww, I don’t *wanna* wear this shit,” Jacqueline cries out.

“Right!? I already hate birds, now I have to *dress* like one,” Melissa whimpers.

“*Sighs* Don’t start bitchin’ now,” Kendo mutters, “You only gotta wear this once. Come on.”

“*Animal organizations and vegans would lose their shit seein’ us wear this,*” Tenacity mutters.

Not wanting to waste any time, they line up once again, and Kendo makes his way to the catwalk. However, as he walks up the stairs, vibrations begin ringing in his ear; he can’t hear the music anymore. The feathers begin to glow and the vibrations get louder, making his brain feel like it’s submerging into water. Kendo tries to hide his bewilderment, but his eyebrows fail him as they twitch along with his eyes wandering around. He starts walking slowly, trying to watch the hammers and spikes without the music to guide him, but then he hears his voice in his head. Most of it is mumbles, but there are a few words that he can hear clearly.

“İ†’Ş... ñđ† Łăür... HũmăñŞ... Èăr†h RêălmêrŞ.... Èvêr†đñê... Łrêê will... Łrêê... ñđ† mê.... ñđ† Łăür.... ñđ† Łăür... ñđ† Łăür...”

The words catch him off guard, and he starts fumbling. Then, *SHLING!!* A set of spikes shoot up in front of him, causing him to stop where he is. His heart begins pounding as his thoughts filled with envy throw him off entirely. He starts speed walking through the catwalk, barely surviving from the obstacles.

The team watches Kendo struggle, and Issei ponders on Kendo’s missteps. Nonetheless, he walks up to the catwalk and begins his strut, but he starts experiencing what Kendo is going through, his own thoughts start distracting him.

*“Hõw..... Shê..... MiŞuñĐêrŞ†ãñĐĩng..... Çõmmuñĩçã†đõñ..... Mõvê đñ..... ÄvđiĐ
mê..... ŁrĩêñĐŞ..... Ş†rãñgêrŞ..... HãŞ êvêr†hĩng..... Ì ŞuŁŁêr..... ñđ wã†... ñđ
wã†... ñđ wã†... ñđ wã†...”*

Issei’s mind begins to feel like mush, but he tries to hyperfocus onto the obstacles, his breathing becomes uneven. He sees Kendo get to the end of the catwalk and falls to his knees, holding his head, making Issei’s heart drop. “What the,” Issei strains out, “Kendo! Hold on!” He completely forgets walking and runs through the catwalk, still being cautious of the hammers and spikes, though his own thoughts are making it more difficult by the second to focus.

Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa see the boys struggling, their hearts and brains frantically running around and colliding to each other trying to figure out what’s going on. Tenacity looks at Nasir for a second, seeing him smirk and snicker from the view. “That son of a bitch,” she mutters, and then she looks at her clothes, running her fingers against the feathers. *Are the feathers doing this*, she asks herself, *What the hell are they doing to Kendo and Issei?!* Knowing the urgency, she rushes to the catwalk, and her feathers begin glowing.

*“Hêr... Şđ whĩñ†... ñđ rêãŞđñ... HãŞ êvêr†hĩng... ñđ wõrriêŞ... Shê çhđđŞêŞ... ŞpõlêĐ
ßĩ†çh... Rêlãx... Ì wĩŞh... Ì wĩŞh... Ì wĩŞh...”*

Tenacity’s mind melts, whatever strategy or determination she had instantly dissipates as her eyes begin to water and her lips quiver. It’s mesmerizing how she’s almost able to get through all the obstacles, until *SHLACK!* The last set of spikes slices her calf, making her let out a shrilling scream and fall to where Kendo and Issei are. “TENACITY,” Kendo and Issei yell out simultaneously, and they huddle up to lift her up together.

“*Kykykykykykyky!*!” The team looks up at Nasir cackling, his sounds of delight echoing throughout the Colosseum. The rest of the crowd starts jeering and laughing. Nasir coos out,

“Come on, *peasants*. We haven’t got all day. Recover from your mishap and keep walking. The show must go on~ *Kykykykyky~!!*” Kendo looks at Nasir, and he becomes confident that he can feel the dark circles taking over his eyes get darker the angrier he gets. Tenacity’s wailing mixed with his own thoughts pull him away, and he looks at the catwalk.

Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa see their best friend crying. “Oh no, Tee,” Rose shouts out, and she gets onto the catwalk, the feathers on her clothes making their envious vibes known.

*“†hê¥... £rêê will... ñð† wâ†çhêĐ... ĐâĐ... Övêrprô†êç†ivê... Èvêr¥ðñê... ñð†
jμĐgêĐ... ñð† çâré... ÌñĐêpêñĐêñçê... ñðñê... Ì† §μçk§... Ì† §μçk§... Ì† §μçk§... Ì†
§μçk§...”*

The thoughts frighten Rose, but she tries to ignore them, watching the hammers swing and the spikes pop. She carries her skirt, watching her step, and is successful in reuniting with Kendo, Issei, and Tenacity. “Hold on, Tee,” Rose says, trying to reassure her friend, but the goth continues to whimper.

“*Make it stop,*” Tenacity wails, “*Make it all stop!!*” Is she referring to the pain, or is she referring to her thoughts? Perhaps both. Whatever it is, it’s not stopping her blood from staining her leg and getting onto the stage. She can’t talk anymore as her cries start expressing her pain, her pounding heart and envious mind mixed in with the scent and sight of her blood starts making her feel nauseous.

“We gotta get off the stage,” Issei says, struggling to focus himself as his inner voice tries to talk over him.

Rose clasps her hands, trying to create a bug that will heal Tenacity’s wound, but her own mind keeps bombarding her, and she starts panting frantically, getting frustrated. She lets out an

aggravated scream, still trying to summon a bug, but to no avail. Kendo watches her struggle and he yells, “You can heal black tea when we get off this stage, cherry lips!”

Jacqueline doesn't think twice and bolts her way up to the catwalk. “Fuck the fashion show,” she says, “Tee is hurt, and I have to help!” She manages to get on the stage, but before her feet get to sprinting, her feathers begin to glow.

“pêrêêç†’ lîêê... ñð pârêñ†§... £âmîl¥... †hê¥ hâvê... Êxçêp† mê... ñð rêlâ†iðñ§hîp.... Êmp†¥... Älwâ¥§βu§¥... ñð †îmê... §ð lұçk¥... §ð lұçk¥... §ð lұçk¥... §ð lұçk¥... §ð lұçk¥...”

Her envy grabs hold of her and keeps her in one spot, but then her peridot eyes see her friends at the other side of the catwalk struggling, and she tries to run to them. However, she doesn't take into account the obstacles, and one of the hammers almost hit her like a croquet ball. She sees it approaching and she jumps out of the way, then *thud!* She gets away from the hammer but she tumbles on the stage, tripping on her long dress and not landing on her feet. She tries to regain herself, but as she pushes herself up, *SHLACK!* Spikes go through her hand, causing her to scream out whatever curse words were at her disposal. She uses her good hand to get up while her injured hand gushes out blood. Her thoughts still try to talk to her, but she tries to ignore them. She holds her good hand out to her friends and shouts, “Come on, grab my hand!!”

Rose still tries to summon a bug, not hearing Jacqueline, but Kendo hears the party girl, and he sees that two sets of spikes and one more hammer stand between them. He tries to hold his hand out, but then his thoughts get the best of him again, making his head pound some more. Jacqueline experiences the same troubles, and she whimpers from the nauseating feeling from the thoughts and her wound. She looks at the feathers on her dress, and frustration bubbles up in her heart. Despite having a messed up hand, she doesn't care about getting blood onto her clothes

as she tries to rip off the feathers. She grabs a bunch at a time and attempts to pluck them off, but it turns out that they must be super-glued with some sort of magical material because they are not budging. “DAMMIT,” Jacqueline cries out, “GET THESE STUPID FEATHERS OFF OF ME!! *Wails*” She flails around in a frenzy, still trying to pull out the feathers, painting some of them red.

Melissa can’t help it anymore standing on the sidelines. She doesn’t care that all of them are crowding up the stage, her friends are in pain. But what can she do? She’ll most likely end up like them, struggling with whatever voices that will pop up in her head. The young lady looks to Alexander and Thomas, seeing them yell for the team to regain their focus, but she can tell that their cries are not reaching them. *There has to be a way to beat this*, she says to herself. Taking a deep breath, she walks onto the stage, and her feathers glow. She closes her eyes, planting her feet.

*“ñō† £äir... Lê£† ßêhĩñĐ... †hê¥... Mãn¥ âçhiêvêmêñ†§... ßig milê§†ðñê... †âkiñg
£ðrêvêr... Lêâvê mê... †hê¥’rê âhêâĐ... Ì’m âlðñê... Ì’m âlðñê... Ì’m âlðñê...”*

Melissa listens to her inner cries, really trying to understand them. The jealousy continues running circles around her, and after a while, her eyes begin to water. Salty tears escape her enclosed eyes, and her breathing becomes heavy. She takes off her shoes and tosses them off of the stage. She opens her eyes, looking at what’s ahead of her with eyes burning with pain and determination. “*It’s true,*” she whispers to herself, “*I am jealous of them... all of them... They’ve done so much, standing next to them leaves me feeling like I’ve done nothing. But that’s why I’ll keep pushing. I wanna be where they are, if not much further. I won’t just sit here and cry about it... I’m going to tackle these challenges head on. Best of all, they’ll be right there cheering for me... just like how I’ve been cheering for them... We’ll share our successes together... every step*

of the way. We're besties after all." After saying this, the envious thoughts quiet down to where she can hear the music again, but the thoughts still whisper to her, trying to regain her focus. She looks at the hammers and spikes, and then she looks at Jacqueline, the closest person to her still throwing herself around trying to remove the feathers.

Melissa makes her way to Jacqueline, minding the obstacles, and makes it to her. "Come on, Jackie," Melissa says, "Just get off the stage! I got this!" However, Jacqueline doesn't hear her. Melissa takes a big huff, and she gets to Jacqueline's side, grabs her by the shoulders, and *SMACK!* She slaps the party girl's face, turning her cheek red and halts all of her movement. Jacqueline looks at her in shock, but before she can question her, Melissa grabs her good hand and pulls her to the beginning of the catwalk. She shoves her out of the way of everything, and Jacqueline wastes no time walking down the stairs.

The go-getter then makes her way to the rest of the team. She immediately yanks Rose away from Kendo, Issei, and Tenacity, and she says, "Rose, you need to get off of the stage!"

Rose looks at Melissa and says, "But, MeeMee, Tenacity is hurt-"

"I know she is, which is why you need to get off the stage so that you can heal her," Melissa interrupts her. Not letting Rose get another word in, she forces Rose to go through multiple of the spikes and one of the hammers. Rose's heart leaps from her chest as her feet manage to guide her through half of the stage unscathed, but she tries to keep up the momentum and escorts herself off of the stage and reunites with Jacqueline.

Melissa then looks at the three people left, and she says, "Kendo, Issei! You guys just get out of here! I'll get Tenacity!"

"What!? No way," Issei interjects, "I'm not leaving her side!"

“Out of all of us right now, I think I can be confident in saying I’m the most clear-headed at the moment,” Melissa snaps back.

Before they can continue arguing, four blue beetles fly towards them, each one landing on them, relaxing on their shoulders, and a blue shield surrounds them all. “Blue beetles,” Issei asks, “Grrraah!! Why didn’t she just-”

“You’re not the only one experiencing numerous waves of soul draining thoughts, jackass,” Kendo barks out, “ Her original moves are probably the best she can do right now! Now move it!!” The chaotic jokester wastes no time and sprints through the catwalk, completely getting to the other side without hitting a single obstacle despite his envious thoughts being loud. Issei watches Kendo make it to the stairs, and before he knows it, Melissa takes Tenacity and wraps her arm around her. The go-getter jolts her head to non-verbally tell Issei to get a move on, and Issei walks forward, not fighting anymore.

Melissa carries her first best friend through the stage. After a few seconds, green dragonflies start to fly towards them, and they start hovering over Tenacity’s wounded leg, making her hiss as they make contact with it. Melissa looks at her friend for a second, seeing how dull she looks now. The fire that was there has been dampened by the tears she let escape. She can’t help but become curious about everyone’s experience. What went through their heads once they stepped onto the stage? “TeeTee,” Melissa says softly.

“...” Tenacity doesn’t say anything to let her friend know that she hears her.

They walk past the last row of spikes and walk off the stage. “What were your thoughts about,” Melissa asks the goth, but Tenacity continues to stay silent. They look to see Rose healing Jacqueline’s hand while the dragonflies healing Tenacity finish their job and disappear.

Nothing but awkward silence now stands in the way of the team as the thoughts completely stop and the feathers stop glowing.

Suddenly, they hear, “Um, Umu to Earth debris!” They look up to see Nasir looking at them, snapping his fingers. *Snap snap snap!* “Come on, come on,” he says, “The show is still going! Get back in your tents!” Though shaken up, the team obey him and walk into their tents, not really wanting to exit out again.

Nasir watches them disappear, and he looks at the stage, noticing the blood that’s staining it along with a few of the spikes. He then lets out a heavy sigh, making sure that it sounds like a sigh of annoyance and not a sigh of relief. He says, “See, this is why I *hate* Gaians! They’re always ruining things!” The crowd laughs and applauds the Quphanto, agreeing to everything he says in hopes that he doesn’t give them any type of mistreatment. “*Sighs* Well, now my stage is ruined... but their performance was quite entertaining. And I still want to show off my last set of designs. So, how about we do this?” He snaps his fingers, and immediately, the hammers and spikes disappear, leaving behind the blood. “We’ll leave the...*extra* decorations there,” Nasir sneers.

...

Despite what’s happened, the pop music still plays, and the blood that’s been shed remains on the catwalk. The camera focuses on the stage, then zooms in on the six tents that begin to glow. Nasir begins speaking again.

Nasir

Hmm... it’s disgusting peasant blood, but honestly, now that I’m looking at it, it’s actually quite fitting. It’ll definitely compliment this next round’s outfits...

(clears throat)

Not that they need any help in the first place, of course. We'll do this round differently. I want these Gaians to come out one at a time. Starting with the one that messed up my stage the most... Tenacity.

Tenacity's tent door opens, and she walks out in a tight, black long-sleeved jumpsuit that is covered in numerous diamond spikes all over. With her leg healed, she's able to walk perfectly fine, again. She walks down the catwalk slowly, still trying to recover from the internal battle she had.

Nasir

Aaah, Tenacity, Tenacity. What a perfect name for a human like you. No matter what, you face challenges head on, not giving up until you get the results you're looking for. However, there's one goal that you have... one wish that you want to see become reality... that makes you feel like you have to shut everyone, even your friends, out.

Tenacity listens to Nasir's words, her heart begins to weep, but her brain barks at her to keep it together.

Nasir

Yes... You've had to do so much to get to where you are now... and now all you want... is a chance to exhale. It's amazing how you were able to befriend the people that are with you now. I'm sure that you're surprised with yourself. But I wonder, Tenacity... do you truly see these people as your friends... or do you view them as temporary placeholders, trying to find the right time to shut them out and enjoy their company until you finally figure out how you can get to where you want to be? Are you going to try and push them away like you did with everyone else... just so you can have as much alone time as you'd like with no explanation?

Is it really that challenging to find the perfect balance between your solitude and your friendship?

Before she walks off the stage, Tenacity stops at her tracks, and she summons her flaming gun and aims at Nasir, then *BAM!* A bullet zooms towards him, but the bullet crashes into a purple shield, sparks flying everywhere. The crowd gasps at the action, including the Tansi Twins. Nasir looks at the goth with an expression filled with appall. Tenacity storms back to the end of the stage, and even though she doesn't have a mic, she's able to roar out her irritation to where everyone can hear every word.

Tenacity

SHUT THE FUCK UP, YOU BEJEWELLED TURKEY! DON'T TALK TO ME LIKE YOU'VE KNOWN ME MY ENTIRE LIFE! YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT ME!

Nasir

(yelps)

It's speaking to me again!! And it dares to insult me!?

Disgusting, disgusting!

(scoffs then flails his hand as if he's shooing Tenacity away)

Get rid of her! Get rid of her!

Before Tenacity can get another snarky comment out of her system, a red dot appears on the side of her head, then *BOOM!* A bullet from within the crowd blasts through the goth's head, making her blood and remains look like fireworks. Her body falls limp, and *boom!* She falls off the stage, and cries and shouts come from the audience, including Alexander and Thomas, start taking over the Colosseum like a thunderstorm.

Nasir raises his hand to silence everyone, but Alexander and Thomas can still be heard. Even Delilah's cries are still making itself known.

Nasir

Well now, *that* was interesting. I know you Gaians can't see anything, but I hope that you have come to the conclusion that you will not make the same mistake your "friend" has made. Now, let's move on. Rose, my dear, I'm sure that you can revive Tenacity, can't you? You are Ubokufa's descendant, after all. Come on out and model my work, and then I'll let you do your thing.

Rose's tent door opens, and she walks out in a large, white garment, and she walks up on the stage, dredging slowly towards the end.

Nasir

Rose... a beautiful soul. So nice, so sweet. You're willing to help out whoever cries out for it, no matter what their background is. You make sure that everyone is taken care of. There's no doubt that you'll most likely make it to Maza. However... Rose... are those good acts *truly* from the goodness of your heart? Yes, you may have wanted to help everyone for no reason whatsoever at the beginning, but all of that seems like something you *have* to do now, huh? I mean, after all, you *do* have some people believing that you're something you're not.

Rose continues to walk down the catwalk, though her heart starts to weigh a ton as she realizes what Nasir is referring to.

Nasir

A good girl who's been blessed with so much... now feels like she has to double the work and do much more to prove that she's not what a lot of people are thinking... she's forgotten the true reason why she was doing good deeds in the first place... all because of what happened to her a few years ago. It doesn't help that your father was the Louisiana Reaper, huh?

Rose

...

Nasir

Heh, it's not even just your father. Your *entire* family on his *and* Delilah's side is just filled with darkness and tragedy. You're doing everything you can to keep your image clean. You'd probably disconnect from your parents if you could, wouldn't you, Rose?

Rose stops in her tracks, but it takes everything in her power to not repeat Tenacity's mistake. She instead lets the tears fall as she continues walking off the stage, uses the steps to exit, and immediately runs towards Tenacity's corpse.

Nasir

Yes yes, please do revive your friend. I hope that it's because you *want* her alive and not because it'll make you look good.

Nasir waits for Rose to say something, but he's only greeted with silence. He watches Rose summon a purple butterfly, watching it land on Tenacity, working its magic.

Nasir

Anywho, let's continue. Jacqueline, some of your blood managed to get onto my stage as well. Why don't you come out next?

The tent door opens, and Jacqueline comes out wearing a gray pantsuit and a white sleeveless top underneath to cover up her chest. She does exactly what her two friends did, and she walks down the messy catwalk.

Nasir

Jacqueline, the daughter of one of the richest people in her hometown. You almost lost your life, but if not for an Umrha,

you wouldn't be here right now. And what's your way of saying "thank you"? Going to parties and throwing yourself around carelessly... not even considering the fact that you might die... and there will be no Umrha to save you next time. But oh wait, you don't have to worry about that, won't you? You have Rose to come to the rescue in case you die of alcohol poisoning or a car accident. And your reputation? Who cares, right? Daddy dearest was always there to pay the tabloids off, making sure that his name wasn't getting dragged in the mud in the business world. You think you're so special... but you're nothing, Jacqueline. When will you realize that how you present yourself does matter in the long run? How long will it take for you to see that you'll have to work towards your goals just like everyone else? You have responsibilities now... you're not a child anymore. Mommy and Daddy aren't going to be around for long, and the people that are in your social circles now are doing whatever they can to be your emotional support. But I guess what I'm saying is falling to deaf ears... isn't it?

As much as Jacqueline wants to hiss back at the Quphanto, her feet pick up the pace and speed walks off the stage before her mouth starts spewing out whatever sentences her brain was forming.

Nasir

And let's not forget about Melissa.
(says sarcastically)
Come on out, you precious dove.

Melissa's tent door opens, and she walks up to the stage wearing a pastel-pink trumpet dress with silver chains wrapping around her. She walks down the catwalk, taking deep breaths and catching a glimpse of Tenacity sitting up, her body looking as if a bullet never went through her.

Nasir

Aah, Melissa. I applaud you for fighting through my feathers. I didn't think that any of you would make it. You truly are ambitious. I can tell that you're gonna be a trendsetter back in your hometown. You might be like me~! You'll have eyes on you, everyone wanting to be you, everyone begging to have what you possess. That is what you want... isn't it? Your friends are ahead of you, aren't they? You're scared that you'll be left in the dust, completely forgotten. Your daddy dearest isn't helping, is he? So close to adulthood, yet you're still behind a cage... chained down. It's a miracle that he's even letting you hang out with these walking disasters.

Melissa

...

Nasir

I can tell that you're still wondering what your friends are jealous about. Well, I won't reveal anything, because where's the fun in that, but I will put it like this... I will be shocked if I see that you all are still as thick as thieves after this,
kykykykykykyky!!!

Melissa listens to the Quphanto's every word, however, it causes her fists to ball up. Air magic surrounds her fists, but she takes deep breaths, trying to control herself, and she walks down the stairs, leaving the stage.

Nasir

Let me see the Peoni-hunter next. I have to see how his outfit looks.

Issei exits his tent while wearing a red polo shirt and brown cargo shorts, his katana and gun making themselves known. He walks down the catwalk, not really trying to hear what the Quphanto has to say.

Nasir

Issei Jackson... I'm so curious about why your parents would name you Issei. Are you the first to do something with your life? What were your parents doing before you came around? Hehe, I'm asking you like you would know. Well, when you figure them out, let me know. Pushing them aside, you've done very well with yourself! Thanks to your Peoni-hunting job, you're financially stable. Got your own place, got all of these weapons... and yet... it's still not enough, is it? You don't have family to talk to often, friends to hang out with, and worst of all, you don't have someone you can call your "significant other". You can't even put a lot of focus into your art commissions thanks to your Peoni-hunting. It's almost as if your work-life balance is just completely out of whack. You want to live a regular life, but your double life stops you from doing that... why?

The Peoni-hunter gets off the stage, completely shutting off Nasir.

Nasir

And last, but certainly not least, let's give it up for Anti. I hope his outfit isn't pinching him.

Kendo storms out of the tent wearing a straitjacket, his arms wrapped up tightly to where he can't use them. Nasir notices him stomping down the catwalk, and he can't help but to smirk at him.

Nasir

Aaaah, Anti-

Kendo

Shut the fuck up, Nas.

Nasir

Oh dear, where's this animosity coming from-

Kendo

YOU PUT ME IN THE FUCKIN' STRAITJACKET AGAIN, ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!

Nasir

You're lucky we know each other, otherwise, I'd have you meet the same fate as your pet down there.

Kendo

AT THIS POINT, I'D MUCH RATHER DO THAT THAN BE IN THIS PIECE OF SHIT!

Nasir

Are you gonna cry now?

Kendo

I'm gonna walk off this damn stage so that we can go to the next challenge. I don't need you to give some big o' analytic essay over my struggles. I know what's wrong, and I'm tacklin' it now.

Nasir

So you win these challenges, you win your freedom... but would you truly be free even after that?

Kendo

I'm plannin' on doing more than just win these challenges. I'm killin' Aidoneus.

GAAAAASP!!!! The crowd starts talking amongst themselves, and Nasir's eyes widen slightly. Kendo looks at everyone in the crowd.

Kendo

Yeah, I said it!! Unlike all you dick riders, I got enough balls to talk my shit!! I'm fuckin' tired of this bullshit! Fuck Aidoneus and everything he stands for! The moment this event is over, Aidoneus better sleep with that stupid third eye of his open!

Nasir

...

Kendo

One more thing, get my fuckin' name right!! My name is not Anti,
it's Kendo!! K-E-N-D-O!

Nasir

... He says all of this while still wearing that jacket. You're
just a dog barking while on a leash.

Kendo

..!!!

(sighs, lowers his head for a minute, then looks at Nasir)

Fuck you, bird-beak... I never liked you, anyway.

(spits on the stage and storms off)

...

Nasir watches Kendo leave his stage, letting the chaotic jokester's words hang in the air. As soon as everyone leaves the stage by its lonesome, the Quphanto snaps his fingers, making the catwalk disappear into a portal, leaving only the six tents still present. He also releases Alexander and Thomas from their cages, and the Upendelaikis reunite with their team.

The team stays silent as they approach Nasir, ready to receive their reward. Nasir slowly claps his hands and says, "Congratulations, Gaians. You've made it through my challenge... barely. Before you go onto the next one, I have a couple of gifts to give you. First off, I would like for you six to go back into your tents. I'm sure you don't want to wear my creations anymore. Upendelaikis, I have something for you, as well."

As soon as he says this, the six tents along with two more appear directly behind the team, and the six disturbed members walk into theirs. Alexander goes into his, and Thomas goes last because of his skepticism. The tents glow, and after a few seconds, the team comes out in completely different clothes than what they started with: Kendo wears a tight, gray, sleeveless

shirt, dark-blue baggy jeans, and black running shoes that have green, blue, and purple streaks on them; Alexander wears a completely unbuttoned ocean-blue shirt(nothing underneath) and basketball shorts to match, both the shirt and shorts having green and purple lines dancing around for a design, and ivory-white loafers; Thomas wears a pastel-green, long sleeved shirt that has a deep v-cut and a light-blue and light-purple peacock feather decal located on his left side, light blue dress pants, and dark-royal-purple loafers; Issei wears a forest-green shirt that has swirls for a design, night-blue jeans along with black boots that take over his calves, and a long, eggplant-purple pleather long jacket that covers him up, his black gloves complimenting his boots and his gun and katana by his side once again; Tenacity is in a black crop top with a design of green peacock feathers taking over most of the top, black bootcut jeans, black high platforms, and long, black, fingerless fishnet gloves; Rose is now in a green-blue-purple ombre, long-sleeved, off-shoulder maxi dress that sparkles from the blue color downwards and has two slits, white jeggings that cover up her exposed legs, and purple and pink high heels; Jacqueline is in a purple sleeveless top with dark green lines making swirls all over it(showing off a bit of the lower part of her breasts as well as her mid section), a very short, glittery-sky-blue skirt with a neon-green thong, and high, blue, fuzzy knee-length boots; and Melissa has on a short, lilac-purple dress with puffy sleeves and pink, green, and blue flowers all over the dress along with pink open-toed wedges. The crowd say their ‘ooh’s’ and ‘aah’s’ as they take in the team’s new attire.

“There you go,” Nasir says, “You look *much* better than how you started. Don’t worry... there’s no magic tied to these clothes. Now, here’s your second gift. Take this and use it to improve your look. Never forget the shade that has been thrown, and ask yourself... ***can you really make it to your goal with the mindsets you have now?***” He grabs a green 0.25 carat old

European cut emerald out of his pocket, and the gem levitates and goes to Rose, allowing the descendant to grab it and place it in the pouch. Nasir looks at Kendo and says, "Let us see how devoted you truly are to seeing your resolution come to life... Kendo." As he says this, he adjusts the ring that rests on his left ring finger, and he sits back down on his throne.

...

The camera shifts from Nasir and the team to the Tansi Twins.

Chelsea

Wow... I think this was the most intense challenge yet.

Fuschia

This is the JUICIEST segment, so far! The Earth Bitches may have passed the challenge, but I think Lord Nasir won that. I don't care what anyone has to say.

Chelsea

Oh, no doubt about it, Lord Nasir was successful in getting in the Gaians' heads, and now they're all shaken up. One of them even DIED and came back!

Fuschia

Right!! I wasn't expectin' it to be Tenacity!! What's the tea with Tee!?
(giggles)

Chelsea

Let's catch up with them after the break. We'll see y'all soon~!

The twins wave at the camera, and the screen fades to black to start the commercial break.

Chapter 10

Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa have been walking around the center of Umu for who knows how long, sand taking over their feet and the blazing heat making their clothes stick to them. They have seen the people who reside in this unknown world, the horns on their heads and the leathery wings, and from that analysis, they understand that they're not in Forestopolis anymore. Zeena waves her hand like a fan and says, "Whoa, *shit!!* It's too damn hot! And I thought Malaiki City was a furnace! Pooh, can we *please* find a cool place to relax?"

Shandon rolls his eyes, not really trying to listen to Zeena's complaining. "We already been through this," Shandon grumbles, "We're in Hell, babe, ain't no A/C nowhere up in 'dis bitch."

"Well, I wanna go home," Zeena whines, "This ain't good for me and Cocoa, ain't that right, suga-boo?"

However, Cocoa doesn't listen to her mother, walking a little ahead of her parents, sniffing the ground. Shandon watches his fur-daughter search for their people through the stiff heat, no wind giving them any type of rejuvenation. "Our 'suga-boo' is lookin' for our niece," Shandon chuckles, "She's determined, just like her daddy. I thought you wanted to find our folks, anyway."

"I *did*, but that was befo' this heat hit me like a train," Zeena whines out, "Look, Rose is a tough cookie, and Usiku is wit' them, so let's just--"

Before Zeena could finish her sentence, a Peoni-kid sees the family, noticing that they don't have the Umu vibe. He approaches them, and says, "Aye, y'all not from 'round here. Are y'all wit' them Gaians in that show Lord Aidoneus got goin' on?"

The trio looks at the child, and Cocoa immediately hides behind her father, letting out a few whimpers. Shandon straightens up and tilts his head up with the blunt still in his mouth, looking down at him, and he says, "What Gaians, lil' jit?"

The Peoni points up at the large Colosseum that can easily be seen anywhere even though it's a few miles away from where they stand. "There's some Gaians fightin' to save their friends and free Anti from stayin' here" he says excitedly, "The Louisiana Reaper is wit' 'em, too! I wanna go watch, but mama's makin' me run errands for her..."

Ba-bump! There it is. The words that Shandon has been waiting to hear. The Louisiana Reaper. Usiku. "Hm, let's go," Shandon says as he takes the blunt out of his mouth to blow some smoke, and he struts to the Colosseum. Cocoa follows her father, keeping her eye on him to make sure that he's safe.

Before Zeena follows her family, she looks at the child and says, "Thank you, sweetie," and she reunites with Shandon and Cocoa.

The child watches the hybrids make their way to their party, and he mumbles to himself, "Maaan, *fuck* mama, I wanna watch." And he spreads his wings to fly towards the Colosseum.

...

As the commercial break rolls, the team does the usual: sit in the sands, waiting for the next challenge to begin. However, the energy is different this time... it's a much heavier atmosphere. Mixed with Umu's negative vibes, there's also curiosity and fear. Everyone's eyes are glued onto Tenacity as if she's a spirit that lacks a fleshy vessel. She notices everyone looking at her, but she continues to look at the ground. "*Would y'all look at somethin' else,*" Tenacity mutters, "*Ya'll actin' like I'm a ghost or somethin'.*"

"I mean... you *should* be," Issei says, "You *would* be if not for Rose."

Usually, Tenacity would have something smart to say for Issei or anyone for that matter, but right now, she chooses to stay silent, still swimming in her own thoughts. Thomas examines the team's vibes, the envious and wrath-filled energy murk that clouds up everyone makes his heart

sink. His instincts are telling him that he should help them, but... how? He's helped a few young adults get out of the darkness within their minds, but he's much more successful with children. Children are much easier to talk to, easier to reach their hearts, but once they reach a certain age, it becomes almost impossible to help. At that point, Thomas would have to hope that a Mazan more skilled than him will save those souls. *Who would I even start with*, he asks himself, *Everyone here has baggage... and it's a different type of baggage for each one.*

Melissa, being the only one to find a way to negate Nasir's magic, looks at her friends, noticing that it's not just Tenacity being awfully quiet. Jacqueline, for once, isn't saying much, either. Rose isn't even trying to lift everyone's spirits up, but she's got enough energy to examine the emerald they received. The go-getter lets out a sigh, and she looks at her goth friend and says, "Tee, I'm glad that you're alive."

Tenacity hears her friend, but her eyes are stuck on the sands, and her glued lips along with her dry throat restrict her from talking anymore. So, to show that she hears her, she nods her head. This response doesn't satisfy Melissa, and she says, "I had asked you something earlier, but you didn't get a chance to answer." The goth looks at her own hands, closes her eyes, and then *fwoosh!* Melissa lets out a soft gasp, and Jacqueline and Rose notice, too, looking at Tenacity watching the flames dance on her hands.

"I still have my powers," Tenacity mumbles, and she makes them disappear as she sighs, *"Good... Can't save Nermal and Amethyst without them..."*

"Tee," Melissa asks a little louder. Tenacity gets up from the ground and walks away from the group, patting the sand off of her body, and she looks at the Emperor's Box, glaring at everyone up there. Melissa follows her, concern rising in her heart, and she says in a loud tone, "Tenacity, talk to me."

“About what,” Tenacity says as she snaps her head towards Melissa with a strained face, “I died from a stupid decision I’ve made, and now I’m back. There’s nothin’ to talk about.”

“But, Ten, ever since we wore those feathers, that was when you... changed.”

“Yeah, I think we *all* did, Mel, so why you pressin’ me?”

“Because you’re my friend, and I’m worried about you.”

“Jacqueline and Rose are also our friends. Go check on them. I’ll be fine. I’ll be better once we get Nermal and Amethyst out of here.”

Tenacity crosses her arms as she fixes her eyes onto the Emperor’s Box, again. Melissa’s heart strings rip and tear from Tenacity’s disconnectedness. She stands in front of her and says, “Tenacity, the way that you reacted to what Nasir said... I wouldn’t say it was out of the ordinary, but you were willing to *shoot him*. *A Quphanto*, Ten!”

“...” Tenacity only glares at Melissa.

“And the contents of Nasir’s little analysis on you is only making me more befuddled,” Melissa says, “What was he talking about? Why did he make it seem like there’s a chance that you’ll leave us at some point? Hell, he’s making it sound like you weren’t trying to be friends with us in the first place.”

“...”

“Tenacity!!”

“I’m not goin’ anywhere,” Tenacity finally speaks, “I’m happy to have you all as my friends.”

“And you’re honest when you say this, right? You’re not just saying this to push me away?”

Before Tenacity says anything else, footsteps approach from behind them, and they turn to see that it’s Jacqueline. “Alright, Tee, spill it,” she says, resting a hand on her hip, her face crumpled up.

The goth rolls her eyes and groans out, “Spill *what?*”

“You know what, you secretive hoe,” Jacqueline sneers, “First you didn’t tell us that you were dating Issei at some point, and now *apparently* you’re *wanting* to be a loner that suffers from RBF for the rest of your life. What gives?”

“It’s none of yo’ business, Jack,” Tenacity snarls back.

“It *is* my business if it’s gonna affect our friendship in the future, Ten” she says, stepping closer to Tenacity. “High school is over, and yeah, college is gonna start soon, and that is, like, *the worst*, but, like, you have *us* to make shit easier. But instead, you want to *choose* to be an apartment dweller? And possibly cut us from the picture?!”

“If you guys believe an Umu bird over someone you’ve known for 4+ years, then just say that.”

“Okay, so you say that like he was lying on you, and if that was the case, why’d you try to shoot him if you knew he was bullshitting?”

“...”

“Aha! Busted!”

“I’m not obligated in tellin’ you guys *anything*. Just because we consider each other friends, that doesn’t mean I gotta tell you every single fuckin’ thing about me.”

“But we’ve let you into our struggles,” Melissa jumps in, “You pretty much know every lil’ situation we’ve been through and are going through! From me dealing with my dad, to Jackie being saved by an Umrha, to Nermal losing her family, to Rose being taken advantage of by a creep! We’ve laid our burdens bare, and it’s made our bond stronger-”

“You forget that we didn’t learn about Jackie’s birth until about a week ago,” Tenacity says firmly, “You forget that we didn’t learn about Nermal’s past until this whole thing started about a

couple weeks ago. And you forget that we didn't know what really happened with Rose's situation until *after* the trial, and even then, we heard about it all through rumors first. We all have our secrets, and that's fine. I didn't ask to be the one to hear about it. I didn't ask any of you to pour your hearts out to me. You all did it on your own time, so let me do the same."

"Tenacity..." The three girls turn to see their Quphanto/Tansi friend, Rose, walk towards them slowly. Tenacity's heart skips a beat seeing her kind friend approach her with her eyebrows softly furrowed and her full lips curved into a gentle frown. Rose says, "I know that you're not wanting to lose us or get rid of us. You made that *very* clear when Jackie tried to leave us after what happened with her dad. You, along with the rest of us, did everything within your power to stop her from breaking away from us and leaving. It's not even just that event alone, you could have left this group a *long* time ago over *anything*. Yet you stayed through it all, sticking beside us, no matter what."

Rose manages to stand in front of Tenacity, the goth's dark-umber-brown eyes locked onto the descendant's ruby-red ones. Rose continues, "But Ten, you can't be getting mad at us for asking these questions. Nasir insinuated that you wanted to get away from everything, implied that you were gonna flake on us at some point, and then you shot at him only to take a bullet to the head in return. Tenacity, *you DIED!* I don't think you understand how that's making us feel! Yeah, I revived you, but do you realize I had to look at your corpse to do so!?! And what if I wasn't able to bring you back!?! You literally threw your life away over a Quphanto's shit-talking!"

The men watch the girls discuss their issues, but they make sure that they're not too close or even breathing too loud. Issei feels his own frustrations towards Tenacity well up, but he doesn't want to make this about himself. Besides, perhaps Tenacity opening up a bit may give him some sort of clarity somehow. If anything, her giving him a chance to explain himself would make him

feel better(though there's a chance that she already figured everything out once he told her and her friends that he's an M-Hybrid and a Peoni hunter). Thomas watches them, hoping that the girls can make it to a resolution, and Alexander hopes the same thing for he hates to see Rose go through anymore problems. Kendo wants to talk to Tenacity, but he knows that he has no place in this. He joined the conversation the last time this happened, and it worked... but would it work the second time? For once, he's choosing to stay on the sidelines. *I'll applaud her for not making it a big deal for who knows how long, the chaotic jokester thinks to himself, I didn't detect any issues from her besides her attitude. And even her own friends don't know what is going on exactly?... That's impressive.*

Rose rests her hands onto Tenacity's shoulders, and she says, "If Nasir's words got to you *that* badly, then it's clearly something you care about! We just want to be here for you! You've always been there for us, why can't you let us do the same!? You already closed us off with the smaller things like relationships, what else are you bottling up!?"

Tenacity can feel her soul wanting to leave her body again as the pressure of the situation becomes heavier. So many sentences are forming in her head, she's not sure which to say. Should she just snap at Rose and try to flip the situation onto her somehow? Should she just go ahead and finally open up about her past even though she promised herself to never visit those events ever again because of how painful and traumatizing it was? Her vision becomes blurry, and before her lips could open to release some words, her hands shove Rose away from her before storming off to another part of the arena, kicking up dust. *Where the hell am I going, she thinks to herself, Pssh, anywhere but around them at this point.*

Meanwhile, Usiku watches Tenacity march away from Rose, his daughter wanting to follow but is stopped by Jacqueline and Melissa. His heart sinks as the vision of Tenacity getting killed

replays over and over in his brain. Delilah, who is still sitting on Usiku's lap, cuddles her lover, trying to calm her aching heart, and Usiku rubs her back. "*I can't believe it,*" she whispers.

"She's fine now, 'Lilah," Usiku attempts to reassure her, "For the most part, she's fine. Let's just be glad that Rose was able to bring her back."

"But, Usi, we had to *watch* that," she exclaims.

"I know... *sighs* I know," he says, "Out of everyone to pull that stunt, I'd have thought Jacqueline would have done it." *This is all my fault,* Usiku thinks to himself.

"... I just find it interesting how he killed Tenacity... but not Kendo."

"HmMMM??"

"Honey, Nasir killed Tenacity, but Kendo practically committed treason. He just told the majority of Umu that he was going to *kill* Aidoneus, but he walked off the stage unscathed. Don't you find that odd??"

"...I guess that is a bit peculiar. Nasir did mention that they have history, so there's that."

"Well yeah, but you'd think all of that would be thrown out the window once Aidoneus' safety is threatened. You would think that they would, you know, make an example out of him, somehow."

Usiku softly nods as he listens to his soulmate's explanation. It is interesting how Kendo didn't lose *his* life as easily. Perhaps it's because Aidoneus needs him alive for his grand plan. Surely it can't be because of anything else, right? That's when he remembers the rewards that the team has been collecting. "Hmmm... this whole ordeal is... odd," he mumbles, "It's not just Nasir giving Kendo the special treatment... it's the Quphantos rewarding them every time they complete a challenge, too..."

“Mhmmm,” Delilah agrees, gently tapping her chin, “Why *are* they rewarding them? I’d have thought that getting Nermal and Amethyst back would suffice.”

“Hmm…” Before Usiku shares his theories, within his peripherals, he sees Aidoneus leaning against the railing of the Emperor’s Box and looking at the team. Delilah notices Usiku’s silence, and before she questions him, she looks up to see Aidoneus looking at them, making her heart jump, and she looks down at the ground.

“*He’s looking at us,*” Delilah whisper-yells.

“*I can sense that,*” Usiku mutters, his nerves bundling up into a knot as Aidoneus continues to stare at them. Then after a few seconds, black mist appears beside them, and it turns into Aidoneus with his legs crossed and his hands resting on his knee.

“Hello again, lovebirds,” Aidoneus purrs out, “Enjoying the show?”

Delilah chooses to not answer or look at him; Usiku tightens his grip onto Delilah, keeping his gaze on the devil(or possibly another copy of him) locked on, and he answers, “If you want me to be honest, no, we’re not enjoying this. How much longer do we have to be here?”

“My apologies, Usiku,” Aidoneus says, placing his hand over his nonexistent heart, “I know that the last challenge was gut-wrenching, but look at it like this~ At least Rose is in one piece, right~?”

“…” Usiku chooses to stay silent, not wanting to entertain Aidoneus anymore, looking at his daughter once again. The Umu CEO notices him disengaging, and he can’t help but to let out a sinister chuckle.

“Not wanting to wring my neck out again I see~” Aidoneus coos out.

“You’re just a copy,” Usiku answers, “I’m not wasting my energy on a fake.”

“Hmmmmm,” the devil vocalizes his curiosity, looking at the empty seats, tilting his head at the two seat cards. “That’s interesting,” he coos out, “They’re not here yet... I hope that they get here soon so that they can *support their niece*~ Hmhmhmhm~!” Usiku’s head perks up when the word ‘niece’ comes out of Aidoneus’ mouth, but before he can question what he said, Aidoneus turns into black mist again and disappears from them.

Delilah knows exactly what Aidoneus is referring to because she looked at the cards already. Usiku looks at where Aidoneus was sitting and notices the two seat cards, and Delilah starts feeling Usiku’s aura become anxiety-filled, already knowing that his blood pressure is rising. Before Usiku can get a good look at the contents of the cards, she tries to snuggle him tightly, blocking his view. Usiku slightly struggles and sneers, “***Delilah, what the hell are you doing?***”

“I just love having you close to me, Usi,” Delilah squeaks out.

“***Did he say what I think he just said,***” he questions as his irritation grows.

“I-It’s nothing, Usi,” Delilah squeals out, “Come on, you know how the devil works! Always trying to get into people’s heads!”

“...***Delilah,***” Usiku says, his bass voice making her heart tremble.

“We’re worried about enough shit, Usi! C’mon, focus on Rose, I think the break is about to be over.”

“***Let me see the cards...***”

“But Usi-”

“***Let. Me. See. The. Goddamn. Cards. Woman.***”

“Oooh *whimpers*... *I was trying to avoid this...*”

Delilah grabs the seat card closest to them, and she gives it to Usiku; Usiku firmly grabs it. He looks at the card and reads the name on it, and his eyes start blinking rapidly, trying to make

sure that he isn't seeing things. He squints his eyes, scanning the name, and it is at that moment, he feels his soul let out the loudest scream as his hand squeezes the life out of the card, crumpling up the piece of paper and slams it down. *Pant. Pant. Pant.* Delilah hears Usiku's heavy breathing, smoke coming out of his flared nostrils, and her body starts trembling. "***Get off of me, Delilah,***" Usiku growls out.

Delilah gulps and says, "B-But Usi-"

"***Woman, get the fuck up off of me,***" Usiku says again, trying not to yell at her, and he lifts her off of him, gently places her back on her seat, and he gets up and stomps off. "***I'm going to the restroom,***" he mutters, leaving behind his lover. *I already have enough to deal with,* he thinks to himself, *Now **he's** gonna be here, too?* Delilah watches him leave, trembling from his boiling wrath, and before she can say anything, loud EDM music starts playing, indicating that the event is about to start again, and she decides to keep her backside planted in her seat, holding her own trembling hands as she tries to calm herself down before the next wave of chaos comes through.

...

The screen fades back into the Colosseum, and zooms into the Tansi Twins who stand on the Emperor's Box.

Chelsea

Welcome back to "Deal or Torture"~! It's been a crazy ride, thus far, and it's only gonna get crazier from here on out.

Fuschia

That's right! Nasir's challenge has left the Earth Bitches a lil' shaken up~. They have succeeded, but Tenacity caught a bullet to the head, only to be revived by Rose, and Anti declared that he was gonna kill his father, Lord Aidoneus, after the challenges were completed!

(giggles)

I wonder how they all are feelin' now that they've had their break~

Chelsea

Let's go check on them, shall we~?

The Tansi Twins fly towards the team with microphones at hand. They stand in front of the team with ominous smirks and a camera-Peoni getting a good close-up shot of everyone.

Chelsea

Hello, again, Earth Bitches~. So good to see you all in one piece.

(looks at Tenacity)

Tenacity, how are you feelin' after gettin' ya' head blown to bits?

(places the mic in front of her)

Tenacity

(rolls her eyes)

I feel like that's none of yo' concern.

Fuschia

Uh-ooh, Chels, let's check on the other team members before she tries to blow *our* heads off~.

(giggles)

Chelsea

Yeah, let's check on Anti~ Heeey, shnookums~. You gave a crazy speech earlier during Lord Nasir's challenge. Were you serious when you said you were going to *kill* your dad?

(puts mic in front of him)

Kendo

(yanks the mic away from her)

Announce the next challenge. I was down to play along, but now I'm over it. Matter of fact, since I know that y'all only listen to one person around here...

(turns to the Emperor's Box)

AIDONEUS!!

The camera shifts to the Emperor's Box, and Aidoneus gets up from his throne chair. He looks at Kendo with a serene smirk.

Aidoneus

You rang, son~?

Kendo

We've pretty much passed the halfway point, so how 'bout we change shit up. One, stop fuckin' askin' me if I accept the deal because like I said NUMEROUS times, unless you let Nermal AND Amethyst go, I'm not comin' back. So you can go ahead and stop doing that. Two, tell these two Peoni whores to stop with the interviews. Moving forward, we're not answering anything. If you wanna learn who we are so fuckin' badly, just watch how we breeze through these challenges like we been doing.

Aidoneus

Hmmmmmmmm...

(taps his chin)

So no more check ups, and no more interviews, hmm?

Kendo

Ex-fucking-actly.

Aidoneus

So you're 100% certain that you want to put your friends' lives through more danger.

Kendo

They knew what they were getting into the moment they came here. You took their friends, and they'll do whatever it takes to get them back.

Aidoneus

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm... Very well then, son. Chelsea, Fuschia, let's refrain from interviewing Anti and his friends, please. And I shall stop checking up on him... it seems that torture is all he craves now.

Chelsea

Huh... fine by me.

Fuschia

(mutters)

Party pooper...

Aidoneus

Good~. Glad that we can come to a compromise. Are you happy now, son?

Kendo

Go suck on a heated curling iron.

Aidoneus

Oh... and... Let me say one more thing before we continue. Back in Gaia, it's actually a special day today so with that said...

(clears his throat, starts singing)

*Happy birthday to you~. Happy birthday to you~. Happy birthday, dear **Melissa**~ Happy birthday to you~.*

Kendo

...!?!?

Aidoneus

Happy 18th birthday, my dear~

BA-BUMP! Right on camera, everyone's eyes widen and a few jaws drop.

Kendo

What-

Aidoneus

Alright, no further questions or discussions. Ladies~?

Kendo

WAIT A MINUTE! WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT'S HER BIRTHDAY!? HOW LONG HAVE WE BEEN-

Aidoneus

(wiggles his finger)

Aht aht aht~ You said you didn't want to talk to me anymore. I'm only honoring your wishes, son~. Now then... ladies~?

Fuschia

You heard the runaway, everyone~! He wants to keep truckin' through these challenges, so we're gonna do exactly that~!

Chelsea

Before we get to the next challenge, let's get into the sponsorship~ This next challenge has been brought to you by Sleepy Flame. Have you been tossin' and turnin' in your bed lately? Feelin' lethargic yet somehow wide awake? Get you a Sleepy Flame today and let its scent rock you to sleep~!



The image of the sponsor takes over the screen, sounds of sloths whistling and gentle snores play in the background.

Fuschia

(sighs)

I love Sleepy Flame. They be smellin' sooooo good.

Chelsea

I know right, I know that after this, I'm gonna light one up and go to sleep *immediately*.

Fuschia

And noooow introducing the *lovely* Quphanto that has the best of both worlds. The one that knows how to sleep for centuries *and* have the perfect spots for parties, Lady Ophelia, the Quphanto of Sloth~!

The Tansi Twins fly back to the Emperor's Box as Aidoneus goes back to his throne chair, and Ophelia emerges from her throne chair as the crowd cheers.

...

Ba-bump...Ba-bump... Ba-bump... That was all the team could hear... their hearts pounding against their ears in unison. All that their eyes could see was every sand grain that resides beneath their feet. Series of questions starts running through their heads. Melissa's birthday is today? They came to Umu in the beginning of July. Is it really August now? If recalled correctly, Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa had gotten their powers by the end of June. The instructions from Lady Cassandra specifically stated that the effects the potions have on the girls only lasted a month. Shouldn't their powers be *gone*? Why do they still have them? *How* do they still have them? If they've been here for a month, that would mean that everyone they know and love is worried right now... right? What's going to be their excuse this time?

“Yooohooooooooo~” The team looks up to see Aidoneus wave his hand at them as he stands next to Ophelia who is a few feet shorter than him. He says calmly, “It’s very rude of you all to not acknowledge the lovely Ophelia~ If you’re still disoriented, then listen closely. Yes, you still have your powers, and it’s because of my potions. One detail that I wanted to keep as a surprise is that by drinking the concoctions, the powers you’ve gained from those potions you took awhile back will not wear out *for as long as you are here in the spiritual plane*. So while you may not be able to use your powers once you go back to your fleshy realm, that won’t be the case whenever you’re in Spirit Realm. And the best part? *It lasts for a year~!* Doesn’t that sound fun~? I hope you love your birthday present, Melissa~! Now will you all focus?”

Kendo rolls his eyes as he holds the microphone close to his mouth as he says, “I dunno, are you gonna shut up like you’re supposed to if I say ‘yes’?”

Twitch. Kendo notices Aidoneus’ eye slightly twitching even from a distance, but Aidoneus immediately covers it up with a smile. “Hmhmhmhm~,” Aidoneus giggles, then he looks down at Ophelia and says, “The floor is yours, Ophelia~”

The Sloth Quphanto faintly smiles at Aidoneus through relaxed aqua-blue eyes, and she looks at the team with the same amount of serenity. They take the time to look at Ophelia: her short, straight, sky-blue hair takes the form of a bob with a long bang that covers her right eye; her warm, medium-brown skin and the freckles that decorates her oval face; the knee-length, sleeveless, and azure-blue nightgown with baby-blue ruffles at the top accentuating her pear shaped body; and extremely long, tan sloth arms resting at her sides. Aidoneus readjusts her silver headmic for her before sitting back down, and Ophelia immediately looks at Kendo and says, “Heeeelloooooo, Keeeeendooooo~!”

“Yoooooooooooo, Oooooopheeeeeeiiiiiaaaaa,” Kendo greets her back, copying the way that she talks, a smile actually forming as he remembers her snuggly, warm hugs, her ability to simply listen to his rants, and letting him sleep on the Inertia Tree with her. He asks her, “Hoooooow aaaaare yoouuuuuuuuu doooooiiiiin?”

“Iiiii’m doooooiiiiing fiiiiine! Iiiii hooooope thaaaaat yoouuuuu aaaaare feeeeeeiiiiing uuuuuu foouuuor theeeeeee neeeext chaaaallege,” Ophelia says excitedly.

“Ooooh doooooon’t woorry Ooopheeliaaaaa,” he says, “Iiiii knooooow thaaat whaaaateeeever chaaaallegee yoouuuuuu gooooooot wiiiiill beeeee looooooaaaads ooof-”

Issei snatches the microphone from Kendo and says, “Can we hurry this up!? We’ve been doing this shit for about a month!! Why are you two talking like that!?”

Kendo and Ophelia look at Issei in silence, Kendo’s smile disappears as the bliss he was feeling while talking to his old friend dissipates into thin air. Ophelia’s smile goes away as well and is replaced with a droopy frown, her bottom lip pouting, and her head begins to hang low. The crowd immediately express their awes and start booing at Issei for making her sad. The crowd starts yelling out their commands.

“BOOO!! SAY SORRY, FLESH WALKER!!”

“THAT’S WHY YOU GET NO BITCHES, PEONI HUNTER!!”

“YOU’RE A JUNGLE FIEND!!”

“ROT IN HELL! OH WAIT, YOU’RE ALREADY HERE!”

“HOW DARE YOU MAKE OPHELIA CRY, YOU FATHERLESS GAIAN!”

“FUCK YOU, PARASITE!!”

The team looks around, caught off guard by the crowd's sudden defense for one of the Quphantos. Where was this energy for the previous Quphantos? What makes Ophelia so different? Ophelia gently clears her throat and says, "Iiiiiit's ooooooaaaaay eeeeeveeryooooone. Thaaaank yoooooou." After she says that, the crowd calms down, a few enraged fans saying their last remarks before it gets quiet again. She continues, "Leeeeet's juuuuuust geeeeet theeee paaartyyyyy staaaaarteed~! Iiiiiit's tiiiiime foooooor Noooooon-Stooooop Boooooogie~!"

Ophelia raises her sloth arms, and a light-blue portal appears in front of the team, a large, sleek, and silver DJ booth appears. She stands on the railing, revealing her smooth legs and bare feet, and she hops off of it to land behind the booth, making the crowd whoop and holler as her claws grab the headphones and delicately places them on her head. She waves her arm again to make another portal, and black balloons and a levitating disco ball appears.

...

Ophelia presses a button on the DJ station, and a light from the booth hits the disco ball, making the light bounce off the fragmented decoration and decorating the Colosseum. Her claw then rests on another button, and before she presses it, she looks at the team.

Ophelia

Leeeeet's seeeeeee yoourr groooooovy siiiiiide~! Briiiiing iiiiin theeeeeee daaaaaanceeeers~!

Click! She presses the button and a song from the 70's, "No Stopping Us" by McBeth and Blackhead, starts playing, its upbeat, groovy vibes filling everyone's ears. Then, many Peonis from within the crowd fly out of their seats while another group

of Peonis come in through the Colosseum's entrances, surrounding the team and treating the arena like a dance floor.

Camera-Peonis get different angles of the party, the screen switching between the cameras to see different Peonis dancing, including the Tansi Twins who dance on top of the Emperor's Box, not giving any type of commentary. The cameras even catch Aidoneus bopping his head to the song, singing to the lyrics as if he can relate to them.

The camera shows the team standing there, not sure what they're supposed to do. Alexander, with a determined face, seems to be saying something to the group, and he starts dancing to the beat, moving his arms, legs, and hips with ease. Everyone watches the Upendelaiki, unsure what he's trying to do, but they let him show what he's got.

The camera stays onto Alexander, making the crowd cheer and root for him as he continues letting the groove move his body with a serious face. A playful smirk grows on Kendo's face, and he starts two-stepping in place. Jacqueline seems to be complaining about the song choice to Rose, Melissa, and Tenacity, but they could care less as they try to figure out if they should just join the "fun" or if they should just have their weapons ready. Issei and Thomas stay alert, watching all of the Peonis around them. Suddenly, some of the Peonis stop dancing and ready their weapons as they approach Alexander, and in a flash, Alexander

summons his light nunchucks and starts beating the Peonis up. *Fwip! Fwoop! Boom! Bam!* Right on beat, he lands fatal hits, making most of the Peonis reset.

The team looks at the Upendelaiki with their jaws on the floor, but they instantly pick them up and summon their weapons; Rose summons her red wasps to amp up her friends' power and agility. The rest of Peonis start trying to attack, and not caring if they're on beat or not, the team starts fighting back, helping Alexander.

...

While the team fights the Peonis on the dance floor, Delilah watches them with her heart fluttering while the crowd dances and cheers. As much as she loves dancing, she believes it's best if she doesn't get caught up. She's not out there in the arena, but she wants to feel like she's helping somehow, even if it's just her simply praying for their victory. She looks to her right to see that Usiku is still gone. Is he *that* bothered about Shandon coming around? *Now that I think about it*, she thinks to herself, *Usi wanted to try and talk things out with Shandon, and Shandon agreed. Does he feel like Shandon is going to act a fool being here regardless?*

Suddenly, Delilah hears a familiar voice yell through the music, "What's good, Honey Bear~?" She jumps and turns to see Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa taking their seats, noticing that the Cerberus Bros. brought them here and her in-laws are holding shot glasses filled with liquid that looks similar to the potions she had to intake before getting here. The couple drink their beverages, shuddering from the flavor, and give the empty glasses to the brothers. The three brothers leave, and Shandon takes a puff of his blunt, making Delilah cringe.

Zeena's body begins to shudder rapidly, feeling the large amount of negative aura poke at her like long needles. Cocoa whimpers from watching her parents intake the substance, and her mother comforts her by caressing the top of her head and letting her snuggle her leg. Zeena then looks down at the arena to try and find Rose within the ocean of souls, and she manages to see her using her light ax, swinging away alongside her friends who use their own weapons. "Oh my goodness," she says softly, having a hard time believing that her niece of all people is actually fighting. "Dee," she calls out, making Delilah turn her head to her, "Fill us in! What's happened so far?!"

"Too much," Delilah responds loudly, "How long were y'all here!?"

"Too long," Zeena answers, "These tall bozos explained that we prolly would have been alright being in this realm since we got at least half of a spiritual being, but they gave us that nasty shit just in case! Did you have to drink that shit, too!?"

"Yeah! *Sighs* Oh, Zee, I wish you guys didn't get dragged into this, but a bit of me is... glad?" While Delilah explains to Zeena what's going on, Shandon watches the battle while slightly jaded, dancing in his seat and completely tuning the women out to listen to the song.

The high Quphanto/Upendelaiki hybrid finds Rose, and his smile widens, showing off his gap. He gets up from his seat, places his blunt behind his ear, and cups his hands near his mouth to make his own megaphone. He shouts out, "*WHOOO THEIR ASSES, LIL' HONEY!!*" He startles the women and dog with his exclamation, but he could care less at the moment.

Rose stops for a second and turns to the sound of the shout, and she realizes that it came from her uncle who waves at her obnoxiously. At that moment, her heart drops, but she senses a Peoni approaching her. She wastes no time and chops the Peoni in half with her ax. As much as she

wants to question why her uncle, aunt, and fur-cousin are here in the first place, she continues to focus on the battle at hand.

Meanwhile, Usiku walks back to his seat next to Delilah. He notices his brother and sister-in-law sitting next to the love of his life, but he decides to sit back down on his seat, not saying anything to them and gluing his eyes onto Rose. The music fills his ears, but he resists tapping his foot on the floor or his head bopping to the beat. Suddenly, he starts hearing shifting next to him, and he looks over to see Shandon had switched with Delilah. *Swish!* With the quickness, Usiku jerks his head back onto the arena, and he can hear Shandon snickering.

“Heeeey, jungle fiend,” he greets Usiku, “I was shooo’ ‘bout to ask where you was.”

“...” Usiku says nothing.

“Oh you ignorin’ me now, ya’ big hobo,” Shandon pokes at Usiku again, “You mad because of all of this shit happening?”

“...”

“Why you ain’t do anything about it, yet? Huh?”

Usiku finally says, “Rose took on the responsibility of helping her friends, and Aidoneus insists that we stand on the sidelines. I already attempted to take him out, but it turned out that it was a fake and he’s hiding in that damned box behind a shield.”

“Whoa! You’re actually talkin’ to me,” Shandon says, “*Finally!*”

Usiku rolls his eyes, not really wanting to hear Shandon’s mouth run like a broken faucet. Before Shandon could get another word in, a Peoni comes around and gives everyone a gas mask, instructing them to place it on. Confused, they do as they say, waiting for the reason behind the masks to come into fruition. However, even though everyone in the crowd is wearing a mask now, that doesn’t stop Shandon from trying to talk Usiku’s ear off. He asks his older

brother, “So just ‘cuz Lil’ Honey told you she wanted to be a superhero, you’re just *letting* her? And you’re not gonna get involved *at all*? You’re not even gonna attempt at gettin’ to the real Aidoneus? Damn, you might look like Usiku, but now I’m startin’ to think you ain’t him.”

“I didn’t even want any of us to come here,” Usiku says.

“So why *are* you here,” Shandon asks while tilting his head, making a scrunched up expression through the mask.

Usiku looks at Shandon aggravated, and he pushes himself to explain to him everything that’s happened thus far, hoping that perhaps with context, the high Quphanto/Upendelaiki hybrid will lay off. Shandon takes in the information, and reviews what he’s been told. He says, “So lemme get this straight. The devil done kidnapped Rose’s friend and *yo*’ friend because his son don’t wanna come back home for some evil plot he cookin’ up, he invited y’all here so y’all can gone ‘head and try to get them back, and in order to get to ‘em, they gotta go through these challenges.”

“Yes,” Usiku confirms.

“...Usiku,” Shandon raises an eyebrow, showing his disbelief.

“...”

“*Usiku.*”

“What?”

“Y’all are dealin’ wit’ *the devil*. Don’t tell me that you really think he’s gonna keep his end of the deal and lettin’ everybody go.”

“I’m sure that he’s got something up his sleeve, but what can we do right now?”

“Ooooh I dunno, maybe *ambush his ass!*!”

“Ambush him *how*?”

“You jungle fiend, you were the Louisiana Reaper once upon a time, you can whoop this dude no problem!”

“First off, I doubt it. I’m sure he’s got magical abilities that put my physical ability to shame. Perhaps if I was still practicing my magic, I’d have a chance, but now I’m not too sure.”

“Pssh...wow...”

“Second off, whatever happened to you damning me for being a Louisiana Reaper? I thought it didn’t matter what my intentions were or if I had a moral compass, a murderer is a murderer.”

“You fuckin’ bum! Look around you!! We’re in Hell, there’s no such thing as morale!! There’s no such thing as fairness!! This is *the devil* we’re talkin’ ‘bout! This dude got yo’ daughter, *my niece*, in the battlefield, tryin’ to kill her and her friends, and you’re just sitting here twiddlin’ yo’ thumbs just like you did when you threw her friends at Cerberus!”

“We’re in unfamiliar territory, Shandon! Aidoneus let me slide the first time. If I try to go against Aidoneus now, something might happen to Rose’s friend that’s held hostage, and I don’t have time to get blamed for more bullshit!”

“Ain’t nobody gonna get mad at you for cuttin’ this bullshit short and nippin’ the problem in the bud! You should have done that from the get-go! You said Rose already had to revive one of her friends. If Rose catches a bullet to the head next, *then what!*? You gon’ sit here and brood like you been doin’!? Don’t say that you’re gonna kill Aidoneus because you could be figurin’ out how to make that shit happen *now!*!”

But before Usiku can get his input in, Ophelia’s voice echoes throughout the Colosseum as she says, “Niiiiiiiice mooooooves, Keeendoooo aaand friiiiiends~!”

Shandon looks at Ophelia and asks, “Why the *fuck* is she talkin’ like that?” However, he only receives silence as an answer as Usiku returns his focus onto the challenge.

...

The team manages to defeat all of the Peonis and Upendeonis that tried to take them out, their souls littering the ground. The camera catches the team regrouping and approaches Ophelia's DJ station as the Quphanto turns down the music.

Ophelia

Thaaaaaat waaaaas sooooo muuuuuuch fuuuuuun! Buut Iiii'm suuure yooou'd waaaant tooooo reeeelaaax noooow, riiight?

At this moment, Ophelia removes her headphones, and she lightly jogs to the center of the arena. She kneels onto the ground and digs her claws into the sand, and she closes her eyes. After a few seconds, the sand glows, and the sand that they are all standing becomes light blue, soft, and plush, the gentle smell of lavender caressing the team's noses. Ophelia then waves her hands around, nonverbally signaling Upendeonis wearing gas masks to walk through the entrances to plant multiple lit candles, more floral and herbal scents welcoming themselves.

The Upendeonis leave the arena, and Ophelia looks at the team with a peaceful smile.

Ophelia

Yooou've beeeen throooooough aaaa looooot. Sooooo juuuuust kiiiick baaaack aaand reeeelaaaax~.

She then jogs back to the DJ station, and *click!* She presses a button, and slow, peaceful music begins to play, harps, pianos, and chimes radiating through the Colosseum.

...

Issei approaches Ophelia with a stern face. “That’s it,” he sneers, “You just want us to relax?”

“Mmmmmhmmmmmm,” Ophelia says while nodding her head, “Taaaake aaaa loooooaad
oooooff foooor aaawhiile, aaand Iiii wiiiiill leeeet yooouuu goooo~!”

Kendo smirks and rolls his eyes at the Peoni hunter, and he says, “C’mon, chocolate drop~
Lighten up~! You *definitely* need this.” He proceeds to lay down on the pillowy sands, closing
his eyes. Issei glares at Kendo, but he decides to lay on his side, use his arm as a pillow, and
closes his eyes.

The girls put their weapons away, and they lay near Kendo. Jacqueline yawns and stretches,
and she says, “*Finally!* I get to have my beauty sleep~!” With no difficulty, she closes her eyes
and snores quietly.

Melissa lays down, looking up at the seven full moons while her heart weeps. Tenacity gets
next to her, plopping onto the sand and looking up at the same sky. Melissa says, “Tenacity...?”

“Hm,” Tenacity responds.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” the ambitious go-getter says sorrowfully.

“It’s fine,” the goth says, “I’m sorry for the pissy attitude.”

“It’s okay...”

“...It doesn’t feel like we’ve been here for *that* long...”

“At this point, I’d rather stay here... The next time I see my parents, I’m never gonna hear the
end of it...”

“Honestly, that might be the case for me, too... I just know my folks are blowin’ up my
phone. Probably already checked my apartment...”

“Do you think that maybe he’s lying to give us a scare?”

“You know what? I hope so, because if he’s actually telling the truth... *sighs* What’s gonna be our alibi?”

“I don’t know, but when you come up with a good one, let me know...”

“I will... Well, the Quphanto is bein’ nice enough to let us get some rest, and you’re dreading goin’ back home for right now, so...”

“I’m gonna *enjoy* this nap. It’d be better if Nermal was with us...”

“We’ll get her back soon. Her *and* Amy. You’ll see.”

Melissa nods and closes her eyes, a tear escaping. Tenacity does the same, drifting to sleep. Rose takes the time to feel the sands, its powdery texture running in between her fingers. She feels sleep creeping up on her, but she tries to fight it. Suddenly, Kendo, with his eyes still closed, says to her, “I didn’t think you’d jump into the action, cherry lips~”

Rose looks at Kendo, softly smiling, and she giggles out, “Well, these Peonis aren’t giving me much of a choice, hmhm~! Besides, if I were to just stand around here at this point, you’d all be on my head about it.”

“Hehe, most likely,” Kendo chuckles.

“I can’t believe we’re almost done,” Rose sighs out.

“I can, I’m ready to be done with this.”

“Yeah, *sighs* this has been an interesting experience, but it really helped me with my powers, and I hope that despite the negative things that’s happened, my friends can say the same thing about their abilities.”

“HmMMM, maybe, maybe not. Do you think they’ll want to get into any more shit like this once it’s over?”

“I don’t know! But whatever they choose to do, I hope that they’ll take care of themselves and know that I’ll be with them regardless.”

“Even if they choose to go on a dark path?”

“Hmmm? What do you mean?”

“If you ask me, your friends are capable of being villains if they wanted to. Jackie would be the bratty villain, Melissa would be the rebellious villain, and Tenacity would be the sociopathic villain. Honestly, *any of us* could become villains after this.”

“...Well, I hope that we don’t feel like we have to go down that route, *especially* since we’re dealing with the devil himself first-hand.”

“Eh, sometimes, the experiences we have don't shape us into better beings. Sometimes, it makes us spiral into worse versions of ourselves.”

“...What type of villain do you think I would be...?”

“A villain I’d side with so that I don’t die.”

“Hmhmhm~! Ooh, Kendo... You may have a point, but... I’ll make sure that *none* of us goes down that route.”

“Well, enough thought-provokin’ convo. *You* need your rest.”

“Of course. Sweet dreams, Ken!”

“Sleep well, cherry lips.”

Rose lays down facing Kendo, and she goes into a deep sleep. Thomas lays on his back, snoring quietly, and Alexander does the same, though his soul cries as it yearns for Amethyst’s company. As they sleep, the crowd quietly talk amongst themselves, go to sleep, or go to the restroom.

...

The camera slowly hovers over the sleeping team, and then it pans over to Ophelia as she whispers into her mic.

Ophelia

(whispers)

*Swееееет dreams, Uuumuuuuuu~. Cheeelseeeaaa? Fuuuuschiiaaaa?
Caaaan weeee gooo toooooo coommeeerciaaal breeeaak?*

The camera shifts to the Tansi Twins who wear gas masks.

Chelsea

(whispers)

*We sure can, Lady Ophelia~. I'm sure the people at home don't
wanna just sit there and watch the Earth Bitches sleep.*

Fuschia

(whispers)

*When we get back, hopefully they'll be up, and we can get to the
next challenge~. Seeeee yooooouuu soooooon~!*

The Tansi Twins wave as the screen fades to black, starting the commercials.

Chapter 11

During the commercial break, many Reapers gather up the souls of Peonis that were slaughtered during the challenge. The team continues to sleep while everyone else is finding ways to entertain themselves in the meantime. Zeena caresses Cocoa, the calm chocolate lab not affected by whatever is in the air. The boujee Malaiki-human hybrid huffs and asks, “What’s the point of these masks?”

Delilah answers, “I think it’s the candles. They said that they help you sleep better.”

“So one whiff, and it’s over,” Zeena asks.

“I think so,” Delilah says, “I’m not going to test my luck though.”

“Hmmm... Then why isn’t it workin’ on Cocoa??”

“Maybe it doesn’t work on animals?”

“Maybe...”

Zeena then looks at Shandon and Usiku, and she whispers to Delilah, “*They’re doin’ better than I thought they would.*”

The Tansi-human hybrid whispers, “*I know right!?*”

Usiku looks at his daughter sleeping soundly, and Shandon does the same, though he notices that she’s sleeping next to Kendo. Shandon says, “Ooooooh, *thaaat’s* why you ain’t did shit. Is that her boyfriend down there-”

“**No**,” Usiku interrupts him, then he calms down, “That’s Aidoneus’ son. Like I said, she’s just wanting to help him, nothing else...”

“*That you know of,*” Shandon mutters.

“...I’m sorry, do you *want* her to be with him,” Usiku sneers through the mask.

“Hell nah, but is that gonna stop her?”

“... Change the subject.”

“You said Aidoneus is where?”

Usiku tilts his head towards the Emperor’s Box, and they look to see Aidoneus leaning against the railing, smiling while watching the team sleeping. Shandon’s face scrunches up in disgust and he whispers, *“Fuckin’ weirdo...”*

“Good, something we can agree upon,” Usiku mutters.

“Okay here’s what we ‘bout to do,” Shandon continues to whisper, rubbing his hands together, *“We can leave the ladies here. You and I are gonna sneak out through the-”*

“What are you doing?”

“Tellin’ you how we’re ‘bout to end this shit.”

“So you’re gonna try to stop all of this before they can get all of the rewards from the Quphantos.”

*“Correction, **we’re** gonna stop all this. And plus, they ain’t gon’ need some rewards once we get done. Are the rewards useful to ‘em at all?”*

“...sighs Not that we know of...”

“Okay then, come on!”

Shandon looks at Aidoneus again, making sure that he’s not looking at them, and he whispers to Delilah and Zeena, *“We’ll be back.”* After saying this, Usiku and he get up from their seats.

“Where are y’all goin’,” Zeena whispers. However, the brothers don’t respond as they make their way to the restroom. Shandon scopes the restroom, making sure no Peonis or Upendeonis were around, and by pure luck, no one is in here, for now.

Not wasting any time, Shandon says softly, “Call up one of yo’ sisters.”

Usiku says, “They’re not here.”

Shandon explains, “They’re the ones that brought me, Zeena, and Cocoa here, and I bet they already scoped this place out.”

“*Why would they-*” Usiku stops himself. As much as he wants to question why his sisters would bring these three people here, he has no time to waste. Knowing how his sisters do things, Shandon is most likely right, and they most likely have taken it to their advantage to see where everything, and everyone, is in Umu. He closes his eyes and calls out, “*Aziza...*”

Immediately, one of the bats flies through the walls and flies in front of the two men. *Squeak squeak squeak squeak!*

Shandon looks at Aziza with determination and demands, “Take us to where this sucka’ is holding Rose’s friend hostage.”

“***And why would you want to do that?***” A voice interrupts Usiku and Shandon, and they jerk their bodies around to see Aidoneus enter the restroom with his hands behind his back, a very apparent smug oozing on his face. He then says, “***Forgive me, Shandon, if I took too long to greet you and your family. It was indeed very rude of me to not welcome the special guests, but I hope you loved the beverages. Let’s head back to our seats and try again, shall we?***”

Usiku’s face scrunches up in irritation, already foreseeing that Aidoneus would catch on, while Shandon scoffs at the sight of the devil trying to play nice. Aziza flies off, phasing through the wall, but suddenly, a copy of Aidoneus phases into the restroom through the same wall while gripping Aziza tightly, distressed squeaks and whimpers escaping her mouth. Usiku and Shandon turn around to see this, and their eyes widen. “Aziza,” Usiku exclaims, and Shandon pulls out his silver gun that is tucked underneath his shirt and in his pants, and he points it at the original Aidoneus in front of them.

Before Shandon can pull the trigger, Aidoneus says, *“Oh I wouldn’t do that if I were you~”*

And right on cue, the Cerberus Bros. walk in while gripping Delilah, Zeena, and Cocoa tightly, the ladies struggling to get out of their grasp; *BA-BUMP*, Usiku’s and Shandon’s hearts plummet. Alpha and Beta continue holding them while Gamma holds Cocoa’s collar in one hand and summons his dark silenced pistol with his other hand and aims it at Zeena’s head, causing her to stop moving. Cocoa whimpers and whines from the sight of her mother being held at gunpoint. The two men stare at the sight, frozen like statues. Aidoneus clears his throat and says, *“Now, I could have Gamma over here just kill your lovers here and now as punishment... no one would know, Rose wouldn’t be able to revive them, and the Reaper would grab their souls before anything else can be done... but I’m a reasonable man~ So let’s do this, you two agree to not try and ruin my event, and you don’t have to worry about these lovely ladies receiving bullet holes. Cerberus will be monitoring you all for me to make sure that the deal is being honored. Forgive me for the extra security, but you’re showing me signs that I can’t trust you.”*

Shandon smacks his lips and says, “That’s rich comin’ from yo-”

“Fine,” Usiku interrupts him, “We’ll go back...”

“Very good, Usiku,” Aidoneus coos out, *“I knew you’d come around~. Now tell your brother to put away his gun, and we can let this be water under the bridge.”*

“....Shandon,” Usiku calls for his brother, looking at him in hopes that he doesn’t try to do anything rash. Now’s not the time to try and fight against the odds. Zeena looks at her husband, her eyes glistening, pleading that he stands down for now.

Shandon winces from seeing his wife, but still holding the gun where it is, he asks, “How do I know that you’re not gon’ harm her when I put my gun away? Yo’ buddy over there could easily take her life regardless.”

“*Aaaah, very fair point,*” Aidoneus says, and he looks at Gamma and says, “*Put that thing away, please.*” The spirit hound obeys and makes his weapon disappear, and the devil says, “*There~ See? Problem solved~! Now, if you could, please, kind sir~.*”

Though hesitation still grips Shandon’s heart, he decides to finally put his gun back in its place. “*Very good, Shandon,*” the Aidoneus-copy purrs while caressing the top of Aziza’s head, “*See? Crisis averted~! And your sisters are free to explore this domain, but they won’t be able to enter my castle. None of you would~! So honestly, I just saved you from wasting your time. Now... let’s go back~.*”

Meanwhile, the Tansi Twins fly to where Ophelia is, and Chelsea says, “Hey, Lady Ophelia~! The commercial break is about to end soon. Just wanted to give you a heads up!”

Fuschia follows up and says, “Yeah, we’re plannin’ on goin’ straight into Master Kal’s challenge.”

Ophelia looks at the two ladies with her one eye that’s not covered by her bang, and she says, “Oookiiiiiee dooooooiiiiiee~! Iiii’ll waaaake theeeem uuuuuup noooooow~!” The Tansi Twins smile at her and nod, and they fly back to the top of the Emperor’s Box. Ophelia stops the music and jogs to Kendo, and she kneels down to gently poke his side with her claws.

“Waaakeeeey waaaaakeeeey~,” she sings out.

With ease, Kendo wakes up, fluttering his eyes open, and he looks up to see Ophelia. He smiles softly and mutters, “Nap time’s over already?” The Quphanto nods her head. She gives him space to get up and stretch his body, a few of his bones popping. As she jogs back to her

station, the chaotic jokester sings out, “Alright, everyone, it’s time to *WAKE! THE FUCK!* *UUUUP~!*”

Thomas and Issei wince from Kendo’s alarming wake-up call, and they get up to stretch. They rise from their resting spots to meet up with Kendo, and Issei groans out, “Could you be any more obnoxious?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, chocolate drop, were you expectin’ me to kiss your face and give you breakfast in bed,” Kendo playfully teases him.

Before the wisecracks can continue, Thomas puts a stop to it, and says, “Guys, let’s focus. We only have a couple more challenges to go. Let’s give it our very best.”

“Yes, sir, vanilla bean twin~” Kendo says, smiling while tilting his head. He looks around to see the girls and Alexander still sleeping, and he lets out a chuckle and says, “Okaaaay, you sleepy heads, the sand feels nice and the candles are great, but we got a cat and a Samaka to save! Let’s up n’ at ‘em~!” He claps his hands as he tries to wake up the rest of the team; however, he makes no progress. Question marks hover over his head, surprised that they’re still sleeping through his shenanigans. Then, he looks at the crowd, noticing that they’re getting a little rowdy, must be noticing Kendo’s struggling. He then sees Usiku, Shandon, Delilah, Zeena, and Cocoa sitting together with the Cerberus Bros., and he has to do a double take. *What the*, he thinks to himself, *What are they doing with them!?* He then sees Aidoneus petting a bat and letting it fly away, releasing it like he was releasing a dove. “*What in the fuck,*” Kendo whispers to himself.

The sense of urgency begins to grow within Kendo’s body as questions begin to form. Why are the Cerberus Bros. standing by Rose’s family? What was Aidoneus doing? Why is Rose’s uncle and aunt even here? With calmness mixed in with a bit of anxiety clouding up his brain, the chaotic jokester goes to Rose, and he starts shaking her body. “Hey, cherry lips,” he says,

“How would you feel if some bitches were hovering over your folks??” No response. “Rose,” he speaks louder, shaking her more frivolously. Still, no response. His breathing quickens as he steps away from her, watching her still in deep sleep.

Thomas notices this, and he goes to his brother to see if he can make any progress. “Alex,” he calls out while shaking him, “Wake up! It’s time to get moving! We’re getting closer to getting Amethyst back!” However, Alexander responds with loud snoring. “No,” Thomas says softly as he shakes his head in disbelief, “Why isn’t he waking up!? Why aren’t *any* of them waking up!?”

Issei looks at the crowd, noticing that all of them are wearing gas masks. “Um, guys,” he says to Kendo and Thomas, “Is there any reason why everyone is wearing a mask?”

“I... I really don’t know,” Kendo answers, scratching his head, but then he looks at the hundreds of candles that surround them in the arena, and the mental fog he was experiencing slowly disappears. He tilts his head and says, “Huh... the candles *could* be the culprit.”

“What,” Issei asks, “These candles pack *that* much of a punch?”

“Not for us, clearly,” Kendo says, “But I guess since the girls and Alex ain’t ever been around shit like this, their bodies aren’t used to it.”

“Okay, but *I’ve* never been around the shit, and I’m not affected by it,” Issei says.

“We can think of theories later,” Thomas says sternly, “For now, let’s just blow out these candles.”

“Hehehehe, blow out, hehehe, candles, hehehe~” Kendo snickers immaturely, making Issei roll his eyes. Thomas and Issei use their feathery wings to create strong enough winds to snuff out the majority of the candles, and Kendo transforms into a hawk to help. As they try to eliminate every candle within the arena, the crowd starts to yell out their encouragement while also trying to wake the sleeping beauties.

As the three members stir up as much wind as they can to snuff out the candles' flames as well as air out the arena, loud music begins to play throughout the Colosseum.

...

The commercials end and the camera flies back into the Colosseum, stopping in front of the Tansi Twins who take off their gas masks.

Fuschia

Welcome back, babes~! "Deal or Torture" is slowly winding down to the end, and honestly, we're a lil' sad about it.

Chelsea

Speakin' of "winding down", before the commercial break, Lady Ophelia gave the Earth Bitches a chance to sleep after cuttin' up the dance floor with some groovy moves, and now it's time to move onto the next challenge~!

Fuschia

Hmm?? It seems like some of the Earth Bitches are still asleep. Looks like those candles really knocked them out.

Chelsea

Good thing we all wore our masks, or else we'd be lookin' like them!
(laughs)

The crowd continues to help Kendo, Issei, and Thomas with trying to wake up the rest of the team by making whatever noise or yelling out whatever remarks they can think of, but even after blowing out all of the candles, the sleepers continue to snooze as if nothing is happening.

The three men go back to their sleeping members after taking care of the candles, and they try to talk to them out of their slumber; however, they continue to get the same results.

Chelsea

(groans)

C'mon, Earth Bitches! We got a new challenge to get into!

Fuschia

(chants and claps)

Get ya' asses up! Get ya' asses up! Get ya' asses up!

While everyone takes off their masks to make themselves more comfortable and say the chant along with Fuschia, the camera goes to Ophelia as she jogs to the center and stabs her claws into the sands, reverting it back to its former state. The men try again once more, shaking everyone's bodies, calling out their names, but alas... no answer, just a lot of "Z's" floating up in the air. Ophelia gently scratches her head.

Ophelia

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, hooooow iiiinteereeeestiiiiing. Iiiiiit seeeeeems thaaaat oooouuuut oooooof eeeveeeryoooooone iiiiin yooour grooooup, theeeese fiiiive craaaave foooor reeest mooore.

(giggles)

Iiiii waaaaas thiiiinkiiiiing thaaaat yooouuuu'd beeeee theeee oooone stiiiiilll aaaasleeeep, Keeeendooooo.

Kendo walks up to Ophelia, getting close enough to where his voice can be picked up by her headmic.

Kendo

What do you mean, Ophelia??

Ophelia

Aaaafteeeeer aaaall yooooou've beeeen throooooough, yooooouuu
choooooose toooooo staaaaay diiiliiiigeent aaaand nooooot
reeeest uuuuntiil yooooouu geeeeet toooooo yooooouuur goooooal.

Kendo

...

Ophelia

Theeeee saaaaame caaaaan beeee saaaaaiid aaaabooout theeee
peeeooni-huuunteeer aaand theeee puuuuure Uuupiindelaaikii.

Ophelia walks to each of the sleeping members, letting her arms
drag against the ground.

Ophelia

Myyyyy caaaandles aaand saaands maaay haaave heeeelped wiiith
puuuuttiiing yooooouu aaaall toooo sleeeeeep, buuuut iiiit's
eeiiiitheer theeee deeeesiiire toooo staaaay liiike thiiis
oor theeeeeee laaaaziineeess aalreeeeaaady theeere toooo
beeeegiiin wiiiith thaaat iiiis *truuuuly* keeeepiing theeee
sleepy speeeell stroooong.

Issei and Thomas meet up with Kendo, grabbing a hold of every
prolonged word that Ophelia says. Issei's face scrunches up in
vexation while Thomas' expression is unmoved, still showing
genuine concern, just wanting his brother to wake up.

Issei

Hold it. So what I'm hearin' is despite the fact that they have
two people to save... they would rather sit around and do *nothing*.

Kendo

Well, hold it, chocolate drop, I'm sure they want to save their
loved ones. It's just that they've been through five challenges,
now, all being in a realm that they're not supposed to be in. At
some point, they were gonna *need* to rest.

Issei

But their friends are in *danger*!! Why would they want to take a long rest in the middle of getting them back!? What's Alexander's excuse, huh!? He was the main one cryin' and *bitchin'* about gettin' his lover back! Suddenly, sleeping on some sand sounds like a lovely time!?

Kendo

You're gettin' worked up over nothing, dude. Nermal and Amethyst aren't going anywhere.

Issei

The better question is why aren't *you* gettin' angry!? Your freedom is on the line, too, on top of all this! Yet you're still finding time to crack jokes, act inappropriately, and let this shit slide!

Kendo

Well, number one... it's my coping mechanism, I can't help that. Number two, I already explained what these people are going through right now, and yes, you can go ahead and throw vanilla bean in there because let's face it, he ain't never been in knee-deep shit like this. And number three, dude, why are *you* getting worked up? No one asked you to care *this* much.

Thomas

Enough! Ophelia, please, there *has* to be a way to wake them up at a quicker rate.

Ophelia

(hangs her head low)

Iiii'm soooooorryyyy, Maaazaaan, buuut iiit loooks liiike yooour broootheeer aaaand friiieends aare gooiing tooo beeee liiike thiiiis foor aaa whiiiile..

*B*OOOOOOOOOOOOOO!! The crowd express their dismay, and the Tansi Twins groan out their disappointment.

Fuschia

(whimpers)

Does this mean we have to go on another commercial break?

Chelsea

(smacks lips)

Fuck that, just put those sleeping whores someplace else or something! At this rate, our ratings will go down!

Fuschia

Oouuuu, I see what you did there~!

...

Suddenly, *ARF ARF ARF ARF!* Everyone looks around, wondering where the barking is coming from. Ophelia walks back to the DJ station, making it disappear along with whatever other decorations remained in the arena except for the disco ball, and she climbs back into the Emperor's Box, already knowing what's about to happen. Kendo looks to where Rose's family is, and he looks at Cocoa. However, as he looks at her, the barking continues, but her mouth isn't moving. No, it's not coming from her. *ARF ARF ARF ARF!*

Wait a minute, Kendo thinks to himself as he begins to sense a familiar aura approaching them. The barking continues to get louder and louder, and suddenly, *badum-badum-badum-badum-badum*, the sound of heavy paws kicking up the sands as the owner of those paws runs into the arena through one of the entrances reaches to the chaotic jokester's ears.

ARF ARF ARF ARF!!

Kendo's jaw and heart drops as his eyes spot a gray pitbull with a scar on the top of his head and the left side of his mouth, a left icy-blue eye, and a right eye socket that is vacant. "*Diablo*," Kendo asks breathlessly, having a hard time believing that his best friend is right there running towards him like he always does.

ARF ARF ARF~!!

“*Haha...Oh my god... DIABLO~!!*” Kendo cries out for Diablo as he kneels down and puts his arms out, and the pitbull runs straight for his friend and jumps onto him, making Kendo fall to the ground. The crowd expresses their admiration for the sentiment as Diablo expresses his love for his friend through head nuzzles and slobbery kisses to his face, his rancid, purple tongue touching all over Kendo’s face. Kendo laughs as his pitbull takes over his face, and after a couple of seconds, Diablo stops and gets off, giving his friend a chance to recover from the love attack. Kendo wipes his face with his sleeve as best as he can, smelling Diablo’s corn chip and hot dog breath in the saliva his sleeve soaks up. Despite the revolting smell, he can’t help but chuckle out, “It’s good to see you, again, boy~... *sighs*...” He pets Diablo’s head, and Diablo pants happily, exposing his slightly yellow fangs, and wags his tail excitedly.

ARF ARF ARF~!

“I missed you too, Diablo... Wait, what are you doing here??”

ARF ARF ARF~!

“You were watching this whole thing through some random person’s TV, and you wanted to come and help... Daaaabloo, were you adventuring in other people’s houses again?”

ARF ARF ARF~! Whimpers.

“Yeeeah, that is true. I can’t really talk, I intrude on other people’s places all of the time.”

ARF ARF ARF~!

Thomas approaches the best friend duo while pinching his nose to block out Diablo’s natural smell, and he asks, “Your dog... Do you think *he* can wake up everyone?”

Kendo taps his chin and says, “Hmmmmmm... Diablo, you *do* smell like mold on a summer day. Just you breathing around these people should wake them up!”

ARF ARF ARF~! Diablo prances to Alexander, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa, sniffing and panting near each one's face, harassing their nostrils with his stench. After a few seconds, the sleeping team's eyes pop open, immediately getting up and holding their noses.

"Woooo!!! What the hell is *that*," Alexander exclaims.

"Did someone, like, shit on themselves," Jacqueline whines.

"I think I'm gonna puke," Melissa gags.

"Eeww, don't tell me that ugly *mutt* is smellin' like that," Tenacity sneers while looking at Diablo running around happily.

"Awwwww, he's not ugly," Rose coos out, "He just needs a bath and a makeover, hmhmhm~!"

Diablo hears Rose, and he stops in front of her, letting her pet him and scratch under his chin. She giggles, "Yep, I can tell you are a good boy~! Thank you for waking us up!"

ARF ARF ARF~!

Kendo, Thomas, and Issei reunite with the team, watching them stretch their bodies and release their yawns, Rose still kneeling down petting Diablo. The descendant looks up to Kendo and asks, "We weren't sleeping for too long, were we?"

Issei glares at Rose, but before he can say anything, Kendo says, "Naaaaaah. Hope you all slept well because that would mean you're ready to kick more ass~"

"Gooooood tooooo seeeee yooooouuuu aaaaaall aaawaaaake~!" Kendo and the team look up to Ophelia who smiles softly at them. She continues, "Saaaadlyyyy, yooooouuuu muuuust gooooooon toooo theeee neext chaaaalleenge. Iiiiiit's beeeeen fuuuuuuun~! Pleeaaaaase taaaake thiiiiis!" She raises her sloth hand, and the disco ball splits open, releasing a 0.25 carat old european cut aquamarine. The light-blue gem slowly lowers, and Rose makes sure to grab it and

place it into the pouch with the rest of the ring pieces. The disco ball disappears, and Ophelia says, “Pleeeeeease cheeeriish iiiit. Iiiiit’s aaaa giiiiift froooooom meeeee tooooooo yoooooouuu.” After saying this, the Sloth Quphanto goes back to her throne chair, letting the Tansi Twins continue the event.

...

The camera pans over from Ophelia to the Tansi Twins who are still standing on top of the Emperor’s Box.

Chelsea

Aaawww, that was sooo touching... Anyway, now we can *finally* move onto the next challenge, probably the *best* challenge in “Deal or Torture”~
(giggles)

Fuschia

(giggles)
Oooh, yes, *definitely* the best challenge these Earth Bitches are going to go through~. But first, we should get into this challenge’s sponsorship~ This challenge has been brought to you by D-lete~. Sex is soo much fun and it feels soooo goood~... but fellow Tansi, don’t you just hate it when a sack of regret forms in your womb afterwards? Well, D-lete is here to save the day~! Enjoy the warm load inside you without the thought of taking care of some living being hauntin’ you, and get you a bottle of D-lete pills today. Just one pill is all it takes, and take it before or after intercourse~! Catch the “D”, delete the seed with D-lete~!



The image of the sponsorship shows up on the screen, sounds of giggles, moans, and snake rattles echo in the background.

Chelsea

(sighs and moans)

It's a wonderful time to be a Tansi~

Fuschia

(giggles)

Right~? We get to have a way to avoid the consequences *and* enjoy the flavors~! These D-lete pills are pretty much like candy for us~! My favorite flavor is Cumberry Blue~

Chelsea

Ooouuu, good choice~! My favorite is Lavender Squirt~. Well, let's welcome our powerful, our sexy, our lustful Master~ He's the reason we Tansi exist~ Say hello to Master Kal, the Quphanto of Lust, as he eases us into his challenge, "Steamy Maze"~!

The crowd cheers for the Lust Quphanto as he slithers out of his throne chair and shows himself to the team.

...

The team looks at Kal, the Lust Quphanto looking at them with a relaxed smirk. He wears a long, sapphire-blue and topaz-blue ombre satin robe with long, loose sleeves, and the robe hangs off of his shoulders, revealing his smooth, sand-colored shoulders and chest, his average build driving some of the crowd crazy. He adjusts his shoulder-length, dark-blue, and wavy hair, making sure that his extravagant makeup can be seen. Jacqueline examines his glittery purple eyeshadow, glittery ice-blue blush, and his shimmery electric-blue liquid lipstick as it all compliments his sapphire-blue eyes with slit pupils, resisting the urge to ask him for some tips.

Kal rests his hands on the Emperor's Box railing, showing his long ballerina-shaped nails that are painted a glittery cerulean-blue, vivid-purple, and bubble-gum-pink ombre, and he waves with his blue snake tail that is adorned with glittery blue, purple, and pink iridescent scales as he moans out, "Hmmmmm, hello, Kendo~ My my, darling, it's been *ages* since I've seen you~"

A Peoni gives Kendo a microphone while the chaotic jokester looks at Kal, and he avoids eye contact as his face heats up, his cheeks turning tomato-red at all the times the Lust Quphanto would occasionally flirt or tease him. The chaotic jokester can feel the endless amounts of fantasies he's had of the Quphanto flood back into his memory banks, but he knows that they will always be just fantasies since Kal always made sure it never became a reality. Kendo then chuckles nervously and says on the mic, "H-Hey, Kal. Yeeeah, it's... been awhile, hehe.."

Some of the team members look at him confused. They didn't think that it was possible for Kendo to be flustered, but here he is trying to keep his soul from burning away as he tries to keep up a conversation with the Quphanto who's considered the sexiest Quphanto in Umu. Kal giggles, "Aaawwww, what's the matter, my phoenix~? Not really thrilled to see me again~?"

"Nooo noooo, it's not that," Kendo shakes his head, "It's just that... I'm nervous about what your challenge is gonna be."

"Oh~? Hmhmhm, oh Ken, don't worry~," Kal coos out, "My challenge is much more tamed than you think~ What I need is for you and your Maza friends to go stand on that opposite end of the arena while your Gaia friends come closer to the Emperor Box~" He uses his scaly tail to direct the team, and they do as he says after the worker-Peoni takes Kendo's mic away. Kendo, Alexander, and Thomas walk closer to their destination, becoming further and further apart from the rest of their team who are closer to Kal. Diablo witnesses the team's temporary split, and he chooses to stick to his best friend.

As Kendo, Alexander, Thomas, and Diablo walk to the end of the arena, Diablo happily taking the lead, Thomas leans towards Kendo and says softly, "Hey, are you feeling okay?"

Kendo nods with a strained smile and squeaks out, "Mhm! I am a-okay~."

"Okay," Thomas nods, "I just wanted to check on you, that's all."

"Oh yeeeah, I'm fine," Kendo says while waving his hand in a dismissive manner, "It's just... You know how you'll have that one person in your life that leaves you feelin'... uuuumm... excited by just standing there, but for some odd reason you're so nervous that you can't make the first move?"

"Hmmmmm... Like when you're in love," Thomas questions, tilting his head.

"Well uuh... It's like that, *but* love isn't involved," Kendo explains.

“Oh...Ooooooooooh.”

“Yeeeeeah. Apparently, Kal does that for a lot of people here in Umu. If you ever thought being around *me* is bad, Kal is damn near unbearable. He’s controlling himself now, but whenever he talks, or whenever he looks at you, it just-”

“I... believe I get the point, Kendo,” Thomas hesitantly chuckles, looking at his brother for some support, but he receives nothing.

“*Sighs*, Yeah, you got it,” Kendo sighs out, “And honestly, some of you might need that Lust Quphanto dick.” He eyes Issei after saying that, though he knows the Peoni-hunter can’t hear him, and he continues, “I heard that sex is a good stress reliever.”

“Fair, but there are many other ways to calm yourself down,” Thomas says.

“I swear, if you say breathing exercises, working out, or tea, I’m gonna barf,” Kendo says while slightly scrunching up one side of his face.

Meanwhile, Issei, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa walk closer to Kal, feeling their bodies shutter from the amount of Quphanto aura they’re approaching. Jacqueline decides to be the first to break the silence and asks, “Sooo, liiiiike, what’s the challenge??”

“I don’t know, but I’m really nervous,” Melissa groans out.

“Same here,” Tenacity agrees, “This is supposed to be a challenge focused on *lust*, right?”

“Well, Kal did say it’s not what we think, so hopefully it won’t be anything *too* crazy,” Rose says, attempting to reassure her friends.

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Issei says, “So far, all except Abigor made light of their challenges, making it seem like it won’t be much until we dive right in.”

Rose then sighs, “Let’s just wait and see...”

They make it to the designated areas, and Kal sighs, “Goooooood gooooooood~ Noooow, I can do this~” He raises his hands to make a portal appear on the ground, and walls made of blue and purple geode crystals rise up, from the top view the walls make a maze. Once the walls settle in and the portal disappears, the lustful Quphanto says, “Ooouuu, I’m so excited~. This will be fun, my darlings~. The rules are *very* simple: Navigate your way through this maze and make it to the exit, thus reuniting with your Earth friends~. Of course, this wouldn’t be a challenge without some *bumps* and *grinds*, hmhmhm~! There are some pathways blocked off, and they will require you to fulfill a certain condition in order to clear the way. You don’t *have* to complete those conditions, but let’s be honest, do you want to be trapped forever? Oh, and there will be no fighting, I can’t stand violence. The only fights I love watching are the ones that happen in the sheets~ Now, any questions?”

The team takes in the information that Kal tells them, trying to ignore his sexual undertones. Melissa raises her hand, and a Peoni gives her a microphone so that she’s able to ask, “Sooooo, obviously *we’re* not gonna do this but... what exactly will these conditions be?”

“Not ones *you’ll* be having to listen to, that’s for sure,” Kal answers as he wiggles his finger, “Issei, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and you are the unadulterated prizes~!”

“So, we’re *not* participating in the challenge whatsoever, is what you’re saying,” Issei says while raising an eyebrow.

“Basically,” Kal giggles out.

“*Scoffs* And why not,” Jacqueline scoffs in the mic, “We’re adults here!”

“*Tuh, puh-lease*, dearie, you can’t even touch alcohol,” Kal says in a serious tone, “Although, taking a peek into *your* life decisions, you’ve been into *a lot* of activities that you’re not supposed to right now... Anyway, these conditions won’t be anything *too* crazy. The condition

may involve making a confession or answering a question... all being *very intimate*, of course, *hmhmhm*~”

“Pssh, c’mon, *I* don’t mind answering them,” the party-girl huffs, “You got two Upendelaikis on the other side of this maze, do you think *they’re* gonna be any fun? Unlike most, I’m not a prude and I know how to have fun!”

“Well, *I* appreciate you not makin’ us do this, Kal,” Tenacity immediately says into the mic, giving Jacqueline a stink-eye for a second.

Rose gently grabs the mic and jumps in, “Wait, so you said while Kendo, Alex, and Thomas are over here getting their dirty laundry aired out, *we’re* just here waiting for them, right? And we’re not going to listen to anything that happens? How is that going to work??”

Kal answers, “Like this, my dear~” And as soon as he says this, *snap!* He snaps his finger, and a watery barrier surrounds the five people, making them gasp from shock. Jacqueline and Melissa are seen screaming, and Tenacity attempts to break the barrier with her fiery fists. Rose tries to summon her bugs, and Issei starts slashing away at the barrier with his katana. However, none of it can be heard, Tenacity and Issei fail at freeing them, and Rose’s bugs instantly disappear on contact with the watery shield. The barrier lifts them from the ground and towards Kal to where he can hold them with one hand, as if he’s holding a large beach ball. He looks at the Gaians, giggling at their response.

“Aren’t they adorable,” Kal exclaims while looking at Kendo, Alexander, and Thomas. He continues “Don’t worry, clearly they’re fine~ They just can’t hear us~... And we can’t hear them. Now, of course, Kendo, we know why you’re one of the few people that will be going through this maze~. As for the Upendelaikis, I’m intrigued to hear out loud what two Mazans think about during those *lonely* nights~ It’ll be Kendo, Alexander, Thomas... and *a few special guests~*” He

then looks at Usiku, Shandon, Zeena, and Delilah, and playful giggles begin to escape his voluptuous lips.

Rose looks at who Kal is eyeing, and although she has no idea what the Lust Quphanto is saying, her heart plummets. “What is he doing,” she asks quickly, “Why is he looking at them!?” The crowd starts hollering at Kal’s surprise, begging for the special guests to finally be thrown into the mix.

“Hmhmhmhm, yess, they’ll be the *perfect* addition to this event~,” Kal playfully says, “I mean c’mon, *look at them~*” Kal leaves the water barrier floating in mid-air as he slithers himself to where Rose’s family is, and the Cerberus Bros. move out of the way as he slowly wraps himself around the guests. Zeena and Delilah hold onto each other, Shandon and Usiku tense up, and Cocoa whimpers and whines while helplessly watching the large spirit entrap them. The Quphanto groans out, “We have a half-Malaiki/half-human that was a dancer and BDSM Mistress once upon a time, *sighs*, a half Quphanto/half-Upendelaiki that was once a gang’s punching bag and saw getting high, drunk, and sex parties as ways of escape, *hmhmhmhm~*, a half-Tansi/half-human that once sought for love in *all* the wrong places, and then...” He looks at Usiku who glares at him, sending endless chills up and down his spine although they’re not the chills that Usiku intended to send him. Kal moans out, “And then there’s the *Louisiana Reaper~ Hmhmhmhm~!* Oooh ‘tall, dark, and handsome’~ So mysterious, so serious, you were once feared by many~! But even *you* had your urges, didn’t you, *hmhmhmhmhm~!!* Mmmmmm, I can’t wait for Umu to hear what lustful things *you’re* into and how you were able to bag such a beauty like Delilah~”

Kendo, Alexander, Thomas, and the family’s souls skyrocket as they hear the information flow out of Kal’s mouth like wine. Did he just reveal a bit of their pasts to *everyone* in Umu? The

trapped team members witness what Kal is doing, and Rose's heart can't help but to shout at the sight. Usiku locks eyes with her for a second, and he feels his own heart jumping up to his throat, wanting to do whatever it can to reunite with his pumpkin. The rest of the girls stand beside Rose, trying to comfort her as best as they can, though they know that with how everything is playing out, their only hope is Kendo and the Upendelaiki twins.

Tightening his grip around the four family members, and grabbing Cocoa with the end of his tail, Kal phases through the walls, the sounds of his lower half wriggling through the sands making the team's hearts tremble. The Quphanto stands in front of them and carefully lowers Rose's loved ones before saying, "By the way, if you *are* going to fulfill a condition, I would suggest being honest~ Otherwise, the blocked entryway won't open."

Shandon smacks his lips and sneers, "And how will you know if we're lyin'?"

Kal leans towards the tainted hybrid and says, "Trust me, handsome, I'm the Lust Quphanto~ I have my ways~ Mhmhmmhmmhmm~!" Shandon looks away, cringing from Kal's answer, and Kal goes to Kendo, giving him a gentle smile as he purrs out, "I'll see you at the end of the maze, my phoenix~" He turns around and slithers back to the Emperor's Box, his tail brushing underneath the chaotic jokester's chin, and the Quphanto's giggles and soft moans begin to echo throughout the maze.

The team looks at Rose's family in awe, still trying to process the fact that they're finally in the arena with them. "... Welp," Shandon hesitantly says while lighting up his blunt, "This 'bout to get awkward super quick."

"Well, at least Rose won't have to hear any of this," Zeena sighs out.

"Her or her friends," Delilah says softly, feeling her face warm up from her anxiety.

“So since we know that the kids can’t hear anything, let’s just try to finish this challenge as quickly as possible,” Alexander suggests, “The sooner we reunite with them, the sooner we can get Amy and Nermal back.”

“He’s right,” Thomas responds, though his own nervousness tugs him a bit, not wanting him to walk into the maze and participate.

Usiku looks at Kal who sits at the Emperor Box with the rest of the team. Not wanting to waste any more time, he sighs out, “Come on... Let’s get this over with...”

Kendo adds, “And let’s just hold our questions and concerns until the challenge is over, please and thank you.”

...

A camera-Peoni follows the team as they enter the maze while another camera-Peoni floats above the maze in its entirety so that the audience can have a top view. The Tansi Twins start their commentating while the team finds their way through the labyrinth.

Chelsea

And here we go, the Earth Bitches are making their way through Master Kal’s maze, making their way back to the rest of their team~! What dirty secrets are we about to hear~? Will these secrets cause more rifts somehow~?

Fuschia

I can’t wait to hear what the Louisiana Reaper is into~!
(giggles and moans)
This is about to be so exciting~!!

The team looks like a group of mice as they take different paths, trying to find the way out. After a while, they finally

make it to a blocked entryway, the road being blocked by lasers, and a large snake statue made of white crystals stands beside the entryway. Its eyes light up blue, and Kal's voice oozes out of its still mouth.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Delilah~ Answer this question... What's your favorite thing about your sex life?

Delilah feels her heartbeat increasing in speed and her body warming up from embarrassment. The microphone is given to her, and her hands start to tremble a bit as she tries to rush through her answer.

Delilah

My favorite thing about my sex life? Ummm
(laughs nervously)
Uumm... Everything~! Yep! Everything~!

The lasers do not disappear.

Statue/Kal

Deeeliilaaah~

Delilah

(gulps)
Y-Yes?

Statue/Kal

I need you to be more specific, dear~

Delilah

...

(sighs, closes her eyes)

M-My favorite thing about my sex life... is that when the deed is done, Usiku is still there... I enjoy every second with this man, but it's something about knowing that he's not jumping in and

out of bed, that he *chooses* to stay with me no matter what's going on... That's what truly sets my heart on fire~ It's comforting... knowing that he chooses me~. That, and he's always up for my pillow-talks no matter how silly they get.

Zeena

Awwww that is so sweet, Dee~.

Shandon

Maaaaan, that shit was *diabetic*. Ain't no way *that's* the answer this thang is lookin' fo-

The lasers disappear.

Statue/Kal

So interesting~... So romantic~ I'm a sucker for romance from time to time. *But*, I *will* get that Tansi side of you to come on out~ There's a reason your relationship isn't 100% platonic~
(giggles then sighs)

Proceed~

Chelsea

Ugh, that was so corny. Are we sure she's *half*-Tansi?

Fuschia

Right, there must have been a mistake on those info sheets, she must be *one-eighth* of a Tansi.

Chelsea

Hmmmm, maybe she was dropped on her head at birth.

Fuschia

(tries to look at Delilah)

Hey, Delilah, were you dropped on your head at birth!?

Delilah chooses to ignore the Tansi Twins as the team walks through the maze trying to find the next locked entryway. Some of the trapped members are seen talking amongst themselves, but thanks to the barrier, nothing can be heard. After running into

a couple dead-ends, the freed members finally make it to another locked entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Zeena~ Confess... Do you do BDSM with Shandon?

Zeena

(rolls her eyes and gently grabs the mic from Delilah)
Yes, I do perform BDSM with Shandon.

Statue/Kal

Ooouuu interesting~! Do you enjoy it~?

Zeena

I'm the one callin' the shots, *of course* I enjoy it.

Statue/Kal

What type of toys do you use on him~?

Zeena

(smacks her lips)
Ain't you s'posed to be askin' me just one question? Let us through.

The lasers don't disappear.

Statue/Kal

(giggles and softly moans)
Zeeeeena~ Just because you're satisfied, doesn't mean that I am~ But it's always you first before everyone, huh~?

Zeena

... I'm not like that anymore...
(sighs)
To answer yo' lame ass question... I use whips, cuffs, tassels, collars, leashes... you get the drift...

Statue/Kal

Ooouuuu, whatever's at your disposal, huh~? You are kinky indeed~

The lasers disappear.

Statue/Kal

Proceed~

The team continues through the maze.

Fuschia

Now see, how the fuck the half-*Malaiki* freakier than the half-Tansi?

Chelsea

I don't know, but now I'm curious about these other holy fucks.

If they turn out to have more spice than Delilah and the Louisiana Reaper combined, I'm honestly gonna be so shocked.

Fuschia

I might hurl if I hear some more romantic shit.

They make it to the third locked entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Usiku~ Answer this question... Who was your first, and how did you meet them?

Usiku

...

Statue/Kal

Cooome ooon, Reaper~ We all know Delilah wasn't your first~

Usiku

...

(grabs the microphone)

It was a pastor's wife. I met her at the church Shandon was going to. We were talking after service was over, and I must have said something that reeled her in because the next day, she told her husband that she was going to go study with her friends and met up with me at a hotel.

Statue/Kal

So it was just a one time thing~?

Usiku

(sighs)

Yes. It was nothing special.

Statue/Kal

You saw, you came, you left~?

(giggles)

Usiku

...

Statue/Kal

Did you have a type back then, Usiku?

Usiku

...

Statue/Kal

(in a sing-y tune)

I'll let you proceed if you aaaansweeer~

Usiku

... As long as she was well kept, had a hint of coconut oil or cocoa butter on her, and used seasonings in her cooking, I was most likely intrigued.

Statue/Kal

Delilah wasn't really "well kept" when you first met her, was she? How did she get a pass~?

Usiku

...

Kendo

Aye, Kal, you said you'd let us go.

Statue/Kal

(sighs)

That I did... Proceed~

The lasers disappear, letting the team continue.

Fuschia

So what I'm hearing is I have a chance~
(giggles)

Chelsea

You whore, we have a boyfriend.

Fuschia

Just give me one night~!

Chelsea

You know what, how 'bout you just stay quiet for a bit? I'll be quiet with you.

Next entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Thomas~ Answer this question... What time of day do you like to have sex?

Thomas

(grabs the mic, clears his throat)

Although there's no sun or moon back in Maza, if we did have them, I'd prefer to have relations during the night time where everyone is asleep and it's the time of rest.

Statue/Kal

Ooouuuu, wanting to keep the dirty deeds in the dark and away from the public eye, hmm, Upendelaiki~?

Thomas

I don't desire to traumatize people by displaying such intimate acts, Kal.

Alexander

Wait a second, time out, Thomas, why are you talking like you-

Kendo

Aht aht, I said hold on to questions until the very end. We already have a Quphanto tryin' to drill into our lives with these questions.

Statue/Kal

And I'm only a couple inches inside, mmhmmhmmhmm~
(sighs)
Proceed~

The lasers disappear, and the team continues. They get to the next entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Shandon~ Answer this question... What's your favorite way to be intimate with Zeena?

Shandon

(grabs mic, blows out smoke)
Shiiiiiiit, fuckin' her.

The lasers don't disappear.

Shandon

Teeheehee, I'm playin', I'm playin'. It's layin' in bed gettin' high wit' her.

The lasers disappear.

Statue/Kal

Hmmmm, I was intrigued to see that BDSM was not even in your Top 3.

Zeena

...
(looks at Shandon, tilts her head, squints her eyes)
Yeah, I'm intrigued, too...

Shandon

Sug, don't look at me like. The BDSM shit is in my Top 5. Sure, I enjoy it, but I mainly do it because I know you love it. Shit,

you *should* be glad that gettin' high wit' you was the right answer.

Zeena

Oh Pooh... I *am* glad, just... I don't know, I was caught off guard, I guess...

Statue/Kal

Hmmmmmmmm~ Proceed~.

The team goes on to the next locked entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Alexander~ Answer this question... What's your favorite sex position?

Alexander

... Hey guys, maybe, we can find another path.

Kendo

Ooh no, vanilla bean, I expected this response from your *brother*, not you. Just answer the question.

Alexander

But what if there's other locked entryways that lead to the exit? For all we know, these locked entryways could be leading us to a dead-end!

Kendo

Nope, we're not backtracking.

Thomas

Alex, have you not realized that we've made progress with every locked entryway we unlocked?

Kendo

Yeah, I don't think Kal is that much of a sadist to block off every pathway just for it to be bullshit.

Statue/Kal

That is right, my phoenix~ And it's like I said, you didn't have to answer, but then you'd be trapped for a long time and your friends will *never* be free.

Shandon

Here you want me to say mine to make you feel better? Mine's doggy.

Alexander

U-Uuuh!!

Usiku

You didn't even give us a chance to say "no"...

Kendo

Heeey, I like doggy, too~!

Thomas

Oh dear...

Shandon

Suga, yo' turn~.

Zeena

Don't throw me in yo' bullshit, Pooh.

Kendo

Hmmm, you look like you're into the cowgirl position.

Shandon

Huh, actually-

Zeena

Shut yo' ass up, Shandon!

Alexander

Alright, alright, I'll answer!
(grabs the mic, sighs)
... Sixty-nine.

Shandon

...Why?

Zeena

Shandon.

Shandon

Look, ain't nothin' wrong wit' some 69, but that's yo' favorite?

Alexander

Can we proceed, please?

Statue/Kal

Hmmmmmmm... why is it your favorite~?

Usiku

(mutters to Shandon)

Stop giving this horny fuck ammo...

Alexander

U-Um, b-because Amethyst was never really into sex, and neither am I. It's not a necessity for us, but when we were in the mood, sure penetration would be involved, but oral was all we needed most times.

Statue/Kal

Ooooooh, so you're *that* good with your tongue, huuuh~? Does being the talkative one in the relationship help you with that skill~?

Alexander

I-I guess...

Shandon

So when penetration *is* involved, what pos-

Zeena

(stomps on Shandon's foot, digging her heel in)

Shandon

(presses his lips together as he holds his screams of pain in,
strains)

Sorry, Suga... I'll be quiet...

Zeena

Thank you.

Statue/Kal

(giggles)

You may proceed~

Alexander

(sighs)

Thank you...

The lasers disappear, and the team moves forward to the next blocked entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Kendo~ Answer this question... What do you fantasize about when you masturbate?

Kendo

(grabs the mic, sighs)

You know, Kal, it's crazy because I fantasize a lot of shit when I'm takin' care of myself~ On some days, I fantasize gettin' dominated by a guy much larger than me~ On other days, I fantasize a woman who plays off like she's a closet freak makin' a mess on my friend downstairs~. But I guess to really narrow it down and try to summarize my fantasies, I mainly fantasize about gettin' my satisfaction from someone, *anyone*, *someway*, *somehow*.

It's never one person.

Statue/Kal

Interesting... Do you see yourself having the same type of fantasies later in life?

Kendo

Yep. I've had humans try to tell me that there's someone for everyone, as if everyone has a life partner or partners, but I don't think that's the case for me. I believe that I'll be romantically alone forever, and honestly, I'm okay with that just as long as my social needs are still being satisfied somehow.

Statue/Kal

Hmmmm... Proceed...

The lasers disappear, and the team continues through the maze. After a few minutes, they get to the next blocked entryway.

Statue/Kal

(moans)

You are all doing so good, darlings~ You're close to the end~ Because you're almost there, I'll try my best to not egg on the conditions, okay~? But you *still* need to be honest and be descriptive~ You know I *love* details~. Now... this condition is for Usiku~ Confess... What is a fetish that Delilah knows about, but you tried to hide it at some point~?

Usiku

(reluctantly grabs the mic, takes a long sigh)
... Ever so often, I sniff her panties...

Kendo

What?

Alexander

(sighs)

For only a moment, I'm glad Amy isn't hearing any of this...

Shandon

You nasty bitch.

Usiku

Says the man that gets whipped, chained up, and probably gets pegged. Shut it.

Statue/Kal

(giggles)

Now now, men~ No need to fuss~ No matter what you're into,
regardless, you're all freaks~. Proceed~

The lasers disappear, allowing the team to move forward. After a few minutes, they make it to the next blocked entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Zeena~ Answer this question... How often do you like to be intimate~?

Zeena

(grabs the mic)

I'd say I like to get intimate at least 3 days out of the week. The other days I need to be in my own space. I'm not really clingy like these other love birds.

Statue/Kal

My my, you're just torturing your husband left and right, aren't you~? Leaving him all lonely on those rest days~.

Shandon

It's okay, I always look forward to Suga torturin' me~. And besides, she already knows that Imma be right there when she ready for some lovin'~

(snuggles Zeena from behind, starts cooing)

Ain't that right, Suga~?

Zeena

(sighs, rubs his head, softly smiling)

Yes, Pooh~

Statue/Kal

Sooo sweeeet~ Mhmhmhmhm~ Proceed~

The lasers disappear, and they make it to the next entryway.

Statue/Kal

This condition is for Thomas~ Confess... Describe the last time you had sex~

Thomas

(gently grabs the mic)

It was not too long ago. After helping the Special Six with fighting Cerberus and another Peoni, I returned to Maza, and of course, I went home to my wife, and we did it.

Alexander

YOU HAVE A WIFE!?

Kendo

... Wait, you didn't know that??

Alexander

NO! Thomas, what the hel-

Thomas

I found it pointless to tell you since you're never coming back home. You two would never meet each other.

Alexander

But it would have been nice to know! You got kids, too!?

Thomas

Only the children I watch over and take care of on the job. They are more than enough.

Alexander

Thomas...

Statue/Kal

I hate to interrupt, but Thomaaaas~ I waaaaant deetaaaails~

Thomas

...

(sighs, whispers)

Forgive me, my dear...

(speaks up)

She loves foreplay, so that goes on for a while. She loves a slow burn. And then when she's ready, she actually likes it when I'm just a bit on the rough side. Personally, I don't ever

really crave for sex as much as she does, but seeing her sleep so soundly after we're done gives me a different type of euphoria.

Statue/Kal

Ooouuuuuuu~!

(giggles and moans)

Never in my life span did I think that I'd get to hear an Upendelaiki's lustful escapades with someone~!

Chelsea

Ummm, Master Kal, it was with his *wife*.

Fuschia

Yeah, you're gettin' riled up over a unity!

Kal climbs to the top of the Emperor's Box and glares at the Tansi Twins, his long snake tongue and fangs exposing themselves. Sounds of a snake hissing escapes his lips.

Kal

(hisses)

Are you talking out of turn?

Chelsea and Fuschia

(gulps)

No, Master! Sorry, Master!!

After hearing their apologies, the Lust Quphanto goes back inside the Emperor's Box.

Kal

(clears throat)

Yes, I know that Thomas is loyal to his wife, but let's not get it twisted. Marriages can have their sexual thrills, too~ Mmmhmmhmmh~ And to hear about a Mazan actually *crave* for such a thrill, mmmm~ Within marriage or not, it's still delicious to listen to~

Thomas

... Kal, can we please move forward?

Kal

Of course~~ Proceed~

The lasers disappear, and the team is able to continue to the next entryway, getting closer and closer to the exit.

Statue/Kal

Only a few more to go~ This condition is for Delilah~ Confess...
Describe your first time with Usiku~

Delilah

(laughs nervously)

My first time with Usiku was uumm... magical! Very, very, very
magical!

The lasers don't disappear.

Usiku

... 'Lilah.

Delilah

(looks up to Usiku)

Yes, Usi?

Shandon

Maaaann, if you don't hurry up and just tell err'body how you
felt when Usiku piped you down.

Zeena

Shandon...

Shandon

What!? Usiku is wit' me on this one! These wannabe heroes got
folks they find themselves needin' to save, and we honestly
wastin' time tryin' to avoid the questions. Just gon' 'head and
get it over with, Rose will be aight. She in that lil' bubble.

Shandon points up to the barrier that Rose and her friends are inside, the camera showing them watching the adults go through the challenge, having no idea of what's being said. The camera catches a glimpse of Rose clasping her hands together as worry splatters all over her face.

Shandon

Shit, if you have to, just make it sound like a fairytale or some shit.

Delilah

Bu-But...

(whimpers)

This is super private... I...

Alexander

Delilah, I just confessed to Umu that I like 69'ing...

Kendo

And we just learned that your soulmate sniffs your panties...

Thomas

I understand why you feel this way, Delilah. I didn't want to share my experience, either... We are all exposed.

Kendo

Hehehehe, exposed.

Thomas

But look at it this way... it's for the mission. We stay here, we never get Amethyst and Nermal back and Rose and her friends are stuck in that bubble.

Usiku stands in front of Delilah and rests his hands on her shoulders.

Usiku

Will looking at me as you tell it make it better, 'Lilah?

Delilah

(blushes as she looks up to Usiku)

A little...

Usiku

Pretend it's just us, honey...

(gently caresses Delilah's cheek, kisses her lips)

Usiku's kiss gets a reaction out of the audience, most of them beg for more while others discourage him. Shandon rolls his eyes, Zeena looks away, Alexander and Thomas blush bright red, and Kendo watches the lovers' connection with a dopey smile. Kal leans against the railing of the Emperor's Box, becoming antsy from the increase of lust in the atmosphere. The team in the water barrier witness this and express their own ways of disgust or discomfort. Usiku pulls away from Delilah, and Delilah's eyes reveal to have heart-shaped pupils, now.

Usiku

(talks in a sultry voice)

What was our first time like, my beautiful orchid?

Delilah

(sighs, brings the mic closer to herself)

O-Okay well, my first time with... you, Usi, was something I never thought that I'd experience. Around this time, we had gone on a lot of dates, getting to know each other, enjoying each other's company. For many months, close to a year, we weren't really intimate for my own personal reasons. I thought that you would have left me at some point, but you didn't. On this very night, we were coming back from our dinner date, and we got comfy and just started talking about the future and how we were planning

to stay together for a long time. Sweet promises were whispered in between every kiss as you held me so close to your warm body.
(sighs shakily)

The way you caressed me, kissed every inch of me, gently grabbed me in various places making me feel like I was a sacred treasure that only you can hold, planting hickeys all over me to make me look like a cheetah... it all made me feel like I was dreaming~.

Zeena

(crosses arms and widens eyes as she looks at Delilah)
Um... Dee?

Delilah

(sighs, starts leaning against Usiku)
Your fingers~ Your tongue~ Just everything you did made me feel so good, and I was more than happy to return the affection.

Alexander

(face becomes redder)
D-Delilah??

Delilah

Do I *have* to describe what you were like inside me? Because I thought I was gonna die on the spot from how amazing it felt feeling every inch of you going in and out~ You went on like that for a while, but then I started begging you to pick up the pace and put a lil' more power in your strokes, and booy did you deliver~

Shandon

Yo, Dee?

Delilah

The moment I reached my climax, I thought I was flying and saw the galaxy~! It was like I was dying and comin' back to life, as if you were trying to reap my soul only to place it back where it belonged~! I was revived~! I screamed and cried out your name numerous times, I couldn't control myself anymore~! We went on all night, almost until the sun came up~ I felt so bad for the hotel maids. I tried to tell you that we should have used towels, but you just *loved* the idea of me making a-

Usiku

Painting on the sheets~?

Delilah

Yes~!
(giggles)

Usiku

It's not my fault that *watercolor* is my favorite medium~

Delilah

Usiiiiiii~

Kendo

WOW, YOU *BOTH* FORGOT WHERE WE WERE, HUH?

Delilah

(jumps from Kendo's yelling)
H-Huh!?

Usiku

Oh... Uh, darling...?

Delilah turns to look at everyone, and then she looks back at her lover to see him point at the top of his head. At that moment, she realizes what everyone is looking at. She feels her glittery purple horns and sees her thin, smooth, and purple tail swaying to and fro. With her heart-shaped pupils still present, everyone is taken aback from her new appearance... her true form. She looks at everyone's surprised face, then she looks up at Rose who covers her face up. The crowd lets out gasps, woos, and wolf whistles at Delilah's form, causing her to blush. Kal begins giggling.

Kal

Aahahahahahahahaha~! Ooouuuu, Delilah~! *That's* how I get you to reveal your true form? Just by having Usiku right there comforting you~? Oh my~ Usiku, you truly do have a hold on her~

A Tansi who only has desire for one soul, the thought of abandoning her lover and entertaining other souls disgust her~

Mmmm, a tainted Tansi you are, my dear, and that...

(shudders)

Is just poetry~ Mmmhmmhmmhmm~! It's rare for my tansis to fall in love and become selfless and loyal, so to actually see someone like that in front of me and *talk* to them is exciting~!

Oooh, I'm getting hot just from the images of you two going at it~! I know it's something I have to get front row seats for~

You talking to each other just now is already riling me up~

(giggles and moans)

Hurry~! Proceed, proceed before I actually request you two to do it here and now~!

Suddenly, a light bulb brightens in Usiku's dome, and an idea hatches. This entire time, the goal has been to satisfy Kal to get closer to the exit. He will not let them go until he gets what he wants. As the lasers disappear, the team is about to walk through, but then they notice Usiku not moving. He looks up at Rose with an expression that says "I'm sorry", and he walks up to Delilah and grabs her by the waist, gently grabbing the mic from her and looking into her eyes.

BA-BUMP! Kal notices this and starts leaning against the railing, wanting to see what Usiku is about to do. The team looks at him confused and anxious. What is Usiku trying to do?

Usiku

(places the mic close to his lips)

Delilah~

Delilah

(softly gulps)

U-Usi?

Usiku

Since the moment we got here... even *before* we walked through the portal, I have been struggling with keeping afloat. The past is constantly trying to remind me of someone I'm not anymore. Death tries to grab a hold of me, wrapping its boney fingers around my soul in hopes of snatching it away...

Shandon

(from the distance)

Jungle fiend goin' through depression?

Zeena

Shush!

Usiku

But then I look at you, and I see our daughter, and I'm motivated to continue living on. Delilah, everything that you do moves me, inspires me, makes me feel brand new.

Kendo

Awwwww~

Usiku

Watching these challenges and going through this one have been a dreadful experience, and hearing your answers to these questions and listening to you describe our first time is driving me wild.

(presses Delilah against himself)

I want to express these feelings to you in so many ways, my beautiful orchid. Right here, right now~

Delilah

(breathless)

Usi~ B-But what about everyone that's watching?

Usiku

(whispers)

Are you nervous~?

Delilah

Of course, I am!

Usiku

It'll be okay, Delilah~ I'll start off with a gentle kiss, holding you close to me, my hands gripping onto you with the right amount of passion~ And whatever happens afterwards... just happens~ It's not my fault that being around you is like ascending to the heavens~

Delilah

Usiiii~

(sighs)

Why must you make me feel this way every time you talk to me like this~?

Usiku

May I kiss you, Delilah~?

Delilah

Of course you can~

Usiku drops the mic, and he gently cups Delilah's face before planting his lips onto hers. Screams and shouts escapes everyone as the camera-Peoni captures every second. The couple kisses passionately, and they let their tongues mingle, the camera showing the glistening saliva string that connects them when they break apart. The aroused Tansi-human hybrid removes her soulmate's cloak, letting it fall onto the dusty ground, and the Quphanto-human hybrid allows his hands to grip her behind and lifts one of her legs to wrap around his waist. Usiku starts planting kisses on her neck and collarbone as Delilah tilts her

head back, trying to catch her breath, his kisses and nibbles making her eyes roll back.

The heat between them increases, and it starts becoming steamier once Usiku's hands starts tugging onto Delilah's shirt and his fingers begin to slowly creep underneath it and grabs onto her bra-

Kal

WAIT~! STOP~!

(huff huff)

I WAS ONLY KIDDING, MMM~! OOOOOOH, THIS IS BECOMING TOO MUCH~!

Usiku and Delilah stop what they're doing, trying to catch their breath, and the team and camera-Peoni look up to see Kal's face twisted into a lewd expression, steam coming out of his nose, his cheeks turn a rosy-red color. Heavy breathing and moans escape his mouth even though he bites down on his bottom lip, and he raises his hands to make the entirety of the maze disappear.

...

"Huff... Huff... Oooh my god~" Kal moans out as he fans himself, "I was looking forward to asking more questions, but seeing those two drove me up the roof~! If I were to let you two continue, there wouldn't be a 'Deal or Torture' anymore~ We'd all be watching and some people would get scarred for life! *Sighs* Well, congratulations, darlings~ You've ruffled my feathers enough to make me let you continue your journey~ Now come over here and get your prize~"

The team reluctantly walks to the front of the Emperor's Box to receive the reward from Kal. The Lust Quphanto snaps his fingers which makes the water barrier holding the girls and Issei

lower to the ground and *pop!* The barrier disappears, setting them free. Then, Kal opens his mouth, and he sticks his tongue out, revealing a 0.25 carat old european cut sapphire that rests at the tip of it. The deep-blue gem levitates from his tongue to the team, and Alexander summons a hot water sphere to clean the saliva off of the reward. After cleansing the gem, he gives it to Rose, and she places the gem into the pouch. Kal takes time to look at the team, seeing how disturbed they are from the challenge. He coos out, “I know that this challenge was hot and heavy, but look at it like this... the windows are finally defogging, and the young ones didn’t have to hear any of it... though I’m afraid that they *did* see some things~ Anywho, you’re getting closer to the end~” He then looks at Kendo, and he softly smiles and says, “I’m proud of you, my phoenix~ I can’t wait to see you and your friends tackle more challenges~ Well, until the next time, darlings~” After saying that, he slithers back into his throne chair, letting the Umu crowd cheer for them even though all they did was listen to Kendo’s, Alexander’s, Thomas’, and Rose’s family’s personal information.

Usiku and Delilah separate from each other, and Usiku helps adjust his lover’s shirt before picking up his cloak from the ground and patting the dust off of it. Delilah closes her eyes and takes deep breaths, trying to calm herself down, and her horns, tail, and heart-shaped pupils disappear. Shandon and Zeena walk up to the couple. Before Zeena can express her concerns, Shandon blurts out, “Now what if Kal didn’t stop yo’ ass, *then* what? You was just gon’ fuck Delilah in front of yo’ daughter?”

“*No, I wouldn’t,*” Usiku sneers out as he glares at Shandon, “I took a risk, and luckily it worked out.”

“Mmmhmm, riiiiight,” Shandon says, raising an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Well, I wish you would have taken the risk a lil’ early on,” Zeena complains, “We’d have to worry about scarring Rose and her friends for life, but at least that would have been the only worry. Umu knows our business now...”

“If I were to try and pull that in the beginning, it wouldn’t work,” Usiku explains, “Sure, Kal’s excitement was there, but it wasn’t to where it would be unbearable for him just yet. I honestly wasn’t thinking about doing anything until I saw how he was acting after Delilah went on with her monologue. The point of the whole challenge was to satisfy Kal. When he was satisfied, he let us get closer to the exit. He was ‘joking’ about seeing us getting intimate, I went on ahead and surprised him-”

“Wit’ a whole porn skit,” Shandon interrupts, leaving Usiku to just glare at him quietly.

Usiku sighs, “The bottom line is it worked, and I’m glad that it ended the challenge early so that Rose and her friends can go ahead and progress.”

Delilah stays quiet, and she walks towards the team with her head hanging low, leaving her lover and in-laws behind. Worried, Usiku follows behind her, and Shandon and Zeena do the same.

...

While everyone groups up, one of the worker-Peonis picks up the microphone that Usiku dropped earlier and flies off with it while the camera-Peoni that followed the team throughout the maze fly back to the Tansi Twins.

Chelsea

Man, that was a very interesting challenge~! I hate to see it end earlier than planned, but I guess that’s just how the cookie crumbles.

Fuschia

What kind of challenges are the Earth Bitches goin' to go through next~? We'll find out after the break~! See you soon~!

(mumbles)

Sis, I'm gonna go to the bathroom real quick.

Chelsea

(mumbles)

You nasty hoe.

As Fuschia flies to the nearest bathroom, Chelsea waves at the camera as it pans away from her and the screen fades into black to start the commercial break.

Chapter 12

As the commercials run, Nermal swims around her prison, humming a hopeful tune while Morgana stands at the front of the television, replaying Kendo's responses to one of Kal's questions in her head.

"I've had humans try to tell me that there's someone for everyone, as if everyone has a life partner or partners, but I don't think that's the case for me. I believe that I'll be romantically alone forever, and honestly, I'm okay with that just as long as my social needs are still being satisfied somehow."

"Oh, Kenny," Morgana sighs softly, "Soon, you'll realize that your life partner has been right in front of you. *None* of these Gaians can understand you like I can."

Meanwhile, Nermal takes a second to glance at the Peoni talking to the air around her, and she cringes. The Samaka-human hybrid then looks up at the only possible exit for her. It's too bad Aidoneus made sure that there wasn't enough water for her to easily hop out of the humongous fishbowl. She swims up to where she can poke her head out of the water, the coolness from the air-conditioned throne room brushing against her body. She raises one of her arms up, imagining her fingers grasping the rim of the bowl and tossing herself out of it. If only the fear of breaking a bone or two after landing on the floor didn't stand in the way. She lets out a sorrowful sigh as she sinks back into the salted water, letting the warm liquid try to give her some sort of embrace. She instantly thinks about the song that she was trying to write in Burger Queen, the place where Kendo and she first bonded. She recollects the lyrics and starts singing...

*Am I just a simple fish in the sea,
Without a purpose, is this easy life for me?
And if so, why do I feel this desire,
To throw myself into the battlefield of fire?*

She thinks back to the lyrics, not really resonating with the words anymore. She truly wants to help her friends out. She envisioned herself contributing more to the Special Six than just being their emotional support. But alas, she's the damsel in distress, the last place she saw herself be. *I'm so tired of being the one that needs help*, Nermal thinks to herself, *I want to be the one that gets into the action somehow!* She looks up at the exit once again, and she resumes her singing...

Am I just a simple fish in the sea,

*Without a purpose, is this **feeble** life for me?*

And if so, why do I feel this desire,

To throw myself into the battlefield of fire?

Is it 'cause I know there's more for me,

Out there than in this bowl of tragedy,

Is it because I know that if Mom was here,

She'd say, "Get up, you're much stronger than fear."

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! "**Shut up,**" Morgana growls out, banging against the fishbowl again and startling Nermal, "**Badness, do you always have to break into song every time a commercial break takes place?!**"

"Well, there's nothing else for me to do," Nermal exclaims, "It's either I sing or I listen to you foam at the mouth over a guy who makes it very clear that he doesn't want you the way that you want him!"

"**Ugh, no point in talking to you,**" Morgana tries to mumble as she turns away, but Nermal manages to hear every word, then she speaks up, "**Just keep it down, will you?**"

Nermal chooses to not say anything else to the deranged Peoni, already knowing that it would be pointless to try and talk some sense into her. She looks back up, looking at the fishbowl's rim, and the lyrics she just sung comes back to her, shouting in her ear that she can make that jump. She starts hearing her mom's voice sing to her, chanting for her daughter's success. She starts wiggling her tail fin, making the glitter dance, and she immediately shoots upward. *Swoosh!* She swims straight up, not leaving any room for hesitance. Her eyes stay locked onto the rim, and then *SPLASH!* She flies out of the water, and her hands manage to tap the rim. That's it... just a touch. Her heart, soul, and body splash back into the water and sink to the bottom, her hopes slowly dissolving into the liquid.

“Now how about you sit there and think twice before attempting again,” Morgana sneers out, her eyes still on the television but her ears listening to Nermal's escape attempt, ***“Let's say you did manage to get out of there... then what? You're taking a chance of breaking something internally, and you would have to find a way to dry yourself quickly so that your legs could come back to you, and you'd have to fight me, which let's face it... I'd smite you down with just one swing. I hope you don't think your singing would give you a fighting chance.”*** Explaining to Nermal why it's pointless for her to even try to escape puts a smile on Morgana's face.

“Did you ever think that *maybe* if you'd *help* me, Kendo would actually *like you more*,” Nermal suggests. She's met with silence for a few seconds.

“...I will *never* side with the enemy, and Kendo *will* see that his father is in the right,” Morgana says, “Besides, even if I *wanted* to help you, I would be putting *my own* life at risk.”

“So you'd rather see Kendo go through more crap instead of actually helping him reach his goal of gaining his freedom.”

“His freedom is *here... with me.*”

“... I feel so sorry for you... because when Kendo gets over here, I can guarantee you he’s not running into your arms.”

“...”

“Morgana, it’s not too late! *Please*, consider my idea. At least by helping me, you have a better chance of salvaging what’s left of your relationship with Kendo!”

“...”

“Morgana?”

“I’m starting to prefer your humming...”

“...*sighs*,” Nermal finally gives up on trying to convince Morgana, and she goes back to swimming around the fishbowl in despair, leaving the Peoni to just look at the television, her mind now becoming murky, the thoughts of Kendo, her personal goals, and Nermal’s input all battling it out within her brain.

...

While the Umu crowd gets themselves comfortable again before the next challenge, the team groups up... not saying a word to each other. The Upendelaiki twins and Kendo had to not only expose themselves, but they also had to listen to Rose’s family’s dirty secrets. Even though the rest of the team couldn’t hear what was said, they know that whatever Kal had them do wasn’t the best experience, especially once they witnessed Usiku and Delilah’s stunt. How does one break the dense awkwardness that plagues the area? Jacqueline is the first to push away the silence by asking, “Soooo, liiiiike, what did you guys talk about??”

“*Sighs* I’d rather not talk about it, right now,” Alexander whimpers out.

“Let’s just say we’re grateful that Kal had mercy on you guys,” Thomas sighs out.

“Sheesh, told ya’ it’d be something bad,” Issei says to Rose, crossing his arms.

“My concern is why did mom and dad... did *that*,” Rose asks, confusion poking at her heart.

“I think it’s best if we let you talk to your mom about that,” Thomas answers.

“Speaking of which,” Tenacity mutters as she tilts her head towards Delilah approaching them, her head drooping and her arms crossed.

Delilah lifts her head up, and her eyes look straight at Rose. “Honey,” she starts off, her face filled with embarrassment.

Rose looks at her mother, trying to keep a level head. Her family completed a challenge, and they had to do something out-of-the-ordinary to make it through the maze. Was the display of affection her parents had to put on part of the challenge? Though answers are being craved for, her mother’s face of shame makes her question if she should worsen the mood by prying. Kal purposefully put her in a barrier where she couldn’t hear anything, after all. Does she *have* to know the details? The descendant walks up to Delilah, arms crossed, and she asks, “Mom... do I even want to know...?”

Delilah shakes her head, unable to say anything or make eye contact. Rose sees her mother’s face becoming a darker shade of red by the minute. Though a lump is in the way of her throat, she manages to say to Rose, “I’m just glad that you’re okay...”

Rose’s empathetic side comes through, understanding that her mother doesn’t want to talk about what she or the others had to go through. She hugs her and says, “Momma, it’s fine. The challenge required you to ... do, or say, some wild things... I’m guessing you’re humiliated by the fact that Umu knows more about you all, but... well, at least *I* don’t know anything, right?”

“I... I guess” Delilah says, “It doesn’t change the fact that I had to go through that, though. I hate that *we all* had to do it.”

“I meeeaaan that last trick you and Usiku did though wasn’t really part of the challenge,” Kendo jumps in, “... *mutters* Kinda wish y’all kept going though...”

“Wait, it wasn’t,” Rose exclaims.

“No, but it *did* push Kal to the point of ending the challenge early,” Alexander immediately adds, knowing that Delilah is already out of her element. She doesn’t need someone to come through and make it look like she just slobbered all over Usiku just for fun.

“O-Oh,” Rose says, seeing Delilah’s eyes slightly water and shaking her head, “W-Well, hey, momma! That isn’t the first time I’ve seen you and dad smash your faces together, hahaha! Don’t feel too bad!”

“*Rose, I think you need to just hug her for right now,*” Melissa mutters as she leans close to Rose’s ear.

“*Yeah, she could care less about you being in the dark,*” Tenacity whispers, “*Kendo, Alex, Thomas, her in-laws, and all of Umu witnessed a side of her I think only Usiku was supposed to witness.*”

Usiku, Shandon, and Zeena manage to catch up with Delilah, hearing her conversation with Rose. Usiku stands beside his soulmate and rests his hand on her shoulder, but Delilah gently nudges him off of her, leaving him stunned. “Delilah,” he asks.

“*Please don’t touch me, right now, Usiku,*” Delilah exhales out.

“... Very well,” Usiku says as he lowers his head, wanting to honor his soulmate’s wish, “But please understand that I’m truly sorry for thinking that you were 100% okay with that idea...”

“It’s fine...” Delilah says, moping, “It’s just... well, now with the excitement gone, I’m just feeling so.... dirty...”

“Oh come on, Dee, you ain’t the only one that went through that shit,” Shandon jumps in, irritation making his scalp itch, “See, now look at what you did, Usiku.”

“I already admitted that it was a rash decision” Usiku says, his frown growing, “Do you have wax buildup in your ears?”

“Or, and here’s a thought,” Alexander says, standing in between the family, “Instead of getting mad at Usiku, we can all collectively get pissed at the Quphanto that *made us do the challenge in the first place!*”

“No point in playing the blame game,” Thomas says sternly, “We are all feeling some type of way about how this situation played out. It’s like Shandon has mentioned, we’re all victims here. Let’s just put it behind us for now and be glad that it’s over with.”

While the family talk out their frustrations, Issei, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa listen to the conversation, knowing better to stay out of a topic they had no involvement in. Tenacity looks at Jacqueline, remembering how she wanted to participate in the challenge, and her face twists with grimace. *Seriously, what is her deal, the goth thinks to herself, It’s one thing to want to help with completin’ a challenge, but to **willingly** want to share her business? In front of Rose’s family for that matter?*

Kendo looks at the group and mutters to them, “*I know **you** guys are glad that you don’t have to go through this.*”

Melissa sighs, “Yeah. I still feel bad for you guys, though.”

“Oh, pffft, well, don’t worry ‘bout me, bubblegum,” Kendo snickers, “I speak for myself when I say I could care less about these sand gobblers knowing my deepest, darkest secrets~”

Shandon stretches, smokes his blunt, and he gets everyone's attention as he says, "Aight, well let's not wallow up in 'dis bullshit any longer. Charge it to the game, and let's not speak of the shit ever again."

"Pooh is right," Zeena joins in, "You're now one step closer to ending this craziness. Let's not let this one event mess any of you up."

"Speaking my language," Issei says, "Rose, we just need one more gem to complete the ring, right?"

Rose grabs out the pouch, and she opens it to look at all of the gems they've collected and the ring band that rests with them. "Yep," she confirms, "We just need that last gem."

"But we still don't know what that thing does or what it's for," Jacqueline says, tilting her head.

"Maybe not, snowcone," Kendo says, "But it's a good indicator that we're on our way to the last challenge."

Suddenly, *ahem*. Everyone looks to see the Cerberus Bros. approaching them, and Diablo growls at them while Cocoa hides behind Shandon, letting her father rub her head. Alpha says calmly, "For the next challenge, Lady Vanity demands that Usiku, Delilah, Shandon, Zeena, Cocoa, and Diablo exit the arena and come back to the stands with us."

"Oh," Kendo asks, "And why would she want to break us all apart just when we reunited?"

"Because their presence is not needed for her challenge," Alpha explains.

Shandon sneers, "She *demands* us, huh? Tell her to throw in a 'please' and 'thank you' up in there, and maybe I'll consider it."

"*Pooh*," Zeena whispers while gently nudging him.

Usiku looks at the Cerberus Bros., and then he looks at Rose and her team. Delilah does the same, gives Rose a soft smile, and she says, “We’re rooting for you, honey. Please be careful.”

“Of course, momma,” Rose says softly, trying to push the Lust Challenge away and just wants to embrace her mother, anything to make that dark cloud that surrounds her go away.

Usiku says, “Rose, before this madness starts again, I just want you to know that-”

“*IMBECILES!*” Everyone jumps at the booming feminine voice coming from the Emperor’s Box. They see a curvaceous dark-brown-skinned woman who’s large purple afro glitters furiously, her black panther tail swish back and forth frantically, and the slit pupils that rest in her deep-amethyst-purple eyes constrict and stare daggers into the team and Cerberus Bros. “What is going on down there,” she snarls out, sounds of a panther growling can be heard, “Cerberus, why are the descendent’s family and those mutts *still* plaguing *my* stage?”

“*Your* stage,” Tenacity mumbles, showing her bafflement by raising an eyebrow.

“Our apologies, Mistress,” Alpha yells out, “We’re moving as quickly as we can!”

“*Goddamn, they just got down here,*” Zeena mutters.

“*Pssh, this bitch ‘bout to piss me off, and I don’t even know her*” Shandon grumbles, rubbing the back of his neck.

The Cerberus Bros. look at the people they’re supposed to escort as if begging them not to make their job any more difficult. Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa go first. Diablo whimpers at Kendo, and Kendo kneels down to scratch underneath his chin, non-verbally telling him that he’ll see him again very soon, before letting the pitbull walk beside Cocoa to exit the arena. Usiku and Delilah look at their daughter once again, and Rose says softly, “*Don’t worry, momma... daddy... We’re closer to the end...*” They nod their heads and follow the Cerberus Bros. back to their original seats, Diablo’s stench somewhat bothering everyone’s noses.

Vanity teleports out of the Emperor's Box and in the middle of the arena, taking on the height of a giraffe. She adjusts her glittery, strapless, and white-gold dress and pulls up her long, black gloves that are adorned with bracelets made of pearls and diamonds. She then straightens her chunky diamond necklace, and she claps her hands to signal worker-Peonis to hold a mirror in front of her face so that she can make sure that her clear, shimmery lip gloss, eye-liner, and black and white-gold mascara are all in order. She then swats the Peonis away, and she raises her hands to create a portal that brings a large purple and gold throne chair and three plum-purple long couches. She rests her large glutes onto the throne chair, and she lets out a long breath as studio-Peonis set up cameras at different angles.

Carnation leans against the railing of the Emperor's Box, looking at Vanity with adoration. Alexander sees her and tries to grab her attention by just staring at her, but the pampered cat chooses to not acknowledge him, her fuzzy black tail only swaying for her owner. Vanity adjusts her white-gold headmic, glares at the team, and she says, "Here's what you *mice* are going to do. You are all going to park your rear ends on these couches, and you are going to be guests on my talk show. That's it. That's the challenge."

"...Seriously," Kendo groans, "There's no conditions to meet? *Nothing?*"

"Just don't try and ruin my show or try to upstage me," Vanity states, "That's a simple thing to do, don't you think, considering that you're a bunch of *nobodies* to begin with."

"*Nobodies!?*" the girls exclaim simultaneously, "*We're not 'nobodies'!*"

"*Aye aye, shhhhhh,*" Kendo shushes the girls.

"Hm," Vanity's eye twitch, "Anti, what did your harem just sputter out?"

"*HAREM,*" the girls yell out.

“*THEY SAID NOTHING, YOUR LOVELINESS,*” Kendo frantically screams, flailing his arms around, “I-In fact, we’re all just about to sit on these *amazing* couches and wait for the commercial break to end~!”

“Hmhmhm, that’s more like it,” Vanity purrs out, her tail swaying happily.

Kendo directs the girls to the couches, Alexander, Thomas, and Issei following them. “*Kendo, what the fuck,*” Jacqueline whispers.

“*You’re just gonna let her talk to us like that,*” Melissa joins in.

“*I don’t know how many more Quphantos I can allow to call me out my name,*” Tenacity growls.

Kendo hisses out, “*Well, it’s either that or we all get scorched! Now please just bear with me!*”

“*If a talk show is all there is to this challenge, then let’s not make this any more difficult,*” Issei says very softly.

“*Sighs Heeere we go,*” Rose softly whimpers.

Kendo looks at everyone and says, “*And remember, **only speak when she’s talking to you.***”

“*Amy,*” Alexander shudders, “*I’m going to get you back... just have to figure out how to-*”

“*Alex,*” Thomas whispers, “*Whatever you’re thinking, stop it, now.*”

Alexander chooses not to say anything to his brother, only nods. They all sit at the couches, studio Peonis giving them all a hand-held mic, and the Upendelaiki looks at Carnation once again. His longing comes to a stop when loud music plays, signaling that the commercial break is coming to an end. *Don’t worry, Amy* he thinks to himself, *I already have a plan boiling up. I just have to figure out the timing.*

...

The commercial break ends, and the camera hovers over to the Tansi Twins.

Chelsea

Welcome back, to "Deal or Torture", babes! Man, we really are coming to a close. It seems like we were just watching the Earth Bitches fight Abigor's Onis, and we take a second to blink and boom! Here we are with the last challenge~

Fuschia

And this challenge is a very special challenge! "Why" you may be asking? Because, dumb-dumb, first of all, *this* challenge doesn't have a sponsorship! It doesn't need sponsorship~! Second of all, this challenge is giving one particular Quphanto a chance to grace us with her presence~!

Chelsea

That's right, Fusch~! Everyone, it's time for your favorite talk show, "Let's Talk(About Me)", with your *favorite* hostess, Lady Vanity, the Quphanto of Pride~!!



The image for the talk show pops up on the screen as the Umu crowd cheers, sounds of a panther growling echoes in the background.

The image disappears in sparkles, and the camera shows all of the Peonis and Upendeonis clapping their hands and grooving to the TV show's theme music, which consisted of acid jazz. The camera then shifts to Vanity who sits on her throne chair comfortably, her hands resting in her lap and her lips curve

into a smirk as she looks at her audience at home. She begins talking in a calm, soothing tone.

Vanity

Hello, everyone~ Welcome to a special episode of "Let's Talk(About Me)"! As you can see, we are not at the studio this time, no no. We are at the Colosseum where Lord Aidoneus is holding his special event "Deal or Torture". It's been an interesting watch, dare I say I didn't think that the contestants of this event would make it to this segment in one piece. With how they interact with each other from time to time, I'm surprised they haven't tried snatching each other's throats, yet. Anyways, everyone, say hello to my special guests, Anti and his friends Alexander and Thomas of Maza and Issei, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa of Gaia.

The audience cheers as the camera shows the team. Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa sit in one couch; Rose, Kendo, and Issei in the middle couch; and Alexander and Thomas in the third one.

Vanity

And before we talk to our guests, let's welcome back a friend of mine~. She was gone for nearly a century, but now she is back~! Rejoice, for my beautiful Carnation has *finally* returned~!

The Quphanto motions her hand upwards towards the Emperor's Box, and the camera zooms in on Carnation who waves gracefully at everyone and smiles as the glitter on her lilac purple dress shimmies. After a few seconds, the camera goes back to Vanity.

Vanity

Now for those at home that have absolutely *no* idea what's going on, here's a bit of a run down. Lord Aidoneus created "Deal or Torture" as a way to bring his son, Anti, back home. All Anti had to do was accept his father's deal: Come back home and his friends, including the friend that is in Aidoneus' possession, would leave Umu unscathed. However, Anti chose the treacherous

route: Decline the deal and go through various challenges that my comrades and I have created. If they manage to complete all challenges, then Aidoneus would be forced to let them all go.

Audience

Ooooooooouuuu!

Vanity

The first challenge was Abigor's "Alive or Dead" where the team had to go through waves of Peoni thugs. Second, it was Alphonse's "Endless Dinner and a Show", which was where they had to fight abominations made of food. Third challenge was Demona's "Raining Halos" where her metallic spawns attempted to make the team their dinner. The fourth challenge was Nasir's "Umu's Top Muse" where the team modeled his rags, and it seemed to have messed with the team a little bit~

(giggles)

The fifth challenge was Ophelia's "Non-Stop Boogie" where they fought off more Peonis, showed off their *horrendous* dance moves, and took a nap that didn't restore *any* of their beauty. Sixth, they tackled Kal's "Steamy Maze" where a few people of the team along with their loved ones were forced to share revolting secrets about themselves. And finally, here they are~... on my show~... funking up my furniture with their stench whilst looking like naked mole-rats that have been dragged in the mud.

Audience

(laughs)

Vanity

(looks at Kendo)

Honestly, I didn't think that your pets would be able to put up much of a fight, Anti. How are you feeling now that you've gotten this far?

The girls, Issei, and Alexander show signs of their irritation growing--feet tapping, legs shaking, lips curling--but Kendo immediately responds to Vanity before the Quphanto says anything about it.

Kendo

(clears throat)

Well, Lady Vanity, it's crazy that you bring those challenges up because I *barely* remember that shit. We really have been through a lot, so much that I even forgot that I puked earlier. But now that we're here... I feel better. I won't say that I'm 100% good, just yet, but I know that I'm getting there.

Vanity

Will you *truly* be at 100% after this? With how everything's been with you and your father, I would be shocked if you manage to reach 50%.

Kendo

You can count on it... I haven't forgotten about what I said. The moment I do that will be the moment I claim my freedom.

Vanity

Poetic... Anyways, pushing you aside, Anti, I want to pick at your friends like the nasty scabs they are.

(looks at everyone else)

So... it seems that this is your first time being in Umu. Enjoying your visit?

Tenacity

No, if anything, y'all are just makin' me wanna go get cleansed... again.

Audience

(laughs)

Vanity

(giggles)

Well, we do tend to have that effect on people. You wanna know what's funnier? You going through all that hassle and possibly *still* end up here~!

(cackles)

Tenacity

...Where's the funny?

Vanity

Anyway, what about you, Melissa dear?

Melissa

I spent my birthday here... 1 star, would not recommend.

Vanity

Awww, that's because you've been stuck here in the arena the whole time. I can assure you that if you had the time to see the rest of Umu, you'd consider this place to be a worthy vacation spot~

Melissa

I don't think an Umu tour would change my mind.

Vanity

Well, it's a much better place than in your parents' home, I'm sure.

Melissa

I... It's irritating living with them, but I would *never* trade living with them for *here*.

Vanity

If the Pits are what you're afraid of, you do know you can just aim to become a Peoni, don't you?

Melissa

Um... Yeah, but... I prefer the *cold*.

Audience

(laughs)

Vanity

Oh dear, you'd be another homebody in Umu. Getting A/C here isn't all that difficult, although you'd be paying good money for it, but you're an ambitious soul. I'm sure you'd find a way.

Issei

Are you *trying* to convince us to come to Umu?

Vanity

Well, you sacks of flesh are doing nothing else with your lives but waste away and die a lonely death. Why live a life full of such hardship when you can just live it up here and watch my show~!

Audience

(cheers)

Vanity

You know, Issei, I've been paying attention to you and how you've been tackling these challenges with your team, and quite frankly... you seem like you want to dump your teammates and do all of this yourself.

Issei

False.

Vanity

Oh? But you've been getting worked up since the very beginning. You were getting snappy with Rose, then you'd be eager to get back to the challenges, not wanting to bond with your teammates in the meantime, need I go on? You even went on a whole rant while your teammates were asleep during Ophelia's segment, as if this was *your* burden to tackle. Do I need to replay what you said?

Issei

I see what you're doing, and I'm not about to fall for it-

Vanity

Somebody, play the recording real quick! Oh, you all *have* to hear what he said.

One of the worker-Peonis searches through the voice recordings that have been caught by the microphones this whole time, and they replay Issei and Kendo's conversation.

Issei

Hold it. So what I'm hearin' is despite the fact that they have two people to save... they would rather sit around and do *nothing*.

Kendo

Well, hold it, chocolate drop, I'm sure they want to save their loved ones. It's just that they've been through five challenges, now, all being in a realm that they're not supposed to be in. At some point, they were gonna *want* to rest.

Issei

But their friends are in *danger*!! Why would they want to take a long rest in the middle of getting them back!? What's Alexander's excuse, huh!? He was the main one cryin' and *bitchin'* about gettin' his lover back! Suddenly, sleeping on some sand sounds like a lovely time!?

Kendo

You're gettin' worked up over nothing, dude. Nermal and Amethyst aren't going anywhere.

Issei

The better question is why aren't you gettin' angry!? Your freedom is on the line, too, on top of all this! Yet you're still finding time to crack jokes, act inappropriately, and let this shit slide!

Audience

Oooooooooooooooooooooo!!

Everyone has different reactions that show the same expression... appall. Tenacity squints her eyes, leans against the couch's arm as she crosses her arms. Vanity notices and starts instigating.

Vanity

(giggles)

Oouu, Tenacity, you look like you have so much to say right now.

Tenacity

I do, but you know what? I'm not going to say anything.

Vanity

Why not!? We have *plenty* of time.

Tenacity

I'd rather not hold up your show, Lady Vanity. We can continue-

Vanity

No no, please I *insist*~!

Issei

Ten, you might as well say what you're thinking while we're talking about it, because I seriously don't need you to be giving me the silent treatment... *again*.

Tenacity

You say that as if my last silent treatment for you was not valid.

Issei

It wasn't!!

Tenacity

...You know what?

Issei

What?

Tenacity

I just think it's funny how *you* wanna make it seem like we're just not carin' 'bout the situation, but really we do. We are in some shit that we're not even supposed to be in right now, and I would think that you'd get that, but it seems like you ain't even got enough brain cells to process *that*.

Issei

Ophelia explained that the reason you all were still under that sleepy spell was because either y'all are lazy folks to begin with, you were *wanting* to get that rest, or it's a mixture of both.

Tenacity

(rapidly slaps her thigh as she yells)

WE'RE IN FUCKIN' UMU FIGHTIN' PEONIS AND SHIT, AND WE'VE BEEN DOIN' THIS FOR A MONTH AND SOME CHANGE! YOU'VE BEEN DOIN' IT FOR WHO KNOWS HOW LONG AND JUST EXPECT US TO GET THE HANG OF IT AND NOT COMPLAIN?! FUCK OUTTA HERE WIT' THAT *BULLSHIT!*

Issei

Man, I was just saying-

Tenacity

"I Was jUsT sAYinG", shut the *fuck* up, bitch ass jungle fiend.

Audience

OOOOOOUUUUUUU!!!

Issei

See, nah nah, you ain't 'bout to talk to me all sideways-

Tenacity

AND YOU'RE NOT 'BOUT TO TALK TO ME LIKE I'M NOT PUTTIN' IN ANY WORK, LIKE I'M NOT CARRYIN' SOME WEIGHT. TRUST ME, IF NERMAL AND AMETHYST WEREN'T IN TROUBLE, I'D HAVE *BEEN* GAVE UP ON THIS JOB AND LET YOU HANDLE IT ALL BY YO'SELF SINCE YOU WANNA BE MR. MACHO MAN, BUT I'M NOT DOIN' THAT.

Melissa

Tee, please calm down...

Jacqueline

Right!? She hasn't gotten *this* upset in a while-

Vanity

Let's rewind a bit, shall we? Tenacity, you and Issei are giving me vibes that you two were once a couple. This exchange just reeks of "lovers' quarrel". Is that true?

Issei

Why does that matter-

Tenacity

We did date once, and I want him to understand that I will never want to be with him again. Mothafucka wanna have secrets and shit when we were together. He wanna not show up for me, stand me up on a lot of dates, and then leave me in the dark. Now he wanna act dumb and not know what went wrong.

Vanity

Ooh~? Please, explain~. Give me the details, what exactly went wrong? What were these secrets he was hiding?

Tenacity

What went wrong was he never told me about his Peoni hunting shit. That moment when he told us who he really was and what he was doing on the side, it all clicked.

Jacqueline

...Whaaat?? I'm confused.

Rose

(sighs)

Jackie, they broke up because Tee thought that Issei was purposefully avoiding her and not telling her anything, when in reality it was all because of his Peoni hunting duties.

Jacqueline

Oooooh!

Tenacity

And so when I broke up wit' him, he wanted to get all huffy puffy, made it seem like I was in the wrong because he lacked communication skills. And now he wanna flirt with me here and there like there's a possibility of us gettin' back together and shit.

Vanity

Aaaah...

Tenacity

And now he wanna get mad at me, get mad at *us*, because we took a fuckin' nap, a nap that we couldn't really control, mind you. He acts like he can just do no wrong.

Audience

(talks amongst themselves as the intense silence grows for a few seconds)

Tenacity

That's it, I'm done. I said all I needed to say.

Issei

Good, because now *I* got something to say.

Tenacity

No, you don't-

Issei

Yes, the fuck, I do. I gave you a chance to talk, now it's *my* turn.

Audience

Ooooooooouuu!!!

The crowd says different things to the special guests, some hyping up Issei, while the others defending Tenacity. The irritated goth looks at the irked Peoni hunter, and she looks at him while tilting her head back.

Tenacity

Fine. Go ahead.

Issei

I get that you're upset with me for not communicating to you why I was always M.I.A., but instead of being a bitch, did you ever think that your communication skills sucked ass, too!?!

Tenacity

...!!!

Issei

How the fuck was I supposed to know that you wanted nothing to do with me romantically anymore if you never told me?! I honestly don't see how you managed to befriend these people considering how cold you can be. Now that I'm here, I don't know what I saw in yo' dumb ass. Maybe it was your looks, maybe it was your reactions to my teasing. Either way, I dodged a fuckin' bullet. You always want things to go *your way*, and if one thing went wrong, you'd blow up and not want to speak to anyone, kind of like what happened when you got shot in the head, which was YOUR FAULT, BY THE WAY. If you really cared about Nermal, *YOUR friend*, you'd have swallowed yo' pride, let Nasir talk his slick shit, and be done with it! But naaaah, you got in your feelings, tried to shoot him, and then took a bullet to the cranium. And you're wanting to talk about carryin' weight, if I wasn't here, none of you would be alive right now! You're right, I do this shit on a daily, so I know what I'm doing! I can do this shit with my eyes closed while you need a Quphanto descendant giving you a boost! I got mad at y'all because the Sloth challenge revealed that *I* was more eager to get this shit done than *any* of you, and it's *YOUR people* that's in danger!! NOW who's tryin' to make it seem like they can do no wrong!?

Tenacity gets up and storms towards Issei, about to throw her microphone, but Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa get up and stop her, begging her to calm down and sit back down. The audience starts rioting and screaming for Tenacity to do something. Issei gets himself up, preparing himself in case Tenacity breaks free, but Kendo, Alexander, and Thomas try to console him, not wanting to see their two teammates get into a physical altercation. After a few seconds, the girls manage to calm the goth, though they can sense her wrath seething through her body. Issei goes

on ahead and sits down with the rest of the guys, his eyes glaring at the one he used to have feelings for.

Vanity watches the interaction, slightly covering her smirk and holding back her snickering, a few snorts escaping.

Vanity

My my, it looks like the Malaiki-winged Ludamu and lioness almost bit each other's heads off, wouldn't you all agree? Well, now that they're silenced, Alexander, do you have anything to say about this? He did say some foul things about you as well.

Alexander

I believe Miss Tenacity has gnawed on his head well enough... and vice versa. I see where both of my allies are coming from, and I know that if Amy was here, she'd be wanting to get on my bucket for napping, as well.

Issei

Look, if it'll get us off of this bullshit and focus on the matter at hand, then I'll apologize-

Vanity

Ugh, don't even. You're gonna make my ratings go down trying to start this "making up" segment. Let's spice things up and talk about Rose and Anti~.

Rose and Kendo

HUH!?

Kendo

What *about* us!?

Vanity

Let's not beat around the bush, hon~! You and Rose have shown to be pretty close since the beginning of the event. You two are pretty much an icon to the Umu crowd~!

Rose

(blushes and stutters)

W-We are not together like that! We've just been helping each other get through these challenges like the *teammates* we are!

Vanity

Ooh, is that so? Well, Rose, I know that you had to have been extremely embarrassed having to witness your parents go to excessive limits to help you all get through the Lust challenge. What was going through your head as you watched your father and mother allow themselves to drown in ecstasy~?

Rose

Um...

(sighs)

I can't lie, it really did throw me in for a loop. But we talked it out a little bit afterwards, and we're okay now. I understand that the circumstances at the time were crazy for all of us.

Vanity

Weeeell, how about you get a little payback? Since *they* want to show their affection to Umu, go right ahead aaand, hmmm, *kiss* Anti~.

Audience

(cheers and shouts)

KISS! KISS! KISS! KISS! KISS! KISS!

Rose

Oh no no no! I-I can't do that!

Kendo

Yeah, uuh, are you *trying* to get me killed? Let's just move onto something different...

Rose

Y-Yeah! L-Like, uuuh, I have a question about Carnation!

Audience

(soft gasps, whispers to themselves)

Vanity

... What about my Carnation?

Kendo

Come on, Miss V, you know what's up.

Alexander

We all know that she's really a Gaian named Amethyst, and you *kidnapped* her and changed her into this Carnation character.

Vanity

Kidnapped? *Kidnapped!*? How *dare* you accuse me of such treachery!
If anything, I was just getting back what was *mine*!!

Alexander

She wasn't yours to begin with!!

Thomas

(grits his teeth, mutters)
Alex, stop-

Kendo

Fuck this, Vanity, we all know that Carnation reincarnated to Amethyst. You didn't like that, so you did everything you could to get her back. How in the hell did you change Amethyst to who she is now, I have no idea, *but* it'd be nice if you shared with the class.

Audience

Ooouuuuuu...

Vanity

... Ugh, you meddling children. Always wanting to get to the bottom of things that don't involve you-

Alexander

IT DOES INVOLVE ME!! YOU TOOK AWAY THE LOVE OF MY LIFE!

Vanity

SHE IS THE LOVE OF *MINE*! Carnation, not my daughter by blood but I love her like she is. Once the Reaper came and took her away, I did all I could to get her back. Now after a century, I *finally* got her back, and I did what I needed to and helped her remember who she was. I gave her all memories of her being here in Umu and gave her the appearance that she has now. This Amethyst that you speak of is no longer here. There's only Carnation now.

Alexander

So then what did you do with the memories she had as Amethyst!?

Vanity

For me to know and *you* to not worry about.

Alexander

Is my child even still alive!?

Vanity

Hm... *what* child?

Alexander

...

...

Alexander's ears begin to hear nothing but his heartbeat banging at a rapid speed, sounding like a hammer hitting a nail on the head over and over. He begins to see red as he pushes himself out of the couch and summons a ball of boiling hot water, causing the Umu crowd to scream at the top of their lungs. The Upendelaiki doesn't even hear his brother shout at him or the girls inhale their sharp gasps as he aims for Vanity, but before he could shoot out his water, he senses a large shard made of dry ice attempt to stab his hand. He moves out of the way in time, and *thud!* The dry ice weapon lands on the ground, stabbing the sand. Everyone looks to see that the shard came from Carnation whose hand is surrounded by white fog, her hand aiming for

Alexander. She squints her glowing purple eyes, her white slits constrict with rage. “You *feather duster*,” she growls out, “How dare you harm mother!”

“Did you not hear our convo, Amy,” Alexander yells out to her, “You’re not even supposed to be Carnation, not anymore!!”

“Do you believe that I will take the side of an Upendelaiki over the one that’s given me life,” Carnation scowls, “As far as I’m concerned, this Amethyst you speak of has nothing to do with me. I am Carnation, Lady Vanity’s companion, and the one that will be forcing you to *reset*.” As soon as she says this, she leaps from the Emperor’s Box, summons dual swords (one sword made of dry ice and the other made of fire), and she lands gracefully in between Vanity and the team, pointing the dry ice sword towards Alexander. “Draw your weapon, Upendelaiki,” she says through a smirk that shows her fangs as her starry tail sways and ears twitch, “Unless you want to apologize to mother and kiss her feet.”

“Amy,” Alexander says softly, his heart tearing apart slowly like a piece of paper, but he releases a sigh, blinks away the tears, and he summons a hot-water claymore. He looks at the stranger who looks like his lover, but his feet stay glued to the ground. The search for strength to fight Carnation becomes a difficult task, and Carnation’s search for patience wears thin as she lunges towards him with her swords ready. As soon as she swings her dry ice sword, *clang!* Alexander blocks the attack just in time with his claymore, immense fog forming in between blades. The feisty cat’s eyes glint as she sees an opening and swings her fire sword and slices the Upendelaiki’s bare abdomen. He gnashes his teeth and hops backwards away from her, trying to ignore the burning cut on his stomach. Suddenly, he looks up and sees Carnation trying to add another cut on him, swinging her swords with the right amount of power and poise, and his claymore disappears from the bewilderment as he dodges every swing.

The team sees Alexander struggle to fight his lover's look-alike, and they look at Vanity who watches the show along with her audience. She looks at the team, and she motions her hand as a way to tell them to go ahead and attempt to help their ally, as if she's confident that Carnation will smite them down just as easily. How will they assist Alexander? As they try to find a way to intervene, Alexander manages to summon one light nunchuck and is able to recover his footing. He uses his weapon to block and deflect some of Carnation's swings, not landing a single attack on her. The woman stops attacking him to look at him, barely breaking a sweat, and she says "Come on! Why aren't you fighting back!?" But Alexander struggles to formulate words. Her voice, her face, her movements... everything reminds him of her. It *is* her. But it *isn't*. He tries to muster up the strength to put an end to her attacks, but Carnation gives him no time to breathe as she dashes forward and starts swinging again. He stumbles and struggles, then *slash slash slash!* He tries to dodge her attacks, but fails as she successfully adds a few more wounds to his body, making him grunt and groan from the burns.

Alexander falls to the ground, letting his cherry-red blood paint his body along with the sands. The ferocious cat giggles deviously at the sight of the Upendelaiki, walking slowly towards her prey, ready to give him the final strike. Thomas sees his brother failing to fight Carnation, and he says, "He's going to get himself killed!" Then, Issei aims his ice gun at Carnation, then *bam!* The ice bullet flies towards Carnation, but she ducks in time, letting the bullet continue its flight to another destination that's not her. She turns quickly to look towards the Peoni hunter, her eyes wide and slit pupils extremely thin, and she turns herself around at an unsettling speed, and she lunges towards him, moving in a zig-zag manner to make it more challenging for Issei to shoot her. *Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh! Bang! Bang! Bang!* Issei tries to shoot down the cat, but she evades every bullet and gets closer to him. As soon as Carnation gets in front of him, Issei

aims his gun at her and shoots another bullet, but her fiery blade swings diagonally in front of him, slicing the bullet and almost cutting his hand along with burning his face with its heat. He backs away in time before she can cause any more damage, and he brings out his katana, having both his gun and sword ready. Carnation wastes no time as she closes the space between them, and she continues swinging her swords in different angles, forcing the Malaiki-Ludamu hybrid to attempt blocking her attacks with his blade, *clang clang clang clang!* Issei manages to block her attacks after upping his focus, but every time he attempts to shoot at her, she makes it almost impossible to aim without having to worry about getting sliced.

The rest of the team witnesses Issei taking on Carnation, him doing a better job at defending himself than Alexander did. Rose watches the fight, taking note of Carnation's fighting skill. Quick. Elegant. Fierce. It's as if she plays with her prey for a while before completely finishing them off. Then, the descendant keeps trying to focus on Carnation, and she notices something else about the cat. *Wait a minute*, she thinks to herself, *that other source of life... the same one I've sensed before...* She lets out a gasp and says softly, "It's her child... the baby's still alive!"

Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa hears Rose through the commotion, and their eyes widen. "The baby's still alive," Tenacity repeats, "But Vanity just said-

"I know," Rose says, stopping her friend from finishing that sentence, "But I think she only said that to get under Alex's skin."

So she was bluffin', huh, Tenacity thinks, *That would mean she intended for Carnation to get into the mix to begin with*. She glares at Carnation, seeing the cat landing a few blows on Issei, but he manages to land some hits as well, though they're not having a heavy impact on her as she shows to be moving with the same quickness and force. *You're not Amethyst right now*, the goth sneers out in her mind, *So let's get nasty*. "Rose," she says, "Boost me up, please. I'll try not to

harm their kid.” With no hesitation, Rose clasps her hands and summons a red wasp that stings Tenacity’s arm, making her wince. The goth creates distance from her friends and then summons her flaming dual guns, aims at the starry woman, then *boom boom boom!!* The bullets fly, and Carnation senses the bullets homing towards her, blocking Issei’s katana with her dry ice sword and kicking him in the gut to catch him off guard before slashing away Tenacity’s bullets with both of her swords.

Like standing a couple feet away from a starved wildcat, Tenacity’s heart drops at the sight of Carnation’s bloodthirsty expression, no sign of Amethyst anywhere within her. The tall woman pounces towards the goth, ready to end her life, but Tenacity tries to slow her down with more bullets. *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* Carnation deflects the fiery shots, turning them into mist, and she prepares to swing her blades at her prey. Tenacity lights a fire in her feet and starts jumping to the side, away from the feline, running away to create distance. Carnation notices Tenacity fleeing, and her frustration rises, the playful manner no longer present. She just wants to remove one person from the team. Eliminating at least one team member would quench her thirst for victory. It doesn’t matter if it’s Alexander anymore, just anyone to prove that she’s not one to mess with, and threatening Vanity should be the last thing on their to-do list. She manages to get to Tenacity, and she jumps high in the air, makes her fire sword disappear, keeping her dry ice sword, and summons three kunai made of dark magic. She throws the kunai at Tenacity, the goth’s eyes widen at the sight, and she tries moving away from the weapons. She then aims her fire guns and shoots more bullets at the cat, and Carnation tries to move away from the bullets and use her weapon to get rid of them, but one bullet grazes her shoulder, barely making her flinch.

While Tenacity tries to keep Carnation occupied, Rose looks to see Alexander who looks down at the ground, watching his blood stain his body and dripping onto the sandy ground. She summons her green dragonflies, and they swarm the Upendelaiki, healing his wounds and making them disappear. Rose kneels down to check on Alexander, and she says, “Alex?? Are you okay?”

“I can’t do it,” Alexander chuckles weakly, his voice shuttering, “I-I can’t fight her, Rose. I could *never* lay my hands on her, even if she was fighting me unprovoked...”

“But Alex, you *have* to understand that she’s *not* Amethyst! Not right now! If we don’t stop her, then we’ll *never* get Amethyst back,” Rose informs Alexander, trying to snap him out of this defeated spell.

“I’m so sorry.... I interrupted a challenge again, and now we’re about to get our asses served by my girl...”

“Correction, someone that *looks* like your girl! *Sighs* And no, we’re not. Listen, your child is okay.”

“H-Huh!?”

“But that won’t matter if you don’t help us. Look, Carnation is too quick, and you guys are barely getting a chance to land a hit on her. On top of that, she’s very durable, not even Issei’s ice bullets are phasing her. I could use a bug to put her to sleep so that we can actually calm down and figure out how to bring Amy back, but her reflexes are so sharp she’d cut the bug down without even giving it a chance to land on her. Just tire her out, and we’ll go from there.”

Jacqueline and Melissa overhear Rose’s plan, and they summon their weapons, Jacqueline with her ice staff and Melissa with her air bow and arrows. Rose and Alexander notice them, and

their hearts skip a beat. Jacqueline says cheerfully, “So basically jump Carnation... I can do that~!”

Melissa joins, “Carnation seems to change her focus whenever someone else tries to attack her. If we all attack at the same time, she might feel a bit disoriented.”

“C’mon, MeeMee,” Jacqueline exclaims, “Let’s go save our second mom~!”

“Our second mom,” Melissa repeats, letting words lift her spirits, “Yeah, our second mom!”

Kendo turns into a vulture and flies in front of the group, grossing out Jacqueline and Melissa, and shouts out, “I’ll be the *best* distraction you guys ever asked for!” He lets out a raspy cry like the vulture he is, and he flies towards Carnation. Jacqueline and Melissa join their friend, Tenacity, in the battle, Melissa stands at a distance aiming her arrows while Jacqueline gets up close and personal.

Thomas stands by Rose and his brother, watching the fight, and he says, “I’ll stay here as back up in case Carnation manages to defeat them.”

Issei successfully reunites with them and mutters, “*Which probably won’t take her long...*”

“No,” Rose says, making the men slightly jump, “We need as many people throwing Carnation off as possible. Just shoot at her from afar.”

“Got it,” Issei says, not wanting to put up a fight, and goes to rejoin his allies, using his Malaiki wings to fly in the air.

“Very well,” Thomas complies, and he reveals his large, feathery wings and joins Issei, readying his light bow and arrow.

Alexander lets out a long sigh, and he pushes himself up from the ground, Rose helping him. They look at their team fight Carnation: Tenacity keeps trying to shoot down the cat, but Carnation continues slicing the bullets and shaking off the ones that hit her, taking the

opportunity to kick her in the chest; Jacqueline jumps in trying to hit her from behind, but Carnation senses her in time and blocks her staff with her sword and pushes her away; Melissa sees the opportunity to shoot a few arrows at her, *fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh!* The whimsical arrows fly, but Carnation dodges them and throws her dark kunai with the addition of magma kunai, forcing Melissa to duck and dodge; Issei attempts to fly above the battle and shoots his ice bullets at Carnation, but she moves in different directions swiftly, keeping her distance from everyone else and still throwing her kunai at everyone, noticing that her opponents are trying to get cheap shots in; then there's Thomas, aiming his arrows carefully, and releases them, and Carnation detects them and dodges; finally, there's Kendo flying around Carnation, frustrating her at a reasonable distance, and she tries to shoot him down with her sword and kunai while trying to focus on the others, getting hit by their bullets and arrows thanks to the chaotic jokester's distraction. Alexander chuckles and says, "She could kill them if she really wanted to..." *I know that's you holding back, Amy*, he convinces himself. After that, he summons his light nunchuk and starts walking towards the battlefield, and he mutters, "I started this, it's time that I finish it. Ideya, give me strength." The Umu crowd continues to shout and cheer, rooting for whichever soul they support, and Alexander's eyes lock onto Carnation who continues to dance with her opponents, and he prepares himself for what must be one of the most difficult battles he will have to take on.

Chapter 13

As the battle continues on the television, Pierre sits on the edge of his couch along with his pets, tightening his fists and gnashing his teeth every time Carnation gets close to ending one of the team member's life. He watches the fight and listens to the crowd go crazy, his thoughts running the most laps around his brain they ever did. His pets start expressing their concern through hisses, barks, meows, croaks, and neighs, begging Pierre to help Kendo and his team. The Upendeoni's face crunches up in frustration, and he gets up from his seat to look at his pets and yells, "What do you guys expect me to do!? Just run in there like a mad man!?"

Arf arf arf arf!!

"No," Pierre stops Adessa, "I said this already, I don't care if I got history with these guys, they're not my problem anymore! I did what I needed to do!"

Mrrrrroooooow!

"No, Shadow, I'm *not* going to feel bad about these guys possibly dying. They have Rose to revive them, they'll be fine!"

Neeeeeeiiiiigh!!!

"Well then you know what, Chidike, maybe *you* can go save them then. Maybe they'll put you in some record book."

Pierre thinks to himself, *Damn, what is up with these guys? Why do they want me to play the hero so badly? Do they know something that I don't?* Suddenly, something phases through his wall, seven bats fly into the living room, disturbing Pierre and his pets, causing them all to look at them fly around and squeak. "What the fuck," Pierre asks to whomever can answer. After a few seconds, the seven bats land on various spots, and they stare down Pierre, their piercing, red eyes gripping his soul. "W-Who are you," Pierre stammers, his feet planted in the carpet.

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“You’re... Usiku’s sisters,” Pierre asks, tilting his head.

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“Y-Yeah, I’m the guy that was tasked to capture Amethyst. L-Look, I didn’t know she was Vanity’s pet before, I didn’t know *anything*. I was just told to bring her back so that I could get paid, that was it-”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“... So you want me to be ready for anything just in case things go further south, huh? It seems like your niece and her friends are already struggling.”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“*Sighs* It seems like all of you guys’ sixth sense is bothering you more than mine...” Pierre thinks about his pets’ and Usiku’s sisters’ pleas and suggestions. They’re really wanting him to get involved somehow. What can he truly do? He’s just a simple Umuite that wants to live a non-chaotic life. Why would he want to get himself into more trouble? What could he possibly get from helping the people he once had problems with other than peace of mind? He inhales, then exhales, and he looks at the bats and says, “Okay, fine. My friends and I will be on standby.”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“Yeah yeah,” he mutters, slowly regretting his decision. The sisters then make their exit and phase through the walls again, getting out of his sight. Pierre sits back down on the couch, making sure that none of his roommates are in the way, and Samael slithers onto his lap.

Hiiiiiiiiissssss!!

“I don’t know, Sam... but now you’re all making *me* anxious. Guess we’ll just have to see how this goes down...”

...

Bang! Bang! Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Shling! Cling! Clang! Carnation puts in all of her effort to keep the team off of her back. All of the wounds that she's received thus far sting, even ruining her attire by painting it dark red, but the adrenaline that courses through her veins numb them all so that whatever pain she's supposed to experience right now can be felt later. She tries to scan her opponents as she continues moving around and dodging her enemies' attacks. As she's analyzing, she catches a glimpse of someone joining the fight... the Upendelaiki that she should have killed when she had the chance. At this moment, she realizes that she's been playing with her food for too long and it's now getting cold. *Let's finish this*, she thinks to herself, and she prepares herself to take out Kendo's team one by one.

The luminous feline takes note of Issei, Thomas, and Kendo being the ones flying around in the air, out of her reach, and she comes to the decision of not trying to take them down, yet. She then sees the three Gaian ladies attempting to attack her, Tenacity with her guns, Jacqueline with her staff, and Melissa keeping her distance with her bow and arrow. These three would be easy pickings if not for their flying companions. She then sees Alexander ready to help his friends out. Unlike them, she doesn't need help.

Vanity notices how everyone but Rose is trying to attack Carnation, the one person she's been wanting back in her life since the moment she left. Something begins to boil in her heart, a feeling she always makes sure the public eye never witnessed... fear. Instantly, she remembers she's a Quphanto, the Pride Quphanto at that. She can do whatever she wants, and no one can stop her as far as she knows. She adjusts herself on her seat, and she begins to slowly twirl her hand around, creating purple electricity, lightning dancing around her fingers, but then *No*, Carnation's voice echoes in her mind, her daughter talking to her telepathically.

Huh, Vanity responds back mentally, But they're-

It's fine, Carnation halts her mother, Let them believe that they have a chance just because there's more of them. I can handle it.

But I just got you back! Carnation, I can help-

Don't. I got this.

Carnation!!

The feline mutes her mother, and she focuses back on the battle, running straight for the three girls. Jacqueline readies her ice staff, running at her with full speed, and Carnation changes her weapons to two fire swords. Jacqueline starts swinging her staff, and Carnation reacts, blocking the party girl's attacks with both of her swords. Issei takes this opportunity to throw off Carnation, again, aiming his gun at her, making sure that he doesn't hit Jacqueline, and *bang bang bang!!* He shoots a few ice bullets at her, but they land on her back and graze her side. *Ba-bump!* Issei's heart skips a beat when he realizes that Carnation didn't turn to stop his bullets this time. Jacqueline notices, as well, but she tries to keep her efforts at a hundred. Carnation feels the bone-chilling sensation send chills up and down her spine, but she takes that pain and uses it to help her take down Jacqueline. As soon as the party girl swings her staff once more, Carnation uses her two swords to collide with the weapon, push it to the side and kicks the girl in the diaphragm, forcing the air out of her. *Thud!* Jacqueline falls to the ground on her back, and as she attempts to get up, groaning out her pain, *BOOM!* Carnation kicks Jacqueline in the face, knocking her out.

Seeing Jacqueline be the first out of the fight sends dread throughout Tenacity, Melissa, and Rose. "JACQUELINE," they yell out simultaneously, and Tenacity wastes no time as she aims her dual guns at Carnation and starts shooting at her. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* Carnation senses the

bullets and turns towards her next target, charging towards her as she switches out her weapons for a water ball and chain. The goth is caught off guard by the new weapon, but she continues trying to shoot her, her flaming bullets grazing Carnation. The cat quickly throws her ball at the goth, and the ball successfully catches Tenacity off guard as it punches her stomach, forcing her to let go of her dual guns, making them disappear as the air escapes her body through her mouth. Carnation pulls the ball back to her, making her weapon disappear, and she kicks Tenacity's face, dazing her. Tenacity tries to put her guard up, blocking off Carnation's kicks, and she tries to punch her. *Swish! Swish! Swoosh!* However, Tenacity's punches only fly by Carnation's face, not landing a single punch as the feline bobs and weaves, and Carnation returns the punches. *Boom! Bam! Boom!* She punches Tenacity in the gut, worsening the bruise she's received from the water ball. Finally, *boom!* Carnation uppercuts Tenacity, knocking her to the ground, laying her unconscious.

"TEN," Rose and Melissa shout together, and Carnation's ear twitches from the sound of their cries. She twists her head to Melissa, but before she can charge for her, Kendo uses his vulture beak to pull on Carnation's hair as a way to try and shift her attention away from her. Little does he know, she's allowing him to do that so that she can swiftly grip his neck. *Yoink!* Kendo begins to wiggle and flail around, flapping his wings frantically as hisses filled with desperation escape his mouth. She then hurls Kendo towards one of the flying team members. Thomas and Issei watch Kendo be thrown, and Thomas takes time to catch Kendo to help him recover while Issei tries to read Carnation, contemplating if he should just go ahead and start fighting her up close. Carnation smirks at the flying members, but then an arrow stabs the back of her shoulder, making her grunt and hiss. She turns to see Melissa shooting more arrows at her, another one grazing her cheek, and she begins charging towards her while summoning two magma kunai.

Alexander watches Carnation knock the team down slowly, his heart becoming heavier and heavier. Carnation gets closer to Melissa, and Melissa quickly replaces her air bow and arrow with her bladed fans, ready to block the incoming attacks. Carnation swings her kunai in different directions, trying to land a hit, but Melissa keeps deflecting her attacks while also trying to hit her. The moves they are using makes them look like they're dancing, as if this is all part of the show. Alexander sprints towards them, trying to stop Carnation from doing anything, but Carnation sees him in time and pushes Melissa away with great force to focus on the Upendelaiki. She swings her kunai at him, but Alexander's nunchuk denies her access. He swings his weapon around, hitting the feline in different spots, but Carnation conquers through those hits and manages to give him more scorching hot slices on his arms and sides. He winces from the pain, and she gives him a cut on his left cheek, the burn becoming unbearable for Alexander as he covers his face wound. Melissa tries to help out by attacking her from behind, but Alexander trying to recover gives Carnation a chance to turn around and finish off the go-getter. They keep going back and forth, *shling shlang shling shlang*, until Carnation finally slices Melissa's hand, causing her to yelp and make her fans disappear. She tries to recover, but *slash slash slash*, Carnation continues slicing her body up, then *stab!* She pierces her gut with her seething kunai, causing Melissa to scream out in pain, and she shoves the girl to the ground. *Thud!*

"*MELISSA,*" Rose screams as she watches her friend lay on the ground, her blood spilling out and her eyes fluttering as it tries to keep her from losing consciousness. Thomas and Issei notice this, and they fly downward, preparing to ambush the feline. Carnation sees them, Thomas preparing his bow and arrow and Issei aiming his gun, and she summons her two dry ice swords once again to attack them. Kendo sees Melissa bleeding out, and he flies to her side, turning back

to his human form. He looks at Rose who shares a glance with him, and he tries to pick up Melissa, hoping that he can get to Rose so that she can get healed. However, whimpers and squeals escape Melissa's lips, stopping Kendo from attempting again. Rose notices this, and she summons her cyan grasshoppers who hop past the battle taking place to teleport Tenacity, Jacqueline, Melissa, and Kendo back to where Rose is, near the couches and Vanity who still sits on her throne chair watching the show.

Vanity watches Rose heal her friends, the descendant summoning many green dragonflies that fly and land on the many wounds located on their bodies. Kendo looks at Rose with concern and asks, "You got a bug that will wake them up?" Rose only nods, and she clasps her hands and summons a yellow-orange stink bug that nibbles on their skin, causing them to slowly awaken. While the girls struggle to fight the heavy fog that clouds their minds, Vanity can't help but giggle at the sight, the anxiety that was slowly growing now shriveling up as her confidence grows. Rose and Kendo hear her, and Kendo frowns as he says, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Very much so, yes," Vanity purrs out, "My Carnation is putting you all in your place. If you want to get mad at anyone, get mad at your Upendelaiki friend. *He* seems to do an excellent job at ruining everything."

"Okay, well we got the point," Kendo exclaims, "Tell your cat to stop so that we can continue the talk show!"

"Are you kidding," Vanity laughs, "The ratings are off the charts now! This is the *best* way to debut Carnation's return~!"

Kendo's irritation grows, and he looks to see Alexander recovering from the cuts Carnation gave him. Alexander looks to see the majority of the group back where they started, and he sees his brother and Issei attempting to wear out the feline.

Thomas summons his light spear while Issei grabs out his katana, and as they prepare to strike Carnation, she jumps out of the way to avoid their weapons. She starts attacking back, her blistering dry ice swords making the two men flinch as they do their best to not make contact with them. Issei tries to attack her more, believing that Thomas' spear won't get far, and he swings his katana in different ways, and Carnation keeps up with him, trying to find the perfect opening even though the Peoni hunter is making it very difficult this time around. Thomas takes a second to look at Carnation, and he notices all the wounds she's received thus far, the ones that are healing and the ones she's earning at the moment. Then he catches a glimpse of her face, and he notices that she's straining, the determination that she started with is finally starting to deplete. Is she getting tired? Carnation and Issei press their blades together, staring at each other, catching their breath. Issei pants heavily and huffs out, "You losin' steam, yet?"

Carnation laughs haughtily, although it sounds forced, and she says, "Not in the slightest, Gaian..."

Thomas looks at Rose and nods at her, as if telling her nonverbally that this is the perfect opportunity to knock her out. Rose catches on and summons an indigo cockroach, and it flies straight for Carnation. The cat senses the bug getting closer to her, and she breaks away from Issei and slices the cockroach in half, making it disappear in sparkles. Carnation looks at Rose, but before she can try to take care of her, Issei takes the split second opportunity to kick the back of her knee, making her lose her balance and fall to the ground. Carnation gets herself up and swings her arm to attack whoever dares to get close to her, but Issei stops her. She attempts with her other arm, but Issei grabs hold of that one, and he pins her down. She struggles to get out of Issei's grasp, shouts of frustration come out, and Thomas and Alexander look on in surprise. Is this it? Is the battle finally over?

Rose immediately summons another indigo cockroach, sending it to Carnation immediately, but as it makes its way to its destination, a new wave of ambition surges through the cat, and she transforms into her cat form and attacks Issei's face. She hops onto him and starts scratching him furiously, making Issei scream in pain as he tries to get her off of him. She continues keeping a good grip on him, scratching and biting at him, then she senses the cockroach getting closer to her. She hops off of the Peoni hunter and catches the cockroach in the air, biting it down to eliminate it. Kendo, Alexander, Thomas, and Rose watch in distraught while Issei stays on the ground holding onto his scratched up face. "Impossible," Rose exclaims, "How is she still kicking!?"

Thomas tries to catch Carnation still in her cat form, but she senses him and runs behind him, creating distance to transform back into her more human form. As Thomas turns around to face her, she summons a dry ice sword and impales him through the stomach, causing him to grit his teeth and groan in agony. *BA-BUMP!* Alexander's heart falls from a skyscraper as his eyes witness his lover's lookalike stab his brother. Carnation removes her blade from Thomas' body and lets him fall to the ground, watching his blood paint the sands red. Suddenly, "*NO!!*" Carnation turns to see Alexander wail out his sorrow, and she takes in the view of his face turning rose-red. She smirks as she ponders what he could possibly be experiencing right now. Could it be sadness? Perhaps it's guilt? It's most likely a mixture of those emotions and then some. She then turns to see a cyan grasshopper teleport the wounded Upendelaiki and Peoni hunter to where everyone else is so that Rose can heal them both before any of them meet a terrifying fate.

She's not Amethyst, Alexander thinks to himself, letting the realization settle in too late, She's not Amethyst... She's not Amethyst... Rose is not going to be able to stop her... At this rate, Carnation is going to kill them... which means I have to-...

Carnation looks at the Quphanto descendant, her white slits constricting as she remembers her attempts at attacking her with those putrid insects, and seeing how everyone is now damaged goods except for Kendo, though there's not much he can do against her, she prepares herself to punish the girl. She starts walking slowly towards them all, summoning her dry ice swords again. Kendo stands in front of Rose, ready to do whatever he has to in order to keep her safe. Carnation sees the notion, and can care less who's blood feeds her blade, then she purrs out to them, "Seems like you've all lost to the challenge... farewell~" But before she can lunge towards them, *FWOOOOOOOSH!!* The woman senses something heading towards her, and she turns to slash at the attack; however, she's taken aback when she realizes that it's a powerful jet stream of hot water. The hot water pushes her back, and her dry ice swords disappear. Carnation tries to see who's attacking her, but the water doesn't stop. It forces her to the ground, and she grunts and groans as she tries to get away from it, but to no avail.

Vanity's anxiety begins to rise again when she sees that it's Alexander spraying down her daughter. She remembers Carnation's wishes, but the possibility of losing her again starts to poke at her like a cactus spine. *NO*, Carnation yells at her telepathically.

Damn it, Carnation, Vanity yells back in her mind, You NEED me!!

I GOT THIS, MOTHER! I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP!

CARNATION, NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO BE LIKE ME-

STAND DOWN!!

The stream comes to a stop, and Carnation, drenched and steaming, sees Alexander still standing at the same spot he's been in, scowling at her with an expression she hasn't seen on him yet. His nostrils flare, and the bridge of his nose and eyes scrunch up as his lips form a frown, revealing some of his white teeth. He storms towards her as she gets up from the ground. She growls at him, and before she can pounce at him, *BOOM!* She senses another attack, and she summons a water sword to slice down the bullet that came from.... "A-Alpha," Carnation whimpers out as she looks out to the stands and sees Alpha pointing his dark revolver at her, Rose's family lowering their heads and Zeena covering Cocoa's ears. Vanity and the team notice as well, and their jaws drop in disbelief and bafflement. Carnation's weapon disappears as her heart shatters. She whimpers out, "B-But... But why-"

Suddenly, Carnation senses an attack behind her, and she summons her dry ice sword again as she turns to her attacker and then *STAB!!* She grunts as a large water blade impales her broken heart, wine-red blood painting her dress and skin. Alexander withholds his groans of despair, feeling her sword freeze his weeping heart as he digs his claymore further and further into her body, allowing her blade to dig deep into his body, as well. They lock eyes for a while as they breathe their last breaths together. *I'm sorry*, Alexander thinks in his head, though he wishes he had the strength to say it to her, *but this is for your own good*. His body then glows along with his claymore, and he turns into a simple white flame that falls to the ground, letting Carnation's lifeless body do the same. *Thud!*

Speechless. White noise. The crowd screams and shouts, yet they don't reach the ears of the team or Vanity. Their eyes stare at the white flame and lifeless woman that lays beside it. "No," Thomas whimpers out, his worst fear coming true, "No no no no no-"

“NOOOOOOOOOO!!!” Vanity howls out, disrupting Thomas’ mourning, “MY CARNATION-”

“Fuck your Carnation,” Issei screams out, his wounds all healed up, “She damn near killed all of us for *that* Arch’s mistake!!”

“SILENCE, YOU PARASITE,” Vanity hisses out, and she stands up and changes her height to where she’s smaller, although she’s still taller than everyone. She storms towards Carnation’s lifeless body and kneels down, running her gloved hand against her face. “Ooooooh my beautiful Carnation,” she sobs, looking at the fatal wound that Alexander gave her. Then, she realizes that this wouldn’t have happened if Alpha didn’t jump in. Rage builds up inside her, wondering why Alpha would attempt to harm the one he’s had a connection to, but her sorrow overpowers it as she picks up the corpse and hugs it tightly, crying uncontrollably.

The team walks up to Vanity, looking at the flame that flickers in its lonesome. Thomas gets close to it, wanting to grab it, but the flame phases through him. Everyone else looks on with sadness and defeat, realizing that this is yet another challenge that they have completed... but at what cost? Rose looks at the white flame, kneeling down with Thomas, and she softly asks, “Is it possible for my butterfly to revive him?”

Thomas perks up a little, remembering that Rose can create such a miracle, and he answers weakly, “You probably can... All you’re doing to revive someone is giving their souls enough energy to fight on while also healing whatever wounds they received, right? That’s all Alex needs... just enough energy to get his physical form back. Though I’m not sure if he’ll still have his powers once you save him. When we reset, we lose every power that we learned up to that point.”

“I can make it to where we won’t have to worry about that,” Rose quickly says, wanting to cheer everyone up as soon as she can. Not giving Thomas or anyone else a chance to express whatever concern they may have, she clasps her hands, and a large purple butterfly appears. It flutters into the white flame, combining with it, and after a few seconds, the flame glows and levitates, making Thomas and Rose stand back up with the team, and the glow takes the shape of Alexander. The glow disappears, leaving behind Alexander in one piece, wearing the same clothes that he’s been wearing since the Envy challenge, and he lowers to the ground, Thomas having to catch him.

“Alex,” Thomas calls out to his older brother, and Alexander grumbles awake and regains his balance.

The Upendelaiki shakes his head around a little, and he looks at Thomas with a surprised face. He then sees Rose and the rest of the team, trying to gather his surroundings. He stutters, “Wha-... What happened?”

“You lost your form for a bit, but Rose brought you back,” Thomas explains, “Do you still have your powers?”

“Don’t know why I would, but I can check,” Alexander says. He lifts his hands, and Thomas gives him space, allowing Alexander to display the light aura that surrounds his hands, followed by water spheres that begin to boil. “Huh,” the Upendelaiki expresses out loud, “That’s interesting. But how-”

“It’s because of Rose,” Thomas says while smiling, and he rests his hands on Rose’s shoulders, “*She* brought you back.”

Alexander looks at the gifted descendant, speechless from her action. He wasn’t expecting to be brought back here. He knew the fate that he chose to take on the moment he stabbed

Carnation, and yet here he is. He then looks to see Vanity who looks up at the team with mascara running down her face, her lips trembling, and her deep-purple eyes sparkling with tears.

Carnation's body stays limp in Vanity's embrace. The team circles around and looks at the feline, and Vanity does the same, letting her tears land on Carnation's cheek. Melissa speaks up, "Rose can just do the same for her, right?"

"Of course, I can," Rose answers. However, as she clasps her hands, Kendo gently rests his hand on top, slightly making her heart jump.

"Hold it," Kendo says to Rose, then he looks at Vanity, "Lady V, what happens if Rose revives her? Are we getting Amethyst back?"

The Pride Quphanto struggles to speak for a second, but she takes a deep, shaky breath, and she answers, "No... No, you will not get your Amethyst back."

"And why not," Alexander questions her with no hesitation in his voice.

"I have already told you," Vanity raises her voice, staring down the Upendelaiki, "There is no more Amethyst. Once you revive her, Carnation will still remain. I made sure of that."

"So then change her back," Tenacity blurts out while taking a step towards the Quphanto, and Rose has to hold her back.

"As if I'd do that," Vanity steers away from the suggestion, "I've waited for a long time to get my baby back. Why would I just let her go *again*? Now hurry up and revive her!! I demand it!!"

"Then don't do shit for her, Rose," Jacqueline jumps in, "Not until she agrees to give us our Amy back."

"Revive her, or I won't give you your reward, and we can all just stand here looking pathetic," Vanity offers, turning her face away from the souls that she views as vermin.

“Then I guess we can sit here and look stupid,” Kendo groans out as he stretches, “Because I said that I wanted Nermal *and* Amethyst back along with my freedom, and none of this bullshit lowered my expectations.”

Suddenly, “Let them have Amethyst, Vanity!” A voice echoes throughout the arena, and everyone turns to see that it’s Alpha walking towards them.

Seeing the brown-skinned man immediately raises Vanity’s wrath, and she bares her fangs as she growls out, “***You... You traitor!! How DARE you come near me and demand such foolishness after attempting to kill her!!***”

“It needed to be done,” Alpha responds, staring at the Pride Quphanto with little to no emotion showing on his face, though his heart is trying its best to hold it together, “Vanity... whether you like it or not, Carnation lived her life to the fullest here. She was never supposed to come back. She’s supposed to be enjoying herself as the person she is now... Amethyst.”

“***What are you saying,***” Vanity booms, “***You mourned for her reincarnation!! You didn’t want to see her go!! I brought her back, you’re SUPPOSED to be happy!! WHY DO YOU WANT TO SEE HER LEAVE US AGAIN!?***”

“...Because that’s how much I love her,” Alpha answers, “I saw her when I was in Gaia. I saw how determined she was to protect these people that she cared about, how relieved she was when we let them all go, and how happy she was being reunited with Alexander. From those moments alone, though not very long, I could tell that she had reached new horizons, and she’s found joy in them. I don’t want to take that away from her, Vanity. If I can’t be a part of her life anymore, then so be it...”

Everyone hears Alpha’s speech being poured out, and the love and sadness either tugs on heartstrings or makes eyes water. Either way, the words stain everyone’s minds and rings in their

ears. If only the same can be said for Vanity for steam only slowly comes out of her ears and she grits her teeth. Alexander looks at Alpha and takes a few steps closer to him, wanting to express his empathy to him, but he bites his tongue, knowing that the spirit hound has more to say. Alpha continues, “You’re right... I was devastated when it was Carnation’s time... But after a while, I managed to convince myself that if she moved on... I should do the same... I still cherish the moments we did share together... I still love her... It’s a painful thing to do, letting the one you love go, but... that’s just the way it is...”

Vanity’s panther ears, though covered in her afro, block out every heartfelt word that Alpha says, and she huffs out, “*Well, just because YOU easily moved on, doesn’t mean that I did.*”

Kendo asks Alpha, “So if you were actually okay with Carnation becoming Amethyst, why didn’t you stop Pops from ordering Peonis to bring her back here? And when she *was* brought here, why didn’t you explain to Carnation what was truly happening?”

Alpha winces from the question, but he answers, “Vanity always had Carnation at her side. They both had an image to withhold: Two strong, independent souls that didn’t need anyone but each other.”

Issei jumps in, “So in other words, you and Carnation kept your relationship private.”

Alpha nods and says, “I could never be seen interacting with her whatsoever. And with the event taking place, that was when she was brainwashing her, and no one, including me, was able to come around and see her. The moment that you all saw Carnation was my first time seeing her, as well.”

Thomas taps his chin and says, “So it was nearly impossible for you to tell Carnation the reality of everything no matter how badly you wanted to fix this.”

“Indeed,” Alpha says, “And as for stopping the search for her entirely... I... All I can say is that... it’s Aidoneus... You know how he is, Kendo...”

Kendo jolts at Alpha using the name he wants to be called by and not his birth name. For the longest, the Cerberus Bros. have called him by the name Aidoneus picked for him. Every time they came to Gaia to capture him, he was always addressed as ‘Anti’. However, this time is different, and as much as he wants to question Alpha, he decides not to and accepts his answer through a nod even though it’s information he already knows.

Vanity gently places Carnation’s body down, and she gets herself off of the ground and pats the dust off of herself. She plants her hands on her hips and sighs out, “Fine... I’ll tell you what... As I’ve made it *extremely* clear, I do not want to give up Carnation. However, if you really want your Amethyst back, then go right ahead and try. Undo my efforts and bring her back as Amethyst. If you do that, then I’ll have no choice but let you have her, and I will have to give you your reward for completing my challenge. *But...* if she comes back as Carnation, then you’ll still earn your reward, however, she will remain by my side.”

Vanity stares at Rose as she waits for her response, and the pressure begins to weigh down on the descendant. Undo the efforts of a *Quphanto* and bring back Carnation as Amethyst? How can she do that? Is this even possible? Where does she even start? Rose can feel her stomach turn and her intestines become entangled as her brain finds the perfect solution for this situation. She looks at Vanity with apprehension and asks, “Miss Vanity, I understand what you’re requesting, but... *How* am I supposed to do this? I’ve *never* just... changed a person *entirely*.”

“Rose, dear, you’re half Quphanto,” Vanity answers while rolling her eyes, “And you’re a descendant of *Ubokufa* at that. Quphantos are the only beings able to completely alter souls how

they see fit. Tap into those genes, child. Or are you terrified by your own potential? Hah!! If that's the case, then this will be easier than I thought! Ahahahahahahaha~!"

Vanity's words poke at Rose's confidence like a stick poking a bear. She balls her fists and creases her brows, and she looks at the corpse that lays in the sands. At this moment, she thinks about Amethyst and the moments that they've had together. She remembers her seriousness, her calmness, her motherly tendencies. Though they haven't known each other for a long time, Amethyst has shown to be a good person to be around, and Rose yearns to spend more time with her and learn from her. She looks to her friends and can see through their longing gazes that they wish for the same thing. She then looks at Alexander, the Upendelaiki who sacrificed himself to stop Carnation and wants to see his lover and growing child again. She looks at the body, and her heart pounds. *I have to bring her back*, Rose expresses to herself. She then thinks about the times she almost fell unconscious because of the limits she's pushed. *This could possibly kill me, could it*, she questions herself, *I'd imagine that this will take a lot of my energy ... But at this point, I'd do anything to get Amy back.*

Inhale. Exhale. Rose takes a deep breath, and she clasps her hands and closes her eyes firmly. She pictures Carnation and remembers her bold personality. Then, she remembers Amethyst. She keeps hold of her appearance, imagining the features that she has now as Carnation going away, the child forming in her womb coming back, and her much more approachable personality warming everyone's hearts. She grasps the imagery like a personal possession, and she begins to imagine putting all of this energy into a butterfly. Everyone watches her with anticipation, the Umu crowd whispering amongst themselves. Usiku and Delilah watch their daughter, and Delilah holds Usiku's trembling hand because she knows that he's fearing for the worst while she's hoping for the best. Meanwhile, Zeena also clasps her hands as she looks at her niece, as if

she's trying to help her make the dream become reality, and Shandon smokes his blunt, wanting to see the power of their godfather, Ubokufa, make itself known through Rose.

Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa hold each other's hands tightly, silently rooting for Rose, but Vanity looks down at her with a condescending smirk, already expecting for Carnation to make her return instead of Amethyst. Suddenly, a ball of light appears in front of Rose, and then more spheres of light appear all over the Colosseum, terrifying the crowd. They lean away from the light, screaming and begging for mercy, while Rose's family looks at the light in awe, wondering what insect is going to emerge. A few seconds later, Rose opens her eyes, revealing that her pupils now have a small red glow, and *poof~!* The spheres disappear in sparkles and reveal hundreds of iridescent monarch butterflies, colors of the rainbow dancing around the butterflies' wings. *Flutter flutter flutter flutter~!* Everyone gasps and expresses their admiration, shock and awe, the team looks at the butterflies with their jaws dropped and eyes sparkling as the insects gather in one spot and lifts the corpse from the ground, putting her to where she would be standing upright. As the body levitates, the butterflies begin circling around her, surrounding her body with rainbow aura. Then, the butterflies begin fulfilling their purpose. One butterfly flies into the fluffy tail that's bedazzled with purple stardust and twinkling stars, and the tail disappears in rainbow sparkles; another flies into her abdomen while a third butterfly flies into her chest, and little white flames appear in both areas, their glow becoming bright and signifying that the two souls are being brought back to life; the fourth and fifth butterflies fly into the body's starry cat ears, making them disappear in sparkles; and finally, the sixth butterfly flies into her face, and the glittery, purple markings that take over her face disappear. The wounds vanish, the blood staining the sparkling dress dissipates, and when all that's left is a dark-brown-skinned woman with extremely long hair that reaches her ankles... she slowly lifts

her eyelids to reveal her purple-amethysts for eyes and black slit pupils, the rest of her eyes now white and not the light purple tint it was before.

GAAASP!! Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa squeal out, “AAAMYYYYYY!!!”

“AMY,” Alexander and Thomas shout out, tears streaming down Alexander’s face.

“CHOCOLATE KISS,” Kendo exclaims.

Issei watches the event with his arms crossed and a soft smile on his face, not having anything to say but is happy that a part of their mission has been completed.

“She did it,” Delilah says softly, tears forming in her eyes, and she starts shaking Usiku in joy as she says, “Oh honey, she actually did it!!”

Usiku watches the spectacle, his eyes staying glued onto Rose, though his heart jumps for joy, his brain still holds an image of his prophetic dream in his face.

Zeena silently thanks the heavens that Rose succeeded, Cocoa and Diablo express their joy through barks, and Shandon blows more smoke out and says, “Well I’ll be damned...”

Alpha watches Carnation disappear in front of his eyes, seeing Amethyst taking her place once again, smiling through his sorrow.

Amethyst’s long ears twitch as she hears her name being called out, and her eyes adjust to see who all is saying her name. Suddenly, her heart skips a beat when she looks down and sees her answer. There they are, the people that she’s bonded with. Alexander, her goofy lover; Thomas, his caring brother; Tenacity, the goth with a fiery attitude; Rose, the loving goody-two-shoe; Jacqueline, the party girl filled with so much life; Melissa, the go-getter with so much determination; Issei, the guy that helped them fight Cerberus and Pierre; and Kendo, the chaotic jokester that helped her get away from Pierre. Her heart flutters and a smile slowly grows on her face as the butterflies slowly lower her to the ground, her soul and her child’s soul settle into her

vessel. As soon as her feet touch the ground, Alexander is the first to step up to her, feeling himself fall in love with her all over again. She takes a step but stumbles, and the Upendelaiki catches her. She holds onto him, and she looks up at him, her amethyst eyes locking onto his sapphire ones and says, “Alex...?”

“Oh Amy,” Alexander says, his voice cracking from almost wanting to cry, “You’re back... you’re *finally* back.”

“I... What... What happened,” Amethyst questions him, confusion clouding her head as she tries to recollect all that’s happened.

“Hehe, uuuh... let’s just say that it was *your* turn to scare me,” Alexander nervously chuckles.

Before Amethyst could further question him, Thomas comes and hugs them both. “Welcome back, Amy,” Thomas says while gleefully smiling.

Amethyst smiles and says, “Thank you, Thomas. I’m still so confused, the last that I remember was-”

“AMYYYYYY!!” A voice cries out her name, Amethyst recognizing that it’s Jacqueline’s voice, and she sees in her peripherals that Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa are running up to them. She smiles at them, Alexander catching on, and he gets out of the way to let the girls get their group hug in.

Jacqueline wails and cries as she hugs the cat, not able to say anything else, and Melissa sniffles out, “Oh Amy, we missed you!!”

“We’re so happy to have you back, Amy,” Tenacity strains out as she tries to fight back the tears.

Amethyst looks at her children, and she says, “Oh girls... *sighs* I really did frighten you all. I’m so sorry.” She then looks to see Rose standing there, her hands still clasped together, the red

glow that she has seen in Usiku's eyes and Mwezi's eyes still present in Rose's, and a soft grin that rests on Rose's face. She gently disconnects from the girls and walks towards Rose, ready to embrace her too, but then Rose, while still smiling, slowly topples down as her eyes roll back and her eyelids close. *BA-BUMP!!* Kendo quickly catches her, and he tries to call out to her; however, he gets no response. He curses underneath his breath as he picks her up bridal style, and everyone tries to gather around to check on Rose. Rose's family notice this, and their hearts drop simultaneously, and they instantly get up and leave their seats to meet up with everyone once again in the arena, Diablo, Cocoa, and Alpha's brothers right behind them.

"Aye aye aye, give her room," Kendo says out loud, backing away from the team.

"Is she even breathing," Issei asks, his voice drenched with dread.

Kendo looks at Rose, and he sees her chest going up and down very slowly. He confirms, "Yeah! She's still with us, I just think she's just exhausted."

Amethyst sighs, "Thank goodness...." She looks around to finally get a better grip of their surroundings. She feels the immense heat of the air, the sands underneath her shoes, the crowds of Peonis and Upendeonis that watch their every move. She asks, "Are we... Are we in *Umu*?"

"Yes," Alpha answers, making everyone turn to him, "And the sooner you all earn your rewards and leave, *the better.*"

Amethyst shakes her head in perplexion, but before she can ask any other questions, Alexander rests his hand on her shoulder and says, "We'll explain when we get back home, babe."

Rose's family, the dogs, and Alpha's siblings finally get to the team, and they look at the light of their lives. Beta and Gamma stand by their older brother, Cocoa stays with her mother and father, and Diablo reunites with Kendo, whimpering at the sight of Rose being unconscious.

Usiku stands in front of the chaotic jokester, staying silent, and Kendo instantly knows what he wants. He gives the towering man his daughter, seeing Usiku look at Rose in his arms with anguish. Delilah leans against her soulmate to try and get a good look at their daughter, whimpering out her wish to see Rose wake up. Usiku looks up at Vanity, rage boiling within him, and he roars out, “**Wake her up!**”

Vanity scoffs and places her hand on her heart and she asks, “*Excuse me?*”

“**Wake her up, NOW,**” Usiku booms.

Vanity growls, “**Don’t get mad at me for YOUR DAUGHTER’S actions! She didn’t HAVE to bring Amethyst back!**”

“**But you gave her no other choice,**” Usiku yells back, “**Now bring her back, you wench!**”

“Oh *now* you wanna cut up,” Shandon mutters, Zeena nudging him to stay quiet.

Usiku’s words make Vanity’s heart want to leave her body and attack him, but she says, “I know that the *Louisiana Reaper* isn’t talking to *me* about bringing *his daughter* back! *You’re* Ubokufa’s little descendant, why can’t *you* do it!? Or is taking and ruining people’s lives the only thing you’re good at? If that’s the case, then the apple truly doesn’t fall far from the tree. What do I look like helping you after talking to me that way, you scoundrel! Hmph! Perhaps I should have you **JOIN her!**”

She prepares her hand, purple electricity surrounding it, but before she can point her finger at Usiku, Kendo stands in front of him, looking up at Vanity, and he says quickly, “Heeey, hiii, yeeaaah, your fave here. Listen, we got Amethyst back. Sorry, Vanity, for things not going the way you wanted them to, but it’s ‘bout that time that you give us that reward so that this event can come to a close.”

Usiku growls at Kendo, “**What about Rose?**”

Kendo whispers, "*We'll figure something out, but trust me, Vanity ain't the answer!*"

Vanity looks at Amethyst, and Amethyst looks at her, dazed by her appearance, feeling a faint connection to her but is unsure why. The Pride Quphanto lets out a frustrated sigh, and she looks back at Kendo and says, "Fine... Because you and your gang made my ratings skyrocket, you've completed my challenge. You've taken away my Carnation, but... I can see that it's pointless now to fight it. Take this gem and remember this occasion. May it remind you that *all* of you are nothing but house flies compared to my Carnation's strength... that *all* of you would be dead if not for Alpha." She points her finger at her own necklace, and purple electricity removes a 0.25 carat old european cut amethyst from the jewelry.

The gem levitates to Kendo, and he grabs it, the electricity slightly shocking him. He grabs the pouch that rests on Rose's belt loop, and places the purple gem in it. He looks up to Vanity, and he says, "Thanks, Lady V."

She groans, "The things I do for peasants. Enjoy your freedom, Kendo..." The chaotic jokester notices her calling him 'Kendo' now, but before he could try to tease her about it, she teleports back into the Emperor's Box, not looking at the visitors anymore as she holds her depressed heart.

...

Acid jazz begins to play as the furniture and extra cameras disappear into a portal, and the Tansi Twins fly into the arena after being silent for so long.

Chelsea

Welp, there you have it, folks! That was the last challenge for "Deal or Torture"~! I lowkey hate that it's ending so soon.

Fuschia

That's what I'm saying, Chels! These guys have truly been through it all, and I only want to see them go through more! Oh well, now that it's over, Anti- oops~, I mean *Kendo* can finally live his life Lord Aidoneus-free and-

Aidoneus

Hooooold it.

Everyone turns to look at Aidoneus, his expression being cold and not the welcoming, charismatic expression that mostly everyone in Umu fawned over. *Kendo*, the team, and Tansi Twins look at him with similar emotions: confusion and fury. *Kendo* sees the twins holding microphones, and he snatches one from one of them, causing them to look at him with scrunched up faces, and he approaches the Emperor's Box, smirking.

Kendo

(coos, talks like baby)

D'aaawwww, what's wrong, devil guy~? Are you sad because you now have to let us all go now~?

(stops talking like a child, speaks in a more serious tone)
Don't be... I haven't forgotten what I said. So how 'bout you come down here, and we can chat?

Issei

(stands beside him, popping his knuckles)
I'll be more than happy to be the mediator of the conversation.

Jacqueline

Can we, like, get Nermal back, first?

Tenacity

Yeah, that was part of the deal. Give her to us, and then y'all can have ya' lil' convo.

Melissa

And if you don't want to give Nermal to us, then we'd be more than happy to add insight to the topic at hand.

Aidoneus finds himself giggling at the souls he views as maggots, and he gives them a smirk, though the smile is anything but warm and welcoming. It even gives some of the Umu crowd a chill so menacing they start questioning if they're still in their warm domain.

Aidoneus

Ooh Anti~ Anti, Anti, Anti~ I believe you, *and* everyone else, has mistaken~! You see... ***You're not done... You're nowhere from being done... In fact, you're just getting started because you see...***

(chuckles sinisterly)

I have some challenges for you to take on as well~.

Chapter 14

Distraught displays on everyone's faces. Aidoneus' words hang in the air. Kendo and his team have completed all seven of the Umu Quphantos' challenges, and they've gotten Amethyst back. All they need now is Nermal, Kendo's certified freedom, and potentially Aidoneus' head on a silver platter and everything would be back to the way they were without the fear of the devil trying to bring armageddon to Gaia. However, Aidoneus now wants to throw another boulder at the team: to have them face whatever challenges *he* has conjured up.

"WHAT," Nermal exclaims as she presses her hands against the glass of the fish bowl, and Morgana looks at the television screen in slight shock.

"*What,*" Pierre says with surprise in his voice as he slowly gets up from his couch and looks at his television, his animal friends starting to express their panic once again.

"*WHAT IN THE FUCK YOU MEAN 'I'M NOT DONE',*" Kendo shouts at the top of his lungs, his voice thundering throughout the Colosseum.

"*I mean exactly that,*" Aidoneus says spitefully, "*You are not done. I have challenges for you to get through, as well.*" He smiles widely, showing his pearly white teeth, and his pupils constrict, showing more of his bone-chilling sunset eyes.

"I called it, this jungle fiend pullin' shit out his ass, now," Shandon says.

"That's exactly what he's doing," Kendo exclaims, then he says to Aidoneus, "You know you're going against your word, right?! You said that if I completed the Quphantos' challenges, then I would win my freedom, we'd all go home, including Nermal!"

Aidoneus waves his finger around, clicking his tongue, and he says, "*That's where you misunderstand, son. Listen to what I said when we started this event.*" He snaps his fingers, and the worker-Peonis search the recordings and play the part of Aidoneus' beginning speech that the devil is referring to.

“Now because I never held this event before, I’ll explain what’s going to happen. Anti and his team will be going through various challenges.”

The devil raises his hand up, signaling the Peonis to stop the recording, and keeping his glare on his son, he says, *“See? I said that you would go through **VARIOUS** challenges. I never said anything about you going through just the Quphantos’ challenges.”*

“So then what the fuck are we supposed to do with the ring pieces,” Tenacity asks, irritated.

“That’s something you should have asked them,” Aidoneus coos out, *“I told them all to go back to their Districts since they won’t be needed anymore. No need to bore them anymore than you already have. Now you’re dealing with me.”*

Nermal shakes her head as she watches everything that her friends have worked for go down into flames as Aidoneus crushes their spirits with his dress shoe. “This isn’t right,” she says softly, her voice trembling, then she looks at Morgana who stays silent, her eyes glued onto the screen.

As Aidoneus goes back and forth with Kendo and the team, Usiku starts stepping away from the group while still holding his unconscious daughter, and Delilah notices. The devious devil detects the Quphanto descendant’s disconnection from the event, and he says, *“Usiku~! Where are you going? We’re not done~.”*

“Usiku,” Alexander asks as he and everyone else look at him walking away from them.

“Usiku, what are you doing,” Amethyst asks, worried.

“You can’t be serious,” Issei says, “Where are you even going to go?”

“Do you even know your way around this hellhole,” Zeena asks.

“Psh, I ain’t surprised,” Shandon chuckles, “Just dippin’ without sayin’ shit!”

Rose's best friends watch Usiku take her, not sure how they should process all of this. They are indeed worried about their friend, but they're confident that Rose will wake up in no time. If Usiku takes her away from here, they'll have almost no way of conquering whatever Aidoneus has for them. "*We need Rose,*" Tenacity whispers, panicking.

Usiku decides to ignore everyone, focusing on his pumpkin. He doesn't care how this is making him look right now, his daughter is his first priority. He looks up to the dark sky and yells out, "Nruku!!" After saying that, a few of his bats fly into the arena, the Umu crowd wondering where they came from and what they are about to do. He looks at Delilah, Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa, and he booms out, "***Let's go.***"

"Jungle fiend, I ain't 'bout to get lost in this hell wit' you," Shandon retorts.

"***Then go play hero,***" Usiku growls, not saying anything else to anyone.

"But what about her friends," Delilah asks, worried for everyone else's safety.

"Her friends," Zeena asks, "What about *Rose*? Shandon, you *sho* ' ain't 'bout to do shit. C'mon, let's just go."

Shandon actually stays silent, letting the high he's experiencing from his blunt keep his feet from walking towards his family. Cocoa looks at her father with a concerned expression, but she decides to follow her mother who joins Usiku along with Delilah. Shandon, while having a face filled with ponder, looks at his family, then he turns his head to look at the team, and then he looks up to look at Aidoneus, seeing that he's patiently waiting to see what they're about to do. He then thinks about Rose, his dedicated niece. *This jungle fiend doesn't learn*, Shandon thinks to himself, *She's gon' wanna help these folks the moment she wakes up. These are her friends. Just like how she was there for them in the forest, she 'bout to be by their side here in the worst*

place in the universe. He shrugs as he lets out a sigh and raises his hands in surrender, and he looks at the team as he says, “Sorry, y’all. Mistress’ orders~.”

“At least leave the ring pieces with us, please,” Thomas requests, and Shandon removes the pouch from Rose and throws it at him, which he manages to catch and place it on his own belt loop.

The team watches Rose and her family group up together, and before they could try to convince them to stay, the bats fly around the family, surrounding them with red sparkles, and they disappear to who knows where. As their minds scramble around, trying to figure what they’re going to do now that their half-Quphanto friend is out of the picture, Aidoneus says, **“Well, what a shame~ Just when things were getting interesting~.”**

Kendo looks at Aidoneus, remembering how he wanted Usiku to not get involved in this event in any way, shape, or form. He just wanted him and Delilah to witness the event, and somehow, he knew that Shandon and Zeena would come around, as well. Now, he’s just letting the family walk away scot-free with the one person he wanted to see take on the challenges with everyone else. Suddenly... he realizes something. Aidoneus was playing down Rose’s capability in the beginning. Even the Quphantos fed the fire. That’s it... Aidoneus was trying to get rid of the one person that had a chance of knocking the devil down a peg or two. Kendo exclaims to Aidoneus, “You *knew* this shit would happen, didn’t you!?”

“Hmhmhmhmhmhm, I don’t know what you’re talking about, son~” Aidoneus coos.

“YOU DO KNOW WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT,” Kendo shouts.

“Hahahahahahahaha~! You sound irritated... you good~?” Aidoneus mocks Kendo, **“I’m just giving you what you wanted~ You got bored, you wanted something interesting to**

happen~ Here we are~! YOU wanted this! YOU didn't have to go through these challenges, remember~? This is all your fault, Anti~~"

Kendo wants to run up to the Emperor's Box and attack Aidoneus, punch his face to the point he's unrecognizable. However, Alpha rests his hand on his shoulder, steps in front of him, and looks at Aidoneus with sternness. Beta and Gamma stand where they're supposed to with their eldest brother, their faces showing the same amount of solemnity. Alpha barks out, "Aidoneus, enough of this! This has gone for too long! End the event or we'll have to-"

"AHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA~!" Aidoneus cackles uncontrollably, holding his stomach and wiping the joyful tears away from his face as his eyes squeeze them out. He then looks at Alpha and his brothers with his smile still wide, his eyes wild, and he laughs out, *"I'm not taking orders from a bunch of curs that let Gaians run them over!! But is it really your fault? The thought of having to face Usiku once again because you could have possibly killed his daughter and her friends must have made you piss your pants! Well, he's not here, now~ He's abandoned everyone~ He has his daughter, so he has no reason to come fight you~ And what's this? Oooh noooo, Gaians AND Mazans have invaded Umu~! Cerberus, do your job and protect us from them!"*

"WHAT," Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa say simultaneously.

"Dickwad, you *invited* us," Tenacity yells out.

"Yeah, don't try to twist this shit up," Jacqueline joins.

Alpha shakes his head and yells, "No, Aidoneus! We're not doing this!" He then looks at everyone, the team keeping eye contact on him and his brothers, and he says, "Kendo, you and everyone need to meet up with Rose and her family. We'll go retrieve Nermal and-"

WUUUU!! Alpha grunts as black mist enters his body and surrounds him with black aura. He groans in pain as he falls onto the ground, his hands grip the sands as his head flails around.

“ALPHA,” Beta and Gamma cry out as they kneel down to check on their brother.

Everyone gasps, the crowd begins to express their bewilderment, and Kendo looks up to see that Aidoneus is now gone. *Oh... no*, Kendo thinks to himself, and before he can express how urgent they need to go ahead and leave...

“I DON’T THINK YOU HEARD ME,” Aidoneus says through Alpha’s mouth, both of their voices can be heard, **“I SAID DO YOUR JOB AND PROTECT US FROM THEM!!”** And as soon as he says that, Alpha’s body glows, so do Beta’s and Gamma’s bodies as they scream out their refusal, their bodies begin merging forcefully.

Meanwhile, the bats teleport their family away from the Colosseum and in the middle of the town. They look around to gather their surroundings, seeing the buildings and a few Umu denizens that walk around. Delilah turns around and sees the Colosseum a few miles behind them. Usiku storms through the town, not talking to anyone, and Shandon notices, following him. The ladies follow the men, not having much to say. That’s it. They’re done. They witnessed all that they needed to, and they’re going back home. Usiku looks at Rose as her eyes remain closed and her breathing stays steady. “Hold on, pumpkin” he says softly as he touches her forehead with his.

“You ain’t gon’ question why yo’ sisters didn’t teleport us to the entrance of this place,” Shandon asks, resting his hands behind his head. Usiku decides to ignore Shandon, making him chuckle. He then says, “You and this silent shit. When you ‘bout to drop it?”

“.... I’m sorry,” Usiku says, making Shandon jolt his head at him in surprise, “I don’t know why they teleported us here, but I don’t care. I know where the entrance is. If we’re lucky, the portal we walked through should still be there.”

“.... Aight,” Shandon responds, a little baffled by Usiku finally talking to him instead of being silent. Delilah, Zeena, and Cocoa witness the two men actually not trying to say anything slick, yet. Is it because alcohol isn’t present in Shandon’s system right now? Zeena and Cocoa know that alcohol is all it takes for the Quphanto/Upendelaiki hybrid to begin acting as if he can get away with anything. Having laced weed mixed in makes everything worse, the clearest piece of evidence of this behavior is when Shandon spilled the beans about the family to Rose. Shandon thinks about that moment, seeing his niece become petrified from the sight of his gun pointing at her father. He then remembers apologizing to Delilah and wanting to apologize to Rose, but not wanting to give Usiku the same treatment. He looks at him for a second, and flashes of their past together begin to play, reminding him why he’s held a grudge for so long. The amount of deaths that were reported. The amount of funerals that Shandon had to attend. The cityfolk either turned to find ways to ward off the Louisiana Reaper or praised him for whatever reason they had. The way that his gang members had their lives taken away so easily in their hideout. His face twists and crunches up, his lip twitches as he feels some words wanting to escape.

As they get closer to the entrance, Usiku senses Shandon’s mixed up aura, as if he knows that Shandon is wondering whether or not he should say something that’ll pluck his nerves. Before Shandon can get a word in, Usiku asks, “Do you remember that talk that we were supposed to have, Shandon...?”

Shandon, caught off guard, responds, “Yeah, I ain’t forgot.”

“... We’re taking Rose to Nyota in hopes that he’ll help with Rose’s condition,” Usiku explains, “And while he’s taking care of her, that’s when we can talk... I request that you be sober for this...”

“And what exactly are we talkin’ ‘bout when we have this discussion,” the faded descendant asks.

“Everything... This feud between you and I has been going on for far too long. You don’t have to like me afterwards, Shandon, but for Rose’s sake, I want to-”

Shrieks and cries echo throughout the town, and they all turn around to see Peonis and Upendeonis fly out of the Colosseum as something glowing grows larger and larger and levitates over the establishment. The glow takes the shape of a three-headed creature, and the glow disappears to reveal that it’s the black and brown three-headed spirit hound, Guardian of Umu, Cerberus. The family’s jaws drop, and Shandon’s blunt falls out of his mouth as they take in the view. Alpha(middle head) looks down at the Colosseum with his completely purple eyes with slit pupils thin. Beta(right head) and Gamma(left head) do the same(Beta’s eyes being completely blue while Gamma’s are completely red) as they bare their fangs, foam coming out of Gamma’s mouth as he growls.

The Umu denizens fly and scurry around, pushing and shoving each other to get as far away from Cerberus as possible. The Peonis that were helping with the event drop all of the equipment, from cameras to boom mics, and the event that has been broadcasting has gone off air. Pierre’s television shows a ‘Please stand by’ message as a beeping sound fills the living room. Pierre(who’s now wearing light-blue jeans, brown boots, and a short-sleeve, magenta button-up shirt) stands along with his pets outside of the house to see Cerberus at a distance, his fellow Peoni brethren flying out of the Colosseum like a swarm of bats. Adessa, Shadow,

Bhishma, Chidike, and Samael stand by Pierre, ready for whatever, and Evros rests on Pierre's shoulder. Pierre asks, "And you guys are sure that you're willing to do this?" They all either nod their heads or make a sound that's equivalent to a 'yes'. *Sighs*. The Upendeoni dreads the idea of his pets getting harmed in the middle of all of this, but they're making it very clear that they are willing to help no matter what. He places Evros on the ground and then hops onto Chidike, readying his bronze recorder and moistening his lips. He then plays a tune that only he and his friends know, and they all, except for Chidike, listen to the music as it helps them focus. Their bodies begin glowing and growing large in size.

The team looks at Cerberus towering over them, the spirit hound the height of a skyscraper, and Diablo barks at him fearlessly. Alpha opens his mouth and grabs the Colosseum, and he picks it up, making the ground around the team vibrate. The girls hold onto each other, Amethyst holds onto Alexander, and Kendo, Thomas, Diablo, and Issei keep their stance firm as they watch Alpha bite down on the establishment, making it break into many pieces that now fall like meteors. The pieces of the Colosseum aim for the team, and as they fall, so do the team's hearts. Alexander grabs Amethyst and flies away from the falling rubble; Issei flies upward, getting his ice gun ready; and Diablo runs closer to Cerberus to continue barking at him, avoiding everything. Kendo wants to transform into a flying creature to get away from the rubble shower, but he sees Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa struggling. A large piece of the Colosseum is about to land on the trio, and Kendo yells out for them, but then *BOOOOOOOOOOM!!!* "NOOOO," Kendo wails out as he sees the fragment land on them, stirring up dust. He begins feeling tears about to form, but he has no time to mourn as the rain continues, and he transforms into a falcon and flies upward to avoid everything.

The piece of rubble that falls onto the girls breaks into multiple smaller pieces, and when the dust settles, it's revealed that the girls are hugging each other tightly, closing their eyes tightly, and seven bats swirl around them, creating a red, sparkling shield around them. The girls open their eyes to see the phenomenon, shocked to see that they're alive. The rubble rain finally comes to a stop, and they see the bats fly around them, squeaking away as if they can understand them.

Squeak squeak squeak squeak!

"Rose's aunts," Tenacity says softly.

"Wait, those are her aunts," Melissa asks, bewildered.

"I'm still finding that hard to believe," Jacqueline says, "But thank you for saving us!!"

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

The bats say nothing more as they fly around Cerberus, trying to lend a helping hand to Issei and Thomas who attempt to fight him off. Issei shoots his ice bullets while Thomas shoots his light arrows. *Bang! Bang! Bang! Fwip! Fwip! Fwip!* The attacks feel like a fly hitting against glass for Cerberus. Alpha opens his mouth, and a beam of concentrated dark magic shoots out, trying to aim for Issei and Thomas, but they move out of the way. Alexander, while carrying Amethyst bridal style, hovers over the battle. Amethyst looks over the dark horizon and sees the dark, iridescent castle. She points to it and then asks, "Alex, you see that?"

Alexander looks at what Amethyst is pointing at, and he scans the unsettling place. "Yeah, I see it," Alexander confirms, "Looks pretty important." He then looks back at the battle, seeing that Cerberus is still trying to kill Issei, Thomas, and now Usiku's sisters who fly around Beta and Gamma, making Gamma want to eat them as he tries to catch them with his shark-like teeth. He then sees Kendo in his falcon form watching the commotion as well, hesitant about what to do now. He flies towards the chaotic jokester and yells out, "Kendo!" Kendo turns to him, and

Alexander gets closer to him. He then shouts, “Hey, is that castle waaaay over there Aidoneus’ place?!”

Amethyst points at the castle, and Kendo looks to see that it is indeed Aidoneus’ home. Suddenly, a rush of adrenaline pumps through his veins as he confirms, “Yeah! That’s his place! Nermal must be in there!”

“Then you have to take Amethyst and the girls there,” Alexander says, making Amethyst jolt her head at him.

“The girls,” Kendo questions him, “But I just saw them...” He then looks down to see that they’re okay, they try to run away from it all. His heart then skips in relief. “Oh,” he exclaims, “Well, alright, say less, vanilla bean~! C’mon, chocolate kiss!”

“Wait a minute,” Amethyst shakes her head, “Alex, what about you?”

“I’ll be fine,” Alexander says, “We’ll all meet with you over there!” And after saying that, Alexander and Kendo fly towards the girls, startling them. The Upendelaiki puts his lover down gently, and Kendo transforms back into his human form. “Girls,” Alexander begins, “You have to get to that castle!” He points to the direction they have to go.

“How will we get there quick enough,” Tenacity asks.

Kendo thinks for a second, and he remembers how he can just easily transform into an animal large enough to carry all of them. He says, “I can just-”

RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE!! The ground violently shakes, making everyone lose their balance once again. Cerberus maintains his balance, staying focused on the flying nuisances. The town feels the tremors as well, Delilah, Zeena, and Cocoa falling to the ground. Shandon waves his arms around and widens his stance to keep himself from falling, and Usiku maintains his balance as he holds his daughter. Rose’s eyes flutter open as the vibrations

take place, and she looks at her father, not saying anything. Then suddenly, *FWOOOOOSH!!* Her mouth slightly opens when she sees a large orange akita, a large black sphinx, and a ginormous black, light-blue, and white cassowary jump over the town. The animals manage to hop over the town without destroying anything, though the vibrations still continue. Suddenly, *clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop!!* A black and smoke-gray horse gallops by the family, not thinking twice about stopping, and Usiku, Shandon, and Rose watch him run towards the danger. Rose catches a glimpse of the horse's owner, and she sees straight, red hair flowing in the stiff heat. "*P-Pierre,*" Rose croaks out, her voice barely escaping her lips, though Usiku hears her.

Usiku looks at Rose, seeing that she's awake, and he instantly feels relief washing over him. "Rose," he exclaims as he nuzzles her, "*sighs* Thank the Highest you're alive. We're getting out of here."

"*H-Huh,*" Rose says, "*B-But what about the others?*"

"They'll be alright," Usiku responds, "We need to make sure that *you're* okay."

"*But I'm fine,*" Rose tries to exclaim.

After a few seconds, the vibrations come to a stop as a large emerald-green king cobra and a deep-blue centipede emerges from the ground near Cerberus. The team notices the cobra and centipede, and they look to see an akita, sphynx, and cassowary surrounding the spirit hound along with animals that just came out of the ground. The possessed guardian scans all of the animals that dare to challenge him. They all growl and hiss at each other. Then suddenly, "*HEY!*"

Everyone turns to see that it's Pierre on his horse, all collectively blinking their eyes rapidly to make sure that they're not imagining him. Of all people to come and help, it's *Pierre*? The Upendeoni yells out, "My friends will keep Cerberus distracted!! Kendo, hurry up and give the flightless Gaians a ride, I'll meet you at the castle!" He says nothing else, and Chidike speeds to

the castle, leaving everyone in the dust. As much as everyone wants to question Pierre, Kendo wastes no more time and transforms into a mammoth, and Alexander helps the girls out as he lifts them one by one and places them on Kendo's fuzzy back. Diablo senses his friend heading for his old home, so he leaves Cerberus alone and starts following him. Issei and Thomas leave Cerberus and start flying towards the castle, Alexander not far behind them. Kendo steps on it and starts running as fast as he can towards their destination, and the girls hang onto each other, trying not to fall off the extremely bumpy ride, Diablo running a little ahead of him. Usiku's sisters notice the animals about to attack Cerberus, and they decide to flee from the battle while they can.

After recovering from the ground's violent trembling, Rose's family manage to get out of the town part of Umu and closer to the bronze gates. However, they see that the portal that they all walked through in the beginning is gone, slimming down their chances of getting back home. Determined, Usiku says to everyone, "We can find another portal in Spirit Realm," and walks towards the gates.

"Um, do we know what's waitin' for us in Spirit Realm," Zeena asks, skepticism showing through her crumpled face.

"No, but it's fine," Usiku reassures his sister-in-law, taking a second to look at Rose, seeing her close her eyes and clasp her hands. *BA-BA-BUMP!!* Before he could continue to speak calmness into the group, his heart skips a few beats for he knows what Rose is doing. Shandon notices as well, but he decides to keep his mouth shut.

Before Usiku can even say anything, a glowing cyan grasshopper appears on top of Rose's hands. She croaks out, "*They need me, daddy...*" The insect bites Rose's finger, and then *shwooop!!* She disappears from Usiku's grasp in a cyan-colored glow, taking Usiku's soul with

her. Blood rushes to his head, his heart hammers his stomach, and his ear drums begin to ring as he immediately turns around and zooms past his family.

His cloak blows in the heat, his feet moving his body much faster than a cheetah, making him run past the town he was trying to leave. He yells out Rose's name as he rips his cloak off of himself so that he can run much faster. "ROOOOOSE!!!" His cry echoes throughout Umu as if it was thunder roaring.

Kendo continues running towards Aidoneus' castle, not planning to stop, and the girls continue to hang on for dear life. The chaotic jokester's eyes stay fixated on the black castle, seeing shades of dark red and purple swirl around the individual bricks that make up the place, but the girls notice that there's a road that is reminiscent of a snake as it curves in different directions, seeing that Kendo is completely ignoring it as he keeps going straight. Suddenly, *shwoop!!* Rose plops onto Kendo's back in front of Amethyst. "Rose," Amethyst exclaims, making Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa lean to see their friend resting her head in Kendo's fuzz, recovering from using her powers to catch up.

"Oh my god, Rose, you're really here," Tenacity yells out.

"I knew our sugary thottie would come back," Jacqueline cheers.

"It's good to see you're feeling a little better, Rosie," Melissa happily states.

The descendant hears her friends calling out to her, but she continues to lean against Kendo as a mammoth, and she faintly says, "*No way I'm leaving you all like this...*" *Dad is just going to have to be mad at me*, she thinks to herself.

As the team gets closer and closer to the castle, Cerberus focuses on Pierre's pets, and though they're slightly smaller than him in height, they can still try to put up a fight. They all continue their stare down, but time is pressing for one of them to attack first. Alpha faces Adessa the akita

and Shadow the sphynx, Beta glares at Evros the centipede and Bhishma the cassowary, and Gamma snarls at Samael the king cobra. Samael hisses furiously as he approaches the spirit hound, and he tries to sink his fangs into Cerberus' body; however, Cerberus keeps his distance and Gamma tries to bite him first. Then, while Cerberus is distracted by the scaly reptile, Evros' numerous legs disturb the sands as he approaches Cerberus, ready to sink his fangs into the guardian's side, but Cerberus catches on, Beta snapping his head towards the blue centipede. Shadow takes the opportunity to hop over the spirit hound to get behind him, and Cerberus tries to turn towards him. However, Samael lunges at him and successfully bites him, making him yelp and back away. Shadow bites his ankle, but Cerberus kicks him off, sending him flying a few yards. Alpha then punishes the snake by successfully biting down on his neck and flailing him around, Samael's body whipping around. The other animals try to fight Cerberus, but he continues swinging around the king cobra, using his body as a whip, keeping his enemies at bay. *Woosh whoosh whoosh!!* Alpha then bites down on Samael, making his body disappear and leaving behind a white flame.

Not wanting to waste anymore time, sensing that the team is getting closer to the castle, Cerberus becomes more offensive and lunges towards Evros in a blur. The centipede summons water spears and chucks them at the spirit hound, but Cerberus treats the spears like they're numerous pokes from a ballpoint pen as he pounces onto the centipede, making him squirm. The three heads begin biting down on Evros' body, piercing through his dense exterior, and with his paw on his body, he begins pulling the centipede apart, reverting Evros back into a white flame. The spirit hound guns for Adessa, ready to take her out next, but Bhishma, the wild cassowary, hurls herself onto the hound, croaking out her loudest croak as if demanding him to stay away from her. *THUUUUUD!!* Cerberus falls to his side and tries to stand back up, but the vicious

bird uses her large foot to kick him back. *BOOOM!!* Cerberus yelps from the attack, sliding away from the animals involuntarily, but he stumbles back up, seeing Bhishma charging for him. *CROOOOAAAK!!* Cerberus hears her cries, but all he sees is her powerful legs getting him closer and closer to him, her extensive claws threatening to dig deep into his body once they get close enough. Adessa and Shadow follow her lead, ready to give Cerberus all they got. The three heads waste no time as they all spur out concentrated dark energy beams towards them, but the three animals create temporary shields for themselves, though they can't have them for long as they continue to use the majority of their strength to keep their large size intact. Cerberus continues to shoot his beam as the animals run until *CRAACK!* The shields break, and the beams pierce Adessa's, Bhishma's, and Shadow's bodies. The powerful blow instantly makes the animals revert to white flames along with their other friends. Aidoneus' cackles can be heard escaping the three heads' mouths, but as he enjoys his temporary victory, he senses another soul running by. Cerberus jolts his head to see Usiku running by like an ant trying to get back to its colony. He then looks to see that Kendo and his friends are getting closer to his castle.

Aidoneus sees no point in possessing Cerberus anymore, and black mist begins leaving the spirit hound's body. Cerberus topples over unconscious as the black mist grows and takes the shape of a creature that has only appeared in fairy tales but is located in different areas of Spirit Realm.

Meanwhile, Alexander, Thomas, and Issei continue flying closer to their destination, and as they fly, they take notice of the many lava pits that scatter the sandy field, the many tortured souls that beg for help down below. They see the Fallen reach out to them, crying for help, and they make Thomas' heart ache. Issei shifts everyone's focus as he looks ahead of them and sees

the castle get bigger in size as they get closer and Pierre is easier to see. “We’re here,” he says, and they fly downwards to meet up with Pierre at the entrance.

The Upendeoni gets off of Chidike, and he rests his head on his horse friend’s muzzle as he says, “Go back home, Chi... Thank you...” Chidike whinnies out his concerns.

Neeeeiighhh...

“I promise I’ll be okay... I’ll be back before you know it,” Pierre reassures him with a smile filled with desolation. Chidike nods his head, and he runs back through the path, hoping that everyone else is okay. Pierre sees the three feather-winged souls land in front of him. “Good to see you all finally made it.”

“Thanks, your boss made sure that this place is *literally* away from *everything*,” Issei points out, “Now we just have to wait for everyone else unless we’re feeling confident.”

“Yeaah, about that,” Pierre starts off, rubbing the back of his head.

“Oh don’t tell me the doors are locked,” Alexander whines.

“It’d only make sense,” Thomas says, “This is his domain, afterall,” and he looks at the doors and notices a touchpad located where the doorknobs would be. He then asks, “I’m assuming that only certain people can come through here.”

Pierre nods his head to confirm Thomas’ statement. “The only way you can get in is if you’re either him or someone that works here in this castle,” he explains, “In other words, we’re stuck here... unless...”

“Unless,” Issei asks, his eyelids raising a little.

“I’ve heard about the Quphantos being able to break this door down,” Pierre says, “Soooo, I guess if any of you got the strength of a Quphanto, it’d be really nice of you to get this out of the way.”

“Then we’re shit out of luck,” Alexander sighs out, “Because the only person that would have a chance of doing this for us is Rose, and she’s-”

Arf arf arf arf arf!! Suddenly, a dog barking in the distance interrupts Alexander’s thought, and the men turn to see Diablo running up to them. The pitbull makes it to them, his tail wagging, his purple tongue hanging out as drool dangles. Pierre can’t help but roll his eyes, memories of Diablo befriending his pets and ruining his property numerous times begin to flood in. “Oh, that’s Kendo’s pet,” Thomas figures out, recognizing the stench that escapes the dog’s fur.

Arf arf arf arf arf!! Diablo looks in the direction he came from, continuing to bark, excited to see his friend catch up. Alexander, Thomas, Pierre, and Issei look where Diablo is staring at, and they see Kendo in his mammoth form less than a mile away. However, like a piano being dropped at a tall height, their jaws plop onto the ground as they see a ginormous, black and purple dragon flying closer to them. Usiku continues running through the sands, trying to catch up to his daughter, but then he sees the dragon fly in the air, the descendant automatically knowing that it’s Aidoneus. Kendo keeps his eyes focused on the castle while the girls look up to see the dragon about to fly past them next. The winged reptile looks at the girls with his orange-red ombre eyes and slit pupils, his mouth curved into a heavy frown. Rose looks straight at Aidoneus, and though her energy has not fully returned, she gains enough motivation stare him down as well along with her friends who do the same: Amethyst glares at him with a calm yet aloof expression; Tenacity sneers at him, her lips curled; Jacqueline sticks her tongue out at him and presses down on her bottom eyelid with her middle finger; and Melissa scoffs and turns her head away from him, not seeing him as worthy of her staredown. Aidoneus flaps his wings, and *ZOOOOOOM!!* He boosts to the castle, not wanting to look at his enemies anymore. He

notices the rest of the team waiting for someone to let them in, but he doesn't plan on stopping his flight. He instead rams into the castle, and he phases through his home in light-purple sparkles, leaving everyone in shock.

Too confused by Aidoneus' entrance, Alexander, Thomas, Pierre, and Issei don't notice Kendo slowing down to a stop in front of them. The girls hop off, Amethyst helping Rose by letting her lean against her, and Kendo transforms back into his human form. The guys turn around to see the rest of their team, and they gasp at the sight of Rose. "Rose," Alexander exclaims, walking up to her and picking her up bridal style after seeing Amethyst try to assist her.

"How in the world," Issei starts to ask, but then he notices Kendo storming to the entrance about to bang on the door. *BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG!!*

"LET US IN, YOU FUCKER," Kendo demands Aidoneus. As if hearing his request, the doors open, showing nothing but darkness, and everyone immediately runs into it, not knowing what to expect at this point.

Usiku runs through the Pits, not giving up on trying to reach Rose. He looks ahead and sees everyone running into the castle, and the doors slamming shut. His teeth grit and his eyes squint, and he continues trying to run to the castle. However, dark energy begins to surround the castle and a few more yards of the desert that surrounds it. The barrier closes off the place, forcing Usiku to stop in front of it. He pants heavily, and he feels tension taking over the front side of his head as his eyebrows stay scrunched up. He punches the barrier, but red lightning shocks his fist, making him grunt loudly and take a couple steps back. He looks at his fist, watching the smoke dance off of it, and he looks at the barrier, feeling his rage spilling over. He punches the barrier again, *zap!* And again. *Zap!* Once more. *Zap! Zap! Zap zap zap ZAP ZAP ZAP ZAP ZAP!!!*

Usiku begins to bang on the electrifying dome, screaming out his frustrations as he does so, his voice echoing throughout the domain as tears burn his eyes and warm his cheeks. He stops releasing his wrath onto the unbreakable shield, his flesh from his hands up to his elbows nearly charred. As he catches his breath, his flesh heals quickly. He tries yelling out for one of his sisters, but they don't come at his beck and call. *They better be in the middle of trying to help the others get out of here*, he thinks to himself, *They need to go ahead and return home*. He looks down to the sands, and his mind then goes back to Rose and the dream that continues to haunt him. The roses. The dark clouds. The lightning. The roses wilting away. The five other animals that stand by his side afterwards.

Rose.... My pumpkin... One of the most important sources of light in my life... Please...

Please be okay when I get back to you...

His tears quickly dry, his arms are fully healed, and he looks at the barrier. He takes a deep breath in... and out. He then growls out, "***Let's try this again...***"

Chapter 15

Darkness. Nothing but the sounds of howling winds fill the area. Where exactly is the team? Are they inside the castle? Even Kendo looks at their surroundings, or the lack thereof, confused. He was expecting to see the throne room, the chandeliers, the throne chair, and the red carpet that collabs with the black-and white-checkerboard tile floor. Alexander, while still hanging onto Rose, asks Kendo, “Umm.. Kendo? Are we *sure* that we walked into a castle?”

“Yes,” Kendo answers quickly, panicking, “We walked into the castle alright. So where is everything!?” He starts pacing all over the place, trying to search for something, anything, that’ll give him some sort of idea of what’s happening.

Rose looks around and says softly, “I could give us some light if-”

“Nuh-uh, no,” Tenacity interjects, “You’re still recoverin’, Rose, we don’t need you to push yourself even further.”

“***Yes, rest your head, dear Rose, hmhmhmhmhm~...***” Aidoneus’ voice echoes throughout the entirety of the void, making everyone look around in puzzlement, trying to find the devil. Suddenly, Aidoneus says cheerfully yet sinisterly, “***Welcome to my home, friends~ It’s such an honor to have you here. I know, this is very unorthodox, but we’ll get through this~***”

“Enough of your games, Aidoneus,” Thomas exclaims in a serious tone, “Stop being a coward and come face us!”

“***What’s this? The pacifistic Upendelaiki WANTS to battle moi,***” Aidoneus coos out.

“If that’s what I have to do to end your evil scheme, then so be it,” Thomas responds.

“***How admirable~ Putting yourself in the frontlines of war, not caring about your own safety but the safety of others. Moving like a true Upendelaiki~ Heroic... yet foolish. Imagine throwing your life away for such a heroic cause, only for the other hero to take the win~***”

“Other hero,” Issei snorts, “You sure you’re not schizophrenic?”

“Let’s not waste any time chit-chatting~,” the devil snickers, *“My challenges are simple. Just do this one thing... Find the door. Oh, and please, for this room in particular, try not to wake up the Illanga Dragon, yeah? We’ll talk again, soon... if you’re still alive~ Hmhmhmhmhm~!”*

Aidoneus’ giggle echoes throughout the void, and the team is left in the dark, trying to decipher what he meant when he mentioned ‘the Illanga Dragon’, until a ball of light appears in the middle of the void, dancing around the team, leaving behind sparkles. The team watches the phenomenon, unsure what to make of it. Diablo starts barking at it, hoping that it will scare the object away. The light sphere continues dancing around, and then it hovers in front of the team, staying completely still. After a couple of seconds, the light grows larger and brighter, to the point where everyone in the team has to look away and close their eyes, and an explosion takes place, bathing everything in brightness, not harming the team. Through the team’s eyelids, they can see the light trying to pierce their pupils, but then the light disappears. All that’s left is the sound of birds chirping and the feel of a cool breeze brushing against everyone’s bodies. *Chirp chirp chirp, tweet tweet tweet!*

The team slowly opens their eyes, and they see that they’re in the middle of a grassy plain outside of a large, red barn. They look to the left of the barn and see that the sky is a soft indigo, the sun’s rays splashing a bit of yellow and orange as the huge sphere of light slowly rises above the horizon. Everyone is taken aback by the scenery, taking in the calming colors of the early morning while also feeling determination and confusion swirling up in their hearts. *“What in the heavens,”* Thomas asks quietly as he still tries to recover from the breathtaking view. Kendo looks in front of them and sees a red door appearing from thin air and standing upright with no need for hinges or walls, assuming that this is the door Aidoneus was referring to. He takes a step

forward, but then *crack!* He looks down to see that his shoe has shattered an egg shell, and then he realizes that they're surrounded by multiple broken egg shells. The sound of the egg shell shattering causes a thundering snore to send unnerving vibrations through their bodies, and they turn their heads to the right of the barn to see the source of the sound which causes their hearts to plummet. Even Diablo refuses to make a sound or investigate the unknown.

A ginormous rooster, the size of the barn behind the team, sleeps soundly as he waits for the sun to rise up. His head is covered in light brown feathers, but the rest of the feathers that cover his body transitions from yellow, to orange, and to red, the colors dance together like the northern lights. His tail feathers are an ombre of blue, yellow, orange, and red, the ends of the feathers have a soft, yellow glow. The wattles and comb are a deep red, but the ends change to orange then a bright yellow, sparkles dance around as the ends glow brightly as if they were part of the sun. SnORES continue to escape his metallic bronze beak. "...*Okay,*" Alexander whispers, "*I'm assuming **that's** the Illanga Dragon Aidoneus was referring to...*"

"*But it's a chicken,*" Jacqueline whispers out.

"*We shouldn't stand around here for any longer,*" Tenacity says softly, and she points at the door in front of them, "*That's the door we need to go through. Let's hop to it.*"

"*Let Alex and Rose go first,*" Amethyst suggests quietly.

"*Can't Rose just use her teleportation,*" Issei asks, knowing that Rose is capable.

Alexander looks at Rose, listening to her sleep. He whispers out her name while gently shaking her body, but he gets no answer. "***Sighs*** *She's drained,*" Alexander whispers, "*We're gonna have to get through this ourselves for now.*"

"*Hold up, just a sec,*" Kendo says softly, stopping the Upendelaiki from taking any steps. He stands in front of them and says, "*I'm sure you can't see where these eggshells are with Rose in*

the way.” Seeing how the door is yards away from them and is a simple straight path, Kendo starts sweeping away the egg shells with his feet, clearing the path for Alexander, making sure that he doesn’t make too much noise. He inches closer and closer to the door though there’s a lot of distance between them, and Alexander makes sure to stay close behind him.

As Kendo and Alexander make their way to their only exit, Issei looks at the Illanga Dragon continuing to sleep, and then he looks at the sun slowly making its way over the horizon. *Are we being timed,* Issei asks himself, *if that’s the case, we need to get a move on.* He looks at the ladies and Thomas, and he whispers, *“We all need to get to the other side as quickly as possible. If this creature operates like any other rooster, then when that sun comes up, it’s **going** to wake up and do its thing.”*

“Very well,” Thomas responds, *“Make sure we all have space from each other, and be careful!”* After coming to an agreement that they all need to get to the door before the sun comes up, they go their different paths, trying to avoid the shell pieces. The air becomes dense as they inch their way towards the door, the maroon red paint calling their names, teasing them to get closer. Pierre glances at the Illanga Dragon, seeing it readjust its body, his long ears twitching from the gurgling snores. Melissa and Jacqueline stay close to each other, holding hands as they tip-toe their way to the door. Amethyst makes it easier for herself and transforms into her cat form, gracefully avoiding every egg shell in her path as her paws march upon the dense dirt. Diablo cautiously navigates his way to the door along with his best friend, trying to keep his paws away from the egg shells as best as he can.

Kendo sees the first door, stretching his arm out towards it in hopes of feeling the golden knob brush against his fingertips. However, as soon as he attempts to grasp the knob, *WUUUUUUU!!!* The door zooms further away from Kendo, making much more distance from

the team. Everyone notices the phenomenon, and their hearts skip a beat simultaneously as if a CD was skipping. “*Oh you motherfucker,*” Kendo growls out, and before he can continue cursing his father out, the sun’s rays begin kissing the Illanga Dragon good morning. Thomas, Pierre, Diablo, and Issei happen to look at the Illanga Dragon, and the men’s jaws drop while the dog begins growling. The large creature shakes and shimmies as he flutters his eyes open, and he looks at the sky in pure innocence. He straightens up, starts flapping his wings, causing harsh winds to make some of the team members lose balance. They all look at him, even Rose pushes herself to take a peak, as his feathers begin transitioning through the warm colors and his wattles and comb begin to shine more brightly, and he starts crowing. *ᄇ.ᄇᄇ.K-J-ᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇ-ᄇᄇᄇ!!!*

After finishing his morning duty, the Illanga Dragon then looks at the team with its red-orange-yellow ombre irises, his sharp slit pupils constricting from the sight of intruders.

Kendo grits his teeth as he makes eye contact with the creature, and he mumbles out, “*Aidoneus. You. Mother. Fuc-*”

“*RUUUUN FOOR IIIIIT,*” Jacqueline squeals at the top of her lungs, causing the Illanga Dragon to begin roaring in response. *Rᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇᄇ!!!* The team begins picking up speed and sprinting towards the exit, not caring about cracking the egg shells anymore. *Crack! Crack! Crack!* The Illanga Dragon starts making his way towards the team, his feet making everything tremble as his claws stab the dirt.

Diablo fearlessly barks at him, *BARK BARK BARK BARK!!* The Illanga Dragon ignores the canine as he continues chasing the team, which only makes Diablo follow him and continue his attempts at getting his attention.

Issei looks back to see the creature get closer to the team, and he can’t help but feel like he needs to buy them a little time to get closer to the door. So he pulls out his ice gun, reveals his

Malaiki wings, and flies upwards, causing the Illanga Dragon to fixate on him. The Peoni hunter aims his gun, and *BAM, BAM, BAM!!* His ice bullets send sharp chills upon the being's body, making him roar in pain. He tries grabbing Issei with his bronze beak, but it's all a failed attempt. Issei pulls out his katana to get a few slashes in, but as soon as he approaches his opponent's body, he begins feeling a very intense heat wave and flies away from him before he could feel the beak give him a warm welcome. He even witnesses Diablo trying to get closer to him, only to back away once he gets too close to the creature's feet. *What in the world*, Issei thinks to himself, *What's he made of? The sun? Neither the mutt or I can get close to him without thinking we're about to experience a heat stroke.* Coming to that conclusion, he decides to continue shooting him with the ice bullets.

As Issei and the mysterious being go back and forth, Kendo finally makes it to the door, gripping onto the door knob. "You're not going anywhere, this time, bitch," Kendo says curtly towards the door. He looks back to see the team not far behind, but his eyes slightly widen when he sees Issei still distracting the large bird and Diablo barking away. He cups his hands near his mouth and shouts out, "*ISSEI!!! DIABLO!!!*" The Peoni hunter and pitbull hear Kendo's cry echo across the dimension, and the Peoni hunter glances to see that his friends are at the exit. He nods his head, understanding that it's time to move on, and he zooms over to them, Diablo following behind him, making the Illanga Dragon bellow once more. *BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!* The dragon marches towards the team, but Issei flies at a much faster pace, the sounds of his friends cheering him on giving him more adrenaline. Kendo doesn't waste any more time as his hand twists the knob and pulls the door wide open, revealing darkness. Alexander sees the opening and carries Rose into the entrance. Jacqueline and Melissa run inside next; then Amethyst still in her cat form; then Pierre; then Thomas; then Issei, who just flies right through; and finally,

Diablo as his heavy paws sprint towards the door and run inside. Kendo takes one last look at the Illanga Dragon as he gets closer to him, a smug look forming. He yells out to the creature, “*SUCK MY COCK, JERKWAD,*” before entering the unknown and slamming the door shut.

The Illanga Dragon gets to the door, his head tilting from side to side as he tries to figure out what happened to the intruders. He grabs the door and swallows it whole, flailing his wings back and forth and crowing away, letting his cry fill up the empty silence of the dimension.

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Chapter 16

Darkness engulfs everything once again and sounds of the team members' feet tapping the ground echoes into the abyss. They walk aimlessly, waiting for something to happen. As they walk away from the red door, the door glows brightly only to disappear in red sparkles.

"...Okay?" Melissa says in confusion.

"Honestly, why are we even walking," Jacqueline complains, "Shouldn't we just, like, stand here? It's dark as shit, and we can't see shit."

"She has a point," Thomas agrees.

"For once," Issei mutters.

"Let's just stand here and save our energy until Aidoneus throws another hurdle at us," Thomas says, hoping that everyone will agree with the plan.

Alexander's arms begin to become sore as Rose's body becomes feeling like a large bag of rice. He adjusts his arms, trying to keep her from falling, and he sighs out, "Rose, how are you feeling?"

Silence.

"Sighs We've gotta find a way to get Rose back on her feet," Alexander whimpers.

"Don't tell me you're buckling up from carrying her," Tenacity says bluntly.

"I had to carry her while running away from a giant chicken," Alexander whines out, *"Don't judge me!"*

"Well, when the shit stain turns on some light, I'll carry her," Kendo says, annoyance nuzzling him.

"You know, I will never understand your hatred towards me, Anti," Aidoneus coos out, his voice echoing throughout the dark limbo.

“AND I’LL NEVER UNDERSTAND YOUR OBSESSION OVER ME,” Kendo shouts out to the nothingness.

“Seriously, from how everything has panned out so far, you’re only proving that Kendo is nothing more than a chew toy for you,” Tenacity says, “No offense, Ken.”

“None taken,” Kendo quickly says, “It’s the truth. I mean you drag me back here *again* and *again*, and for what!? Just to shit on me?!”

“*All will make sense in due time, son,*” Aidoneus purrs out.

“*Would be nice if you explained now,*” Melissa mutters.

“*Amethyst! So good to see you again,*” Aidoneus says cheerfully, “*Your former self, Carnation, was quite the feline, I’m honestly missing her already. Well, anyway, how are you feeling~?*”

“I’ll feel better once we get out of here with Nermal,” Amethyst responds, her eyebrows creasing together.

“*Aah, yes... Nermal,*” Aidoneus says with a soothing tone, “*The one person you all just have to get back. Well, come on, then. She’s waiting for you. You already know the deal... your next door is this way~ Oh, but do pay the Larynx a visit~ Perhaps she can lighten the mood, hmhmhmhm~!*”

And as soon as he says this, his giggles echo and another ball of light appears, dancing around the team just like the first time, leaving behind sparkles. It repeats the process of becoming brighter and brighter, forcing the team to shut their eyes tightly, and after a couple of seconds, the team’s surroundings change. They slowly open their eyes to what the light left behind: a large desert. Golden hills of sand can be seen for miles, and the sky is an early morning blue, hints of orange and yellow splashing the canvas.

Kendo huffs out his pent up resentment as he stands in front of Alexander and holds his arms out. “Alright, hand her over,” Kendo orders him.

“With pleasure,” Alexander exhaustingly says, and he places Rose in Kendo’s arms.

Kendo looks at sleeping Rose, watching her snooze through the fiasco once again. However, he gives her a bit of leeway, knowing that this is her first time using her powers this much. He looks at Alexander stretching his arms, releasing whatever strain Rose had given him. The chaotic jokester sees this as a moment to get a little chuckle out, wanting to give himself some sort of comfort, and he says, “Teh, you really need to hit arm day, vanilla bean.”

Alexander scoffs, “Sir, I would *love* for you to carry Rose for as long as we’re in this... wherever we’re in, and then tell me that your arms won’t be crying.”

“Guys, please focus,” Thomas interrupts, “We should be looking for the door and avoid whatever the Larynx is.”

“Isn’t that, like, a body part,” Jacqueline asks.

“Jacq- *Huh*... Well, yes, it is a body part,” Melissa confirms, taken aback, “Wow, good job, you *did* learn something from anatomy class!”

“C’mon, I made it out of that class with a D,” Jacqueline cheerfully says.

“... Not really a flex, but aight,” Tenacity says, scrunching up one side of her face.

Pierre examines the people that he decided to give a helping hand to. Ever since he stepped foot into Aidoneus’ home, he hasn’t uttered a word, not only because of the heavy feeling of discomfort he’s experiencing from being around so many people at once, but also because of the dense regret taking over his body. *What am I doing here, Pierre thinks to himself, I listen to my pets’ concerns, and I get stuck with these brats... while they are outside of the castle... Are they even okay?*

Arf! Arf! Arf!

Diablo interrupts Pierre's train of thought as he stands beside him, wagging his tail. He presses his head against his leg, trying to give him some sort of comfort, and Pierre can't help but to let out a sigh. The Upendeoni kneels down and pets the pitbull, and he says softly, "You know, just this once, I'll accept your condolences, mutt."

Arf! Arf! Arf! Pant pant pant pant...

"You still reek, though," Pierre mutters.

"Awwww, red velvet," Kendo coos, "You're finally bonding with Diablo~!"

"Don't push it, Ken," Pierre says while standing up, "I'm only letting him do this because I got myself into a situation I tried to avoid."

"Then why did you follow us," Melissa sneers.

"I honestly forgot you were even with us," Tenacity says bluntly.

"My pets literally *begged* me to hop into this mess with you all," Pierre bites back, "They wouldn't shut up, so I said 'fuck it'."

"What could they have seen in you that would add enhancements to the team," the goth sneers.

"I honestly could ask your little cat friend the same thing when it comes to you three maggots," the Upendeoni hisses back.

Tenacity, Jacqueline, and Melissa feel a vein pop out of their heads, and they lean towards Pierre, gritting their teeth. "You wanna say that again *after* I kick you *again*," Melissa says through her teeth."

Pierre crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow, and he says, "You won't even get the chance to kick me this time."

“Ahem,” Amethyst says, approaching the group, “Stop wasting time, you four. Let’s find the next exit.”

“*Sighs* Yes, ma’am,” Tenacity says.

“Aye aye,” Melissa joins in.

“Uh, in this deserted place,” Jacqueline asks, raising an eyebrow, “That door could be *anywhere!*”

“Alex, Thomas, Pierre, and I will fly around to see what we can find,” Issei says to his team, really wanting to focus on the task at hand.

“So we can sit here and relax, right,” Jacqueline asks, her peridot-green eyes sparkling in anticipation.

“We should still keep moving and keep an eye out,” Amethyst suggests, “Who knows, the door may not be too far and we may find it before they do.”

“I second that,” Kendo adds, “This is the *worst* time to be standing around.”

“*Then allow me to light the way for you,*” a feminine alto voice rings out across the sandy land, making everyone jump and look around in confusion. Suddenly, a beacon of golden light shoots upwards towards the sky, giving the team guidance. They notice that it’s a couple of miles away and collectively groan in disappointment.

“Uuuugh, it couldn’t have been closer,” Jacqueline whimpers.

“Alright, don’t start your temper tantrum,” Issei rolls his eyes, “We’ll just carry y’all over there.”

“I don’t know how good your math is, Issei, but there’s four of you that can fly, and then there’s seven of us,” Melissa says matter-of-factly.

“Actually, there’s *five* of us and *six* of you,” Issei corrects her, “Kendo can easily transform into a flying being, remember?”

“Yeah, but, like, he’s holding Rose, remember,” Jacqueline retorts, “Tee, say something to shut him up! Hit him with a cold one liner!”

Issei looks at Tenacity, and their eyes lock for a second. Tenacity’s head immediately jolts to the side, her eyes finding something else to look at as her arms fold. The Peoni hunter can’t help but to scoff at her response and place a hand on his hip as he looks at the ground.

“... That’s cold enough,” Jacqueline shrugs.

“You guys are hopeless,” Pierre groans out. Diablo starts running towards the navigation point, making Pierre point at him and say, “See, even *he* got much more sense to just stop bitching and go.”

Rose’s body begins to feel the spiders of anxiety crawl all over her body as tension in her team rises. “*Oh my goodness, guys, please,*” she says softly, putting a halt to everything, and the team looks to see Rose pushing to wake up. Her eyes flutter, and her body wiggles trying to free itself from Kendo’s clutches. He takes the hint and gently places her down, helping her stand on her two sleeping feet. The descendant stumbles a bit, but she gains her footing and clasps her hands together, summoning a yellow-green tiger beetle with the little amount of strength she’s recovered. The glowing insect lands on Rose’s shoulder and bites her, sending a burst of energy throughout her entire body. She lets out a long sigh, feeling her blood rush through her veins, and she says clearly, “I’ll just teleport us over there.”

“Rose, dear,” Amethyst says, approaching Rose to rest her hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure you can be doing this *now*?”

“That tiger beetle I used gave me whatever energy I needed to get us to the next room,” Rose explains, “I’ll be alright.”

“But aren’t you just going to exhaust yourself even *more* once the effects wear off,” Thomas questions her, “Right now, it’s just seeming like you’re forcing yourself to stay awake...”

“Unfortunately, this will have to do for right now,” Rose says, shaking her head. “Aidoneus has put us in a weird predicament, and I’ve been hearing nothing but bickering this entire time. The worst part is this is just room *two* out of goodness knows how many others.” The team looks at Rose, and a wave of guilt washes over them. “If Nermal was here, she’d be so disappointed in all of us,” she continues, “There’s *eleven* of us. We should be able to bulldoze through this bullshit. With Amy’s wit, Ten’s fire, MeeMee’s wind, Jackie’s ice, Alex’s... determination...”

“I’ll take that,” Alexander sighs happily, though he knows Rose is just trying to be nice.

Rose continues, “Thomas’ support, Issei’s resilience, Kendo’s... chaotic-ness?”

“Yes~,” Kendo nods rapidly.

“Pierre’s... eeehh,” Rose begins to struggle, trying to find the right word for him.

Pierre looks at her with pursed lips and says, “Go on, ‘Pierre’s’ what? I’m gonna laugh at whatever you choose for me.”

“... Pierre’s level-headedness,” Rose says confidently.

“...Not bad,” the Upendeoni looks away, feeling his face get warm.

“Diablo’s cuteness, and my Quphanto powers, we can do anything,” Rose cheers, “We *will* get out of here, and we *will* get Nermal back!”

“Hurrah!!” Kendo exclaims, throwing his fists in the air.

“Yaassss, Rosie,” Jacqueline cheers, “Boost up our team morale!!”

“Alright alright, you gave us a motivational speech,” Pierre cuts in, “Go ahead and make some moves.”

“Right,” Rose nods her head firmly, and she summons her cyan grasshoppers. The insects hop onto each team member and teleport them across the sands, closer to their destination. In a matter of seconds, *shwoop!!* The team teleports to an oasis, Diablo collecting the clear, sapphire water with his purple tongue. They take in the vibrant greens of the grass and palm trees. A few queen butterflies flutter and dance around. “Oh my goodness,” Rose says breathlessly, “This... is so beautiful...”

Thomas notices Diablo drinking the oasis water and asks, “This is getting weirder and weirder by the minute...”

“No kidding,” Kendo joins him as he kneels down to pet Diablo, “We were at a barn with a giant chicken. Now we’re in a desert with an oasis that’s filled with water that Diablo can *actually drink?*”

“It’s all real... and yet... it’s not,” Alexander sighs out, touching the grass.

“Is Aidoneus creating all of this,” Amethyst asks, tilting her head.

“No way, that’s impossible, isn’t it,” Melissa says, perplexed by the whole phenomenon.

“If it is him doing this, then why is he, like, doing all of this,” Jacqueline asks as she taps her chin, “Wouldn’t he have *been* on the road with his ‘end of the world’ plan?”

“He talks like he’s on a schedule,” Issei says, “It’s as if he’s waiting for a certain moment to happen before he can strike... but what?” After saying this, the Peoni hunter looks at Pierre.

“Nuh-uh, don’t look at me,” Pierre says, shaking his head and holding his hand out to stop whatever Issei is going to say, “I don’t know anything of what Aidoneus is trying to do, not with his own powers *or* Kendo. He likes to keep *everyone* out of the loop somehow...”

“Um, guys,” Tenacity interrupts the conversation, “You might wanna come check this out.”

The team turns to see Tenacity crossing her arms as she stares down an extremely large, sandy-brown sphinx statue that rests a few yards away from the oasis. However, there’s a few distinct characteristics to the statue: it has a leopard tail, a lion body, and a caracal head with a gem adorned on its forehead. The team almost breaks their necks trying to examine the statue, but their attention soon shifts to an orange door that appears in a bright light, standing next to the statue with no need for anything to hold it up. “Oh thank god,” Jacqueline cheers, “There’s the door!”

“Hold it, snowcone,” Kendo immediately says, “Don’t get *too* excited...” He takes initiative to approach the door, and Diablo follows his friend. The chaotic jokester stands in front of the exit, but then... *jiggle jiggle jiggle!* He attempts to open the door, only to be met with the golden knob refusing to work with him. “Uuh-huh,” Kendo groans out, and he faces his team and yells, “It’s locked!!”

The team can’t help but to let out sighs, moans, and groans of despair. “Well, what do we have to do, this time,” Alexander says loudly, awaiting for Kendo to respond. Although Kendo walks back to the group, Diablo approaches the statue, standing right in front of it. He places his nose near it to get to know its scent, then suddenly, “Hello, visitors.” Diablo yelps from the voice the team and he heard earlier, and he scurries back to Kendo’s side as the rest of the team reacts to the surprise. They all look up to the statue once again, guessing that the voice is coming from it... and they guess correctly, “Welcome to my domain,” the statue says calmly, “I am the Larynx, guardian of this dimension.”

“The Larynx,” Rose repeats.

“This is who Aidoneus was referring to,” Amethyst immediately figures out, “He said to talk to the Larynx when we found it, and the door is right there, so...”

“Who’s gonna talk to it, because I’m certainly not,” Melissa asks, placing her hands on her hips to emphasize her discomfort.

“Right, that is *way* too creepy,” Jacqueline cringes.

“You brats are true superheroes, aren’t you,” Pierre says coldly.

“Oh, then by all means, *you* talk to it, then,” Melissa snaps.

“*With pleasure, honeybee,*” Pierre barks back.

“Honeybee,” Jacqueline and Tenacity both ask simultaneously.

“Trust me, it’s not a compliment,” Kendo immediately says, “Pierre can’t stand honeybees.”

“Why,” Tenacity asks with an eyebrow raised.

“*I’ll share that story another time,*” Kendo whispers.

Pierre takes a few steps towards the statue, and he yells out, “Hey, Larynx! We need to get out of here, and we’re assuming that *you* are the only one that can let us through! What do we have to do!?”

“It is a very simple task, dear Pierre,” the Larynx begins, “All you have to do is solve my riddles. I have **10** in total. Answer them all correctly, and you will gain access to the door. However, get a question wrong, and I will have to annihilate you.”

“...*Don’t like that it knows my name, but alright,*” Pierre mutters.

“Before we begin, can we get an idea of what these riddles will be focused on,” Rose yells out to the Larynx.

“The riddles will be focused on you... all of you,” the Larynx answers, “Figure out who I am talking about correctly, and you may progress. Will you accept this challenge?”

The team takes a minute to absorb the information the Larynx just shared. There will be 10 riddles, and they will be focused on them. All they have to do is answer all of the riddles correctly. At first, it doesn't seem like a difficult task to complete, but the more they think about it, the more they realize that the Larynx will most likely not make it as easy as they want it to be. Kendo looks at everyone and says, “HMMMMMM, I think we all have a good idea of each other's character by now, right??”

Issei says, “Tsk, all except Pierre,” while crossing his arms.

“Tuh, not much *to* know about me,” Pierre rolls his eyes.

“Will you accept this challenge,” the Larynx repeats itself.

“I believe it's losing patience,” Thomas says calmly.

“Then let's get to it,” Kendo nods his head, and he looks up to the statue, “We accept the challenge!!”

“Very good. After I ask the riddle, say the name of the person I am talking about. If you yourself are the answer, you are not allowed to speak,” the Larynx explains.

Ba-bump!! The person that is the answer cannot speak? Surely, that won't be too big of a hurdle... right? The team nods their heads simultaneously, giving the statue the green light to start asking the riddles.

VWOOOOOOOOOM!!!! The Larynx's eyes glow a brilliant yellowish-white. Its voice echoes, “Riddle one... Diligence and Kindness are my favorite virtues. I'm willing to

give a helping hand, and I am always focused on the job. I aim to provide for the ones I care about, but the one person I've loved all my life abandoned me. Nevertheless, I remind myself of my purpose, but it doesn't numb the pain. Who am I?"

The team's brains run different calculations of who the Larynx could be talking about. After a couple of seconds, Alexander's heart sinks into the acid that rests in his stomach once he realizes who the answer is. He looks at his brother, but Thomas instantly looks in a different direction. Amethyst senses the tension between her two friends, her ears droop downward. Not wasting time, the groovy yet melancholic Upendelaiki approaches the Larynx and says loudly, "Thomas!!"

"Correct," The Larynx confirms, and not giving the team a chance to ask for context, it gives the next riddle. "Riddle two... I don't understand the concept of rest. I work and work until ends meet, even if all my bones are broken. I chase fish, but only water fills my cheeks. Will I ask for help from my clan? Nay, for pride courses through my veins. Who am I?"

A hand grips Alexander's soul as he immediately knows who the statue is referring to. *What the hell*, he thinks to himself, *How does this thing know about all of this?!* He looks at Amethyst, seeing that she looks at him with a hint of sorrow, nodding her head to nonverbally tell him to answer the riddle. Not wasting time, he exclaims, "Amethyst!!"

"Correct," the statue says. They move on to the next riddle. "Riddle three... I want to dance my cares away, but I live in a realm that is riddled with troubles. I left my first home for the love of new experiences even though I will never gain access back.

I question the decisions that I've made thus far, and I question if I'm capable of being someone worth having around. I need the groove to make the negativity go away for even a little while. Who am I?"

"Alexander," everyone except Alexander says simultaneously.

"Yeeah, 'dance' and 'groove' gave that away," Kendo chuckles.

"Are we not gonna question this thing knowing y'all's info," Tenacity asks.

But before anyone can add input, "Correct," the Larynx echoes, "Riddle four... I am in the past. Souls that have crossed my path and inflicted harm upon me still have their chains attached to my vessel. The wounds they left behind still bleed out. My solution to avoid any more anguish is solitude. Who am I?"

Finally, the team comes to a dead end. They all look at each other once again, wanting to ask questions to each other, but they're afraid to break the Larynx's rule. Will it punish them for asking questions? Is it worth testing out? Can they even ask it if it's allowed? Anxiety plagues the team's minds, then suddenly, a light bulb lights up in Rose's, Jacqueline's, and Melissa's minds. They think back to Nasir's challenge and the one event that took place within it. The sound of a bullet going through a certain someone's head echoes in their ears. The freezing atmosphere they begin to feel from the person they call their friend when questioning her. Could it be her? It seems to make sense... but at the same time it doesn't. The riddle mentions the person wanting alone time, but it also brings up the past. There's some blank spaces that need to be filled out. The three girls look up to the Larynx, and simultaneously they yell out, "Tenacity!!"

“Correct,” the Larynx confirms, making the girls’ hearts sink. They look at Tenacity, immediately catching her turning her head away from them while crossing her arms. The statue continues, “Riddle five... My world is empty. In the day, my world is gray, but when night prospers, neon lights dance. Friends fill my heart with joy only for the ones responsible for my existence suck it away like leeches. I crave acceptance, but only judgment lands on my plate. Who am I?”

The three girls look at each other, already knowing who the statue is talking about thanks to the mentioning of neon lights, dancing, and the fact this person loves being around them and despises how her birth givers interact with her. Rose and Melissa exclaim together, “Jacqueline!!”

“Correct,” the statue echoes, “Riddle six... I am a bird whose wings have been compromised. I try to gain my independence, but it is snatched away once it’s within my grasp. I believe I’m going to be left behind by my companions. They are already soaring in the topaz-blue skies. There’s a chance that I may be forgotten... and I fear that. Who am I?”

Rose feels a hand grip her heart as she immediately knows the answer. *Aww, Melissa*, she thinks to herself as she glances at the gloomy go-getter as her face becomes a soft red, *Is this how you truly feel? We could never leave you behind!* She then yells out to the statue, “Melissa!!”

“Correct,” the Larynx says, “Riddle seven... High expectations have been placed upon me. I’ve been put on a decorated pedestal closed off by a golden cage. The Kenholder

adores me, and he doesn't want the world to take me away. I feel like I must transform into a rebel if I want to see the beautiful sights I only read about in fairy tales. Who am I?"

"Rose," everyone except Rose says at the same time.

"The keyholder is definitely your dad," Tenacity says.

"And you were always into the cute fairy tales," Jacqueline adds.

"Correct," the statue interrupts, "Riddle eight... I am a gift that doesn't know its value. I come from darkness, and I crave for light, even though I will never be accepted. *Put* drugs and alcohol into my system, help me forget my existential crisis. Laying with another soul helps fog up my vision, my ability to make the right decisions. I've gone my own way for so long, I've forgotten my way back home. Who am I?"

Question marks hover over the team's heads, hesitant about who the Larynx is talking about. Kendo instantly rolls his eyes, knowing that it's his father that's making the Larynx word the riddle this way. He looks at everyone and starts whistling as he rests his hands on his head, hoping that they'd catch onto him trying to nonverbally tell them that he's the answer. Rose, Tenacity, and Thomas instantly catch on and exclaim to the Larynx, "Kendo!!"

"Correct," the statue validates, "Riddle nine... I'm just a speck of dust that wants to be left on the shelf. Leave me to my loneliness for people always grind my gears. I have companions that never fail me, but I'm always forced to leave them alone at

home. I live my life in the heat, and it's because of my *Past Life* actions, my original family and I may never meet. Who am I?"

"Pierre~," Kendo sings out, leaning against Pierre like a drunkard, putting most of his weight on him. Pierre feels himself wanting to say a few choice words to him, but he zips his lips.

"Correct," the statue verifies, "Final riddle... I have two occupations. One job is for my personal enjoyment while the other job is just to help pay the bills. I'm stable financially, but I crave to share the wealth with a partner. I've been alone for too long, and my cup is overflowing with affection. Who am I?"

"Ken, get the fuck off off me," Pierre demands as he shoves Kendo off of him.

"Why didn't you say that earlier," Kendo says as he smirks.

"Because the answer wasn't supposed to talk, smart ass," Pierre barks.

"But I already answered the question, red velvet~!"

"Well I wasn't about to fuck us over because of some bullshit technicality..."

"Ahem," Thomas steps in, wanting his temporary comrades to focus back on the challenge.

"Well," Kendo says, "Duh, it's Issei, he's the last dude to be called."

"Heh, they saved best for last," Issei says jokingly.

"Correct," the Larynx says, then the glow within its eyes disappears, and it says,

"Congratulations, you have answered all of my riddles correctly. Because you have fulfilled my condition, you may proceed to the next room."

As soon as it says this, the rust-orange door opens, revealing the darkness waiting for them on the other side. Diablo wastes no time and sprints towards the door. "Diablo's got the right idea, c'mon," Kendo exclaims, and everyone follows the Umu pitbull to their temporary victory.

However, ***SLAM!! SHWOOOOOOM!!!*** The door closes, suddenly shifts away from its original spot, and slides far away from them as if it's being chased.

"Oh you've GOT to be shitting me," Pierre groans.

"Just keep running," Kendo insists.

Arf arf arf!! Diablo tries to motivate his team as he continues taking the lead.

"What are you still doing here?," the Larynx questions the team, its voice echoing throughout the dimension and into the team's eardrums as they get further away from it, "**Proceed to the next room.**"

"So is anyone gonna tell it that the door is moving away from us," Melissa yells out.

"By all means, Bubblegum, *you* can go back there and tell it," Kendo sarcastically pants out.

"Rose," Tenacity calls out to her friend, hoping that perhaps she has a solution.

Rose watches the door as it continues to create distance from them, seeing how it disturbs the sands. She then says, "It doesn't look like it's wanting to stop! I can try to get us closer with the grasshoppers, but-"

"Nuh-uh," Alexander barges in, "Find another solution!"

"Huh," Rose asks, "But Alex-"

"You're already pushing yourself enough, dear," Amethyst jumps in, "Kendo, transform into a large animal to carry the girls. Alex, Thomas, Pierre, and Issei should fly towards the door. I'm sure you'll get there faster that way."

"What about you," Thomas asks.

"I'll run with Diablo," Amethyst answers, transforming herself into her cat form, running alongside Diablo.

Arf arf arf!! Diablo cheers happily at the sight of having a running buddy.

“But Amy,” Alexander exclaims, “I can easily just carry you-”

VWOOOOOOOOOOOM!! RUMBLE, RUMBLE, RUMBLE,

RUMBLE!! The team looks back and sees the statue standing on all fours from its base, prowling towards them as the rock used to make the statue is replaced entirely. Now, the Larynx is a living being: its yellow leopard tail swaying to and fro; the winds brush against its sand-brown lion fur as its silver claws stab the ground; and the sun’s rays kisses its yellow-orange caracal head, making the glittery opal gem with a golden rim in the shape of a sun twinkle upon her forehead. The Larynx bares her fangs, lowers her brown ears, and constricts her slit pupils, making her red-orange-yellow ombre eyes more apparent. She growls out, “*You have overstayed your welcome, trespassers. Now you must perish.*”

MRROOOOOOOWWWW!!!!

Once she lets out her roar, the Larynx picks up speed and prowls faster towards the team, making their hearts explode. Not saying anything else, Alexander, Thomas, Pierre, and Issei summon their wings, and they dash towards the fleeing door. Amethyst and Diablo don’t stop in their tracks, trying to keep up with their flying companions. Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa jet towards the exit as fast as they can, forgetting the idea of using Kendo as a source of transport, and Rose summons her red wasps to sting them whilst they run, putting some pep to their step. Kendo keeps up with everyone, but then he looks at the Larynx, seeing her closing in. *They’re not gonna make it*, he thinks to himself, *I gotta hold her off*. He suddenly stops at his tracks, and he plants his feet into the sands, trying to think of a good animal to transform into.

Rose notices Kendo not running with them anymore, concern beginning to nibble at her nerves, and her feet stop moving. Her friends notice this and stop along with her, not wanting to leave her behind. Jacqueline says, “Rosie, what are you doing?! We gotta go, like, now!”

“I know,” Rose says to her, “But Kendo is lagging behind! If he’s going to try and stop the Larynx, he’s going to need some help!”

“News flash, Rose,” Tenacity says flat out, “The dude can transform into whatever animal he wants. There’s a chance he can transform into a dinosaur if he wants to.”

“Yeah,” Melissa chimes in, “We saw him transform into a wooly mammoth, and those things have been gone for a *looooooong* time.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Rose shuts them down, “The tyrannosaurus rex was about 40 ft. The sphinx statue is around 66 ft.-”

“Noooo, not the lectures again, Rose,” Jacqueline whines.

Tenacity notices the Larynx getting closer, and Kendo transforms into pterodactyl, flying around the hostile feline, making her hiss and attempting to claw at him. The goth looks back at Rose and says, “Get to the point, Rose!”

Rose then says, “Kendo could transform into a t-rex and his chances of stopping the Larynx would still be slim to none because she *towers* over him!!”

“Surely, Ken doesn’t think he can *stop her*, does he,” Melissa skeptically says, “Maybe he’s trying to just *slow her down* a bit to give the others a chance to get to the door.”

“Either way, he’s still going to need help,” Rose says, “You guys can run ahead. I’ll catch up with you.”

“What are *you* gonna do, exactly,” Tenacity asks while furrowing her eyebrows.

In silence, Rose clasps her hands together and closes her eyes tightly. Seconds later, thousands of yellow wolf spiders appear in front of her, sending chills throughout the other girls' spines. "Okay, I'm out," Jacqueline exclaims as she starts running towards the exit, and Tenacity and Melissa follow her. As the spindly lump of spiders rush towards the Larynx, Rose runs towards the beast.

"KEN," Rose shouts out, getting the chaotic jokester's attention.

Kendo looks at Rose as he flies around the Larynx, dodging the silver claws with ease.

"Rose," he yells, "What are you doing here!?"

"Don't worry about that," she answers, "You need to come with us or you'll never get out of here!!" She looks at her wolf spiders and clasps her hands again as she whispers, "*Please help him, give that big kitty a good nip in the bud...*" The wolf spiders hiss in obedience, and they merge together to become a ginormous wolf spider, large enough to hopefully knock the Larynx out. It hops onto the feline's hide and plants its eight legs into the sandy fur. The Larynx feels the spider's legs and immediately turns to look at it and snarl. "Ken, come on," Rose screams out as she begins running away, trusting her creation to finish the job. Kendo wastes no time as he dives down and transforms into a black-and-white shire and runs in front of Rose, stopping her in her tracks.

He kneels down and says, "Hop on!" Rose nods her head and immediately gets on top of his back, and he stands back up and begins to run full speed. *Clip-clop! Clip-clop! Clip-clop!* His hooves disturb the ground, making the sands dance in the air. Rose clings onto him as tightly as she can, not wanting to fall off. Meanwhile, the Larynx tries to sink her teeth into the wolf spider, and before she successfully grabs it, *chomp!* The wolf spider sinks its fangs into the Larynx, sending a numbing feeling across the Larynx's body. Her fangs grab the wolf spider, and she

clenches her jaw, crushing the wolf spider and making it disappear in sparkles. However, it is too late as her hind legs begin to give up on her and *THUD!!* She falls onto her side, forced to feel her entire body, including her face, becoming extremely numb as if thousands of spiders are crawling all over her.

While Kendo and Rose try to catch up with their friends, leaving the Larynx in the dust, Alexander, Thomas, Pierre, and Issei get closer to the moving door. They pick up more speed, trying to stop it from getting any further away from them. “Come on,” Pierre groans out, “One of us gotta grab it!!”

“It just won’t stop moving,” Alexander complains.

Thomas doesn’t waste time as he dives down first, flying close to the ground, and he reaches his arm out towards the exit. He gets closer and closer until *grab!* His fingertips finally grab the doorknob, and he tightens his grip and pulls on it, putting a stop to the door’s shenanigans. The door stays completely still, and Thomas turns the golden knob to open it. “Grab the girls, and let’s go,” he shouts, and the men waste no more time and turn around to get the rest of the team. Alexander grabs Tenacity, Pierre grabs Jacqueline, and Issei grabs Melissa, and they fly towards the exit. Amethyst and Diablo get to the door, and they boost through with no problem. Everyone else makes it through the door, but Thomas turns to see Rose and Kendo still lagging behind.

“Come on, you two,” he cheers.

Kendo tries to run faster, not wanting to give the Larynx a chance to recover from Rose’s attack. Rose closes her eyes and summons another yellow-green tiger beetle, allowing it to bite Kendo’s neck, and his eyes shoot wide open. Feeling a rush of adrenaline, his legs increase horsepower and get closer to their destination more quickly.

The Larynx's leopard tail begins to sway back and forth, and seconds later, her lion body manages to recover, standing her back onto her feet. She sees her targets at the door, and her caracal ears droop down in irritation. Hoping to stop them, she crouches down, wiggling her behind, and leaps forward. Thomas sees the Larynx high in the air as if she's in slow motion, his heart wanting to jump into the door, but he lets Kendo and Rose pass by him first. As soon as the duo enters, the Upendelaiki wastes no more time and follows behind them, shutting the door. The Larynx lands back on the ground, *BOOOOOOOOM!!!* Large clouds made of sand slowly settle, revealing the gigantic feline crushing the door into millions of pieces with her paws. She looks at the results, her slit pupils constricted in anger. She lets out one more roar, letting it fill in the deadly silence that plagues the dimension once again. *MRDDDDDDWBWBW!!!!*

Chapter 17

The team is in the darkness once again, somewhat relieved that they are not in the blazing desert anymore, no statues in sight to threaten their lives. Rose gets off of Kendo, giving him a chance to transform back into his human form. Jacqueline whimpers out, “At this point, I might as well not work out for, like, another year...”

“Jackie,” Tenacity, Rose, and Melissa groan out together, a bead of sweat rolling down their faces.

“Please, dear,” Amethyst says stiffly, “No more complaining for the rest of the way.”

Kendo takes a step forward, luckily not bumping into anyone, and yells out, “Alright, Aidoneus, hurry up with the next world! Or does the king of asshats need time to shit it out!”

“*Anxious to see your father, I see,*” Aidoneus coos out, his voice echoing in the abyss.

“No, dumbass,” Kendo says curtly, “I want to get Nermal back.”

“Yeah, you made a huge mistake roping her into this bullshit,” Jacqueline jumps in.

“*Aah, is it really my fault, Ms. Jacqueline~,*” Aidoneus asks, “*After all, perhaps if Anti didn’t run away, I wouldn’t have felt the need to do all of this.*”

“Blaming others for your actions, huh,” Issei says as he crosses his arms, “Classic narcissist...”

“*Pierre, what are you doing here,*” Aidoneus asks cheerfully, completely ignoring the Peoni hunter’s comment, “*Shouldn’t you be with your roommates~?*”

“I could be back home,” Pierre answers, “But my roommates were concerned about this group of hero-wannabes. I was basically roped into this bullshit, and honestly, the quicker you just go ahead and give Ken what he wants, the quicker this all can end and I go home...”

“*Wait... You’re actually SIDING with Anti,*” Aidoneus asks.

“I wouldn’t word it like that, but I guess that’s the best way to put it for right now.”

“But he gets on your nerves. He has you watch over his dog, Diablo, even though HE is responsible for him. Diablo has damaged so much of your property in the past as well as everyone else’s, it’s an Umu record at this point. It’s Anti who was supposed to train that unruly creature and make sure he didn’t get into trouble... not you.”

“Well... *sighs* Yeah, you’re not wrong...”

“Anti abandoned you with Diablo... just so he could flee and do what he wants. He doesn’t care for you nor him.”

Kendo’s face twitches, and Diablo begins growling, but before they can curse Aidoneus, Pierre says, “No... I’ll have to disagree with that one, sir...”

“Excuse me?”

“Sure, Ken is a pain in the ass, and his mutt is no better. But their relationship is something you will never understand. Those two can be away from each other for an *eon*, and they will still love each other and reconnect like they never left each other’s side. They have their own adventures, and it’s the fact that they allow each other to go their separate ways from time to time that makes their connection so strong. Kendo loves Diablo... so much that he wanted me to make sure that he was still happy here. As for what he thinks of me... the fact that he chose me to watch over Diablo tells me that he trusts me, so... I’m doing my job very well. Ken is definitely a handful, but... he’s alright.”

“Awww, red velvet~,” Kendo purrs out, wanting to hug him, but he can’t see anything.

“Hmmm... Did you not believe that he needed to come back home at one point, Pierre,”
Aidoneus asks in a lower tone.

“I did,” the Upendeoni confirms, “But at this point, Aidoneus, I think it’s time to just let the dude go. He clearly isn’t coming back. He *doesn’t* want to come back. Watching him and his new

friends go through the bullshit the Quphantos put them through really drove that fact home for me. *And you know* everyone else in Umu feels the same way. We all can see that Kendo doesn't want to be here... *so why can't you?*"

"..."

"And the devil is silent, for once," Melissa says.

"Good," Kendo says, "Let it stay like that for the rest of the stay. Now hurry the fuck up and let us get to Nermal."

"... *Yes... You're getting much closer to your friend,*" Aidoneus says monotonously, "*The next room is something I hope you will love, Rose~*"

"Huh," Rose voices out, her heart jumping at the mentioning of her name.

"*Yes, a luscious garden, something you're familiar with~ Props to your mother and father, the garden in your home is very beautiful. I don't think anyone can ever replicate its beauty. With that being said, my garden is somewhat on the simpler side, but it could use some help. Some furry friends of mine will explain the situation once you run into them. Surely you'll be a peach and help my garden thrive, won't you, dear~?*"

"U-Um," Rose hesitates, feeling her 'people-pleaser' side wanting to take control.

"She ain't gotta do *shit* for you," Tenacity steps in, pushing out her words with much protection and offense.

"*Aaah, Tenacity~ So happy to have friends who don't damn you for you are, yet you're afraid that it's too good to be true~*," Aidoneus giggles, "*Willing to throw yourself in front to protect them, yet you feel like you have to protect yourself as well because you feel like your friends won't do the same~.*"

“...!!!” Tenacity’s lips immediately super-glue shut, her body tenses up from sensing the possibility of her friends’ hearts skipping a beat. Are they looking at her right now? Can they tell that anxiety is parading around her? Why is Aidoneus bringing this up now? Wasn’t Rose the topic just now? Should Tenacity have kept her mouth shut? It seems no one is safe from Aidoneus’ analysis. Say one peep, and it’s time to get read like a book, and Aidoneus wants to be the author.

“Well, let’s not waste time~ Tenacity, we’ll talk again very soon~”

Before anyone else can say anything, a little sphere of light appears once again, dancing around and leaving behind sparkles. Knowing what’s about to happen, the team close their eyes tightly, preparing themselves for the ‘big bang’. Seconds later, the light repeats the process, growing bigger and brighter, filling the dark void. After a while, the light disappears, revealing a new setting to the team. The clouds are nonexistent and the sun is high, sharing its rays with the emerald-green grass. Smooth, circular, and gray stones that decorate the dirt create different pathways. Mockingbirds, bluejays, and red robins fly and tweet, saying hello to their visitors, and butterflies, dragonflies, and bumblebees flutter around, sharing pollen with the garden. Trees with heads full of luscious, green leaves swish and sway, dancing with the gentle breeze and welcoming their visitors with soft applause.

“Wow,” Rose breathlessly says as she slowly walks down the stony path, “This place is so...”

“Repulsive,” Kendo instantly scoffs, “Come on, let’s just find the door and get the fuck out.”

Kendo storms forward, leaving everyone behind, and everyone watches him. Giving him a little space, they go on ahead and begin following him. Diablo can’t help but whimper at the sight of his friend becoming distant, but Rose gently pets him, trying to comfort him.

Alexander tilts his head and squints one of his eyebrows. He asks, “Um... Does he not notice a pattern going on?”

Amethyst analyzes the chaotic jokester’s wrathful aura seeping out of his body, and she can’t help but feel something fuzzy buzzing in the back of her mind. “Hmmm,” she purses her lips and narrows her eyes, trying to understand why she’s experiencing this sensation now. She then thinks back to Aidoneus revealing to her that in her Past Life, she was someone named Carnation. Could Carnation and Kendo have had some sort of connection somehow? Should she even care? She’s Amethyst again, and Carnation has been laid to rest. Perhaps, it wouldn’t hurt to learn more about Carnation, right? *I’ll ask about her later*, she thinks to herself, *Right now, Nermal is the priority*. She then answers Alexander’s question, “Kendo is too upset to care. However, he does need to calm down and realize that we might as well see what this world’s problem is and solve it before we try to progress.”

“I agree,” Thomas says, “If we find the door now, it’ll most likely be locked.”

“I can *literally* hear y’all,” Kendo says snappily as he turns to them while walking, the dark circles invading his eyes seeming to have gotten darker as his frustration rises.

Thomas and Amethyst wince from Kendo’s words, but Alexander smacks his lips and says, “Then *listen* to what we’re saying, smart ass,” he barks back, “I’m not about to keep doing this shit where we find the door, we get locked out, we do something Aidoneus wants, we do that, then we have to do a whole chase sequence because he’s salty that we’re successful. Let’s just go ahead and do what he wants *now* so that when we find the door, there won’t be any reason for Aidoneus to come through with some other bullshit.”

“Alex is makin’ a lot of sense, Ken,” Tenacity says, “If we just go ahead and do what the dude wants us to do, we can go ahead and progress through.”

“And what makes you think he’ll let us out so easily even IF we do what he wants the moment we walk in,” Kendo snaps, gritting his teeth.

“Nothin’ wrong wit’ tryin’, or do you WANT us to keep runnin’ laps for these pieces of wood,” Tenacity snarls, bucking at Kendo.

“Seriously, what’s your deal,” Melissa asks Kendo as she gently grips on Tenacity’s shoulder, “We’re trying to get to Nermal, and you’re getting sassy over a suggestion.”

“Ken, I’m about as wired up as you,” Pierre jumps in, standing between Kendo and the girls, “But we might as well see what your dad is gonna do if we changed it up a bit. This is only room #3.”

Before anyone else can make another input into the brewing argument, Rose and Diablo spot a snow-white Akbash and an Egyptian Mau walking side-by-side, getting closer to the team. They immediately walk past Kendo and stand in front of the dog and cat, Rose kneeling down to their level to look into their eyes, the Akbash’s hazelnut-brown eyes sparkle while the Egyptian Mau’s olive-green eyes shimmer. *At least they’re not the same scary eyes we’ve been seeing,* Rose processes to herself. Diablo sniffs the two animals, and *grrrrr!!* “*It’s gonna be okay, boy,*” Rose whispers as she caresses the pitbull’s back. Diablo stops growling, letting Rose do what she needs to do. “Well, hello there,” she says calmly, putting on a gentle smile, “You must be the ones that are gonna tell us what we need to do, right?”

“Ah, finally,” the Akbash says happily, “A friend! A friend!”

“Now now,” the Egyptian Mau says calmly, “Let’s not scare off our visitor.”

Ba-bump! Rose’s heart misses a step but instantly recovers, knowing that this isn’t the first weird occurrence she’s experienced, and it’s definitely not going to be the last. She clears her throat, lightly shakes her head, and says, “You’re not scaring me at all. My name is Rose, this

cutie here is Diablo, and the people behind me are my friends~!” The rest of the team stand behind Rose, cringing at her warm approach towards two beings that they already know are up to no good.

“Hello, Rose and Diablo,” the Akbash cheerfully howls, “I’m Oak!”

“And I’m Daisy,” the Egyptian Mau meows.

“Hi, Oak, Daisy,” Rose responds, “It’s nice to meet you two-”

“Enough of this Michael Fantasia bullshit,” Kendo interrupts, “Just hurry with the task.”

“*Ken*,” Rose softly says, turning her head to face him.

“Aww, don’t worry, Rose,” Oak barks, “We’re not offended!”

“Although we should explain the situation while it has not gotten any worse,” Daisy mews.

“Yes! Yes,” Oak agrees, “Rose, the crops need protection! They need time to grow, but the other animals here are too famished to care!”

“You see, these crops are special,” Daisy explains, “If left alone, they can grow into the largest harvest anyone has ever seen. However, the animals around here don’t understand the concept of patience and only accept the little scraps.”

“Daisy and I try to protect the garden, but there’s only two of us and *many* of them,” Oak whimpers out, “Won’t you help us, please...?”

Issei says, “So we’re just on pest control. Sure, we can do that.”

Pierre asks, “How long do these crops take to be fully grown?”

“Not long at all,” Daisy answers, “But like I’ve mentioned before, however, patience isn’t the animals’ best virtue.”

“Well,” Rose says as she stands up and dust herself off, “We don’t want to waste any more time. Lead the way!”

“With pleasure,” Oak and Daisy cheer simultaneously, and they turn around and begin prancing towards the garden of crops they’re talking about, their tails up in the air, swaying. The team skeptically follows the fuzzy duo, keeping an eye for these intruders they are referring to. After a couple of minutes, they make it to their destination; however, it is not as grand as they had in mind. There’s an apple tree with one apple flower; a lemon tree with one lemon flower; a pomegranate tree with one pomegranate flower; and a carrot, white onion, and russet potato resting in the soil with a lot of space between them.

“...Um, this is it,” Alexander asks.

“Well, they did, like, say that animals were eating this stuff,” Jacqueline reminds the Upendelaiki.

“Yeah, but wouldn’t there be scraps or something,” Tenacity mumbles.

Oak gasps and says, “Oh joy! They haven’t come by yet!”

“Yes, *yet*,” Daisy says, “Our friends should be prepared for when it gets crazy.”

“Wait, *this is it*,” Pierre asks as he scans the interesting garden once again, “You made it sound like it was much... more grand.”

“This *is* grand,” Oak barks as he jumps in place.

“And it will be even more grand once you let these crops grow to their fullest,” Daisy explains.

“So we just have to protect these crops,” Thomas repeats, nodding his head to show understanding of the task at hand.

“Yep,” Oak cheers.

Rose looks at the crops, tapping her chin, then *ding!* An idea bakes in her mind. “How about I just make it easier for everyone,” Rose says, and she clasps her hands and closes her eyes.

“Only if you have enough energy, Rose,” Amethyst answers, “It’s not something grand like actually making these things grow, is it?”

“Though you might as well so we can get out of here,” Kendo grumbles.

“The tiger beetle’s effects are still active, but don’t worry, I won’t push it,” Rose reassures Amethyst. Seconds later, multiple blue beetles appear, and they fly towards the crops. They land on the trees and the tops of the vegetables, and *vwoooooom!* A large, sparkling blue shield surrounds the garden, the team, Oak, and Daisy. Oak and Daisy look at the shield in awe, Oak sprinting around and barking at the shield while Daisy approaches the shield, her paw wanting to touch the shield. The team watches Rose, once again, find the ‘easy’ route, despite the decision costing Rose’s energy. As soon as Oak and Daisy finish admiring the shield, multiple animals begin peeking out of different spots from outside of the shield. Raccoons, deer, and rabbits try to get to the famous crops, but the shield disappoints them as they press their noses and paws against the magical force like it is a glass window. Some of them give up and strut away while a few keep their determination alive and attempt at getting through the shield.

Diablo approaches the shield to look at the animals. *Arf arf arf arf!!* He tries to strike up a conversation with them, but the majority of them run away.

Issei sighs out, “Well, I guess we can take this moment to catch our breath before we have to keep moving.”

“Finally,” Jacqueline exhales, “My feet are *crying!*”

“Eh, I guess there’s nothing wrong with a quick break,” Melissa shrugs.

“There’s not much for us to do, anyways,” Tenacity concludes.

“It could do us some good to regain some of our energy back,” Amethyst says.

“Yeah, let’s chill in *the devil’s* garden whilst he keeps *Nermal* in his clutches,” Kendo half-heartedly says as he flails his arms around.

Alexander feels his tongue becoming a knife ready to stab Kendo, but Thomas senses his brother’s frustration and rests his calming hand on his shoulder. The team-oriented Upendelaiki looks at Kendo, watching him becoming more distant and less playful as time goes by. The Kendo that he met months ago is at the exit right now. *That last room must have really tested him*, he thinks to himself, *He’s going to want a way out, no matter how reckless it is. There has to be a way to speed this process up... without Rose pushing herself.* He looks at Oak and Daisy who sit idly by the crops, keeping their eyes glued on them while their tails sway at different speeds. He approaches them and asks, “Pardon me, but is there any way to speed up the crops’ growth?”

“Hmmm, not that we know of,” Oak answers as he tilts his head.

“Though you could give them water,” Daisy suggests, “That may help with the process.”

“Hmmm,” Thomas hums, tapping his chin, “Can it be magical water??”

“I’m not quite sure,” Daisy mews, “But there’s nothing wrong with trying, right?”

Thomas wastes no more time and walks back to Alexander. “Alex,” he says, “Use your water to help the crops.”

“Uuuh, alright,” Alexander hesitantly says, not sure where this plan is going. He walks to the crops and creates multiple water spheres, making sure they’re room-temperature and not boiling hot. The water spheres go to the six plants, the soil soaking up every ounce of whatever magical nutrients it can absorb. Oak and Daisy watch the phenomenon, curious to see if Alexander’s water will help their produce.

While the Upendelaiki twins try to grow the crops, Rose looks at Kendo as he looks out to the horizon, not talking to anyone, not even Diablo. Diablo sits beside Rose, whimpering out of concern. “I know, boy,” Rose sighs out, “I want Kendo to get out of the mud, too...”

Rose’s friends stand close to her, Tenacity’s arms crossed, Jacqueline’s hands on her hips, and Melissa’s hands behind her back, all three of them showing different versions of irritation. Knowing why they’re feeling this way, Rose tries to reassure her friends. “I know what you guys are thinking,” Rose says, “But let’s just be patient. I’m gonna see if I can get Ken to come back around before he does something crazy.”

“I would usually be against that idea, but Nermal needs us, and we don’t have time for setbacks,” Tenacity sneers, “If Kendo fucks any of this up somehow, it’s gonna be *me* that’ll be snatchin’ his freedom away.”

“I get why he’s being bitchy, but Aidoneus is clearly more powerful than we originally thought,” Melissa says as she closes her eyes and rests her finger on her chin.

“What exactly are you gonna, like, say to him,” Jacqueline questions Rose, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ll think of something,” Rose sighs, and without wasting any more time, she begins walking towards Kendo, taking cautious steps as if every time her feet touch the ground, his irritation only grows. Kendo slightly turns his head and looks from the corner of his eye, and he spots Rose making her way towards him, sensing a sigh escaping his lips. He looks away, trying to find something else to look at through the blue, sparkling shield, but he only feels the same frustration he’s been feeling since stepping foot into this dimension running its gnarly nails against his back.

Rose chooses to stand beside him, and she tries to think of a conversation starter. Based on the moments spent together, she knows for sure that Kendo despises Aidoneus. He's doing all he can to get away from him, save Nermal, and remain in Gaia. An idea forms in her head, and she says gently, "Gaia looks much prettier than this, huh?"

"*Tsk*, this doesn't even compete," Kendo scoffs out, "*All* of what that asshat has made makes Diablo's shit look like a masterpiece."

Rose slightly giggles at Kendo's insult, and although she understands why he's saying these things, she can't help but to slightly... disagree? These dimensions they have gone through so far are *at least* impressive. Surely, that's something Kendo can't deny. However, perhaps it's because it's not necessarily real and Kendo's personal relationship with the creator that's keeping him from giving Aidoneus credit where it's due. She then says, "Thomas and Alex are trying to speed things up if that makes anything better!"

"Hm," Kendo mumbles, "Then while they're doing that, you don't mind that I go... take a walk, do ya'?"

"Hmmm?" Rose asks, "You don't want to just walk around this area? It's a lot of room for us, and I don't want us to get separated."

"I understand that, but I'd rather know where the door is *at least*."

"You don't think that Aidoneus would want you to-"

Kendo instantly turns to face Rose, the dark circles around his eyes darkened. "*I could give a pigeon's ass what that prick wants!*"

"Uh- O-Okay, okay," Rose whimpers as she waves her hands in front of herself, a bead of sweat trailing down the side of her face. However, none of this stops Kendo.

“Look, it’s already bad enough that we’re in here doin’ some bullshit ass tasks. I’m already lettin’ y’all do whatever y’all need to do kiss this motherfucker’s ass so that he can let us get closer to Nermal. **The least** you can do is read the fucking room and maybe not mention the bastard’s name around me!”

“I-I’m sorry, Ken, I was only trying to hel-”

“You can help by letting me go find this damn door!”

Rose’s chest gets tight, her heartbeat speeds up, her hands begin to tremble, and her eyes begin to water as his tongue gets sharper. Before anything can be said, *rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble!!* The two people look over to see Alexander and Thomas’ work, and they witness the crops trembling. The green apple, pomegranate, and lemon slowly come to fruition upon the trees, and the white onion, russet potato, and carrot grow bigger in size, protruding more and more from the ground. “Guys, we did it,” Alexander cheers, “Rose, let the shield go! We did it!”

Not saying anything, Rose closes her eyes, mentally telling her blue beetles that their job is done, and the glowing insects disappear in sparkles, making the shield dissipate in sparkles as well. Pierre and Issei watch the crops continue their little dance, but then Pierre takes a glance at Kendo, seeing how the dark circles around his eyes look like voids. *He’s looking like when Aidoneus first started punishing him for his escape attempts*, Pierre thinks to himself, *Aidoneus, what exactly did you do to this guy...?*

Oak and Daisy bark and mew in victory, ecstatic to finally see their crops make it to their full potential. “Yay,” Oak exclaims, “It’s finally happening! It’s finally happening!”

“Yes,” Daisy purrs, “And the best part is the crops will have some playmates~.”

“Playmates,” Amethyst asks, her brows furrowing.

“Great,” Kendo huffs, “They manage to grow the little shits. I’m gonna go find the door. C’mon, Diablo.” Diablo whimpers, not wanting to leave Rose’s side, but he knows that his best friend needs him, so he walks alongside him as the chaotic jokester stomps away.

Rose watches the duo become smaller as they walk further away. She can still feel her heart aching from the conversation she tried to have with Kendo. Her brain can’t help but to replay that interaction over and over again, trying to figure out what she could have said differently to avoid such an outcome. Is Kendo going to be mad at her for the rest of the way now? Her right foot takes a step forward, wanting to follow him, but then... “Um, what’s happening,” Jacqueline squeaks, pointing at the crops that are now becoming bigger than the team, the trees leaning as the fruits begin to touch the ground.

Issei looks at the harvest closely, and he starts seeing a face form on each of them, their mouths jagged, their eyes closed. “I don’t know,” he answers, “But whatever’s going on can’t be good. Get ready!” He whips out his ice gun and readies his katana, and the rest of the team summon their weapons, sensing a battle now coming to life as the crops get even bigger.

Chapter 18

The green apple's stem becomes its arm, the end of the stem becomes a large hand with sharp fingers as it grasps upon the tree's branch; eight small, red-orange-yellow ombre eyes with no pupils surround a larger one, the large eye having the same colored irises, slit pupil, and orange-yellow sclera. It smiles and opens its jagged mouth to laugh, revealing the inside to be nothing but a dark void that has different shades of red and purple swirling around as if it's a portal to somewhere.

The lemon grows a set of lengthy arms made of green vines on both ends, four fingers forming on each one. Its pair of eyes open to reveal no pupil but have the same red-orange-yellow ombre color, and its mouth opens to reveal the same red-purple void, lemon juice escaping its mouth as it snarls.

The pomegranate grows vine-like arms on its sides, gaining four fingers for each hand like the lemon. It opens its pair of eyes to reveal it being red-purple voids, and lets out a roar, revealing its mouth to be filled with eyeballs that have orange-yellow sclera, red-orange-yellow ombre irises, and slit pupils.

The russet potato hops out of the ground with a pair of wooden arms, four sharp fingers forming at the ends. It opens its one eye, revealing to have the same color scheme as its companions and a slit pupil. It lets out a roar, its mouth having the same void as the other crops.

The carrot, although grown large enough to where its face and three-fingered wooden arms are exposed, keeps its bottom half underground. Its same-colored four eyes make a shape of a diamond, its slit pupils constrict as they examine the team. It lets out a snicker, revealing the red-purple void.

Finally, the white onion rises out of the ground, levitating in mid-air with its roots gently flailing around like jellyfish tentacles. It opens its pair of eyes to reveal the same color scheme

and slit pupils except in each eye, there's three irises with a slit pupil. The same, mysterious red-and-purple void resides inside its mouth as it groans.

The crop monsters stare down the team, groaning, growling, and howling their anticipation of tearing them to shreds. "*Now what,*" Jacqueline exclaims quietly.

Rose looks at the monsters, and she analyzes her teammates. Memories of battling Cerberus and Pierre flood back into her mind as she remembers how she had to determine who would fight whom around that time. However, even though it was easier to read them, it's much more difficult determining how to go about this battle. She has no idea how these creatures operate. But then she realizes... "Wait," she says, and she looks at everyone as she says, "Everyone, if you got something to *slice*, have it ready!"

Alexander summons his water claymore, Amethyst gets her dry ice sword, Tenacity her fire sword, Rose her light battle ax, Jacqueline her ice chainsaw, and Issei his katana. Already knowing what Rose is suggesting, Pierre counts the number of members that will be able to cut down the crop monsters, and says, "So one person can take on one of the crops, while the rest of us... do what?"

"Give a lil' bit of assistance," Melissa answers as she readies her air fans.

"Exactly," Rose confirms.

Thomas nods in approval and says, "These are some huge serving sizes, after all."

"Wow," Alexander chuckles, "You finally made a joke on the battlefield, Tom!"

ⓇⓄⓄⓄⓐⓐⓐⓐⓇ!!!! The crops interrupt the team, not giving them a chance to decide which crop to chop down first. The pomegranate monster starts spitting its eyeballs at them, forcing them to jump out of the way. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The eyeballs, like bombs, land in different spots of the garden and explode on impact, the explosion radius somewhat small. The

lemon monster starts vomiting its acidic fluid, trying to aim for one of the team members, but they all manage to dodge it perfectly as the acid lands in different spots of the garden, slowly disintegrating the dirt.

Not wasting anymore time, Issei readies his katana, aiming for the lemon monster to stop its acid rain, but something grips his ankle tightly to where it trips him over and disconnects him from his sword. *Thud!* He falls on his side, making contact with the dense ground, and he immediately sees his katana close to him. He tries to grab for it, but a bunch of roots appear from underground and makes it sink. “What the-” he exclaims as he tries to get up, but his ankle is still being held hostage.

He looks to see that more roots are the culprit, and he looks around and realizes that the carrot monster now holds his weapon, laughing haughtily. It opens its mouth and swallows the katana whole. **YUM YUM!!**

Issei feels a huge vein pop out of the side of his head, and he yells, “Aaah *hell* nah!! Give me my shit back, bastard!!” He pulls out his ice gun and *bam! Bam!* He shoots a few ice bullets at the carrot, and it howls in pain, releasing the peoni hunter from its roots. While Issei gets up to try and recover, he looks to see Tenacity battling the levitating onion monster, shooting numerous fiery bullets at it, and even though she hasn’t missed a shot, the bullets that do land barely penetrate the vegetable’s body.

The onion monster hisses as it extends its roots to grab onto Tenacity, but the goth makes her gun disappear and uses her flaming sword to scare the earthy tentacles away from her. She then, without hesitancy, jumps up and attempts to swing her sword vertically to chop the onion. Her blade makes contact with the crop, *schtick*, **AAAAHHHHHHH!!!**

The onion screeches as the weapon only gets halfway through its vessel and becomes stuck, forcing Tenacity to let it go and land on the ground, which causes the weapon to disappear in a few seconds. “Okay,” the goth huffs, “One more slice and it’s over with.” As the onion cries from the attack, a strange gas begins emitting from itself, taking over the air and invading Tenacity’s eyes, making her growl and curse under her breath. She makes her weapons disappear to wipe the endless tears away from her burning eyes. The onion’s roots reach out to the woman once again, and they begin wrapping themselves around her, but then *bam bam bam!!* Ice bullets tap the onion, making it turn to look at the person responsible for snatching its attention away from its target, which was Issei. It roars out and lets Tenacity go, making its way towards the peoni hunter. The goth summons her flaming sword once again, and through watery eyes, she jumps up once again and swings her sword downward, and her blade successfully chops down the onion, its shrilling howls echo across the dimension as its body disappears in sparkles, leaving behind a black flame that looks similar to a soul. The gas it released in the air still lingers, and soon travels to Issei’s eyes, making him hiss through his teeth.

The carrot monster watches the two struggle, chuckling at their minor suffering. Issei tries to look at Tenacity and asks, “Maybe you shouldn’t have messed with the onion? Ya’ know? Since it does shit like this when chopped open?!”

“Oh save the sarcasm, smartass” Tenacity snaps, “I got rid of the fuckin’ thing, did I not!? How’s *your* battle going?!” She looks at the carrot monster, seeing it chill in the ground, not doing anything. She then says, “I see it’s just living life.”

“The thing ate my sword,” Issei groans out, “Could you be a dear and get it back for me?”

“*Me?* I thought I was a slacker,” Tenacity asks in a light tone drizzled with pettiness, tilting her head with a slight shock expression on her face.

“Ten, *please!!* I’m pretty much rendered useless if I don’t get my katana back!”

“Fine! How does the thing work?”

While Tenacity approaches the carrot, readying her fire sword, Issei explains, “It likes to use its roots underground, so watch your footing.”

“Or you could give me a *lift*,” Tenacity suggests, “Ya’ know? Something that maybe *you* could have done to avoid this predicament?”

“I wasn’t expecting it to have roots popping out everywhere,” Issei argues.

“Oh really? Maybe you should have at least considered that possibility? Ya’ know? Since vegetables have fuckin’ roots underground?”

“Uuuggghh, hang tight,” Issei says, putting a stop to Tenacity’s criticism, and he summons his malaiki wings and starts flying upward. The peoni hunter holds out his hands for the feisty goth to grab hold, and they ascend from the ground, only for the carrot’s roots to reach up to try and grab her ankle. The roots tap its target, but they are unsuccessful in stopping its opponents. Issei gets close to the carrot, and Tenacity frees one of her hands to summon her flaming sword, once again. The carrot looks up at the duo, intrigued by their attempt at cutting it down, and it tries to swat them away with its large, wooden hands like they are flies buzzing around it. Issei flies in different directions, avoiding the large hands and trying to find the perfect way for Tenacity to slice the carrot.

As Issei and Tenacity deal with the carrot, Jacqueline and Melissa choose to deal with the apple together. “Okay,” Jacqueline huffs, “We just gotta, like, chop this thing down, right?”

“Exactly, Jackie,” Melissa confirms, “And this looks to be one of the easier monsters.”

The apple monster looks at the two girls as it stands on its only hand, smiling away and waiting for them to make a move first. Jacqueline takes a deep breath, reminding herself why

she's doing this in the first place. Then, she revs up her ice chainsaw, *VRROOOOOOOOM*, and she charges towards the monster, letting out a battlecry. She swings her chainsaw diagonally upward, and the apple responds by putting itself down and stopping her weapon with its wooden hand. It laughs as the blade struggles to cut through, and it grips the chainsaw tightly, lifting Jacqueline from the ground and flailing her to a different spot in the garden. The party girl's whines can be heard as she flies across the garden, and *thud!* Her chainsaw disappears as her back hits one of the trees, knocking the air out of her. "Jackie," Melissa exclaims, then she grits her teeth and looks at the apple monster.

Growling out her iration, and not giving the monster a chance to notice, Melissa summons her dual air fans and starts slicing at its body, making it howl. *Scratch! Scratch! Scratch!* Her fans make multiple scratch marks on the apple's body as she screams at it, and as it turns around to try and face her, she ends up slicing up its eye, bloodying up her weapon.

ⒶⒶⒶⒶⒶⒶⒻⒻⒻⒻⒻⒻ!!! The apple wails out its pain as it now can't see well, but there's no need since the ambitious lady doesn't stop the adrenaline from doing its work, making her go numb and not caring how messy the process of cutting it up is. But as it tries to recover, the apple swings its arm around, trying to swat Melissa away, and it succeeds, making Melissa grunt and fly to another spot away from it. She lands on her side, *thud*, but she tries to quickly recover. Jacqueline shakes off the first attack the apple inflicted upon her, sees her friend battling the apple, and she summons her chainsaw once again. *VRROOOOOOOOM!!*

"Okay, you big ugly hoe," Jacqueline sneers, "It's time for you to get juiced." The party girl amps herself up, and she charges for the damaged crop, watching it stop flailing its arm around though still struggling to see. Not wasting time, she swings her chainsaw once again, and *VRROOOOOOOOM!!!* Apple juice flies everywhere as her chainsaw blade cuts straight across the

apple, splitting the fruit diagonally, and making it disappear in sparkles, a little black flame plopping to the ground. The party girl immediately runs to Melissa to help her up, and the go-getter accepts the help, happy that Jacqueline managed to take down a monster.

Meanwhile, Rose and Thomas face the pomegranate monster, the fruit spitting out numerous eye bombs. *Boom boom boom!* The duo avoid the attacks, and Thomas starts flying and shooting light arrows at it, giving Rose a chance to attack. As the pomegranate gets distracted by the flying Upendelaiki, the Quphanto-Tansi hybrid readies her light battle ax, but then she realizes something. *Wait*, she thinks, *Its mouth is full of eyes that are bombs. If I hit it, wouldn't that cause... a huge explosion?* She examines its mouth, seeing that the amount of bombs inside is slowly decreasing. She then looks at Thomas, feeling slight relief knowing that he's having no trouble avoiding the bombs the pomegranate is spitting at him. She then looks to see Issei and Tenacity struggling with the carrot as it continues messing with them, her ears wanting to believe that they're picking up hints of the two team members bickering. She looks back at the pomegranate monster, and an idea sprouts in her head.

The Quphanto-Tansi hybrid positions herself to where she's in front of the carrot monster, but she makes sure that it doesn't notice her. Then, she scans the ground and finds a rock, and she picks it up to throw it at the pomegranate monster, gaining its attention. She flings it, and the rock hits the pomegranate's side, making it cease its fire and look at her, snarling. Rose starts flailing her arms in the air as she yells out, "Over here, meanie!!" The pomegranate hops towards her and prepares to shoot its bombs at her, but as soon as it starts shooting, she hits the deck, causing the bombs to hit the carrot. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The carrot howls in pain, distracted by the numerous explosions bruising its body. Thomas immediately shoots a light arrow at the pomegranate to get it to focus back on him, trying to decrease its ammo. Preoccupied with its

pain, the carrot doesn't realize that Issei and Tenacity are not wasting a second. Issei drops Tenacity above the carrot, and the goth swings her sword vertically downward as gravity pulls her down, splitting the carrot in the middle, making it disappear in sparkles and a black flame landing on the dirt.

Tenacity dusts herself off, letting out a sigh, and Issei lands on the ground, making his malaiki wings disappear. He looks at where the carrot was, but he doesn't see his katana anywhere.

"What the hell," he says under his breath, "We defeated it, so where's my sword!?"

"Hmmm," Tenacity ponders, not wanting to give Issei any more reason to snap. Though a part of her wants to keep giving him a hard time, she knows that the katana holds a lot of importance to him. She then says, "You don't think that their mouths are some... portal to someplace else, do you?"

Sighs If it is, where would it go," Issei asks calmly, taking deep breaths to not boil over.

"I don't know, but look, we'll find a way to get it back," Tenacity reassures her former partner.

Rose looks at Tenacity and Issei, not sure what's being said as the sounds of Alexander and Pierre fighting off the lemon monster snatch her attention, the acidic fruit vomiting out its toxic liquid. Alexander uses his Light Barrier, and Pierre uses his Spiny Darkness, the Upendalaiki's light-yellow shield and the Upendeoni's dark-purple shield made of spikes blocking out the lemon's acid while they think up some ideas. Pierre exclaims through the commotion, "There's two of us and one of it! I'll grab it's attention, and you'll cut it from behind!"

"Got it," Alexander says to him, nodding his head to demonstrate his understanding of the plan. Without wasting anymore time, Pierre waits until the lemon monster ceases fire, and he spreads his leathery wings and takes flight. He flies over the fruit, making it twist and turn to

keep its eyes locked on him. It snarls and growls, preparing his next attack, not noticing that the groovy Upendelaiki is creeping up on it, his footsteps not making a single sound. When it finally senses someone else behind it, *SCHLING!!* Alexander swings his water claymore downward, splitting the fruit in half and making it disappear in sparkles, leaving behind a single black flame.

Rose's spirits lift up more seeing less and less crop monsters running around. There's only the potato and pomegranate monster left. She looks to see who's dealing with the potato, and it's Amethyst who handles the tuber with ease. The potato hops around in a frantic manner, trying its best to avoid the feline's dry ice blade. It tries to attack her, swinging its splintered claws to scratch her, only to miss every time as she gracefully dodges and blocks its attacks. She scans the vegetable, coming to the analysis that it's time to end this little dance, and she swings her dry ice rapier diagonally as the potato hops up in the air, ready to slice her. *Slice!!* The blade runs through the potato, splitting it and making it disappear in sparkles, a black flame softly landing.

"Rose," Thomas calls out to the sweet Quphanto descendant, and Rose turns to look at him still in the air, giving him his full attention now that the pomegranate monster is the only crop remaining. As he flies around the pomegranate, he exclaims, "You all get out of here, now! I'm going to shoot an arrow into the pomegranate's mouth, causing a huge explosion!"

"You're telling me it *still* has a lot of bombs," Alexander asks, slightly surprised that the fruit hasn't ran out yet.

"Pomegranates do have hundreds of seeds," Rose quickly explains, "But enough talk, let's go!"

The team doesn't waste time, and they all start running out of the garden, making the pomegranate monster look at them. It lets out a roar, about to spit more bombs at them, but then it feels something sharp poke its back. It turns to see Thomas, opening its mouth widely to let out

a huge roar, expressing its frustration. (R O O O O A A A A R R R)!!! Thomas moves swiftly and shoots a light arrow into its mouth, making sure he has enough distance from the fruit, and as soon as the arrow pierces one of the eyes, BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!! The eye-bomb explodes, and the eruption making contact with the rest of the bombs causes a bigger explosion inside of the pomegranate's mouth. The blast radius destroys the monster, pieces of it going to different spots of the garden, and they disappear in sparkles, a black flame remaining.

Once the explosion disappears, Thomas places his feet on the ground, making his Upendelaiki wings disappear, and he looks at the deserted garden, noticing the six black flames that flicker in their spots and Oak and Daisy are nowhere to be found. *That's strange*, he thinks to himself, *These little flames... they're similar to what a soul in its first form looks like. What is going on...?* Wanting to figure out the strange phenomenon, he decides to put it on hold and reunites with his teammates who waited for Thomas' return. He looks at everyone, and he asks, "Everyone is okay, right?" They all nod their heads except for Issei who looks off into the distance, making it very visible that he's trying to keep his breath steady but is failing. "Issei," Thomas says, "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Issei huffs out, but he quickly says, "It's just... my sword... one of those bastards ate it, and after Ten and I defeated it, the sword never came back..."

"Oh dear," Thomas sighs out, "I'm sorry, Issei. Don't worry, we'll find a way to get it back."

"Well, no point in dwelling on it," the peoni hunter exhales, "Let's just find the door and get out of here..." The team notices Issei's entire change of behavior. First, it's Kendo having his sour attitude, and now it's Issei disappointed in losing a weapon that clearly is important to him. Tenacity looks at Issei with a hint of sympathy in her face, feeling her heartstrings pull a bit seeing Issei's soul experience defeat. She realizes how she's never seen him look so down about

something. Even when Issei shared some of his life story to her he didn't seem so bothered by it. He's always had the goofy persona on with the hint of flirtiness, as if nothing could erase his smile. Now, here they are... this whole situation chipping at them like an ice pick.

Not wanting to dwell on the feeling, Issei takes the lead, trying to search for the door, and the teammates follow him. Silence walks with them, not even the trees applaud them for their temporary victory. As they walk somewhat aimlessly, hoping to see the door somewhere, they hear barking in the distance, and they see that it's Diablo trying to reunite with them. "Diablo," Rose exclaims happily, making Diablo more excited to see the team again. He spins around in joy, and he tilts his head to motion his new friends to follow him. They obey and follow the Umu hound, hoping that he found the door with his best friend. After a couple of minutes, they find the exit to the garden and Kendo standing at the yellow door, his arms crossed and the dark circles around his eyes still as dark as the new moon. He looks at the team, feeling some words wanting to come out, but his dry throat begins to lump up as he remembers the show that he put on earlier, his lash out towards Rose scaring her and upsetting everyone else.

Suddenly, *click!* Kendo turns around to look at the door, realizing that it's finally unlocked, but as soon as he's about to reach for the golden door knob, a familiar voice asks, "**WHERE ARE YOU GOING, □RIEND□?**" The team turns to see that it's Oak along with Daisy once again, however their eyes are now the cursed red-orange-yellow ombre color they've been seeing and their pupils are now slit, their voices are somewhat distorted. Oak says, "**YOU'RE NOT LEAVING U□, ARE YOU? PLEA□E □TAY~! PLEA□E □TAY~!**"

"**YE□□, purr,**" Daisy purrs out, "**WE NEED YOU~. YOU CAN'T LEAVE U□~.**"

Rose can feel her stomach turning as she looks at the same animals she somewhat befriended at the beginning now have a menacing appearance, their true colors revealed. “Let’s go,” Pierre says, “We wasted enough time here.”

“Something we can agree on, for once,” Melissa jumps in.

Not saying anything, Kendo quickly opens the door and swings it open, being the first to walk to the dark side. The team follows him, not giving Oak or Daisy a chance to try to convince them to stay just a while longer. The dog and cat watch them in silence, and they look at the door close, staring holes into the piece of wood in hopes that maybe, just maybe, their new ‘friends’ would return.

Chapter 19

In the darkness again, the team wanders aimlessly, waiting for Aidoneus to come around to say some more nonsense. They stand in the emptiness, not wanting to be the first to say anything. Issei thinks about his katana, wanting to reunite with it soon, but he wonders if he's even going to see his weapon anymore. After what feels like a few minutes, the mastermind behind this fiasco finally speaks, "*Aah,*" he begins, "*There you all are~ You took a while taking care of my crops... only to destroy them in the end. Tell me, do you have fun ruining my things?*"

Completely ignoring his question, Issei is first to speak, and he asks, "Where's my katana, you evil spawn!?"

"*Oooh, Issei,*" Aidoneus coos, "*Are you talking about the same blade that your caregivers gifted you before they were murdered~?*"

BAM! BAM! BAM! Jacqueline and Melissa squeak from the sound of Issei shooting his ice gun in the air. Diablo starts barking as if he's trying to help Issei curse Aidoneus. "I'M NOT EVEN GONNA ASK HOW YOU KNOW ABOUT THAT SHIT, JUST GIVE ME MY KATANA BACK, YOU SON OF A BITCH," Issei yells out, his voice shredding from screaming at the devil.

Aidoneus can't help but to cackle at Issei's response. "*My my Issei, calm down,*" he says in a higher octave, "*Your katana is safe with me~! Awwww, isn't this cute~? This is the same reaction Tenacity had when Nasir pointed out HER flaws, hahahahahaha~! I guess lovers do tend to share the same characteristics~ Aaah, speaking of which, Tenacityyyyyy~ Deaarieeee~ I haven't forgotten about you, hmhmhmhm~*" Tenacity begins to dread what the Upendeoni has to say, her lips sealed shut as her brain scatters around to find the perfect comebacks... but is it even worth the search? Aidoneus continues, "*Let's talk about you for a second~ Your friends are severely confused about your behavior, lately~ Nasir brought up that*

you want to achieve something... something that has challenged you in the relationship department, with other people and with yourself. The Larynx brought up people of your past having a hold of you, as if you were... harmed in some way and are now struggling to move on. What happened, my dear? What are you looking for exactly? Aren't the friends you have good enough...? Or... is your past bleeding into your present... to the point that your future is not even a thought... to the point that your present... is shrouded in such darkness...?"

“Shut the fuck up, dickhead, and get to the next room,” Kendo says, not even giving Tenacity a chance to say anything although for once, she has nothing to say.

“I’m talking to Tenacity, Anti,” Aidoneus says, “I’ve tried talking to you, but you want nothing to do with me. I’m just waiting until I see you again to attempt to even say ‘hello’ to you. Now... Tenacity, sweet heart-”

“IT’S ME THAT YOU WANT, IS IT NOT, JUNGLE FIEND,” Kendo yells, “ISN’T THE POINT OF ALL THIS BULLSHIT IS TO GET TO ME!? STOP PLAYING WITH US AND FUCKING SKIP TO THE PART WHERE WE SEE YOUR BITCH ASS!!”

“... I see,” Aidoneus says in a monotone voice, “You’re all tired of my challenges. Unfortunately, you haven’t made it to the end, but you’re getting closer. Maybe I should take it easy on you for this next room, give you a chance to breathe. Mayhaps you’d love to grab a quick snack before finding the next door. Unfortunately, my good friend, Chef Cookie, is having some trouble in the kitchen. Maybe he’ll reward you with some good grub if you help him out, hmmm?”

Uncertainty looms over the team as everything that has been said and seen thus far is only creating more questions than answers. Different dimensions, secrets revealing themselves, information so personal that Aidoneus should have no knowledge of... yet he continues to spill

them out like tea. A small beam of light appears again, repeating the agonizing process of taking over the darkness, attempting to blind the team, and disappearing in a humongous flash to reveal the next dimension.

The team stands in the middle of a large restaurant: the walls are a garnet-red, the floors are black marble, multiple tables are covered with sleek, white tablecloth and decorated with a single candle, and many lantern chandeliers that give dim lighting give the place a calm, soothing vibe. Each table has up to four seats, some tables having only one person while other tables have a family of four enjoying each other's company. Soft murmurs can be heard throughout the establishment as each table holds their own conversations. The team continues taking in the view, and their hearts collectively skip a beat when their eyes notice that the customers are anthropomorphic animals. Dogs, cats, foxes, chickens, deer, and even lizards. Every animal imaginable, from the mice to the elephants, are all sitting on their hides and enjoying their meals, using their utensils and picking up cups to take a sip with ease. All of their eyes are either black or dark brown, the light from the candles and chandeliers giving them some sparkle.

"There's no way that these people are animals," Melissa whispers.

"Oh my gosh, this is like that one tv show I was always scared to watch," Jacqueline whimpers.

"Girls, focus," Amethyst hushes the two, *"We need to look for Chef Cookie."*

Kendo looks around, seeing the waiters are pigs snorting away as they walk around pleasing their customers. He then sees one of the pigs go back into the kitchen, saying something to someone. "Come on," he says softly, and he takes the lead, the team following him to the silver doors that lead to the kitchen.

As soon as they go through the doors, the team sees the animals responsible for keeping this restaurant afloat. Pigs dressed in white jackets and chef hats continue doing their jobs as if they don't notice the team's presence. The kitchen is bright, everything is white, black, silver, and made of marble. Sounds of crops and meat being chopped, boiled, and sizzled echo throughout the area, smoke dancing in the air like it's a ballroom. *Sizzle, sizzle, sizzle, bubble, bubble, bubble, chop, chop, chop, chop!* The team looks around, trying to find the worker that could possibly be Chef Cookie, and after a few seconds, Diablo sniffs them all, and he prances to the largest pig in the kitchen who happens to be humming.

The team approaches the working hog, not disturbing his concentration as he hums and whistles while sprinkling different seasonings and dropping chopped vegetables into a large pot. "Hmmm," the pig snorts, and he takes a silver ladle to hold it near his stomach. *Snort! Snort!* "No no," he mumbles in various snorts, "It's still not good! Uugh, where's those ingredients that I asked for!?" The pig turns around to reveal his front side, and the team's jaws drop when they see that he has his jacket unbuttoned, revealing the hairs that adorn his limbs, chest, and round stomach and in place of the belly button is a huge mouth with straight teeth. The pig's mouth is covered by a brown, leathery muzzle, and his eyes are red-orange-yellow ombre with slit pupils, solidifying that he's indeed who the team is looking for. Chef Cookie looks down at the team like he's looking at a bunch of kittens, and he says, "Ooooooh! Some help! Maybe you'll be a better help than these piles of swine I'm stuck with!"

The team watches Chef Cookie talk to them, seeing the mouth on his stomach doing the movements instead of the mouth that's on his face and is restrained by leather. However, they do notice snorts escaping from the muzzle, his moist nose twitching from time to time. While cringing, Alexander says, "You must be Chef Cookie. We were told that you needed some help."

“That is correct,” Chef Cookie confirms, “I’ll cut to the chase. This is supposed to be the special dish, my Paradise Gumbo! However, it’s not feeling like paradise in my mouth because it’s missing some things, and none of my staff bothered to inform me that we were low in stock... I’ve tried to make up for what’s not here, but it’s just not working out...”

“What’s in it so far,” Rose asks, tilting her head.

Chef Cookie’s mouth goes from a deep frown to a bright smile, happy snorts escape, and he answers, “Red, orange, yellow, and green bell peppers, sweet onions, celery, some golden apples, berries, grapefruits, oranges, and for protein I threw shrimp, salmon, and sausage!” The team feels disgust clawing at their stomachs. The chef continues, “I’ve been having it all dance together with my chicken and water bug broth, and once I get it to where I need the flavors to be, it’ll all be served on a bed of maggots!” Chef Cookie grabs another steaming pot and takes off the lid to show the team his seasoned maggots, the baby flies wiggling and squirming. “The poor babies are gonna be cold by the time I perfect this thing,” he whimpers as he places the maggots back on the stove.

Everyone looks at the chef befuddled by all that’s been explained to them. Knowing the ingredients to the Paradise Gumbo makes their stomach acids want to act up, the thought of even trying the dish makes them either want to remove their taste buds or just simply lay down and die. Rose, though visibly disturbed by Chef Cookie’s cooking, asks the cook, “So no amount of seasoning can save it?”

*Why even ask him that, Kendo thinks to himself, The boar is literally making **slop!!***

Chef Cookie shakes his head, snorting in disappointment. “I’ve tried to mask this imperfect delicacy with everything, black pepper, sea salt, turmeric, paprika, you name it! But alas... not

paradise...*Snort snort!* But with your help, you will help me get Paradise Gumbo where it needs to be, right~!?”

“*Hell no,*” Kendo grumbles.

“Yes, we will help,” Rose confirms to Chef Cookie, hoping that he didn’t hear the chaotic jokester.

“*Snort! Snort!* Mud-tastic,” Chef Cookie cheers, chuckling and snorting away, “So listen up, the ingredients I need shouldn’t be too difficult to find. Prove to these piglets that this is an easy task that *they* should have taken care of ages ago. I need a coconut, a pineapple, a banana, a crab, a piece of seaweed, and some seawater. There’s one more ingredient that I’ll need after that, but we’ll worry about it later.”

“A coconut, pineapple, banana, crab, seaweed, and seawater,” the kind Quphanto descendant repeats, “Got it!”

“Awesome sauce,” Chef Cookie oinks, “Now run along, you can take the exit door over there to start your journey. Don’t need the customers knowing what’s going on. Oh, and take this!” He grabs a cup from nearby and hands it over to Rose. He then points at the exit door that’s several feet away from him, and the team wastes no more time as they exit the establishment and prepare themselves to go on a scavenger hunt. As soon as they exit the building, the sun’s light blinds them for a second, and the moment that their eyes adjust, they observe that the restaurant is on a small island, aquamarine-blue water taking over the entirety of the dimension, the clear blue sky hanging over the team’s heads. Gentle breezes brush against their bodies which also make the palm trees swish and sway.

“Okay,” Thomas says, “He said he needs a coconut, pineapple, banana, crab, seaweed, and seawater. Ladies, you will look for a crab, some seaweed, and gather some seawater. Kendo and Diablo will help. The rest of us will fly around and find the coconut, pineapple, and banana.”

Everyone agrees with the plan, and Alexander, Thomas, Pierre, and Issei summon their wings to fly around and investigate the trees of the island while Kendo, Amethyst, Diablo, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa walk to the beach to start their search. They go to different spots on the beach, trying to find the three ingredients that they were assigned. Rose immediately takes off her heels to let the lukewarm water cover her feet as her toes sink into the damp sands, and she kneels down to gather some seawater. Kendo looks at Rose, remembering the harsh words he said to her in the last room, and he feels something nudge his leg. He looks down to see Diablo trying to push him towards Rose. *Ruff!* Diablo softly barks at his friend as if demanding him to apologize.

Kendo lets out a sigh, knowing that Diablo is right. He looks to see that Rose’s friends are doing their best to find a piece of seaweed and a crab. Not wanting to waste time, he approaches Rose cautiously, scratching his head and looking at the water. Rose gets up, holding the cup of seawater, looking at its crystal clearness, and she looks up to see Kendo standing right there, her heart slightly jumping from the view. “Oh,” she yelps, “K-Ken, hey...” Kendo makes eye contact with Rose, but the dark circles around his eyes remind Rose of what transpired the last time they spoke to each other, making her eyes shift to her friends. She softly says, “I’m... I’m sorry for what I said earlier... I didn’t mean to-”

“Don’t apologize,” Kendo sighs out, “I should be the one saying sorry. The way that I talked to you back at the garden was unnecessary... and I’m sorry.” The chaotic jokester’s apology makes Rose shift her eyes back to him, wanting to give him 100% of her attention. He continues,

“I’m not saying that this is an excuse, but hopefully it helps give some sort of clarification behind my bitchiness.”

“Oh, well before you start, we should get out of the water first,” Rose suggests, seeing that Kendo walked up to her with his shoes still on, his shoes and socks now drenched.

“Oh,” Kendo says, looking to see his shoes and some of his jeans are now wet, “Right, right.”

Rose softly smiles, and Kendo and she walk back to shore, deciding to sit down to where they can look at the ocean waves peacefully swish and swoosh. Rose rests the cup of seawater beside her and hugs her legs as she lets out a sigh, admiring the view, and she looks at Kendo and says, “So what made you finally throw the carefree, trolling persona and crash out on me?”

Kendo leans back, looking at the clear sky, and he answers, “The fact that we’re in Aidoneus’ castle. I *know* we’re where Nermal is at... it’s Aidoneus’ bitch-ass still playing games. I tried to push away my frustration with my usual humor, my sly comments, my dirty jokes... but the moment he pulled this shit at the last minute... I couldn’t play along anymore. And the more rooms this bitch makes us go through, the more pissed off I get. I mean come the fuck on, man, you hire peonis and Upendeonis to come and capture me over and over again for seven centuries, start throwing me into solitary confinement for four decades, put me in a straitjacket that snuffs out my magic, and then drug me with *whatever* it is that makes me ‘out of it’ and has now fucked up my face, and now you’re wanting to do all of this elaborate bullshit? Throw in more people into some shit that should be kept between us? Just to try and make me feel bad for what *I* want to do with *myself*? Like seriously, Rose, put yourself in my shoes. Usiku tries to monitor you for 800 years, I’m 1000% positive that you’d go bonkers, too.”

Rose listens to Kendo’s rant, catching a few important details pertaining to Aidoneus’ treatment towards his own son. What catches her off guard is the length of this conflict. She

realizes that neither she nor anyone else within the team truly knows the details of this ongoing fiasco. She then says, “Ken, I hate to do this to you, but... Do you mind rewinding to when this all first started? Like how did we exactly get to this point? Was it always just you and Aidoneus going back and forth with the chasing and escaping? For *800 years*? I’d have thought you were 25!”

Kendo chuckles and sighs, “Oh Rose... You and your protagonistic ways~ Always wanting to help others out. Reminds me of someone... I mean, there were a lot of people that were similar to you, but for some reason, I feel like you’re supposed to remind me of someone specific. Huh... Anyways, I guess this will be my first free therapy session. I’ll try to keep it simple. It all went downhill when I turned 100 years old. For that first chunk of my life, I was in Umu, causing trouble even then. I don’t know why I was always a troublemaker, but I guess we can blame genetics and the environment I was in. One rotation, Aidoneus decided that it was a good idea to have me explore Gaia. He thought that I’d see that realm and go ‘Oh yeah, I’d love to rule this place,’ but that shit backfired on him. I love Gaia for what it is, and I love the souls that make up that realm. I could never take your world and try to change it up in any way... but as we can see, that’s what Aidoneus wants to do.”

“So because you fell in love with Gaia, you couldn’t get down with what Aidoneus was trying to do.”

“Exactly. After that first visit, I started going to Gaia more and more and more, and Aidoneus was alright with it... until he started noticing that I was coming back home less and less. I’d say I was around 300 when Aidoneus started sending his followers to come and get me. If the hired peoni or Upendeoni managed to get me, Aidoneus would just lock me in my room and have someone be my bodyguard whenever I wanted to walk around Umu.”

“Wait, Cerberus wasn’t always there to capture you??”

“Pfft, nope. It took Aidoneus a while to realize that the peonis and Upendionis he’d hired sucked ass, and it wasn’t because they were having a hard time finding me. He and everyone else thought I’d be missing for decades... but gossip travels quickly, and he found out that I was *paying* his followers to not take me back home.”

“Whaaat? I’m assuming Aidoneus is able to pay these guys handsomely. What did you offer that would prolong the chase?!”

“Rose, these are Umuites we’re talking about. It was always either my dick, my ass, or my mouth... or a combo of all of those things.”

“Uh... Oh...”

“Aww, don’t start looking like that, it’s not like I was *forced* to do those things. Plus, I can’t help that I’m one fine ass dude, might as well put it all to good use, hahahahaha~!”

“Hmmm...”

“Hahaha... Hah....*ahem*, Anyway, I was willing to do anything and everything to stay away from Umu, and if what I offered wasn’t good enough... I started running and laying low for a while until my luck ran out. Now, Cerberus came into the picture when I was around 600. There was *no* way for me to bribe him. Alpha was always about business, Beta had his plaything already, the Tansi Twins, and Gamma... you already know why I don’t even bother trying to reason with him. They managed to bring me back within weeks, *much* more quickly than the other Umuites.”

“So Cerberus started being in charge of capturing you. However, even that wasn’t enough for Aidoneus considering that he started putting you in solitary confinement and forced you into a straitjacket...”

“And that shit was recent, like I said, 40 years ago. I think it was after Aidoneus tried to convince me of helping him out with his dastardly plan of taking over the world. I told him how I truly felt, and that’s probably what made him snap. The next time Cerberus captured me, I...”

Suddenly, Kendo stops speaking, and his vision gets blurry as he gets lost in the sky’s beauty. His lips begin to super glue shut, his throat becomes dry, and the dark circles around his eyes get darker, almost as if it’s trying to take over his entire face. He tries to talk, but he only stutters and his bottom lip begins quivering, as if he’s trying to hold back something. Rose notices this, and she rests her hand upon his hand, making his heart skip a beat. She softly says, “You don’t have to say anything else, Ken... Aidoneus is very evil for doing all of this to you. I mean he’s making us go through dimensions that we’re not even sure if they’re real or not! If he’s supposed to be this powerful being, he shouldn’t have to rely on you to put his master plan into action! It’s just... not making sense... At this point, this is just him being petty.”

Kendo listens to Rose voice every thought that he’s had up until this point, and it makes his heart well up in tears. This kind-hearted soul is the second person he’s been this vulnerable with, the first being Nermal. He’s hidden the family drama for so long from people he’s interacted with, never feeling like they would understand why he is the way he is to this day. To finally unleash it all leaves him feeling much lighter. After a few seconds of comfortable silence, the chaotic jokester notices Rose’s friends approaching them, and he says, “Aaand that’s my cue to get up.” He gets up from the ground, dusting the sands off of his jeans, and he looks at Rose and offers her a hand. She looks at his hand and grabs it, letting him pull her up. He then says, “Hey, thanks for hearing me out. And if your friends get curious, you can go ahead and fill them in. I don’t really care.”

“It’s no problem, Ken,” Rose says, “But I feel like it’s wrong of me to tell your story to them. Don’t you wanna tell them??”

“Mm-mm, by all means, you can tell them,” Kendo insists, “You have my permission. I’m surprised that I was able to explain everything to you and Nermal alone. Speaking of the cutie-patootie, we better try getting to her, soon. I’ll go check on the guys.” After saying this, he transforms into a seagull, flying towards other parts of the island to look for the flying Mazans, Umuite, and Gaian.

Rose watches Kendo fly away, feeling a smile creep up on her face after realizing that they’ve found some time to get a better understanding of each other. Suddenly, “I take that he wasn’t bein’ a bitch this time?” Rose turns to see that it’s Tenacity asking the question, the goth crossing her arms and signs of disapproval showing on her face. Amethyst, Jacqueline, and Melissa follow behind her, Amethyst holding a long piece of seaweed.

Rose answers, “No, he was very decent. We managed to talk everything out, and now we’re okay! I see that you guys managed to find the seaweed.”

“Yes,” Amethyst confirms, “And did you get the water?”

“Yep,” Rose nods her head, remembering that she still has the cup of seawater still on the ground. She carefully picks it up and gives her friends a bright smile. “Okay,” she says, “Now, we just need a crab.”

Arf arf arf!! The ladies turn to see Diablo running up to them in a timely manner, holding a medium-sized, red crab in his mouth.

“Oh wow,” Rose exclaims, “Well look at you, honey! Good job!” She kneels down to pet Diablo, making the Umu-pitbull wag his tail excitedly. “Alright, we’re pretty much done! Should we wait outside of the restaurant near some shade?”

“Yeah,” Jacqueline huffs out, “This heat is *killing* me.”

The girls and Diablo walk to the back entrance of the restaurant, resting underneath a tree that’s close by. While they wait for the guys to come back, the girls try to strike up some conversation, from talking about the challenges, to the dimensions they’ve been through, to even their interactions with everyone in the team so far. Rose explains to the girls what Kendo and she talked about, remembering that Kendo was alright with them knowing what he’s been through. Amethyst closes her eyes, feeling some remnants of her Past Life trying to make itself known. “Hmmm,” she hums out, “Kendo... His name was Anti before, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Rose confirms, and she tilts her head, “Are you... remembering some of Carnation’s memories?”

“A little bit,” the feline says, “I felt some form of familiarity when I looked at... what was her name... Vanity??”

“She was your mom, apparently,” Tenacity says, “Or at least that’s how she treated you, like a mother.”

“And now I’m getting that same feeling with Kendo, like we were acquaintances at some point,” Amethyst sighs out, “Which is strange because I never experienced this before...”

“Maybe it’s like that because Lady Vanity did whatever to bring Carnation back,” Melissa guesses, “And even though *you’re* back, Carnation’s memories still somewhat remain.”

“What did she do to you anyway to bring back Carnation,” Jacqueline asks, “Did she, like, hypnotize you or something?”

“I can’t remember,” Amethyst says, “It’s all so blurry. All I remember is being in the mansion with you all when the blackout happened, then some music was playing outside, and that’s when it all got weird. I was being carried into some throne room, and I didn’t get a good look of who it

was that was carrying me, but he fed me some catnip, which only worsened my condition. And then next thing I know, I'm in some bedroom filled with purple, and I'm guessing it was Lady Vanity who used her abilities to change my appearance and gave me this small orb and pressed it upon my forehead, which is when everything went dark *again*. I remember bits and pieces of our battle in the arena, but I didn't fully gain consciousness until Rose revived me."

"Hmmm, that is strange," Rose says, rubbing Diablo's head as he plays with the crab, "Kendo did mention that he had some sort of bond with almost everyone in Umu, including the Quphantos, so there's a chance that you two did have a few run-ins here and there."

"Perhaps," Amethyst says, "*sighs* Well, even though these memories are sloshing around, I don't want to become too hung up over them. I just want us all to get Nermal and go back home."

"Let's not waste anymore time then." The girls look up to see Thomas approach them with a smile while holding a coconut. Alexander holds a bunch of bananas, Pierre holds a pineapple, and Issei and Kendo follow them empty handed. Thomas then says, "Alright, so we have all of the ingredients Chef Cookie needs. Let's give them to him and get out of here."

The team hastily walks back into the establishment, making sure that the ingredients are still intact. They walk into the kitchen, seeing the pigs still working. Then they spot Chef Cookie who's still trying to throw whatever seasonings he can grasp to fix his Paradise Gumbo. He takes the ladle, stirs up the food, and he places it near his mouth on his stomach. "Hmmm," he snorts, "It's almost there..."

Rose is the one to approach the hard-working pig, and she clears her throat and says, "Chef Cookie? We're back with the ingredients you needed!"

The chef turns his head to look at his helpers, and he oinks joyfully seeing the ingredients in their grasps. He takes the seawater to pour it in the pot. Then, he grabs the coconut to break it open and pour the coconut water next. Next, he takes the pineapple to chop it up and place the juicy pieces in, watching each individual piece plop into the substance. After that, he takes the bananas and peels them and chops them, *chop, chop, chop!* He places the banana slices in the pot, and he takes the seaweed and drops it in there. Finally, he takes the lively crab from Diablo and throws it in, watching the scorching substance slowly cook it. Chef Cookie snorts non-stop, his nose twitching from the various scents tickling his nose hairs. “Ooouu, yes, *snort snort*,” he oinks, “*Now* it’s starting to smell like Paradise Gumbo!” He stirs and stirs, the smell traveling to the team’s noses which make them slightly nauseous, and he gives the gumbo another try. He smacks his lips, letting his taste buds truly analyze the dish, and he turns to look at the team and says, “Yep! That’s it! *Snort!* Now I gotta get that one last ingredient, and Paradise Gumbo will be complete~!!”

“Lovely,” Rose cheers, happy for Chef Cookie and for Kendo since this means that they’re one step closer to getting through this segment, “So what’s the last ingredient we need?”

Silence. Chef Cookie continues smiling at Rose, but then his eyes begin to glow as he leans close to her, and he says in a distorted voice, “*Γαϊαη φρεση~. Υου κησω γου cαη't ηανε Paradise Γουμπο μεησολ ηαt ηιcε, sιweet, tενd-er φρεση, ανδ γου ισσκ ιικε γου φστ ιστς σφ ιt~...*”

Chapter 20

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP ZAP ZAP ZAP ZAP! Usiku ceases the futile punching for a second, seeing that he's not yet broken down the shield that Aidoneus has placed around the castle. He lets the smoke continue dancing on his fists and arms, letting his skin heal up again. After a few seconds, his sisters manage to teleport Shandon, Zeena, Delilah, and Cocoa to Usiku's location, noticing that the stubborn Quphanto descendant is still trying to get to his daughter. They watch Usiku bang the electrified shield over and over, *ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP!* The bright red electricity dances upon his arms once again, and Usiku starts growling out his frustration. Delilah can't help but to feel her heart become heavy as she watches her lover struggle. She approaches him while he still throws his punches, making sure to have some distance, and she exclaims, "Honey, you can't keep doing this! Just give it up!!"

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!

Delilah sighs out her frustration, but she continues, "Usi!! You're not going to be able to break that shield! Take a break, at least!!"

ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP!!

The Tansi-human hybrid's words fall on deaf ears, and she looks at Zeena, her eyebrows crease with worry. Zeena looks at her friend and sister-in-law, and she exhales while crossing her arms. She stands next to her, and she yells at Usiku, "Usiku, you've been goin' at this fo' too damn long!! Do you think Rose would want you to keep doin' this when she knew the risks!?"

... ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!

Zeena sucks the air through her teeth and mutters, "*Hard-headed jungle fiend...*" Then, she looks at Delilah and says, "Honey, we should just go ahead and go back home."

"What," Delilah asks, "But we can't just leave Usi here!"

“We both tried to get his attention, and he clearly ain’t listenin’,” Zeena explains, some of her frustration seeping into her voice, “If he wants to keep doin’ this insane shit, then fine! We shouldn’t be hangin’ around this hot ass, musty ass hellhole just ‘cuz *somebody* wants to do things his way!”

“Well then Zee, *you* can go back home,” Delilah suggests, “If you want to get out of here, that’s fine with me, but I’m not leaving Usiku here by himself!”

Usiku stops punching the shield once again, letting his arms and hands heal up, and he pants heavily as sweat covers his entire body, making his dashiki drenched. He growls out his wrath and exclaims, “Nruku!!” Seconds later, the bats come flying to him, flying around him, squeaking away. He demands, “Teleport me to the other side of this cursed shield, *now!!*”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“*What do you mean you can’t do that,*” Usiku shouts, his voice booming, “**Huffs** *Then help me with destroying the damned thing then!!*”

They don’t waste energy squeaking, and they fly to another place in Umu, not wanting to hear their little brother’s whining again. It was at this moment when Usiku felt his last nerve being played with. He looks back at the shield. He then looks at his hands, letting his eyes sink into the lines that make up his palms. He says to himself, “These hands grasped necks...”

ZAP!

“Squished eyes...”

ZAP!

“Decapitated heads...”

ZAP!

“Ripped out organs...”

ZAP!

“Torn limbs apart...”

ZAP!

“***Yet they can never break a damn barrier...***”

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!

Delilah and Zeena continue watching Usiku try to break down the barrier, Zeena completely giving up on him while Delilah still hoping that he sees that this is all pointless. Cocoa sits next to her mother, watching Usiku with her ears drooped and tail not wagging. Shandon approaches the two women, not saying anything as he watches his brother struggle while smoking his blunt. Zeena looks at her husband and asks, “Why don’t you try talkin’ to him, Pooh?”

Shandon blows out some smoke, and he sighs, “And waste *my* energy on that jungle fiend not hearin’ me through his temper tantrum? No thanks.” He continues watching Usiku attempting to break the shield. He mutters, “*I do wanna see how long it’ll take for him until he finally gives up...*”

ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP, ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!.... ZAP!... Zap!.... Zap... Usiku’s punches of fury slow to a stop, his limbs finally getting a chance to fully heal and not experience the electrifying torture. He looks deep into the shield, his eyes then focusing on the castle. There’s truly nothing else he can do now. His one and only daughter is going through trials only Ideya knows about, and he’s not 100% sure if he’s going to ever see her again. Shandon, Zeena, Delilah, and Cocoa notice Usiku standing still, questioning if he’s going to start punching again. After waiting for ten seconds, Shandon finally approaches the frozen Quphanto-human hybrid and says, “Are you done actin’ stupid?”

“...” Usiku says nothing.

“Good,” Shandon continues, already knowing that his brother is back at square one communicating, “Now bring ya’ big ass ova’ here so we can gone ‘head and head home. Rose is in there helpin’ her friends take down Aidoneus, and there’s nothin’ we can do about it.” Usiku continues staring at the shield, and Shandon notices his fists trembling. “Nuh-uh, you’re not ‘bout to try again. This is crackhead shit that you doin’, and you know it. You’ve been bangin’ at that shield for who knows how long, and if you ain’t made progress yet, then mothafucka, what are we doing?”

Usiku slowly turns around and he looks at his brother with bloodshot eyes, deep frown, and creased eyebrows, strain making itself well known in his expression. Shandon, however, looks at him unfazed, every part of his face relaxed as he continues smoking his blunt and keeping his hands in his pockets. Shandon takes a couple more steps closer to Usiku, really trying to get a reading of his brother. What could he possibly be thinking? After a couple of seconds of staring at each other, Usiku lets out a sigh, closing his eyes, and he says softly, *“I don’t want to give up on her...”*

“There’s nothin’ we can do, Usiku,” Shandon enforces upon his brother, “Everything that *you* could have done should have happened a *looong* time ago. It’s too late now. Ya’ fucked up, but you already knew that, huh?”

“I want to fix this,” Usiku pushes out, a lump starting to form in his throat, *“I was so confident in the possible future of my daughter not having to use her powers... so comfortable with being her knight in shining armor every time she was in a predicament... I didn’t consider training her for the possibility of her having to do something like this... Where I wasn’t there for her... And now we’re here, in Umu of all places... and my baby is... sighs And I threw her friends into all of this like a coward... It should have been me facing Cerberus and that Upendeoni... It should be*

me in there facing Aidoneus...” The defeated man looks at the shield again. “***But it isn’t... There has to be a way for me to get in there, Shandon... There just has to be...***”

Shandon starts feeling something tug his heart, but he can’t tell what it is. It’s something about seeing Usiku, his half-brother and half-cousin, the one person that he tries to convince himself over and over again that he could care less about, in the state that he’s in now is making him question his view. Is it sympathy? Is it frustration? Shandon could just leave Usiku right where he is, stuck with his problems. *I should just go ahead and take the ladies back home*, he thinks to himself, *I tell myself this over and over again. Usiku is a lost cause*. And yet... his feet aren’t moving. *Dammit*, he curses to himself, *I should have brought my henny*. Trying to keep himself from getting overly emotional, the high Quphanto-Upendelaiki hybrid huffs out, “Usiku, I... I get it. I love Lil’ Honey, too. *We all do*. I’m worried about what’s happenin’ wit’ her right now, too. But seein’ how this devil guy done made it to where it’s damn near impossible for us, *for you*, to get to her, we’re just gonna have to give it all to Ideya, now. *You* have to give it to Ideya.”

“...”

“Whatever happens... happens... Usiku. *There’s nothing you can do, now.*”

“... *I’m sorry... for everything, Shandon... You are right... I am a guilty bastard that’s been given too many blessings...*”

“...!!” Shandon feels his throat tightening and his breath shortening for a split second as Usiku looks at Shandon with glistening eyes and breathes out his apology. The fact that Usiku admitted that he is right and is able to recall what Shandon called him back at the garden when Rose and Usiku were talking about everything makes the wall that he built between them start to crack a little. Shandon shakes his head and says, “Aye, save the apologies fo’ when Rose gets done wit’

her mission and we get out of here. You already know I'm gon' wanna hear it again when we have our talk."

The ladies watch the brothers talk to each other, able to hear every word they say. Suddenly, they hear footsteps behind them, and Zeena and Delilah turn around to see that it's the Cerberus Bros. "Cerberus," Delilah softly says, surprised that they are in front of them, though they look as if their energy has been depleted.

"Hello, ladies," Alpha says, bowing his head. Beta and Gamma stand by their brother, not uttering a word. Usiku and Shandon turn to see the brothers, and they walk up to them, wanting to know why they're here. The eldest Cerberus Brother says, "If you're trying to get to Aidoneus... I'm afraid you're wasting your time."

"We see," Shandon says, "And we don't know our way around this place or the rest of Spirit Realm. So are y'all gonna lead us to a portal out of here?"

"Well, it depends," Alpha answers, "Do you want to go back to your home domain to wait for Rose, or would you like to go to a hotel nearby?"

Beta jumps in, "You all took the potion Aidoneus gave you all, so you might as well put it to good use and stay close by for when Rose gets out of there."

"Tuh, *if* she gets out of there," Gamma says raspily. A pulse of rage goes through Usiku, and he takes a step toward the hound; however, Shandon stops him, putting his arm to where he stops his brother from taking another step. Gamma doesn't wince from Usiku's response, confident knowing that even if Usiku laid his hands on him, it wouldn't bring his daughter back to him. He says, "Oh by all means, *Usiku*, go ahead and try to make us reset *again*. If there's one thing that Aidoneus was right about, it's that we let you get into our heads to the point we'd hide our tail in

between our legs just from the thought of you. But now that we know that you let *your daughter* fight *your* battles, and she's not here-

"Gamma, *enough*," Alpha barks out.

"... **Yes, brother**," Gamma growls.

"*Typical*," Beta mutters.

"As I was saying," Alpha says, trying to shift the focus back to the original matter at hand, "The hotels here in town are not too bad. However, if you want something on the more decent side, you would have to go to one of the seven districts."

Delilah and Zeena share glances, then Zeena looks at Cocoa who looks at her mama with her tail wagging. The boujee malaiki-human hybrid sighs and says, "If y'all want to just stay in town, I'm fine. My need for top tier service isn't all that important right now."

The Tansi-human hybrid then looks at her lover, seeing the life in his eyes almost non-existent. She looks at the shielded castle, taking note that even though it is far away from everything, the town is their best shot considering that she doesn't know where these districts are. Thankfully, Zeena isn't begging for luxury, so Delilah answers, "We'll settle for any of the hotels in town."

"Very well, then" Alpha says, "Just follow us."

The Cerberus Bros. take the lead, escorting the family back to town so that they can get some rest at a semi-decent hotel whilst waiting for Rose to return with her friends in one piece.

...

Chef Cookie stares hungrily at Rose, sinister chuckles escape his mouth as he tries to grab for her, but Kendo manages to grab her in time and pull her away from the ravenous pig.

Squ-eaaaay!!! The chef releases a distorted squeal, signaling his worker-pigs to stop what

they're doing, and as if already knowing the objective, the pigs grab their weapons(which are either knives, spoons, pots, or pans) and begin ambushing the team. Alexander summons his scorching-hot water and creates jets streams from both of his hands to push away most of the pigs, making them squeal in pain. The team gets their weapons out, and they don't waste time as they begin making bullets fly and blades cut whatever is in their way. As the team clear out the kitchen, slaying the pigs one by one and leaving behind black flames, Chef Cookie begins sucking in the air around him, inflating his stomach, and then *PEW PEW PEW!* He begins spitting out fire balls into the air, aiming at the team. The group notices the fiery attack, and they make sure to dodge in time before the fire balls could hit. The fireballs land, but they either hit the other pigs or a part of the kitchen. *Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Fwoosh!* The fire instantly cooks the pigs and burns parts of the kitchen.

Rose notices everyone taking care of the remaining pigs that give Chef Cookie a helping hand so she decides to face the ringmaster himself, ready to end this segment so that they can progress to the next room. She summons her light battle ax along with a large yellow wolf spider, and the sparkling arachnid hops over to the sloppy swine and hops onto his left calf. Chef Cookie feels the sensation of the spider's legs tickling him, and he tries to swat it away before it's too late.

Snort! Snort! Chef Cookie struggles to get the spider off of his body, and before he knows it, *chomp!* The arachnid bites down on his salty fat, and his body locks up, yellow electricity dancing around his body as he falls onto the ground, landing on his side. *THUD!* He lays on the marble floor completely paralyzed, his lips can't even form words. Rose stands over him and raises her battle ax, and *CHOP!* She swings her weapon downward and decapitates his head, making his body disappear and leaving behind a black flame. Amethyst notices Rose finishing off the chef, and her heart stops for a minute as she sees how swiftly Rose executes the action,

something she thought Rose could never be capable of doing; however, she pushes the feeling aside, for now. As soon as all of the pigs are defeated, a forest-green door appears in the middle of the room, not needing hinges to stand straight.

The group reunites while looking at the door, putting away their weapons. Jacqueline says, “Wow! That was, like, the quickest battle, so far!”

“Well, I’d be concerned if we couldn’t defeat a bunch of pigs that just cook up slop for a livin’ in under five minutes,” Tenacity says.

Amethyst approaches Rose, resting her hands upon her shoulders, and she asks, “Are you okay, dear?”

Rose, a little confused, confirms, “Yes, Amy, I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

Amethyst says, “It’s just... It was *you* who killed Chef Cookie...”

“... Yes??... Oh, wait, that’s right, you don’t remember everything. Yeah, I kinda have been conditioned to getting the job done no matter how crazy it gets-”

“Which is the exact approach we need,” Issei jumps in, “Keep this up, Rose, and we’ll get to Nermal in no time.”

Rose softly smiles and says, “Aww, thank you, Issei!”

Issei then says, “Now we just need Jackie to get with the program...”

“Hey,” Jacqueline exclaims, “I’ve been improving! I didn’t complain too much this time!”

“Well,” Amethyst sighs out, “I guess I’m just not used to seeing this come from you, Rose... I’m just hoping that this doesn’t change you negatively, dear, that’s all...”

“Are you afraid that I’ll end up like how dad used to be,” Rose asks, “Or perhaps even being murder-crazy like my grandfather?”

“Oye,” Kendo calls out to the team as he stands in front of the yellow door and grabs onto the golden knob, “We can check on everyone’s moral compass when we finish this.” Everyone agrees with the chaotic jokester, though Amethyst’s worry for Rose lingers, and Kendo opens the third door, allowing everyone to walk into the darkness once again, ready to repeat the dreadful cycle that Aidoneus wants to continue.

Chapter 21

The darkness welcomes the group once more, but they don't make any comments on it. In fact, they all collectively agree to not say anything at all. Just wait until Aidoneus comes around with the next dimension. After a couple of seconds, the mastermind asks, "***Helloooo? Is anyone there? Are you all alive??***"

Complete silence. No more. The team's spirits have grown tired of Aidoneus' shenanigans. They know now that whatever they say to him will only be used to fuel the fire and give him some sort of entertainment. "***Hmmmmmm,***" Aidoneus hums, "***You don't want to play catch up, friends? It's been a while since we've spoken to each other~***" No response. "***... I think it's admirable that you 11 are willing to go through anything and everything for one soul. You could possibly die from trying to save Nermal yet here you all are throwing caution to the wind.***"

Kendo grinds his teeth as he tries not to say anything towards his sperm donor. Suddenly, he feels something nudge his leg, and automatically, he knows that it's his fuzzy best friend trying to comfort him in the darkness. He cautiously kneels down as he keeps his hand on Diablo's head, and he hugs the dog tightly. "***We're almost done, boy,***" he says softly while rubbing his back, listening to the pitbull's quiet panting, knowing that he's smiling through all of this.

Aidoneus breaks the silence once again and says, "***What I'm curious about is the rewards the Quphantos gave you all. Have you figured out what they do, yet~?***" Tenacity feels like she wants to smart mouth the devil, but judging from the last couple of times that she's done so, she decides to zip her lips. "***Hm, you truly are ignoring me,***" the mastermind says curtly, "***Perhaps it's a good thing that you stay quiet. This next room will require that. Wouldn't want to wake up Teddy.***"

As soon as Aidoneus finishes speaking, the same sphere of light appears, dancing around the team and filling the space with intense brightness. Once the light disappears, the team opens their eyes to see that they're inside a large cave. The only source of light that they have is the sun's light that enters the cave's mouth. They look around to find anything out of the ordinary, and to their left they see the next door, an azure-blue door that stands upright like the other doors. Suddenly, they hear something shift around and release a low grumble, and they look to see that on their right is a ginormous, brown bear snoozing. Melissa whispers, "*I'm assuming that's Teddy?*"

Issei whispers, "*No doubt about it.*"

Pierre then whispers, "*Okay, well this is just the Illanga Dragon room all over again, is it not?*"

Alexander whispers back, "*Seems like it! And there's nothing in our way this time, so let's get out of here!*" After saying this, the group doesn't waste time and sneaks their way to the door, making sure that their steps are light and there's nothing to make them lose their balance or their footing. As they make their way to the door, Rose can't help but to feel like this room is too simple. Is the door going to start giving them problems again? Surely, it will for Aidoneus hasn't made it this easy for them since they stepped into the castle. Why would he let up on them now? She stops to look at Teddy, watching him sleep peacefully on his side; then, she notices something glint underneath his paw. She tries to take a closer look, but she can't determine what's giving the gold shine from where she's standing. She looks at her team, then back at Teddy, and she makes the rash decision of going to investigate the phenomenon.

Amethyst notices Rose not following the team to the door and making her way to the large sleeping mammal, and she decides to transform herself into a cat to accompany her. Everyone

notices this, and right before they make it to the door, they look to see that Rose is not with them and is approaching the bear. Tenacity hisses, “*Rose, what are you doing?!?*”

“*Yeah, are you, like, crazy,*” Jacqueline exclaims quietly.

However, Rose doesn’t answer; she doesn’t even notice Amethyst walking alongside her. She gets closer and closer to Teddy, feeling hints of warm winds coming from his nostrils as he snores peacefully, and she sees that the golden mystery is a set of keys. Amethyst sees the keys as well, and she looks up to Rose to see what she’s going to do this time. The Quphanto descendant clasp her hands and summons a maroon-red bed bug, and she cups her hands to where it lands on her palms. She then gently tosses the bug onto Teddy’s body, and it burrows into his fur until it reaches to his bare skin. *Chomp!* The bed bug bites Teddy, making him wince and his eyes shoot wide open, revealing that he has the red-orange-yellow ombre color scheme and slit pupils. However, as quickly as he opens his eyes is as quickly as he closes them as a huge sleep spell overwhelms him, making his body feel extremely warm and fuzzy. “Okay,” Rose says, her voice slightly echoing in the cave, and she immediately grabs the set of keys from under the bear’s paws. She walks back to her teammates and says, “The bed bug knocked out Teddy. We got 10 minutes to figure out which key goes to this door.”

Rose shows the set of keys to the team, and they see that there’s 30 keys for them to go through. Diablo approaches his new friend and starts sniffing on the discovery, taking in its scent. Jacqueline sighs out, “We can’t just pick the lock? That’s too many keys!”

“Jack, she just said we got 10 minutes,” Tenacity says bluntly, “It shouldn’t take us too long to figure out which key is the right one.

“We’re wasting time,” Issei says, motioning his hand in a way he’s telling them to hurry up.

Rose takes initiative and stands in front of the light-blue door, and she tries out every key. *Click click.... Click click.... Click click...* The sound of the attempted keys going into the lock only to fail fill in the cave's silence. While Rose goes through the keys, Thomas says, "Let's talk about everything that's happened so far while we can because I hate to admit it... Aidoneus makes a point about the ring pieces. We *still* don't know what they do."

"I honestly forgot about those things," Alexander sighs, "And while we're at it, can we talk about these enemies leaving behind what looks like a soul but isn't? What's up with that?"

"I wondered that myself," Issei joins.

"You still have those pieces, right, vanilla bean twin," Kendo asks. Thomas nods and grabs the pouch from his belt loop. He opens it and pours out the ring pieces into his hands, but when the ring pieces come out of the pouch, Thomas' eyes slightly widen when he notices that the garnet, citrine, topaz, and emerald are attached to the golden ring band and the aquamarine, sapphire, and amethyst still the remaining gems needing a home. Kendo, Alexander, and Issei notice this as well and they get closer to Thomas to get a better look at the change. "Well, *that's* new."

"Is it because we completed those other dimensions," Alexander asks, tilting his head.

"Am I tripping, or is the aquamarine kinda glowing," Kendo points out, seeing that the light-blue gem has a glow that's very dim but noticeable. Amethyst examines the Quphantos' gift to her friends, her eyes twinkle with curiosity. Thomas leaves only the aquamarine out as he places the rest of the ring back into the pouch. He walks to the door with the gem, then he hovers it around the keys Rose is holding, but the gem's glow doesn't brighten.

Rose notices what Thomas is doing, seeing the gem's soft glow, and she asks, "Huh, it hasn't always done that, has it? What does it mean??"

“Trying to figure it out, now,” Thomas answers, then he walks to other spots in the cave.

Pierre, Issei, Tenacity, Melissa, and Jacqueline stand in one place, watching the team take time to figure a way out while uncovering the mystery behind the ring pieces. While they watch, Melissa shifts her eyes to Pierre, taking in his appearance while he’s not noticing. She starts thinking back to all of the times they’ve encountered so far. She remembers their first time meeting each other at Applebuzz when he was with the tainted Alexander, and she recalls finding him attractive. The attraction immediately dissipated, however, when he and she talked again at her job and he called her another person’s name. Melanie. The human go-getter crosses her arms and sneers at the Upendeoni, squinting her eyes, and says, “Hey, Pierre.”

Pierre can’t help but feel his nerves being messed with again as Melissa calls his name. He looks at her with a deadpan expression and says, “If you’re wanting to hold a convo while we sit here and do nothing, then you’re talking to the wrong person.”

Melissa ignores his statement and continues, “Do you remember the day you came into Applebuzz to ask me where Amy was after the first time we kicked your ass?”

“Don’t start...”

“In the middle of the convo, you called me Melanie. What was that about?”

“... *sighs* I was hoping you’d have forgotten about that.”

“Oh suuure, let’s just forget how you not only called me ‘honeybee’ once or twice for whatever reason but also some other chick’s name. I hope you don’t do that to a lover if you ever get one.”

“First of all, having a partner is overrated. Second of all, I don’t know why I called you Melanie, alright-” As soon as he says the name, his head begins to pound again like it did when

discovering his Past Life. He lets out a hiss and groans as he starts holding his head with one of his hands, feeling an intense wave of pressure taking over one of his temples.

Melissa, along with Tenacity and Jacqueline, notice Pierre in pain, and a wave of concern and confusion hits them. “Um, are you good,” Tenacity asks, scrunching up one side of her face.

“Yeah, you’re acting like you got a brain freeze,” Jacqueline adds in.

“*Don’t worry about it, I’m fine,*” Pierre hisses out.

“Hmmm, I dunno, red velvet,” Kendo says, inserting himself into the conversation, “The last time you looked like that, it was because you were remembering some of your Past Life.”

“*Would you shut up, Ken,*” Pierre exclaims through his pain. He takes deep breaths, the pain slowly subsiding. He then says, “I don’t need these brats in my business. It’s already bad enough that *you and the peoni hunter* know about it.”

Melissa then stands in front of the Upendeoni with her hands on her hips, leaning in so that she’s closer to his face, giving him no choice but to look at her. She then says, “I could care less about your PaST liFE. Just don’t go calling me MeLAnIE. It’s *Melissa. Me-li-ssa!*”

Pierre feels a vein popping out and he leans towards her as well, his pink eyes locking onto her dark-green ones. “Ugh, now you’re *really* acting like a honeybee invading my space! Is it an apology you’re looking for? i’M SorRY. There, there’s your stupid apology, *HoNEYbEE.*”

Electricity starts sparking between the two souls. Melissa says through gritted teeth, “*And stop calling me ‘honeybee’!! If I’m a honeybee, then you’re a condor, CoNDoR!!*”

“Alright alright, you two,” Kendo says as he gets in between Melissa and Pierre, “Let’s just drop this for now and get back to getting out of here.” The chaotic jokester then looks at Rose to see that she’s on the last few keys. “Hey, cherry lips, what’s the status report?”

Click click... click click... click click.... Click click... “W-What,” Rose stutters, and she starts fumbling through the set of keys. “I-I tried all of them, but... *none of them worked?*”

Thomas, with all of his focus on the gempiece, walks closer to Teddy with the gem still in his grasp, and suddenly, *hmmmmm!* The aquamarine glows brighter, and the Upendelaiki lets out a soft gasp. “*It wasn’t doing this when I was close to the keys Rose has,*” he whispers to himself, “*If what I’m thinking is correct, then the key to the door must still be near Teddy... but where?*”

“Thomas, why are you close to that thing,” Amethyst asks, “What if he wakes up and you’re *right there?*”

“I still have some time left,” Thomas reassures his long-time friend, “Rose, you need to come here. I don’t think the keys you have are the answer.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Rose responds as she makes her way to Thomas. She tosses the useless set of keys to another part of the cave, the metal’s clink-clanking echoes throughout the area. She stands next to him and notices the glowing gem. “Oh wow! Wait, is it telling us where the key is!?”

Sniff sniff sniff sniff! Diablo approaches Teddy and smells him, his nose continuously smelling his stomach.

“I believe so,” the helpful Upendelaiki says, “But I don’t see any other key in plain sight. It could possibly be *under* Teddy.” After hearing him say that, the Quphanto descendant wastes no time as she approaches the sleeping bear and begins pushing him, trying to roll him over, and Diablo gives her space to complete the task. She rolls him over with a lot of ease, but Thomas puts the gem in the pouch and gives her a helping hand to keep her from using all of her strength. Kendo notices this, and he runs to them, wanting to be their extra eyes while they move the big mammal.

As they finish rolling him over, Kendo tries to look for some keys, but... no luck. "Um, you might wanna check that gem, again," he says, "It's nothing but dirt under that sack of fur."

"What," Thomas and Rose exclaim simultaneously, and they gently place Teddy back how he was before they came to investigate.

"Then what could it be," Thomas ponders, and he grabs out the aquamarine again, seeing that it's still glowing. Rose looks at the gem's glow becoming extraordinary as they stand next to the large bear.

Diablo goes back to smelling Teddy, and his nose goes back to his plump stomach. The pitbull looks at Kendo, Thomas, and Rose and starts whimpering out his discovery, motioning his head in a way to tell them they need to check Teddy again. "What are you saying, boy," Kendo asks, tilting his head.

Arf! Arf!

Kendo takes in Diablo's barks, and Pierre hears him, as well. The Upendeoni walks towards the chaotic jokester, catching up on what's going on. He then asks, "Is the mutt trying to say that the key *is* Teddy?"

Kendo looks at the gem, then looks at the bear, then looks back at the gem, and he remembers how the last door opened when Rose eliminated Chef Cookie. It was at this moment that he figured that it must be a repeat. "Well," he starts, "It's only one way to find out. Rose, go ahead and cut Teddy's head off real quick."

"No," Amethyst says forcefully as she approaches the group and rests her hand on Rose's shoulder, "She is not going to do that, again."

"Huh," Rose says, looking at her second mother, "But Amy, we need to-"

"I understand that, but make someone else do the deed."

Kendo can't help but to roll his eyes and groan, "Okay, Amethyst, look. We love that we got you back, but we don't need another Usiku in here. We already had to deal with him wanting to shield Rose, *you were there for that!* Rose has gone through too damn much to start actin' like she can't do anything when we know she can. Didn't you believe that she could be out here putting in work at one point?"

Amethyst takes a step forward and responds, "I believed that she could put up a good fight, not *kill someone off.*"

"She's not becoming another Louisiana Reaper, Ames," Kendo exclaims, "This situation just so happens to call for a dead bear. Would you like for us to knock him out with some anesthetic so that we all play surgeon, *dissect the thing* to see if the key is inside, sew it all back up, and then high five each other when the job is done!?"

ᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁ!!! The team hears low, distorted growling, and they turn to see Teddy slowly lifting himself off of his front paws to stand on his hind paws. **ᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁᄁ**

!!! The furious bear releases a ferocious, distorted roar as his fur transitions from brown to a dingy magenta, glowing lines made of red and purple swirl around his body. His regular claws transform into claws made of air, and he swings his arm to land his first attack. He hopes to send his claws through one of the team's bodies, but fails as they all manage to dodge in time. Issei takes initiative to grab his ice gun and starts shooting, *bam! Bam!* However, as soon as he shoots a couple bullets at Teddy, they're absorbed into his fur, not making a single wound. "Huh," he exclaims, "It just went through him with no issue!!"

Everyone notices this, taken aback by the discovery. Teddy begins charging towards the team, and they separate, running to different parts of the cave to make it difficult for the mysterious

beast. Rose tries to paralyze Teddy with a yellow wolf spider, but as the arachnid hops closer to its target, it tries to hop onto his back only to disappear just like Issei's bullets. "Wh-What the," Rose says, baffled, "Is his whole body a portal or something?!"

Thomas thinks, *One of the crop monsters took away Issei's sword after eating it, and their mouths looked similar to Teddy's body. Are they really portals? And if so, where are they going?* Before the Upendelaiki can do anymore thinking, Teddy starts charging for him, forcing him to summon his feathery wings and fly above.

Teddy gets on his hind paws and tries scratching Thomas, but he misses numerous times. The bear then roars out, "*ᠠᠢᠨᠭᠠ! ᠭᠢᠨᠦ᠋ᠨᠡ ᠮᠡ ᠠᠢᠨᠭᠠ!*"

Thomas hears the word 'ring' come out of the bear's mouth, and he puts together what's happening. *Aidoneus wants the ring*, he concludes. He looks at Amethyst, and yells out, "Amy, catch!" He holds the pouch with the ring pieces and tosses to his cat-friend, and Amethyst manages to swiftly catch it. Teddy turns his head towards her, and he starts running towards her, trying to absorb the ring pieces.

Amethyst sees Alexander summoning his Upendelaiki wings and flying up. "Alex," she calls out, and she throws the pouch to him. Catch! Alexander gets the pouch, and Teddy switches his focus to him.

As the team continues to keep Teddy from getting the ring pieces, Rose looks at the bear, and then she looks at the door. She then remembers that the gem was glowing its brightest around the fuzzy beast. An idea immediately hatches in her brain, and she runs to the door and clasps her hands to summon a cyan grasshopper. The grasshopper rests in her hands, and she whispers, "*On my signal,*" while standing in front of the door. She then looks at Kendo who's playing with Teddy now, running around while dangling the pouch. "Ken, pass it to me," she exclaims. He

obeys her and throws it at her, and while holding the grasshopper with one hand, she catches the pouch with the other one. Teddy sees the Quphanto descendant holding his target and snarls at her. He charges for her, *thoomp thoomp, thoomp thoomp!* His heavy paws beat against the ground, but that doesn't shake Rose. She stands her ground, holding her creation, facing the bear with no fear left in her eyes. He stops in front of the woman, stands on his hind paws once again, and as soon as he swings his front paws, *shwoop! CRACK!!* Rose teleports away from Teddy, forcing him to attack the door instead and break off the golden doorknob, swinging the exit open.

Rose appears again near her team again, making Teddy turn around, distorted snarls escaping his lips. Diablo starts jumping on Rose, trying to make her lean towards him. "Diablo," Rose questions him.

Arf! Arf! Diablo grabs the pouch from her hands, letting it rest in his mouth, and he starts boosting away from Teddy, making the bear follow him, completely forgetting about the team.

"He's buying us time, let's go," Pierre says, and the team starts running to the door, ready to see the darkness once again. All but Rose and Kendo go to the other side as they look at Diablo still distracting Teddy.

"Come on, boy," Kendo calls out to his best friend, and Diablo listens. The pitbull beelines to the door, reuniting with Kendo and Rose, and he jets through the door. Kendo and Rose go inside, and they slam the door shut even though it's damaged. Teddy looks at the door, seeing that his targets successfully escaped. He slowly calms down, then he lets out a yawn, noticing that all of the chasing tired him out, and he lays back down to go to sleep, the purple and red swirls disappear and his fur goes back to brown.

Chapter 22

Darkness. Once again. *Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.* It's almost as if someone is holding a mic to every team member's chest as their hearts pound loudly from anticipation, knowing that they're getting closer to Nermal. Though there's a few people that are questioning one of their members, since she's expressed concerns at the wrong moment one too many times, they decide to wait until the next room to discuss it. For now, they must wait for Aidoneus to come around and try to talk their ear off once more before being placed into another dimension. Right on schedule, Aidoneus greets the team members, "***Hellooo, friends~ It's time to check on you aaall~ How are you feeling~?***" No answer. His tone then shifts to something more serious. "***Sighs Why do I even bother? I could sit here and explain to you all how I'm able to even do all of this, and you wouldn't even care. Quite frankly, I don't care that you don't care because I'm going to explain myself anyways once we see each other in a dastardly long monologue that you'll be FORCED to listen to. You might as well hear me out... since you all will die by my hand... even you, Anti.***"

Kendo feels himself wanting to bad-mouth his creator, give him a piece of his mind. Everyone else has grown very curious of Aidoneus' power and what he's capable of, questions are bubbling up in their mind banks the more he speaks. However, they remember the silent oath they took of not talking to him until they got to Nermal. The devil continues, "***Though I will say, Anti, your death will have MUCH more of an impact to all of this. Yes, your death shall not be in vain... for it is for my plan... the plan that I told you of many years ago. Don't you feel special, son~? All of this I did... for you... all just so I could get you back... Don't you see how important you are to me?***"

Kendo grits his teeth and tightens his fists, feeling his nails dig deep into his palms, almost cutting through. Aidoneus coos, "***Maybe I should give you all a break, hmmm~? Give you time***

to reflect before you come facing me. I saw your gift from the Quphantos, by the way. Very beautiful stones on a shiny piece of metal~ It's a shame that it seems to be useless for the most part. So what if it glows brighter the closer you get to a way out of the room? It won't help you against me~ Now THAT I'm sure of, hmhmhm~ Matter of fact, let's just complete the ring, shall we~?! Hahaha~! Let's see, you have the sapphire and amethyst left, correct? So if I let you go through two more rooms, then the ring shall be complete~! Hahahahaha~!! Then I'll end the games, and you all can finally fight for the person you've been looking for this whole time~!! HAHHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

The team notices Aidoneus' shift in moods, not just within the castle but even during the Umu Quphantos' challenges. There's times that he seems cool and collected, acting as if he's got it all planned out and nothing can faze him; however, there are moments where he's clearly running out of patience, the fragile persona that he's had going on for so long finally starting to fade away. Is he confident that he can defeat them even if they complete the ring, or is he just trying to buy the team more time to figure it out and they slip up by saying the answer out loud? Or perhaps he's trying to have the team lose the ring before they even get to him? He did have Teddy try to take the ring, after all. Kendo wants to poke fun at him... just one more time. He tries to look at you, the reader... but it's dark. He then says out loud, "If you ask me, *Lucifer*, I'd say you're just a scared lil' tainted Upendelaiki hiding behind his precious lil' throne~"

Aidoneus' laughter comes to a halt. "... *Who told you that you could call me-*," Aidoneus stops himself, noticing that his voice was sounding like a low growl, then he clears his throat, "... *Heh... Hehehe... Almost, son... Almost had me there, hmhmhm~... We'll talk very soon~... Enjoy that little break I promised you~...*"

After saying this, the team instantly closes their eyes before the sphere of light comes back around to take them to the next dimension. After a couple of seconds, the light does its thing, lighting up the room, and leaving the team in a large boat in the middle of a vast ocean, the sun setting, making the sky the colors of an orange lily, a pink flamingo, and a purple lilac. The boat doesn't have a driver, yet it cruises across the sapphire-blue sea, nothing but smooth sailing. There's a few couches on the boat where the team can sit down and catch their breath or take in the colorful view.

Jacqueline is the first to plop onto one of the couches, letting its plush texture welcome her as she slightly sinks in. "Oouuu, these are extra comfy," she sighs out, positioning herself to lay down. Tenacity can't help but to roll her eyes, but she decides to sit on the couch across from the party girl, crossing her arms and legs. Melissa sits next to Jacqueline, looking out to the ocean to watch it twinkle against the remaining sunlight. Pierre decides to sit on a singular couch by himself while Alexander and Thomas sit on a couch together, Thomas taking another look at the ring pieces. Amethyst decides to transform into a cat and lays next to Tenacity, curling up in a ball. Kendo and Diablo decide to sit on a couch together, Diablo wanting to play with Kendo for a little bit to make his friend smile for even a little while. Issei is the only person who decides to keep standing, looking out to the horizon to keep an eye out for the next door.

Rose sits next to the goth, feeling the effect of her tiger beetle slowly wearing off. A wave of nausea hits her, causing her to take slow, deep breaths, and Tenacity notices this. "Rose," she asks, "Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah," the goody-two shoe responds weakly, and she summons another tiger beetle, and before she stings herself with it, Tenacity grips her arm. "Huh? Tenacity, what are you doing?"

“I think you shouldn’t do this,” Tenacity says calmly, a splash of worry apparent in her expression.

“It’s fine,” Rose insists, “Look, we’re almost done. I just made this tiger beetle to where it lets me go on for a little longer. It’s not as strong as the last one-”

“But you’re already pushing yourself with the first one!”

“And it’s because of the first one, I’ve been able to help us all so far!”

“But we’ve already predicted that you’d be harming yourself by pushing your limit. Now you’re adding *another* tiger beetle into the mix? I don’t care how strong this one is, you’re only solidifying the prediction and worsening the after effect!”

“Look, I appreciate the concern, but I’m fine!”

Melissa listens to her two friends bicker, and she decides to jump in by asking, “Ten, weren’t you the one that understood that we needed Rose for this?”

“That was before I knew what kind of bullshit Aidoneus would have us go through,” Tenacity answers, her voice dripping with anxiety, “Rose has done enough, we only have a couple rooms left. Shit, *I’ll* carry her if I have to.”

Rose scrunches her face up at the goth and says, “No offense, Ten, but you wouldn’t be able to carry me.”

“I’d make it work,” Tenacity enforces.

Jacqueline sits up from her spot, and she says, “Guys, don’t you think that you’re being a little dramat-”

“STAY OUT OF THIS, JACKIE,” Tenacity and Rose exclaim simultaneously, making the party girl slightly jump. Melissa can’t help but experience the same feeling of being hushed, and even though they weren’t talking to her, she decides to silence herself, as well. Everyone else

can't help but to overhear the commotion, and being on the same boat together with not a lot of space from each other makes it difficult to tune them out.

"I promise you, I'll get on your case later, Jack," Tenacity sneers at Jacqueline, then she faces Rose again, "But right now, I'm dealin' with you."

Rose then says, "Do you think that because you're the oldest of the group, you get to just order me around and decide what *I* get to do!?"

"No, I think that because I know that one of my best friends is still learning the ins and outs of her abilities, I feel like she shouldn't push herself too hard, and you're doing exactly that!"

"I don't need another person to hold me back, Ten!!"

"AND I DON'T NEED ANOTHER PERSON TO DIE, ROSE! NOT WHILE I'M RIGHT HERE AND ABLE TO DO SOMETHING!!"

Tenacity's voice travels throughout the dimension, and her breath becomes shaky as she soon realizes that the walls that she's tried to keep up are finally breaking down. Rose looks at her with wide, sparkling eyes, noticing that the goth's are beginning to twinkle themselves. The Quphanto descendant can't help but to scooch closer to her friend and grab her hands, sharing her warmth. Nothing but the ocean waves fill the silence. It's time. Tenacity has to open up now. Since the beginning, the girls have been anticipating learning more about Tenacity, seeing that her past was being poked at without her permission. And even though Rose wants to respect Tenacity's privacy, she can't help but feel like they may never get this chance to truly talk about this hurdle that's presented itself. However, she doesn't want to push it, not like how she did with Usiku and Kendo despite Kendo not minding it. Rose's ruby eyes connect with Tenacity's smoky quartz eyes, and she says softly, "Ten... If you still don't want to talk about it, then it's fine... I understand you're just worried, and I notice that Amy is feeling the same way. But I promise that

I'm fine, and after this, I'll still be fine. We're one step closer to Nermal, and I'm not planning on letting up until she's right beside us."

Tenacity looks at Rose for a few seconds, letting her words sink in, but they do not give her any type of comfort. She takes in a deep breath in, and slowly exhales it out as a single tear finally drops. "Brooke," she says with a shaky voice, "Her name... was Brooke..."

Suddenly, Melissa's brain begins to bring back some memories. "Wait a minute," she says, "Wasn't she your friend at some point? I know you rarely talked about her around me, but you've mentioned her a few times in the past in middle school. You never brought her up again once we reunited in highschool."

Tenacity nods her head, and she croaks out, "That's because... *sighs*..." Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa simultaneously lean in, they could have sworn their hearts stopped and they stopped breathing. It's finally happening. Tenacity continues, "Brooke... was my warrior. My first best friend. My favorite person. The yin to my yang. Elementary through middle school would have been a livin' hell for me if not for her. I was always the odd one. Kids would always find a reason to shit on me, whether it was my hair, my skin, my quietness. I just didn't belong anywhere. It wasn't until second grade, a group of boys decided to gang up on me when Brooke came around and kicked their asses. She got in trouble for me... but she didn't care. She saw me and immediately befriended me, and I was more than happy to finally have someone to call a friend despite being opposites. We became so close, our parents would plan play dates for us so that we could see each other outside of school. It was all so wonderful... trying to have the same classes together, hoping to see each other during lunch and recess, passing notes to each other in the hallways, *sighs*... even giving each other candies and gifts for Love Day.

“I didn’t think that anything was wrong. She was always happy, smiling, not having any problem giving everyone else her slick attitude and using her loud vocals for whatever reason. I’d help her with academics while she helped me toughen up. It wasn’t until we were about to start highschool. It was the last day of school... *sighs*... We were sitting outside, waiting for our rides, talking about our highschool careers at Forestopolis Academy. I should have known that something was off. She wasn’t really responding to me... for once, *I* was doing most of the talkin’. I thought she was just tired... *pant pant*... Our rides came around, and we hugged and-”

Tenacity stops herself, feeling the tears almost becoming uncontrollable, but she tries to control her breathing. Rose tightens her grip on her hands, feeling herself almost wanting to cry for her. The goth then says, “*Inhale... Exhale*... I asked my parents if... *sniffles*... If I could meet up with Brooke a couple days after.... A-And... they... *sighs*... *sniffles*... They told me that Brooke-.. *Hic*.... Got into her mom’s sleeping pills and- *whimpers*...”

Rose softly gasps, “Oh my goodness... Ooh, Tee...”

Tenacity continues through her cries, “*Her last words to me... on our last day of school... Were ‘I love you, Ten-Ten. I’ll see you later.’ I thought she was just saying goodbye to me... I didn’t think she was going to **leave** me! The whole summer, I felt like it was my fault! I **still** feel like it’s my fault! I should have seen the signs! If I can just rewind time, I’d go back to that moment and do something differently to where she’d still be alive! Surely, if I was a good friend, she’d still be here, wouldn’t she!? **Sniffles** Was I not a good friend...? That summer was the **worst** summer of my life. I never wore black before coming to the academy... but it was her favorite color... and now it’s mine...”*”

The girls take in the information that Tenacity shares with them, feeling a lump of sorrow form in their throats as their empathy for their friend swells up. Rose leans against her, and

Tenacity leans towards her as well, feeling their hair being each other's pillows. Everyone else wants to express their sympathy to the goth, as well, but they give her a second to recover and make sure she doesn't have anything else to say. Tenacity sniffles, and tries to fight through the tears. She slightly recovers from her breakdown and she says softly, "*Once Brooke was gone, I didn't want anymore friends. I was convinced that I was never meant to have friends. No one else seemed to fuck wit' me anyway, so what was the point? Anyone that knew of Brooke's death would try to send their condolences, but I didn't welcome them. I didn't want to hear it, especially if they were the ones giving her bullshit. I wanted to be a loner... I'll be brutally honest... when we first became friends... I didn't see you all as 'friends'... You all were more like distractions for me... And with how everything went down our first year of highschool... It was the perfect distraction. Then Melissa came back into the picture, and Nermal came in a year after that and... sighs... It just became harder and harder to leave you all. Seriously, why are y'all still here putting up with me? There's been a point in time where I've been a bitch to all of you... yet you're still calling me a friend...*"

"Um," Melissa starts, "You do realize that you weren't the only loner, right? We *literally* bonded over the fact that we'd sometimes have to eat lunch by ourselves!"

Jacqueline joins, "And yah, I did kinda force my way into your bubble, but it was because I was alone, too! Any other friends I made up until freshman year had all, like, moved onto other things in different schools or just didn't like my ass anyway."

Rose then says, "And you already know I was coming from being homeschooled, so I came to the academy *friendless*. And honestly, you can't claim that we were *just* distractions to you, Tee. You didn't *have* to hang with us. You could have had the same attitude towards us like you did

with everyone else and cut us off, but you didn't. You welcomed us, you hung around us, and you clearly love and care about us enough to be here with us now, and vice versa."

"It was at least true in the beginning," Tenacity says, "But... yeah... I did end up carin' about y'all. I still do... I'm sorry for givin' y'all such a hard time..."

"It's fine, Tee," Rose says as she nuzzles her, "We love and care about you too much to leave you alone and hold anything against you. You deserve to be surrounded by people who want what's best for you."

Jacqueline and Melissa get off of the couch they were resting on to move to Tenacity and Rose's couch, and they all hug each other tightly, feeling the love they have for each other warm their souls. Amethyst smiles softly at the group, and she decides to go lay next to Alexander, letting the friend group enjoy their accomplishment in getting over that hurdle. Tenacity then looks to see Issei watching them, his face relaxed though it's clear that he has a few things he wants to say to her. However, he turns around to go back to his sight-seeing, leaving Tenacity with the impression that they should try again with talking everything out involving their relationship. But before she can even think about making her way to her former lover, Jacqueline disconnects from the hug and says, "Okay, so, like, now that we finally understand why you act the way you do... Do you wanna just, like, go ahead and spill out your beef with me? I know I'm the only one you're always seeming to have problems with..."

Tenacity sighs, "Jackie, you have always been a pretty good friend. Yeah, we have our moments, but I know you mean well most of the time. It's just that sometimes you-"

"And just like that, your break is over~," Aidoneus purrs out sinisterly, his voice echoing throughout the dimension, ***"It's dinner time, and Luna is ravenous~ Ooh Luna, girl, your dinner is getting awaaaaay~"***

As soon as he says this, a colossal, deep-blue door appears miles away from the boat, and as it slowly opens, letting the water flood into the darkness, *fhmāāāāāāāāāāRGH!!!* A distorted cry echoes throughout the dimension, sounding similar to a whale's call. The team tries to see where the cry came from, and they unanimously turn to see the creature responsible is far behind them, peeking from the water to reveal that it's a midnight-blue whale about 5 times larger than a blue whale, her eyes red-orange-yellow ombre with slit pupils and her body covered in glowing purple cracks; the team comes to the conclusion that this beast is Luna, and they are correct. She stares daggers into the team, and she starts swimming towards them as fast as she can with her scraggly, light blue fins that have a soft glow, the ocean trying to run away from her as it makes huge waves. Diablo starts barking at Luna, thinking that his barks could scare her away, but it doesn't work.

Kendo looks at the waiting door and then the speeding Luna, and he looks at the steady boat they're on, noticing that it's not moving as fast as they need it to. Not even the wild waves can help them get away from the aquatic giant. *We gotta get off of this boat*, he thinks to himself, *There's no way we can whoop that thing*. Rose remembers the tiger beetle she's supposed to have taken, and she hurriedly resummons the insect and lets it bite her, *chomp!* A large surge of energy goes through her body, her heart beating rapidly. She looks at everyone in the boat, trying to find the answer to this predicament they're in.

The waves start rocking the boat violently, making some of the team lose their balance. Alexander picks up Amethyst as he summons his feathery wings and flies upwards, and Thomas, Pierre, and Issei do the same, summoning their wings and getting off of the boat. "We have to help the girls," Thomas instructs, Pierre and Issei showing their agreement through nodding. Thomas grabs Jacqueline, Pierre gets Melissa, and Issei takes Tenacity, leaving Kendo, Diablo,

and Rose left. They begin flying towards the door as fast as they can, but Luna makes it seem more impossible the closer she gets to them.

“Ken,” Rose exclaims to the chaotic jokester, “You have to transform into something like a dragon, right now!”

Kendo nods his head and says, “Alright, but I don’t wanna damage this boat and have you two swimmin’!” So he dives into the ocean, and he closes his eyes as his body glows and morphs into one of a dragon. Rose and Diablo see Kendo ascend from the water, seeing that he’s now a yellow dragon with black horns, his jasper eyes locking onto Rose’s rubies. He gets close to the boat, letting Rose get on his back, and she hangs on tightly. Kendo rises out of the water, and he decides to carry Diablo, letting his best friend enjoy the ride as he lets his purple tongue feel the winds. They all fly to their exit, getting closer and closer to the darkness, but Luna starts closing in as she opens her mouth revealing lots of sharp teeth. Rose feels dread trying to take over her soul, but she fights it with determination. She summons green-yellow tiger beetles, having them bite all of the flying members, giving them much more agility, and they fly faster.

They feel the winds trying to stop them from getting out of there, but the team doesn’t stop. They keep pushing through, not trying to look back at Luna whose mouth begins hovering over them, making it very apparent that she’s getting to where she can bite down and make them her snack. However, as soon as her mouth makes it to the door, the team dives through the exit safe and sound, the door instantly closing once everyone makes it through. *Chomp!! Swish, swoosh, swish, swoosh!* Luna bites down, gathering water and the door, making lots of waves and splashes, but she fails at devouring Kendo and his friends. She sinks into the ocean, continuing to disturb the ocean’s peace, wishing that she could get a taste of non-sea creature flesh.

f_māāāāāāāāāāRGh!!!

Chapter 23

The Cerberus Bros. manage to find a hotel in the central town of Umu, and they check in Rose's family and get them rooms, making sure that the workers don't give them a hard time. The peonis and Upendeonis that do work there already know not to act up in Cerberus' presence so the checking-in process becomes a breeze. Shandon, Zeena, and Cocoa get a room together, and Usiku and Delilah share a room that's across from theirs. Before they go into their rooms, Alpha says, "If you all need anything else, the workers here will help, but if you're not comfortable with getting help from them, then have them come find us."

"You don't have a phone," Delilah asks, tilting her head.

"Tuh, no," Beta answers, "We're not really tech-savvy."

"So y'all legit make these folks come fetch y'all if they need anything," Shandon implies.

"It's how we like it," Gamma says raspily, "It's not difficult to grab us, we're always at the Pits... or at least we're *supposed* to be."

"Well, we thank y'all for this," Zeena says calmly, a bit exhausted from the events she's had to witness thus far.

"It's no problem," Alpha says as he slightly bows, "If we witness anything, we'll be sure to let you all know. Enjoy your stay."

The family gives Alpha a nod of understanding, and the trio leaves the hotel after telling the hotel staff to not be a pain. While they go back to the Pits to monitor the Fallen and occasionally check Aidoneus' shielded castle, the family goes to their respective rooms, trying to find ways to wind down for a while. Delilah looks at the room Usiku and she will be staying in. She notices how simple it is: cream-colored walls; a queen size bed with brown and black bedsheets and pillows; a dark-brown wooden nightstand with a lamp that has an off-white, rectangular lamp shade; a chestnut-brown single couch; a large window with black drapes; an air conditioner; an

empty white mini-fridge; a closet that has a few hangers, iron, and ironing board; and a medium size bathroom that contains a sink, a large bathtub, and shower. As she looks at the room, memories begin to flood into her brain, making her mouth softly curve into a smile as she remembers how Usiku and she first started dating.

Delilah takes off her shoes, letting her feet sink into the black carpet, and Usiku walks to the air conditioner, trying to make the room slightly cooler than it is right now. He messes with it to where air does begin to blow, but it's not as cold as he would like for it to be. Delilah notices what Usiku is trying to do, and she walks up to him to see if he's making progress. The closer she gets to him, however, the stronger the smell of his efforts of getting to Rose begins to disturb her nose. She touches his dashiki and feels how damp it is. She then notices that his cloak is non-existent, most likely resting in the Umu sands somewhere. The tansi-human hybrid then looks out the window, seeing some peonis in the streets talking and almost getting into a fight. She looks at the dark sky, seeing the seven full moons hang there with no stars to accompany them. She looks at Usiku, seeing him fixated on the air conditioner, letting the slightly cool air hit his face, and she softly smiles, letting his calm expression warm her heart. She asks, "Does this remind you of something~?"

"Hmm, what are you referring to," the Quphanto descendant asks.

"When we lived in a hotel room together~," his soulmate coos.

"The room we lived in was much more decent than this, but I can see why you'd be reminded of those times..."

"*Sighs* If you would have told me that years later, we'd be right here, together... I'd have thought you were lying. My life was so desolate before you came around... you helped me with so much..."

“That’s how I feel with you, ‘Lilah. You were helping me, too... We were helping each other...”

Usiku turns to look at his soulmate, his face relaxed. Delilah feels her love for him swell up, and she decides to grab his warm, rugged hands, locking her kunzite eyes with his garnet eyes. She asks, “How are you feeling right now?”

“How are *you* feeling,” he flips the question back onto her.

“Aht aht, you first,” she giggles, “You’re not slithering out of this one, mister.”

“*Sighs* I’m... here. Having you here is keeping me from losing my mind again, but... I’m not exactly at peace...”

“Honey, you might feel better if we take a cool shower together. You’ve done so much, you haven’t really gotten a chance to rest.”

“Hmmm, you go on ahead, I think I’m just going to sit and reflect for a bit...”

“And let your funk permeate the room,” Delilah laughs out, “Darling, come on, you need this more than me. You’ve been doing so much to get Rose back. Are you not uncomfortable?”

“... We don’t even have a change of clothes,” Usiku comes to a realization as he looks at Delilah and himself.

“You act like you don’t have sisters to snag some clothes for us, real quick. Besides, this wouldn’t be our first time laying around the room naked for a long time~”

““Lilah...”

“Hmhmhmhm~! Come oooon, call up your sisters, ask them nicely to get us some new clothes, and let’s take a shower together~! Have them get something for Shandon and Zeena, too.”

“So many years later, and I’m still amazed by how you act during times like these...”

“What left is there to do, honey? There’s no point in being a stick in the mud especially if I know that’s not what Rose would want.”

“Rose....”

Delilah hugs Usiku tightly, trying to ignore the strong scent of determination. She says softly, “She’s fine, Usi... Come ooon, do you want her to come back to a stinky daddy~?”

“Heh... no,” he slightly chuckles, a smile creeps up on his face as he hugs her back. He then calls out, “Nruku!” His sisters fly into the room, squeaking away. “Search around Umu and get all of us some decent clothing, please.”

Squeak! Squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“Don’t rub it in,” Usiku mutters, not liking his sisters teasing him for finally showing some politeness towards them.

“Thank you,” Delilah says to his sisters, smiling at them, and they fly out of the room. “Now about that shower, Usi~” she then purrs as she starts pulling him to the bathroom, wanting to help him with washing away the worry and stress he’s put himself through since being in Umu.

...

The team soars into the darkness, and the door closes before Luna could eat them, some of the ocean flooding into the room. They land on the somewhat flooded floor, feeling their shoes and possibly socks getting wet. As they catch their breath, Aidoneus sighs out, “***Hello again, friends~ Did you enjoy your break~?***”

They all stay silent, but their anger boils over and takes the form of heavy breathing and clenched fists. They know that it would be pointless to say anything to the CEO of Umu, knowing that he feeds off of their negative emotions. Aidoneus then says, “***Hm, anyway, I’m assuming the amethyst is the only gem left that needs a home, yes? Well, let’s hurry this along.***”

Seeing that you all have been trying to improve your relationship together, let's see if you can work together helping someone in need. Rose, you love creepy crawlies, and Pierre, you're always helping animals, as well. Maybe you two wouldn't mind helping a glow worm with something, hmm? The rest of your team surely wouldn't mind lending a helping hand, right? Do this for me, and I will finally let you reunite with your precious friend."

"Uuuughhh, anyways," Jacqueline's voice echoes as they all begin to close their eyes, "TeeTee, you were saying before we got *interrupted*?"

"Right, fuck this dude," Tenacity says coldly, tired of Aidoneus' shenanigans, as well, "I was sayin' that even though you mean to be a good friend, there are moments where you do piss me off." She continues talking as the little sphere of light repeats its dance, "Like when you're bitchin' about the simplest things, whether it's walking a long distance, gettin' messy during a fighting sequence, whinin' 'bout bein' tired *afterwards*. You were always doin' the most or the least, never in between, and it's like it's guaranteed to hear you have a bitch fest regardless."

The light sends everyone to expansive grasslands, the tall grass coated with not only silver from the full moon that rests upon the night sky, stars twinkling to say their hello's to the team, but also with hints of greens, blues, and purples from the aurora borealis that dance across the sky like ribbons. The team open their eyes to take in the view, but Tenacity walks to Jacqueline, wanting to continue their conversation while being able to look at her finally. She says, "Even before we even dove into this new reality, you would complain about your parents and what they were doin', and seein' it from my perspective, it just looked like a spoiled princess whining about getting the wrong set of shoes meanwhile she has a whole *mansion*, butlers and maids givin' her whatever she wants and needs, personal chefs cookin' her meals, just having everything handed to her and she doesn't have to lift a fuckin' finger. You were able to do

whatever you want, and daddy dearest would be right there to cover up the tracks. If not for him, I don't think you'd have been able to graduate if I'm bein' blunt. I just wish you could just realize how good you got it. Even though your relationship with your parents could be better, you're still doing better than most folks."

"I... *sighs* I understand," Jacqueline says softly, crossing her arms and displaying a soft frown, "I guess I have been acting like a crybaby around you and everyone else. It's just that everything is so new, and it's, like, I was expecting all of this to have some sorts of fun in it. But in reality... this is the most work I've ever, like, done. I'm not trying to excuse my whining, but like.... Can you, like, blame me? It's like you said, everything was handed to me, and that wouldn't have happened if it weren't for my parents."

"Yeah, you're not wrong," Tenacity says, "If not for mommy and daddy spoiling the fuck outta you, you might have had some gratitude. But Jackie, I can't lie to you, even though your dad was foul for sayin' the shit he said once you pressed too many of his buttons, he *did* try to get you on the right path, didn't he?"

"..."

"You acknowledged it yourself. You told us that he said that the way he brought you up wasn't the best way to raise a child, and he tried to make things right by encouraging you to go to college and teach you responsibility while he's still around and while you're under his roof. He wasn't tryin' to throw you out to the wolves. Your mom was trying to help out, too, as best as she could."

"... So what I'm hearing is... I'm a problem all-around."

“No, you’re hearing that you’ve been on this high horse for so long, and people around you are tryin’ to help you get off of it before it’s too late, even the people that put you there in the first place.”

“...”

Jacqueline looks to the ground, listening to her friend’s words, realizing how much of an issue she truly was despite Tenacity wording it differently. She’s been using her friends as a diary for every time an inconvenience came around, she didn’t realize how entitled she was sounding to them. They have problems just like her yet she made her life problems sound like it would be the end of the world. She then thinks about Nermal, seeing her sister’s smile once again. “*Do I deserve to see Nermal again,*” the party girl croaks.

“Neither of us do,” Tenacity answers, making Jacqueline look up at her in slight surprise. The goth says, “Look at us, Jackie. I was bein’ a bitch towards everyone includin’ the only friends I’ve had because I was havin’ a hard time livin’ with what happened to Brooke. You were bein’ a spoiled bitch doin’ everything she can to run away from her responsibilities and used her parents as a scapegoat. I think that out of all of us, Rose and Melissa are the only decent people...”

“... Yeah,” Jacqueline sighs, “... *sighs* Oh Tenacity, I’m sorry... for everything. I’m sorry to you guys, too.” She starts looking at Rose and Melissa who have been listening to the conversation this entire time, not wanting to interrupt.

“You already know I’m going to say it’s fine, Jackie,” Rose says softly, her heart beating calmly knowing that this is another obstacle they’re finally pushing through.

“Yeah, it’s like Tenacity said,” Melissa adds, “You’re a cool person to be around. I always liked how energetic you would be compared to the rest of us, and how much fun you wanted to have with us with whatever we’re doing, but it’s just the whining you do, that’s all.”

“I’ll try to do less crying from now on,” the party girl says, “Don’t expect it to be different, like, *now now*, because like, I’m sure I’m going to still whine every now and then, but like, I’ll at least try... for you guys.”

“That’s all that I ask,” Tenacity says, “No more brattiness and maybe take baby steps into bein’ someone that actually puts in some work. We don’t want you to end up on the streets or worse just ‘cuz you want to have fun all of the time. I get genuinely concerned every time you mention going to a party for a reason... I don’t want you to... harm yourself... you know...?”

“Yah, I get it,” the party girl says and immediately nods, feeling guilt make her heart weigh a ton as she realizes that every time she spoke of a party, going to someone else’s spot, getting extremely drunk to where she can’t keep her eyes open, she’s reminding Tenacity of someone she lost. “For you guys, I’m gonna, like, what’s the phrase? Turn a new leaf?”

“Yes,” Tenacity, Rose and Melissa giggle out, and they can’t help but to hug each other once again, happy to finally get Jacqueline to see what they were talking about.

“*Sighs* Okay, let’s, like, focus on Nermal before I start crying,” Jacqueline says giggling a little bit, “Even though I don’t deserve to be here trying to save her, she deserves to be back home happy and free. And I’m already here, so like, let’s get to it!”

“Couldn’t have said it myself,” Tenacity agrees.

“We have to look for a glow worm, right,” Melissa asks, wanting to get straight into business.

“Yes,” Rose confirms, and she looks around to see everyone else is walking around the grasslands, trying to find their target. Then she sees Diablo running up to her, Kendo behind him. “Awww, hi, baby,” she says in a high-pitch tone, kneeling down to give Diablo his rubs, “You’ve been such a good boy~! How’s the search for this glow worm?”

Arf arf arf! Whimper...

“We were hoping you’d have some knowledge on those things, cherry lips,” Kendo says, resting his hands in his pockets, “Because as we can see, we’re in this wide open space, and we have no idea how the lord of assholes expect us to find this small ass insect... if it’s even small.”

“Hmmm, let’s bring Thomas since he has the ring pieces,” Rose suggests, “If it works like how it did a couple rooms ago, it should lead us to the cute beetle.”

“Wait, glow worms aren’t worms,” Jacqueline asks while they begin walking towards the Upendelaiki who happens to be using the ring as they speak to help with his search.

“Nope,” Rose answers, giggling out of excitement from sharing new knowledge, “They’re not worms at all. They’re only called worms because of how they look, worm-like. But in actuality, they’re just beetles. In fact, glow worms are just flightless fireflies! Fireflies are males while glow worms are females, and they find their mate through shining as brightly and as beautifully as they can.”

“Huh, interesting,” Kendo says, “Maybe I should try that then. I’ll paint my ass with glow-in-the-dark paint and then shake it in hopes of finding someone~!”

“You’re so unserious, Ken,” Tenacity grumbles as she rolls her eyes.

“But for real though,” Kendo says, focusing back on the situation, “Since you know all of this, Rose, where would a glow worm be located?”

“Hmmm,” Rose taps her chin, then she looks at the sky, “Usually glow worms burrow underground to avoid predators during the day time. It’s night time now, so... they should be out here somewhere.”

“But it’s not,” says Melissa, “So maybe it’s still underground?”

Thomas looks at the ring, seeing that the aquamarine and sapphire are now latched onto the ring band, leaving the amethyst remaining in the pouch. He looks up to see the ladies, Kendo,

and Diablo walk up to him in hopes of finding the glow worm. Suddenly, the helpful Upendelaiki's eyes sparkle, and he immediately stands in front of Kendo. "Kendo," he says, "Let me see your hand!"

"O-Oh, uuh, okay," Kendo says hesitantly, lifting his left hand, which Thomas firmly grasps. The Upendelaiki gently places the ring onto the chaotic jokester's ring finger, which makes Kendo purr out, "Oh my~ Vanilla bean twin, don't you have a wifey at home~?"

"It's a perfect fit," Thomas says, ignoring him, "Are you feeling anything, Kendo?? Anything magical?"

"Besides you non-verbally telling me that you and I are a unity now," Kendo jokes, "Ummmmm-"

"Kendo..."

"H-Huh," the chaotic jokester squeaks out, caught off guard by the gruff voice that he recognizes.

"Ohohohoho~! So the ring does fit!"

"I told you I knew Kendo's ring size! Keeendoooo, teehee! Can you hear us!?"

"Ugh, took him long enough to put it on..."

"Keeendooooo, aaare yooouuu theere?"

"Aaah, has my phoenix finally placed the puzzle pieces where they need to be~?"

"Not quite, yet... Vanity still can't patch through..."

Kendo can't help but to become unbalanced from the voices that have become audible inside of his head, and his team members help him sit down, unsure of what's happening. "Ken," says Rose, worried, "Are you okay?? What's happening?"

Kendo looks at Rose, then sees that everyone has gathered around, giving up on the search for the glow worm at the moment. They wait for him to say something, then he hesitates, “I-I-”

“Don’t rat us out, you idiot...”

“Yes, unless you want Aidoneus to continue having the upperhand...”

“Listen to us, Kendo! We put centuries into this plan, so don’t mess it up, do you hear me!?”

“If my beautiful gems did what they were supposed to, they should have been helping you and your friends get closer to that scoundrel.”

“They should also be keeping our connection with you a secret from Aidoneus. He may have gotten himself to where he is now, but he’s still not a Quphanto.”

“He’s got a long way to go whether he believes that or not, ohoho~ But telling him that will probably bruise his ego, oohohohooo~!”

“Keeendoooo, giiiive uuuus cooontext. Whaat iiiis haaappeniing?”

“And please just talk within your mind, my phoenix. We’ll hear you perfectly fine.”

Kendo feels his head starting to pound from the Quphantos’ influence over his brain. “H-Hold on,” he hisses out as he begins holding his head, trying to keep a low volume while hoping that everyone can take the hint of not asking him any more questions.

“Weeee’re soooooorryyy, Keen...”

“I’m not. You need to straighten up, focus, and get to explaining what Aidoneus has done.”

“The sooner you get your crazy ass in gear, the better. And hurry up, my stomach is growling!”

“It would probably help him if we just stopped talking for a second...”

The Quphantos, Kendo thinks to himself, *Are inside my head...?*

“Yes, now start singing.”

“Abigor...”

“Kendo, dearie, we HAVE to get Vanity’s gem onto your ring in order for it to be used to its full potential. You’re going to need it when you face Aidoneus.”

If that’s the case, then we need to get out of this room, and fast. It’s how we’ve been able to get your gems on this thing. Lord Twat-doneus been changing up this place again and again ever since we stepped foot into his castle.

“Manipulating reality itself? Ohohoho, even I’m impressed. That’s tiring even for a Quphanto.”

“Must be juiced up on his own supply... I will have to drink to that, I called it the moment we found out about Kendo’s birth that he would try to pull this stunt.”

Huh?? What are you talking about?

“My phoenix, there’s so much more to your father than he’s been revealing. But to put it simply, he’s been pushing himself into the same predicament as Rose for a long while. We knew that he had alternative motives when he came to Umu, but we weren’t sure of exactly what it was. We just knew it involved him trying to become stronger. For instance, this castle... is not real... he made that place up within his mind...”

W-What!?

“Please tell me that you’ve noticed some themes in whatever Aidoneus is doing. For example, have you paid attention to his Spirit Eye? What colors are they? Did you see them anywhere else? If so, then that must have been him watching you all... listening in. Another example, and this ties to the castle, ever spotted some other colors making a scene? Perhaps red and purple? Though in my opinion, those colors clash...”

Whenever we saw red and purple, they were these... areas that we knew we shouldn't touch. One of them acted like it was a portal somewhere because it took Issei's katana. So... wait a minute, are you saying that **he** sat here and conjured up a whole castle!? And I've been living in it!?!

"Not your idea of a wonderland, huh, ohohoho..."

"For centuries, Aidoneus has been making so many concoctions, anything to help him progress in his plan."

Wait a minute, wait a minute. Give me a second because now I have **so** many questions.

"Yeah, we know. We sense them bubbling up like Alphonse's stomach, teeheehee~!"

"Shut it, bug face!!"

"Keeeen, weeee're soooooorryyy. Thiiiiis iiiis soooo muuuuch foor yooooouu toooo taaaake iii-"

"Yeah yeah, so much for him to take in, and he has no choice but to deal with it."

So how exactly is Aidoneus trying to bring Umu to Gaia? How did he keep **me** here in Umu for so long if I was supposed to be in Gaia? Why does he need me if he can do all of this shit himself? How does he even know everyone's information? What are these souls that keep popping out of his creations, and why are they dark flames instead of light?

"Stop right there... souls that are a dark flame...?"

Yes!! He's literally in here making these different places, deserts, islands, grasslands, gardens, and making creatures that talk and do all kinds of shit, and when they die, they leave behind a black flame!!

"Hm, Alphonse, you might want to retract that statement about Aidoneus having a long way to go..."

“NO KIDDING, DID THIS PRISSY UPENDELAIKI TRULY GET THIS POWERFUL?”

“Then... his threats... he wasn't bluffing...”

His threats?? Why the hell are y'all helping me and y'all are QUPHANTOS!? WHY COULDN'T YOU HAVE DONE SOMETHING ABOUT THIS!! YOU GUYS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE STRONGER THAN HIM, WHAT THREATS COULD HE HAVE MADE THAT HAVE Y'ALL RELYING ON ME TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?

“Keeeen... Theeee truuuuuth üüüis-”

“Um, excuse me, but why are you all just sitting there...?” Aidoneus' voice echoes across the dimension, his tone as dry and coarse as sandpaper. The Quphantos hear the person they were forced to call a 'comrade'. However, they stay silent, giving Kendo a chance to focus back onto the people in front of him and the being that is making them go through all of these pointless trials. ***“Come on now, the glow worm isn't going to find itself-”***

“How 'bout you bring the glow worm to us since you want us to see it so damn badly,” Tenacity exclaims.

“Yeah, you're, like, able to do all of this shit,” Jacqueline joins, *“You go get the glow worm! Chop chop!”*

“At this point, Aidoneus, I feel like I'd much rather sit here and talk with my team,” Melissa yawns out, stretching her body.

“What about your friend, Nermal?” Aidoneus asks, a little drop of frustration can be heard in his voice, ***“Do you not want to rescue her? You'd be terrible friends if you-”***

“Aaah shut up,” Issei groans as he lays back, *“How 'bout you give me back my katana while you're doin' all that yappin'?”*

“We’re done with your games if you couldn’t tell, Aidoneus,” Thomas says, “We’ve entertained you for far too long.”

“If you’re afraid of facing us, just say that,” Alexander says as he shrugs, “We all know Amy would knock you down easily.”

“Don’t give me too much hype, Alex,” Amethyst mutters as her face heats up.

“*Sighs* Well, since we’re all just sitting here, you all wouldn’t mind if I give this place some setting music, right,” Pierre asks as he whips out his bronze recorder.

“Blow away, red velvet~,” Kendo says as he claps for the anticipated performance.

Arf! Arf! Arf! Diablo happily cheers for Pierre, sitting next to him and rubbing his head against his arm, making the Upendeoni cringe despite a sense of comfort creeping up in his soul.

“***It’s that ring, isn’t it,***” the devil sneers out, “***Well share with the class... What else does it do besides glowing like a worn out neon sign?***”

Pierre licks his lips and delicately places them onto the recorder, and within seconds, serene sounds begin to escape from the instrument. The Upendeoni plays and plays, letting the music take him away, and everyone else listens, riding the wave with him. They all sway happily on the cool-colored ribbons in the sky, letting the stress and torment that they’ve been going through since stepping into the castle dissipate into thin air. Even though he wants to enjoy this moment of peace, Thomas looks at Kendo and can’t stop his eyes from targeting the ring. Kendo notices, and he shakes his head gently and tilts it upwards, trying to tell him that Aidoneus is not supposed to know. The Upendelaiki immediately understands and nods his head, wanting to trust the chaotic jokester despite being left in the dark. Letting Pierre create the peaceful ambiance that surrounds them, the team decides to hold a regular conversation. Melissa looks at Kendo and asks him, “Could you explain to me now why Pierre calls me ‘honeybee’ from time to time?”

Pierre immediately stops playing, looking at Melissa with shock plastered on his face though his recorder stays where it's at. "Oh c'mon, Pierre," Kendo chuckles, "They were bound to hear it sooner or later. Keep playing~!"

"Yeah, well you better tell it correctly," Pierre says in annoyance, and he goes back to playing his recorder.

"Okay," says the chaotic jokester, sitting up and holding his hands out as he recollects the honeybee origin story, "So there's a few reasons why our *beloved* Pierre resorts to 'honeybee' as an insult for you, bubblegum. Let me ask you this, during your time here in Umu, have you seen any bees buzzing around here?" The team shakes their heads. He continues, "That's because bees on this side of the universe are usually found in either Maza or the Love Quphanto's domain. And as we all know, Umuites aren't very fond of those two places, far from it."

"So basically he's calling her something that ties to his natural enemy," Rose concludes.

"Yep, it's that, and the fact that he *did* get pranked," Kendo snickers, "He pissed off a Tansi because he wouldn't give her the time of day. She didn't like his response, and she legit went to the black market to buy several jars of Mazan honeybees, just for her friends and her to walk up on Pierre and unleash the madness!"

"We were friends prior to that bullshit," Pierre explains while creasing his eyebrows and deepening his frown, putting another stop to the music, "She wanted to take things a step further, and I told her I wasn't comfortable. The moment she released those pieces of shits on me, I just grew a deep hatred for the insect altogether."

"Well, that's interesting," says Rose, "I hate that it happened to you, though, Pierre. Some people just can't handle the word 'no' ..."

“Tuh, it’s whatever,” Pierre shakes off, “It’s normal here in Umu... You’re bound to run into the ‘wrong one’ sooner or later.”

“But my thing is you only call *MeeMee* that,” Jacqueline points out, “Like, what’s up with that?”

“We associate honeybees with positive shit, hence the thought of you tryna flirt with her was a thing,” Tenacity says.

“She just annoys me *that* much,” Pierre mutters, looking away for a second, and he goes back to playing his recorder.

“And you’re all about to annoy me,” Aidoneus growls out, “Anti, if you’re not going to find the glow worm, then fine. At least tell me about the ring, and I’ll let you through. I can compromise. I can work around that. I can come up with other solutions. I can accept some disappointment, UNLIKE YOU. I ask for one thing from you and it’s ‘NO, POPS, I DON’T WANNA’. Waaah waaaah WAAAAH!!”

“Right back at ya’, Lucy~,” Kendo says playfully, the dark circles taking over his eyes darken while his heart races in iration, “I ask you to let me go, ya’ know, just one thing, and it’s ‘No, AnTi, I DoN’T WaNnA’! Waaah waaaah waaaaaaah!”

***“... Hehehehe... Hehehehehehehehehe... Hahahahahahahahahahaha!
HA!! Fine... It’s fine...
Hahahaha, it’s aaaaall fine~ You won’t do as I say? You want to have an attitude!? Fine!! If you won’t tell me what the Quphantos have given you, I’ll find out myself. It’s what I have to keep doing. In order to learn, in order to expand my knowledge, I have to push myself to do so. I can’t expect everything to be given to me. Yes... I’ll just take it by force~... As soon as you walk through this door, you’re going to WISH that you’d have found that glow worm...”***

Pierre and Kendo both look at each other with different versions of surprise, taken aback by Aidoneus' complete shift in behavior. Never have they witnessed the mastermind this upset. This isn't the Upendeoni that always talked so calmly and kept his smile shining bright like diamonds. Every time he spoke, Aidoneus made sure he sounded like a gentle soul, always trying to make the souls he interacted with feel welcomed and comforted. However, they knew how manipulative he was, always dangling flaws and mistakes in people's faces, finding ways to twist situations to make it sound like he's not the cause of a problem. And now... they're hearing a man that is possibly knocking things over as he throws his temper tantrum.

Seconds after Aidoneus' outburst, a vibrant purple door appears near them. The team gets up from their spots and approaches the door cautiously yet hastily. As Kendo reaches his hand out towards the golden knob, the Quphantos speak to him once again.

“Stay on your guard, Kendo. Lucifer is going to up the ante now that you've pissed him off.”

You're... calling him Lucifer, too, Kendo asks them, slight shock showing up on his face. He opens the door and everyone walks into the darkness.

“Fuck that Mazan reject, ohohohohoooo~ Keep that descendant friend of yours alive. The ring is a major part of this plan, but Ubokufa got involved, as well. Rose is needed.”

So then why did y'all try to kill her during the challenges, the chaotic jokester asks them.

“It was a facade, dearie. To keep Aidoneus from thinking we were trying to stop him... although I'm sure he's figured it out by now.”

“That bedazzled sewer rat will rue the day he convinced himself that he could be more powerful than us. We've been waiting for this very moment.”

“Weee're rooooting foooor yooooouuu, Keeeendoooo!”

“Once Vanity’s gem attaches itself to your ring, my phoenix, the ring will finally be complete, and we’ll be able to help you take down Lucifer. It should be trying to connect itself now. Do you see it?”

Although they’re in complete darkness once again, electricity popping can be heard in Thomas’ pouch. “Hm,” the Upendelaiki says, feeling for the pouch, and he grabs it and opens it to see the amethyst glowing and little lightning streaks dance around it. He doesn’t want to touch it, but he doesn’t need to because the gem flies right out of its container, dancing around everyone, leaving purple sparkles around, and it connects to the ring, making the entire piece of jewelry glow for a few seconds and then leaving the team in darkness once again. Suddenly, Kendo hears a new voice in his head...

“Hm, finally. Hello, Kendo.”

Yooo Lady V~!

Chapter 24

Ba. Bump. Ba. Bump. Darkness. One. Last. Time. However, there is something different about this time around. Hostility fogs up the area and seeps into the team's bodies, giving them the sensation that they should be ready for an attack. What exactly would attack them? They have no idea since Aidoneus can create anything. "We should get ready," Issei suggests, and everyone agrees. However, even though Issei gets his ice gun ready, everyone else tries to summon their weapons... but nothing happens.

"Umm... It's happenin' again," Tenacity grumbles, already having to go through this before when they first were surprised by Aidoneus.

"Now see, how is he able to do *that*," Issei asks, raising his hands though no one can see it.

"If he's able to snuff out your powers for a while, then you all need to hurry, Kendo. That's an ability only WE can do."

"I'm surprised he hasn't changed up your appearances just to mess with you. Adding and subtracting abilities is all part of changing up a soul's appearances. It's how I was able to create my Tansis and give them the distinct abilities that they have."

"Go ahead and suggest that, Kendo, see how Lucifer reacts. He believes that you don't know any better, but even this is common knowledge in the Spirit Realm."

"Ah, so we're back to calling him that name."

"Yes, and I hope that you won't get in one of your hissy fits just because we're trashing your boyfriend."

"Correction, plaything."

"Plaything? But Vanity, dear, you always did have a soft spot for hi-"

"I don't recall such sentiments."

"Huh, that pridefulness is in full effect I see."

Kendo considers Abigor's suggestion of irking Aidoneus one last time. So he says, "Hmmm, if I had to guess, it's probably because Lucy is tryna play Big Bad Quphanto~ Awww, Pops, I didn't know that you liked playing preten-"

"You think you're so fucking cute, don't you," Aidoneus growls, "YOU'VE played pretend for EIGHT CENTURIES. You've convinced yourself to believe that Gaia is your home, that the people there love and care about you, that you're supposed to be living a regular human life. You would rather live a MEDIOCRE LIFE than live a PROSPEROUS LIFE. Do you realize how BACKWARDS you sound? No. Of course you don't. You're broken beyond repair. I've tried helping you, and-"

"I don't know why you're wastin' your breath," Kendo chuckles, "A sentence later, you're gonna tell me you're gonna *kill* me."

"... You're right. I am going to kill you, and it's going to be beautiful~ So let's go ahead and get this over with, shall we~?"

The sphere of light appears one more time, taking the team through the blinding process again. When the light disappears, the team open their eyes to see that they're inside a room with dim lights, one of the light bulbs flickering. The air is freezing cold, and the walls and floor are densely padded, the ivory-white making Kendo's heart immediately sink. He notices the lack of furniture, the paddings on the walls and floor, and his breathing slowly loses tempo, starting to let in air and let it out more quickly. Everyone looks at this place, and the girls immediately figure it out. Rose checks on Kendo, and she sees his pupils dilating from his memories of being trapped start fogging his mind and cutting his air supply. *Pant pant pant pant pant*. "Ken," the Quphanto descendant says softly, standing in front of him and trying to get a hold of his frightened soul.

“Breathe, my phoenix... It’s going to be okay... This is not your home. Not anymore.”

Arf arf arf! Whimper whimper! Diablo stands by his friend and starts hopping on him, trying to give him kisses of comfort.

“I-I-I’m tr-tr-trying,” Kendo whimpers, *“That fucking shithead! I-I just can’t-”*

“Hey,” Tenacity calls out, “The door is right here. Let’s get out of here!” The goth points at the black iron door that rests in front of them. Kendo looks at the only door that ever laughed at his face, that ever joked about his freedom. The thought of Aidoneus easing his way inside the room with a syringe ready to invade Kendo’s body once more sends chills up and down his spine. However, he remembers that there’s no straitjacket stopping him from trying to escape this time. He immediately rushes to the door and grips on the silver door handle. However, *jiggle jiggle jiggle!* The door is locked.

“You think I was going to make it EASY for you, HAHHAHAHAHAHAHAHA,”

Aidoneus maniacally shouts, ***“Now where is the fun in that, huh!? You didn’t even get the chance to hear the story I wanted to share~! About how I become who I am now-”***

“AND WE DON’T CARE,” the girls shout out simultaneously.

“Seriously, shut the fuck up *forever*,” Jacqueline whines out.

“I second that,” Melissa jumps in.

“Aidoneus, you’re dragging this shit out, now,” Pierre complains, “Let us through!”

“The sooner you accept your fate, the better,” Alexander exclaims, “No use in fighting it anymore!”

ARF ARF ARF!! Grrrrrr!!!!

“Just give it up, dude,” Issei says, throwing his hands up in the air, “You lost! End of story-”

“**SILENCE!!!**” Aidoneus releases a shrilling scream, and as soon as he says this, the team tries to bark back. However... nothing escapes their mouths. They look at each other with wide eyes, and Jacqueline and Melissa begin holding each other and squealing, wanting their voices to come back, but it’s just silence. “*Aaaaaah, that’s better~*,” Aidoneus moans out, “***Such sweet music~ Hahahahahahaha~! Are you all that forgetful!? I TOLD YOU BEFORE~! You were going to be FORCED to listen to my monologue, and I don’t care that YOU don’t care for it!! Now, ahem... It all started when Ideya created everything...***”

“*Oh, I HAVE to hear his version of how we got here, oohohoho~*”

Wait, Kendo thinks to himself, *You guys can still-... Oh that’s right, you’re in my head.*

“***Don’t waste your energy on that door for now, Kendo. Save your energy. Let Lucifer talk himself to death.***”

Could you guys just go ahead and tell me how to use this ring while he yaps away?

“***I think you’ll benefit from hearing his version of everything, my phoenix.***”

“***Yes, teehee, more ammo for your little banter with him~!***”

“***Flaaaaws. Look fooooor flaaaaaws iiii stooory!***”

I’m so tired of listening to him!... But alright, if that’s what you all are suggesting, then I’ll let Bitch-doneus rattle. Kendo doesn’t bother trying to open the door anymore, and he sits on the chilly floor, letting the floor welcome him back after a while. Everyone notices this, and they all follow his lead, understanding that the door is locked, their powers are unavailable... what can they do? They are truly being forced into something they didn’t want to participate in, but here they are, having to listen to Aidoneus.

Aidoneus begins, “***Ideya created the universe to where it would be split into two dimensions that we all know, the Flesh Realm and the Spirit Realm. There’s also the Dream Realm, but***

that's irrelevant for now. Flesh Realm consists of Gaia, and the Spirit Realm consists of Maza, Umu, and many other domains that you'll never get to see. For Maza, Ideya created malaikis and Upendelaikis whereas for Umu, She created peonis and Upendeonis. She made it possible for anyone to become what they want if they worked for it and embraced it... which allowed souls to change up everything about themselves, even becoming a being that they're supposed to oppose. We come to know this as 'tainting'. How does this tie in to me, you ask?

"You see, the road that I took to get to where I am now has not been an easy one...

However, it has been worth it. That's what we all say no matter what path we choose, right? Well, my path began at the beginning of time. I was an Upendelaiki, part of the High Court. For those who don't know, the High Court consists of seven Upendelaikis, one from each Virtue Village. I came from Diligence Village. The High Court dedicated their energy into making sure that everything in Maza was running smoothly and giving out missions to Malaikis and Upendelaikis going to Gaia. I loved my work. I enjoyed seeing Maza be so peaceful, so filled with warm light. I loved it so much that I dedicated whatever free time I did have into studying the other six virtues, wanting to master them as well so that I can find better ways of improving and protecting it. I dedicated myself to mastering all seven virtues. I even decided to go help the Malaikis and Upendelaikis with their missions from time to time.

"Being in Gaia managed to break my heart every time. Seeing humans suffer from the darkness of the world, caused by not only themselves but the spirits of Umu. I wanted to do something. I had to do something. After having enough, I decided to go to the High Court to discuss my worry. 'I don't want to see humans suffer like this anymore,' I said to them, 'There has to be a way to save them.' They looked at me with sorrow, understanding where I was coming from. You know what they said to me?

“After expressing my concern to my holy brothers and sisters in the High Court, they said to me, ‘Lucy, there’s nothing we can do. Our role is to only help humans move towards the light, and the Umuites’ role is the complete opposite. It’s how Ideya intended the universe to work. We can’t do anything about that.’ I was highly upset, but I appreciated them hearing me out. I started doing more research. I continued going down to Gaia to get more motivation and inspiration, trying to determine what I could do to solve this dilemma. I just knew that there had to be a way to help the Gains. Why did they have to wait until Death to experience full happiness, right? It just seems unnecessary. As I studied, I found new ways to improve the Villages, as well. I couldn’t just abandon my home and my duties after all. That’s when it dawned on me. Why wait until Death to find Maza when I could just bring Maza to you? What do I mean by that??

“Maza is a domain filled with light. Umu is a domain filled with darkness. My goal was to bring the light from my home to your home, Gaia. As Mazans, we are spirits who give off natural positivity and never run out of it unless we are tainted. Same can be said about Umuites with their negativity. So, I sought out different ways of making my dream into a reality. I thought of going to war with Umu, attempting to wipe them out of existence, so that we wouldn’t have to worry about darkness ever harming you Gaians again. Then I thought of a more peaceful route: Open the largest portal possible to the point both Maza and Gaia would merge. It would be so much light and positivity that it would drive the evil spirits away. Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? I thought so, too...

“I thought that by expressing the idea I had to my colleagues, they would understand and want to expand on it. But no... they shut me down immediately. Them denying me of my genius steered me to the right direction, however. I realized that the only spirits capable of

even opening a portal so large were the Quphantos... So why not go to them? I talked to the Quphantos of Virtue, pleading for them to see the vision that I had. The silence they gave me was so daunting, but I was hoping that they would agree to the plan. Finally, they fixed their mouths to say 'No.' Oooh the rage that I felt... I went around Maza, telling others about what happened, explaining to them what I was aiming to do. The High Court caught wind of what was being gossiped, and they approached me. It was at that moment I had declared that I was leaving Maza. If they weren't going to be on my side, then so be it. And you humans rely on these beings to protect you every single day of your lives, tuh. I left Maza, and my soul was filled with so much wrath and sorrow, I stumbled upon Umu.

“At first, everyone here despised seeing me in their home, which is understandable. I was an Upendelaiki, after all. Cerberus, the Guardian of Umu, questioned why I was there. I explained my situation to them, but they refused to let me stay. They did all that they could to kick me out, but then I took notice of their home. Umu didn't look like it does now. There were no lava pits, no pizzazz. It was freezing cold and lonely as if it was supposed to be Limbo. Then it hit me... if Maza won't let me help them, then Umu will. I offered to help my fellow peonis and Upendeonis. I declared that I was no longer one of Maza's people and that my devotion and knowledge will go towards making Umu better. My speech sounded nice, but not everyone was on board. It was until the Quphantos of Sin heard of my arrival and listened to what I had to say was when everything turned for the better.

“The Umu Quphantos heard me out, and they had mixed opinions of what I wanted to do: to merge Gaia with Umu. Reasonably so, they told me to focus on improving Umu first and then perhaps they will help my Master Plan come to fruition. And so I did that. I created the Pits for the Huzuzis, or the Fallen, I improved the Sin Districts, I even went back to Maza to

convince the majority of malaikis and Upendelaikis to join me. We all became peonis and Upendeonis, and it was going to be a wonderful era. I was so close to my goal, but then Maza and Umu went into a huge war because the heavenly souls couldn't stand seeing Umu rising from its ashes like a phoenix. I decided to make a deal with the Mazans. The Pits would be for the souls who were denied access to Maza, and Maza would come up with whatever mediocre system for the souls that couldn't get into Umu, and those souls would be soon called Kuokas or the Saved. That way, the 'balance' that they oh so desired for would be in place. Maza left us alone, we left them alone. I wanted to finally move on to my final phase, but peonis and Upendeonis were begging me to continue what I was doing. They begin seeing me as their High Court. They were so happy to have me here. Feeling the appreciation from spirits I once saw as my enemies welled up my non-existent heart. The Umu Quphanots even granted me immense power and a longer life span so that I could continue my work and never have to worry about Reincarnation coming for me. So I decided to stay here for a while. But then I realized my purpose once again... and I couldn't waste any more time.

"I know that my plan seems dissatisfying to most of you. It's natural. However, if you were wanting the world to be bathed in light, then you can blame Maza for not letting it happen. It is their fault that your world will be filled with darkness very soon. I tried to help, but your heavenly friends shot me down. THEY are the cause of your despair. Remember that. Now, I need Anti because I had a hunch that the Quphantos here wouldn't help me with my Master Plan of merging Gaia with Umu. It started feeling like they were holding me back though I'm sure they were just thinking about their home first, which I understand. I've gained so much knowledge of this universe, understanding the virtues, glorifying the sins, discovering everything in between, attempting to achieve ultimate power. My Spirit Eye has become visible

due to my diligence. However, I want to be able to commence the Merge and still be around to see it. I try to do it now, I'm bound to reset or even worse, reincarnate. I knew that I needed some security just in case I did meet that fate. That's where you come in, Anti."

Aidoneus stops talking, and then *click!* The door unlocks, making everyone's souls jump for joy. "Finally," Issei speaks, catching himself off guard, "Oh shit, we can talk again!"

"Oh my god, that was torture," Jacqueline whimpers, "But now we can move forward, let's go!"

"Hold it," Tenacity says, "Let's see if our powers came back, too."

"Oh yeah, that's right," says the party girl, and she tries to summon her ice staff, and *fwoosh!* She's successful. "Oh hell yeah, we're, like, *soo* back~!"

Everyone else summons their weapons, and Rose summons her red wasps to give them all a boost in power and agility. "Everyone, be on your guard," Amethyst says, "We don't know what Aidoneus is going to pull, next."

"His story," Thomas says softly, "It's... interesting to say the least."

"Do you know what happened, Thomas," Melissa asks, "Surely, he has to be lying about something."

"Well, considering it's Aidoneus, he's definitely twisted some details here and there," Thomas concludes, "But I won't linger on it for too long. Let's just get to Nermal."

"That's because that bastard IS lying."

"Ohohohoho, he's become so good at lying, I almost believed it for a second~!"

How much did he lie about, Kendo asks the Quphantos as he places his hand onto the door handle once again.

"All of it. He's yanked the story and rewritten almost the entire thing."

Get to explainin' because he definitely made it seem you guys were down for him once upon a time.

“Kendo, are you alright,” Rose asks as she rests her hand on his shoulder gently.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine, cherry lips,” Kendo reassures his friend, “I’m just... *thinking*.” He wiggles his left ring finger in hopes that Rose catches on, and she nods her head.

“What are we waiting for,” Pierre asks, crossing his arms. Then he looks at Kendo, wiggling his finger still. “Ah, alright.”

However, as Kendo tries to talk to the Quphantos, the door violently swings itself open, making Kendo fall onto the ground, *thud!* He grunts from the brief pain, and he gets up to see that they’re in a hallway, a hallway that he knows all too well. He brushes himself off as he looks around and sighs, “Aah... we’re truly here then...” The team gives him questionable looks, and he continues, “We’re in the castle, *for real* this time. I know how to get to the throne room, come on.” Diablo walks beside his best friend, making Kendo softly smile. They begin taking their time walking down the long hallway, and Kendo keeps his eye out for the set of stairs he always had to walk up. He gets back to talking to the Quphantos. *Alright, get to singin’.*

“Even though we weren’t in Maza to see Lucifer for what he was then, do we truly believe that he cared about that place? If he did, he’d still be there. He doesn’t care about helping Umu, Maza, Gaia, none of the domains. He only cares about himself.”

Yeah, we can clearly see that...

“We’ve heard from many tainted Mazans that have come to live in Umu that Aidoneus leaving Maza was actually the Maza Quphantos kicking him out.”

So basically he said ‘You can’t fire me because I quit’.

“The Huzizis and Kuokas have ALWAYS been around, even during the beginning of time. They were the servants of their respective realms, but Huzizis were just heavily mistreated while the Kuokas’ experience is the opposite. Lucifer just came to make the Huzizis’ lives worse by creating the Pits.”

And y’all are alright with that.

“Judging by their actions in their Past Life and they believing that they deserve to be in Maza? And their pain gives us more energy than we ever could witness? Yes, we’re alright with that, teeheehee~!”

Touche.

“Kendo, I want to apologize to you for creating that straitjacket, adding onto your trauma as if I didn’t care. You don’t have to forgive me. But I hope you’ll find somewhere in your soul an understanding as to why it seemed like we had no choice but to bend to Lucifer’s will.”

Hmmm, I’ll forgive you if you expand on that. Does this involve the threats you mentioned earlier?

“Yeeeeesss. Weeeee neeeever waaaanted tooooo heelp Luuucyy wiiiiith hiiis plaaaaan...”

But Ass-doneus told y’all of his plan, right? So what, was Umu so fucked up that him coming around just seemed like a miracle? To the point that y’all glazed over the possibility that he was going to crash out. The Quphantos go silent for a minute, as if the guilt of letting Aidoneus get this far was crushing them. Kendo sees the flight of stairs, and he motions everyone to follow him. He goes up the stairs slowly, seeing the next hallways ready to welcome him as a dim light covers his face. The Quphantos begin speaking again.

“Before Lucifer, Umu wasn’t so industrialized...”

“It was nothing but sand, run-down buildings, and the seven moons above us...”

“We had our Districts and we had our ways of keeping our influence onto the Umuites, yet we weren’t satisfied...”

“Peonis and Upendeonis were begging for new ways to gain negative energy and new forms of entertainment... All Cerberus did was monitor the entrance of Umu, making sure that none of the souls that didn’t belong here trespassed, and making sure everyone in Umu were okay...”

“Theeeeeen Luuucyyyyy caaaaame...”

“And changed the realm entirely... He invented the Pits, shared his ideas with us on how to improve our Districts by sharing information about Gaia and taking inspiration from there, and even increased the population by bringing some of the Mazans back with him after bragging to them that Umu was thriving... that HE was thriving...”

“Along with the realm, Lucifer changed as well. No more was he the Upendelaiki that betrayed his people... he was the Upendeoni that wanted to help his new family...”

“Or so we thought... When Lucifer arrived, he presented himself as someone who simply wanted to improve the domain after being rejected by his home... But after a while, his true intentions began to show...”

“As time passed, Lucifer privately studied topics he wasn’t supposed to... He got into umlingawi, or should I say magic, that no one is supposed to possess except us Quphantos...Mastering all six magic abilities that are already available to everyone just wasn’t enough for him...”

“He says he mentioned his plan to us when he came here... but that was also a lie, dearie. He never told us of his master plan. He waited until we found out about your birth... really

hammering in that by the time he revealed what he was really wanting to do, it was already in motion...”

“He wasn’t trying to be the CEO of Umu... He wasn’t even trying to be a Quphanto... He was trying to be the most powerful being in existence...”

“Iiiiiideeeeyaaaaaa...”

“We may complain about our duties from time to time... but if there’s one thing we never did, it was to try to be something we’re not.. We think too highly of Ideya to even dare try to take Her place...”

“Lucifer told us what he was trying to do... merge Umu with Gaia, perhaps even Maza and the rest of the domains in Spirit Realm, and be the ruler of it all, being a spirit that he believed even Ideya would have trouble snuffing out... we pleaded that he just stays in Umu and to not cause such an event to happen... but then he pulled out his threats...”

“He showed his abilities... But they weren’t as grand as what you’ve seen... At the time, seeing a being able to manipulate water, fire, earth, air, light, AND dark magic was unheard of, and it still is... and then he revealed that it wasn’t the Umuites that helped him build the castle... he conjured it up. All of this was enough to make us stop and question our decisions up until that point. With that under his sleeve, he forced us all into a deal. We let him work his way to making his master plan come true, including helping him avoid reincarnation, he would continue helping Umu as CEO in the meantime. If we were to go against this deal, then we’d all be punished somehow... I, the Quphanto of Wrath, would have lost all of my senses, basically becoming a vegetable... not being able to enjoy the one thing I love the most... drinking my alcohol while witnessing other people getting lost in their wrath...”

“I, the Quphanto of Gluttony, wouldn’t be able to enjoy food anymore... Everything would taste bitter, and I wouldn’t be able to stop eating it... I would implode, only to come back and go through the cycle again and again...”

“I, the Quphanto of Greed, a mother of millions, would have to watch all of my babies die in front of me and not be able to produce anymore of them...”

“I, the Quphanto of Envy, would have to be in rags, lose all of my jewelry along with my dashing good looks, and be the ground that everyone walked and spat on...”

“Aaas Quuuphaantooo ooof Slooooth, Iiiii’d beeeee iiiin eeeteernnaal sleeeep aaaand ooonlyyyy eeexpeeriieence niightmaaaares...”

“I, the Quphanto of Lust, would be mentally neutered... Nothing would please me, or excite me, or entice me... I’d never get to enjoy the feeling of lust ever again...”

“And as the Quphanto of Pride, I would become a statue... Even though people could see me and even compliment me, I wouldn’t be able to get the gratification... I’d just be there... feeling nothing...”

Kendo feels his heart sink as he listens to the threats the devil placed onto the Quphantos. This entire time, they’ve been having to play along with the devil in fear of being punished eternally. They had to entertain him for a very long time, and they had to keep Kendo within his grasp or else he’d speculate they were conspiring against them. The team makes it through the long flight of stairs, and Kendo walks down the hallway, still going the cruising speed. *So all of what you did just now, the challenges... was to make it seem like you were still helping him...*

“Fooorgiive uuuus! Weeee diiidn’t waaaaant toooo haaaaarm yoooouuu, Keeeendooooo...”

“Tsk, I wanted to hurt you a little bit. You’re an irritating little shit... but you are an important piece of our plan.”

Aaaawwww, thanks, pussycat~ And it’s okay Ophelia, I forgive you, all of you... even you, Nasir. We had a theory that you guys were crying for help with the ring pieces, but we weren’t completely sure. And now we know for certain. Kendo then thinks about more people that could have helped besides himself... Ubokufa and Cerberus. He decides to ask about them. So was it because of the planned punishments that Ubokufa didn’t do anything?

“At some point, Lucifer sensed that it was time for the Umufa, or the Reaper, to come and inform him that it was time to reincarnate. He called us up, demanded us to find a way to stop it from happening, and we knew that the only way we could stop it is to talk to the one behind those creatures.”

“We were on the lookout. We knew that Ubokufa watches everything through his Reapers, and we hoped that if he saw all of us trying to stop him, he’d let us explain why. He approached the castle, we stopped him, and we begged him not to go in there. Ubokufa took over the Reaper to talk to us, and we got to tell him about our punishments if he were to reincarnate Lucifer, ruining his plan.”

“Heeeee uuuundeerstooood, sooooo heeeeeee leeeeeft hiiiiiim aloooooone...”

“He didn’t want to put our lives in danger. So every time his Reapers came around after that, he would always skip Lucifer...”

Kendo can’t help but to look at Rose for a brief second, seeing her look at the off-white walls and the black, marble floor. She looks up at him, seeing him looking at her, and she softly smiles, not wanting to interrupt his talk with the Quphantos. He gave her a smile back and looked forward, seeing that they’re getting closer to another set of stairs. “Just one more set of stairs,

guys,” he says, “And we should be where Nermal is.” He then thinks to himself, *That must be why Rose is here... to take Ubokufa’s place in stopping him. So then where’s Cerberus in all of this? Maybe you guys couldn’t stop him, but you’re telling me they couldn’t? Lucy was only concerned about you guys trying to stop him, I’m sure Cerberus could have done something.*

“Perhaps if he wasn’t there when the convo took place. Lucifer may have never given them a punishment, but he felt like seeing us suffer would be punishment enough for them since they’re supposed to be the Guardian of Umu. He knew that Alpha took his role seriously, and seeing us in pain would make him feel like he’s failed.”

In my opinion, he still failed you all in the end... Kendo makes it to the last set of stairs, and he starts walking up them, the team following along. As he walks up the stairs, the chaotic jokester looks at the ring that rests on his left ring finger, watching the gems glow and sparkle. So while we were going through the challenges, you were giving us the ring piece by piece... making sure that it just seemed like a regular ring so that Lucy wouldn’t suspect anything until the time was right. But... why me? You couldn’t have gotten anyone else? I’m just a simple Upendeoni-human hybrid...”

“Yes, a hybrid that despises his creator. Even though you acknowledge that you don’t have any powers that could rival a Quphanto, let alone your father, that still doesn’t stop you from wanting to stop him. Your passion, your determination, your love and devotion to Gaia and everyone in it... it all proves that you’re willing to do anything to stop this devil.”

“Besides, Lucifer needs you, Kendo. Why do you think he made sure you were alive this whole time?”

“You’re basically the only person who can get so close to Lucifer. You’re all he wants.”

“This is all true, my phoenix. Even though WE can’t stop him...”

“Weeee knooooow yooooouuuu caaaaaaan.”

“Unfortunately, we didn’t know when or how to commence this plan. You running away and Lucifer entrapping you multiple times didn’t help. But we can thank Ideya that this is finally happening.”

Kendo takes in every word that everyone is saying to him, feeling a sense of purpose grow within himself. He was the damsel in distress not too long ago, and now he’s the one doing the saving. He’s saving himself, Nermal, her friends, Rose’s family, the Quphantos, and everyone in the universe. His heart pounds. The fate of the entire universe rests upon his shoulders. The responsibility starts taking the form of a lump in his throat and a dumbbell in his stomach. Before he can even attempt to chicken out, the chaotic jokester asks in his mind, *Okay, so we’re here now, what happens next?*

“Alright Kendo, what you’re wearing is a Correction Ring. With all of our powers combined, and with the help Ubokufa, we casted a spell onto it. Every time you make physical contact with Lucifer, you take away a large portion of his power.”

“So beat that prick to a pulp until his powers are completely gone and he’s a helpless fool. What happens to him after that is completely up to you, ohohohoho~”

“We just need him to be taken down a million pegs. At least at that point, we’d know for sure that we’d be okay and the punishments wouldn’t matter anymore.”

Kendo gently nods his head and reviews what he’s been told. *So whoop Cunt-doneus’ ass, take his power away from him, do exactly what I said earlier and kill him. Got it. Well, thanks guys. The ring seems to be ready to go, so let’s not keep it starvin’.*

“We have a Plan B prepared if it seems like you’re struggling. But hopefully, we won’t have to resort to that.”

What's Plan B, Lady V?

"Hmmm... Let's just say it would involve us giving you a little more of our power. But again, I'm praying we won't have to do that."

Huh, well alright then. We got Rose anyway, so we should be fine. He looks up to see that they're about to be done with the final set of stairs, and he takes a deep breath in and slowly lets it out. He asks everyone, "Are you all ready?"

"Been ready," Tenacity answers.

"Let's kick some devil ass," Jacqueline cheers.

"It's what we've been wanting all along," says Melissa.

"Time to end this," Amethyst adds.

Everyone else simply nods their heads, readying their weapons. Kendo then says, "Let's pick up the pace then. Let's do this!" He then starts racing up the remaining stairs, the team right behind him.

Chapter 25

The team makes it to the hallway, and they burst through it, not caring for the details anymore. *Tap tap tap tap tap!* Their footsteps echo across the hall, their hearts racing with them. *Ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump!* They see the next entryway, and Kendo feels his soul wanting to fly out of his chest as he sees the hints of the checkerboard floor peeking at him. The team and he go straight into the entryway, and there it is. The chandeliers. The bright lights. The black-and-white checkerboard floor. The red carpet that leads to the black and gold throne chair. The entrance to the castle. And best of all... the large fish bowl that holds the lovely Samaka-human hybrid... “*NERMAL,*” Kendo and the girls cry out together, startling Nermal and making her turn towards them, seeing that they were coming from one of the hallways.

The hybrid’s heart skips several beats, and she feels more tears wanting to mix into the already salted water. Leaning against the glass, pressing her hands against it, she cries out, “*GUYS! Oh my gosh, I knew you’d make it!! I’m so happy to see you!*”

“*You have no idea how glad we are to see you,*” Rose says, feeling her own eyes water from joy as they all stood in front of the glass.

“*Sniffles I tried to warn you all that Aidoneus created a large portal in front of the entrance to take you all somewhere else,*” Nermal whimpers, “*But when I tried to scream, I couldn’t even hear myself. Sniffles*”

“We’re here now, Nermal, let’s focus on the now,” Issei tells her, wanting her to not be stuck in the past.

“Where is he at this very moment, do you know,” Alexander asks her.

“*H-He was in here,*” Nermal says, “*Just talking like a madman. I’m sure he was probably talking to you guys, but on this side, it just seemed like he was talking to himself. And then when*

he got even angrier, he was pacing around this place, making everything shake. I thought one of the chandeliers was going to fall into the fish bowl..."

"I know that had to be uncomfortable to watch," Thomas says, cringing at the imagery that comes to his mind.

Nermal continues, *"He was here while spilling his life story, but then he disappeared in dark smoke. I don't know where he could be-"*

"Aaaaaah, there you all are~" Aidoneus' voice echoes, and everyone gets in their fighting stances, looking all over the throne room to spot the mastermind. He begins talking calmly, trying to hide his true colors, once again, even though they've already been exposed one too many times. *"Listen, before we begin this bout, I want to give you one last chance, Anti. One more time to say you'll help me. You're my son. I love you. You're an important piece to my plan. As Aidoneus, I can do so much, but not enough to where I can make the Merge happen and be perfectly fine. However, as Anti AND Aidoneus, TOGETHER, we can become something much stronger than a Quphanto. I'm sure that two souls is better than just one. Cerberus is clear proof of that. He's three souls that merge into one to become a dastardly beast. Imagine us. And so... Anti, I need your help. You're my only hope. I'm giving you one last time to comply, and I'll make the process as painless as possible. Join me. Let me aid you in disposing your fleshy vessel so that with your soul and mine merged together, we can rule all. We may even be able to merge ALL domains together, Umu being the most powerful. And don't worry, I have a good friend that will make sure this all goes swimmingly. If the Quphantos of Sin won't help us, then I know a certain chaotic Quphanto will. You two are so much alike, you'll love him. Come on, son. Don't you want to see your Father happy? I know that we've had our complications, but I've done all I could to make you happy, regardless.*

Don't you think it's time to pay me back for all I've done for you and what I will continue doing for you... for us all?"

The cogs in Kendo's mind begin to work overtime as he tries to grasp everything that the devil has said, and more questions form. He shakes his head and exclaims, "But I don't understand! Why would an all-powerful bitch like you want my soul!? I'm just half Upendeoni and half human! Wouldn't I just be holding you back!?"

"Unless," Issei hops in, standing beside the chaotic jokester and looking at the floor as he begins to think about his research. He thinks back to one of the excerpts he examined.

His son will throw everything into chaos. However, like everyone in the universe, we all have to give away something in order to blossom and transform...in his son's case, his flesh. When the time is right, Lucifer will hold a ceremony where every Peoni will witness his son's transformation. His son will give his life away for our victory, and he will come back as a powerful and wild spirit that not even the Reaper can grasp.

"That book described Kendo as 'chaotic' and a 'powerful and wild spirit'," Issei explains, "It also mentioned that you would hold an event where you would kill him and he would somehow become something that Ubokufa wouldn't be able to stop. It's almost as if you *predicted* all of this would happen. You're thinkin' Kendo is gonna be this powerful spirit when you kill him."

"Aaaaah, yeess," Aidoneus purrs out, "The Reaper's Contract. Such an interesting piece of literature, isn't it~? Written by someone from Umu, left in Gaia for a cult to find it and worship it~ Such a shame that the cult was short-lived. It lasted for hmmm... 200 years, I believe. That family truly did try to get everyone in on the scoop of what I was planning to do~"

“I... I never said it was *The Reaper’s Contract*,” Issei says, stunned by Aidoneus already knowing what book he was referring to.

“*Oh my*,” the devil coos, “*Well, hahaha... When you’re a proud author, you can’t help but to talk about your work to someone who’s taken an interest in it, you know~?*”

BA-BUMP! “Hold up, time out,” Pierre exclaims, “YOU wrote that shit!?”

“*Hmhmhmhm, I wanted to give the Gaians a chance to choose the right side of history before it was too late~ Aren’t I generous~? Yes, Anti’s death would be a spectacle for Umu to witness, but as we can see some things had to be changed around, and that’s fine~As far as him being a powerful spirit, he indeed will be when he and I merge~. Now, to answer your question, Anti, the Chaos Quphanto and I made a deal, and you were part of it~ To test how determined I was to cause the Merge, he challenged me to create a Gaian soul and come back with their soul after they’ve lived for 10 centuries. The idea of a Gaian soul making it to see 10 centuries, and that soul with an Umuite soul merging sounded so chaotic to him, he WANTED to see me pull it off~!*”

“Ohohohohoho~!!! Oh this is comedy gold!! He really believed HE would help him out?!”

“Honestly, that’s the LAST person you go to for any favors...”

“HIM asking for a 10 century old soul from Gaia? He was hoping he didn’t succeed.”

“That explains why he kept you here in Umu, my phoenix. Being in the spiritual plane immensely slows down everyone’s aging process to almost a stop.”

“Well, first of all,” Kendo starts, “Aren’t you cutting corners a bit, Lucy? I’ve only been around for *eight centuries*.”

“Anti, you’ll be just a little flame when he sees you~,” Aidoneus says matter-of-factly, “Ubokufa is the only Quphanto who knows how long a soul lived its life in the Flesh Realm and Spirit Realm. I can tell the chaotic one anything I want, and he’ll believe me~”

Kendo then says, “And let’s pretend that the Quphanto doesn’t go to Ubokufa for confirmation-”

“Which he won’t,” Aidoneus sneers.

“And why is that?”

“Because-....ahem...”

“Got him.”

“... No reason... Continue your little theory, son...”

Almost got him to rat himself out, the chaotic jokester thinks, wanting to press him further. He says, “All I’m saying is what makes you think this Quphanto is going to want to help you afterwards. There must be a reason why he would make a deal so ridiculous. The Maza Quphantos didn’t want to help you. You *FORCED* the Umu Quphantos to let you do what you want-”

“Forced them? I didn’t do such a thi-”

“STOP. LYING,” Kendo shouts out, clenching his fists, “*NONE OF THE QUPHANTOS WANTED TO HELP YOU. WHAT MAKES YOU SO SURE THAT THIS ONE WILL? YOU SURE YOU DIDN’T THREATEN HIM, TOO? You know what, haha! Don’t even answer that because I’m sure you’re about to lie some more! I can’t trust anything that comes out ya’ mouth anymore, Lucy!!*”

“WHAT ARE YOU BLABBERING ABOUT NOW? I’VE TOLD YOU THE TRUTH THROUGH AND THROUGH! The Chaos Quphanto loves disorder, and the idea of domains

and two different souls merging is something he wants to witness! He could care less about what others say!”

“Pffft, yeah aight, Lucy, ooh great Ideya-wannabe that wants to screw everyone in the universe over~!! Are you sure it’s not *you* that could care less about what others say~!? Even *I* know good and damn well if this Quphanto wanted to see this shit pop off, he could have done it himself by now!”

“... All you had to do was say ‘yes’... That’s all you had to say to stop all of this from happening... was ‘Yes, Father, I’ll help you’. You think you know everything, huh? It’s that blasted ring, isn’t it? Yes, that’s what it is. I WILL learn the ins and outs of that damned thing, whether you like it or not. Morgana, my dear~”

As soon as he calls for his peoni assistant, *click, clack, click, clack!* Sounds of high-heeled pumps echo throughout the throne room, and from the opposite hallway exits a tall, green horned peoni with wild maroon kinks and curls going down her back, her red and gold cat-eye glasses glint against the light and the life in her jade-green eyes disappears as she summons a bladed chain whip made of dark magic. *“Teach Anti a lesson for me, won’t you sweetie~? Please and thank you~”*

Morgana looks at Kendo, and he looks at her, memories of together flood their minds. The peoni’s heart cries seeing the person she’s grown attached to stand in front of her, looking at her with such anger and disappointment. Kendo takes a few steps towards her, and he asks with a low tone, “You’re really ‘bout to do this, huh, Morguey?” She winces from his question, but she doesn’t say anything, still approaching him cautiously. “C’mon, Morgana,” he says with a little more force, “You always helped me escape this place! You *wanted* to see me happy and free!”

The peoni continues to not say anything, but her feet come to a stop. Kendo then says, “We agreed that what this psycho was doing to me was unfair and cruel!! You hated seeing the sight of me being in that straitjacket and having to be the one to give me my dosages!! That’s what you told me anyways! Was all that a joke!? Did any of our moments really matter to you!?”

“... You’re asking if our moments mattered to me,” Morgana finally says in a monotone voice, “*You... are asking me... if our moments mattered?! **Pant pant pant pant...***” She then cries out, “***I SHOULD BE THE ONE ASKING YOU THAT!!***” Within an instant, she swings her chain whip, and Kendo transforms into a black mouse to avoid the attack. She continues swinging her weapon at him, grunting loudly as if it helps add force into the attack, but she continues to miss as the chaotic rodent scurries across the floor, jumping and dodging the blades. *Shling! Shlang! Shling! Shlang!* The blades scratch the floor numerous times, ruining the artwork, but the peoni can care less right now.

While Kendo plays around with Morgana, Rose watches them, but then she looks at Nermal, seeing her fixated on the quarrel, as well. *We need to get her out of here*, the Quphanto descendant tells herself. She looks back at the battle, and she sees that Kendo makes some distance from the crazed woman to transform into a cheetah and runs up the stairs. Morgana runs towards him, still swinging her whip in hopes of giving him some bloody stripes. Rose looks at Alexander and Thomas, and she asks, “Could one of you grab Nermal and get her out of there?”

The twins look at Nermal and the height of the fish bowl, and they look back at the delusional Morgana. “Yeah, I think she can care less about us, I’ll go ahead and grab her,” Thomas insists, and he reveals his large feathery wings and flies up towards the rim of the fish bowl. He hovers over the water, lowering himself and holding his hands out. “Grab my arms, Nermal,” he exclaims.

“Okay,” Nermal says with excitement, ready to finally leave her prison. She swims to the bottom of the bowl, and she swiftly swims up to the surface, her scales sparkle wildly. She gets closer and closer until *SPLASH!* She’s able to escape the watery prison and grabs onto Thomas’ arms, and the Upindelaiki firmly grasps her, making sure that the slime that forms all over her doesn’t make him drop her. He sees his twin brother flying up to help him, and Alexander positions himself to carry Nermal bridal-style. They look at front doors, and waste no more time as they fly towards it.

Meanwhile, Kendo manages to get to the second floor, still dodging Morgana’s attacks. He looks at her with anguish, feeling himself not wanting to fight her back. He just wants her to get tired out to the point he can talk some sense into one of the only friends he was able to make while spending his time in Umu. *Shliiing! Shlaaaang!* The blades on the chain whip continue to try to make contact. “*GET OVER HERE, KENNY,*” Morgana shouts, “*LET ME SHOW YOU HOW MUCH OUR MOMENTS TOGETHER MATTERED TO ME!!*”

Wow, Kendo thinks to himself, *She’s fucking crazy.* He slowly comes to the understanding that there’s no point in playing with her anymore. This isn’t the quiet, reserved Morgana he befriended years ago. However, he still doesn’t want to harm her. He stops running away from her, and he transforms back to his human form. The peoni swings her chain whip, but Kendo catches it with his bare hand, the blades cutting his flesh open and catching Morgana off guard, her eyes widening. “Now, Morguey,” Kendo whimpers out, starting to question himself why did he grab her weapon as if it wouldn’t hurt him, “This isn’t how we usually release our frustrations together~...”

Morgana flinches from Kendo’s tone, feeling her body wanting to cling onto him, however, like a switch, she shakes her head and makes her chain whip disappear and summons dark claw

gloves. “*THAT TRICK WON’T WORK ON ME, KEN,*” Morgana exclaims furiously, and she begins trying to scratch him.

Back with the team, Alexander carries Nermal to the entrance, Thomas not far behind them to help open the door. The girls watch this, but then they see Kendo dipping and dodging Morgana’s claws. Jacqueline exclaims, “We should, like, help him! Nermal will be alright with the twins!”

“Yeah, we should gang up on her,” Tenacity nods, readying her flaming dual guns.

Diablo, while standing next to Rose, sees his best friend and his fling dish it out, and he decides to run up to help before anyone else.

“Um, guys,” Issei says, as he looks to see the twins are struggling with the door.

“Oh no,” Melissa whines, “Don’t tell me it’s *locked!*”

Thomas yanks and yanks at the door, but it doesn’t budge. Alexander exclaims, “Did he seriously lock us from the inside!?”

“But I didn’t see him do that,” Nermal says, feeling despair settle once more in her soul.

“Are you disappointed~?” Everyone turns to the voice they’ve been having to listen to since they’ve stepped into Umu, and the voice’s owner walks from behind his black and gold throne with his hands behind his back, a sly smile painted across his face. Aidoneus then shows his bright pearls for teeth as his jewelry glistens against the throne room’s lighting, and he says as he cocks his head to the side, “My my, you all have nothing to do~” He then holds his hand out, and in bright light, Issei’s katana appears. He positions himself and purrs out, “*Let’s change that~*”

Back with Kendo and Morgana, the peoni continues trying to scratch at the hybrid. *Swish!* *Swish!* *Swoosh!* Kendo continues to dodge her attacks, though there are a few close calls thanks to her fury giving her more speed. He understands that there’s no more time to waste, but he can

barely find an opening... or is it that he's still holding back? He keeps watching Morgana, almost not recognizing her. The last time he saw her, he was the one enraged while she was the monotone assistant following every order his creator gave her even if it caused him more harm. Now that they have reunited, the roles have been switched, but he's searching in his brain to find the answer why. What happened here while he was at the Colosseum handling the Quphantos' challenges? Suddenly, *bark bark bark!* Diablo tries to get Morgana's attention, but she stays locked onto his best friend. Wanting to help, the pitbull runs up from behind her, and he jumps and pushes her down with his front paws. *Shove!* Morgana loses her balance entirely and lets out a squeak as she falls over to her side, her dark claw gloves disappearing from her loss of focus. *Thud!* As she tries to get up, the pitbull runs up to her and kisses her face multiple times, causing her to groan out of disgust. "*Get off of me, Diablo,*" Morgana hisses while pushing him away forcefully, but Diablo continues giving her affection.

Kendo chuckles slightly from the view, remembering the good times and seeing remnants of the Morgana he befriended come back, and he kneels down, motioning his best friend to get off the peoni. Then, he holds out his hand to Morgana, wanting to help her up, but she swats it away and lifts herself up. The hybrid sighs as he straightens up and asks, "Can we just talk about this?"

"*What's the point,*" Morgana growls out, "*You're just going to say sweet nothings to me, feed me more lies, and then leave me **again.***"

"You were alright with me leaving here," Kendo interjects, "You did everything you could to help me get out of here every single time. It was *you* who didn't want to displease your boss. *You* put your job before anything else... You could have left with me... but you didn't..."

Morgana looks at Kendo, listening to him remind her of how she handled his escapades. She then remembers the words Nermal said to her, about how perhaps she could help Kendo once

again to appease him and be on better terms with him. Perhaps she could even win his love? She knows it's a stretch... but then she remembers her loyalty to Aidoneus. For so long, she's had to play a double agent, it has become tiresome to the point she doesn't know where her emotions are anymore. She just wants Kendo. That's it. But her job, the one thing that has given her purpose in her Spirit Life, calls for her to go against everything Kendo believes in. Calming down, the peoni sighs out as she slowly steps away, "You don't understand, Ken, I... I... *sighs* You don't understand what kind of predicament you've put me in by requesting me to just abandon my work!"

"Oh trust me, I did understand," Kendo says, getting closer to her, "That's why I didn't pressure you into escaping with me. Every time I invited you to leave with me, you'd say you couldn't, and I would be alright with it. I'm not about to force you into doin' shit you'd be uncomfortable with doin' unlike *your boss*."

"I... *sighs* I know, Ken..."

"So then what's going on!? You're making it all sound like I hurt you or some shit!"

"*Ugh, you can be such a dumbass, Ken!?*"

"*Me a dumbass!?*"

"*Yes!?*"

"Morgue, what the fuck did *I* do!? If anything, it's *YOU* who has been hurting *ME!*"

"You mean to tell me this whole time, you truly felt like our relationship wasn't worth staying around...? Not once, you didn't think that maybe being with me in Umu wouldn't be so bad...? Ugh, who am I kidding... I knew this all along... I just didn't want to accept it..."

Kendo stands inches away from Morgana, taking in the faint scent of sweet strawberries and lime coming from her perfume, getting lost in her jade-green eyes once more. He analyzes the

words escaping her plump lips, and then it finally clicks for him. "... Morgana," he says softly, sending chills up and down Morgana's spine and making her heart skip a beat, "When I asked you how you felt about us... if you loved me in any way... You told me it was nothing but lust..."

"... I did," Morgana squeaks out, looking down at the ground, fighting back tears.

"So then why did you lie to me," Kendo asks her, his eyes slightly squinting.

"..." Morgana's lips don't move.

The chaotic jokester gently places his finger upon the workaholic's chin and lifts her head to where she has no choice but to look at him. He says softly, "Morgana, you do realize that you've made this complicated now... right?"

"It wouldn't have made a difference if I did tell you how I truly felt about you," Morgana whimpers, "You would have still chosen Gaia over me! Gaians, especially humans, will always have your heart! But not me... If anything, you'd have probably dropped me entirely if I admitted my true feelings to you..."

"Morgana, I-... *sighs*... Listen..." Kendo gently cups Morgana's supple face, slightly squishing her cheeks, making Morgana and himself crack a smile from all of the times he'd make her giggle from doing that. He says, "You know that I value honesty and fun over everything. That's why I let you know ahead of time that I wasn't feeling the whole committed relationship shit. It's just... not for me. So... *sighs* Yeah, you're right, *kinda*. I probably would have called a quits on our little fun if you did, but I wouldn't drop you altogether. You're my friend!"

"But I don't want to be your friend, Ken," Morgana whines.

"I... *sighs* Yeah, I see that, *now*..."

"You really couldn't tell..?"

“I’m not a fuckin’ mind reader, Morgue. I took what you told me and rode on it until the wheels came off.”

“...”

“... So you were for real going to just torture yourself... just to keep me around. Despite knowing that I craved freedom more than anything and that I wasn’t looking for anything serious... you chose to silence what *you truly* wanted out of this and continued this bullshit.”

“Anything to keep you in my life, Ken... I knew that you didn’t want to stay in Umu... so whatever opportunity I had to have you around, I took it. Even if you saw me as a plaything, I didn’t care. I powered through listening to your adventures in Gaia and the relationships you developed there... all so I could have you in my arms again.”

“There’s way better dudes than me, Morgana... There’s *way better* jobs than working for Lucy...”

“But Ken, I-... I don’t know what’s out there! I feel so comfortable being with you! I feel complete here working for Aidoneus in Umu! What if I leave all of this, leave *you*, and whatever comes to me ends up not working!?”

“That’s the beauty in it, though... Trying out new shit is always scary. But you’re so caught up in the bad shit, you can’t see that there’s also a possibility of it actually working out.”

“Oh Ken, I-... *sighs... sniffles...*”

“.... Come with me, Morgana.”

“H-Huh? But-”

“I know, I know, just hear me out. I know our relationship now is... messy as fuck... But even after all of this, I’m still down to be your friend. Hell, if you want to still be friends with benefits, I’m fine with that, too, *just as long as you understand and are okay with the fact that*

I'm not wanting anything more than that. I don't mind bein' a lil' placeholder for the person that's actually more deserving of you if that's what you really want. I just want you to be more communicative with me, that's all. I want to see you happy in all aspects of life, Morgana, *genuinely*. I can see us making memories together in Gaia. I do whatever bullshit I want, and you get a job at a place where your efforts are more appreciated, where your work is valued and not used against you. We go to parties together or some shit, just hanging out and having a good time! This whole thing is about you wanting to be with me, right?"

"...Mhm..."

"And then I'm wanting to be in Gaia. Who's to say we both can't have what we want? Well, I mean, there's the whole situationship thing, but we can work out the kinks and shit after we get out of here! *Together!*"

"But... What about Aidon?"

"Man, *fuck* him! *Fuck* this bullshit ass job! Look at me and then look at Diablo! Even *he* wants to see you happy!"

Kendo releases Morgana so that she can see Diablo rubbing her leg, and she smiles through the tears that stroll down her face. She rubs his head, reciprocating the love back to him as she gently caresses the scar on his forehead. She then looks back at Kendo who wipes away her warm tears. She croaks out, "I guess I can do that. *Sniffles* It's going to be scary, but... you two are with me, so... I'll try not to wuss out. As far as *us*, Kenny, I... *sighs* I'll just wait until we get there. I just want to be with you... in your arms..."

"And I'm a guy that aims to please, Morgue-y~"

"*Giggles* Oh you~..."

Diablo, happy to see his two friends work out most of their drama between each other, wags his tail in excitement. Suddenly, he remembers that their new friends are downstairs doing who knows what, so he decides to go check on them, leaving behind Kendo and Morgana. Without warning, Kendo wraps his arms around Morgana, hugging her tightly. She feels his warmth envelope her once more, her soul soaring as she hugs him back, enjoying the feel of his smooth muscles. They stay like this for what feels like forever. Kendo lets his heart fly around for a while, just enjoying the fact that his longtime friend is finally leaving behind her Umu life to live with him in Gaia. The possibility of her and him being more than friends with benefits begins buzzing around his head... like it's something that he could consider. He's always been unpredictable, and he has always wanted to see different outcomes coming from different decisions. He just got done preaching about trying new things to her... perhaps it's time for him to take his own advice? After all, surely they can still be friends if it doesn't work out... right?

As they continue their embrace... *SCHLACK!!!* Both Kendo's and Morgana's eyes shoot wide open as they feel something sharp pierce through their abdomens. Kendo looks to see who's made them into a shish kebab, and he sees behind Morgana the person responsible. His heart spills out of his guts as his eyes notice the same jasper eyes that he's despised for most of his life stare back at him with no empathy. "*K-Ken...*" Kendo hears Morgana whimper out to him, her tears now filled with pain as she feels her dark-red blood escape her body. "*I... I love you... Kenny,*" she cries, and then *SCHLICK!!* The attacker pulls out the bloody katana, and Kendo stumbles downward as he tries to hold the limp peoni only for him to put himself in more pain.

Thud! He howls out his pain as he lays on his side, and he looks at his open wound, seeing his grey shirt become soaked with red, some of his blood ruining the floor. He looks at Morgana, the life in her eyes leaving, and suddenly.. *Poof!* Her form disappears in sparkles, leaving behind a

black flame. Kendo feels dread holding him down like it did before, as if he was back in the straitjacket again. As soon as his eyes land on the black flame, his memories with Morgana start to rush through his brain like a slideshow. Everything that they've done together... everything that they have said to each other... The conversation that they had just now. *This entire time*, Kendo cries in his mind, *She was...*

“*Sighs* Look what you made me do, Anti,” the devil says in a monotone voice, “You’ve made me eliminate the one experiment that was the walking proof that I was getting closer to becoming Ideya’s replacement. Creating a soul takes a lot of work... and you’ve made me undo that because you want to fill its head with fruitless fantasies.” He picks up the black flame and flails his hand, making the flame disappear. He then stands above the wounded chaotic jokester, and Kendo tries to shift away, but he only winces and whimpers as his deep cut locks him down. Aidoneus looks at Kendo with dim eyes, and he says with a straight face, “This is all of your fault, Anti. This could have gone much differently if you would have complied. Oh well, it doesn’t matter... a new chapter starts now.” He then raises the katana and says calmly, “This is goodbye, for now, son...”

Chapter 26

The team looks at Aidoneus as he holds Issei's katana with a cunning smirk. The mastermind walks up to them, twirling the weapon, and he says, "Now... let's see how everyone's stories are going to end~ It's a shame really-" *BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BANG! BANG!* Issei and Tenacity both shoot at Aidoneus, the bullets shoot through multiple spots on his body, and one of them goes through his forehead, making him disappear in black smoke. "So rude," he says, peeking from the left hallway, still smiling and twirling the katana, "But I see that you two are the most eager~ That's okay, your turn will come eventually-" *BOOM!* Headshot. But more black smoke.

"We don't have time for this," Issei says while gritting his teeth.

"We *have* to find the real Aidoneus," Amethyst suggests, readying her dry ice rapier.

"Should we split up," Jacqueline asks, "This place is, like, *huge!*"

"No," Nermal whimpers while still being carried by Alexander, "You guys should stick together! That's probably what he wants you to do!"

"She's most likely right," Thomas says, "We split up, we're making it easier for him to knock us down."

"But if we don't go and get the real Aidoneus, we're going to be stuck here for who knows how much longer," Pierre sneers, preparing his dark spear.

"Hmmm, decisions, decisions~," Aidoneus purrs out as he walks out of the right hallway, "Whatever will you do-" *BANG!* Tenacity gets another headshot, and more black smoke dances in the air.

"Uuughh, *enough,*" Tenacity growls out, "The fucker is clearly wantin' to play some hide and seek."

"Quite the opposite, Tenacity dear," the devil coos, and two copies of him walk out of each hallway, followed by multiple more. All of the copies say, "I'm as eager as you are to end this

foolery.” An ocean of Aidoneus copies flood into the throne room, and the team starts breaking them down as they continue to talk to them. *BOOM! BOOM! FWIP! FWIP! BANG! BANG! VRRRRRR!!* Issei’s ice bullets, Tenacity’s fire bullets, and Melissa’s air arrows fly across the throne room while Thomas’ light spear, Pierre’s dark spear, Amethyst’s dry ice rapier, Rose’s light axe, and Jacqueline’s ice chainsaw cut through the madness. Alexander continues to hold onto Nermal, and they watch their friends try to eliminate every copy of Aidoneus in hopes of it being the real one. The samaka-human hybrid then looks up to see Kendo still trying to avoid Morgana’s attacks, and she can barely hear Diablo trying to get the peoni’s attention.

As the team continues eliminating the Aidoneus copies, his voice begins to echo out, “It’s like finding the needle in the haystack, isn’t it~? This is very depressing... knowing that you’re all going to die as soon as you find me~”

“Stop fuckin’ with us, bitch, and face us already,” Tenacity shouts out through her dual guns firing away.

“What’s more depressing is the fact that Anti won’t be able to see it,” the devil giggles, “But maybe a few of you will survive *if* you take what I say to your advantage~ I’ll give you all a hint on the order of people I’m going to smite down, *right now~ You ready~?*” The team doesn’t give him a response, still shooting and slashing at the copies, wanting to get closer to the original. He continues, “First to die will be the one that was saved by the umhra who served the Moon Quphanto. Next will be the soul who worshiped me in his Past Life. Third is the girl that was the Upendeoni’s crush in her Past Life. Fourth will be the soul that’s carrying a child, so I guess that’s two souls that I’m snuffing out. Fifth is the one that should be glad to see her end since she’ll be reuniting with an old friend. Sixth is the soul whose purpose is to hunt down beings like myself. Seventh is the soul dedicated to his role as an Upindelaiki. Eighth will be the one who

gave you the most problems during the Quphantos' challenges. Finally, Ubokufa's sorry excuse of a descendant will finally meet her demise. The samaka and dog will be the only ones to live... maybe~."

Rose takes in every word that the devil slithers out, and she tries to figure out the order as she chops down the copies. *He threw in some new info in there*, she thinks to herself, *But I should be able to figure it out still. Let's see...*

"Do you know the order now," Aidoneus chuckles out, "I'll come out to play in *ten...*"

Rose thinks, *The one that was saved by an umhra... First is Jacqueline...*

"*Nine...*"

The soul that worshiped him in his Past Life? That has to be Pierre.

"*Eight...*"

The girl that was Pierre's crush in her Past Life?? Is he talking about Melissa??

"*Seven...*"

The soul that's carrying a child is definitely Amy.

"*Six...*"

The fifth should be glad because she's reuniting with an old friend... Tenacity...

"*Five...*"

The sixth's purpose is to hunt down beings like him. That's Issei.

"*Four...*"

The seventh being dedicated to his Upindelaiki role is Thomas.

"***Three...***"

The eighth gave us the most problems during the Quphantos' challenges. He must be referring to Alex.

“Two...”

And the last person is... me...

“One~”

As soon as Aidoneus finishes his countdown, *POOOOF!* All of his copies disappear in dark smoke, leaving the team in confusion as they are the only people in the throne room now besides Kendo, Diablo, and Morgana being upstairs. Not wasting time, Rose clasps her hands together and summons multiple blue beetles, and they fly to everyone’s shoulders or the top of their heads, surrounding them all in their own blue shield. Rose explains, “The moment you guys attack, the beetle will disappear so be careful! If you’re gonna attack him, don’t miss!”

“Your efforts are futile, Rose,” Aidoneus says in a monotone voice, and after saying this, a portal appears below everyone’s feet, causing everyone to fall into the darkness, screams filling in the silence. *Thud!* They all land in the familiar darkness, having no clue where they could be now. Then, like flipping a switch, the darkness turns into white space, making the team’s hearts jump when they see that they are surrounded by a large crowd of copies of not only Aidoneus... but of themselves. They all walk around, not saying anything, not doing anything. Just being.

More tricks, Rose thinks to herself. She sees the copies of her friends, her enemy, and herself walking around with straight faces. Then, she realizes that she’s by herself. *Okay, still the same plan. Don’t attack until I know for sure it’s him.* She walks through the ocean with her light axe in hand and her blue shield still active, trying to reunite with her team while keeping an eye out for the real Aidoneus. “Tenacity,” she calls out, but no answer. “Jackie,” she then says, but still nothing changes.

Suddenly... “Cherry lips?” Rose hears a familiar voice, and her heart flutters when she sees Kendo shoving through the numerous copies.

“K-Ken,” Rose says softly, “Wait, what are you doing here?”

“Pfft, you tell me,” Kendo chuckles out, “I was talking to Morgana, and then, boom, Lucy puts a portal under my footsies, sending me here.”

“*Sighs* Well, we should be on the lookout,” Rose says, summoning another blue beetle and letting it land on Kendo’s shoulder, giving him a blue shield as well. She then says, “He’s on his bullshit still.”

“So I see,” Kendo groans out, “*sighs* Well, I trust your judgement, Rose. The goal is to find the real Lucy, right?”

“Mhm.”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult. He’s too hideous for his own good.”

“Hmhm, c’mon Ken, don’t make me laugh now~!”

Suddenly, shrieks can be heard from afar, then it suddenly stops. Then *shoooooosh!* All the copies of Jacqueline disappear. “W-What the,” Rose exhales out, watching all of Jacqueline’s copies disappear. Kendo looks at the copies dissipated in black smoke, and he cringes from the sight.

“Imma assume that’s not a good sign,” Kendo says with a bit of worry in his voice.

“We have to hurry,” Rose says, and she starts to pick up the pace, Kendo still close to her.

They start shoving through the crowd, trying to find their friends, then suddenly, they hear struggling from afar, and seconds later, Pierre’s copies begin to disappear. Right afterwards, they hear Melissa begging for Tenacity to stop, and moments later, her copies go away. “What is happening,” Rose panics, “Guys!?!”

“Melissa sounded like she got into a scuffle with Tenacity,” Kendo says, “Does that mean these copies are bound to attack sooner or later?”

“Aidoneus’ order of people he’s going to kill,” Rose reminds herself, then she gasps, “Oh my god.... That means... Then Amy is next! Amy!!”

“Rose!!” Amethyst responds to Rose’s call, then sounds of her struggling echoes. Kendo and Rose shove through the crowd of copies, trying to reach the second mother of the Special Six. They push and push, until *mrooooww!!* A black cat runs through the crowd and hops onto Rose, and Rose embraces her tightly, making her blue shield disappear.

“Oh Amy,” Rose softly sobs, hugging her tightly.

“*Look out,*” Kendo shouts out, pulling Rose and Amethyst close to him and away from a copy of Issei who swings his katana. Rose immediately summons another blue beetle that surrounds the three of them at the same time, stopping the Issei copy from slicing them down. “Come on, Rose,” the chaotic jokester says, “We gotta get through this! Amy’s next on Lucy’s list, so now we know for sure which are the fakes!”

“O-Okay, y-you’re right,” Rose whimpers out, though her soul does not want to leave Kendo’s embrace. Suddenly, they hear Tenacity cursing out Aidoneus, then *BANG! BANG! BANG!*

“I’m gonna try to get to everyone else,” Kendo tells Rose, and he leaves the shield and transforms into an elephant, running over the copies and hitting them with his trunk.

“Be careful, Ken,” Rose exclaims, still holding Amethyst.

“Rose, we can’t stay like this forever,” Amethyst says calmly, trying to control her breath, “The longer we prolong this, the longer Aidoneus stays alive, and the longer we’re stuck here.” She then hops out of Rose’s grasp, and as soon as her paws land onto the white ground, *shooooooooosh!* She, along with the copies of Amethyst, disappear in black smoke.

“*W-What,*” Rose shudders, and she starts breathing quickly, feeling her heart quickening. *Pant, pant, pant!!* Everything becomes a blur as she lets out a fear-filled scream, and she starts swinging her light axe. *FWOOOOOSH!!* Her axe cut through the copies, making a lot of smoke fill the air once more. She continues swinging her axe recklessly, seeing that Tenacity’s copies vanish. Then Issei’s. Tears begin to form as she realizes her friends are dying one by one, and she doesn’t even know where they are. She continues swinging until she sees Jacqueline’s corpse laid out, blood escaping her mouth as it oozes out of her chest and stomach. She stops what she’s doing, feeling her heart drop to the pit of her stomach, and her eyes notice how less copies of her friends walk around and more Aidoneus copies take their place.

“*AAIIDOOOONEEEUUUUSSS,*” Rose roars out, and a small red glow appears in her pupils as she summons a monstrous black centipede that lets out a screech as it runs over majority of the copies, revealing more of her friends’ corpses. She kills the copies that lose their footing, swinging her axe away, and she looks around ferociously, trying to catch the original. However, she only sees Alexander still holding Nermal inside their blue shield as he keeps his distance from the remaining copies in case they attack. Then, she sees Thomas attacking Kendo.

“Hey, easy there, vanilla bean twin,” Kendo cries out as he loses his footing and scurries away from the Upindelaiki, “I’m on your side!!” However, Thomas doesn’t say anything as he closes in on him, readying his light spear.

Then, not wanting to see another friend die, Rose yells out, “Thomas,” as she runs to reunite with them, “Stop!!”

“Wait, Rose,” Nermal shouts, “That’s not-”

Before Nermal can tell Rose anything, a portal appears underneath everyone’s feet once more, and they fall through it, revealing that they’ve been taken back to the throne room. They fall

from the ceiling and *boom!* Kendo, Thomas, and Rose land on the checkerboard floor hard, their shields disappearing and the large centipede and remaining copies nonexistent. Rose shakes her head to regain focus, and she looks to see everyone's corpses in one pile, their blood mingling together as their wounds spill over, their eyes lifeless. She sees a white flame flickering next to the pile, knowing that it's Pierre's soul. The Quphanto descendant looks away quickly, trying not to break down, and she sees Kendo trying to get himself up and Thomas regathering his strength, summoning his light spear once again. However, as he gets up to tower over the chaotic joker, *stab!!* Thomas grits his teeth as Issei's katana runs through his center, and then *schlack!!* The blade runs up to his face, splitting him in half and immediately forcing him to reset, his soul dropping to the floor to reveal Aidoneus right behind him, smiling wildly as his face, teeth, and entire body is drenched in blood.

"NO," Rose wails out as her body becomes completely numbed up from her wrath and she pounces onto Aidoneus like a panther, knocking him over and choking him out. He drops the katana, hearing it slide across the room. Rose digs her nails into the devil's skin, and he begins struggling, grabbing onto her arms, trying to pull her off of him. However, she stays on top, gritting her teeth, the red glow in her pupils becoming brighter as her grip on his throat tightens. Then *BAM! BAM! BAM!* She starts slamming his head to the ground in hopes creating dents in his skull and rupturing his esophagus, watching the life in his eyes disappear. Aidoneus stops struggling and his grip becomes loose, and he stops breathing. Death. Aidoneus. The devil himself. The mastermind behind this chaos is finally dead.

Rose, still enraged, gets off of his corpse, and she turns to see Kendo now standing and is disturbed by her actions, noticing her body covered in the blood Aidoneus had on himself as well

as her hands painted completely red. “Wow,” Kendo says breathlessly as he approaches the descendant, “Rose, that... was-”

Boom! Boom! Boom! Kendo and Rose turn to see Alexander and Nermal banging against the now empty fish bowl, a cork lid keeping them from escaping. “Rose,” Nermal screams out as she lays on the pebbles still in her true form, her voice muffled, “Kill *Kendo!*!”

Rose, upset yet confused, tilts her head as she says in a low tone, “*What are you talking about? How did you get in there?*”

“That doesn’t matter,” Alexander explains, “Kendo is-”

“*ALEX, WATCH OUT,*” Kendo and Rose shout simultaneously, seeing that black smoke appears behind the Upindelaiki, but Alexander turns around too late as a copy of Aidoneus slices his throat, making him choke on his blood and reset once more and Nermal to shriek in terror. She backs away from the copy, but it disappears as soon as the deed is done, leaving her with tightened lungs, a rapid-beating heart, and flooding eyes. Rose looks at what just transpired, then she realizes something... a copy of Aidoneus appeared even though she killed the original. Or did she...? She hears nothing but her heart beat as she turns to see Aidoneus’ corpse and the katana slowly dissipating into dark smoke, then she looks up to see upstairs another Aidoneus stabbing Kendo and Morgana, causing them to fall to the ground, Kendo crying out in pain. Rose then remembers that there were no copies of Kendo when they were in white space...

Rose quickly turns around to face who she thought was originally Kendo, but then *STAB!* She lets out a curdling squeal as a frozen machete goes through her gut, sending chills throughout her body. “What’s wrong, Cherry Lips,” Kendo asks smoothly as his jasper eyes freeze her heart, then as he looks at her, she watches his appearance and voice transition to Aidoneus, “Not liking the cold like your little bug friends~? Ahahahaha~ *sighs*... Such a shame... Your father was

right..." *Schlack!!* He yanks the machete sideways, cutting Rose's entire left side and making her fall to one side. She tries to hold her wound and crawl away from Aidoneus, and as he kneels down to look at her, no emotions apparent on his face, he continues, "You *ARE* gullible... Your little infatuation for my son blurred your judgement just a little... and now you're bleeding out~" He turns to see Nermal banging against the bowl, crying out for Rose and begging Aidoneus to stay away from her. He looks back at Rose and slithers out, "You're still breathing, Rose... you can still do something about all this. What are you going to do? Are you going to heal yourself, revive your friends, or save Kendo before he loses his life? The way that all of this ends is up to you..."

Chapter 27

After cleansing himself of his worries and getting himself comfortable in the new clothes given to him, Usiku sits on the couch, gazing at the starless sky and getting lost in the seven moons' glow. He looks at his lover who sleeps soundly in the bed. Even though his heart beats calmly at the sight, his mind can't help but to tell his soul that something is wrong, and like a rope, doom wraps itself around him. He looks at the buildings of Umu, then his eyes land onto Aidoneus' castle far, far away, the shield still standing strong. He then remembers his brother's words.

"You have to give it to Ideya."

"Whatever happens... happens... Usiku. There's nothing you can do, now."

Shandon's words echo throughout his mind, leaving his soul weighing like a ton. The worried descendant lets out a sigh, and he lowers his head, saying softly a prayer, hoping that Ideya can hear him. *"Ideya,"* Usiku says softly, *"I... rarely talk to You, and I know it's shameful how I only come to You during times like these. But... please... just this once... listen to this selfish soul's cry... and please protect Rose... watch over her... guide her... and give her the strength she needs to fight. I don't think I can handle a reality where—"* he stops himself. He lets out a shaky breath, feeling his eyes slightly sting as tears slowly build up. *"No,"* he shudders, *"I will not speak that to existence. Just... protect my baby... Bring her back to me... please..."*

He ends his prayer... but his soul doesn't feel any better. If anything, he feels his heart sinking and organs tremble, as if he just got the worst news ever. He shakes his head continuously and sighs restlessly as he gets up from his seat, and he gently approaches Delilah, caressing her head and brushing her hair away from her face to plant a kiss on her cheek. He then searches for some paper and something to write with... but he finds nothing. Huffing in frustration, he looks back at Delilah, contemplating if he should wake her up even though he

doesn't want to interrupt her rest. He then walks to the door and gently opens it, and he walks out of the room, leaving the door ajar to go to the room across from theirs.

He knocks on the door, waiting for a response, and a few seconds later, the door opens to reveal Shandon smoking a blunt. The Quphanto-Upindelaiki hybrid lets out a tired sigh, releasing smoke that is laced with stress, and he asks, "What you want now, Usiku...?"

"Could you watch over Delilah for me," Usiku requests his brother.

"Ya' know, before I answered this door, I was guessin' you was gon' be on some stupid shit still," Shandon says, scratching his afro, "And I see I was right."

"Please, Shandon, just for a while," Usiku softly pleads.

"You can't just write her a letter like you always doin', loverboy," Shandon dryly says.

"There's no paper or pencil in this room... And I don't want to wake her up..."

"Then I guess she's gonna have to suck it up."

"*Shandon just-... sighs*... Never mind. I'm just going to see if I have any luck at the front desk. Just keep your door open and keep an eye on 'Lilah until I get back."

"You do realize that Delilah ain't no damn baby, right...?"

"I do..."

"... *sighs* May I ask why you doin' all this extra bullshit?"

"That's something you'd have to ask Delilah yourself. I made a vow to never reveal the purpose behind our traditions to anyone."

"*Traditi-...* You know what, *tuh*, fine... Hurry up, jungle fiend."

"I won't be long."

Usiku makes haste and speed walks to the front desk, hoping to find something to construct his letter to Delilah with. Shandon stands at the door, looking at the partially opened door across

the hallway, and he walks up to it to take a peek inside only to see Delilah sleeping away in Dream Realm. He lets out another restless sigh as he stomps back to his room, seeing his wife watching television whilst rubbing Cocoa's head. Zeena looks at her husband and asks, "What did Usiku want?"

"We're babysittin' Dee, I guess," Shandon huffs, taking another hit of his Malaiki Cabbage while leaning against the door frame.

"What's Usiku doin'," she asks, tilting her head and keeping her soft expression.

"I don't fuckin' know. Lookin' for some paper and pen to write some funky letter to her before he leaves."

"Oh..."

"Talkin' 'bout it's some secret *TrAdITiOn* they do. The jungle fiend just tryna get into Dee's panties."

"... Actually, Pooh... There... might be a valid reason why Usiku does that..."

"*Please* enlighten me."

But before Zeena can explain anything, Usiku returns with a piece of paper and pencil in hand. He turns to look at Shandon with a calm expression and says, "Thank you. I won't bother you anymore..." Without saying anything else, the descendant goes back into his room, closing the door behind him, leaving Shandon and Zeena to themselves. He goes to the nightstand on his side of the bed, and with the little light he can get from the lamp, he writes...

O my beautiful orchid,

My perturbation for our daughter has not ceased since the moment we walked away from that shielded castle. You'll have to forgive me because by the time you wake up, I will not be here. I will be going to talk to Cerberus. I need to hear if anything has changed... if this nightmare is

coming to an end. I'll be back soon. I'll probably grab us something to eat from nearby. I'm sure you'll be hungry when you wake up. If you're feeling lonely and I'm not back by the time you've awakened, go hang out with Shandon and Zeena. Stay close to them. I love you, Delilah.

Your Usi

After finishing his letter, he rests it upon the pillow next to Delilah, and he leaves the room, being sure to lock the door. He then exits the hotel room, and calls for his sisters. “Nruku!!” Seven bats fly in front of the tall man, and he says, “Please take me to Cerberus...”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak!

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to attempt again... just... *please...*”

The sisters stop squeaking, and they decide to teleport him to the Pits where he can find the eldest brother, Alpha. The spirit hound stands over one of the lava pits, watching the tortured souls begging him to pull them out, but he doesn’t listen to their pleas. He then looks up to look at Aidoneus’ castle, his nose twitching from various scents coming from the establishment. He looks at the castle with a contorted expression, not sure what could be happening there.

However, he feels his soul tensing up once his nose picks up a new scent... blood. Gaian blood. Umuite blood. Mazan blood. *Sniff sniff sniff!!* He closes his eyes and sniffs more intensely, his nose twitching. His heart drops when he smells Kendo’s blood... and Rose’s. *No*, he thinks to himself. He takes a few steps toward the castle, but he stops himself as soon as he senses someone else approaching him. He turns to see Usiku walking up to him while wearing concern on his face. “Usiku,” he says calmly, trying not to show any signs of panic, “How is the hotel treating you and your family? They’re not giving you trouble, are they?”

“You know why I’m here, Alpha,” Usiku says sternly, cutting the small talk, “Any updates on Rose?”

“...” Alpha can’t seem to get himself to give Usiku the straight truth. How is he going to tell the man who’s forced him to reset once upon a time that his daughter is knocking on Death’s door at this very moment? He knows that lying to Ubokufa’s descendant would be pointless. Maybe half of the truth will suffice. *Here’s hoping*, he dreads.

“*Alpha*,” Usiku says once more, now not hiding his anxiety as he steps closer to him, “*What’s happening to Rose?*”

Alpha lets out a shaky sigh, then he says, “She’s still alive...”

“... You don’t sound certain, Alpha,” Usiku says, squinting his eyes.

“It’s a close fight, but she’s standing strong,” the spirit hound responds, looking into Usiku’s garnet eyes even though they make his amethyst eyes want to avert away.

“... You’re lying to me...”

“I understand that you’re worried for your daughter, and unfortunately, I’m sure that no matter what I say, it will not bring you any type of ease. However, Usiku, even if I were to tell you the full truth... What could you do...? I want to run in there and fix my mistakes just as badly as you... but we can’t...”

“Your mistakes...?”

“If I would have never allowed Aidoneus into Umu, none of this would be happening... It’s my fault that he’s as powerful as he is now...”

“You’ve had ample time to stop him... What was holding you back...?”

“I was foolish. Aidoneus played the savior part so well, I genuinely thought he was for Umu. We didn’t learn about his true intentions until after Kendo was born, and even after that, we still couldn’t do anything... Not unless we were willing to risk the lives of the Quphantos... If we were to have rebelled against Aidoneus, they would have suffered a fate worse than death...”

“Hm... So the ring pieces... They were the Quphantos’ secretive way of stopping him?”

“I’m assuming so. They didn’t let us in on anything. Most likely to keep Aidoneus out of the loop as much as possible.”

“Hm...”

“... *sighs* It probably would have helped if Ubokufa would have told us that he’d start a family in Gaia in order to have someone fight Aidoneus in his place... We could have recruited you... and stopped you from offing us...”

“... Is that really why we’re here...?”

“It’s what I’m predicting. Quphantos are supposed to strictly stay in Spirit Realm, but Ubokufa stuck his neck out to truly find a placeholder that holds the same powers as him... and he’s not breaking the Spiritual Laws, considering that he created this family for business purposes...”

“Hmph, if he wanted to find someone to fight for him, he could have just *given* the powers to that person... could he not?”

“He didn’t want to give them to just anyone. Besides, it was the best way to throw Aidoneus off. You saw how he thought little of Rose.”

“Fair...”

So many more questions run through Usiku’s mind about his godfather; however, he remembers that he was going to get food for Delilah, and he doesn’t want to put himself through anymore mental torture. Finding it as a good excuse to distract himself, he sighs out, “I’ll let you back to work then, Alpha. I apologize for bothering you.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Alpha says, “If anything else happens, I’ll be sure to let you know.” Usiku nods his head and calls his sister to teleport him to the nearest restaurant to get

some food. Alpha watches the descendant make his exit, and once he's gone, he looks back at the castle. Seconds later, Beta and Gamma stand by their eldest brother, looking at Aidoneus' home, as well with a weary sensation taking over their souls, smelling the same tragic events Alpha sniffed.

"Do you really think they'll make it through," Beta asks Alpha softly, "They barely made it through the Quphantos' challenges..."

"Never mind that," Gamma huffs, "What is *momma* gonna say? We've had to keep her in the dark for so long... Is she going to be mad at us?"

"*Sighs* I don't even want to *think* about her, right now," Alpha groans out, shaking his head as he digs for a blunt, "Let's just hope that the Quphantos' secret plan kicks in and puts a stop to this madness before *she* tries to get involved..." He then lights up his blunt, letting the Devil Lettuce slowly ease his nerves, pushing away the thoughts of their mother finding all that has happened so far. *She has such high expectations for us*, the eldest brother thinks to himself, *And I'm sure she's already known of Aidoneus' shenanigans up in Maza. If she hears that he's still pulling the same shit here... and we were supposed to be Guardians of this place... We're never going to hear the end of it... And I'm sure the Quphantos are going to have to hear a mouthful from her, as well... Kendo... Rose... You two are our only hope...*

...

Diablo's heart weeps as he stands at the stairs looking at his new friends' corpses piled up in one spot of the room and Rose bleeding out as she lays on her back. *Whimper, whimper, whimper!* His body stays frozen, but he releases some cries to help give the descendant some form of supportive energy. Rose hears the pitbull, and she looks at him through the dread-filled blur that takes over her eyesight. She tries to ignore the devil's malicious stare, knowing that he's

cheesing at the sight of his obstacles being nothing but sacks of flesh piled up. Her mind runs through all of the possible solutions that float in front of her at this second. She can either revive her friends, heal herself, or help Kendo who is about to lose his chance at freedom.

Helplessness. Despair. Tragedy. Rose's life begins to flash before her very eyes. Her father. Her mother. Her uncle. Her aunt. Her fur-cousin. Tenacity. Jacqueline. Melissa. Nermal. Their smiles flash at her, taunting her with the possibility that she'll never get to see them again. She thinks back to when things were simpler... when her friends didn't know that she was an M-Hybrid and they weren't involved with otherworldly affairs. They would still be alive if they didn't help Amethyst rescue Alexander and Thomas from the Umuites. They would be in Gaia continuing their less complicated lives if it weren't for Usiku. Usiku. Rage slowly boils in Rose's stomach as she remembers her father pushing the idea of having her friends do the dirty work. All just so she would be protected and he wouldn't have to get his hands dirtied once again.

However, as her fury bubbles, Kendo's face shows up. Then Alexander's. Then Thomas'. Then Amethyst's. Then the moment her uncle finally removed the veil and revealed the family's dark past. She realizes that if not for these events, who knows if she would have ever met these people or learned the information she has now. It's even because of these events, she's finally taken the time to discover her powers. *You're not perfect, daddy... not at all*, Rose thinks to herself, wishing her father was here to listen to her, *I wish you were here so that I could give you a piece of my mind. You've made so many harmful decisions even when you were trying to do good. You just couldn't accept the fact that as Ubokufa's children, we play a huge role in all of this, and you really tried to snatch it all away from me as soon as I was ready to accept that.* She looks up at the ceiling, looking at the light dance among the chandeliers' diamonds. *I have to fix*

*this, she thinks, I have to give everyone a chance at life... both in the Flesh Realm **and** Spirit Realm.*

Meanwhile, Aidoneus hovers over Kendo after saying his last words to him, keeping his katana raised as he is about to strike his son down. Finally. He's done it. He's finally about to see his master plan play out how he always wanted it to. His son's soul is finally his, and he's now able to get the Chaos Quphanto's help in making it happen. However, as soon as the blade strikes down, *SCHTIING!!* A sparkling rainbow-iridescent barrier surrounds Kendo, making Aidoneus bounce back unwillingly as rainbow electricity surges through his body. The devil recovers his footing though his heart jolts in shock. He looks at his son now surrounded by the mystifying shield, the shield becoming more opaque to where Kendo isn't visible anymore, and his face starts to strain. *"What is this,"* he hisses out as his slit pupils narrow, *"Why is this happening...!?"*

Kendo listens to Aidoneus through the bright colors dancing together, hearing him try to break the shield and fail every time. *SCHTING! SCHTING! SCHTING! SCHTING!* He starts hearing Aidoneus huff out his vexation. *"Anti,"* the devil exclaims, *"Are you still in there!? ANSWER ME!!"* But the chaotic jokester stays silent, and as he lays there in pain, he then notices another sensation vibrating on his left ring finger. That's when he remembers... the ring. He looks at it and sees the gems glow brightly, and as soon as he takes notice of the jewelry, a bright portal appears underneath him, making him sink into the unknown. Aidoneus continues trying to slice the shield down, but he becomes more desperate as he notices his efforts aren't making progress, his huffs becoming shouts. *"ANTHIII!! I SWEAR IF YOU DON'T COME OUT OF THERE I'LL- ACK!!"* Before Aidoneus can release another threat, scorching liquid rushes up his esophagus while an intense wave of pain courses through his brain, making him drop the katana

and fall to the ground. **UUUURRRKKK!!!** The devil starts puking up black, red, and purple iridescent vomit, painting the entirety of his mouth and lips the color of his creations' souls.

Aidoneus' sudden sick-fit makes the copy of him downstairs with Rose disappear in black smoke and, *click*, the front entrance to unlock. Rose hears everything, and she takes this chance to try and push herself to her own limits. *I am Ubokufa's goddaughter, Rose tells herself, Unlike Aidoneus, I actually **am** part Quphanto, and unlike my father, I **will** do what must be done. I can do what they can't and will succeed.* "**You will not win, Aidoneus,**" she says softly. She closes her eyes, thinking of an insect that will do everything she needs to accomplish. She has eight souls to revive, nine counting Alexander's and Amethyst's baby. She has herself to heal. She has Nermal to get out of her fishbowl prison once again. Seeing how Aidoneus is dealing with his own struggles, she can safely assume that Kendo is okay, which makes it one less problem for her to worry about. In a couple of seconds, she slightly opens her eyes to reveal the small red glow once more in her pupils, and a glowing giraffe-sized rainbow-iridescent praying mantis appears besides its creator, letting out a harmonious howl which snatches Aidoneus' attention as he tries to recover from his sudden withdrawal. *Help them all,* she tells her creation telepathically, and then she starts feeling a warm sensation take over her body, her eyelids becoming heavy. *Hurry...!*

"*This can't be happening,*" Aidoneus groans out, spitting out whatever remaining acidic fluids he has left inside trying to escape. He stumbles back up, wiping his mouth, and grits his teeth as he expands his leathery wings and flies downstairs while holding his stomach. "*I have to hurry,*" he mumbles out, continuing to fly past his destruction and down the right hallway to get to the set of stairs going downward. "*I'll deal with whatever bullshit is going on with Anti and that **pain-in-my-ass Rose**... I was feeling just fine, I don't understand!! Was it the shield!? Never*

mind that, right now, I need to recharge... Perhaps even double the dosage. I'm gonna need as much energy as I can get if I want to- UUURRRRRRRRK!!!" He crashes into the floor before he pukes up more of the dark vomit, his throat feeling as if he shouldn't be able to talk anymore, his insides feeling like a Quphanto's hand is gripping them and squeezing them to the point they're balled up playdough. He curls up once again, feeling a blazing sensation take over his body. When he's done vomiting, he starts panting heavily, ferociously ripping off his jewelry, not caring about some of them breaking and the gems bouncing onto the floor. He then removes his tux, becoming completely shirtless, and he starts hanging onto the wall as he limps to his destination. *"Th-The lab,"* he whispers out, *"I-I have to hurry..."*

Chapter 28

Nermal and Diablo watch in awe as Rose's rainbow praying mantis marches towards the fish bowl and neatly slices the top off, allowing it to slide off and shatter onto the floor, not harming the H-Hybrid or Upindelaiki soul. It lowers its front legs, gently grabbing Nermal and Alexander's soul and removing them out of the glass prison. It places them down onto the floor, and Diablo can't help himself but to run towards the hybrid and hop onto her, trying to give her a slobbery greeting. Nermal can't help but to giggle as she tries to push him off. "Awww, hahaha," she giggles, "Hey cutie~! No kisses, you're too stinky, hmhmhm~!" Diablo understands her and instead nuzzles her, letting her pet him despite his rancid scent. The praying mantis then lets out another howl, and numerous strands of rainbow aura dance towards the eight lost souls, lifting them all up. The aura removes all of the wounds Rose's friends have received, reversing them all as if they never went through the hell Aidoneus put them through not too long ago, and it gives Alexander's, Thomas', and Pierre's souls enough energy to gain their forms back whilst still having their powers. The samaka-human hybrid and umuic pitbull watch the phenomenon like it was Rose turning Carnation back into Amethyst all over again except it's not on a television screen and it's on a much grander scale.

Several seconds go by, and the praying mantis finishes reviving everyone and giving their powers back, and it lowers everyone as their eyes slowly flicker open and begin examining themselves. Amethyst feels on her stomach, sensing her child's soul once again. They make it to the ground, and they look up to see Rose's creation, caught off guard by its massiveness.

"Whoa," Melissa says softly. "Wait.. Rose made this!?"

As soon as she mentioned Rose's name, Tenacity quickly looks to find Rose laid out on the ground, still bleeding out. "ROSE," she exclaims, and Jacqueline and Melissa see the awful sight as well, running to their friend.

They all hover over the descendant, not caring that their knees are soaking up the blood puddle that their friend has created, and Issei comes around to brush them away. “Aye, back up,” he says, “Give her some air.”

“*Air*,” Jacqueline shouts, “*She’s, like, dying!! We have to help her!!*”

“*Rose, tell us what to do*,” Melissa cries, “*We’ll do it in a heartbeat!!*”

Rose looks at everyone, softly smiling through her half-closed eyes, feeling tears forming. They all look at her, feeling some form of guilt for getting caught lacking and leaving Rose to use her powers once again to save them. “*You don’t have to do anything for me*,” Rose softly says, and her praying mantis creates another sparkling strand that envelops her wound in light, making her wince as it heals her. She continues, “*You need to get out of here...*”

Issei straightens himself up as he prepares his ice gun. “Like hell we’re leaving you here,” he says firmly, “Aidoneus’ ass is grass.”

“Yeah,” Tenacity agrees, summoning her fiery dual guns, “Where is the son of a bitch?”

Nermal immediately speaks up, “He went that way! He shouldn’t have gone far, he was looking very messed up!” She points to the hallway Aidoneus fled through, and Diablo starts barking, leaving the hybrid to lead the way.

“Looking messed up, you say,” Amethyst asks, summoning her dry ice rapier, “Then he should be no problem for us to take down now.”

“*No*,” Rose pleads, feeling a surge of urgency give her some energy, but hisses as she tries to sit up, laying back down as she whimpers.

Thomas kneels down to Rose with a look of concern and says softly, “Rose, you’ve done enough. Please, just rest-”

*“I didn’t revive you all just so you could die **again**,”* Rose hisses out while gritting her teeth, then she looks at her creation and shouts weakly, *“Get them out of here while Aidoneus is weak!!”* The praying mantis howls once again, and it marches to the entrance and *BOOOOOOM!!!* It forces its front legs into the castle’s walls, making it crumble down, the front doors nonexistent. As the dust dances around, the mantis marches to the shield that has surrounded the place and *VWOOOOMP!!* It slices through the magical barrier, making it disappear in sparkles.

The mantis releases another howl, its cry echoing throughout the domain and grabbing the Cerberus Bros.’ attention. It then grabs the team and Diablo with its aura strings, and it carries them in the air as it runs away from the castle. Rose’s friends cry out to her, begging her to let them go and let them help, but she refuses to comply. The Cerberus Bros. spot the rainbow insect, making their eyes go wide as they realize who created it.

The praying mantis crawls past the pits, past the brothers, and through the central town of Umu, making some Umuites scream their heads off and fly away from it. As Usiku walks out of a restaurant with large bags of food and his sisters flying around him, he looks to the right and his heart and bags drop to the sandy ground. *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* The large insect stomps past him, and he hears Rose’s team’s shouts and cries. As soon as they see him, they start calling for him. *“UUSIKUUUUU,”* everyone shouts.

Forgetting about the food, he starts keeping up with the creation by lightly jogging. *“WHERE’S ROSE,”* he shouts out to them.

“SHE’S BACK AT THE CASTLE,” Alexander answers.

“GO TO HER, USIKU,” Amethyst shouts out, *“SHE DOESN’T HAVE MUCH TIME!”*

Not saying anything else, Usiku instantly starts running towards the castle once again, not giving his sisters a chance to even let them teleport him there. They decide to fly ahead of him, wanting to see their niece first. *Squeak squeak squeak squeak!!* As they make their way to the castle, the mantis gets to the tall, bronze gates of Umu and gently drops the team there. Back at the castle, Rose feels that her wound completely healed up, and she lets out a sigh as she doesn't experience the intense pain anymore, though now she's experiencing a lot of drain. Emotional drain. Physical drain. Spiritual drain. She's doing so much at once, she feels her eyes now wanting to give up and close shut. Suddenly, *squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!* She peeks to see her aunts flying around her.

"Aunties," Rose whispers, then she softly giggles, *"Then daddy is on his way..."*

Squeak squeak squeak squeak!

"I did it... Aren't you proud of me...?"

Squeak squeak squeak squeak!

"I'll be okay... I just... Need to rest... Like I've been doing... I'll see you... in a bit... I love you all..."

As the descendant breathes out her words, her eyes finally close, and her body goes limp, her breathing barely detectable; then, her praying mantis disappears in sparkles, leaving her team to themselves. Some of Rose's aunts land beside her, looking at her with sad eyes, one of them nuzzling her face. The rest of the bats fly upstairs to see the rainbow barrier that Kendo has been stuck in and has yet to emerge.

...

Kendo closes his eyes, trying to block out as much light as possible as he lowers into an unknown area, the dimension being nothing but pastel-rainbow colors swirling around, sparkles

dancing everywhere. He lands gently onto the warm, solid ground, and he starts feeling a weird sensation around his wound. He slowly opens his eyes once more, adjusting to the bright light and looking down to see his wound is being drenched with pristine water. The liquid comes from a heart-shaped bottle being held by a skeletal hand. As the chaotic jokester feels his wound slowly going away, he tries to see who's pouring the substance, and his eyes widen when he sees that it's a large being in a flared long-sleeved cloak that has black swirls dancing around it, the cloak having a moonstone adorned on it with a silver rim. The being's left side is a skeleton that has a small red glow within his eye socket, and his right side is a dark-skinned man with high cheek-bones, no facial hair, and his eye is dark blood-red with a small red glow within his pupil. Split down the middle, where the two sides meet, rests a magical line, sparkles dancing together, emphasizing that the two sides are different halves but are much needed. Kendo's heart skips a beat when he takes in the being's appearance and he realizes that the fleshy side looks like someone he knows. Then he realizes... he looks like Usiku.

The being finishes the bottle, shaking it gently to make sure every drop makes it to Kendo's wound. In seconds, the wound disappears, and Kendo slowly lifts himself up, making the mystery guy stand up and place the bottle inside his cloak. Kendo looks at where his wound originally was, then he looks up the person who healed him. "*Ubokufa*," he asks while squinting his face, confusion starting to settle in.

"Correct," the Life and Death Quphanto confirms calmly, "However, you should be thanking the Love Quphanto for giving me the water that healed you..."

"Oh," says the chaotic jokester, "Well, thank you Love Quphanto even though you're not here... I think. Wait, *you* couldn't just heal me?"

“I could have,” Ubokufa says, “But I have my reasons... Reasons that won’t make sense until after you defeat your father.”

“Oh... Alrighty then.”

“Aidoneus is going to do all he can to kill you now, Kendo. The Correction Ring will be rendered useless because I’m sure he’ll make it impossible to get close to him. This vessel you’re in right now won’t be enough to defeat him.”

Kendo gets up and dusts himself off, and as he stretches, he says, “Okay, so I’m assuming this is where you go ahead and change up my look?”

“Yes, but it won’t be so easy,” Ubokufa croaks out, his warm tone slowly shifting to a bone-chilling one.

“Huh, what do you mean,” he asks the Quphanto, “All you gotta do is just go ‘bippity-boopity-bop’ and then I transform, right?”

“Kal’s Tansis... the Love Quphanto’s Upemis... the Hate Quphanto’s Ichukis... they all had to sacrifice their original appearances and lifestyles to devote themselves to their Master’s purpose in this universe. Their transformation required purpose... devotion... sacrifice.”

Ubokufa leans towards Kendo, drilling into his soul with his red glow. Chills start spilling all over Kendo’s body as he looks into Ubokufa’s eyes, and his heart quivers. With an icy tone, the Quphanto continues, “With that said... Kendo, the purpose behind your new form will be to thwart Aidoneus’ plan. Are you devoted to this purpose?”

“Pssh, *fuck* yeah,” Kendo scoffs, “I meant what I said!”

Ubokufa then asks, “Are you willing to sacrifice your true form to gain this new one?”

“Oh yeah, you mean the funky horns and the slit pupils that I haven’t seen for centuries? In trade for whatever badassery you’re about to give me? Hell yeah, I’m willing to sacrifice this shit!”

“Then reveal your true form...”

Ubokufa steps away from Kendo, and the chaotic jokester nods his head and closes his eyes, revealing the form he was born in. Black horns emerge from his head, and his round pupils become slits. Ubokufa then says loudly, “Quphantos of Sin, come forth.” Within a couple of seconds, the seven Quphantos of Umu appear in bright light, and they stand by their long-time friend as they look at Kendo while wearing the same outfits they wore to the Colosseum.

“Ooh, my phoenix,” Kal sighs out, “It’s truly time...”

Kendo asks, “This was the Plan B you were referring to... huh, Lady V?”

“It was,” Vanity confirms, “And I was really hoping we wouldn’t have to do this...”

Nasir says, “Although you’re finally getting rid of that dreadful look... It’s going to hurt...”

“How much,” the chaotic jokester asks, then he chuckles, “If it’s the right amount, I might like it~”

“Ohohohohoho, ooh trust me, Kendo,” Alphonse cackles, “It’s going to fucking hurt, and you’re *not* gonna like it.”

“Transformation, no matter the scale of it, will always involve pain,” Ubokufa says monotonously, “And in most cases... it is not enjoyable...”

“Less talking, more transforming,” Abigor impatiently huffs out. He then places his hand out in front of Kendo. Alphonse follows suit, then Demona, Nasir, Ophelia, Kal, and finally Vanity. Kendo subconsciously takes a step back, unsure of what’s about to happen. He’s never witnessed

transformation so he has no idea what it's supposed to look like or how it's going to feel.

However, determination keeps him planted, giving him no choice but to experience this.

Ubokufa places his fleshy hand out in front of Kendo along with his comrades, and colorful aura appears in all of the Quphantos' hands and shoots straight towards Kendo, making his entire body glow. Kendo can be seen struggling against their hold, flailing around, holding onto himself as groans and grunts filled with agony escape his lips, echoing throughout the dimension. He feels his horns disappear, but it feels like a pair of hands are gripping onto them tightly and ripping them off of his head. Then, he feels his eyes beginning to have the sensation of toxic chemicals making contact with them, and there's no water around to wash them out. His scalp starts to tingle as if thousands of needles are poking at it or fire is dancing all over it. Finally, he feels something trying to poke out of his back, wanting to rip his flesh open just to see the outside world. His shouts become cries as a pair of wings begin to ease their way out of his back, making him feel every tormenting inch as they emerge.

What feels like under a minute feels like forever, but Kendo lets out one last cry and *POOF!* The glow disappears, revealing him in his new form. The dark circles around Kendo's eyes dissipate to nothingness; Kendo's hair transitions from black to white; and he inhales sharply as he opens his eyes to reveal that the sclera is now completely maroon-red and his irises a yellow-orange ombre with slit pupils. His hands wander to the top of his head, feeling the emptiness. No more horns. He looks at a few of his hair strands. White as pure snow. Does he even want to look at his eyes? He sees the Correction Ring still resting on his left ring finger, watching it glow effortlessly. Finally, he sees his wings, black as charcoal, but the edges of the feathers are an ombre of colors of the rainbow, and the edges shimmer and dance against the

light every once in a while. “*Wow*,” he exhales, losing all ability to talk thanks to the miracle the Quphantos manage to pull off.

Demona lets out a sigh as she daps her tears away and says, “Just look at you, dearie... You’ve grown up so fast... You’re not the Upendeoni that was trapped in Umu, anymore...”

“Nope,” Kal concurs, softly smiling, “He’s our phoenix, ready to save the day...”

Ophelia fails to fight the urge and runs up to Kendo to hug him, wrapping him around with her long arms. She looks up to him, smiling widely, and Kendo looks at her, still unoriented, but manages to give her a soft smile back. She lets him go and reunites with her friends, and Ubokufa steps up to him with no emotion. “Kendo,” he says, “Your Upendeoni half is now non-existent... From this moment forward, you are half human and half Phoenru...”

“You made that up just now,” Alphonse snorts.

“Yes,” Ubokufa answers dryly, “After all, he is simply a phoenix wanting his freedom... ‘Phoenix’... ‘Uhuru’... He shall be the only Phoenru in this universe... unless he decides to procreate...”

“I like that name,” Kal says while holding his heart, “It’s fitting and it’s beautiful.”

“On top of his new form, the magic he possesses now are light, dark, fire, and water,” Ubokufa further explains, “Because why not give the indecisive soul more options?”

Kal softly giggles at his friend. He knows that Ubokufa didn’t have to give Kendo any more powers, but he did anyway, and they’re powers that naturally conflict with one another. He then coos out, “Well, my phoenix, how are you feeling~?”

“I feel... different,” Kendo says through a dry throat, and he tries to clear it and says, “Like it hurt *a lot*, like you guys said, but... it was definitely worth it. It feels weird not feeling those

things on top of my head and these wings are a new sensation, too. I... I think I'm gonna grow to like this~ I... thank you, guys... really... for everything.”

“Don't go thanking us, yet,” Abigor grunts, “You still have a virus to extract.”

“You can do it, Kenny, dear, we know you can,” Demona cheers.

“Free us all from Lucifer's nonsense once and for all,” Vanity demands.

“Gooooo Keeendooooo,” Ophelia coos out.

Kendo nods his head and gives his Quphanto allies a smirk of confidence, now about to go into battle with a new form and clearer mind. “I won't let you guys down,” he says, “I'll make you proud.” Then, as soon as he says this, a portal appears above him, leaving him to believe that this is his way out of here and back into the battlefield. He spreads his feathery wings and *FWOOSH!!* He flies upwards, and as he flies through the portal, *CRASH!!* He breaks through the rainbow barrier that kept him protected this entire time, and he flies around the throne room, trying not to crash into anything. He flies in a circle, gathering his surroundings, and he notices that the room is almost empty. He then notices that the entrance to the castle is broken down, and he then hears *squeak squeak squeak!!* He sees four bats flying around him, trying to grab his attention.

He realizes who the bats are and asks, “Rose's aunties? What are you guys doing here?” To answer his question, they fly downward, making Kendo look down and his heart to break. Not wanting to believe what he's seeing, he flies downwards, too, meeting up with the bats, and he kneels down to get a good look at his friend, Rose. Her face is so relaxed, as if she's sleeping, but her breathing is shallow... too shallow. “Rose,” he softly calls out to her, but she doesn't respond. He looks around to see if he can find the rest of their team, but they're non-existent. Then, he hears footsteps approaching them.

He looks to see that the Cerberus Bros. in their hound forms run into the castle, and they transform back into their human forms, looking at the disheartening sight before them. However, the despair is soon replaced with astonishment as they look at Kendo in his new form. “Kendo,” Alpha says, “Is this... the result of the ring?” Kendo shows off his ring to confirm the spirit hound’s suspicions. He then looks back at Rose, remembering his talk with Usiku. “*Sighs* He’s not going to be happy-”

“Um... Big bro,” Beta whimpers out, “His scent is getting stronger...”

Kendo looks at the entrance, sensing Usiku getting closer to the castle, and he looks back at Rose. Then he remembers his current mission and thinks of the possible locations that Aidoneus could be at right now... his lab. He picks up Rose and hands her to Alpha, and he orders, “You guys gotta get her out of here. This place is about to get a renovation.”

“But Kendo, *you* against *Aidoneus by yourself*,” Gamma asks, “Even in this new getup you’re wearing, is it enough?”

“It’s Quphanto-guaranteed to take him down,” Kendo says while puffing his chest out, “Now go! Shoo! Scram! Skedaddle!” The Cerberus Bros. take one last look at Kendo, still trying to convince themselves that this is truly happening. Without wasting any more time, they carry Rose out of the castle, and Kendo looks at the hallway leading to Aidoneus’ laboratory. “Ooooh Luuuuucyyyyy,” he then coos out playfully as he extends his wings, preparing himself to boost to his destination, “It’s tiiiiiiiiime~!”

Chapter 29

Aidoneus stumbles into his laboratory. He frantically looks around the dark room, looking at the different setups of bottles, test tubes, beakers, and syringes, the different color liquids in the containers bubbling subtly. The only sources of light within this room are torches resting on the walls, the purple and red flames flare wildly. He storms to his library across the room, picking up different books and throwing them around. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* “*Where is it,*” he hisses out, “*Where is it!?!*” His hands fumble around the many shelves, and after a couple of seconds, his fingers feel a small, rugged booklet and grips it tightly. He looks at the raggedy, dark-brown book and opens it, and he turns the page that is covered in chicken scratches for writing.

“*There it is, hehehehehe~*” the devil snickers raspily, “*Now, I have to be quick...*” He lays the book down and marches towards a large stone statue of a nude woman with extremely long locs flowing down to her bare feet, her hands held outwards as if she’s offering a hug, and her face creating a serene expression with a soft smile and three relaxed eyes that have no irises or pupils. He looks up at the statue, feeling his envy, wrath, and pride beginning to blaze his soul. He then guides his hand towards the drawer that rests on the front side of the statue’s pedestal, and he opens it to reveal seven test tubes containing something different. He snatches them up and carefully walks back to the table with his booklet. “*A minor setback,*” he says to himself, “*This is just a minor setback... This is why backup plans are made...*”

He grabs a triangle-shaped beaker filled with dark-red substance. The devil wheezes out, “*My blood... plus...*” He grabs the first test tube filled with smooth, red liquid, and opens it, *pop!* “*Abigor’s alcohol...*” He pours the substance into the beaker, then grabs the second tube filled with thick, clear liquid. *Pop!* “*Plus Alphonse’s saliva...*” Pour. The third test tube holds miniature balls of spider web. *Pop!* “*Plus Demona’s web...*” Pour. The fourth test tube contains a small piece of vivid-green prasiolite. *Pop!* “*Plus Nasir’s gem...*” Pour. The fifth test tube has light blue

sands. *Pop!* “*Plus Ophelia’s sands...*” Pour. The sixth test tube has lapis-lazuli-blue water. *Pop!* “*Plus Kal’s water...*” Pour. The final test tube holds strands of glittery purple hair. *Pop!* “*Plus Vanity’s hair...*” Pour. Once he pours the seven substances, the dark-red liquid begins to change between the colors of the rainbow, though the darkness that co-exists with the colors doesn’t make the substance look welcoming.

Aidoneus firmly grasps the bottle and closes his eyes, and he whispers scratchily, “*By drinking this potion, I shall regain all of my energy back, and I **will** be able to achieve my goal. I sacrifice this form for a new one, one that will be indestructible. Though I still don’t understand that blasted ring, this **will not** stop me. Aidoneus the Upendeoni, from this moment forward, is **dead**. I am now Aidoneus the-*”

“Ooooh Luuuuucyyyyy~!” Aidoneus halts his spell, though the liquid begins to glow softly, and his wrath begins to seep through his teeth when he realizes it’s his target attempting to taunt him. “It’s tiiiiiiiiime~,” Kendo coos out, and Aidoneus wastes no more time as he closes up the beaker and ferociously shakes it up. *Shake shake shake shake!!* The liquid along with the seven ingredients merge together, *bubble bubble bubble!* It begins to bubble and fizz, hues of purple and red beginning to dance with a few hints of black.

“*I will be Aidoneus the Creator of the New World,*” the devil growls out, “*I **will** be Ideya’s successor...*” He looks at the statue once again, continuing to growl and snarl at it, and he opens the bottle and chugs it down, letting the metallic taste of his blood along with the flavors of the other ingredients mingle on his tongue and the smooth yet thick substance travel down his throat. He throws the bottle down to the ground and breaks it into multiple pieces, and he waits for the effects to kick in. He hears wings flapping, and he hurriedly runs behind the statue, making sure his body is out of sight.

Kendo flies through the hallway, and he notices Aidoneus' vomit trail which makes him cringe. He flies to the set of stairs that go downward and zooms through, and he goes to the right, speeding down the hallway until he sees the last opened door on the left. He stops in front of his destination and marches in. He looks around, trying to find his target, and then his ears pick up sounds of groans and grunts filled with torment, much similar to what he experienced a couple minutes earlier. "*Sighs* Yeah, I called it," Kendo sighs out as he walks to one of the lab sets, looking at the different test tubes and beakers with different colored liquids. "I went through a transformation, it's only fair that you go through one, right?" *CRASH!!!* The chaotic jokester carelessly sweeps the equipment off of the table, making it all crash onto the floor. He waits to hear Aidoneus' response, but he only receives groans and cries.

He follows the sounds of suffering, and he stands in front of the statue, hearing Aidoneus' voice becoming distorted. He steps closer to the statue, but then the devil lets out one last cry and *FWOOM!!* Aidoneus expands his body, knocking down the statue, forcing Kendo to get out of the way so that it doesn't harm him. *CRASH!!* The statue shatters into pieces, big and small. Kendo recovers from the event, but his eyes soon capture the person responsible for the statue's damage, and they want to pop out when he sees Aidoneus' new look. His skin is now midnight purple; his afro has completely disappeared along with his nose, though the number of eyes that are on his face have went from three to seven; his black horns now have a neon purple glowing outline; a glowing red halo hovers over him; he's increased in his height to where he can possibly tower over Cerberus; his muscles become larger; his nails are now long claws; his ears have become longer; and his wings now have the red-purple swirls that Kendo and his friends have been needing to avoid, adorned with three eyes on each membrane(18 eyes in total on his wings), the eyes having gold-yellow sclera and red-orange-yellow ombre irises with slit pupils.

Aidoneus glares at Kendo with the seven eyes that now rest on his face, and he smiles very widely, exposing his glowing purple-red ombre sharp teeth and lengthy dark-indigo snake tongue with red-purple swirls surrounding it, the inside of his mouth also revealing to be the red-purple hazard. The eyes have an eerie, red glow in the dark, and as he slowly walks to Kendo, he sways his exceedingly long, smooth tail and says in a raspy, distorted voice, “**ΨΣ┐┐, ΨΣ┐┐, IF IT IS Π’T ΚΣΠΔΘ ΤΗΣ ΨΑΠΠΛΒΣ ΓΑΙΛΠ!?**”

“Wow, Lucy, you *finally* say my name right~” Kendo playfully says, “And it took for you to look like an alien after midnight to do so~!”

“**I’M ΔΘΠΣ Ρ┐ΛΥΙΠΓ ΓΑΜΣΖ,**” Aidoneus hisses, “**IF ΥΘЦ ΨΘΠ’T GIVΣ ΜΣ ΥΘЦЯ ΖΘЦ┐, I’┐┐ ЖЦΖТ’ΗΛVΣ ΤΘ ΖΝΑТ┐’Η IT FЯΘM ΥΘЦ, ΛΠΔ ΤΗΑТ ЯING IZ ΠΘТ GΘΠΓ ΤΘ ΖТΘР ΜΣ!**”

“KENDO, YOUR WINGS!! CREATE A BARRIER!!”

Kendo hears Abigor’s command in his mind, and as soon as Aidoneus lunges towards him like a lion, Kendo closes his charcoal wings in front of himself, the rainbow edges glow, and a rainbow shield appears in front of him. Aidoneus attempts to land a punch, but his fist aggressively kisses the shield, and then **BZZZZZT!!!** Aidoneus’ body shakes and vibrates from the multicolor electricity surging through his body, making him grunt and groan. He manages to pull away, stumbling from the attack, his sight blurred and his mind scrambled.

“Catch him, dearie!!”

Demonia’s voice echoes through, and Kendo hurriedly runs towards Aidoneus and reaches out to him with his left hand. His hand grips onto the devil’s forehead, forcing his head back, and dark aura escapes Aidoneus’ body and goes into the Correction Ring, making him release a despair-filled roar. Through the pain, he begins to feel himself slowly weaken, and he creates a

dark portal underneath their feet, making them fall into the throne room, catching Kendo off guard. Feeling nothing underneath his feet, Kendo’s heart plummets in surprise as they fall onto the floor, the fall separating the two. *Thud!* Kendo’s hand disconnects from Aidoneus’ head, and Aidoneus quickly recovers, frantically getting up and shaking his head, trying to get over the temporary daze Kendo has given him. Kendo hurries to get up before Aidoneus is able to flatten him with a magma hammer. *BAM!!* Kendo shifts to the right just in time as the weapon damages the black-and-white checkerboard floor, tile pieces flying everywhere.

The phoenru-human hybrid tries to find an opening once again, but then he notices Aidoneus standing in place, looking at him with wide eyes and a deep frown, his tail swaying to and fro. Seeing that the devil is frozen, Kendo takes the leap and holds his left hand out again, but then Aidoneus closes his warped wings, creating a red-and-purple swirling barrier. *SHIT*, Kendo curses to himself, and he stops himself in time, pulling away and taking a couple of steps back.

“Aah, the two clashing colors making a return...”

His wings... and his mouth, Kendo thinks to himself, No touchy...

*“**ΗΘΨ ΛΔΘΥΛΒ**~Σ,”* Aidoneus purrs, his distorted voice echoing throughout the room, *“**ΖΘ ΤΗΛΤ ΙΖ ΨΗΛΤ ΤΗΣ ΥΠΠΓ ΙΖ ΦΘΥ... ΗΛΗΛΗΛΗΛΗΛΗΛΗΛ~! ΖΘ Λ~Λ ΙΉΛΥΣ ΤΘ ΔΘ ΙΖ ΠΘΤ ~ΣΤ ΥΘΨ ΤΘΨ~Η ΜΣ. ΛΠΔ ΥΘΨ ~ΛΝΝΘΤ ~ΣΤ ΜΣ ΤΘΨ~Η ΥΘΨ. ΘΗ ΨΗΛΤ Λ ~ΘΥΣ~Υ ΖΙΤΨΛΤΙΘΠ ΨΣ'ΥΣ ΡΨΤ ΘΨΥΖΣ~ΥΣΖ ΙΝ, ΣΗ, ΚΣΠΔΘ~? ΨΨ~Λ... ΙΤ'Ζ ΤΙΜΣ ΤΘ ΡΨΤ Λ~Λ ΤΗΛΤ ΤΙΜΣ ΘΦ ΥΘΨ ΥΝΝΙΝΓ ΛΨΛΥ ΙΝΤΘ ΓΘΘΔ ΨΖΣ~ ~ΣΤ'Ζ ΖΣΣ ΗΘΨ ΓΘΘΔ ΥΘΨ ΥΣΛ~Λ Υ ΛΥΣ ΘΠ ΥΘΨΥ ΦΣΣΤ, ΤΥΙΝΚ~Σ ΤΘΣΖ~”*** The devil summons dual swords, one sword made of chilling dry ice and the other created with scorching tar, and he spreads his wings, removing the barrier, and flies upward.

Kendo sees this, and he spreads his wings as well, making sure that he's on the same level as Aidoneus, not giving him any type of advantage. *I got wings now, jackass*, he says in his mind.

“Get creative, my phoenix! Don't let our efforts go to waste!”

Kendo hears Kal's motivation, and tries to think of an item to use against Aidoneus while he finds the perfect opportunity. However, he starts struggling with thinking up a weapon. Not once in his life he's used his fire magic to create a weapon let alone using his magic altogether. He always avoided using magic to make things more interesting for himself, and the only reason he's only ever transformed to different animals during stickier situations was because he had options and it did come in handy, especially when trying to get away from something or someone. All Kendo ever wanted was to be a Gaian who didn't have much magical ability, just transforming into an animal ever so often. But now he not only has fire, but he also has water, light, and dark magic. *I always did become an animal, so I guess there's nothin' wrong with changing it up a bit*, he thinks to himself, trying to push himself to do something new, something he always avoided.

Aidoneus lets out a raspy laugh as he sees Kendo's hesitation as an opportunity for him to strike his son down. He swings his tar sword and flings the hot liquid towards Kendo, but Kendo flies away in time before the substance can make contact with him. Aidoneus continues repeating this move, *swing, swing swing!* The chaotic hybrid quickly dodges the tar slings, the seething liquid painting the various spots of the throne room black. After a few seconds of thinking, Kendo finally decides to use his water magic to create a pistol and then, ***BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!*** He starts shooting at the devil, but he uses his wings once again to create his barrier, the water bullets phasing into the red-purple swirls. The devil can't help but to chuckle to himself as he watches his son attempt to inflict any harm on him. He laughs out, ***“TYPI ⊂ A ⊃ ! THΣ***

**ЯЦМΘЯΣ ΛЯΣ ΤЯЦΣ, ΤΗΣΠ. ΤΗΣ ΘΠ~ Υ ΒЯΛΙΝ ΤΗΛТ ЩΘЯКΣ ΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΘΠΣ
DΘЩΠΣΤΑΙЯΣ.”**

The devil waits until the sound of gunshots stop, and he opens his wings to see Kendo soaring up close and *SCHTICK!!* The chaotic phoenru-human hybrid forces a katana made of light into Aidoneus’ chest, and he pushes him to a wall, *BOOM!* The devil lets out a curdling scream as the katana pins him into the wall, and Kendo places his left hand upon his indigo throat and strengthens his grip tightly, the Correction Ring glowing once again and absorbing more of the devil’s dark aura. “*Shut the fuck up,*” Kendo hisses out, looking into all seven of Aidoneus’ eyes with his fury on a low boil, “*We were just about to have fun, but then you start yapping...*”

Aidoneus tries to create a portal... but nothing appears. *No...* he panics internally, *No no no no!! I can’t make portals anymore?!* Not trying to show his worry, the devil makes a copy of himself behind Kendo.

“KENDO, BEHIND YOU!!”

Vanity’s voice roars, grabbing Kendo’s attention on time, and Kendo turns to see Aidoneus’ copy summoning an ice gun. He quickly withdraws the katana, *SCHLING*, and swings it horizontally, splitting the copy and making it disappear in black smoke. The hybrid then tries to focus back onto the real Aidoneus, but the devil flies away from him, creating distance to try and heal himself. As he hovers on the other side of the throne room, he creates multiple copies of himself, all of them summoning a different weapon made of one of the six magical abilities he’s mastered(from swords, to guns, from hammers, to axes), and they charge. Kendo makes his katana disappear and summons two swords made of fire and ice. He starts offing the copies one by one, having a few close calls but managing to recover. Blades nearly cut his hair or make a cut on his skin, bullets almost pierce his vessel, but he succeeds in dodging, blocking, and cutting

the copies off. His heart begins to dance with the beat of battle, his blood begins rushing from the... excitement? Seeing his father dissipate again and again, even though they're not him, leaves Kendo feeling... *elation* within his soul. For once, he's getting the chance to truly express how his father has left him feeling for the past eight centuries. The devil tries to shut him out, to silence him; he's been trying since Kendo's discovery of loving Gaia, but he won't be successful... not this time.

As Aidoneus watches Kendo trying to get to him, he can't help but to talk to his son once more, really wanting to caress his own ears with his voice. **“ΚΣΠΙΘ, ΤΗΣ ΜΘΡΣ ΥΘЦ ΜΘΝΣ, ΤΗΣ ΜΘΡΣ ΥΘЦ'ΡΣ ΡΥΘΝΙΠΓ ΤΘ ΜΣ'ΗΘЦ ΤΥЦ┐ Υ ΡΑΤΗΣΤΙ┐ ΥΘЦ ΛΥΣ. ΥΘЦ'ΡΣ DΘΙΝG Λ┐┐ ΥΘЦ┐┐ ΛΠ ΙЦΖТ ТΘ ΣΠD ΥΘЦЯ Θ┐D ΜΑΝ'Ζ┐┐ ΙFΣ. ВЦТ ТΗΣ ΖΛD ЯΣΛ┐┐ ΙTY ΙΖ... ΥΘЦ'ΡΣ ΠΘТ GΘΙΠG ΤΘ ЩIN. ΥΘЦ'ΡΣ ΡЦТТΠG ΙN Λ┐┐ ΘF ТНIЗ ΣFFΘЯТ, GΣТТΠG Λ┐┐ ΘF ТНIЗ'ΗΣ┐┐ P FЯΘM ТΗΣ QЦPНΛΠТΘZ, ΖΛ┐┐ ЯIFI┐┐ ΙNG ΥΘЦЯ FЯIΣNDZ... ΙЦΖТ ТΘ┐┐ ΘZΣ ΙN ТΗΣ ΣΠD. ΙF ΥΘЦ ЩΘЦ┐┐ D'ΗΛVΣ ΙЦΖТ Λ┐┐┐ ΣPTΣD ΥΘЦЯ FΛТΣ FЯΘM ТΗΣ VΣЯУ ВΣGΙNNING, ΠΘΠΣ ΘF ТНIЗ ЩΘЦ┐┐ D'ΗΛVΣ'ΗΑΡPΣΠΣD. ΝΘЩ I'M GΘΠΠG ΤΘ'ΗΛVΣ ΤΘ ΠΘТ ΘΠ┐┐ Υ┐┐ ΘMMΣΠZΣ ТΗΣ ΜΣЯGΣ, ВЦТ Λ┐┐ ZΘ PЦNIZ'Η ТΗΣ QЦPНΛΠТΘZ,┐┐ ΣЯВΣЯЦZ, ΛΠD ΛΠΥΘΠΣ Σ┐┐ ZΣ ЩНΘ'ΗΛZ DΘЦВТΣD ΜΣ ΘЯ QЦΣZТIΘΠΣD ΜΣ... AND ΙТ ЩI┐┐┐ ВΣ Λ┐┐┐ ВΣ┐┐ ΛЦZΣ ΘF ΥΘЦ. ТНIЗ ΙZ Λ┐┐┐ ΥΘЦЯ FΛЦ┐┐ T.”**

Kendo hears every drop of poison that oozes out his father's mouth, and it makes his soul burn wildly. His words keep echoing in his mind. *Your fault. All because of you. You. You. You.* He tightens his grip on his swords and starts increasing his agility, trying to cut his way to his father, ready to shut him up for good. Aidoneus continues, **“PΣЯНΛPZ ΥΘЦ ΛΠD ΥΘЦЯ ΜΘТΗΣЯ ЩΘЦ┐┐ D'ΗΛVΣ ВΣΣΠ ТΗΣ ВΣZТ ΘF FЯIΣNDZ. Ι ZΣΣ ZΘ ΜЦ┐┐'Η ΘF'ΗΣЯ**

**IN YΘC, IT'2 ЯCIVΘ TING. I Λ MΘZT FΣΣ IΚC YΘC C' HΛΠΓCΔ YΘCЯ ΠΛMΣ
 TΘ KΣΠDΘ TΘ ΓCΤ ЦΠDΣЯ MY ZKIN... ZIN C Σ IT ZΘCΠDZ ZΘ MЦ C' H IΚC' HΣЯ
 NAMΣ. FΘЯ Λ I KΠΘЦ, YΘC PЯΘBΛB Y ΛЯC' HΣЯ. THΣ ΘΠ Y DIFFΣЯCΠ C Σ
 IZ Z'HC ЦΛZ MЦ C' H MΘЯC ZЦBMIZZIVC TΘЦΛЯDZ MΣ THΛΠ YΘC'ЯC BΣIΠΓ
 ЯIGHT ΠΘЦ... Λ THΘЦGH IT MIGHT BΣ BΣ C ΛЦZC OF THΣ... MΣDI C INΣ I'D
 GIVC HΣЯ FЯΘM TIMC TΘ TIMC. IT ЦΘЯKCD ZΘ ЦC C' ЦITH' HΣЯ, I' HAD
 HOPCD IT ЦΘЯKCD FΘЯ YΘC TΘΘ... BЦT YΘC'ЯC Λ DIFFΣЯCΠT ZITЦATIOΠ. YΘC
 KΠΘЦ ЦHAT? PΣЯHAPZ THIZ IZ PΛЯTIA Y MY FΛЦ T, TΘΘ. I ZHΘC D
 HΛVC P C KCD Λ BCTTΣЯ C ANDIDATC, ΘΠC THAT ЦΛZ ΠΘT MЦ C' H OF Λ
 HΛZZ C. INZTΣAD, I P C KCD AN ЦNCTAB C' HΛЯ C ΘT ЦHΘ ЦΛZ ΘΠ Y GΘΘD
 FΘЯ BЯCΣDIPG ΛΠD C ΛЦZIΠG TЯΘCB C, AND ΠΘЦ HΣЯ BAD TЯΛITZ HΛVC
 BΣCΠ PΛZZCΔ ΘΠTΘ MY GΘΘD-FΘЯ-ΠΘTHIΠG C' HI D.”**

BA-BUMP!! At this moment, his final nerve snaps, his sight becomes a blur, and his ears begin to ring. Even though his mother is a stranger to him, for a mysterious reason, hearing Aidoneus disrespect her... *ba-bump... ba-bump... ba-bump...* causes him to let out a blood-curdling scream and his body to engulf in golden flames, catching Aidoneus off guard. Soon, he sees Kendo blasting through the copies like a shooting star. The devil tries to enclose his wings once again, but he's too late as Kendo grabs onto him and bursts through the castle wall, making a ginormous hole. They soar like a blazing comet across Umu as Kendo keeps hold of the devil, making him scream in pain as more of his power is absorbed and his purple flesh warms up in his son's flames. Umuites within the town square witness the phenomenon, reasonably confused by it since there are no stars here in this domain.

Kendo can't slow himself down as he soars across the dark sky, but he doesn't care. Aidoneus tries to break free of Kendo's grasp, trying to dig his long nails into his arms, but Kendo doesn't budge. The bats manage to catch up to them, and they fly ahead, creating a sparkling red portal back to the throne room to where they land on the floor. *BOOM!!* They made a large indentation into the checkerboard floor, the cracks taking over the majority of the area. The enraged hybrid looks at his surroundings frantically, jerking his head left and right, whilst Aidoneus continues feeling the Correction Ring taking his power, the burning sensation not really bothering him since he's used to the heat. "*I'm tired of seeing this place,*" Kendo growls out, and he gets off of the devil and gives him space, "*Get the fuck up...*" He notices Aidoneus struggling to get up from the ground, the devil panting heavily, his arms trembling.

Aidoneus tries to create a copy of himself... but he can't. He attempts creating a weapon... but he fails. "*THIZ... ⊃ AII'T... BΣ,*" he whimpers out, and he successfully lifts himself up, though it sends an intense wave of nausea throughout his brain and body. His seven eyes roll back and eyelids flutter, and the eyes on his wings roll around crazily as the red and purple swirls within the membranes and his mouth begin to slowly disappear.

Kendo looks at his father with so many emotions swirling within his heart. He begins to think about his time in Umu; his adventures in Gaia; his torment in that isolated room. Memories begin flashing before his very eyes: the first tree he's ever seen; the Gaians that he's befriended, loved, and betrayed; the Umuites he tried to get away from; the Quphantos spending time with him; the Cerberus Bros. having to put up with his shenanigans; and Morgana being there for him every step of the way, trying to be his emotional support and much more. Her death replays in his mind over and over again. Then he remembers his new friends... Nermal was kidnapped, Amethyst was taken away and brainwashed, and Rose was forced to use all of her power to get everyone

out of here. He doesn't even know of the other team members' fates. Surely they're okay... but what happened that pushed Rose so far? Uncertainty. Sorrow. Wrath. The flames that cover his body fizz out... only to be replaced with icy-blue frost. Aidoneus doesn't even notice his son slowly approaching, but he senses the chilly sensation and instantly tries to back up only to fall onto the ground once again. Kendo stands over him, hearing him whimper and watching him try to crawl away, and he sneers out, "***800 years... I've been forced to listen to your funky ass... for EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS... And you would think that I'd have some crazy monologue for your ass to listen through... but you know what? I only got two words for you... Fuck. You.***"

Stomp!! Kendo steps onto Aidoneus' tail, making him yelp as the frostiness surges throughout his body. The hybrid then grips it with both of his hands, more of the dark aura going into the ring. Like a ball and chain, he begins swinging Aidoneus around with ease, his negative emotions and Aidoneus' weakened state making it somewhat easy to do so. Without noticing, the tail disappears, and Kendo unintentionally releases Aidoneus, sending him flying to the throne chair and knocking it over. *Crash!!* Aidoneus tries to get up, but through his blurry vision, he notices his skin shifting from indigo and his original skin color, chocolate-brown. "*N-No,*" he says softly, his voice less distorted now, "*It wasn't supposed to go like this-*"

Yank!! Icy hands grab onto Aidoneus', more of Aidoneus' dark aura seeps out and flows into Kendo's ring, and he winces and groans in despair. He looks up to his son with a grimace plastered on his face, but he doesn't see any emotion displayed on Kendo's face. "*Wh-What are you d-doing,*" Aidoneus hesitates, the cold making it difficult for him to speak, "*K-K-Kendo d-don't be rash, w-we can t-talk about thi-*" *FWOOSH!!* Kendo extends his feathery wings and shoots upward, *CRAAAASH!!* He breaks through the roof of the castle and soars high in the sky,

looking like another comet except having a blue hue this time instead of yellow. Aidoneus groans and cries, trying to get out of Kendo's grasp, but his fragile strength fails him. As they fly higher and higher above ground, the devil can feel his transformation going away. His skin is no longer indigo; his wings are back to being midnight-black without eyes or red-purple swirls; his red halo disappears in sparkles while his black horns discontinues its neon-purple glow; his mouth loses its monstrous look; his nose returns; his ears shrink back to its original size; and his seven eyes decrease to three. The one physical part of him that doesn't return is his afro, the detransition leaving him completely bald. Then, Aidoneus' worst nightmare comes true... his Spirit Eye, the one physical attribute about himself that he admired the most, disappears in sparkles. He feels it going away and he cries, "*Nooooo! Nooo, noooo, NOOOO!!!*"

Kendo ignores Aidoneus' whining, looking up at the seven moons as he tries to get as close to them as he can, and when the chilliness begins to bother him, he stops, flapping his wings in place while still holding onto the defeated soul. Aidoneus sees how far they are from the ground, and fear begins to poke at his heart, making him yelp and whimper though his body begins to feel like a huge chunk of ice. The phoenru-human hybrid looks at Aidoneus, still not saying anything to him. Then, he looks at his first home.. Umu. Seeing how small the buildings are, the people are almost non-existent. He then sees the torn up castle. "*KENDO,*" Aidoneus cries out, making Kendo cringe, "*COME ON, SON!! DON'T DO THIS!! L-L-LOOK, I'M SORRY, OKAY? I-IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR!? I'M SORRY!! P-PLEASE FORGIVE ME!!*"

"*Forgive you,*" Kendo growls out.

"*Y-YES,*" Aidoneus pleads, "*L-LET'S T-TALK THIS OVER!! I'M POWERLESS SO YOU HAVE NO REASON TO BE UPSET ANYMORE!! YOU GOT WHAT YOU WA-*"

Drop! Kendo lets go of Aidoneus, watching him fall down like a raindrop, and before Aidoneus can even think of a way to recover, Kendo grabs onto him once again, making them fall at a faster rate together. The mastermind begs repeatedly to let him go, but the hybrid doesn't listen. Sound of the wind rushing floods their ears, and everything becomes undetectable as Kendo's blue, icy aura takes over everything. And then... *BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!!* They land back into the castle, only this time, the landing was strong enough to make the entire castle collapse, its bricks falling one by one and making the sands fly and dance around, grabbing everyone's attention and making a few of them want to go see the results.

Chapter 30

The Cerberus Bros. walk out of the castle to let Kendo handle his father, dreading the unavoidable outcome of running into Usiku. Alpha looks at Rose as he carries her, sensing her soul still giving life to her vessel... but it's struggling. Beta and Gamma can't help but to look at her, as well, thinking back to the large mantis she created earlier and dragging her team out of the castle for their safety. No words escape their lips. It's just silence. What is there to say? They walk past the Pits, continuing to get closer to the central town of Umu until they see... him. Usiku runs into the picture, and as soon as he spots his heart in flesh form being carried in Alpha's arms, his soul cracks. He slows down to a stop, and he stands in front of the brothers, his eyes stuck on Rose. The brothers slightly quiver in his presence, unsure of what he's going to do. Alpha croaks out, "Usiku-"

Usiku raises his hand and lowers his head, shaking it to stop Alpha from saying anything else. *Siiiiigh*. He holds his arms out, and Alpha immediately knows what he wants and gives his daughter to him. The descendant looks at his only child, feeling tears wanting to escape his eyes but fights the urge. The eldest brother of the Cerberus Bros. says softly, "We're sorry, Usiku..."

"... *Don't be*," Usiku says raspily, his eyes still on Rose. He then turns away from them and starts walking back to town. He continues gazing at his daughter, waiting for her to do or say something for her shallow breathing isn't lifting his spirit. If anything, it's making his heart want to cry but it tries to hold back, its strings wanting to snap away. "*Rose*," he calls out to her softly... no answer. "*Pumpkin, come on, wake up*," he whispers while gently cradling her like she was a baby all over again.

Suddenly, "Usiku!" The broken man looks up to see his brother running up to him alone, his wife and their dog nowhere to be seen. Shandon looks at his brother, then he sees his niece, and his mind starts racing but he doesn't show it. He stands in front of them, and he examines Rose,

seeing that her breathing is barely detectable. “*Lil’ Honey,*” he says, hoping that she’ll wake up... but she doesn’t. The calm descendant looks at his brother once again, and he notices his eyes slowly becoming glossy. “*Usiku-*”

“*She’s not answering us, Shandon*” Usiku mumbles, “*Her soul... feels faint...*”

“Nope, nuh-uh, shut up,” Shandon interrupts, “She’s fine, she’s just restin’.”

“*Shandon-*”

“Where are her friends?”

“...*They were taken towards the entrance of the domain... Kendo wasn’t with them...*”

“Then he must be takin’ care of Aidoneus if he’s still prancin’ around. Let’s just gather everyone and go home.”

“...*Shandon, what if-*”

“Usiku, for once, I actually *want* you to shut up. She’s *fine*. Long as she’s still breathin’, she’s *fine*. Let’s grab the ladies and go home.”

Shandon walks ahead, and Usiku follows him, his head hanging low. They make their way to the hotel they were resting at, but then *FWOOSH!!* They hear something fly past them, and they look up to see a shooting star fly past. However, they say nothing about it, wanting to keep their focus on Rose. As soon as they get to the hotel’s entrance, they see Zeena, Delilah, and Cocoa meet them halfway, opening the doors and leaving the building. “Shandon,” Zeena says softly, and then she sees Usiku with Rose. She sighs, “Rose... is she okay?”

Delilah stands in front of her soulmate, and she looks at their daughter, caressing her face but it only sends stress to her soul. “*Honey, she’s cold,*” she whispers, her voice trembling, “*Is she-*”

“*She’s fine,*” Shandon blurts out, making everyone look at him and Cocoa whimper. Suddenly, they hear a bunch of footsteps approach them, and they see that it’s the team making a return,

Thomas holding Nermal because of her true form still in the way. Shandon looks at them with frustration in his eyes, and he says bluntly, “*Now why are y’all here?*”

Amethyst sighs, “I tried to tell them we should leave like Rose wanted us to...”

“We’re sorry, Shandon,” Thomas says, stepping forward, “We felt horrible about what happened at the castle, and we just wanted to check on Ro-”

“*Well, get to steppin’*,” the Quphanto-Upindelaiki hybrid says harshly, “*We got Rose, yo’ dumbasses see that she’s fine, let’s start headin’ home.*”

“*Shandon*,” Zeena says softly, resting her hand on his arm, but he shrugs her away.

“What’s *your* deal,” Alexander asks, squinting his eyes, “We’re all upset that this shit is happening-”

Shandon steps up to Alexander, closing in on him, and says, “*My deal is that my niece told y’all to leave and you’re still here.*”

Suddenly, *BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!!* A huge explosion rumbles across the domain, and everyone turns to where the booming sound came from. “Was that at the castle,” Melissa ponders.

“Doesn’t matter,” Shandon grunts, “Usiku, call ‘em up.”

Without being much of a hassle, Usiku calls out, “*Nruku!!*”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!!

Shandon then looks at the sisters, and he demands, “Teleport us back to the garden.”

Nermal looks at her friend in Usiku’s arms, seeing her look so lifeless, her soul shudders as the sight of Rose being stabbed by Aidoneus and pushing through to create her final insect flashes in her mind over and over. Then, she remembers Kendo, not knowing what’s happened to

him. One of the bats senses her worry, flying in front of her as if she's waiting for a request.

Nermal clears her throat and asks, "Could you bring Kendo back, too? Please?"

Alexander winces at the suggestion, but he decides to put his dislike for the character on hold, seeing that Nermal's relationship with Kendo is quite different and he doesn't want to salty it.

Squeak squeak squeak squeak!

"Thank you," the samaka-human hybrid says softly as she gently nods her head, and a few of the bats fly towards the castle while the rest of them transport everyone back to Gaia.

...

The Cerberus Bros. witness the crash, and they look at each other, hesitant on what they should do. Alpha takes charge and transforms into a hound, and his brothers follow suit, the trio running towards the catastrophe. They run through the dust storm, not letting the dirt disturb them as they navigate through it with their strong memory of where the castle once was. They start seeing rubble, the bricks losing their red-purple iridescent coating. Finally, they start seeing remnants of the checkerboard floor, and then they see them... a sight that they never thought they'd witness in all of their lives.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Kendo mercilessly punches a bald Aidoneus, his fists painted red as the devil's face slowly becomes mush. The phoenru-human hybrid continues smashing his face, his wrathful grunts become sorrowful shouts as his fists punch their target, no more dark aura going into the Correction Ring. Alpha takes a few steps forward and quietly says, "*Kendo...*" He can't believe it. Kendo won. But at what cost? He witnesses Kendo not letting up and Aidoneus not moving a single muscle. "*That's enough, Kendo. You got him.*" *BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!* "Hey! Kendo!" However, he fails to get to the hybrid as his exclamations drown him out.

Then suddenly... ***Kendo...*** Kendo sees some dark smoke dancing, then his eyes shift to see a figure standing over him. He looks up to see Ubokufa standing there looking down with no expression, the smoke dancing at the bottom of his cloak. ***“Your friends need you,”*** he says stoically, ***“I’ll take it from here... You don’t have to worry about Aidoneus making a return any time soon...”***

Kendo looks at the Quphanto of Life and Death, wanting his words to give him some sort of comfort... but instead, he feels a void in his heart, a void that he can’t seem to fill no matter how many times he punches the reason behind his tormentous life. He looks at Aidoneus again, but then his body glows and transforms into a small white flame. Aidoneus has finally resetted. The hybrid’s heavy breathing becomes frantic panting, and then... his pants become sobs. Tears escape his eyes, making them burn, he tries to bite his lip to stop himself from crying. However... he starts thinking about where he started and realizes that he’s *here*. No more isolation. No more running away. No more restraints. No more mind games. No more Aidoneus. Just freedom. He can finally start his life as a Gaian. He’s been waiting so long for this to happen yet he’s not feeling what he was hoping to feel... Happiness. Pure bliss. None of that is in his mind right now. Instead, he’s feeling many other emotions tangled up. The knot makes it difficult to hold it in anymore, and Kendo begins crying. His cries become uncontrollable as his fists begin gripping the sands, his tears begin to fall, giving the dirt moisture.

Ubokufa doesn’t react to Kendo’s response because he’s seen this reaction too many times. Death has always stricken people differently, but no matter what... sorrow and/or rage was in the mix. He picks up the flame, looking at its glow, seeing all of its memories play out like a movie, and his face contorts into one of disgust, grateful that the movie finally met its end. He then senses a few of the bats arriving, and he lets them get closer to them. The bats fly around Kendo,

witnessing his breakdown. Ubokufa then says, ***“Girls. See to it that Kendo is taken back to Gaia. However, I believe it’s best you take him somewhere away from everyone. Give him time to regather himself.”***

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!!

“I’ll leave it to you to decide where you take him, my dear. And watch over him, but don’t invade his space. Just check on him from time to time.”

Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak...

“... The past is in the past. What’s done is done. You did what you could with Usiku... the decisions that he’s made in his life were all on his own accord. This isn’t your fault.”

...

“Go on now, little ones... Don’t worry about Usiku or Rose... I’ll take care of them.”

The bats squeak no more and they circle around Kendo, surrounding him in red sparkles, and within seconds, they disappear. Ubokufa, still holding Aidoneus’ soul, walks up to the Cerberus Bros., and the brothers look up at him with their ears down, their tails not wagging. The Quphanto sighs out, ***“Your mother is making her way here...”*** The brothers’ hearts trip on their feet, the mention of their mother makes them almost consider resetting again. He continues, ***“She shouldn’t be too upset, considering a crisis has been averted. However, I’m sure she expected you three to keep this from going this far...”*** They nod their heads. ***“Just be honest with her... Tell her what happened. Knowing her, she’s most likely going to want to hear from the others, and you already know that they’ll back you up. However, if she still seems upset... I’ll try to come back in time to talk to her...”***

“W-Where are you going,” Alpha asks.

“To have a word with Usiku,” Ubokufa answers, *“And... to see if I can finally have time to connect with Rose... give her the answers she’s been wanting... Until I get back, be ready for your mother. Stand up straight, ears up, your tail not between your legs, you already know the deal...”*

The brothers bow their heads, their ears not lowered anymore, and they say simultaneously, “Yes, uncle...”

“Good... I’ll be back,” Ubokufa says, and he starts making his way to Gaia. He looks at Aidoneus’ soul in his skeletal hand, and uses his flesh hand to create a silver lantern. The glass door opens, and he places the flame inside, closing it and letting its white light glow, the flames dance calmly. He then makes the lantern disappear, taking it somewhere else to free his hands, the lantern most likely in his home domain in Spirit Realm. Finally, he disappears in a bright glow, ready to go see his other relatives.

The brothers watch Ubokufa make his exit, then Gamma asks, “Big bro? When are ya’ gonna ask uncle why he never told about his secret family...?”

Alpha sighs, “One family problem at a time... One family problem at a time...”

...

October 2017
Early Morning

The team makes it to Gaia in one piece, and they look at their surroundings. They see the full moon hanging high, her light painting the leaves, flowers, and everyone a silver-blue. It’s almost unbelievable. Are they really home? What time is it? What day is it? Are they still in the Spirit Realm? Jacqueline is the first to check her phone, and she exclaims, *“Oh no... guys!? It’s October!”*

“*What*,” Tenacity says, “No way...!” She checks her phone, too, and she’s distraught at her phone screen showing that it is indeed the beginning of October, midnight.

“We’ve been gone... for *three* months,” Melissa shudders, “Oh god, my parents are gonna *kill* me!!”

Amethyst witnesses the girls slowly realizing what kind of situation they’re going to have to deal with now that they’re back home, but then she’s taken aback when she notices Pierre is with them, still. “I wonder why the bats took you with us,” she asks, tilting her head.

Pierre shrugs, “At this point, I might as well stick around. The girl that saved our lives is... *ahem*, non-responsive, and I’d feel like shit abandoning you all.”

Thomas, while still carrying Nermal, stands in front of everyone, and says calmly, “Okay, everyone. Let’s just take deep breaths and regather ourselves. Thanks to Usiku’s sisters, we’re back in Flesh Realm and in Gaia once again. We have *several* concerns to tackle. First and foremost, Rose...” Usiku steps forward, and everyone gives him space as he stands in front of the Upindelaiki with his daughter. Thomas looks up at Usiku with concern and asks, “Has she woken up at all?” Usiku can’t help but to keep his eyes glued onto his daughter, but he shakes his head to answer Thomas’ question. The Upindelaiki’s lips can’t help but to crease to a sorrowful frown.

Shandon steps up and says, “I keep tellin’ y’all she’s fine. Usiku, come on, let’s go put her to bed. She’s just restin’.”

But as soon as he says that, winds begin to rustle the trees and bushes, making it sound like an applause in a football field. Suddenly, flower petals and leaves of gold, orange, and red begin to swirl around in the middle of the straight path to the gazebo. Then, black smoke and sparkles begin to form, and after a couple seconds, *fwooom!!* The magical swirl reveals a hooded large

being wearing a cloak with dark swirls dancing around it, his moonstone glistening in the moonlight. However, as soon as he lifts his head, he shows that he's a skeleton with a small red glow in his dark eye sockets. He looks similar to the reaper, but he doesn't carry a scythe. Usiku's heart immediately stops at the sight... he knows who this is... Then, the being spoke...

“I am here for Rose Nruku Garcia... Her time has come...”

To be continued...