The Bard and The Boy with No Memories

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The Bard and The Boy with No Memories

by Zazzel

Summary

Another Traveler showed up in Teyvat. This one, has lost all his memories and forgotten everything about his past life.

Chapter 1: Lost Self

Stasis completed....

Initiating extraction.

3... 2... 1...

Commencing body transfer...

Error....

System fault detected. Continue?

The system rebooted. Someone made the choice to go on.

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His eyes opened. The light hit him all at once, sharp and blinding. He blinked through it. His gaze swept around to the left, right, up, down. Grass. Trees. Dirt paths winding near him. A river off to his right. The sound of it moving was soft. Gentle and peaceful. Somewhere above him, birds. He could hear them chirping. Maybe sounds of insects too.

He couldn't remember a thing. Not his name. Not even what he looked like. Not where he'd come from, or who he was before this moment.

He looked down at his hands. Strange clothes. Gold and purple, his midsection left bare. He turned toward the river and walked to it. Crouched at the edge and looked down at the surface.

He looked down at his reflection. A young looking man, brown hair. Once he turned his head, he saw a single braid hanging down from the side.

He studied that reflection for a moment. Something sat wrong in his chest. "That's not me..." he murmured. His mind was still empty. He had no memory of what he looked like. But somewhere underneath all of that blankness, something quiet and certain told him... that wasn't him.

He lifted his eyes. A town sat in the distance. It looked... old. Medieval, his brain supplied, before he even thought about it. He frowned. Why had that word come to him? There was something there — hovering at the edge of his thoughts — but it slipped away before he could catch it.

He exhaled slowly, then started walking toward it through the short grass. His surroundings were beautiful, he thought. Still, the unease didn't leave him. Something wasn't right.

The town was built on an island, ringed by a high stone wall. A bridge stretched from the mainland to its entrance. He doesn't know why he was drawn to this. He just was, and walked towards it.
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People crossed the bridge in both directions. Strangers. People he had never seen in his life. And yet , somewhere deep, somewhere he couldn't name — they felt familiar. Adults like him going about their afternoon. Older folk, and younger ones. Children running ahead until someone called after them to stop running on the bridge.

He crossed to the other side without a word.

Two guards stood at the entrance. They each gave him a single nod as he passed.

"Welcome to Mondstadt," one of them said. A brief salute, nothing more.

He nodded back, quiet, his expression still. The town sprawled out ahead of him. It was bigger than he'd expected. He could probably get turned around in here easily.

But what did he have to lose? He didn't remember anything. Walking around seemed like the only real option — maybe something would shake something loose in his mind to jog everything back into place.

Shops lined the streets on either side. His stomach growled. He was hungry. He also had no money. What could he do now? He couldn't possibly beg? That would be embarrassing. He shoved his hands into the attire's pockets, and continued walking.

A fountain sat ahead of him, right in the middle of the path. Steps led up to the left and right. He went right and kept going.

He walked, passing people without stopping, until he found himself standing in front of what looked like a church. In front of it, a massive statue — arms outstretched, wings fanned wide behind it. A hood resting over the head, two braids falling forward from beneath it. "Who's that?" he muttered to himself.

Then, he heard music coming from nearby.

He looked to the left, and saw a bard sat at the base of the statue, strumming a lyre with his eyes closed. His outfit was old-fashioned, heavy on green and brown. He played like he wasn't thinking about it — easy, unhurried.

The boy stood there and watched. Didn't say anything. Just watched the bard.

Eventually, the bard's eyes opened. He caught sight of him immediately, then a smile spread across his face. "Hey there, cutie~," he said.

The boy got startled and looked away fast, like he hadn't been staring for the past few seconds.

"Haven't seen you in Mondstadt before," the bard laughed softly. He set his instrument aside and got up, wandering over. "Though, many people come here at times, can't catch everybody,"

The boy glanced back at him, cheeks warm.

The bard's eyes crinkled at his expression. "I'm Venti. And you are?"

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out. His name — whatever it was — wasn't there. "I..." He stopped. Then, he tried again. Still, nothing. "I don't remember."

Venti's smile faltered. Something concerned moved across his face. "You don't remember your name?"

He shook his head.

"Do you remember anything? Where you're from, maybe?"

Not even that, he remembered. He could only remember stuff that has happened before he seemed to regain consciousness. He remembered the grassy areas outside of the town. He remembered that the name of the town is Mondstadt, as said by the guards. He remembered what the name of the bard is... Venti, as he had told him.

"Oh no," Venti said quietly. "Okay. Stick with me. Maybe I can help." He reached out and set a hand on the other boy's shoulder. The boy blinked, uncertain what was happening.

Venti closed his eyes. The wind shifted — picked up, swirling around them both. The boy sucked in a breath and looked around. "Wh — what—?"

Venti pushed with his power, searching. Looking for whatever was underneath.

There was nothing there.

That wasn't right. Even a curse — even something designed to strip a person's memories clean — would leave something behind for the bard to see. But this was different. This was a blankness that went deeper than that. Something outside of what Venti knew.

He opened his eyes slowly. "That's not right..." His brow creased. "You can't be like—"

The other boy's stomach growled. Loud.

Venti blinked. Then his expression shifted, something lighter taking over. "Oh! You're hungry." He said it like he'd just solved something. . "Okay... Uh-I.. Wait! I know! The taverns! I was saving to buy some wine for myself, but you need the food! Let's go!" He suddenly grabbed the other's hand, pulling him, making him gasp.

The boy stumbled forward. "Wait—"

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They were halfway through the streets when Venti slowed and looked back at him. "You really don't remember anything? Not even your name?"
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"Nothing," the boy said. "Not my name. Not where I'm from. I don't even know how old I am. I just... know I'm an adult at least."

"Hm." Venti tapped his chin. "Okay! Then I'll come up with something. A temporary name, until yours comes back to you!" He brightened at the idea.

The other guy blushed a bit. "O-Oh... okay?"

"Let me think," Venti murmured. He squinted as he thought about it. Then shook his head. "This is harder than I thought. Maybe we could—"

Something surfaced in the boy's mind. Out of nowhere. "...Oliver?" He said it without meaning to.

Venti managed to hear him, and looked towards the other. "Oliver?" He repeated. "You remember?"

The other boy blinked slightly, he couldn't remember anything else. He really didn't even know if that was his name or not. It somewhat just appeared in his mind. "I don't know, it kinda just came into my head.."

"Oliver it is!" Venti announced, already moving again. "Come on, Angel's Share — Diluc can probably get you something to eat... 'Oliver~!'"

The boy — Oliver, apparently — barely had time to react. "I — but I don't have any money, I don't think —" He doesn't remember when the last time he has gotten currency. Did he work somewhere? All of those possible memories were gone from his head.

"Don't worry about it!" Venti called back. "Everything will be on me!"

And before 'Oliver' could get another word in, he was being pulled down the steps to the lower part of the town, through cobblestone streets, until Venti stopped in front of a tavern. A small wooden sign hung overhead with a painted wine glass and the words Angel's Share below it.

Before he could say anything more, Venti pushed the door open, and dragged him in.

"Hello Diluc~!" His voice rang out bright and cheerful.

Oliver stumbled over the threshold. He grabbed onto Venti's arm to keep from going down. "oOf!"

Venti steadied him and laughed. "Sorry about that—" He got Oliver upright, then swung his attention to the bar.

The man behind it looked up. He folded his arms. "Venti." His voice was flat. Maybe unimpressed for some reason. Judging by his mannerisms, Venti probably has been inside this tavern one too many times.

Venti practically skipped over to the bar, then jumped into the stool, and spun around to Diluc. "One bottle of Dandelion Wine, please~!" He smiled greatly, his squeaky voice sounding extra squeaky as he ordered that drink.

"One?" Diluc asked, arms still folded. "Usually you order my entire stock in one sitting," He turned around to get the bottle. "Trying to not show that boy you dragged in here that you're not a drunken bard?"

"N-No — I just—" Venti started. "His name is Oliver, and he-," Venti then blinked, and noticed that Oliver wasn't seated next to him at either of the stools. "Eeh? Where did you go-?" He turned around on the stool, and saw Oliver was still standing at the door, looking rather dazed.

Venti blinked, then giggled. "Why are you still standing over there for? Haha, come over here! You said you were hungry, Angle's Share has food too as well as Dandelion Wine and other delicious wines!"

Oliver cleared his throat. Then walked forward and took the left stool beside Venti.

Diluc set the bottle down in front of Venti and looked at Oliver. Studied him for a moment. "You're new. I don't think I've seen you here before."

"He might be a Traveler," Venti said, already popping the bottle open.

Diluc was about to wipe off the counter, but then froze. "A-A Traveler?" He glanced at Venti, then at Oliver with wide eyes. "L-Like the other one? The one looking for their sibling?"

Venti nodded, taking a drink. "He said he doesn't remember anything. It's as if his mind was wiped or something. I met him just outside at my- I mean, the Barbatos statue. He looked pretty lost. I heard his stomach growl, he sounded hungry."

Diluc finished wiping down the bar and set the cloth aside. "If he was hungry, why didn't you take him to Good Hunter?" He looked at Venti, genuinely puzzled. "They have more food than me, all I have is bar snacks."

"Well, I..." Venti rubbed the back of his neck and kept his other hand on the bottle.

Diluc sighed. "Of course. You just needed your 'daily' dose of wine."

Venti grinned. "Yeah, yeah~." He tipped the bottle back and finished it off, setting the empty down on the counter.

Oliver stared at it. He'd watched Venti drink the whole bottle in the span of two minutes.

Venti turned around on the stool and hopped off. "I'll get you one, but I dunno what you really are, and if you have the best wine intolerance like me, hehe~," Venti walked forward, leaving Oliver there, who looked back at the bottle then at Venti as he continued to walk.

"He usually goes through ten in one visit," Diluc said, without looking up.

Oliver blinked, then his eyes widened.

10?!

Oliver shook his head, then turned around to get to Venti, who was already at the door about to leave.

"Hey! You comin' or what?" Venti said with a playful smile with hands on his hips.

Chapter 2: Good Hunter

"Good Hunter has some amazing food! Haha! So I'm sure you'll enjoy it!" Venti announced cheerfully, leading Oliver through the winding streets of Mondstadt. "Sara's cooking is something else entirely." His smile didn't falter once.

Oliver nodded, awaiting this place. He was still a bit shy, and a little confused with everything. But he just continued to walk with Venti. There was something about this place to him, but he couldn't quite place his finger on it. Something was still so familiar, yet so unfamiliar at the same time. Like he's been here before, but at the same time, he hasn't seen this place ever in his life.

They rounded a corner onto a wider street, and something about it clicked differently in Oliver's head. Not in a way that gave him answers — just in a way that felt less foreign. To the left was the draw gate, the one he'd come through earlier. To the right, the staircases that had eventually led him to that big statue. Lining the path between were shops of all kinds, and nestled among them was Good Hunter — an outdoor food stand with wooden seating and a handful of patrons working through their meals in the evening air.

"Come on, come on!" Venti snatched Oliver's hand without any warning. "There it is!"

"Woah—" Oliver stumbled. "H-Hey slow down!"

"Hello-Hello!" Venti said cheerfully to the owner behind the stand, as he skidded to a stop at the counter, and Oliver nearly walked straight into his back for the second time that day. Venti laughed about it immediately, then he plucked the menu right off the countertop. "Here, look at this!" He pressed it into Oliver's hands. "Look at all the yummy choices they have!" He smiled.

Oliver steadied himself and looked down at the menu. "Wow..." He scanned the options slowly. "This feels like something out of a Studio Ghibli film or something..."

Venti giggled. "Ehehehaha! Yeah it kind of—" He stopped. His head tilted. "Huh? Studio what?" He squinted in confusion.

Oliver looked up. "What?"

"You said something. About a studio."

"I..." Oliver's brow creased. He looked genuinely uncertain, like the words had slipped out from somewhere he couldn't locate. "Did I say that?"

Venti studied him for a second, then waved a hand. "Haha, never mind! Just pick something, what do you want?"

Venti just waved it off. "Haha, it's fine! Just tell me what you want!"

Oliver looked back down at the menu. There were a lot of food options. And he wasn't going to lie, they all looked really good. He actually didn't know which one to pick.

"What's the...," one did caught his eye though. "Sticky... Honey Roast?"

Venti's whole face lit up. "OooH! That's basically a local favorite with most of them here! You want that? It's basically a really sticky mess, you'll get honey everywhere ha!" Venti smiled then turned to Sara. "One order of Sticky Honey Roast please!" Venti smiled. "And for me... I'll just have that Apple salad you guys have!"

Venti glanced back at Oliver was now sitting at one of the chairs at the outdoor tables. He tilted his head, Oliver was still looking lost. "Don't worry, I believe a tasty dish will rejuvenate you right up!"

Venti hopped into the seat across from him. "Hey." His voice dropped a little, softer now. "You can talk to me if you need to. I just met you, but I don't want you all lost and confused if you really did lose all your memories,"

Oliver shifted his gaze over to him, then out at the street, then back. "It's this place," he said eventually. "The buildings. The food. The people walking around." He exhaled slowly. "It all feels like something I recognize. But I don't. I've never been here. I know I haven't. So I don't understand why it feels like I have."

Venti nodded, listening. "Could be that you're actually from Mondstadt. Memory loss doesn't work the same for everyone — sometimes just being somewhere familiar is enough to start pulling things back up from wherever they've gone. Something in your subconscious holding onto it. Being here might get you to remember and get your memories back naturally." He rested his chin in his hand. "Though... I don't recognize you. And Diluc didn't either. Maybe you're from one of the other nations?" He paused. "Do you remember where you were last? Like, did you wake up somewhere specific?"

"Outside the gate." Oliver turned slightly in his chair to look toward the draw gate in the distance. "Way outside. Out in those open fields."

"Outside? You mean outside of Mondstadt? Windrise?"

He looked back. "Is that what it's called?"

"Mhm! It's beautiful out there, honestly. All that green. When I'm not wandering around the town I'm usually out there somewhere, just sitting up in that tree."

"Oh," Oliver said simply.

Sara arrived at the table and set their food down before either of them could say anything else.

"Thank you, Sara!" Venti beamed at her.

Oliver looked down at his plate and went very still for a moment. "Woah..." The dish looked almost too good. He was fairly certain he'd never seen food presented like that before, though of course he couldn't actually confirm that. "That is..."

"A sticky mess? Definitely," Venti giggled. "I personally don't like sticky things. One of the many reasons why I absolutely hate cheese. But this apple salad I got is the best! I love apples!" He let out a soft breath of giggles that sounded very light in the air.

Something about it caught Oliver off guard. It was such a light sound. The kind of thing that could probably stop someone mid-thought without trying. He cleared his throat quietly, picked up his fork, and took a bite of the roast, and—wow.

He was practically blown away, all his down bad thoughts for Venti flew out of his mind momentarily as the taste and texture of the roast hit his tongue. "Holy- I... this is good!"

Venti giggled as he ate his own food. "Told you Sara cooks the best!"

Oliver closed his eyes, savoring the great blend of sweetness and savory. He knew he lost his memories, so he doesn't remember exactly what he had eaten before. But he knew it wasn't anything as good as what he's having right now. He opened his eyes again, and saw Venti devouring into his Apple salad. He glanced up, and could see in the distance the Barbatos statue. He remembered that's what Venti called it.

He glanced back down at Venti, then back up at the statute in the distance. He blinked once. Then, he looked back down at Venti. "Huh?" He muttered to himself. The face on the statue looked at little similar to Venti's facial structure. He and the statue also had the same two braids on either side.

He took another slow bite. "Hey... has anyone ever told you that you look a lot like that statue?"



Venti froze, and nearly choked on his food, and had to grab the water Sara had given them complementary, and drank it. "Huh!? Why... why would you-," Venti glanced around quickly, and then looked back at Oliver. "Haha!" He laughed, but the laugh sounded nervous. As if he was hiding something. "That's silly! Why would I... hah! How can I possibly look like a statute that has been up for *years* haha...I-,"

Oliver tilted his head. "Oh... I- It's just that the statue looks similar. Or... you look similar to it."

Venti's ears went a little pink. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I— well—"

"Are you the statue?" Oliver asked.

Venti went completely still.

"Or... is it a relative of you?"

Venti exhaled slowly. "Okay. I... I am going to tell you. But you better keep it a secret. Only a few people know. Barbatos... he's a god. A god for Monstadt. The people here worship him. And... I am them. The statue was built for me years ago." Venti said. He said it very quietly. He only wanted Oliver to know, and no one else around them.

Oliver froze, his eyes widen slightly. "... A god?" He whispered. "Like.. you're... you're a..."

Venti pressed a finger to his lips. "Keep your voice down." He glanced around again. "I don't exactly advertise it. I just want to be a bard. Play music, wander around, make people's days a little better. I gave these people their freedom a long time ago — the last thing I want is for them to spend their lives kneeling at me. I want them to just... live."

Oliver sat with that for a moment. Several moments, actually. "How old are you?"

Venti blinked. A quiet smile crossed his face. "Over two thousand years." he whispered.

Oliver dropped his fork and it clattered on the table. "Sorry— what?" He pushed his chair back and stepped around to Venti's side of the table, crouching slightly to look at him more carefully. "You don't look— you look like you're nineteen at the most—"

Venti giggled, looking up at him with a faint blush. "This is just what I looked like when I became a god. Gods tend to stay however they were at that point. Guess I should thank the universe for me to have such a handsome and divine body!" He smiled, flipping one of his braids.

"O-Oh-," Oliver blushed, and stood back up, and backed to get back to his seat, but he nearly tripped, and grabbed his balance. "Ah! I-," He quickly stood up. "I'm okal- I mean okay!" He didn't say 'okay' right, and got embarrassed, and sat back in his chair with a very red face.

He stared at Venti across the table.

Venti blinked, then burst into uncontrollable giggles at the human in front of him. "Are you okay? That was quite the fall. At least you managed to brace it haha!"

"I'm fine." Oliver's face was still very red. "So. You're a god."

"I am," Venti said, still catching his breath.

"And... you don't like praise?"

Venti shook his head. "Not really no,"

Oliver chuckled. "So, you don't like this-," Oliver stood up, and dramatic bowed in front of Venti. "Oh praise thee, I... uh.. I come from the divine... land of- uh...," He was trying to make a joke, but he ended up not knowing what the hell he was saying. But this random amount of silliness made Venti burst into louder laughter then what he did when Oliver almost fell onto the table.

"Oh my word! Stop! No! That's so stupid hahahaha!" Venti clutched his stomach as he laughed. "Please never do that again!" He said, still laughing.

Oliver cleared his throat, and sat back down. "I... I don't know where that came from, I'm sorry,"

"Haha!" Venti let out another cute giggle. "It's totally okay! That was so silly of you. Ugh, I hope I don't regret telling you what I am when you get your memory back~ Because it sounds like you're a trickster in that subconscious." Then Venti took a breath of laughter. "Well, I guess I am one too! Haha!"

Oliver giggled shyly, and scratched the back of his head.

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Night came rather quickly. Once Oliver woke up, in... that Windrise place, as Venti called it. He wasn't really aware of what time it was. But with how quickly nighttime fell, he then assumed it was late afternoon. So then Oliver realized he had more things to worry about.

The two of them, Oliver and Venti were sitting at the edge of the Barbatos statue, relaxing. Venti was playing on his lyre, some people around came by to give him some coins as he played.

Some of them shot Oliver curious glances — clearly puzzled by the unfamiliar boy who'd apparently been following their beloved bard around all day.

Eventually Oliver turned toward him. "Venti?"

"Mm?" Venti opened his eyes, looking at Oliver with a soft expression. "What is it?"
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"Uhh.. I think it's getting darker. It's nighttime right? Where will I sleep?"

Venti suddenly stopped playing his instrument, and looked at Oliver. "Oh-," he blinked. "Right... sleep. You need sleep," he looked around. "I haven't thought about that... oops-,"

Oliver blinked a little. "Do you even sleep? Can you even sleep?" He whispered.

Venti nodded. "But I somewhat just sleep wherever. I don't have a house or something," he stood up, and the lyre disappeared from his hands. "I sometimes sleep in my... realm, but I don't think I can bring a human in there with me-,"

He then had an idea. "Ooh! I got it! The tree! I sleep in there sometimes!"

Oliver blinked. "Tree? What tree?"

"I'll show you, come on!" He grabbed Oliver's hand and took off down the street, already pulling him along before he had any say in the matter.

Chapter 3: The Experiment

Venti shot through the gates of Mondstadt like a crossbow bolt, dragging Oliver along behind him. The two guards on either side were very confused where Venti was off too in such a hurry, dragging a random boy behind him. They exchanged a glance, then he shrugged. Honestly, at this point, nothing the bard did surprised them anymore.

"Venti— hey— would you slow down!" Oliver had lost count of how many times he'd said that today. Since the moment they met, Venti had been hauling him from one place to the next with zero warning and even less explanation.

"Almost there! See that big tree over there? I sleep in it sometimes!"

Oliver stumbled to keep up. "You— sleep in a tree?"

"Sure! I sleep all kinds of places. The tree, the bar— well, until Diluc throws me out, anyway. Heh!"

Venti screeched to a stop at the base of the tree. Oliver, with no time to react, pitched forward and hit the grass face-first with a thud.

"Oof—" came the muffled response from Oliver.

"Oh! Whoops, sorry!" Venti hauled him back up by the arm.

Oliver spat a blade of grass out of his mouth. "You seriously have to stop doing that." He straightened up and tilted his head back to look at the tree. "Okay... that's... really tall."

"Isn't it great?" Venti beamed. "I sleep up there in the branches sometimes! Figured you can come up there with me!"

Oliver stared at the tree. Then at Venti. Then back at the tree.

"...You mean climb it?"

"Oh... are you bad at climbing things?" Venti asked. "Most of everyone I know is an excellent climber."

"I'm... pretty sure I'm terrible at it."

"That's fine!" Venti said cheerfully—and then simply lifted off the ground, hovering there like it was the most natural thing in the world. Well, Natrual for him. Not so much for Oliver.

Oliver stumbled back a step. "What—"

Venti pressed his lips together, clearly trying not to laugh.

"I—" Oliver shook his head. "Okay. You said you were a god. I guess that tracks."

Venti swooped down to Oliver, and without asking, or waiting for his permission, Venti put his arms around him. "Uh- what are you-," Then Venti hoisted Oliver up, and took off into the air with him.

"AH?!" Oliver grabbed onto Venti with both hands, every muscle in his body going rigid.

Venti snorted. "Oh hush down, I'm not going to drop you," he giggled.

Oliver's grip did not loosen even slightly.

Venti carried him up through the branches, weaving between the thick arms of the tree until the ground disappeared entirely beneath a canopy of green. Then he slowed, dipped, and set Oliver down into something that gave gently beneath his weight.

A hammock. Strung between two of the biggest branches, hidden up here like a secret.

Venti drifted back a little, smiling. "I sometimes sleep in this! No one else in Mondstadt knows about this spot. It's mine. My little hideaway in the human world."

Oliver sat up and looked around properly. Just below them, a wide branch served as a kind of shelf— covered in stacked books, random odds and ends, and more than a few empty wine bottles. He opened his mouth to comment on that, but before he could, Venti dropped down and settled into the hammock right next to him.

Oliver went very still.

"...What are you doing?"

"What? I'm sleeping here next to you," Venti said.

Oliver's face turned red so fast it was almost impressive. "Here? Next to me?"

Venti giggled. "What? It is my hammock you know." He said. "I could go back to my realm for the night, or crash at the bar with Diluc. But I don't really want to leave you up here unattended."

"I'm an adult you know," Oliver said, his voice coming out a little strangled. "I can handle myself. You don't gotta watch over me..."

Venti snorted with a small burst of giggles. "That's not what I mean. At night, monsters wander around out here. I want to make sure you're safe. And the bar gets rowdy— last thing you need is some drunk guy stumbling into you." He paused. "Up here, though? You're fine. The monsters almost never climb. If they do, I can defend them off for ya!"

Oliver froze momentarily. Lewd thoughts of... sleeping in the same hammock with the bard vanished out of his mind momentarily. "M-Monsters?"

"Yeah! But they rarely climb as I said. So you should be fine up here!"

Oliver nodded. "O-Okay..."

Venti watched him for a second, then grinned. "Or maybe you're just flustered about sharing a hammock with me~"

The red came rushing back.

Oliver cleared his throat loudly.

Venti giggled. "Well be a little less raunchy~," he teased. "We're just two guys, in the same hammock about to get some sleep until morning! Nothing else~,"

Oliver covered his face with both hands.

Venti was already laughing as he turned over, pulling a folded blanket from somewhere and tossing it over Oliver without looking. "Goodnight!"

Oliver peered over at him. Venti had his back turned, perfectly still— except for the quiet giggling that kept slipping out no matter how hard he seemed to be trying to stop it.

Biggest tease in all of Mondstadt. Possibly the world, Oliver thought.

Oliver exhaled and sank back into the hammock. Grudgingly, he had to admit: it was incredibly comfortable. And roomy. It was big enough to hold two people. He sighed. He might as well get some sleep. It was a long day.

Still no memories. But who knows? He might get his memories tomorrow. He looked up as he could see the remaining of the branches of the tree they were in, swerving left and right. He could see the few stars he could glance up at through the branches. It was peaceful. He felt like he never did something like this before. Sleeping In a hammock, gazing at the stars above him... with a cute boy sleeping next to him.

Or maybe he had. It was hard to tell when your memories are gone from your mind.

He took a sigh. He was just grateful to go to sleep on a full belly, and is able to actually get some sleep in a very comfortable setting. He smiled softly as he closed his eyes, snuggling into the blanket.

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Oliver's eyes snapped open.

Dark. The tree was gone. The stars were gone. Venti was gone.

He was staring at the low ceiling of a dimly lit room, his body completely locked in place. He tried to move his arms— nothing. His legs— nothing. Only his head was free.

"What—" He looked down. Clamps on the armrests. Wires running up and down his arms. "What is this? Why am I strapped down—"

And then it hit him, all at once, flooding back.

"The experiment." He exhaled sharply. "Right. The experiment."

But something was wrong. He looked around. This wasn't the right room. The walls were different. The layout was different. There were other chairs lined along the edges of the space, half-swallowed by shadow— he couldn't tell if they were empty or not. "I wasn't strapped down before.."

"Dr. Barclay?" His voice came out louder than he meant it to. No answer. "Dr. Barclay!"

Silence.

"Why didn't I remember any of this while I was in there?" He strained against the clamps again, uselessly. "He never said I'd forget— and he never said anything about being restrained—" He panted from his

excessive struggles to move. At the far end of the room, something that might be a door. A thin strip of light through a small window. "Am I even still in his lab?"

Error — Dimensional transfer

Oliver went still. He craned his neck upward with effort, twisting to see the screen mounted above him.

Vitals of subject: Fine

Dimension Gateway: Closed

Media: Genshin Impact — Media Type: Game — Fictional Universe Code: Sub-3921 — Missing Elements: Missing some lore points, other subs have more; different locations — Stable for transfers.

He stared at it. He'd seen that before. He remembered seeing it. So why had it thrown an error?

"Dr. Barclay, something's wrong with the machine—"

Beginning transfer

Oliver gasped. "Wait— I need to talk to Doctor Bar—!"

Suddenly there was a zap that went through Oliver, and his eyes shot open with a force. "Ah!" He gasped, and looked around. He saw tree branches above him, and the night sky. He rubbed his eyes. He turned to look at Venti next to him. "Why did I wake up with such force?" He rubbed his eyes again. "That was weird..." he muttered to himself. "it's like I had a nightmare, but I do not remember it."

He snuggled into the covers again. "Maybe tomorrow I'll get my memories back, I hope."

Chapter 4: Warm Waters

The first thing Oliver registered was birdsong.

He stirred slowly, blinking against the pale morning light that filtered through the canopy above him. The hammock swayed just barely with his movement, the branches holding steady around them. Good thing too — without the shade of the great tree, the early sun would have been merciless against his eyeballs.

He turned his head, just a little.

Venti was already awake. He hadn't said anything, hadn't moved much either. He was just lying there on his back, eyes tracing the twist of branches overhead, looking peaceful in a way. Oliver let himself look — just for a second. The soft curve of his jaw. That strange, lovely eye color, somewhere between seafoam and sky. The quiet little upturn of his nose. Venti wasn't even aware that Oliver was staring.

Then Venti's gaze drifted sideways.

Oliver snapped his eyes to the upward, pretending he wasn't looking in the bard's direction.

But Venti managed to see the shift in movement.

"You are so obvious~," Venti said, the smile already in his voice before Oliver even turned back. A soft little laugh followed. "Were you really hoping I wouldn't notice that?"

Oliver's face went hot. "I wasn't looking at you."

"Mmhm," Venti hummed, utterly unconvinced. "So. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine. Good." Oliver cleared his throat. "Well. Good enough, considering." He paused. "Actually... I think I had some kind of dream. I'm not sure."

Venti tilted his head, rolling to face him properly. His expression shifted — the teasing melted into something gentler. "A bad one? Maybe you're just stressed about everything."

"That's the thing." Oliver frowned at the branches. "I don't know. You ever wake up with that feeling like something happened in your sleep, but when you actually try to grab onto it, it's just... gone? Like you just can't remember it for the life of you?"

Venti nodded. "Mh-mm. Many times. But I guess with you, it must be different. Lost memories and all. If it really is a curse, the dream could be something that has happened in the past!"

Oliver looked at him.

Venti shrugged. "Maybe something in your subconscious is telling you something. Though, I don't think you should force yourself to remember though. It's never good to do that."

Oliver nodded. "Yeah. You're probably right." He shifted to sit up a bit and completely misjudged where his hand was going. His palm landed directly in the center of Venti's stomach. He yanked it back so fast the entire hammock lurched sideways.

"Hey, be careful~," Venti giggled.

"S-sOoRy!" Oliver's voice cracked terribly. His voice did something catastrophic on the second syllable.

Venti stared at him for exactly one second.

Then he laughed so hard the hammock began actually rocking, tears pricking the corners of his eyes. "THAT VOICE—! What?! Where did THAT come from—!?" He cackled, which made the hammock sway harder, which made Oliver panic and lurch sideways, which sent the whole thing into a proper wobble.

Oliver yelped and grabbed the nearest solid thing, which happened to be Venti.

The laughter stopped.

Venti blinked, suddenly aware of Oliver's arms around him, face very close. He registered the reason immediately — the poor human had just been scared half to death by the swaying. Still. An opportunity was an opportunity~.

He leaned in just slightly. And pressed a small, quick kiss to Oliver's forehead. His face was very close, so he decided to just do it.

Oliver went completely still. His eyes shot all the way open, and he instantly let go of Venti, and stared at him.

Venti covered his mouth and let out a sharp breath of a laugh.

Oliver turned around, laying on his stomach and let out a muffled scream into the pillow.

Venti covered his mouth with both hands — pointless, because the laughter came out anyway. "Okay! Okay, I'm sorry! I'm sorry—! Haha—! I have never in my entire life seen someone get so red over nothing—!" Venti knew people liked him. And he uses that as his advantage to fluster and tease a lot of the others around the town. But something was different with Oliver. His face would get more red than a pyro slime.

"It's not NOTHING—!" came the muffled yell from the pillow.

"Sorry~," Venti said, but the giggle that came after pretty much meant that he wasn't sorry at all.

Oliver rose slowly. Propped himself up on his elbows. Looked at Venti with the energy of a man composing himself after a great personal tragedy. "You," he said, "are the single biggest tease I have ever encountered."

Venti tilted his head. "Am I~?"

"Ugh!" Oliver grunted and slammed his face back down on the pillow. He laid there for a bit, until he rose back up again. "First you called me 'cutie,' then you dragged me up here, and you practically—you basically—edged me!" Oliver gestured vaguely and with great distress, "—and then you just fell asleep!"

Venti burst into even louder giggles, his laughter sounding so sweet in the morning air. "I did WHAT now?!" He looked at Oliver with wide eyes.

"You know what you did," Oliver grunted.

Venti's eyes went wide and innocent. "I have no idea what you're referring to."

"Yes you do."

"I truly don't~."

Oliver rolled his eyes, then he laid back down. He was facing away from Venti in the hammock. "Do you all have a shower here? Cause I'm practically on fire and need to freshen up. Because I feel disgusting."

"Shower? The heck is a shower?" Venti blinked.

"You know... where you wash up. Water. Soap..."

"Oh! Well... uh, people do that at the hot springs! Or the Bathhouse!"

Oliver shot up. "Ooh? Bathhouse? That... sounds familiar..."

Venti looked at him. "Ooh! It does? Well maybe I can take you-," Venti then blinked. "Wait... Nevermind, I don't think they open this early. And you definitely need a bath," he let out a small giggle.

Oliver turned to him with a grave expression. "Thanks for that," he said sarcastically.

"Well, the hot springs are open! I can take ya there!"

Oliver nodded. "Okay, but... where is the hot springs?"

"It's-," Venti blinked. "Wait, shoot... it's kinda far from here. A lot of walking." He turned back to Oliver. "Orrrr..... Maybe I can..." it seemed like Venti was thinking about something.

"Or what?"

"I've actually never tried this with a human before. Hmm. Here goes..."

Oliver blinked a bit more rapidly now. "W-Wait here goes? Here goes what?!"

Venti grabbed his shoulder. There was a sharp crack of wind and light—

And then they were somewhere else entirely.

"WHAT—" Oliver stumbled forward onto solid ground, blinking rapidly, arms out for balance. "What just —WHAT—"

"It worked!" Venti clapped his hands together, delighted.

Oliver had a dazed look on his face as he took in a grassy landscape beyond him, as he heard Venti's voice.

"I'm happy it worked! Oh my word! I'm going to have so much fun with that one with the others!"

Oliver turned toward the voice in a daze. Venti was standing a few feet away looking insufferably pleased with himself, hands on his hips, practically glowing.

When he noticed Oliver's expression, he blinked. "What?"

"What the fuck just happened?"

Venti pressed his lips together, fighting the laugh clawing its way up his throat. "I... pfft— I teleported us to the hot springs!"

Oliver shifted head to the front of him. He blinked, and squinted his eyes. "I don't see a hot springs-,"

"It's behind you silly," Venti said, rolling his eyes.

"Huh-?" Oliver turned around. "Oh! OH!" His mood changed as he saw it. The springs were surrounded by a closed off wooden wall, and the springs it self was a small little body of water next to a large rock formation.

"Whitestone Springs," Venti announced, coming to stand beside him. "Not bad, right?"

"No," Oliver said. "It's really not." He could see the steam rising off the surface in lazy spirals. He felt fairly certain he'd never been in a hot spring before, But he was sure has had heard about it somewhere before. He knew the concept — relaxation, joints, mineral water. Which meant it wasn't exactly a bath. "Wait. Will this actually get me clean? I don't think hot springs are really meant for that."

"Oh." Venti blinked. "Right. Yeah. Okay, see — soap and running water is more of a Fontaine thing. I wanted to bring you, actually, but Fontaine is... a lot. The most advanced city in Teyvat. Things there that most people from Mondstadt wouldn't believe exist. I didn't want to break your brain." He paused. "Although — you did say soap. Which tells me you might know about it. But still, I think you should get into the hot springs. You've been walking all day yesterday, it can help your joints... and all that... mortal stuff."

Oliver looked at the water. It did look very warm. Very welcoming. "So do I just... go in?"

"With your clothes on?"

Oliver went stiff and turned to look at Venti with a very pink face. "C-Clothes. I— Do I have to take them off?"

Venti let out a breath of laughter. "Do you normally get into a pool fully dressed?"

"What?! No, don't be silly! I-... I don't have any swim trunks!"

"No worries! Hold on-," Suddenly Venti disappeared in a warp.

Oliver stumbled backward half a step. "What?!"

Then Venti was back, in the exact same spot, holding out a pair of swim trunks towards Oliver. "Here you go!"

Oliver blinked down at the clothes. "Okay... I'm not even going to question how you just used the apparition spell, but okay..."

Venti giggled. "Yeah yeah. And whatever that means-,"

Oliver's eyes dropped back to the trunks. "Do I... also have to take off my shirt?"

Venti rolled his eyes playfully. "Oliver. Why would I teleport all the way to Fontaine for swim trunks if you were just going to stand in the water fully clothed?"

Oliver blinked. "Y-You got these from that Fontaine place you talked about?"

"Mmhm." Venti nodded sagely. "And I absolutely, definitely paid for them."

Oliver blinked. "You stole it from the shop didn't you-," Venti's exaggerated words definitely told him he did this. "Venti—"

"Come on! Take off your shirt!" Venti giggled.

Oliver turned very red, set the swim trunks on a flat rock near the edge of the water, and — after a steadying breath — pulled his shirt over his head, exposing his brown skin.

Venti couldn't help but tease Oliver some more, he whistled at him once he removed the shirt.

"Oh my god, VENTI!" Oliver whipped around, face absolutely ablaze, clutching his shirt to his stomach like a shield.

Venti dissolved into laughter. "HAHAHA—pfft— your face—" He bent slightly at the waist, shoulders shaking. "I can't— bahahaha—!"

Oliver let out a deeply suffering grunt, threw the shirt onto a rock behind him, grabbed the swim trunks, and pointed a finger. "I am not taking my pants off in front of you!"

"Aww~ But I was enjoying the performance~"

This bard was definitely the biggest tease in Teyvat. No one else should be able to compare. Oliver grunted and slipped behind the large body of rocks.

Soon, he came back around wearing the trunks.

"Ready?" Venti asked, still visibly suppressing a grin.

"Don't say a word." Oliver turned toward the water — then paused and glanced back. "...Aren't you coming in?"

Venti blinked. "Oh? You want me to?" He pressed a hand to his chest. "I mean, as a divine being of my race, I don't exactly get sore muscles or achy joints like you mortals do~"

Oliver blinked. "Oh-,"

Venti giggled. "Oh dummy I'm just teasing. There was a reason I brought two swim trunks silly," Venti talked ahead of him. Oliver watched him.

Venti rose his hand up, and suddenly snapped his fingers and all of the top parts of his attire, and leggings disappeared off of him from a sudden gust of wind, the clothes swirled in a small whirlwind.

"Heh! Hold that-," Venti smirked at Oliver, flashing his arm towards the human.

Oliver gasped, and tried to catch the clothes. Completely missed.

"OOF—" The clothes hit him directly in the face.

He stood very still with Venti's clothes pressed against his face. They smelled like cool air and something faintly floral — like spring wind through open windows. He lowered them slowly.

Venti was standing with his back to him, hands on his hips, already in the swim trunks. Just — standing there. Oliver's gaze moved across his shoulder blades, the line of his spine, the easy way he held himself. Something in Oliver's chest did something inconvenient.

Venti turned his head, catching Oliver's expression, and had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from absolutely losing it. He managed. Barely. "Enjoying the view of the lake~? Or the handsome bard in front of you?"

Oliver opened his mouth. "I'm enjoying the lake of the view—" He blinked. "I mean the bard of the lake— *I mean the— the VIEW of the BARD— I—* ***OH, FUCK—"*** He slapped both hands over his face.

That was it. Venti lost it. He laughed so hard he nearly toppled sideways into the water, catching the edge just in time. "BAHAHAHA— OLIVER— WHAT—?!" He wheezed. "I have lived for centuries and I have never heard anyone stammer like that—!"

"I'm dying," Oliver whimpered behind his hands.

Venti composed himself just enough to walk over, still giggling, and put both hands on Oliver's shoulders. "Eheheh— don't be embarrassed! Come on! Let's just get into the springs!"

"O-Okay..." Oliver lowered his hands down from his face. He looked really shy now. Venti rubbed his back. "You'll feel better in the hot water,"

Oliver looked down at the edge of the pool rock rim, then slowly stepped in — one foot, then the other — then lowered himself in all the way. The warmth swallowed him up to the shoulders and he couldn't stop the long, genuine sigh that came out of him. "Oh."

Venti giggled. "Told ya," he settled into the water beside Oliver. "Feels good, huh?"

"Y-Yeah," Oliver sighed. "Really good."

Venti smiled and leaned back, propping his arms on the stone lip of the pool. "Lots of people come here. Just not this early. Give it another two hours and this place will be packed."

Oliver nodded slowly. The place was somewhat designed like a pool. That was something that was still in Oliver's mind, but he couldn't latch it onto where he had seen a pool before. He knows that they exist, but he doesn't know which one he could have possibly gone too.

He glanced sideways at Venti. The bard had his eyes half-closed, expression relaxed, the steam soft around him. His skin looked impossibly smooth in the early light. Oliver really wasn't staring. He was just — looking in that general direction.

One of Venti's eyes opened.

"You're staring again~"

"I'm not—"

"You were." Venti rose a little, lifting himself half out of the water, and gave Oliver a wink. "You can't stop looking at my divine body, can't you?"

Oliver's face went red again — and then Venti was standing fully upright, water running down his sides. His eyes wandered over Venti's chest, then down to his midriff, until his eyes latched onto the belly button. Oliver blinked. Venti's belly button was perfect to him. It was a long slit innie, it seemed pretty deep. It looked really nice against his stomach.

Venti already knew what Oliver was doing. But after seeing the human stare at that part... He titled his head. "...Why are you looking at my belly button?" He asked with a small amused chuckle.

"eEIGH—I WAS NOT—" Oliver made a truly indescribable noise and spun away from him so fast he nearly splashed half the pool out.

"Okay," Venti said, fully delighted, "You are — without question — the most flustered person I have ever, in all my long years, managed to make flustered. This is a new record ehe!" He laughed more. "In all my years of walking Teyvat — no one has EVER—"

"Please stop talking," Oliver begged, facing the stone wall.

"—gotten flustered about my belly button—!"

"VENTI—!"

"Stop!" Oliver blushed.

Venti giggled and sank back into the water, settling against the side of the pool. "Okay, okay. Done. I'm done." He grinned up at the sky. "We'll just relax. Then I'll take you back to Mondstadt for you to get something to eat for the morning,"

Oliver cleared his throat. "O-Okay... Yeah- th-that seems nice to me!"

Venti let out one last small laugh and closed his eyes.

Oh, he was going to have so much fun with this one.

Chapter 5: A New Face



Oliver kept stealing glances at Venti.

The bard wore that insufferable smug expression, lounging in the hot spring water like he hadn't just said something that nearly made Oliver's entire face combust.

This bastard-bard... Oliver thought. Though, it could be worse. At least Venti wasn't cruel about it. Oliver had a feeling that cruelty wasn't something new to him. People being unkind. He couldn't grab onto it properly, not with the memory loss muddling everything in his mind, but the feeling was there, hovering. Something about the things he liked — certain things, private things — that he knows he likes... Venti somewhat found out about onejust now. He was pretty sure other people would wrinkle their noses at it. His thoughts kept spinning in slow, uncertain circles. Had something happened, once? To him? For him to feel this way?

"You okay?"

Venti's voice, soft and close. Oliver looked over. The smugness had gone. There was something about this bard that Oliver kept noticing — how easily he shifted. He was very playful, and such a teaser, but when it came time to be quiet, he was quiet. He didn't push anything.

Right now, he sounded concerned.

Oliver met his eyes. "Yeah." He nodded. "Just... still thinking."

Venti lifted an arm out of the water, droplets running down his wrist, and rested it on Oliver's shoulder. "Hey. What did I tell you? Don't overthink it. Just be here." He gestured around with his free hand. "Just relax! Come on, you're in a hot spring!"

Oliver smiled softly, and nodded. Yeah, he was in a hot spring. A calm and relaxing mineral bath.

Venti kept his arm there. After a moment, it slipped around Oliver's back, pulling him in just slightly.

Oliver felt the shyness creep up his neck, but he didn't pull away. He melted in, just a little. Venti was still a stranger, technically — and yet there was something that felt like safety in being near him. Was it

because Venti revealed himself to be a god? Can't go wrong with a god, right? Or maybe it was just that Venti has a way at being most relentless tease in the universe, and somehow that was doing things to Oliver's chest, making him swoon.

He closed his eyes. Let the heat soak through his muscles. Let himself just... exist, warm and held, for a moment.

It couldn't last forever, of course. The sound of a splash nearby broke the stillness — then another. More people filtering in. Venti did say in a couple more hours people were going to show up.

Oliver opened his eyes.

Venti chuckled. "You wanna head back now-," He nudged Oliver's shoulder. "Or do you wanna stay a bit longer? Your call,"

"Yeah." Oliver nodded, and started to rise, the warm water running off him. "I think I'm ready."

He'd barely gotten to his feet when his stomach let out a loud, dramatic growl. He blinked down at it, then laughed and pressed a hand over it. "Also, I guess I'm getting kinda hungry-,"

Venti stood too, water rushing off him. "You mortals," he said, quiet and playful. "Always needing—" Then his own stomach growled. Loudly. Venti froze, looked down, and went a little pink. "Oh. Haha." He rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I guess even people like me can get hungry too. Probably didn't help that the apple salad yesterday was the only thing I've eaten this week."

Oliver blinked at him as they climbed out. "Wait. Seriously? You just... don't eat?" He climbed out, catching up to Venti.

"Shh~," Venti giggled, eyes darting to the people around the springs. "Not the conversation to have out in the open~."

"Oh — right—" Oliver stepped closer, lowering his voice.

Which meant he was now very close to Venti, who was still shirtless, skin still gleaming faintly from the mineral water in the morning light. Oliver made a very dedicated effort to look only at Venti's face. His very, very pretty face. This was also a problem. Fuck he was beautiful.

"Come on—" Venti grabbed his hand and towed him behind a large rock formation beside the springs, tucking them both out of sight.

"I can't put my clothes on back out out there-," Venti said— then snapped his fingers. A gust of wind curled around him, and his clothes seemed to fly in from nowhere, settling neatly onto him. He smoothed his vest and beamed. "There we go~." He tilted his head at Oliver. "You planning to get dressed, or just stare at me all morning~?"

Oliver made a noise that was not quite a word. He turned around. "Where — where are my clothes?"

"I've got them, silly."

He turned back. Venti held them out with an entirely too pleased expression.

Oliver snatched them and pulled his shirt on. "So — you actually don't eat?"

Venti shrugged, leaning against the rock. "I do, now. Before I had this body — no. I wasn't... I was never this, not my whole existence." Something flickered across his face.

Oliver paused with his pants halfway up, watching him. "Really?"

"Yeah." Venti's voice was lighter than it should have been, like he was choosing the tone carefully. "Not many people know that about me... in this way. I'm not entirely sure why I'm telling you. Guess I trust you, haha."

Something warm settled in Oliver's chest. "Oh..." He finished pulling his pants on.

"I was a Wisp," Venti said. "I won't get into the whole story — it's too long and too much. But the short version is I had no human body. No need to eat, no need for any of it. This body... it was... it... uh... " His voice caught, just slightly. Oliver heard it. He felt something in him pull toward Venti, wanting to smooth him somehow. "Anyway. Point is — Wisp. Then, this." Venti gestured at himself. "A kind of... hybrid, I suppose. God mixed with human. So I can eat, I just don't need to as often. A few weeks without meals and I'm fine."

Oliver thought for a moment as he straightened his clothes. "Is that why Diluc said you can drink ten wines without blinking? I guess your... body can process all of it because your godly body can withstand it."

Venti brightened. "Exactly! My body handles it differently. Though, I can get drunk, mind you. Just takes about twenty bottles."

Oliver laughed. "I think I'm a lightweight."

"Yeah? Wait—" Venti tilted his head. "Is that something you remember?"

Oliver paused. "I... don't know. Maybe?"

"We need to find something that can truly jog your memory." Venti clapped his hands together. "But first — breakfast. Come here—" He grabbed Oliver's shoulder before Oliver could even process the words.

"Huh — wait, don't—" "H-Hey wai—"

The world lurched. Wind. Then suddenly they were standing outside Mondstadt's main gate but off to the side. The stone walls rising up beside them, the two gate guards just barely out of eyeline.

"EAAH—" Oliver staggered, grabbing for balance. He looked around wildly, heart pounding. "You have got to stop doing that!" He hissed.

"It's faster than walking for hours!" Venti argued cheerfully, already heading for the gate. "All of Teyvat could use Fontaine's water-bus system, if you ask me. Though, I'd want to keep Mondstadt old and timeless. It doesn't need all of that new-fangled nonsense-,"

Oliver stared at the back of his head. "You sound like someone's grandfather complaining about technology."

Venti didn't answer. Just giggled cutely.

They looped around behind the guards and slipped in through the gate. The guard on the right squinted at Venti. "Where did you come from?"

Oliver offered a tiny, sheepish smile as he followed. "H-Hi." and then he walked in.

The guard watched them go, then looked across at his partner a the other rend of the gate.

"Bard's got a boyfriend, finally," the other one said.

They shrugged at each other.

Oliver could see Venti was already at the stand. "Come on!" Venti called him over. "Sara still has her breakfast items on the menu," Oliver waved through the streets, trying to get around the crowd of people. Eventually, he made his way to the outdoor food stall.

"You want pancakes? Sara makes all her food good, but the locals say that's one of the best breakfast options in Teyvat," Venti smiled, as he handed Oliver the menu.

Oliver stared down at the option Venti was pointing at. "Woah... that does look good. Yeah, I guess I'll get that,"

Venti nodded with satisfaction, and when it was their turn, stepped up to the counter. "Morning, Sara! Can Mondstadt's most beloved bard get a pancake order for his cute little friend here~?" He reached over and ruffled Oliver's hair.

Oliver blushed a lot, and out of shyness, he shoved Venti's hands away, then turned around and folded his arms with a pout. Venti giggled at it, of course.

Sara rolled her eyes playfully. "You know, you really need to start paying me..."

"Me? Pay? I'm the finest bard in Mondstadt, Sara. That's payment enough." He grinned. "And come on, you met Oliver yesterday! He was absolutely devoted to your Sticky Honey Roast!"

Sara's expression softened. "Alright, alright." She looked to Oliver — who was still aggressively pouting, facing away. "Lighter-Than-Air pancakes for you?"

Venti prodded him gently. "Sara's talking to you, dork~."

"Wh— I—" Oliver spun back around. "Oh! Yes! The pancakes — the pin — I mean—" His brain and his mouth had a small, catastrophic disagreement. "The pincakes—"

Venti's composure collapsed entirely. "BAHAHAHA — PINCAKES?!" He doubled forward, grabbing the counter for support. "Oliver — are you alright — Yeah, Sara, you got any pins and needles back there to blend into the batter? PiffFTTT~!" He dissolved into helpless laughter.

"Venti, stop—" Oliver buried his face in both hands.

Sara just smiled quietly at the pair of them and turned back to the kitchen. "Okay one pancake order for your friend. And, I reckon you want the apple salad?" She asked Venti.

Venti was still giggling at Oliver. "Huh? Oh, right. You bet!" He smiled. He stood back up, and gently punched Oliver on his arm. "Haha come on, let's sit at the table,"

They sat at the table. Actually, it was even the same one they sat in yesterday. Venti was still giggling even once he sat down.

Oliver couldn't say he was tired of hearing Venti's little giggles and laughing. It was music to his ears, he sounded adorable. But his embarrassed state and shyness was making him blurt out things he didn't truly mean. "Oh my god, can you shut up, you cup size!"

Venti stopped. Stared. "Cup size?!" He promptly burst out laughing again. "What?! What kind of insult is —"

"Ugh! It's what they call the size of a cup in a café!"

"I have never heard of that!" Venti laughed. "I think I would have been aware if the size of a cup was named after me!" He giggled.

"It's—" Oliver stopped. He blinked. Something had snagged at the back of his mind. "I could've sworn I knew that. Like — it's there, almost. Something about a café, something I knew—"

Venti stopped laughing when he saw that Oliver was trying to remember. "Okay, I know I said you should push anything, but you remembering a café is a good start! You actually remembered something!"

"Just barely," Oliver said, deflating a little. "It's like reaching for something and your hand goes through it."

"Better than nothing!" Venti beamed. "One step closer to getting your memories back!"

Their food arrived. Venti's apple salad again. And Oliver's pancakes.

Oliver looked at the plate and forgot, briefly, everything else. Four pancakes, stacked with whipped cream between each layer, cream and chocolate drizzle on top, fresh fruit, a single piece of chocolate, what might have been mint leaves, and a small decorative rose tucked neatly at the base. It looked exactly like the picture on the menu. Oliver stared at it.

"Does Sara just — use magic when she cooks, or—" Oliver said as he took his fork and knife up, his eyes not once leaving his plate.

Venti grinned. "Pretty sure she doesn't. Though magic's not exactly rare around here." He picked up his fork. "Seems like it is for you, since you're gawking at everything. Unless that's just because you lack memories,"

Oliver began to work on the pancakes. He cut a piece off, and pushed his fork into it, then brought it up to his mouth. He closed his eyes, savoring the taste.

"Okay," he said, with great sincerity. "If I am actually from another world — and I have no idea, genuinely... I can 100% guarantee that I have never eaten anything that tasted like this. And if I ever get my memories back and have to choose whether to go home?" He pointed at the plate. "This. This is the reason I'd stay."

Venti laughed properly at that. "Swooning over Teyvat for the food. Incredible. Can't even say I blame you, ehaha~!" He speared a piece of apple, then glanced past Oliver. "Heheh, speaking of different worlds... There's the Traveler I talked about. Just came over."

Oliver looked up from his pancakes, cheeks puffed with his food

Venti snorted. "My word," he laughed. "You look like a chipmunk!" He choked down his giggles, and gestured to Oliver to turn around.

Oliver turned, chewing, and saw someone standing at the food stall, ordering something. He finished chewing and swallowed "Is that him?" Oliver whispered to Venti. The bard gave him a nod.

The Traveler — tall, golden-haired, a long braided ponytail trailing behind him. Oliver reached back almost automatically and grabbed his own braid, comparing. "Does my hair look... similar to his?"

Venti heard him. "I dunno... maybe? Yeah, actually," he nodded. "Just some minor differences? As I said, I dunno if you're a Traveler like him and his sibling. And he never told me or anyone else about other Travelers. Who knows, maybe that's a Traveler trade mark. Braided ponytails. You don't look anything alike though. You both have different skin tones,"

"Hmm," Oliver faced forward to Venti again.

"Hm — that's odd, actually," Venti murmured, scanning the area.

Oliver looked up at Venti. "Huh? What is?"

"Usually she's always with him?"

Oliver looked around. "Who, his sibling?"

"No, someone else,"

Oliver was confused, and didn't know who Venti was referring too. "Who are you talking about?"

And then someone appeared out of absolutely nowhere — a small, floating girl, materialising in the air beside their table like she'd always been there. "Hello Venti!"

"GAH—" Oliver's chair tipped back. He hit the ground.

Of course, that sent off the giggles in Venti.

"Oh! Paimon is so sorry!" The girl dropped down instantly, reaching out to help.

"Oliver, haha — this is Paimon!" Venti managed between fits of laughter. "She's friends with the Traveler —"

"Paimion's really sorry!" The small girl said again.

Oliver sat up, brushed himself off, and looked at Paimon properly.

She was — quite small. Tiny even. No bigger than a small cat. He blinked. "Wow. You're... really small—"

Paimon's hands flew to her hips. "Hey! So what if Paimon is small!"

"PffFT—" Venti pressed both hands over his mouth.

Paimon whipped around. "Don't you dare—"

Venti tried. "Ehe!-,"

The tiny girl grunted, and zipped over to him. "What do you mean 'EHE' Stop!"

The two of them descended into bickering, Paimon indignant and hovering, Venti barely keeping himself together. Oliver watched from the ground with genuine amusement, then sat back down in the chair. Paimon's voice was really squeaky. And I thought Venti sounded like a toy...

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, Paimon — it was funny—" Venti managed.

Paimon huffed, then drifted over toward Oliver with a more curious look. "So who are you? Paimon doesn't think Traveler have met you before. Or Paimon."

"I...," Oliver was about to speak, but Venti did it for him.

"We're theorizing if he could be a traveler or not," Venti said.

That caught Paimon's attention. "Oh!" She lowered down and sat at the edge of the table.

"Yeah," Venti said. "But he's lost his memories, he doesn't remember anything..."

"Hmm..." Paimon looked at Oliver, then back at Venti. "So Paimon guesses you're helping him around?"

"Uh-huh! Yours truly! Mondstadt's finest bard, sworn protector of one small amnesiac Oliver—" He reached over the table, and ruffled Oliver's hair again.

Paimon giggled. "Well at least you're finally doing something useful!"

"Yeah, I- HEY! Now wait just a minute!" Venti snapped.

Paimon was already gone, zipping back to the Traveler's shoulder as he settled in at a nearby table with his food. "Ooh! Fisherman's Toast!!!" She swiped one off his plate without hesitation. "Nom nom!"

Venti watched her go and shook his head. Then he looked at Oliver. "Don't mind her. I'm not that unhelpful and lazy." He leaned in conspiratorially. "It's less laziness and more..." he lowered his voice, "an old god taking a well-earned rest."

Oliver chuckled. "Well, I guess I can't say you don't deserve it then," he smiled.

Venti smiled back — soft and easy. "Finish up, and then I'm taking you to the tavern. I need my daily wine~." He patted his stomach.

Oliver giggled. "You just throw around to everyone how much of a heavyweight you are, huh~?"

Venti giggled, and stuck his tongue out at him.

Chapter 6: Getting Closer



Diluc did a double take the moment Venti strolled in with Oliver trailing behind him. He set down the glass he was drying and crossed his arms. "Alright. Two days in a row with the same guy. This has got to be a boyfriend if you're still with him."

Venti gasped dramatically and threw himself onto the barstool like he'd been physically wounded. "Diluc~! Can't a charming, devastatingly attractive individual such as myself spend time with a cute boy without everyone making it were we are an item~?" He flopped forward onto the bar counter with a groan.

Diluc stared at him. "You don't spend time with anyone. Ever. So yes, this is a whole thing." He glanced at Oliver. "Especially with this one." he folded his arms. "You have feelings,"

The bard lifted his head with a grin. "And what if I do?" He propped his chin in his hands. "What are you, the feelings police?" he turned to Oliver whose face was more red than Diluc's hair.. "Oliver doesn't mind, do you~?"

Oliver opened his mouth.

"Atta boy~," Venti bit his lip, turned back to Diluc, and then— "PffFt—" He slapped a hand over his mouth. Then, he burst out laughing. Couldn't hold it in much longer. As if, he ever could.

Diluc shook his head. "At this rate, you're going to kill that poor man," without any more words, he turned around, grabbed one of the bottles, and handed Venti.

Venti giggled. He turned to Oliver. "Hey! Diluc! Pass over an empty glass~ Wanna make Oliver here try my favorite wine," Venti pulled off the cork, tossing it, then took a long drink, then set down the bottle on the counter. He winked at Oliver. "It's some good stuff~,"

The empty glass came sliding across the counter. Venti caught it.

"Venti. Sharing his wine." Diluc said it like he was narrating something historic. "Remarkable."

"Oh, hush, candy-hair~," Venti said, already pouring carefully into the glass. "Here." He handed it over to Oliver.

Oliver accepted it, looked down at it for a second, then took a sip. He blinked. "Wait. That's... actually really good?"

"RIGHT?!" Venti looked personally vindicated.

"It's... a subtle sweetness. But it doesn't have that harsh alcohol taste I usually don't like. I hate that burn... It just... goes down easy."

Venti's smile softened into something a little warmer. He nudged Oliver's shoulder. "Hey~ there you go again. You're remembering something~!"

Oliver blinked. "Oh— yeah. Yeah, you're right. I... I just remembered I don't like the taste of some alcohol. Whiskey especially. Whiskey is awful."

"Hard agree," Diluc said flatly from behind the counter.

Oliver took another quiet sip.

Venti smiled at him. "Hey now, remember you said you're a lightweight~," he teased. "Don't be drinking too much hehe~,"

"R-Right! I know, I know," Oliver said quickly.

The bell above the door rang.

Diluc glanced up. "Afternoon, Bennett."

Oliver blinked, then turned around, and saw a pretty short boy sit down in one of the stools next to him. "Hey Diluc! Can I get those cocktails you and Traveler put together last time? Oh— and make two, Razor's on his way, he's just running behind."

Oliver found himself staring. Something was tugging at the back of his mind. He couldn't quite grab it.

He looked up at the top of his head. White hair, had goggles rested on his head, instead of wearing them. A vest, he probably didn't wear anything under the vest, as it was pretty revealing and he saw a lot of skin.

Bennett caught his eye. "Oh! Sorry, didn't mean to just sit down without saying hi!" He stuck his hand out. "I'm Bennett!"

Oliver blinked. "...Oliver,"

There was something about Bennett... Why did he look familiar?

Bennett tilted his head slightly. "You okay?"

Venti had already leaned forward, eyes flicking between the two of them.

Bennett saw. "Oh! Geez, I guess I must be blind, haha!" Bennett laughed, rubbing the back of his head. "I didn't even see you in here either Ven! How're you?"

"Pretty good~! Just keeping Oliver company. He lost his memories."

"Oh." Bennett's expression went immediately soft with concern. "Oh no, that's really rough. Is there a way to get them back?"

Venti shrugged, took a slow pull from his bottle. "Not sure yet. For now I'm just making sure he's comfortable."

Venti told Oliver that when he remembers something, he shouldn't try to dwell onto it. But he also said to try to grasp it, if may have been in reach. Something was with Bennett. Oliver looked at Venti. "Venti? I... I dunno, something is in the back of my subconscious when I look at Bennett. But, I... I dunno what it is?"

"Oh—!" Venti sat up a little straighter.

"Huh?" Bennett blinked. "What happened?"

At that time, Diluc slid down the drink Bennett ordered, and he caught the glass. "Hey! Diluc be careful!" Bennett yelled at him. "You know I have that bad luck thing, I could have dropped it,"

"Oh- right, sorry!" Diluc quickly said.

Oliver blinked. 'Bad luck...?'

Bennett turned back to Venti and Oliver. "What's up?" He said.

Venti nudged Oliver with his elbow. "Seems like you might know Benny~."

Bennett blinked. "Know me? I-I don't think I ever met you before... uh, Oliver, was it?"

Oliver nodded.

"Maybe you two crossed paths before? You're always going on adventures, maybe you came across him out there somewhere? Even just one little meet up could have had a longing impression on his mind," Venti said.

Bennett shook his head, really trying to think. "Unless he had a different hairstyle back then, I don't remember ever coming across someone with a braided ponytail like that, except Traveler."

"Hmmm..." Venti turned to Oliver. "Well, Bennett is pretty known around Monstadt. Maybe you caught a glimpse of him somewhere? Now why would you remember him that hard if you did?" Venti's voice went into a low tease. "Maybe you had a crush on him!"

"What?!" Oliver and Bennett both yelled at the same time.

"No!" Bennett laughed, waving his hand. "I mean — even if that were a thing, I have a boyfriend. That's Razor."

Oliver shot Venti a flat look. "I don't think so, Venti." He paused. "Besides, at the moment I have a crush on you—"

He stopped.

The whole bar went quiet for half a second.

Did he just say that out loud?

Then Venti completely fell apart. He slammed both fists on the counter, doubled over laughing, loud and unrestrained, the sound bouncing off every wall in the tavern.

It startled Diluc so badly he nearly dropped the glasses he was holding. "WHA — HEY! Keep it down!" he snapped, mostly just because his heart was still racing.

Venti was already sliding off the stool. "Oh my WORHAHAHAAORRDDD!!!— YOU JUST — YOU—"

"Ah! Venti!" Bennett hopped off his own stool to help.

Oliver had rotated himself on his seat so he was facing completely the other direction. His face was on fire.

Eventually — eventually — the bard collected himself enough to climb back onto his stool, wiping at his eye. "Oh no... oh, this mystery boy is going to make me lose a lung one of these days..."

He turned to Oliver with the softest, most insufferable smile. "I can't believe you just said that out loud~ Aww, you're so cute~."

"It's your fault I have a crush in the first place," Oliver muttered, still facing away. "You teasing, chaotic mess."

Venti snorted. "Oh sure, all my fault huh~? I tease plenty of people and none of them have ever swooned like you do! Haha!"

Bennett was a little lost on the full context but found the whole thing funny enough that he was quietly giggling into his drink.

Oliver exhaled slowly and turned back around to face forward.

"There he is~," Venti said warmly.

"Oh my god, Venti, shut up~."

"Hmm~? You rang~?" Venti leaned in closer.

"Huh? What do you-," Then Oliver realized. "Oh- you! Ugh! That's not what I meant!" He laughed.

Venti giggled, bright and easy, and finished the last of his Dandelion Wine.

"Honestly," he sighed contentedly, setting the bottle down, "who needs wine to feel light-headed when you're sitting right there?"

Oliver put his face in his hands, and sighed.

That was, by his count, about the millionth sigh of the day.

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Night crept in again. Oliver's second night in this world now.

"C'mon, c'mon!" Venti suddenly snatched Oliver's hand, pulling him along at full speed through the cobblestone streets. "To the tree!"

Oliver had no choice but to keep up with the erratic bard. They flew past the town gates, the guards watching Venti with that particular look they reserved for him. The look that said they had long since given up asking questions. They'd seen it all at this point with this man.

When they reached the tree, Venti threw his arms around Oliver in a sudden, bone-squeezing hug. "GKGH —!" Oliver wheezed.

"Hehe! Upsies!" And with that, Venti launched them both into the air, holding Oliver close as they went.
~~~~~

"Hey! A little warning next time!" Oliver yelped, arms gripping the bard.

Venti threaded through the branches with ease, weaving up until the hammock came into view. "Ta-da~!" He set Oliver down in it gently, then floated down after him, settling in right beside him.

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Oliver lay there staring upward through the canopy. Neither of them were asleep. Neither of them were really trying to be. They were just... breathing. Just existing there for a bit. Oliver couldn't speak for Venti, but his own head was a mess. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened today, not really. But he was so, incredibly, stupidly flustered by this bard. And it just kept getting worse.

He felt an elbow nudge him.

He turned his head slowly.

There was Venti, in the faint moon light, Oliver could see his smirk.

"W-What is it?"

"Hehe, nothing~!" Venti laughed quietly. "Just lookin' at you!"

Oliver turned back toward the sky.

"Heyyy, don't ignore meeee~!"

Oliver sighed. He looked back over.And the moment he did, Venti leaned in and kissed him. Short and sweet. His lips, soft and slightly damp, pressed against Oliver's for just a moment before pulling away with a little smooch.

Oliver just stared at him.

Venti, just grinning.

His heart was pounding. Like, genuinely hammering. Like he'd just sprinted a mile, except he was flat on his back in a hammock with a ridiculous bard grinning at him.

But he couldn't deny it anymore. He leaned in too. And kissed him back. And Venti, of course, let him.

It started simple. It stayed relatively simple. Though at some point it became something more, the two of them just... going with it. The hammock rocked slow and steady in the night breeze. Venti's hands came up to cup Oliver's face, gentle and warm.

They stayed like that for a while. Maybe ten minutes. Then it felt like time to breathe again, and they pulled apart. Venti pressed one last small kiss to Oliver's cheek, and then reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair away from his face.

Oliver's heart was still going. But that tiny little gesture absolutely demolished him.

"Oh my god... what are we even doing..."

Venti giggled. "Hehe~ You should feel honored I'm letting you get all close with me, honestly! I don't just date anyone, you know~!"

"N-Now we're dating..." Oliver groaned, burying his face in the bard's neck.
~~~~

Venti's laugh was soft. He brought a hand up to the back of Oliver's head, fingers slow and easy as they combed through his hair, brushing over his braid every now and then.

"Ehehe~ you're gonna kiss me anymore, or you're just gonna live in my neck for the rest of the night?" Venti teased.

Oliver slowly lifted his head. He leaned in and kissed Venti's cheek.

"Hehe, there you go~," Venti giggled.

"Oh, be quiet—" Oliver kissed him on the lips again.

They went back and forth like that a little more before settling down. Venti pulled Oliver against him, letting him rest with his head against his chest. He kept running his fingers through his hair, light and unhurried.

They both just watched the moonlight shift through the branches overhead.

It was nice. Quiet. Until Venti opened his mouth.

"You remember when we were in the hot springs? And you got absolutely, totally, and weirdly flustered by my belly button?"

Oliver's eyes shot open, then he groaned loudly, "Ventttttiiii! Come on! Stop!"

"Hey, hey, hey! No teasing! I'm being serious right now!" Venti insisted, giggling anyway. "I just wanna know. Like, is that your thing? Are you into it, or something?"

Oliver's face was burning. "...Yeah. It is," he mumbled. "I don't really know why. I just always have."

Venti smiled, pulling him a little closer. "Hey, your memory's getting better though!" he said, brighter now. "See? You remembered something about yourself!"

Oliver thought about that. He was right, sort of. He didn't remember how he'd developed the preference, just that he had it. But then again, most people couldn't explain why they liked what they liked.

What he did remember, vaguely, was that someone had made him feel terrible about it. He didn't know who. A past partner, maybe? Had he even had a partner before? It was all blurry.

"...I think someone made fun of me for it," Oliver said quietly. "Details are fuzzy. But I'm pretty sure that happened."

The teasing dropped out of Venti's expression entirely. "What? Really? Oh no—" He kissed Oliver's cheek. "That's awful. Who was it? Who did that to you?"

"As I said... fuzzy details. I doubt I'd have told a friend about something like that, so... probably a partner, if anyone."

Venti kept his arm around him, hand stroking Oliver's cheek carefully. "I hope my teasing about it didn't... surface some bad memories? Oh geez, that's not why you remember it, is it?"

Oliver shook his head quickly. "No, Venti. Seriously, it didn't. Your teasing is... different. You're trying to get a reaction out of me, but in a good way. Whatever happened before, that was the opposite. That was meant to push me away."

Venti nodded slowly. "Okay. Good." He kissed his cheek again.

Oliver blinked. "Y-You keep kissing me..."

Venti gasped dramatically, hand flying to his chest. "Are you saying you don't want the most dashing bard in all of Mondstadt giving you kisses under the moonlight?! I'm wounded." He kept one eye cracked open, watching to see if it was landing.

Oliver stared at him completely flatly.

Venti completely lost it. "HAHAHA what IS that face?!" He kissed Oliver's forehead anyway. "Okay, okay. Different topic. Since we where on the subject—" he grinned— "do you wanna actually see my belly button properly this time?"

Oliver nearly choked. "WHA!?"

"Don't give me that!" Venti laughed. "We both know you wanna~." He gently shifted Oliver off of him and sat up, turning so he was facing him.

He snapped his fingers. A little gust of wind, and his top came off in one clean motion, settling neatly on a nearby branch.

"There you are~!" Venti said, closing his eyes like he was presenting a gift, gesturing grandly toward his navel. "One handsome bard's beautiful innie! You're welcome!"

Oliver was blushing a lot, staring at Venti's midriff.

"Well? Aren't you going to do something?" Venti asked. "Like, touch it?"

Oliver swallowed. He reached over. Pressed his palm carefully against Venti's upper stomach. Venti smiled softly, arching into it just slightly, like he was offering.

His skin was incredibly smooth. Pale and soft in the moonlight. Oliver moved his fingers gently up and down, and Venti let out quiet little sounds, giggling under his breath.

And then—the obvious next step. Oliver pressed his finger into Venti's belly button. Into the tight slit-innie. Venti inhaled. "Oh!" He blinked a few times. "Hehe~ huh. I just realized I never actually had someone touch my belly button before. That really tickles~"

Oliver wiggled his finger softly. Venti squirmed. "Hehehe! Oliver~! Okay, that really tickles~!"

Oliver giggled himself, and continued to dig into the bard's navel. Eventually he pulled his finger out.

Venti exhaled a laugh. "Okay! Okay. I'm gonna need a second to adjust to that. Wow. That's gonna take some getting used too~" He leaned in and kissed Oliver's nose. "Give me a moment haha..."

Oliver looked down at Venti's stomach. At the little navel there. This felt surreal. Like if he thought about it too hard it might stop being real.

He wanted to do something else. He wasn't sure how out-there it would come across. He wasn't sure if Venti would be okay with it.

"Venti?"

"Yeah, Ollie?"

Oliver paused. "...O-Ollie?"

Venti tilted his head. "Yeah? Oh—you don't like it?"

"No! No, I do, I just—I think I remembered something. I think people used to call me that. Maybe friends."

Venti lit up and clapped his hands together. "You're remembering more stuff! That's great!" He poked Oliver's cheek fondly, then settled again. "Okay so what were you about to say?"

The blush came back immediately. "I... okay. If you don't want to, just say so right now, alright? Before I finish asking." Oliver steadied himself. "I... want to lick it. Your belly button."

Venti went quiet for a moment.

Oliver covered his face with both hands.

Venti's lips curled into a smirk. "Gettin' frisky aren't we~?"

"Please don't make this worse—"

Venti burst into giggles. "For the record—yes, absolutely yes, I want you to do that. But!" He held up a finger. "I now know for a fact that my belly button is extremely sensitive. So if I say stop, you stop immediately. Deal?"

Oliver nodded right away. "Of course, I wouldn't force you with anything."

Venti beamed. "You're genuinely so sweet~." He shifted, glancing around. "Should I... lay down?"

Oliver nodded. "I think I-I can get your belly button better like that~,"

Venti giggled and let out a few snorts. "Hehehahahhaha~ okay!" He layed down, his bare chest and stomach on display in the hammock. "Knock yourself out! Just don't knock me out~,"

Oliver's face was on fire staring down at him like that. He inched closer, practically draped over him, face just inches from Venti's stomach. He could see the detail of his skin much more clearly now. The faint texture of it. The exact shape of that tight little slit-innie, the way the opening was just barely visible. Curious, he brought two fingers down into it to part the rim slightly and peer inside.

Venti squirmed immediately with giggles. "Hehehe— what are you looking for in there~? I promise there's no treasure~! Or lint~ I keep myself clean~"

Oliver was trying to see what the bottom of Venti's belly button looked like, the knot. But with how dark it was, with the only illumination being the moon, made it hard to see.

So, eventually he stopped, then looked at Venti. "I-I am gonna lick it now-,"

"Hehe~ okay! Remember, be easy on me~ This poor bard's tummy is rather sensitive!"

Oliver looked back down at the belly button below him. He took a deep breath, then lowered closer, and began leaving small kisses on, and around Venti's navel. The bard melted at first. "Awww~," he cooed. "You're kissing it~,"

The licking came next. Oliver let stuck his tongue out, the wet body part of his, dove into Venti's belly button. To the best he could do, Oliver wiggled his tongue around in there.

Venti's whole body jolted. "BAHAHAHA— okay! OKAY! Too much! Too ticklish!! Hahaaa!!"

Oliver pulled back instantly.

Venti was catching his breath, laughing, cheeks flushed. "Okay, yeah, I need to get used to that. Thank you for stopping though. You're a sweetheart," He sat back up, wrapped both arms around Oliver, and kissed him firmly. Pulled back, studying his face. "You good? You look a little out of it."

"Absolutely not!" Oliver laughed. "I just played with your belly button!"

Venti snorted. "You're acting like you just saw me strip for the first time!" He giggled. Then, he smirked. "Maybe I should do that~!"

"What!? No! Come on, it's only so much my poor mortal heart can take!" Oliver laughed.

Venti giggled and waved a hand. "Okay, okay~ let's sleep. Big day tomorrow, early start~!"

"Is the early start just for you to fluster me some more?"

"haha, shut up~!"

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

~~~~~~

Oliver's eyes open with a suddenness. The same as last time. He blinked at the darkness around him as his vision adjusted slowly.

"Right..." he muttered.

He tried to move his arms. They didn't. "Still stuck—" He looked down at the straps across the armrests. "This is... not right."

Then the full picture of the situation settled over him. He blinked a few times rapidly. "Did I just—I just kissed Venti. I played with his belly button. I licked his—" If his hands were free he would have buried his face in them completely. "EEEEE," he hissed to himself. "My dream~!" He squealed.

But the good feeling only lasted a second. Dr. Barclay still wasn't here.

"Where is he?" He looked around the dim room. "This was never part of what we discussed." His mind started going over everything again.

Dr. Barclay was a scientist. He'd stumbled onto the hidden realm entirely by accident—a realm containing hundreds of separate worlds, all of them fictional to the dimension Oliver and the doctor and everyone else they knew came from.

Oliver had gotten pulled into this because of college. Dr. Barclay had connections to his computer science course, had spotted something in Oliver apparently, and offered him what he'd called an internship. Oliver had gone to the meeting. That was when the doctor explained it all. The worlds. And the tests he wanted to be done. He'd do them himself, but needed someone to watch over the equipment, and well, actually run the test.

And the offer: help run the experiments, get paid very well, and get to choose which world he'd visit. For someone like Oliver—a fictosexual—that wasn't a hard call. There was only one world he'd wanted. The

one with his fictional crush in it.

Oliver sat there in the dark, quietly pleased with himself despite everything. He'd kissed Venti. He'd really kissed Venti. And played with his belly button~

"But Doc still isn't here," he muttered, the warmth fading a little. "And I still can't remember anything when I'm in there." He frowned. "He didn't seem like the kind of person who'd abandon someone mid-experiment. There has to be a reason."

His eyes had adjusted more now. He could make out the shape of things. And across from him—

"What is that?"

He stared.

Another chair. Just like his. He'd half-noticed it yesterday but couldn't make it out. Now he could see it clearly.

It was the same kind of chair. Same design. Just... empty.

"I thought there was only one. Doc said there was only one."

Beginning send back

"Oh, here we go—" Oliver muttered. "Amensia 100%..."

He closed his eyes, bracing to be sent back to Genshin Impact.

Chapter 7: World Destroyer

Oliver's eyes opened slowly, taking his time adjusting to the pale morning light filtering through the leaves. He blinked once, twice. There was that familiar feeling again — the ghost of a dream he couldn't grab onto, already dissolving before he could make sense of it.

I hate this... He thought, exhaling quietly.

He turned his head. Venti was still beside him in the hammock, stirring just enough to signal he was waking up too.

"Mornin'~," The bard yawned, stretching his arms out like a cat in the sun.

Oliver's thoughts of his missing dream quickly dissolved into something else entirely — the very vivid memory of last night flooding back. What he did with the bard. He swallowed.

Naturally, Venti caught the flustered human's expression. A slow smirk crept across his face. "Oooh? What're you thinkin' about, huh?" He tilted his head with that look. That specific look he always does when he wants to be smug ass.

Damn this bard. Oliver turned away sharply. "I-I was just... the leaves on this tree are... really something, huh... f-filled with em..."

Even barely awake, that was apparently still enough to send Venti into a fit. He pressed a hand over his mouth, but it didn't help. "Oh Ollie~, hahaha!" He laughed — quiet but unmistakably him, bubbling and bright.

Oliver sighed once he realized that there was no way out of his one.

"...It... it won't just be a one-time thing, right?"

Venti's laughter faded into something softer. "Do you not want it to be?"

"Dummy, that's literally why I'm asking..." Oliver said softly.

A small smile came on the bard's face. "Of course not. You can play with my belly button all you like, for as long as we're together." Venti paused, something more thoughtful settling into his expression. "That is, until you figure out how to get home to your world. Wherever that may be."

Still blushing, and reeling in the fact of the things he has done with the bard, what he said somewhat settled within him. He shifted, now he was facing the bard. "V-Venti? I... Would I really be from another world?"

Venti shrugged loosely. "Could be. Mind wipes wipe everything — you could just be from Teyvat. But..." He tapped his chin. "Some of the stuff you say doesn't land right. Like yesterday? You called me a 'cup size.' Said something about a café using that as an actual measurement for drinks?"

"I've never heard anything like that," Venti added.

Oliver stared at the canopy above. "But if I really am from somewhere else... how do I get back?"

Venti didn't have an answer for that. That was a Traveler thing, and even then, it wasn't simple. If Oliver were a Traveler, they'd probably have that power within them somewhere. But it'll be useless now, given

the forgotten memories.

He sat up with a quiet exhale. "Alright, enough of the heavy stuff for now. Let's go eat, walk around Mondstadt a bit. Maybe something will click — like Bennett did yesterday. Then I can maybe take you to the other nations." He glanced over his shoulder. "Sound good?"

"Yeah." Oliver nodded. "Sounds good."

~~~~~~

Diluc had been up early, the way he always was. He straightened the kegs along the back shelf, lined up the glasses neatly, and made sure everything was in order before the morning crowd trickled in. He reached for Venti's preferred bottle without even thinking about it, set it off to the side.

"I know he's coming this morning. And I bet he's dragging that new boy around with him," Diluc got the last things ready, but then he heard someone behind him. A whisper. "Dimension energy...." At first, Diluc didn't take much note of it, but then he heard another.

"Combine the worlds..."

Diluc was cleaning a cup he forgot to clean yesterday. He slowly set the cup down.

"The island is home to us, we don't want to leave,"

Diluc slowly turned around. It sounded like it was multiple voices. "Kingdom Hearts was the source of the universe," Then, it said one last thing, before Diluc fully turned.

"This world's not strong enough like Sub 7 is... Reporting back."

There, right at the bar counter — something that had no business being there at all. Dark. Shifting. A creature swathed in black mist, its form crackling with an energy Diluc had never felt or seen before. It stood at the bar like it was simply waiting to be served.

The moment his eyes landed on it, it recoiled. The dark shape shot backward, slipping through the cracks of the tavern door like smoke, and every inch of the floor it crossed trembled and buzzed with that same strange energy — before it all went still.

Diluc stared at the door.

"What-?... What the hell?"

Four seconds passed.

The door swung open."Bahahaha! Oliver, I genuinely cannot believe you just walked into Amber like that! You almost took her clean off her feet!" Venti held the door wide as he wheezed.

Oliver walked in looking like he wanted to disappear. "I wasn't paying attention..."

"I'll say! You can't just bowl over one of the Knights of Favonius! Haha — are you sure the memory loss didn't take your spatial awareness too~?"

"Oh, har har." Oliver grumbled, and made his way to the counter. He looked up at Diluc.

Then he stopped, tilting his head.

Venti noticed, but couldn't resist. "Pfft — Diluc, what is that face? You look like you've seen an actual ghost."
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Diluc blinked. "...I think I might have."

Venti rolled his eyes. "Sure, sure. A ghost who came all this way to buy alcohol. Just keep it away from my dandelion wine~."

Oliver, however, leaned in slightly. "You sure? What did it look like?"

Diluc set the glass he was cleaning down slowly. "All black. Dark mist. It was just... standing here. Right where you're standing. Like it wanted to order something." He shook his head.

Venti giggled. "Told ya he wanted to buy some alcohol."

"Then it... vanished." Diluc shook his head again. "You guys didn't see it? It left just a few moments before you entered!"

"Nope~!" Venti said cheerfully.

"I didn't see anything..." Oliver looked back at the tavern door.

"I probably just need sleep," Diluc muttered.

"You stayed up late again, didn't you," Venti said, already climbing onto a bar stool.

"Maybe... a little," Diluc said. "Probably why. I didn't sleep well,"

"Well, you want me to run the bar for you today? Go and get some rest." Venti told him.

Diluc leveled him with a stare. "Absolutely not. You'll clean out my entire stock the second I'm not watching."

"I won't! Haha, I wasn't even thinking about that!" Venti pressed his hands to his chest. "Come on, trust an old friend~ I'll be on my best behavior, I promise. Oliver can keep an eye on me!"

Diluc looked at Oliver for a long moment. Then, slowly: "...Fine." A pause. "Oliver, if he drinks any, report back to me immediately." Another pause. Then, with the faintest resigned look: "Though you won't. Because you're completely gone for him and you'd cover for him without thinking."

Oliver's face went scarlet.

Venti dissolved into giggles. "Diluc, just go! Shoo! We've got it!"

Diluc left without further comment.

"Uhh? Venti?" He turned to the bard. "I... I don't know how to serve alcohol. Or... even know how to mix anything, like cocktails."

"That's fine! I do~" Venti smiled. "You just greet everyone who comes in. Chat them up a little — maybe someone'll spark something for you. Like Bennett did." He smiled. "We still gotta get your memory back. That's a great way to try."

Oliver sighed, then he nodded. "Okay,"

~~~~~~~

The hours passed. Patrons came and went, and Oliver greeted each one, helped where he could, kept himself busy. No memories surfaced — but he wasn't just standing there being useless, and that counted
~~~~~~~

for something. It felt good to be doing something to help out a little bit. Something to keep his mind going, that wasn't Venti's teasing 24/7.

"Ollie! Can you come here for a sec?" Venti's voice could be heard.

Oliver looked up from where he was and walked over to the counter.

"It's getting a little packed in here," he noted as he approached the bard.

Venti groaned and dramatically collapsed face-first onto the bar. "I know. Diluc absolutely knew this was going to happen and said nothing."

Oliver felt something, he didn't do too well in crowds. And this loud bar wasn't helping.

"Can you help me out?" Venti asked as he stood back up. He turned, and got a clean cloth. "Can you go upstairs? And clean the tables up there? I think Diluc closed it off for a while. There was a leak in the roof, he did just fix it though, but never opened it back. I am sure the tables are dusty up there. Can you go clean em' for me?"

Oliver took the cloth. "Wait — the tavern has an upstairs?"

Venti blinked. Then laughed. "Have you genuinely never noticed the stairs?"

Oliver looked around until he found them. "...I'll go."

"Thanks, cutie~" Venti winked.

With his face red as fire, Oliver made his way up the steps with the cloth in his hands. Actually, he didn't mind doing this. Since the upstairs was closed off for now, that meant he'd have a little moment of space. He trekked up the stairs, until he came up to the private seating area. A few tables, and maybe some loose kegs laid around. Some small windows, and a door.

Oliver nodded, "Okay, let's get started, I guess," He walked over to one table, and started to wipe it down, along with the chairs after.

He started on the first table, wiping it down methodically, then the chairs. Moved on to the next.

"Scouting..."

Oliver blinked, and looked up. "Huh?" He was sure he heard a voice. But no one was around him on the upper floor. He could hear the chatter coming from downstairs from the customers, but that was about it. "I-Is someone there?" He called out. Nothing.

"Scouting..."

Oliver blinked. "What?" He muttered. The tables were in front of him, scattered around. Two sets were facing the wall, plus 4 kegs spaced out at the far end. The voice... sounded like it came from over there.

"Scanning.... Dimensional energy is low."

Oliver slowly set the rag down, and slowly walked over to the kegs. "H-Hello?"

The voice continued to speak.

"Scanning... Dimensional energy is low. Scanning... Dimensional Energy is low. Dimensional Energy is low. World cannot be combined..."

Oliver gulped. Something wasn't right. The voice kept repeating words. He slowly peaked around the keg, and felt his heart drop.

Pressed against the wall, pulsating slowly, was a dark creature. Shifting, crackling. And two wide, white eyes staring straight ahead.

Oliver couldn't do anything as his vision went blurry. His vision started to cackle and glitch, as it started to distort.

ERROR. AVATAR OFFLINE.

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

~~~~~~

Oliver gasped loudly, and so forceful, if he wasn't strapped to the transfer chair, he could have flown out of it. "AH — what — what the —!" He thrashed, eyes flying across the room, trying to get his bearings. "What was THAT?!"

He craned his neck up toward the monitor. Black screen.

His heart dropped to his stomach. "Oh no. Oh no no no no — What do I do!?" He pulled at his arms, but the restraints held firm. "DR. BARCLAY!" His voice cracked. ARE YOU THERE!?" Still no answer. "COME ON!!! DOC! Your machine is BUSTED! There was... some.. dark thing! I dunno what it was!"

Just like the last two times, there was no answer.

Oliver's breathing went ragged. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know if Venti was okay. He didn't know anything. "That thing better not have touched him," he said through his teeth. "I think that's gotta be the thing Diluc saw! What is it?!"

Then the screen flickered.

Error - Problem within system

Oliver gasped, and shot his head up towards the screen.

Error — Dimensional transfer

Vitals of subject: Poor

Dimension Gateway: Erupted

Media: Genshin Impact — Media Type: Game — Fictional Universe Code: Sub-3921 — Missing Elements: Missing some lore points, other subs have more; different locations — unstable for transfers.

Oliver felt his heart drop. All of what was written on the screen, spelt out bad.

Subject was poor, which meant his avatar he was transferred to was damaged. The gateway being erupted, meant what it exactly said. It was either blown off from the receiver, or turned off. Oliver didn't know

what to do. Panic started to kick in now. When he's in the world, Dr. Barclay has told him his body within the chair stays preserved as long as he is connected.

That fact that he's now back in his body, trapped in the chair, means he'll eventually starve.

"No — NO, I have to get it back online, I have to get these straps off, I have to — Ugh get off me!" He strained and pulled until his wrists burned. The chair didn't budge. "COME ON! GET OUT, DAMMIT!!!"

Error error error - Dimensional breach detected.

Oliver gasped, and looked up at the screen again. Still back, but it was saying something. "What is it talking about?!" Oliver then saw what it was talking about.

A dark substance manifested around the back side of the mounted screen. Oliver went quiet, as his eyes widen. The dark matter slithered around the monitor, and formed line of darkness down towards the ground just next to the human.

Then, the darkness manifested into a creature.

Oliver was trembling inside of the transfer chair. He wanted to speak, but couldn't as he saw the bright white eyes staring into his soul.

But to his surprise, the creature spoke.

Did it sound pleasant? No.

"I don't know what's going on here, or what this is supposed to be," The creature said. "But you, and whatever this lab is, showed up on my radar." The dark creature came closer to Oliver's face, its head twitched slightly, as its white eyes grew wider. Oliver was frozen, but his breath was coming out in very rapid sounds.

"I have something important to do within a combined world. I don't want any more anomalies messing up my plan," The creature said, as it pulsated. "That wretched blue-haired Holder is enough." It stared down Oliver.

Then, it stood back up, but at a fast pace. It continued to warp and crackle. "I will send you back to whatever fantasy you're living out. I won't ask anymore questions about what this lab is. Just stay outta my way."

The dark creature lifted it's shadowy arm, and snapped a finger.

Vitals of subject: Fine

Dimension Gateway: Open

Media: Genshin Impact — Media Type: Game — Fictional Universe Code: Sub-3921 — Missing Elements: Missing some lore points, other subs have more; different locations — Stable for transfers.

Oliver swallowed, and panted. The creature disappeared in a puff of black mist.

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...
~~~~~

~~~~~~

Oliver awoke on the floor. He felt his heartbeat racing madly. But he didn't know why. He pulled himself up. He was confused. What was he doing? He stood up, and saw that he was on the upstairs of the bar. He came here to clean. Why was I on the floor?

Everything that had just happened was gone from his mind. Completely. Like it had never existed. But his body hadn't gotten the memo — he felt awful. Wrung out, shaky, like something had passed through him and taken too much on its way.

He didn't feel like bussing the other tables anymore

He had no idea why he felt like this. He just held the rag, and made his way down the steps, and back into the busy bar below.

Venti was at the bar, seems like Bennett has joined. And another boy, Razor, who was Bennett's boyfriend, but Oliver was too much in a slight panic attack to even care.

"Here you go, Benny! I think this is your usual what you get from Dilic, right? Sorry if I got it wrong!"

Bennett took the glass with a bright smile. "No, actually this is great! I think it might even be better than how Diluc does it. Don't tell him I said that though!" He laughed.

"Haha! Your secret's safe with me!"

Bennett turned to Razor. "Here, try it!" He smiled.

Razor took a sip. "I... like it." He said.

Bennett giggled sweetly, and kissed Razor's cheek. "Knew you would!"

Venti smiled watching the couple share the drink, then he turned, and saw Oliver walking over.

"Oh! Ollie! I was wondering where you were. You took so long up there. Surly it wasn't that dirty. It wasn't closed for that long." As he talked, he was getting another drink for another patron. "Here you go!"

This time, he fully turned to Oliver . "You wanna help out some more? Or do you-," Venti stopped once he saw the expression on Oliver's face.

"Hey..." His voice dropped. "You don't look good. Like, at all..."

Oliver didn't feel good.

"My heart won't stop racing and I... I don't know why..." He said, quieter than he meant to.

Venti set everything down in an instant. "Bennett, cover for me!"

Bennett and Razor were currently very occupied with each other. Kissing. Bennett pulled back. Razor was still kissing the air, then blinked once he realized Bennett pulled away.

"What? Why?! I don't know how to —"

"Just do it!" Venti vaulted over the counter... though he could have used the door. "I'll sing and play my lyre for you later! Just hold it, geez!" Venti grabbed Oliver's arm, and pulled him into the storage room of the tavern. Once the two were in there, Venti closed the door, drowning out the sound of all the loud noises of the bar.
~~~~~~

Venti then turned around to Oliver, who seemed to be visibly calmer, but he still looked stressed. He held himself absentmindedly, as he slightly glanced around the somewhat enclosed space, filled with stocked up unused wine glasses, beer mugs, and empty kegs.

"Hey," Venti came closer slightly. He could see that Oliver was going through something. A panic attack? "Can I hug you? Is that okay when you're like this?"

Oliver met his eyes. Then nodded.

"Okay." Venti closed the space between them and pulled him in, arms wrapping around him steady and sure. "Shh... you're alright," he said softly, rubbing slow circles across his back. "I've got you. You're okay~" He pressed a quiet kiss to Oliver's cheek.

Oliver gripped him back. Venti smelled like flowers — light and warm and gentle — and between that, and the circles on his back, and the softness in his voice, Oliver's heartbeat began to gradually, finally, slow.

He breathed. Once. Again. Deeper.

Until he was fully calm.

Venti didn't let go the moment he felt Oliver calming down. He stayed until he was sure. Then, carefully, he drew back.

After a moment, he did pull away. "You feel better?"

Oliver sniffed. "Y-Yeah."

Venti smiled. "Good."

Oliver cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I dunno what came over me..."

Venti took his hand, lifted it gently, and pressed his lips to his knuckles. "Don't apologize. If it happens again, I'm right here. That's all." He lowered Oliver's hand and gave it a small squeeze. "Now — let's go back out before Bennett somehow manages to shatter all of Diluc's good glasses."

Oliver nodded.

The door swung open, and they stepped back out into Angel's Share.

Sure enough, Bennett was behind the bar looking frazzled, balancing two orders at once while trying to remember a third. Razor was seated exactly where he'd been, expression serene, watching Bennett's spiral with quiet amusement.

Venti vaulted back over the counter.

Oliver took a deep breath as he walked over to the counter, trying to clear off the last of his panic attack. "You know, you... there is a door."

"Doors are for people who aren't me~," Venti replied, and heading to Bennett. "Sorry I did this to you friend!" He laughed nervously. "I didn't know what else to do..."

Bennett dropped his head with relief. "Thank Barbatos. I thought I was going to knock something over. Geez you would have made Diluc nearly kill me!"

Venti giggled shyly. "Sorry~," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "I would have taken the blame for it, I promise."

Venti got started to make the other drinks for the other costumers, then he got a glass, and put it in front of Oliver, who was sitting at the counter.

"Here-," the bard took one of the bottles of dandelion wine that Diluc keeps just for him. "Might help your nerves," He slid the now filled glass to Oliver.

Oliver looked at the glass, then took it up, and took a tip, savoring the taste of it. He could tell why Venti liked it. Lightly sweet, floral, not acidic. Almost like Venti himself. Smell, looks, ways of acting. All of it.

As he continued to take some sips, he found himself staring at the bard working on the drinks, staring at his two blue braids. He was very beautiful. "How would someone pretty like him even like me..." he grumbled to himself. "Does he even like me at all?" He remembered that it was said that Venti loves to fluster everyone. Even Venti himself said that. But Oliver was the only one who he maybe stuck around with.

"Am I really that special...?" He thought to himself.

If I ever get my memories back, I'll probably find out there's nothing remarkable about me at all. And I'll wish I'd never remembered.

He finished the glass and set it down quietly. Didn't ask for another. I don't have whatever immortal liver Venti's working with, he thought. I'm not superman

Then he blinked for a moment. *"Superman?"* He squinted.

Why do I keep saying things I don't understand?

Chapter 8: Embrace

By the time a few more hours had passed, the bar had thinned out considerably. Oliver had managed to pull himself together during that stretch — the panic attack had run its course and finally left him alone. Eventually, Diluc reappeared from wherever he'd disappeared to. It must have been a long nap for him to have taken so long. He seemed rather pleased that Venti hadn't gone and drank all the wine.

"Hey!" Venti shot him a look. "I can control myself for a few hours, you know," he said, already swinging himself over the counter in one smooth vault, then grabbing Oliver by the arm and tugging. Oliver felt a small smile pull at the corner of his mouth once Venti was back to yanking him around.

"You seriously love jumping over the counter, don't you?" Oliver chuckled. "And pulling me.."

Diluc, as a sane person, used the little lift door and stepped calmly behind the counter. He watched Venti drag Oliver along. "You're heading off with him again?" he asked.

"Yep!" Venti answered cheerfully.

"Right then. Thanks for keeping an eye on the place. At least it's still standing and in one piece," Diluc said.

Venti pulled Oliver out through the door, and Oliver followed without much resistance. "Still standing," Oliver giggled once they were outside. "Barely, after you let Bennett run it for five minutes,"

Venti snickered and shook his head. "Yeah, that could've gone very badly," He let go of Oliver's arm and turned to face him properly, bringing his hand up to Oliver's cheek. "But — are you really okay? Like actually?"

Oliver's face warmed up a little. He nodded. "Y-Yeah. I am. It passed a while ago, I promise,"

Venti nodded slowly. "Okay," He lowered his hand. "It's getting kind of late, but I was thinking we could pop over to one of the other nations? If you're up for it?"

Oliver hesitated. He did want to see the other nations, but exhaustion was sitting heavy in his bones right now. "Could we maybe just... hang out somewhere around here? Nothing too intense?"

Venti's expression softened into a warm smile. "Of course. You still need to eat at some point though. We can grab something at Sara's later. For now, how about the tree?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"We'll just rest and talk," Venti said simply, already heading in that direction.

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The hammock swayed gently up in the branches, a soft breeze moving through the leaves overhead. Oliver was staring up at the canopy when something flickered at the edge of his mind — a brief clouding, like a smudge on glass — and then it was gone just as quickly. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes.

Venti noticed immediately. "Oliver? Something wrong?"

"Hm?" Oliver glanced over. "No, I'm fine. It's nothing,"
~~~~~~

Venti let out a quiet breath. "I know it's weighing on you. Losing your memories like that — and knowing you've lost them while it's happening... I can't imagine what that's like,"

Oliver looked back up at the canopy. "At least I'm slowly getting them back. Like you said. That's something, right?"

"Definitely," Venti said. "You're already remembering bits and pieces. That's a good sign." He tilted his head toward him. "You feeling tired at all?"

Oliver turned to look at Venti properly. Strangely, no he did not. The heaviness he'd been dragging around earlier had faded somewhere between getting in the hammock and now. He felt oddly awake. "Not really, actually. I'm not sleepy at all,"

Venti smiled. "Oh? Well then~ Want to have a little fun?" he said, the bard's voice slipping into that familiar teasing lilt.

Oliver's cheeks immediately went red. "F-Fun?" He swallowed. "What kind of fun?"

"Oh, you know. Like last night," Venti let out that little signature giggle of his. "I did promise you it wasn't going to be a one-time thing,"

Oliver's face burned. "I just — I wasn't expecting it to happen again the very next night..."

Venti giggled again. "All the more reason to take this very attractive bard's offering~,"

Oliver stared at him. "You are something else entirely,"

"Hehe~" Venti just laughed harder. "Come on! Don't you want to touch my belly button again?"

"D-Didn't you say you were too sensitive there?" Oliver sputtered.

"Yeah, so? As long as you're careful with me, it's fine," Venti said breezily. "And you were very careful last night. Listening to what my boundaries were and not pushing past my limits and everything~,"

Oliver buried his face in his hands. "W-Well, I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. I do like you, and —"

"Ohhh~ he's admitting it again~," Venti cut in with that insufferable teasing tone.

Oliver groaned, though there wasn't any real frustration behind it. "S-Shut up. I do like you, and I just — I want you to feel good too, that's all,"

Venti's expression shifted into something softer, and he giggled. "You're really different from most people,"

Oliver rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. There are good people everywhere. Bennett and that Razor guy seemed like a perfectly sweet and healthy couple,"

Venti giggled, "Oh? Comparing us to a couple? Does that mean we're already boyfriends then~?"

Oliver's entire face went crimson, though it was difficult to tell under the warm glow of the setting sun stretching across Teyvat. "You know the word 'horndog'? Well you're a teasedog," Oliver fired back.

Venti let out a dramatic gasp and pressed his hand flat to his chest. "How dare you!" He was barely holding back laughter. "That's it! No belly button privileges for the rest of the evening!"

Oliver's stomach dropped. "Wait — no!" He said in genuine distraught.

Venti stared at Oliver's face for one second. Then he absolutely lost it. "BAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!" He folded over laughing, and the hammock started rocking back and forth in the branches.

Oliver grabbed for something, anything. "Venti! Stop — you're going to tip us out!"

Venti managed to rein himself back in, eventually. "Oh wow," he wheezed. "You did not like that," He giggled, then reached over and booped Oliver on the nose. "Okay. Noted — do not take belly button privileges away from Oliver. Ever."

Oliver blinked, then playfully swatted Venti's hand away. "Stop teasing me, geez..."

Venti giggled and sat upright, settling himself beside where Oliver was still lying flat. "Someone can't take a joke,"

"What are you doing?" Oliver asked.

Venti rolled his eyes. "Letting you play with my belly button, dummy—" He snapped his fingers and, just like the night before, a quick gust of wind stripped away his top and deposited it neatly on a branch somewhere below. "There we go~! The bard's belly button back in service!"

"You're so dramatic and cringe..." Oliver half-muttered, half-said out loud. He was blushing as he propped himself up on his elbows, then reached over with his left hand and rested his palm against Venti's stomach — soft, warm, exactly as he remembered from the night before.

Venti closed his eyes with a smile. This part felt genuinely nice. The belly rubs always felt good. The only part that got to him was—

Oliver pressed his finger into Venti's navel.

"Gerk~," Venti snorted, squinting one eye shut as he felt the pressure of Oliver's fingertip sinking into his belly button.

Oliver pulled back immediately.

"No, no — it's okay!" Venti caught his hand before he could retreat fully. He placed it back against his stomach. "I can handle it, really~," He took Oliver's index finger between his own and pressed it back into his own navel, then let go, leaving Oliver free to move. It tickled sharply, but Venti held his ground. "Eehehe~," A few giggles slipped out anyway.

Oliver worked his finger a little deeper. Venti's belly button was a narrow innie — the coin-slot type — so it took some effort to get to the bottom. Down there, Oliver could feel the little bump of the navel knot. The moment his fingernail grazed across it, Venti's composure completely cracked.

"BahahHAHAH! OH WOW —" Venti jerked backward. "Okay — that part is very sensitive!" He laughed, rubbing his own stomach.

Oliver tried very hard not to visibly react to any of this. He crossed one leg over the other. "I-I guess your navel knot is really sensitive,"

"Yeah!" Venti laughed, poking his own finger experimentally into his belly button. "Weird — it doesn't tickle as bad when I do it. But when you do it..."

It was dimming out, but watching Venti curiously prod at his own belly button like that flustered Oliver considerably more than he wanted to admit.

Venti sighed and pulled his finger back out. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess in there. I genuinely want you to play with it, but those tickles make it hard,"

Oliver cleared his throat. "I-It's fine! I told you — I don't wanna make you uncomfortable. And... you know, run away from me,"

Venti laughed softly. "I think you'd run away from me long before I'd run away from you," he joked, shifting to lie down beside Oliver. "The belly rubs are less ticklish anyway. If you want to do those, I truly do not mind." He curled up next to Oliver, reaching up toward his cheek, but his hand...

Oliver had uncrossed his leg at some point, thinking Venti wasn't paying attention. Venti's hand made contact with his hardening erection by accident as he lifted it up to rub Oliver's cheek.

Oliver froze.

Venti froze too. He looked at Oliver's face, and saw the mortified expression.

A slow smirk spread across Venti's face. "Well, well, well~,"

"Venti, please don't —" Oliver said, voice pained.

"Maybe I can make it up to you~. Since I couldn't let you play with my belly button properly," Venti said.

Oliver's voice went quiet. "Y-You'd do that?"

"If you want~" Venti said easily. "I'm a switch, you know,"

Oliver's mouth dropped open slightly. "I — oh my gosh, you're a tease..."

"That's like the fifth time you've said something like that~," Venti winked.

Oliver's face was on fire. But he didn't say no. He looked at Venti softly and gave a small, quiet nod.

Venti smiled. "Okay. Have you done this before?"

Oliver blushed harder. "I-I can't really say. I know what it is. I know... how it works, at least,"

Venti nodded. "I'll be easy about it," He moved his hands down carefully. "I'm going to touch it now,"

Oliver swallowed and nodded.

Venti's fingers moved slowly, running up and down the fabric of Oliver's crotch. Oliver's erection responded instantly, a small twitch, and he made a quiet sound under his breath, shutting his eyes.

"Wow, you really want this~," Venti said softly. Oliver had his face covered again, and Venti found that adorable.

He snapped his fingers, using his anemo powers just enough to blow off Oliver's lower garments entirely, evne his underware — which startled Oliver quite a bit, a gasped left him as his cock sprung out into the cool air, the hammock shook slightly.

He blinked up at Venti, who was fighting back another giggle as usual.

"V-Venti...," Oliver said breathlessly, a tad embarrassed.

Venti glanced down, biting his lip briefly.

"You couldn't pull off my pants slowly like a normal person..." Oliver blushed as he looked away.

Venti giggled. "What? This way is more fun~," He winked. Though the reason was probably he was too lazy to do so, and just used his magic instead. The bard positioned himself carefully over Oliver, his face near his hard skin. "Are you okay with me giving kisses to it?" He asked.

Oliver peaked through his fingers, and saw Venti's face inches from his penis. He only nodded.

Venti smiled, then turned his attention to Oliver's erection. He looked back up once, winked, then started at the base of the shaft, leaving small kisses trailing upward toward the tip, feeling it twitch faintly under his lips. Just before reaching the top, he paused. "And licking~?" he asked with a smirk.

Oliver made a weak, flustered nod.

Venti drew his tongue out slowly, touching the tip at the side, then licking upward, swirling around it.

"A-ahh—" Oliver's back arched a little, his torso twisting to one side in the hammock, trying not to show how much he was flustered.

Venti licked the tip once more, kissed it, then pulled back. "Look at me, Oliver~ I wanna see how flustered you're getting~,"

This insufferable tease of a bard Oliver thought. His face was burning. Still, he managed to lower his hands. The blush stayed firmly in place — especially when he saw that smirk — and all he could manage was a pout.

Venti snorted. "Much better~," he giggled, and went back to his work. He kissed the tip of his penis again, licked slow circles around it.

Oliver bit his lip, no longer hiding his face but gripping the hammock fabric with both hands, opening and closing them. There wasn't much to hold onto since the hammock wasn't flexible. "V-Venti..."

Venti ran his tongue from the very base all the way up the shaft to the tip in one long, slow movement, and swirled around it.

"AHH—" Oliver gasped sharply. His cock twitched and a bead of pre-cum slipped from the tip and ran down the shaft.

Venti licked his lips, and looked at Oliver. "You don't mind if I lick that off, do you?" He asked.

Oliver gulped, and shook his head. "I-I do not mind..."

Venti dragged his tongue slowly up the shaft, tasting him. "Hmm~," he said, a little exaggerated, a little deliberate to make Oliver even more flustered than he already was.

Then, Venti took most of the shaft into his mouth, and started to drag his lips up and down.

Oliver's grip on the hammock tightened. His cock twitched hard, and he couldn't hold it in anymore— he came, the release hitting sharply. Venti wrapped a hand around the base of the shaft and sucked carefully, taking it all in.

Oliver fell back against the hammock with a breathless gasp. The hammock swayed more than usual but held steady in the branches. He lay there panting, and looked over at Venti, who was sitting up licking his lips, a thin streak of white at the corner of his mouth.

Oliver found the sight completely unreasonably attractive, which meant he immediately covered his face.

Venti smiled, then scooted up beside him and gently pulled Oliver's hands away from his face. Oliver let him. The moment his hands were moved, Venti kissed him — warm and soft — and Oliver felt the embarrassment slowly release its grip on him. He kissed back. Both hands came up to cup Venti's face.

They made out quietly up in the hammock — the shirtless bard and the pant-less human, tangled close together as the hammock swayed in a light, easy breeze that flew by. Venti smelled faintly of flowers, something soft and calm, and it made Oliver feel more close to him. He wrapped his arms around him and pulled him closer, fingers pressing gently into Venti's back as they kissed.

When Venti pulled back, his eyes opened slowly. They both just looked at each other for a moment. Venti smiled and giggled softly. "Did you enjoy that?"

Oliver, face still red, nodded. "Y-Yeah,"

"I'm glad you did," Venti said. "I did too,"

He settled down beside Oliver, then pressed a small kiss to his shoulder before speaking again. "You wanna do me at all~?"

Oliver blushed again. Venti was asking him to suck him off too.

"No rush at all. Only if you want to," Venti added, easy as anything.

Oliver gulped. "I... I don't know," he did want too, but he was a little nervous. Also he was somewhat picky with some things when it came to him being a bottom with a few things. "W-What does it look like?"

Venti glanced up at him from where he was lying, idly toying with a small piece of fabric from Oliver's top. "My penis, you mean? Well." He sat up a little. "It's not big or anything heh..." he said. "Kind of small down there, honestly. Mt fri-, I-I mean my body's not exactly built for it haha,"

Oliver blinked. His eyes went slightly wide. Oh. Something in him relaxed considerably. He couldn't fully name why — his memories were a patchwork at best — but somewhere buried underneath in his subconscious was a quiet awareness that large ones made him a little... nervous. "I-I... those are kind of... my favourites, actually,"

The bard blinked. "Oh?" He looked at Oliver. "Really?"

Oliver nodded, a little pink. "They, um... f-fit better. You know. In my mouth,"

Venti stared at him for a moment, then giggled. "You really are unlike most people I've met,"

Oliver looked sideways at nothing.

"In a good way!" Venti said quickly, waving a hand. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Oliver's lips. "I like your kind of different. It's refreshing," He sat up properly. "Here — let me show you what it looks like —"

This time, Venti didn't use his wind powers to take off the clothes. He slowly lowered the pants, and showed his flaccid penis. It wasn't that big, it wasn't that small either. But after Oliver seeing it, it was a good size for him. He blushed and nodded.

The pants inside though, was sticky with Venti's own cum. "Hehehe~," Venti giggled. He looked up at Oliver. "Our little moment earlier made me have a little mess~,"

Oliver blushed a little and he looked away.

Venti laughed softly, "I'll need to wash these tomorrow," he said, sliding his pants back up and lying back down next to Oliver. "And myself." He tutned his neck to the human, "Tomorrow you wanna suck it? It's all flaccid now, I'm totally spent,"

Oliver nodded, a little more comfortable now. "Y-Yeah,"

"Okay," Venti nodded.

A moment passed.

"You've... been in relationships before, right?" Oliver asked. He thought back to Venti teasing him earlier — about not getting close to many people.

Venti rolled his eyes with a little laugh. "You asking that to get jelly or something?"

"N-No! I... I just, I'm just kinda curious," Oliver muttered.

Venti smiled and shifted closer. "I'm over 2000 years old," he said. "Which you know already. It would be strange if I hadn't had a few. I've had some relationships around Mondstadt. And I do remember them. Some that fell apart, some that didn't,"

Oliver listened carefully. Hearing about this was rather interesting "What happened to the ones that worked out?"

Oliver listened. Hearing about this was rather interesting."What happened to the ones that did?" Oliver asked.

Venti was quiet for a moment. "Oliver... I'm over 2000 years old. The ones that worked out — I outlived them. I never dated other gods like me. Just humans,"

Oliver felt something drop quietly in his chest. He hadn't thought about that. Of course. A god falling for humans would always have to face that eventually.

"It was only humans I had the chance of getting close too," Venti continued. "But losing someone after seventy, eighty years... it never got easier. So after a while I told myself I'd stop." He glanced at Oliver sideways. "And yet here I am, ignoring that promise I made to myself completely," He let out a small breath, then nuzzled himself against Oliver's cheek. "Just don't go and die on me any time soon, ya hear?"

Oliver laughed softly at the nuzzle and wrapped his arms around him. "I'll try not too,"

Oliver giggled slightly as Venti nuzzled him, then he reached over and hugged the bard. "I'll try not too,"

Then Oliver's stomach grumbled.

Venti looked at it, then tapped it once and poked his belly button.

Oliver giggled involuntarily.

"Ticklish there too, just like me~," Venti said smugly. "It's late, but you haven't eaten since this morning. Sara's might still be open. A living god needs a living Oliver — and living humans need food,"

"Oh — right, I completely forgot," Oliver said.

Venti kissed him lightly. "Yeah we kinda got wrapped up in here,"

Oliver kissed back and laughed. "That's one way to put it,"

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The night was settled firmly over Mondstadt now, but a few of the shops near the gates were still lit. Good Hunter was quiet, but Sara still had her stall running. She looked up when she heard Venti's voice, then spotted Oliver coming along behind him.

"Okay, Is he your boyfriend?" she asked, cutting straight to it.

Venti let out a delighted laugh and dramatically draped himself over the counter. "And what if he is~? Can't a weary old bard have a sweet, cute boy trailing after him all day~?"

Sara gave his dramatic display a long-suffering look, then turned to Oliver. "You're going to have your hands full,"

"Hey!" Venti protested, laughing.

Oliver smiled, standing beside Venti. "H-He's been pretty amazing so far,"

Sara made a small sound — a smile she didn't quite suppress — handed them both menus, and turned back to the kitchen.

Venti flushed faintly afterward and looked at Oliver. "Aww," he said, and kissed him on the cheek. Then, since Sara's back was turned, he reached up and turned Oliver's face toward his and kissed him properly. Oliver's eyes closed and he kissed back softly.

Sara turned around. "Okay, so what can I get you two—" She stopped. "Ahem,"

"Ah—!" Oliver yanked back so fast he nearly crashed into the counter. "We weren't — I mean, we were just — THE FOOD!" He stared at the menu then looked desperately at Venti.

Venti couldn't stop it. He laughed — loud and full in the quiet night air. "BAHAHAHAHA!" He folded against the counter.

"V-Venti!" Oliver whispered-shouted. "It's nighttime!"

"Oliver what was that?!" Venti wheezed. "Oh my word, you get so funny when you're flustered! You're so silly!"

Sara just slowly shook her head. "Are either of you actually ordering tonight, or what?"

Oliver swallowed, then quickly pointed to the Sticky Honey Roast.

Venti, still giggling: "That again? You don't want to try something different?"

"N-nAh that's finE!" Oliver's voice cracked on probably every word.

"PIFFFffFfft—" Venti muffled himself with his hand.

Oliver turned away and stared very hard at a wall.

Sara sighed, probably regretting opening late.

"I'll put those in. Venti — apple salad as usual?"

Venti, recomposing himself, "You know me so well, Sara~," A last giggle. Then he turned to Oliver. "Come on, let's sit down before you set me off again. Though knowing you, you're going to do it anyways!"
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Their food came and they settled into it easily. Venti brought up Fontaine between bites. "I think we should go tomorrow. I don't leave Mondstadt much — honestly, I barely do — But I think it'll be good to guide you all around Teyvat. You know, for you to remember some things,"

"You don't leave often?" Oliver asked.

"Hey-," Venti lowered his voice a little. "Even though people call me lazy I don't wanna leave Mondstadt. I'm this place's god. Its protector. I get nervous about being gone too long." He paused. "But you matter too, and I don't want to leave you on your own. So. Fontaine it is. Quick trip, in and out of the nation,"

Oliver nodded. "You mentioned it was... advanced?"

"Yeah. A little too advanced for my taste," Venti said. "I've been a few times. Like when I got you those swim trunks. So I kinda know my way around main areas,"

"Do you know of anyone there?"

"Not really. Never ended up talking to many people," Venti said. "Though there's apparently a fairly famous magician there — Lyney, I think? And his sister — I forgot what her name was... but I think it was the same name as him but with different ending letters, heh,"

Oliver finished the last of his food and looked out at the quiet street. "Mondstadt really is peaceful at night,"

Venti smiled, genuine and easy. "It is. I'd have made the best of whatever place I was given, but I'm really glad it was this one. The big tree outside the walls especially. I love it out there,"

After they were done eating, they headed back to the hammock, to get some rest for tomorrow.
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Chapter 9: Doctor

The machines hummed low and steady in the dark. The room sat quiet, still — that was, until the door slid open.

Extraction Room 1 - Door Opened

The lights blinked on. A woman stepped inside, clipboard tucked under her arm. "Can't believe he's got me doing this," she muttered under her breath. "Can't believe he's doing any of this in the first place. Using me to carry out his dirty work." She grunted, flipping her pen between her fingers. "None of this was in the plan."

She started from the far edge of the room, then turned and faced the chair to her left. A dark-skinned man was strapped into it, fast asleep. Wires ran from the chair up to an overhead computer, and a few more were connected directly into his skin.

She flipped through the pages on her clipboard and started writing.

Last Name: Radcliffe

First Name: Oliver

Age: 23

Sex: Male

She glanced up at the screen. Something caught her eye. She unclipped her comms from her belt and pressed the button. "Barclay?" A pause. "The signal on Radcliffe's screen is flashing red." She said. "And... Is.. I think I am looking at two people going at each other in the screen." Nothing. She scoffed. "Of course. Sends me in here to check on them and then he can't even pick up when something's—"

"That one's fine." The voice came in flat and even. "It's been glitching out for a while now." the masculine voice said.

She exhaled. "Huh." She set the radio down on the tool table nearby and kept writing.

"Oliver keeps slipping in and out of the warp," Barclay continued. "The experiment for that one has some flaws, I'll admit. It's not performing quite the way I intended."

She nodded to herself, checking off a few boxes. "His vitals are steady. The nutrients are registering on the screen." She moved around the chair, checking the wires, checking the connections. She picked the radio back up. "You're sure there's no risk of a line bursting? Or leaking?"

"Check the other subjects Claire,"

She clipped the comms to her belt and moved to the next seat. "Hey—" She stopped. "This one's new." She pressed the button on the radio. "Or he's been swapped out. What happened to Ashton? Did you finally let him go like you said you would?"

Silence on the other end.

"Barclay?"

The radio cut in with a beep. "Yes," Barclay said.

Claire blinked. "If you say so," she looked up at the screen. "How long has this one been here?"

"Since the last five days, he's been sent into Fallout," Barclay said on the other end.

"I can see that, the screen's got it all up." She started a new sheet and wrote.

Last Name: Daniels

First Name: Jasper

Age: 19

Sex: Male

"Anything I should flag with this one?" she asked.

"Almost the same as Oliver's. He cuts back out randomly. Though, he doesn't actually come back. He remembers this world while he's in there. But it leaves quickly,"

Claire pressed the button and held it. "Barclay. What exactly is the endgame here? You've never actually walked me through the whole thing."

The radio crackled. "To go where no one's gone. These are real dimensions we're plugging these people into, Claire. The goal is to rewrite their lives entirely — drop them into a world that isn't ours. They become new people within the worlds we put them in, as these avatars," Barclay said. "That's the plan,"

"And they consented to this." She said it flat. "Did you get their consent?"

There was a small silence on the other end. "Of course I do." Barclay said. "I always do," he then spoke one more time. "Check the last one. Should be across from Oliver's chair,"

Claire crossed the room. There was another figure in the chair — a boy, wired up the same as the others, head slack to the side.

She slowed. "Barclay." She pressed the button carefully. "This one is new too." She looked at the screen. "And he's... he's a kid. I thought after Ashton you said you were not going to use more—"

"I made that call after I had the agreement from the boy's family," Barclay said. "And either way, I can't let him go. His extraction is a near success,"

Claire was writing down notes, and the vitals of this one.

Last Name: Harper

First Name: Arnold

Age: 16

Sex: Male

"Where did you put him?" she asked.

Barclay's voice cut in onto the radio once Claire's finger left the button. "Movie sector of the Fictional Universe. Wreck-It-Ralph. A perfect extraction. He doesn't remember anything at all of this world. It's like

he also completely rewrote the dimension's time line. His avatar became his own character within the world! It even has a back story, and a lot of things. Told you. Perfect extraction!"

Claire was quiet for a second. "His vitals are fine. He's getting his nutrients. Same as the others." She clicked her pen shut. "You are going to send them all back eventually, right? These two especially — and definitely the kid. Even if his parents agreed, they're going to want him home."

"Of course, of course! They'll all stay here a little while longer, until I can run more tests. Then I will send myself into one."

"Alright," Claire put the radio back onto her belt, and flipping her pen closed, tucking it into the clipboard clip. She cleared her throat, and began to head out. She flipped the light switch, stepping out, and shut the door.

Extraction Room 1 Door - Closed

The only light left was the thin strip flooding in through the small door window. The only sound was the low hum of the machines.

Then Oliver's chair began to tremble. Just barely. The screen above flickered — numbers rolling fast across it.

Send back commencing

Returning Subject to Body in 5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

The chair lurched hard. Oliver snapped forward against the restraints, gasping. He sat there for a moment, chest heaving, eyes wide and unseeing in the dark.

He swallowed. Blinked a few times. Let his eyes adjust.

Then his face went red.

"Did I just—" His mouth hung open. "Did I just have sex with Venti?"

He sat with that for a second.

"Yeah." He nodded slowly. "Yeah, I did." The red deepened. "And I'm not ashamed one bit," He shook his head. "Oh man. How long have I even been in here in this room?" He exhaled long and slow.

"And what did Ven mean about Fontaine? I played the game — Venti never went to Fontaine. So is that just... how it actually went in that dimension? Is it different?" He leaned back as far as the restraints would let him. "Guess I'm finding out tomorrow. Heading there with him. To 'recover my memories.'" He said the last part quiet, will a roll of the eyes.

"Venti... you have no idea what I actually am." Oliver stared at the ceiling. "Just some guy. Just some boring man from... 'reality',"

He was quiet for a while.

Oliver closed his eyes. "Would he still like me like this?" He shook his head, eyes still closed. "No. He wouldn't. I look different than my avatar. I have the same skin color, but... my avatar looks like a Genshin character. I really look... I look different than Venti. I'd look really out of place next to him. He'd stop liking me as soon as he find out," Oliver couldn't help the little tear the appeared in the corner of his eye. He sniffed.

"Maybe Doctor Barclay should just disconnect me soon. I'm sure he got whatever it was that he wanted. I just wanna go home now," he sighed.

He didn't want that.

He wanted more time with the bard. He knew that. But sitting here, between one life and another — fully himself in only one— the thought of Venti's face when he eventually found out was enough to hollow him out. He did not want to see Venti's face when he'd find out he's not from the same world and looks physically different.

Beginning send back

Oliver closed his eyes.

"Here we go again."

Chapter 10: From Another World?

Oliver's eyes flew open. The disorientation hit him first, then the familiar hollow feeling — like something dark had been chasing him in his sleep, only to vanish the second his eyes opened. A nightmare, probably. It was gone now. Vanished, like it never existed.

He exhaled slowly. Morning light was slipping through the tree canopy above, gold and soft, brushing warm across his face.

He shifted up onto his elbows. The hammock dipped a little under the movement. His gaze drifted over to the bard curled up beside him, and without really meaning to, a small smile pulled at Oliver's lips. He reached over quietly and touched him — but the moment his fingertips made contact, Venti stirred.

"O-Oh—," Oliver blinked.

Venti's eyes opened, still carrying the heaviness of sleep. "Morning, Ollie~," he murmured, knuckling at his eye. "Ready to start the day?" Without much warning, he leaned up and pressed a quick kiss to Oliver's lips. "Don't forget! Taking you to Fontaine today," he said.

Oliver's brain stalled completely. The kiss was there and gone before he could even process it, and now he was just sitting there blinking like an idiot. He was still getting used to the fact that he and Venti were... something. He still hadn't fully figured out what to call the relationship yet.

"I— uh. M-Morning,"

Venti smiled, bright and a little smug. "So, you want to get ready?" He kicked the blanket off, raised both arms above his head, and stretched — back arching, shirtless stomach on full display. Very deliberately.

He was absolutely doing that on purpose to tease Oliver. And it was absolutely working.

Oliver turned his head away. "Venti...," he whined. "It's too early for this..."

Venti tilted his head toward him, all innocence. "What? Can't a bard stretch when he wakes up~?"

Oliver groaned. "God, you are such a—"

Venti's fingers pressed gently against Oliver's lips. "Nuh-uh!" He giggled. "No calling me the T-word this morning you cutie!"

Oliver sputtered behind his hand. "Bah— I— you literally just—"

Venti's fingers found his neck and started tickling, "Nuh-uh-uh!" He teased.

"Hey— nohoho!" Oliver immediately clamped his shoulder up, trying to trap Venti's hand. "Stop that!"

Venti smiled, and stopped the tickling.

Oliver rubbed his neck with a grunt. "Geez."

"So, we going?" Venti asked again, tilting his head.

Oliver looked at him. Then up through the leaves. "Can we... stay a little longer first?" He could feel his face warming already. He was about to ask for something... more couple like. "Like... cuddle? I mean—

we just woke up, we don't have to bolt out immediately—"

Venti's expression softened, and for once he didn't immediately pounce on the opportunity to tease him for it. "Aww~!" He laid back down, stretching both arms wide. "Nothing like some morning cuddles!" he giggled. "Come here, you dork~"

Oliver's heart thudded as he carefully settled himself on top of the bard. Once he was settled, Venti folded his arms around him, warm and easy. "There we go." He pressed a few gentle kisses to the top of Oliver's head.

Oliver closed his eyes. Each one landed like something quiet and good. He pressed his ear against Venti's chest and found the steady beat of his heart there, slow and unhurried.

Venti giggled as he saw Oliver trying to adjust himself. He could see him trying to get closer to his chest. "Trying to listen to my heart?"

"Mm." Oliver nodded. "It's really calm."

Venti giggled. "Yeah? Well, I'm always calm. Especially around you~,"

Oliver's own pulse did the opposite. They stayed snuggled up like that while the morning breeze moved through the branches above them — Venti's hand moving slowly through Oliver's hair, the occasional kiss pressed to the top of his head.

Suddenly, a sound came through. From Venti's stomach that is.

Gloorrrrrggg~

Venti snorted. "Oh, that's embarrassing." He let out a long breath. "Weeks of eating next to nothing finally catching up with me. I blame you, for what it's worth~ Making me craze apples more and more," He shifted slightly. "I don't really need to eat like you do. But then you came along and I couldn't exactly just sit there watching you. Had to eat with you,"

Oliver had heard the sound perfectly fine from where he was. Which was exactly why he slowly started sliding himself downward — just a little — until his ear was pressed against the soft skin of Venti's belly.

Venti went still. Then he peeked down with narrowed eyes. Then he started giggling once he saw Oliver pressing his eat to his stomach. "Ollie— what are you doing?"

Another growl rumbled through the bard's stomach. Long and deep and full of strange, wet bubbling sounds. Oliver pressed his ear closer.

Venti gasped, "Oh!" then he laughed. "Please tell me this isn't another thing with you are into—"

Oliver didn't answer. He didn't move either.

Venti laughed louder. "Okay, you know what? You are a weirdo~" But he reached down anyway and started running his fingers gently through Oliver's hair again.

"I'm not weird!" Oliver protested, his face completely red. He tried to sound very casual about having his ear pressed to someone's stomach. "This is normal. This... everyone does this... Yeah!"

"PIFF—" Venti choked out a laugh. "Oliver, no. I have been alive for over two thousand years—"

"Yeah, yeah, you old Grandpa-man, we get it," Oliver cut him off with an eyeroll with that teasey tone of his own.

Venti gasped. "Excuse me?! Haha—" He poked Oliver right on the nose. "How dare you!"

Oliver smiled.

"What I was going to say," Venti continued, still grinning, "is that I've known a lot of people. And not a single one of them was into what you're into. It's genuinely unique."

Oliver buried his face in Venti's stomach. "That's just a nicer way of saying I'm weird." he said, his voice muffled.

Venti sighed, but let out a small breath of amusement. "You dork! You do know that weird doesn't mean all bad at times right? There's good weird, and there's bad weird. You my little cutie-?," Venti reached over and pinched Oliver's cheeks, tugging on it gently. "-Are the good weird."

Oliver let out a small squeak. He pulled his face up just enough to look back at Venti, then settled his ear back down. "Did you just call me little?"

Venti dissolved into giggles, shoulders shaking. "That's all you got from that?"

"I'm literally taller than you."

"Yeah yeah. Old friend was a small guy. Can't do much about that~," Venti waved a hand. "But seriously. I mean what I said. You're good weird. So far you've been very wholesome. I mean, I've been with people before who respected my boundaries— but none of them quite like you do."

Oliver went shy again, and covered his face. "Come on, I ain't all that good,"

Venti's hand settled warm and still on top of his head. "You're good for me," he said simply.

Oliver held that. It felt real and warm and — complicated, in a way that had nothing to do with Venti. What happens if I get my memories back? The thought had crept in before. He didn't know anything about where he came from. What if he had a partner waiting? That would be awkward. But he also genuinely— he liked Venti. He just didn't fully trust the mind he was using right now. It was his own mind, but at a sense, not.

Oliver's worried and pondering were cut short after Venti's gut let out one more loud grumble.

Grlopp-gro-gorrraaaan~~~

Oh that one was loud. Oliver's face went scarlet. He decided, on a whim, to lean into it. Venti said he liked his weird. So fine. He'll go all out. "Damn that sounded sexy. All slurpy and wet-,"

It wasn't even the words. It was the completely deadpan delivery: Venti lost it. Full body, hammock-shaking laughter, back arching off the fabric. "OH— NO—" He wheezed. "Oliver! THAT'S... ***EWW!*** HAHAHA—"

"Hey! Don't be mean~" Oliver stuck his tongue out.

"Why did you say wet—"

"Aren't stomach juices wet?"

Venti laughed some more. "This boy..." Venti brought his hands to his mouth, giggling still. "You are definitely a strange one. And I love it!"

"The very good weird. As you called me~"

"Right you are~," Venti said.

Oliver, feeling brave, pushed himself up and crawled over to Venti. He leaned in and kissed him. Slow and soft, a proper good morning kiss.

Venti melted immediately. When they pulled apart they were both smiling, Venti's cheeks faintly pink. "Mmm~," he said quietly. "That was a sweet kiss~," He smiled. "I think I may need another one~" He shut his eyes and puckered his lips.

Oliver laughed and leaned back in. The kiss deepened, gentle and unhurried, and Oliver slowly lowered until his weight was pressing softly against Venti, his hand cupped around his cheek. The morning breeze moved over them. Neither of them was in any rush.

When they finally pulled back, Venti let out a small, delighted exhale. "Wow. I am gone for you," he said, like he couldn't quite believe it.

Oliver smiled. "And I'll keep my promise, I won't die anytime soon,"

"You better not." Venti pouted dramatically. "The divine bard cannot be left sad~"

Oliver kissed him again—just a peck—then his cheek, then his other cheek, then his nose, then back to the cheek. He was kissing Venti all over his face.

Venti burst into small giggles. "H-hey!" He giggled. "We should be going you know! We gotta get to Fontaine, and before that you need breakfast!"

Oliver gave one last kiss, then pulled away. "Aww, but I wanted to kiss you more!"

Venti was beaming. He couldn't help it. "Since when did you get so bold, Mr. Blushattack?"

"Blushattack—?! I don't— that's not— I mean, I—"

Venti just looked at him and snorted. "Uh-huh,"

"Shush." Oliver stuck his tongue out. "Come on then. Good Hunter it is then... Again."

Venti sat up, gently rolling Oliver off of him.

"Wow, just discarding me—" Oliver flopped bonelessly to the other side of the hammock. "Just like that. Like I mean nothing—"

Venti laughed again. "Such a drama queen," then he turned to face Oliver, and opened his arms.

"Ooh, hug?" Oliver asked, smiling a lot.

Venti snorted. "Well yes, but no. I gotta get your down, don't I?"

Oliver quickly nodded. "Oh! Right!"

Venti came over, and held Oliver in a right embrace. "Hold on~!"

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The outdoor tables at the Good Hunter were warm in the morning light. Oliver had ordered the Lighter-than-air Pancakes again. Obviously. How could he not? They were very good.

"These pancakes are seriously banging—" he said through a mouthful.

Venti paused. "That's a strange figure of speech."

Oliver nearly inhaled a bite. "W-What?! No— it doesn't mean—"

"No, no, continue," Venti said pleasantly. "Keep banging those pancakes in your mouth~"

"Venti, no—"

"I'd much prefer it was me banging in your mouth instead~," Venti teased.

At least he said that quietly so no one heard but Oliver.

But Oliver's face went so red. He was going to say it again. The T word. Venti was definitely all things about that word.

"If this pancake wasn't so good, I'd definitely take the plate and smash them in your face,"

Venti snorted and stuck his tongue out. "Damn!" He giggled. "Getting violent now, huh~,"

"Urrrggg," Oliver grunted as he chewed a piece of pancake with a big pout.

"Anyway!" Venti said brightly, spearing an apple. "When we get to Fontaine, what I'm thinking is—
"Oliver rolled his eyes. "There is no way in hell you're starting a serious conversation after all that-,"

Venti froze, then laughed. "Hey, what can I say, I'm versatile!"

Oliver blinked repeatedly.

This bard. This absolute menace of a bard who was apparently was now his man.

Venti continued to talk, trying to keep his giggles at bay. "Basically when we go, we just walk around. I'd teleport us to the main city, but I'd rather teleport us to one of the aqua-buses, and we can ride it to the

town," He smiled. "You know, to get your memories back. If you're from Fontaine at all, maybe it'll jog your memory,"

Oliver nodded. The plan made sense. Then he thought about the teleport part and grimaced. "Do we have to do the teleporting thing?" He hated that, mostly because Venti always does it unprompted with no warnings, and just leaves him jarred for a few moments.

Venti shrugged across the table, eating his apple salad. "Unless you want to walk for two days?"

Oliver had absolutely no frame of reference for how far away anything was in this world and it didn't seem like Teyvat had any form of transportation system. "Yeah, yeah, I guess..."

"Wonderful!" Venti grinned. "Eat up then, we've got a whole day ahead of us~ I just hope Mondstadt doesn't burn down while I'm away." He paused to chew his apples. "Hmm! So good."

Oliver laughed a little and glanced down the street. Sara was already busy at her shop, the rest of the market slowly waking up. "I think Mondstadt will survive," he said. "They've got guards, don't they?"

Venti nodded. "Yeah, but there's only so much they can do."

They finished eating, and then without any preamble whatsoever, Venti snatched Oliver's hand and started pulling him away from the table.

"Wh—Hey! Venti!"

Ugh. Oliver thought this every single time. It was like the man had no buffer between thought and action. Whatever entered Venti's head just immediately became a physical event in the world. Oliver had barely pushed back from the table before he found himself being towed down a back alley squeezed between two of Mondstadt's buildings, sunlight cutting out entirely.

"V-Venti, why are we back here?" Oliver's face had already started going pink, looking around at the cramped space. His heart pounded a bit.

"I can't exactly teleport in the middle of the square of town!" Venti said.

"Oh." Oliver exhaled. "That's why you bright me back here. Okay. That makes sense."

Venti dropped his hands from Oliver's shoulders. Then he did a double take at Oliver's expression and promptly lost it. "Oh— oh, Ollie—" He covered his mouth, giggling. "You thought I brought you back here to—! I wasn't going to do that~! You naughty boy!"

Oliver just had a grave expression plastered on his face. "With how you've been, I wouldn't have put it past you. And you called me dirty,"

Venti just giggled harder. "Oh hush~!" He leaned in and kissed Oliver quickly— Oliver leaned into it on reflex, eyes already starting to close—

A gust of wind blew by, "Uh-oh-," but before he could say another word there and blurring light, and the two of them were suddenly in a new place.

"WAAAHOA—" Oliver yelped, stumbling hard into Venti, who caught him and immediately started laughing so violently he nearly let Oliver hit the ground anyway.

"The noise you just made!" Venti wheezed, holding his sides. "You sounded like someone stepped on a cat —"

"Dude," Oliver straightened up, still gripping Venti's sleeve, face hot. "You have no idea what that feels like from my end. It feels like I'm being stretched out into a tube!"

"And yet!" Venti beamed, planting his hands on his hips. "Better than walking for two days." He swept an arm grandly to the right. "Welcome to Fontaine! Well— the aquabus terminal at the harbour, technically. Haha!"

Oliver turned left. Looked up.

"Woah—"

The building was large. More than large. And the style of it was completely unlike anything in Mondstadt — cleaner lines, something almost sleek about it, the architecture had a different logic entirely. And yet...

Something about it had a familiarity with Oliver. Like he's seen this place before. He remembered he did feel like this with Mondstadt. But just like that moment, he still cannot pin it down.

"You're staring pretty hard at a bus terminal," Venti observed beside him. "Rings any bells?"

Oliver blinked. "I don't know. Something about it looks... familiar. Feels familiar."

Venti hummed thoughtfully. "Then let's go~!" And then he was pulling Oliver forward again. Of course he was.

The terminal was large and echoing inside. Oliver had assumed the buses— aquabuses, whatever they were— docked at ground level. There was a long channel of water cutting between two platforms down there, but it looked like you had to take a lift up to actually board. Some kind of upper area.

Venti hopped straight into the lift and tugged Oliver after him.

"One of these days you're going to dislocate my shoulder—" Oliver started, laughing despite himself.

"Hehe~" Venti rocked back on his heels, hands clasped behind his back as the doors slid shut and the lift began to rise.

Venti glanced sideways at Oliver. "We're alone in here, you know~ we could make out!"

"Venti, oh my god—"

Venti turned fully toward him, arms already going around Oliver's shoulders, and Oliver's eyes had already started to close—

The lift stopped. Then the door opened.

"Oh!" Venti stepped back.

Oliver, still with his lips puckered out, "Hmm?!" His eyes shot open as he stood on place, watching Venti walk off.

"You're going to enjoy Fontaine, I think!" Venti said loudly outside of the Elevator. "I'm thinking what part I should take you though?" He scratched his chin. "Maybe the Court of Fontaine! I mean, that is where this Aquabus line goes, if I'm getting it right," Venti then turned to look at Oliver.

Oliver was still standing inside the lift. Standing in the same place Venti left him. His lips still faintly puckered.

The laugh that came out of Venti was loud. A nearby Fontaine guard actually got startled. "BAHAHAHA—" Venti folded in half, then just went all the way down, sitting on the platform floor, kicking his feet, "HAHAHA— HAHAHA—" full tears, he was completely gone.

Oliver's face went scarlet. "You owe me a kiss now," he said flatly.

Venti was still on the floor laughing.

The guard looked genuinely concerned.

Oliver, face still burning, stepped forward to exit the lift.

Venti was beginning to calm down now, though he was still giggling a small bunch. "Okay, okay, I'm good now," he stood up.

But before Oliver made it to leave the elevator, it seemed like he stayed too long inside the there as it had closed on his face. "AH-!?"

"PIFFfffFffFff—" Venti erupted again, slamming his hand on the ground. *"Oh nohohono—"* He could barely get words out. *"O— Oll—Olhahaliver!! HAHAHA!"*

A moment went past, as the elevator had to go back down to the first floor, then had to come back up.

Once the door opened, there was Oliver, looking annoyed.

Venti pressed his lips together very hard. "Pfft—"

"We are never talking about that." Oliver walked out of the lift. Then he caught his own foot and stumbled slightly. Kept walking like nothing had happened.

"Hahaha—" Venti fell into step behind him, one hand over his mouth. "Ollie, I mean this sincerely— you are the funniest person I have ever met in my entire long life—"

"I am not funny, I'm just— I'm just a disaster person—"

Venti jogged the two steps to catch up, stepped in front of Oliver, and kissed him.

Oliver went soft immediately. When they pulled apart, they were both smiling.

"Hehe," Venti giggled. "There's the kiss you were supposed to get~,"

Oliver felt warm all the way through. He looked past Venti and saw the waterway— wide and long and elevated over the landscape, stretching out until it dissolved into distant rock formations and the mountains.

"It's a long ride," Venti said cheerfully, standing beside him. "Hope you don't get bored~"

"I'd be fine," Oliver said, "if there were any chance of you not teasing me the entire way."

"Oh!" Venti brightened. "No teasing! Promise!" He dragged a finger across his lips. "Sealed."

Oliver looked at him. "That is absolutely not going to happen."

Venti just rolled his eyes, but he was smiling.

The aquabus arrived. Oliver had been imagining something vaguely like a ferry in his mind, which was apparently what it did look like. It came gliding along the waterway, slowed as it reached the platform,

then— rotated. The whole vehicle turned slowly until its back end was facing the dock, then reversed the remaining distance and connected with a solid clunk.

"Huh," said Oliver.

"Come on~" Venti took his hand— gentler this time— and led him up to the top deck. It had no interior. Just a top deck, and that was it. There were benches along the side at the edge.

At the front of the deck, someone was standing there.

"Go sit anywhere," Venti said, nudging Oliver's arm. "Let me check in with Aeval."

Oliver started toward the benches, then stopped. He looked at Venti. He looked at the figure at the front of the boat. He took a few steps closer instead of sitting. Oliver blinked, then squinted. They didn't look human. They looked like an animal.

"Hello there, dear passenger! Is there anything I can do for you?" Aeval said.

Oliver stared. Non-human ears. Big eyes. Small. Soft-looking. "What is that?" he mumbled. They were maybe the same size as that Piamon person he met.

"Oh!" Aeval jumped up. "Is it time to leave already? Right away!" They spun around.

Suddenly there was a loud clang, as the Aquabus detached from the platform, then it shook slightly as it started to move forward.

Oliver was still looking at this Aeval person, he didn't even fully notice when Venti had come over to him. "Hey, I told you to find a seat-," Venti said.

"Is that—" Oliver lowered his voice, leaning slightly toward Venti. "Is that a rabbit? Like— a little— a human-rabbit thing? What is she?"

Venti blinked, then turned around to Oliver. "Huh?" He backed up, and then sat on a bench. "Why you look so shocked?" He asked. He then patted a spot next to him. "Come sit,"

Oliver made his way over to Venti, and sat on the bench.

"She's just someone who lives around here, I'm sure," Venti said.

Oliver watched Aeval at the front of the boat. Something about her nagged at him, but he couldn't figure out what.

"I think," Venti said slowly, "that you're not from this world."

Oliver turned to look at him. The Aquabus rocked gently as they moved through the passage. "You really think so?"

"I'm pretty sure." Venti had his thinking face on— rare enough that Oliver noticed it. "When I looked into your head, there was nothing. When one loses their memory, not everything is gone. There is always still some things within your subconscious," He nodded toward Aeval. "People like her are normal here. You grow up knowing them. They're just part of the landscape. Even if someone loses their memory, they still carry that— you'd recognize her without knowing why, the way you know how to breathe." He glanced at Oliver. "You looked at her like she was something impossible. As if she was otherworldly,"

The bard glanced at Oliver. "Like, do you even know what Mora is?"

Oliver blinked. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what the freak that is..."

"See!" Venti said. "Mora is money. Our Currency. Everyone knows what Mora is, it's pretty much engraved in everyone's head since birth. Memory loss or not, you don't forget things like that."

Oliver blinked, his mind racing. If he was from another world, where was that world?

"I have no idea if you're a Traveler though. I don't even know about universes. I heard people may be able to travel to them. The Travelers are from other planets, not universes I think. I believe people like Aeval are in those other planets up in the stars. Surely you must have come across one! Maybe you are from a different universe that has things... very differently,"

Oliver slid around on the bench to face the water instead, watching it pass. "If I was from another world entirely," he said, and then stopped. "Would you still— like me? If that turned out to be true?" The question was sudden. Even Oliver himself didn't know why he asked it. It just came into his mind and he blurted it out.

"What?" Venti turned to look at him. "Why would that change anything?"

Oliver shook his head. "I don't— I honestly don't know why I said that. It just came out."

Venti shifted to mirror Oliver's position, both of them facing the water now. He leaned into Oliver's side. "I'd still like you. Whatever world you fell out of." He paused. "I don't know what your life was like there. But you're nice here, so."

Oliver leaned back into him. "Then why are we going to Fontaine at all? You said it might help me remember."

"Hey, what I said was a hunch," Venti said. "And hunches can be wrong. So we can still head to Fontaine. I mean, we're already here and moving, so. Might as well." He smiled.

Oliver nodded. "Yeah,"

Venti smiled, and kissed his cheek. "And you have to admit, the ride is relaxing, yeah?"

Oliver smiled back, blushing from the kiss. "It is,"

"Oh!" Venti suddenly said. "I just remembered. You still haven't showered. You're genuinely kind of smelly~"

Oliver blushed a lot. "Venti, stop! That's embarrassing!"

"There's a hotel in the Court of Fontaine," Venti went on, cheerful. "Real showers, pipes, the whole thing. Or, well, Mondstadt has baths in some of the hotels,"

"Huh?" Oliver looked at Venti. "All this time you told me Monstadt doesn't have... pipes or whatever?"

"Mondstadt doesn't have showers. Mondstadt has tubs. You fill them with hot water, you get in, do your stuff then someone comes in later and empty it out." Venti shrugged. "I wasn't sure if you'd go for it. And you kept saying shower like it was a specific thing, and you didn't seem like a bathtub type— I got the vibe you were a little fancy about it. Like some rich boy from Fontaine."

Oliver shook his head. "Well, I definitely wouldn't mind soaking in a bath tub, but since we're heading to Fontaine I guess I can use one of the showers," He glanced at Venti. "But you... you said hotel? Wouldn't... you know... that cost money?"

"Well, yeah. But I'm the cutest bard! I can get away with anything!" Venti winked at him proudly. "Actually I'll just teleport us into a room, lock the door, then you jump into the shower!"

Oliver blinked. "Wow, you... that is... Venti. I'm not going to lie, you probably are a bad influence..."

Venti giggled. "Hey, no I'm not! People should help you know! It's not like you got money or anything! And I don't have money... uh, well people don't pay a singing bard enough!"

"I'd pay you," Oliver said, smiling. "If I had money, I'd stand there every day and just rain money down on you while you played.

Venti stopped. Looked sideways at the water. Looked back at Oliver with a slow flush rising up his neck. "You— you know what that sounds like, right? Standing there and raining money at me while I perform?"

Oliver's expression went completely blank for two full seconds. "Oh god, that's exactly what it sounded like, didn't it?" He put his hand over his face. "No. That's not what I— I didn't mean it like that—"

Venti dissolved into giggles. "You naughty, naughty boy~!" He laughed. "About to make it rain on me like one of those adult places in Fontaine,"

"No, stop! I didn't mean it that way! And you're calling me naughty when you're the biggest tease in the universe!"

Venti grabbed him and kissed him all over his face in quick succession, giggling between each one.

"Ven—haha— Venti, stop—" Oliver laughed, trying weakly to lean away.

One more kiss. Then Venti pulled back, still grinning.

"G-Geez," Oliver's face was red, as he looked at the scenery going by. "C-Can we just... look out into that ocean as we travel along the... well, the water above it?"

Venti laughed. "Yeah, fine," he slung his arm around Oliver's shoulder.

Chapter 11: Fontaine Hotel

The Aquabus glided through the waterway without so much as a bump. Smooth and quiet. Oliver didn't mind it at all — he liked looking at the water. He liked watching it pass, it was very peaceful. He turned his head and looked at Venti sitting beside him on the bench, also staring out at it.

But Venti's face was hard to read. Like something was sitting on him.

Oliver tilted his head. "Venti?"

A small moment of silence. Then Venti glanced over. "Huh? Oh!" He blinked. "What's up?"

"You looked kind of out of it just now."

Venti waved a hand and laughed. "Ehh. I just miss my wine," he said, then gave Oliver a wink. "You're cutting into my private dandelion wine time, you know!"

Oliver giggled and rolled his eyes. He knew full well about Venti's relationship with his wine. But he also knew that probably wasn't what Venti was looking like that for.

"You sure?" Oliver asked.

Venti nodded. "I'm sure,"

Eventually, the Aquabus eased into the dock at the Court of Fontaine. The town rose into view from the distance, and Oliver's eyes went wide. "That is definitely not Mondstadt," he said.

Venti laughed, standing up beside him. "Definitely not, haha."

The buildings were sleek. Modern. Nothing like the old stone and wood of Mondstadt's buildings.

"Enjoy your stay!" Aeval called, as the Aquabus spun around in the water and backed slowly into the dock with a soft clang.

"Oh, we will!" Venti giggled. He reached over and took Oliver's hand. The two of them walked down the steps and out onto the platform together. "The hotel should be somewhere close by. Once I know where it is, I can just teleport us in."

They descended the terminal steps and stepped out into Fontaine's ground level.

Oliver was still in awe. He turned his head slowly, taking it all in. "This place looks like the future or something," he murmured. He looked forward and realized Venti had gotten several steps ahead of him. "Hey, wait up!" He jogged to catch up. "Did you figure out where it is?"

"Mm-hm!" Venti nodded, pointing toward a building sitting right at the edge of town. The town itself was built on raised terrain, and at that edge there was nothing — just open sky and water stretching out below, held back only by a barrier. The hotel was at the edge, so a nice view if you stayed at the top.

"That has to be expensive," Oliver whispered, the two of them standing at the front of the building now, craning their necks up at it.

"Yep!" Venti giggled. "That's exactly why we—" He grabbed Oliver's shoulder without warning, and in a rush of wind and pale light, the world rearranged itself.

As always, zero notice from the bard. "AHH—?!" Oliver stumbled forward and landed hard onto something soft. "OOF."

Venti's laughter rang out immediately.

Oliver pushed himself up slowly and found himself on a bed. A very nice bed. A very, very expensive bed. He looked around. Hotel room, no question. And — he noticed it right away — a balcony. He got off the bed and went straight for it.

"Wanna go out there?" Venti called after him. "The view's worth it I think."

Oliver slid the door open and stepped out.

It really was. Mountains stacked up in the distance. The Aquabus waterways wound out toward the horizon, connecting to whatever other districts Fontaine had beyond. A soft breeze moved through, and for a moment Oliver felt completely still. "Venti, what floor are we on?"

Venti had followed him out and was leaning easy on the railing. "No idea," he said. "I just looked for a room with no active booking."

Oliver turned to look at him. "But what if someone comes in?"

"They won't," Venti said simply. "Apparently the hotel has this one closed off. So they'll never know we're in here~,"

Oliver shook his head. "How do you even know that? We literally just got here."

Venti grinned. "I am Barbatos~." He winked.

"Oh, now you want to use the god title," Oliver laughed.

Venti's smile softened. "Go take a shower, stinky-boy~"

Oliver gasped. "So mean~."

Venti laughed. "Shower's on the right side of the room," he added helpfully. "Need a hand with anything?"

Oliver was already heading for the bathroom, rounding the corner of the bed. "Hey, I can shower myself you know,"

"You sure you don't want me to come bathe you~?" Venti called after him.

Oliver stopped in the doorway and leaned back against the frame. "Venti." His face went warm. "Stop being so bold, and being a tease!"

"Okay, okay. Go. I'll be right here."

Oliver disappeared into the bathroom and pulled the door shut behind him. He stood there a moment, smiling at nothing. "That bard is going to kill me one day," he muttered to himself.

He turned to survey the bathroom. Toilet to the left, sink to the right, and the shower straight ahead at the far end of the room.

"I've done this before, right?" He frowned at it. "I've taken showers. I know I have." Venti had told him he came from another world, and a lot of things didn't line up — gaps in his memory, things that felt familiar but came out sideways. But showers. He was pretty sure showers existed where he was from. "Yeah. I know this."

He pulled his shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor.

"Venti's still got something wrong though," he muttered, stepping out of his pants. "Even my own head feels wrong. Some things just... don't piece together right." He looked down at the pile of clothes. "He said your subconscious will not.. mess up. But I think mine is a little broken,"

He looked down at the file of the clothes, "And these clothes — I wouldn't normally wear something like this, would I?" He then turned to himself in the mirror. He blinked. "And this face... Something feels off,"

He shrugged. "Whatever."

He stepped into the shower and pulled the curtain closed.

He leaned forward and turned the valve.

He didn't realize that the shower head was facing directly to his face, and he wasn't thinking to check beforehand. The water blasted him directly in the face at full pressure. "WAAA—?!" He spun the valve off in a panic. He stood there dripping, eyes wide, hair plastered flat.

He was genuinely glad Venti wasn't in here. He would never, ever hear the end of it.

He took a breath. Reached up, angled the nozzle away. Then, he tried again.

This time he let the water run slow until it warmed up. When it finally hit right, Oliver let out a long sigh and let his shoulders drop. "Ohhhh. Okay. Yeah." He stood under it for a moment. "Ven was right. I smelled bad."

He looked down and noticed two bottles sitting in a rack. He reached for one, hoping it was shampoo, opened the cap, and sniffed it. "...Okay. I think this is it." He squeezed some into his palms and started working it into his hair.

Then a pain hit without warning. Sharp and sudden, right through the middle of his head. "Ahh—" He flinched and leaned into the wall. "Ow—" He straightened again, blinking. "That was weird—"

And then he stopped moving entirely.

Then his eyes widened. He stopped lathering his hair. His eyes darted around.

"How?" He said quietly. He blinked again. "How?"

He lowered his hands slowly. His eyes moved around the small enclosed space like he was checking whether any of it was real. "I thought this only happened at night when I sleep here," he said. He stared at the curtain. "Should I tell Venti?" He pondered. He stood there, frozen. He didn't know what to do. "Why do I suddenly remember?!" He yelled quietly to himself.

Oliver blinked. "No.. Why- Why now?!"

He went to bite his nails by instinct and got a mouthful of shampoo for it. "Blah!" He spat. "That's disgusting—"

He made up his mind, standing there in the steam of the previous hot water. He wanted to tell Venti. He needed to. Because something was wrong on his end — really wrong. Doctor Barclay was missing, and he was in some dark room, and there were no answers anywhere. Venti wouldn't fully understand. Oliver didn't fully understand it himself. But keeping it in felt worse than letting it out. Even if Venti looked at him differently after. Even if finding out what Oliver actually looked like where he was from changed things.

He figured it's best to let Venti know, and not have this useless going back and forth, going all over Teyvat to figure something out that was right under their noses.

Oliver didn't finish washing his hair. He stepped out of the shower.

In his urgency, he forgot something fairly important.

Oliver pulled the bathroom door open. "Venti! Venti—!"

"Huh?!" Venti had been sitting at the edge of the bed and spun around fast at the sharpness in Oliver's voice. "What's wrong, Ollie—" He went still. His eyes traveled slowly from Oliver's face downward and then back up. A flush crept across his cheeks.

"Venti, there's something urgent I have to tell you!" Oliver pressed. "I remember something, I just—" He stopped. He noticed the way Venti was looking at him. He followed his gaze. He looked down at himself.

Oh.

"YIP—!" Oliver slammed the door. He stood in the bathroom alone and pressed a hand over his face. "I am such an idiot." Venti's laughter came clearly through the door, which made it worse.

He got his pants back on. Left his shirt. Then tried this again.

Venti was still laughing when Oliver came back out, sprawled across the bed dramatically. "Quite a show~." He stuck his tongue out.

Oliver willed the heat out of his face. This was important. This actually mattered. "V-Venti. I need to tell you something. It's urgent."

The laughter cut off. Venti sat up. The teasing drained out of his expression completely. "Woah. Ollie? What is it? What's wrong?"

"Venti — I remember. It just came on, out of nowhere, but I remember. I remember where I'm from."

Venti gasped, and suddenly sprung up from the bed, and stood on the ground. "You... you do?!" The bard looked shocked. "Please, tell me!"

"I-I...," Oliver didn't know where to start. How could he start? Should he start with the experiment first? Should he explain about Doctor Barclay, and how he's missing? Should he go all in and say he went into the universe of a video game?

"I-I-I," Oliver stammered. "I'm from... I'm from another world," he started.

Venti nodded quickly. "Yeah, yeah, we already had that part—"

"But I'm connected to a machine."

Venti's expression shifted. His eyes sharpened. "A machine?" he repeated.

"Yes — I fall asleep on this machine and it pulls me into this universe. And Doctor Barclay, he was the one who built it, who founded the whole - the whole thing, but Venti, he's gone missing. I don't know where he is. And I'm in some dark room somewhere, I'm trapped and I—" Oliver blinked.

His voice stopped.

His expression went flat. His eyes slid slowly relaxed.

A moment passed.

He looked back at Venti. "What were we just talking about?" He blinked, looking confused.

Venti's breath caught. "You were— you were just—" He pressed his hand over his mouth. "Oh my word," he whispered, staring at Oliver. "You were right in the middle of it. You were about to tell me everything."

Oliver looked genuinely lost. "...I was?"

"And then your brain erased, just like that!" Venti stepped closer.

Oliver's his eyes darted around. ".... It did?"

"Yes!" Venti said. "You said you were trapped in a dark room! And... something about a Doctor! You also said you were hooked up a machine!"

Oliver went still. The blankness on his face gave way to something closer to fear. "Venti... if what you're saying is true... that sounds terrifying. What do you mean I'm trapped?"

Venti closed the space between them and pulled him in. "I don't know what it means yet. But this is deliberate. Someone is interfering with your memory — messing with it on purpose. And I think it's this Doctor Barclay you mentioned."

Oliver pressed into the warmth of Venti's arms. "What am I supposed to do? I'm scared."

Venti rubbed slow circles on his back. Pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Hey, hey. Breathe for me, honey," he said softly. "Your heart's going a mile a minute. Shh. It's okay." He pulled back just enough to look at him. "I'll figure something out. And... there's something else. Something I've been holding onto that I should have said a while ago."

Oliver looked at him. "Huh?"

Venti let out a slow breath. "I saw when you appeared," he said. "I was in my tree when a beam of light just — dropped from the sky out of nowhere. It faded, and when it was gone, you were there in its place. Glitching and flickering, morphing, until finally you were just... you. I watched you walk to the river and look down into it and say something about your reflection not looking like you. Then you started heading toward Mondstadt." He gave a small, almost sheepish laugh. "I don't know why I didn't come over. I just thought I'd meet you in town instead. So I waited at — well. My statue." He chuckled. "I forget sometimes that you know I'm Barbatos. So I can freely say that around you,"

Oliver stared at him for a moment. Then let out a breath. "The way you built that up, I genuinely thought you were going to say you had plans to kill me."

Venti blinked.

Then burst out laughing. "No! No no no — hahahaha! Not even close!" He shook his head, still giggling. "I only brought it up because the way you arrived made it obvious you weren't from around here, but I didn't want to say it right away when you looked so out of it. I didn't want to make it worse." He sighed. "I make dumb decisions sometimes."

Oliver smiled and leaned in to kiss him, soft and warm. "I'm grateful for you, Venti. You've stayed with me through all of this. I don't think most people would have done that."

Venti waved him off with a grin. "Oh, come on. Mondstadt's not full of tyrants, you know~. Plenty of good people there would have looked out for you. I can't take all the credit for that."

Oliver kissed him again. "Venti?"

Venti pulled back, expression soft. "Yeah?"

"Thank you,"

Venti hugged him close, pressing a slow kiss to his neck. "We still have work to do. We have to figure out who Doctor Barclay is and where he went."

"But how?" Oliver asked.

Venti settled into him, warm and steady. "I don't know yet, baby. I really don't. But we'll get there." He kissed Oliver on the lips again, brief and gentle, then looked at him with a glint of mischief. "In the meantime — do you want more kisses? To calm down?"

Oliver very much did. And with Venti this close, pressed up against him while he stood there half-dressed, he was aware he might want a little more than that. "I want to," he said. "But I still need to take my shower." He paused and reached up to touch his damp hair. "Wait. Why is my hair already wet?"

"Haha! Right!" Venti stepped back. "Looks like you got pretty far into it, actually. You kind of bolted out of there mid-shampoo. That's when you told me everything." He tilted his head with a soft smile. "Go finish. I'll be right here when you get out, Ollie."

Chapter 12: Embrace Part II

Venti waited on the bed while Oliver finished up in the shower. The bard had decided to plan a teasing little surprise for the moment he stepped out. He had seen the look in Oliver's eyes earlier; he knew the human wanted to do much more than just kiss.

Since the hotel room was off the booking registry, Venti knew no one else would be coming up to bother them. They could enjoy some private, sexy time together. Venti figured it would be fun to do it here in a room with an actual bed.

He had completely stripped out of his clothes, tossing his usual bard attire carelessly onto the floor. He sat entirely naked on the bed, back arched, his hands resting behind him on the frim mattress.

After a little while, Oliver finally swung the bathroom door open. "Okay, that felt good." He had one towel wrapped around his waist and was using another to finish drying his hair. "I really needed that." He lowered the towel from his head. "Is there any way I can get new clothes, though? Like, anywhere? These really stink—"

Oliver froze mid-sentence the second his eyes landed on Venti's display. The bard giggled gently, biting his lip.

Oliver's breath hitched. He already knew Venti was beautiful, but seeing his body illuminated by the soft hotel lights rather than dim moonlight hit him in a completely different way. "Oh, wow..." Oliver stammered, his eyes wide. "Y-You... You're hot..."

Venti let out another quick giggle. "Did you not know that already~?" he winked. Then, with a smooth, small movement, the bard swung his leg over and laid back flat on the mattress instead of sitting at the edge. With his slim, twink frame now on full display, he let his penis show more, stretching his arms above his head to tease Oliver even further.

"You told me that you liked penises like mine—" Venti reached down, picking up his own flaccid length and gently rolling it between his fingers. "Now that you're seeing it in better lighting, is it really okay for you?"

Oh, it was definitely more than okay. It certainly wasn't big. "D-Does it get bigger when it's hard?" Oliver involuntarily stammered. "Or does it stay the same size?"

Venti smiled warmly. "It stays the same size. Ollie, I'm not that big, haha."

Oliver smiled back, nodding eagerly. "Okay."

Moving his hands away from his cock, Venti arched his back invitingly. "Okay, your turn~," he winked.

"Uh... do you want me to be shirtless too? And... and pantless?"

Venti nodded. "If you want," he purred. "I'd personally want you to. It'll make this even more hot."

Oliver climbed onto the bed, then dropped to his knees right in front of Venti. The bard laid before him in that steamy, inviting position. Biting his lip gently, Oliver undid the towel wrapped around his waist.

Venti watched him with a highly sensual gaze, his eyes widening slightly as the towel finally hit the bed, revealing Oliver's already hardened dick. Venti let out a soft, amused chuckle. "Already want me, don't you~?" he teased softly. But this was Oliver's time to pleasure him; Venti had promised he'd let him.

"Come on~," Venti coaxed, reaching down to playfully wiggle his own member between his fingers again. "Come play with it~."

Oliver's own shaft twitched in response to seeing Venti touch himself so openly. He slowly got onto all fours and crawled his way over the mattress toward the bard. Straddling Venti's legs, he looked down at the ethereal boy beneath him.

Venti was undeniably beautiful. He had a slight hourglass waist—his hips weren't massive, but they held a softer, more feminine curve than most guys. Oliver's eyes trailed down to Venti's thighs, which were beautifully plump and soft. Gently, Oliver traced his fingers down the smooth skin from the base of Venti's waist to the tops of his legs.

Venti giggled, smiling up brightly as he watched Oliver explore.

Oliver's gaze eventually shifted to Venti's belly button. The navel looked distinctly different under the hotel lighting—it was a deep, vertical slit-innie, and the sight of it made Oliver's heart thump wildly.

Noticing the human's fixation, Venti teasingly lifted his arm, lowered his hand to his own midriff, and pressed a finger deep into his navel. "Hmm~ You can play with my belly button if you want~." He dug his finger around inside the sensitive dip, wiggling it playfully.

Oliver's heart pounded against his ribs. Before reaching out, he glanced up at Venti's face, silently asking for permission.

Venti, of course, nodded enthusiastically.

Oliver gently stroked a finger down from the top of Venti's midriff, letting it graze right over the opening of his navel before dipping lower to the base of Venti's shaft. The light sensation pulled a gentle giggle from Venti's lips.

Reaching back up, Oliver trailed his fingers down the bard's soft stomach once more. But this time, instead of just grazing over the belly button, he dipped his finger inside and wiggled it around.

"Erk~," Venti bit his lip, a tiny, breathy sound escaping his mouth. He tried desperately not to laugh too much. He genuinely wanted Oliver to mess with his belly button, knowing how much the human adored it, but his navel was just far too sensitive.

Pulling his finger out of the sensitive dip, Oliver finally moved his attention to Venti's penis. He gently gripped the shaft, rolling the flaccid length around his fingers.

Venti arched his back slightly, a soft noise slipping out. "Hmm~," he hummed, fluttering his eyes closed. Oliver continued the light, teasing play, letting his thumb find the sensitive tip to rub it gently.

"Ermm~," Venti moaned softly, his fingers curling into the bedsheets beneath him. "Oh~."

After a little more of the teasing manual stimulation, Oliver lowered his upper body until he was lying flat on his stomach, his face hovering mere inches from Venti's crotch. "Can I lick it?" he asked softly.

Venti nodded eagerly. "You don't need to ask, cutie," he breathed. "Do whatever you want to me~."

A lustful, eager smile spread across Oliver's face. Venti's shaft was finally beginning to harden, the small penis sticking straight up. Oliver leaned in close, pressing a tender kiss to the tip before opening his mouth and letting his tongue swirl around the sensitive head.

The shaft hardened even further. It wasn't too big, and it wasn't too small—to Oliver, it was absolutely perfect. Opening wider, he took Venti completely into his mouth, working his head rhythmically back and

forth.

"Ahh~!" Venti cried out, overwhelmed by the wet, hot sensation of Oliver's mouth engulfing him. "Oh, Ollie~ That feels so good~."

Oliver continued to suck Venti's penis, his eyes fluttering shut as he fully enjoyed the taste of the bard's skin. Eventually, he pulled off with a soft pop, grasping the wet shaft in his hand to stroke it up and down. As he jacked Venti off, he crawled further up the bard's body.

Venti watched him approach with a dazed, blissed-out expression. He knew exactly what Oliver wanted, and he was more than ready for it.

Their lips crashed together in a passionate, heavy make-out session while Oliver continued to rhythmically squeeze and stroke the bard's dick. "You're so gentle~," Venti praised breathlessly between sloppy kisses. "I love how you do things."

Oliver pulled back from his lips just enough to press a sweet kiss to Venti's cheek, never stopping his hand's movements.

Venti bit his lip, fiercely savoring every single sensation. He hadn't felt this good in so long; he'd forgotten how incredible it was to share this kind of intimacy with someone he truly cared for. And Oliver? Oh, how much he was beginning to love him.

"Oliver~ I'm gonna cum~," he warned breathlessly. "Do you wanna suck it, or just... keep rubbing me?"

Oliver chose to keep rubbing, his hand moving in quick, slick strokes up and down the small shaft.

Venti arched his back sharply as his first load shot out over his own stomach. "Ahh~!" he cried out, biting his lip as a second wave followed. He snuggled closer to Oliver, who was lovingly pressing open-mouthed kisses to his neck.

Panting softly, Venti finally relaxed against the mattress. "That was so good," he sighed happily. Leaning his head to the right, he pressed a tender kiss to Oliver's cheek, and then to his lips. They lingered there for a long moment before pulling away. "So good~."

Oliver smiled, letting out a bubbly giggle as he laid his full weight down on Venti, their naked, sweat-slicked bodies pressing flush against each other.

Venti wrapped his arms securely around Oliver's waist, rubbing soothing circles into his bare back.

The friction and the sheer intimacy of it all pushed Oliver right over the edge. Unable to help himself, he came right then and there, his own climax shooting out to splatter warmly against Venti's stomach. "Errrk~," Oliver gasped out.

"S-Sorry," he mumbled shyly, immediately burying his flushed face into the crook of Venti's neck.

Venti just smiled fondly. "What are you sorry for, baby?" Teasingly, Venti swiped a finger through the fresh cum on his stomach, bringing it right up to his lips to lick it clean.

The sight of Venti tasting him was so incredibly hot to Oliver that he just whined softly and snuggled even tighter against the bard.

"So good~," Venti purred, licking his lips.

Still lying heavily on top of him, Oliver pressed lazy kisses to Venti's chest, eventually finding his left nipple. Getting slightly carried away, he began to gently lick and swirl his tongue around the sensitive nub.

Venti beamed, a fresh wave of pleasure washing over him. "Did cutie find a new part of me to like~?" he teased affectionately.

Oliver giggled, suddenly feeling shy all over again. He hid his face by burying it deep into Venti's neck once more, basking in the bard's radiant warmth. He felt Venti's hand gently stroking his hair, followed by a soft kiss to the crown of his head. Oliver hugged him even tighter.

Venti continued his soft, rhythmic petting, rubbing Oliver's hair and tracing small circles on his back. "You okay, Ollie? You're being all shy again~."

Oliver didn't respond at first. Then, he quickly lifted his head, pressed a lightning-fast peck to Venti's lips, and dove right back into his hiding spot against Venti's neck.

All Venti could do was laugh. "You're so silly," he cooed, pulling Oliver a little closer. "You wanna play with my belly button some more?"

Oliver's face burned even redder. "B-But you're always so sensitive there," he mumbled into Venti's skin. "You always laugh and squirm."

Venti snorted playfully. "That's the fun part~."

Oliver blushed harder. "I'd want to, but maybe we should get going. W-What if those people come in here? The hotel owner? Or the cleaners, or whoever?"

Venti laughed softly, his chest rumbling against Oliver's. "I told you already, the room is closed for today," he reassured him. "But fine. If it'll make you feel more comfortable, we can head back to Mondstadt." He pressed one final, lingering kiss to Oliver's forehead. "Come on, cutie," he sighed happily. "I'm kinda craving my wine~."

Oliver let out a soft, fond laugh. "Of course you are."

Chapter 13: World Destroyer Part II

"I have come for my wineeeeee!!!" Venti suddenly bellowed, materializing right in the dead center of the tavern via sudden teleportation, with Oliver tumbling out right alongside him.

Behind the counter, Diluc let out an uncharacteristic, high-pitched screech. *"AiIEI!?"* He launched into the air, nearly tripping over his own boots, before clearing his throat with a booming, *"aHEM!"* He instantly smoothed down his coat, acting as if he hadn't just screamed at the top of his lungs. "I mean, how are you doing this fine evening?"

Meanwhile, poor Oliver crashed face-first straight into the wooden counter—Venti, as usual, having given absolutely zero warning that they were about to teleport again.

Seeing Diluc's sheer panic, Venti collapsed into a fit of hysterical, genuine laughter. He leaned heavily against the bar, slamming his fist against the wood. "BAHAHAHAHA! DILUC, WHAT WAS THAT?! Why did you turn into Oliver right there?!" he howled, practically shrieking with delight.

Diluc merely adjusted his clothes, clearing his throat once more. "You should know better than to materialize inside my tavern. You are fortunate no one else is here at this hour, Barbatos."

"How dare you use my old name~," Venti chirped, playfully sticking out his tongue as he recovered his breath. He glanced over at Oliver, who was still slumped miserably over the counter. "You okay there, dork~?"

Oliver slowly pushed himself up, a mischievous glint in his eye, before launching himself directly at Venti, fingers flying into a ruthless tickle attack.

Venti let out a high-pitched shriek of giggles as they both crashed to the floor.

"OhahahOlHeheiver!!!! Nooooo!" He squirms frantically beneath Oliver's hold. "BAHAHAHAA STOPPPP! THAT TICKLES!!!" He laughed hysterically as Oliver pinned him down, his fingers mercilessly digging into Venti's sides before diving deep, wiggling right beneath the brown leather strap around Venti's abdomen to target his belly button.

"EEEHEHEEHEEEKKK~!!!!" Venti jolted, squealing in pure, ticklish delight.

Behind the counter, Diluc simply stood and blinked at the chaotic scene, folding his arms tightly over his chest.

Finally, Oliver relents, pulling his hands away and standing up off the Archon. Venti remained sprawled on the floor, panting breathlessly with a euphoric smile. "O-Oh my wohhahaord..." he gasps, letting out a few lingering chuckles as he lay there in pure bliss.

Diluc sighed, keeping his arms crossed. "He must trust you if he's letting you teleport with him around," he noted. "And if he trusts you, I suppose I trust you too."

From his spot on the floor, Venti pointed a dramatic finger upward. "He's my boyfriend."

Diluc froze. He looked at Oliver, then back down at Venti. "Oh? Really?" He blinked, processing the news. "Huh. So... when did that happen? I knew something was brewing between you two."

"Brewing line fine liquor!" Venti chuckled as he sat up and pushed himself off the ground. "Yeah, it kinda just happened, hehe!" He flings an arm around Oliver, pulling him close before looking back at Diluc.

"So? My wine?"

Diluc let out a heavy grunt, rolling his eyes. "Fine, I'm coming, I'm coming." He turned around, retrieved a bottle from the back shelf, and set it firmly on the wooden counter.

Venti beamed, hopping onto a barstool. He popped the cork and took a massive, continuous gulp straight from the bottle. Slamming it back down on the wood, he sighed happily, "Hmm~! So good!" He glanced over at Oliver. "Want some?" He passed the bottle over.

Oliver nodded, taking a few quick sips before handing it back to the bard.

"Any progress on regaining his memories?" Diluc asked, leaning against the bar.

Venti shook his head, taking another gulp of his wine. "Not really," he admitted. "Though we did get something at least. He's from another world actually,"

"Hmm." Diluc crossed his arms again. "Like Traveler."

"Yeah, but I don't think he's a Traveler type," Venti explained, meeting Diluc's eyes. "His memories only sparked back for a brief moment. He told me a little bit about where he came from, but then his mind just went blank again." Venti sighed softly.

Sitting on the stool next to him, Oliver rubbed his own shoulder awkwardly. "I wish I could actually remember saying that..."

Diluc narrowed his eyes, raising a sharp eyebrow. "Huh? What exactly did he say? Where is he from?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Venti shook his head. "He mentioned being hooked up to some kind of machine... and a Doctor named Barclay who went missing. That was everything before he blanked out again."

Diluc stood in quiet contemplation. "A machine? Like... advanced technology? Sounds advanced. I mean, a device that can make you visit another world?"

Venti nodded. "Seems like it." He turned to Oliver, leaning affectionately against his shoulder. "Hey, don't look so down. We'll figure out a way to help you. It might take a long time—I won't sugarcoat it, yes. But we'll get through it." He pressed a soft kiss to Oliver's cheek.

Oliver blushed a deep pink, nodding quietly.

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Oliver's eyes snapped open. Gasping for air, he looked around the dimly lit, familiar laboratory room. His mind instantly raced back to the moments he had just shared with Venti.

"Shit..." he whispered, closing his eyes tightly. "What is happening to me? Why did those memories suddenly flood back while I was in the shower back in Fontaine? It makes no sense."

He looked up at the ceiling, his cheeks burning a bright pink. "And... oh my god, I had sex with Venti again..." He let out a tiny, embarrassed squeak. "Wow, that was... incredibly enjoyable."

Despite the happiness, his deep-seated insecurities crept back in. The persistent thought—Venti would absolutely hate my real-world form—lingered heavily in his mind every time he woke up here. He sighed, desperately holding onto the remnants of the memory. The passion, the way Venti completely accepted him, and how incredibly open the Archon was with his belly button fetish.

"I'd say it doesn't even feel real, but..." Oliver tilted his neck back, staring at the glowing monitor above his chair. "But the Fictional Universe is a real place." He nodded to himself, recalling the secret notes he had peeked at on Doctor Barclay's desk. Every thought spawns a distinct universe within an accessible realm, provided you have the right tools. Oliver smiles softly. "It's... it's beautiful. Who would have thought humans would actually achieve travel into fictional worlds?"

Suddenly, muffled voices echoed from the outside of the room. Oliver stiffened, recognizing the tone instantly. His eyes widened—it was Doctor Barclay. He opened his mouth to call out the doctor's name, but then a second, a completely unfamiliar voice cut in.

An instinct deep inside Oliver screamed at him to remain completely silent. He quickly shut his eyes, going limp and pretending to be fast asleep. The voices grew louder as the heavy door swung open.

"Doctor Barclay, you cannot seriously be planning to get another patient," a woman's sharp voice snapped. "Don't you already have enough people hooked up to these machines?!"

Oliver cracked his eyelids open just a fraction, catching sight of Doctor Barclay walking alongside a woman he's never seen before.

"Claire," Doctor Barclay sighed, his voice heavy. "I cannot simply abandon this breakthrough. This will reshape human history. Humanity has always dreamed of venturing into the unknown. In this specific world I've mapped, a natural phenomenon occurred—two distinct dimensions merged completely unprovoked! And I intend to—"

"No!" Claire cuts him off fiercely. "Are you even obtaining proper consent from these subjects?"

"How many times must I tell you? Yes, I am," Doctor Barclay insists.

Peeking through his lashes, Oliver sees the woman looking absolutely furious.

"Because I still find it incredibly hard to believe that this kid's..." She pointed aggressively toward the pod directly across from Oliver. "...that his parents just willingly handed their son over for your dangerous experiments!"

Doctor Barclay stepped into her space, his tone hardening. "I pay you to maintain the client logs, Claire. I do not pay you to cross-examine my methods. This is the most advanced position you will ever secure in your field, remember? Every other institution rejected you. I didn't."

Claire inhaled sharply, shaking her head in defeat. "If it's so safe, why don't you enter these worlds yourself?"

"As I have stated repeatedly: who would monitor the systems? I cannot send you either, because I cannot manage the console and run diagnostics simultaneously. Now, let me do my work and cease the interrogation." Doctor Barclay gestured toward the opposite side of the laboratory. "The new interface chair is set up over there. I will find a new subject to insert into the world shortly so I can observe how the dimensional matrix handles it. It promises to be fascinating." He began walking toward the exit. "Meet me in the break room once you've finished filing the logs."

Oliver kept his eyes locked shut as the woman began pacing around the room. The bright overhead fluorescent lights had been humming since they walked in, and everything Oliver just overheard sends a cold chill down his spine. Doctor Barclay sounded completely different from the man Oliver remembered

working with. Is he actually kidnapping people? And who is this woman? If Barclay had an assistant that entire time, why hadn't he ever mentioned her?

The woman finished her rounds and finally exits, clicking the door shut behind her. The room plunged back into heavy, suffocating darkness.

Oliver slowly opened his eyes, staring toward the exit. The tiny window in the door cast a faint, weak beam of light across the floor.

"Okay," he whispered under his breath. "That was... I mean, I knew something felt off. So Doctor Barclay isn't missing after all." He let out a shaky sigh. "But he asked for my consent. Why isn't he asking anyone else?" He shook his head in frustration. "If only I could explain all of this to Venti... but I can't."

Oliver glances back toward the door, and his breath hitches. His eyes widen in pure terror. "What the...?"

A shifting, pitch-black entity was materializing right by the doorway. Before Oliver could even let out a gasp, the creature instantly zoomed right into his face, its form blurring with speed.

"AHH!?" Oliver thrashes wildly against the heavy restraint straps of his chair. "GET AWAY! WHAT ARE YOU!?"

"Shut the hell up, and stop squirming," the creature commanded, its voice still and deep.

Oliver froze shattered, completely caught off guard by the fact that it can talk—though a memory sparked, reminding him it spoke once before. "Is... is it you? Are you the reason I can't remember anything? My memories vanished completely after I ran into you last time in the world!"

The dark entity hovers backward slowly, standardizing its distance. "Remember my warning. Stay out of my way. Stay out of my way, and I will stay out of yours. And no—your memory loss is not my doing."

Oliver swallowed hard, his throat dry. "W-What even are you? What do you want—?"

"That is none of your concern," the entity snaps, cutting him off. Its gaze shifts toward the newly installed chair Doctor Barclay had pointed out earlier. It drifted silently over to the machine. The looming shadow inspected the interface with a piercing, intense stare. "He discovered it too," the creature murmurs. "And the chair's already hardwired into the realm." Its head snaps back toward Oliver, its glowing white eyes locking onto him. "All it requires now is a host."

Oliver watched in stunned silence, paralyzed by fear.

"How do I deactivate it?" the creature demands.

Oliver blinked. "What?"

"How do I turn it off," the entity repeats, its voice dropping into a menacing, dark growl.

"I-I don't know!" Oliver squeaked out.

In a flash of darkness, the creature zapped right back into his face. "You must," it hisses. "You must possess operational knowledge of this facility to be here at all!" Turning its attention back to the machinery, the dark entity drifted over the empty console. "No matter... I shall sever the link to the world myself."

It hovers closer to the secondary chair. "This world is far too critical for my plans. I cannot allow that 'doctor' to disrupt my what I need to. Introducing a whatever he's got going into the realm will destabilize the current energetic balance. The energy is already good enough. It does not need more."

Raising a shadowy, mist-like hand, a dark stream of corrupted energy begins to snake out from its fingers, seeping directly into the empty chair's control panel. Oliver is completely powerless, strapped tightly into his seat, watching the bizarre, terrifying display unfold. He wants to scream or ask questions, but the sheer aura of power radiating from the creature keeps him dead silent.

Suddenly, the chair in front if Oliver made a beep sound. Startled, the dark creature instinctively unleashes a concentrated bolt of pure void energy directly into the chair.

"Ah!?" Oliver gasps, closing his eyes as the blast detonates against the hardware.

The creature growls in frustration. "Curse this room," it mutters, quickly turning back to the chair it was messing with.

Oliver swallows hard, silently praying that his own pod will malfunction in a helpful way and send him straight back to Genshin Impact, anywhere away from this nightmare. Instead, the chair across from him begins to severely glitch out, its automated voice warping into a distorted, digital stutter:

Error - Malfun-Chara-Too many- Error code: 2399- Malfunction within Dimension-

The voice coming from the chair was getting all warped and messed up.

Begin - Sudden Memory change initiated, ***dimension overwritten***

System shut down

The other chair completely dies, its lights flickering out into total darkness.

Rebuilding database.... Rebuilding database... ***adding... new story...***

Kid Powers - Rebuilding story...

Adding... Danger Kid

A sudden wave of dark, corrupted mist pulses out from the ruined console.

Restarting dimensional threshold - Wreck It Ralph universe code 34, Online, subject vitals: Good

The dark creature hovers in place, its luminous white eyes wide as it stares at the other chair. It turns back to the original interface it had targeted. "Not my concern," it mutters coldly, placing its misty hands firmly over the primary overrides.

System offline.

"There we are," the entity spoke, satisfied. "Doctor Barclay shouldn't mess with Sub 7 now."

Oliver opens his mouth to say something, but before a word can escape:

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...
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Chapter 14: Waverider

~ Four Days Later ~

The past few days had drifted by at a slow pace. Though, in the short amount of days, Venti and Oliver's affection for one another had only blossomed more. They felt undeniably closer, their bond strengthening with every passing sunset.

Venti was still determined to help Oliver recover his memories and uncover the truth about whatever realm he had come from. But despite their best efforts, they both had found no success.

Currently, Venti was lounging on the soft grass just outside the canopy of the great tree, with Oliver resting right by his side.

"Okay—" Venti turned to Oliver, his eyes bright. "Someone from another nation is coming over to Mondstadt. Something about a trade thingy. He already visited once, but the Knights of Favonius are supposed to head over there to finalize the paperwork or whatever. Boring stuff, honestly, but I decided to secretly help them out!" Venti beamed. "Yes! The drunken bard is finally being of use for once! Not that I'm never of use," he quickly cleared his throat. "Besides, it'll be nice to show you the other nations."

Oliver, laying in the grass beside him, tilted his head in confusion. "But I thought you were certain I'm from another world? What's the point of me seeing the other nations here?"

Venti nodded. "Yeah, I know, Ollie. But I'm sure you don't want to be cooped up in Mondstadt forever," he reasoned. "Also, even though I am certain you're from another world based on what you've told me—"

"It feels so weird to hear that I said something without actually remembering it," Oliver muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

"—though I am certain you are from another world," Venti continued seamlessly, "you weirdly remember places here. Like how you mentioned Mondstadt looking familiar. Then you said the exact same thing about Fontaine." The bard shook his head. "It's really bizarre, and I still don't understand how that's possible."

Oliver sighed. "I don't either." He turned his gaze toward the distant city of Mondstadt. "There is definitely something about this town, but I just can't lay my finger on it."

"Okay, wait here," Venti said, suddenly standing up and turning around. The bard was finally using his brain for once. "I don't know how long we'll be staying in the nation we're heading to, so I'm going to go stock up on some food for us." He began to walk away. "Just stay right there, I'll be back in a flash."

As soon as Venti trotted off, Oliver looked down at the ground. Maybe I should just lay back down on the grass until he gets back, he thought.

He was just about to sit drop back down, when something nearby caught his eye. "Huh? What's that?"

It was some sort of blue, gelatinous blob hopping through the grass. It had large, expressive eyes at the front and looked almost like it was made of pure water. "Aww? What are you? You look kinda cute." Oliver got back up, then wandered over toward it. "Is it some type of animal?" He inched closer, captivated by the strange creature.

"Hello there," Oliver smiled, kneeling down to get a better look at the blue blob. "I wonder if I can pet it —"

Suddenly, the creature sprang into the air and slammed directly into his face, drenching him in a splash of cold water.

"AHHH?!" Oliver yelped in sheer surprise, thrashing his arms wildly to get it off. "AH GET OFFA' ME!!!"

He didn't know how, but in his frantic panic, a sword materialized directly into his hands. "HUH?!"

Without even thinking, Olvier threw the blob off of his face, then he swung the blade into the blue blob a couple of times until, with a wet pop, it completely vanished.

Oliver stood there panting, but this wasn't over.

Five more blobs were suddenly bouncing his way. They all hopped toward him, blinking those deceptively adorable eyes.

"Oh, fuck—"

"Holy shit, those things are the cuteness of death!" Oliver raised the sword instinctively. In a flash, a blast of intense fire erupted from the tip of the blade, incinerating one of the slimes on the spot. Oliver blinked, stunned. "What? How did I—" He blinked again, staring at his hands. "Wait a minute, when did I even get a sword in the first place?!"

The remaining blobs kept coming. "Oh god, why are they multiplying like Minecraft slimes?!"

Oliver slashed his sword in a wide arc. A powerful gale of wind shot out from the steel, launching all the slime blobs into the air where they became trapped in a spinning whirlwind.

He stared at his weapon in utter disbelief. "Did... did I do that?"

Suddenly, the air beside him grew stiflingly hot. He whipped his head to the left and saw a new wave of blobs hopping toward him—but these ones were on fire.

"Oh, fuck! They're flaming now?!"

Oliver swung wildly at them, and to his shock, his sword instantly frosted over, turning to pure ice. He just went with it, slashing defensively, but the overwhelming, radiating heat from the fiery blobs was beginning to get to him.

Then, something violently zapped within his mind.

"AHHH!" Oliver dropped the sword. The fire blobs were inching ever closer, but his eyes snapped wide open. "...Why do I remember again?" He blinked, the fog in his brain suddenly parting. "I remember... I... Wait, where did Venti go?! I need to tell him! VENTI!"

Oliver took off sprinting. His discarded sword lingered on the grass for a second before fading into thin air.

"Venti! VENTI, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

But the moment Oliver fled from the oppressive heat of the fire slimes, the sudden clarity in his mind abruptly evaporated. He slowed his frantic sprint to a jog, and then to a confused halt.

"Uhhh..." He looked around, completely bewildered. "Why was I running? What just happened?" He glanced over his shoulder and saw the flaming blobs still steadily hopping in his direction—about seven of them now. "OH, THAT'S WHY!"

Oliver geared up to bolt again—

"Ollie? What's going—"

Not looking where he was going, Oliver slammed right into Venti. "AHH!" They both yelped, tumbling into a tangled heap on the grass.

Oliver shot up into a sitting position. "VENTI, VENTI! OH GOD BRUH THEY COMING!"

Venti gracefully hopped to his feet, dusting himself off. "Oh! Those are just Pyro Slimes!" With a flick of his wrist, an ornate bow materialized in his hands, and he dropped into a battle stance.

Oliver froze, staring at him. "Uh—? Excuse me?" He blinked repeatedly.

Before he could process it, Venti vaulted high into the air. Oliver could barely track his movements as a volley of glowing arrows rained down from the sky.

"VENTI, WHAT IS HAPPENING?!" Oliver shouted over the noise.

Venti landed back on the grass in a dramatic pose: one leg extended, his fist brushing the ground, his other hand gripping the bow tightly. In the background, every single flaming blob dissipated into a cloud of harmless ash.

Oliver stared in absolute awe. "V-Venti?"

The bard stood up straight and glanced over his shoulder, a smug little grin plastered across his face. "I looked so cool just then, didn't I?"

"Cool? That was freaking amazing! I... did you just summon a bow?!"

Venti giggled, then stood back up, and the bow vanished. "Yep! But seriously, stick close to me out here! Sorry I left you unattended for a minute!" Venti laughed, scratching the back of his neck. "Those were some of the monsters I warned you about. They're called Slimes. There are a few different elemental types; those ones were Pyro Slimes." He reached out and gently took Oliver's hands. "I got our supplies! Are you ready for the teleport?"

Oliver took a deep, steadying breath. "I suppose I am."

Venti nodded. He leaned in, pressing a quick, sweet kiss to Oliver's lips, tightened his grip on his hands, and then—with a sudden, rushing breath of wind—

Oliver stumbled slightly as they reappeared, but quickly caught his balance. As his vision adjusted, he realized they were standing on a wooden dock. Bobbing gently on the water in front of them was a compact, enclosed wooden boat.

"W-Whoa? Where are we?" he asked, looking around. "Is this the other nation?"

"Nah, we aren't there yet," Venti said, strolling down the dock toward the vessel. "The nation we're heading to is called Inazuma. It's an archipelago broken up into many different islands. I would have just teleported us all the way there, but I forgot exactly which island that general is stationed on, and I didn't want to subject you to like five rapid-fire teleports in a row."

Venti stepped lightly onto the boat and held his hand out. Oliver eyed the vessel hesitantly, then looked back at Venti. It had a solid roof and a sleek design; it definitely wasn't a simple rowboat. It looked mechanically powered.

"Uh... how does this even work?" Oliver asked, taking Venti's hand and letting the bard guide him aboard.

Venti moved along the deck and popped open the cabin door, gesturing inside. "You control it from in there."

Oliver peeked into the interior. "Huh..." he muttered, taking in the sight. There was a primary control seat and a rows of bench seats stringed along the side. Almost like the Aqua bus. "Y-You're going to drive it, right? Because I don't think I'd be able to figure this out."

Venti nodded reassuringly. "Of course! Why would I make you do something hard like this?" Once they were both inside, Venti pulled the door shut and hopped into the captain's chair.

"Let's go!" The moment Venti settled in, he shoved a heavy lever forward, and the boat smoothly launched away from the dock.

Oliver gasped, grabbing the edges of his bench seat. "Woah— Uh? There was no start-up sequence at all," he marveled.

Venti just chuckled, keeping a light grip on the controls. "The water should be pretty calm today. It's going to take a couple of hours to get there, though. So feel free to take a nap, or just relax. Or... you could keep me company and talk to me, if you want~."

The interior of the Waverider had small bench seats lined up along the sides. Oliver was settled onto the right-side bench and scooted a little closer to Venti. "Dang," Oliver remarked. "A couple of hours? I'm surprised you didn't just teleport us directly."

Venti shrugged casually. "Remember I just said I forgot where the General is. But I kind of just wanted an excuse to chat with you on the way. Plus—not that I really care—but Amber would be super suspicious about how quickly we returned. She doesn't know that I'm Barbatos. Jean does, but not Amber."

Oliver looked at the back of Venti's head. "How many people actually know you're Barbatos?"

Without taking his eyes off the water, Venti shrugged again. "I dunno. I've kinda lost track by now. But I usually only let the people I trust the most know. People who I know won't go babbling about it to the rest of the world, you know?"

Oliver nodded softly. "Okay." He leaned back on the bench, his shoulders hitting the wooden wall behind him. Letting out a calm, contented sigh, he rested his hands on his stomach.

"Hey—" Venti turned his head slightly to look at him. "You should try something. To help with your memory."

Oliver looked up. "What is it?" he asked.

Venti turned his eyes back to the horizon. "You should hum."

Oliver blinked, raising an eyebrow. "Hum?"

"Yeah!" Venti giggled. "Remember when I told you how memory wipes rarely erase the deepest layers of your subconscious? If you love music—assuming your homeworld actually had music—those songs will still be buried somewhere in your mind!" Venti tapped his fingers against the boat's controls, a fond smile

on his face. "So, just hum a tune. It doesn't even have to make sense! Just hum whatever comes to you naturally, and maybe, just maybe, a song from your world will come rushing back!"

Oliver thought about it for a moment. It actually didn't sound like a bad idea. "Huh," he murmured. "Venti, that's actually a really great idea."

"Hmm!" Venti hummed proudly, closing his eyes with a smile.

Oliver took a deep breath, shook out his shoulders to loosen up, and relaxed back against the wall of the Waverider. He began to hum softly to himself. "Hmmm-mmmm-mmmm—"

He caught Venti sneaking a fond glance at him from the corner of his eye. Their eyes met, and Oliver broke into a giggle, stopping his tune. "Venti, stop~ you're distracting me."

Venti snorted. "Gee, am I not even allowed to look at you~? Fine, fine~." He fixed his gaze firmly out the front window.

Oliver smiled warmly, closing his eyes to focus. He picked the melody back up. *"Hmmm-mmm-mmm-mmm-rmmmm..."*

He stayed like that for quite a while. The boat swayed rhythmically as it cut across the waves, the gentle rocking motion lulling him into a deep state of relaxation. His fingers tapped lightly against his exposed midriff in time with his humming. "Hmmm-mmm..."

His mind was totally clear. He wasn't forcing anything, just letting the vibrations soothe him. Even if no memories surfaced, he was happy just to feel this calm.

"Hmm-mrrrrmmm-mmm..."

But then, after a while, Oliver found himself looping a very specific pattern. "Hmm-mmm-mmmm..." His brow furrowed slightly, his eyes still closed. "Hmm-mmm-mmmmm..."

What was that melody? It felt... so profoundly familiar. But he couldn't quite grasp its meaning. He kept at it, tracing the musical loop, until his voice shifted from a closed-mouth hum to an open tune.

"Oooo..."

Oliver's eyes snapped open. He shot a glance at Venti, who was still casually steering the Waverider, before his gaze darted down to the floorboards.

"Ooo..." Oliver blinked, the notes tumbling out of him automatically. "Oooo-eee-oooo..."

He kept going, driven by an invisible force. "Ooo...eee...ooo..."

"Dooo-do-doo... Doooo-do-do..." Oliver squinted hard. A sudden, vivid image flashed into his mind's eye, but it vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

"Man, you're really humming up a storm over there, haha~" Venti giggled softly. "Did something come to mind, love?"

Oliver opened his mouth to reply, but a massive blush flooded his cheeks instead. "L-Love?"

Venti laughed, a bright, airy sound. "I mean, you are mine now. So, I get to call you all sorts of cute nicknames~."

Oliver had half a mind to throw his arms around the bard and squeeze him tight, but he knew better than to tackle the person actively piloting their boat.

"Uh, yeah... something did pop into my mind just then," Oliver admitted.

"Oooh~ Do tell!" Venti beamed.

"Well, it's not much, if you're expecting some grand revelation. Just... a blue blur. That's literally all that popped in there. A blue blur falling down some type of tunnel. That was it." Oliver groaned, sounding more than a little defeated.

Venti just giggled, then reassured Oliver. "That's okay! It's still a start! Looks like my genius plan was a success after all!" He smiled proudly.

Oliver couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah," he smiled softly to himself. "I still don't completely understand why you're dragging me all over Teyvat if you know I'm not from here."

Venti let out an exaggerated sigh. "Ollie~ how many times do I have to tell you? Even if you are from another world—which we're pretty sure you are—there's still something weird going on. Remember, Mondstadt looked familiar to you. So did Fontaine as I have been saying. Unless your home world somehow has two exact replicas of our cities, it's a mystery worth looking into."

Oliver nodded slowly. "You're right. It... it is rather weird how I find comfort and familiarity in these places."

He pushed himself up from the bench and moved over to the captain's chair. Stepping behind Venti, he wrapped his arms securely around the bard's shoulders, leaning his weight forward into the embrace.

Venti gasped softly. "Hehe! Ollie, I'm trying to sail here~" he teased, leaning back into the touch. "You're going to distract me... Oops, it's happening~!"

Oliver pouted playfully, withdrawing his arms and shuffling back to his seat.

Venti let out another bright laugh. "So needy," he teased. "We can cuddle all you want when we're done with this commission and back at the tree."

Oliver slumped against the wall with an exaggerated, theatrical pout, playing along with the joke that he might bee needy for Venti.

Venti snorted. "You absolute dork!" He laughed warmly. "Don't give me those puppy eyes, you cutie~."

Smiling, Oliver decided to shift the conversation. "Hey, I remember you mentioning once that you... have a realm you can sleep in?"

Venti blinked in surprise, then nodded. "Oh, yeah! I did tell you about that. Man, I really just spilled all my deepest secrets to you right off the bat, didn't I? Well, most of them~," he winked playfully before turning his attention back to the ocean. "But yeah, I have a realm for myself."

"You said something about not being able to take me there, though."

"Well, it's not that I'm completely unable to take you, but bringing you through regular teleportation was a risk I took. I really don't want to gamble with bringing you into my personal realm. I've never, ever brought a mortal human in there with me before. Or, well, at least I don't remember ever doing so," Venti explained, his voice softening. "I love you so much now, Ollie. I want to protect you in every single way a god-bard can."

Oliver felt his heart do a massive leap in his chest. Love...

Venti loved him. He desperately wanted to say it back, to shout it from the rooftops, but something heavy and invisible was anchoring his tongue. It wasn't a lack of feeling; he adored the bard. But some deep, buried instinct in his mind was clawing at him, violently preventing the words from slipping past his lips.

"W-We... we really got incredibly close in just a few days," Oliver managed to stammer out.

"That we did, haha!" Venti agreed brightly. "I mean, I've had boyfriends and girlfriends throughout my long life, but... there is just something so incredibly special about you, Oliver. I can't quite put it into words." Venti turned his head to look at him, his eyes filled with absolute sincerity. "You're super funny. You make me laugh so hard. My friends would probably joke that it's just the dandelion wine talking, but nah, it's all you~."

Venti's smile grew impossibly soft. "You're also incredibly cute. Like, so cute. I don't think I've ever seen someone quite as cute as you. And you know the thing I love most? You respect my boundaries. I know I've told you that already, but I really, truly appreciate it. I've never even been the type to be super big on sex—" Venti paused, looking back out at the rolling waves. "But I actually look forward to it with you. I dunno what kind of spell you've cast on me," Venti sighed, a happy, contented sound. "You just know exactly how to melt an old bard's heart~."

Oliver's face had been burning a vibrant, scarlet red for the entire speech. Utterly overwhelmed by affection, embarrassment, and sheer happiness, he let out a muffled groan, slid off the bench, and collapsed onto the wooden floorboards, burying his face in his hands.

Venti caught the dramatic display from his peripheral vision and burst into a fit of laughter. "Bahahaha! What was that?!" he wheezed. "Did I mention how much I love that you're a massive dork? You're too cute!"

Oliver lay flat on his back, staring hopelessly up at the wooden ceiling. Gods, this bard made his heart race. He loved him... so why couldn't he just say it? Oliver sighed heavily. Maybe deep down in my subconscious... there's something wrong with me. Maybe that's what's holding me back...

Slowly, Oliver realized the cabin was getting incredibly stuffy. It was uncomfortably warm. He tugged loosely at the collar of his shirt. And no, it wasn't because Venti made him blush to 100% maximum.

"Whoo—" Venti exhaled loudly, using a hand to fan his flushed face. "It is getting seriously hot in here." He glanced down at Oliver. "Hey, Ollie?"

Oliver looked up from the floor. He already knew what Venti was going to ask. They needed to open a window, or maybe the door. Oliver could feel a bead of sweat rolling down his neck. "Yeah, it's getting hot. Want me to—"

Suddenly, a violent zap flared in Oliver's mind.

"Yeah—" Venti gestured toward the cabin door. "Pop that open so we can get some fresh air in here."

Oliver froze on the floor. His head throbbed intensely for a split second, his eyes widening in shock as he stared at the bard.

The memory. It was flooding back. The clarity returned with brutal force. Oliver opened his mouth, desperate to get the words out. "V-Venti—?!"

But Venti just waved his hand toward the door again. "Ollie, the door? You wouldn't want your poor Bard to melt into a puddle of pyro sludge, would you~?"

Oliver's mind was racing. He had to tell Venti what was going on. He had to finish explaining to Venti what was going on. But he quickly listened to him, and went to open the door.

He really shouldn't have done that, and speak to Venti first.

Because the exact moment the wooden door swung open, allowing the crisp, cool ocean wind to blast into the stuffy cabin, the clarity in Oliver's mind vanished without a trace.

"Whoo!" Venti sighed in absolute relief, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. "Ah, that is much better. Even the Bard of the Winds needs a good breeze to cool off every now and then." He smiled warmly, glancing over his shoulder at his companion.

Oliver stood by the open door, his expression completely blank. For a agonizingly quiet second, there was nothing but static behind his eyes.

And then, just like that, the fog settled, and he was back to normal.

"Yeah, it was getting seriously hot in here," Oliver chuckled, leaning against the open door frame.

"Just make sure to close it soon," Venti warned gently, his hands steady on the wheel. "We wouldn't want the ocean spray splashing in here and making a mess. Don't worry, just a little while longer until we reach the islands!"

Chapter 15: The Islands

"Wait—" Oliver said, looking down at the small stash of supplies Venti had somehow managed to hoard onto the Waverider. Alongside some fresh water were several snacks brought straight from Mondstadt. "When did you even get these on the boat?"

Oliver turned around to look at the bard piloting the boat. Venti didn't look back, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Oh, I just teleported back and forth between the Waverider and Mondstadt a few times before I grabbed you to head over to Liyue," Venti explained casually.

Oliver blinked. "Wait... L-iyue?" He paused, looking around blankly. "That's... how you say it?"

He racked his brain, recalling a slow afternoon a couple of days ago in Mondstadt. He had been looking at a map of Teyvat on the upper floor of the tavern, trying to sound out the nations.

"I-I could have sworn it was pronounced lie-you," Oliver confessed, facepalming.

Venti snorted, instantly bursting into a fit of giggles. "Oh, okay, that is hilarious!" he gasped. "Yeah, no! It's definitely not called that!"

"Never in my life did I expect it to be pronounced lee-way," Oliver muttered, continuing to rummage through the stash.

Venti had clearly prepared for a long trip, though Oliver's eyes narrowed as he spotted three distinct glass bottles of Dandelion Wine. He let out a playful sigh. "Seriously?" He giggled softly.

"Huh? What?" Venti asked, finally turning his head around.

Oliver smirked, holding up one of the bottles. "You're only going to be gone for a few hours. Can't bear to be away from your wine?"

"Nope!" Venti beamed proudly, spinning back to face the front window.

Oliver gently set the bottle down and walked over to stand right beside the bard. For a while, they both stood in a comfortable, therapeutic silence, save for the rhythmic sound of the Waverider cutting through the ocean waves outside.

"You told me you didn't remember where this island was," Oliver said, tilting his head toward Venti. "But aren't you a god? Shouldn't you know all of Teyvat?"

Venti answered softly, his tone shifting to something gentler. "I'm the god of Mondstadt. So, I don't know absolutely everything about Teyvat."

Oliver nodded. "Oh, okay." He thought for a moment before pushing further. "As a god, do you know... everything? Like the past and the future?"

Venti tilted his head toward Oliver, a fond smile breaking across his face. "I can't believe I'm having this conversation with a mortal," he giggled. "But yes. That's a pretty common trait among most Archons."

Oliver narrowed his eyes, trying to piece it together. "But... wouldn't you know about me then? Shouldn't you know for sure if I definitely come from another world or not?"

"That's the thing," Venti replied instantly. "I couldn't. I don't know if you remember, but when we first met and you told me you lost your memories, I placed my hands on your shoulders. I was trying to scan deep into your essence to see where you came from, but I saw absolutely nothing." Venti sighed. "You're a massive mystery, Ollie, and I am highly intrigued to solve it."

"Hmm." Oliver crossed his arms. "So... if you can see the future, does that mean you saw yourself handing these trade papers to the general?"

Venti blinked, then burst out laughing. "Oh Ollie, of course not, dummy~" He giggled. "It doesn't work quite like that. How do I explain this..."

He tapped his chin with one finger while keeping his other hand steady on the boat's controls.

"I can only see the future of major events. Like which god might be throned to rule Mondstadt, how Mondstadt start started, or how it will end. Even if I can't read too much into other nations, I can even see how Teyvat itself will end." Venti shook his head. "I can't see ordinary, everyday things. Like me giving you a box of treats tomorrow, or handing the Traveler a gift, or... the next eventful time we have sex~" He added that last part with a playful wink at his boyfriend.

Oliver had been listening intently, but at that sudden turn of phrase, a massive blush erupted across his face. He whipped around, hiding his expression.

"Ventiiiii!" he whined. "Don't rile me up while you're driving a boat!"

"What?" Venti giggled. "Sex on the water sounds hot~"

"Oh god—" Oliver covered his face.

Venti snorted. "Anyway, yeah... oh boy, if I could actually see everything, I'd go completely mad, Ollie. And I think that goes for anyone. It would give me a real reason to drink this much wine, haha."

Oliver sighed and looked back at Venti, eager to change the subject. "So only big things. Hmm... Teyvat ending? How exactly does it end?"

Venti's expression turned somber for a brief moment. "It's something I try not to focus on. It won't happen in the timeline of anyone I currently know. But it will happen way down the road, to whoever comes after. I won't know them unless they are incredibly important to the entirety of Teyvat. But hey! It won't happen for a very, very long time at least."

Oliver could see the underlying weight in Venti's eyes. It looked like Teyvat was destined to go south somewhere down the line, and there was absolutely nothing the bard could do to stop it.

Venti cleared his throat, breaking the heavy mood. "I think this is also why I fell for you so quickly." He glanced at Oliver. "The whole 'not being from here' thing, I mean. I don't often date people from Mondstadt. I view them all as my children. If I ever dated before, it was usually people from surrounding nations. Though... I have accidentally slipped up and dated people without realizing they were from Mondstadt first, but I was already so deep in my feelings before figuring it out, haha." Venti smiled.

Oliver leaned against the chair Venti was sitting in. "Well, even if I was from Mondstadt, it's a bit too late now."

Venti snorted. "Yeah, we banged twice," he giggled. "No turning back now."

Oliver groaned, burying his burning face into the crook of Venti's neck.

"Also, you played with my belly button a ton~"

"Ventiiiii!" Oliver whined against his skin.

Venti giggled teasingly. "Hehehehehe~"

Oliver sighed, leaning heavily against Venti. Venti tried to playfully push him off. "Hey! What did I say before? I'm driving a boat here!" he smiled. But Oliver dodged his hands and managed to plant a swift kiss on Venti's cheek.

Venti just sighed, his shoulders dropping as he gripped the wheel again. "Ahh, when did you get so bold, huh~?" He glanced up at Oliver standing over him.

Oliver shrugged, a smug smile on his face. "Me kissing you just now—did you see that in the future?"

Venti giggled again. "Ollie, I told you that's not how it works, haha!" He shook his head. "Only major, world-changing events!"

Oliver had been planning this trap for the last few seconds. "Oh? So me kissing you isn't an important event? HA!" He dramatically threw his hand up and turned away. "How dare you~"

The theatrical tone caught Venti off guard, making him snort. "Ollie, that's—" He turned his head and saw Oliver sitting on the bench behind him, smirking. When their eyes met, Oliver playfully stuck his tongue out, trying to stifle his own laughter.

"Oh dear," Venti let out a breathless chuckle. "I'm rubbing off on you~"

Oliver smiled softly. "I don't know how I feel about that—"

"Oh, shut up~" Venti giggled, turning back to the controls. "Better hang on, we're approaching land. I just hope it's the right island." He pulled the lever down, slowing the Waverider to a crawl, then to a stop.

Venti glanced back at Oliver as he stood up and walked toward the back of the boat, picking up a box nestled among their supplies.

"This is the paperwork from Jean and Amber. Honestly, if you weren't here... well, to be fair, I probably wouldn't have volunteered to help them, ehehe~ But if I somehow did, I would've just used the wind to drop these papers right on the general's head." Venti hoisted the box. "But I'm far too lazy to use my powers like that right now."

Oliver blinked in disbelief. "You're too lazy to do something that makes it easier?"

"Well, more like I don't want the general to deal with raining paperwork," Venti said, stepping toward the door. "He does not me know me, and he'd definitely babble to the Knights about what happened letting all who know did not know about the true me, know about the true me now, haha,"

Venti gestured to the door, "Care to open it for me, babe~? Your poor bard's hands are completely full~" He said, giving the box in his hand a small glance.

Oliver shook his head. This man was unreal. "You are incredibly confusing sometimes..."

"Hehehe~" Venti giggled.

"Like..." Oliver reached over and pushed the Waverider door open. "You've told me so much, but it still feels like there's a whole world more to you."

"Oh, maybe~" Venti said playfully. "I don't have to reveal everything at once~ Maybe when the time is right."

Venti stepped out onto the island, with Oliver following closely behind. The environment was massive, and the atmosphere was entirely different from anything Oliver had experienced since waking up in Mondstadt.

"Wow... this is a totally different vibe," Oliver murmured, looking around in astonishment. "Look at the trees. They're different shades of purple. Like... It looks straight-up magical or something."

"Yeah," Venti nodded. "Pretty, isn't it? Come on, let's see if we can locate the General."

Oliver nodded. Suddenly, a wave of intense heat flared up right behind them. A Pyro Slime had spawned. Before Oliver could even think, a sudden spark zapped through his mind.

"Oh, you mean Gorou?"

The words slipped out unexpectedly. He didn't even know where the name came from. Feeling the heat intensifying behind him, he turned to see what it was, then, he gasped. "VENTI!"

Venti was already moving. He dropped the box, instantly materialized his bow, and shot a single, precise bolt at the slime. It popped out of existence.

Oliver let out a heavy sigh of relief. "How does anyone survive those things? They're everywhere. I'm glad you haven't taken me into the dangerous depths of Teyvat yet." He looked up at Venti, who was busy picking the box back up. "They're really hot... but honestly, not as hot as you."

Venti blinked, turning back to Oliver with a grin. "Wow," he laughed. "That was smooth~ OK, Mr. Bold-Pants, I see you." He giggled.

Oliver laughed, jogging to keep pace with Venti. "Yeah, I'm the king of pickup—" He abruptly tripped over his own feet. "WOAH—"

His eyes went wide as he desperately scrambled for balance. Snapping back into a normal stride, he brushed himself off, let out a nervous cough, and looked back at Venti, continuing as if nothing had happened. "—lines."

That did it. Venti completely lost it again.

"BAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The box slipped from his hands once more. Just like back on the lift in Fontaine, Venti collapsed onto the ground, entirely consumed by laughter. Oliver's face flushed a deep, bright red. You'd think he'd be used to the bard's chaotic laughing fits by now, but it still caught him entirely off guard.

"HahaaHahahahhHHahahah!" Venti cackled on the dirt path, his legs kicking slightly as he clutched his stomach.

Oliver's blush deepened. "O-Okay, Venti... stop it now," he mumbled, nervously glancing around at a few locals who were starting to stare at them. "P-People are watching..."

Venti just laughed harder. Taking a few breathless, wheezing gasps, his arms went limp for a second before he finally dragged himself up. "Okay, okay, I'm good now." He let out a small cough and bent down to grab the box. "Oh my word, your face... the way your eyes went so wide... the way you tripped... the—PFFFT!"

Venti dropped the box again, doubling over in a fresh wave of cackling.

"Oh, COME ON, VENTI!" Oliver snapped.

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After Venti's millionth laugh attack, the two finally resumed walking to find the general.

"Sometimes the general just hangs around specific spots," Venti explained, wiping away a stray tear. "He could be stationed anywhere on this island. I just hope we find him quickly. I could use the wind to listen for him, but I've never actually met him, so I don't know his voice. I only know what he looks like because of a picture the Knights of Favonius had." Venti glanced sideways at Oliver. "Though... I am a little confused about what you did earlier."

Oliver blinked. "This better not be about me tripping over air again."

Venti bit his lip, dangerously close to another laughing fit. "Okay—" a few chuckles leaked out. "If I start cackling again, it's officially your fault! Ehehe~ I'm trying to be serious here!"

Oliver sighed, crossing his arms as they walked.

Venti cleared his throat, forcing the giggles down. "So, right when we stepped off the boat and I mentioned the general, you blurted out his name."

Oliver blinked. "I... I did?"

Venti nodded.

"I don't know, maybe you mentioned it before?"

"Oliver, no. I haven't," Venti said, looking straight ahead. "I've been calling him 'the General' this entire time. I never use his actual name when Jean or anyone else brings him up, and I certainly never said it to you. How could you possibly know his name? The only way would be if you saw it on some papers when I brought you to the Knights of Favonius headquarters a few days ago... but nah, you were glued to my side the entire time."

Oliver flushed, crossing his arms defensively. "Hey, that building was massive. I was terrified of getting lost."

Venti giggled before turning serious again. "But back to the point: how did you know his name? I was going to ask right then, but then that Pyro Slime showed up and put all my questions on hold."

"...I really don't know why I said it. Honestly, I don't even remember saying it!"

Venti sighed softly. "I really wish I could see into your past. Normally, I can't look into someone's life like that, but if I form a deep connection with them, I can usually see glimpses. But with you, I hit a total wall. It just proves that you really are from..."

"Another world," Oliver finished for him. "I know. You already told me."

"Yes, but..." Venti sighed, shaking his head. "Your subconscious is so confusing. It's clear your soul belongs to a different world, but your reaction to Mondstadt looking familiar is one thing... calling someone by their exact name without ever hearing it while your memory is completely wiped? That is incredibly strange. Have you ever traveled to Teyvat before?" He looked over at Oliver. "Could you be like a Traveler? World-hopping back and forth? I don't know, I'm running out of theories. I feel like I definitely would have run into you if you've been here before."

Oliver shoved his hands into his pockets. He desperately wished he understood what was going on inside his own head. "Venti... it feels so weird when this happens. It's incredibly uncomfortable knowing that I know something, but I can't actually remember it. It's a horrible feeling."
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Without hesitation, Venti dropped the box once more, instantly pulling Oliver into a tight hug.

"Shh, it's okay. I'm sorry for rambling on. I didn't mean to make you feel anxious," he murmured, gently rubbing Oliver's back before kissing his cheek. "I'm just naturally curious. And, as always, Venti is incredibly impulsive." He chuckled softly against him. "Sorry."

He pulled back slightly. "But I promise you, we will get to the bottom of this. And yes, I remember everything you told me. Like about that Doctor Barclay guy. Well, oh crap—" Venti groaned, playfully thumping his forehead against Oliver's chest while holding his shoulders. "I totally forgot you don't even remember talking about that person either!"

"Y-Yeah, I don't," Oliver said, resting his chin on top of Venti's head. "But I remember you telling me I said it. It's been stuck in my head ever since."

"Please don't overstress yourself over it," Venti said, hugging him a bit tighter. "Overthinking is a Venti trait. Don't go stealing my job."

Oliver blinked. "Huh?"

Venti let out a quick cough. "Anyway! Come on!" He pulled away, though not before planting a sweet, big smooch right on Oliver's lips. "We need to get this to the general!" He looped back, scooped up the box, and beamed. "Let's go!" He said tilting his head to the side, then turned around.

"Is it going to take forever to find him?" Oliver asked. "Because I fear if you only know what he looks like, and a name, it may take-,"

"Wow," Venti interrupted suddenly. "There he is! Well, that was easy!"

Oliver looked ahead and spotted a nearby village. The place looked like something plucked straight out of a fantasy novel. They were standing right at the entrance of the village, where two figures stood talking.

One was quite small, noticeably feminine, and sported actual dog ears on his head. The other was a towering, muscular man with prominent horns.

"Uhhh... which one is the general?" Oliver muttered under his breath.

"Come on, let's go!" Venti nudged him forward, holding the box.

They walked up to the duo by the wall. Oliver cleared his throat, instinctively stepping toward the massive, muscular man to address him. But out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Venti walking straight past him toward the dog boy.

"You're the general, right?" Venti beamed, presenting the box. "This is the trade deal paperwork straight from the Knights of Favonius in Mondstadt!"

The dog boy gasped, a warm smile breaking across his face. "Oh, thank you! I wasn't expecting these to be delivered so quickly... and by a bard, no less! Haha!" The general laughed softly.

Oliver blinked rapidly, looking back and forth between the actual general and the muscular man standing right in front of him. "The femboy dog is the general and not the macho-man over here?"

"HUH?!" The general let out a startled, high-pitched squeak, his eyes widening in pure shock as he stared at Oliver.

Venti bit his lip so hard it turned white, instantly looking away as a massive wave of laughter threatened to explode out of him again.

Well, that came out of Oliver's mouth without him even thinking. "I-I mean- I..."

"Ghh-rk~" Venti squeaked, fighting for his life to suppress the laugh.

The muscular man burst into a laugh, throwing his hands onto his hips. "Hahaha! Man, I wish I was the general! But knowing my luck, they'd probably kick me out on day one!"

The general was just staring at Oliver. *"The heck is a **femboy?!"***

Venti took a sharp, dramatic gulp to force down the impending hysterics, turning back to the general to salvage the conversation. "So, yes! That's the paperwork!"

The general blinked, clearing his throat. "Um... right! I'll get these all sorted out." He gripped the box tightly, casting one more suspicious glance at Oliver before looking back at Venti. "Your assistant over there is definitely a strange one."

Venti just giggled.

The general turned to leave. "Will I see you later when these are processed, or will it be Jean or someone else from the Knights?"

"Most likely Jean or someone else! I'm just helping out for the day!"

"Alright!" the general called out as he walked away. "Come on, Itto!"

Once they were out of earshot, Venti playfully nudged Oliver's arm. "Oh babe, you're going to be the death of me," he smiled. "You can't just call the general that to his face!"

"I'm sorry! It just slipped out! I was seriously expecting the giant, buff guy to be the general... not a dog boy in a crop top!"

Venti snorted loudly. "Babe, that wasn't even a crop top!" he laughed. "I mean, sure, it's revealing, but it's not meant to be sexy. Now, if you want to talk about revealing and sexy, you should see my Archon clothes~" Venti offhandedly teased.

Oliver blinked. "W-Wait, your what now?"

Venti snorted.

Oliver blinked again, stopping in his tracks. "No, no, no. What exactly is this 'Archon outfit'?"

Venti giggled. "Oh, just something I know would send that little belly button fetish of yours into absolute overdrive~"

Oliver gasped, his entire face flushing a violent crimson. "I—?! HUH?!"

Venti burst into full-blown laughter. "HAHAHAHA! YOUR FACE! OH MY WORD, HAHAHA!"

Oliver groaned, burying his face in his hands. "It really feels like you're withholding crucial information from me..."

Venti snorted. "Crucial information? What, because of your cute little belly button obsession?" He giggled adorably.

Oliver rolled his eyes, looking away to hide his smile. "Stop,"

Attempting to save face, he quickly changed the subject. "Not gonna lie, though. I was incredibly tempted to pet the general's ears."

Venti let out another loud snort. "Pfft~ Trust me, he absolutely hates that!" He smiled warmly. "Or at least, that's what the Traveler told me. You know who does like that, though? Tighnari. He might seem strict and acts like he's above that kind of stuff, but he'll actually let you feel his long ears if you just ask him nicely~"

Oliver narrowed his eyes as they continued down the path. "Tighnari?"

"Yeah!" Venti beamed. "He lives over in Sumeru."

Oliver stopped dead in his tracks yet again. "Sum-... Seriously?!" He faceplanted into his hands, shaking his head. "I am actually stupid."

Venti's eyes widened as he looked at him. "Huh? What's wrong?"

"Sumeru..." Oliver clicked his tongue in absolute defeat. "I swear it was pronounced as SUMMER-RUE on that freakin' map! I literally read 'Sumer' as 'Summer'. BRUH!"

Venti completely lost it, leaning heavily against Oliver for physical support as a fresh wave of giggles took over.

"Geez, I saw the map said part of it was a desert, so I thought it was just called 'Summer-rue' because it was hot. Wow."

Venti laughed even harder, burying his face right into his boyfriend's neck. "Oh my god, you are so incredibly silly!" he giggled.

"There was another town I saw, and I definitely read that one wrong too," Oliver muttered.

Venti chuckled, finally standing back up and wiping his eyes. "Which one?"

"Nateland," Oliver said flatly.

Venti blinked, and then—

"PFFFHAHAHAHA!"

He clutched his stomach, completely doubling over. "Oliver, NOHOHO! There isn't even an 'E' in Natlan! And it's definitely not 'land'! Where on earth did you get 'Nateland' from?!"

Oliver looked away, completely embarrassed. "I think I genuinely need to get my eyes checked."

"Your reading comprehension too~" Venti teased, nudging him playfully.

"Hey!"Oliver snapped, but giggled softly.

Chapter 16: His Vision

Oliver and Venti were making their way back to Mondstadt. The waverider was cutting through the calm waters.

Venti let out a soft sigh, his hands lightly gripping the boat's controls. "So," he started, glancing over to Oliver. "What do you wanna do once we get back to Mondstadt? After we check in with Jean, I mean. Do you want to chill, or..."

"I dunno," Oliver replied. He was leaning comfortably against Venti's side, standing while the bard relaxed in the boat's control chair. "Maybe we can chill? Or, well, maybe something will crop up." He smiled thoughtfully. "I kinda didn't mind helping the Knights out. Though... I didn't really do much."

Venti let out a small, playful sigh. "Ugh, don't tell me you're thinking of joining the Knights of Favonius~," he teased, dragging out the syllables. "You'll drag me into helping you!"

Oliver looked down at him. "You say that as if it's a bad thing," he chuckled. "No wonder that small floating girl called you lazy~."

"Hey, stop!" Venti yelled defensively, though a bright smile betrayed him. He turned to the right to face Oliver and gave him a quick, affectionate kiss. "Do you mind getting one of my wine bottles, love?" he asked.

Oliver blinked, looking from Venti to the pile of supplies stashed at the back of the Waverider. "Uhh... are you sure it's okay to be drinking and driving a boat?"

Venti just beamed. "Hehe! It's fine! Remember, I don't get drunk easily. One bottle will do absolutely nothing to me—it'll be the equivalent of me drinking non-alcoholic grape juice!"

Conceding the point, Oliver made his way to the back, picked up one of the bottles, and brought it over to the bard.

"Thanks, cutie~," Venti said, taking the bottle. He popped the cork out with his teeth, spat it to the side, and took a drink straight from the bottle like he always does. Lowering it, he set the bottle down in front of him near the front window. "Hey, remember I brought some snacks from Mondstadt? They should all be back there. I'm sure you're hungry, and we're not going to be back for a while. I still don't wanna take any chances with teleporting and arriving back too soon. Not sure if we're meeting Jean or someone else, so I don't want to risk it."

Venti had definitely brought a lot of things.

There were bags upon bags stacked together. "Ha... I may have overdone it," Venti chuckled, scratching the back of his head. "They're all in individual boxes. I kinda overworked poor Sara this morning," he smiled guiltily. "But don't worry! I paid her this time, using some funds I made from performing over the last couple of days."

Oliver rummaged through the bags and picked up a box marked Moon Pie.

Venti glanced at him in the reflection of the glass. "That's Moon Pie," he helpfully pointed out.

Oliver opened the box and took a hearty bite, then paused, blinking as he stared down at the pastry. "I swear I thought this was a dessert—"

Venti snorted, struggling to hold back a giggle. "Oof. Yeah, it's savory, not sweet."

"It's still tasty," Oliver mumbled, taking another bite as he walked back over to Venti. "Maybe when we go back—" he paused to chew, "—I can watch you perform like the last few days."

Venti smiled, a faint blush dusting his cheeks. "You like watching me sing, huh?"

"I honestly have no idea what half of your songs are actually about, but it's nice."

Venti's smile softened. "Yeah. I mean, with you coming from a different world, my songs would actually mean nothing to you. I'm a god here, but you're not from here, so you're not required to worship me."

"Oh, is that what those songs are about?" Oliver asked.

"Yeah," Venti nodded. "I mostly sing them not because they're about me, but because they're about freedom. Which is kind of my whole thing. I love seeing people be free, you know? So, I love singing about it. The people of Mondstadt... well, they don't really know who I am, but they respect 'Venti' because he's someone who keeps the tradition of Barbatos' love for freedom alive."

Oliver let out a quiet sigh, finishing off his Moon Pie before leaning comfortably against Venti once again. "It must be hard to... live a double life like that."

"Eh," Venti shrugged nonchalantly. "It ain't all that bad." He reached over from the wheel, grabbing his bottle to take another sip.

Oliver watched Venti drink, his gaze trailing down to Venti's lap where a familiar glowing orb caught his eye. "Hey? What is that thing, exactly? I meant to ask you about it earlier," he said, pointing at it.

Venti glanced down. "Oh, you mean this?" He lifted the glowing pendant attached to his hip. "It's my Vision," he replied. "Though, mind you, this one I have is fake."

Oliver squinted, his curiosity piqued. He had a few questions. What exactly was it, and why was it fake?

"I'll try to loosely explain," Venti started, gesturing with his free hand. "Okay, so select people here are gifted Visions by the higher gods in Celestia. But Archons like me don't use Visions. We use something called a Gnosis." Venti flashed a quick, cheeky smile. "Heh, my Vision is fake! It's nothing but a glass case with some thick paper with the Anemo logo on it!" He laughed, looking up at Oliver.

Oliver looked thoroughly confused. "Huh? Why is it fake, then?"

"Because gods like me don't have Visions. But I use Vision-like powers because of my Gnosis. Remember, I'm trying to blend in as a human. So a fake Vision helps me keep up the act."

Oliver nodded in understanding. "Ah, okay. I get it now. So no one will be suspicious of you using powers?"

"Exactly!" Venti beamed.

"So... I guess with that Gnosis thing, it... lets you summon that bow?"

"Well, I—" Venti started, but Oliver kept his train of thought going, and continued to talk.

"It's strange," Oliver blinked, staring out at the water. "Before you came back, when I was near those slimes, a... a sword actually appeared in my hands. And... I could have sworn I was using different elements."

Venti gasped slightly, his head snapping over to look at Oliver. He blinked gently, processing the information, before turning his eyes back to the ocean. "Every day you sound more and more like the Traveler."

Oliver looked at him in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes. The Traveler... well, I won't say everything that I know about him, but he's able to use the elements without a Vision or a Gnosis. And he's definitely no Archon like me. It's something about him touching the Statues of The Seven..." Venti glanced back up at his boyfriend. "Upon waking up in Mondstadt, do you remember coming into contact with any large Statues?"

Oliver blinked, searching his memories... the ones of being here in Teyvat so far. "Uhhh... no? Not that I can recall."

"Interesting," Venti muttered, tapping the wheel. "I doubt you have a Gnosis. Though, as Archons, we don't truly need one either."

"You don't need one? How come?" Oliver asked.

"They're a big part of us, yes, but... one day a few years ago, I was attacked. This lady came out of nowhere, ripped it out of me, and kicked me to the ground—"

Oliver's breath hitched, a sharp gasp escaping his lips. "WHO DID THAT TO YOU!?" His voice rang out, laced with a fierce, sudden anger that surprised even himself.

Venti jumped, utterly caught off guard. "W-Woah! Hahaha!" Venti broke into a laugh, waving his hands. "Babe, babe! It's okay! Hold on, let me finish—"

Oliver coughed, his face flushing a deep crimson. "S-Sorry, I—"

Venti giggled warmly, leaning over to press a quick kiss to Oliver's cheek. "It's okay! Awww~ you care about me so much~."

Oliver blinked, though his eyes remained narrowed in protective frustration. "Honestly, I'd kill that lady myself for hurting you."

Venti snorted. "Babe, babe! Calm down!" he laughed. "The thing is... I saw her coming. I already knew it was going to happen."

Oliver tilted his head, confusion replacing his anger. Then, he gasped. "Oh... Oh wow! Was... so that was an important event? Like what you told me?"

Venti quickly shook his head. "Well, not exactly. You see, my old Gnosis held my full power as an Archon. You remember when we talked about what you just brought up? About whether I can see the future? Well, before my Gnosis was stolen, I actually could see literally everything. I joked about it, but yes... I could see everyday things like me giving... oh, I dunno, Diluc a flower as appreciation for his delicious wines," Venti sighed softly. "So, I saw her coming. I always did. And I let her take it, because I didn't want that full power of an Archon anymore."

Oliver listened intently, trying to wrap his head around the weight of it all. Actually having all that power, being able to see anything and everything across the past, present, and future? "Oh wow... I... that's insane."

"We lower-tier gods are supposed to be granted all those things, but many of us don't want it. Zhongli gave his away too. I don't know for what reason, but I'm sure it was similar to mine," Venti giggled. "But he just gave his away. Of course, I had to pick the most convoluted way to get rid of mine."

Oliver couldn't help but laugh at that. "Yeah, that sounds like you."

"Though—" Venti pointed down to the 'fake' Vision on his hip. "I ended up putting some of the power from the Gnosis into this befre she took it. So, I guess in a way, it's not all that fake? I didn't want to get rid of all my powers. Just the ones I didn't want anymore. I still wanted to live long to make sure my people are safe, I still wanted to fly and control the wind, and I definitely still wanted my high intolerance to wine!" Venti added the last part with a playful wink.

"Of course!" Oliver laughed, shaking his head. "Can't give up your wine addiction, can you?"

"Never!" Venti beamed, proudly fiddling with the Vision. "Yeah. So seven years ago, this was all fake. Not so fake now. Though, admittedly, not as strong as some other people's Visions." Venti leaned back against his chair. "Anyway, don't worry, we'll get to Mondstadt soon. If you want, you can take a nap~."

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The two arrived back in Mondstadt a few hours later. The sky was darkening, the sun dipping below the horizon as nighttime set in. They made their way to the Knights of Favonius headquarters and checked in at Jean's office.

Jean was incredibly grateful for Venti's assistance. "Thank you, Venti! But seriously, you didn't have to drive all that way with the Waverider. Amber and the others aren't even here! You really didn't have to go through all of that trouble."

Venti chuckled, throwing his arm casually over Oliver's shoulders. "Ah, it's okay! It was nice to spend some more time with this adorable thing outside of Mondstadt~," he teased, gently squeezing Oliver.

Oliver giggled, a soft blush spreading across his face as he was pulled into Venti's side.

"Well, I appreciate you both for doing this for me. I just hope General Gorou signs that paperwork soon."

Venti smiled brightly. "You're welcome!" He pulled away from Oliver and gave him a gentle nudge. "Come on, let's go get something to eat for dinner at Sara's."

They turned toward the door, about to leave.

"Oh! Venti!" Jean called out, halting them in their tracks. "I'm sorry to bug you and Oliver again, but this will be quick." She reached down below her desk, retrieving a set of keys. "The Traveler was here this afternoon, but he seems to have left his hotel keys behind—" she held them out, offering them to the bard. "If you find him, could you give these to him?"

Venti nodded, swiping the keys. "Sure thing!"

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"Hey—" Venti paused outside the headquarters, handing the keys over to Oliver. "I think the Traveler might actually be up in his hotel room. You should bring these to him personally, so you can meet him properly! You haven't really spoken to him since you've been here."

Oliver looked at the keys in his palm. "Oh... there's a hotel here?"

"Yeah," Venti nodded, gesturing down toward the lower parts of the city. "The Goth Grand Hotel. The Traveler pays for a room there with the Mora he's made since he arrived. I don't know why he was so careless as to leave his key behind, though. It's right over there—" Oliver followed Venti's finger and spotted the large, imposing building. "Go on in, ask for him, and hand him the key. I'll wait for you at Good Hunter."

Oliver nodded, pocketing the keys. "Okay, I'll be off then."

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Oliver pushed open the heavy double doors and stepped inside the grand lobby of the hotel. He glanced around, but there was no one manning the front desk. "Oh crap... I was hoping someone was there so I could just hand them the key..." He walked directly up to the counter, peering over it. "I wonder how much a room is here?" he muttered to himself.

He quickly shook his head, dismissing the thought. "Nah, sharing a hammock with Venti is way better."

Oliver looked down at the brass key tag in his hand.

Room 210

"I guess... I can just head up there on my own," Oliver decided. He found the grand staircase and made his way up to the second floor. His shoes padded softly against the carpet as he walked down the dimly lit hallway, checking the brass numbers on each door.

Room 207. Then 208, 209, and finally, 210.

"Hey... uh? Traveler?" Oliver rapped his knuckles firmly against the wooden door. "Hello?"

Silence greeted him. There was absolutely no noise coming from inside. "Wait a minute. Is he even inside?" Oliver grabbed the brass knob and gave it a twist. It held firm. "Okay... it's locked." He looked back up at the door number just to double-check. It was definitely the right room. "Huh. He has to be inside. He couldn't have locked the door from the outside if he doesn't have his key."

He knelt down, peering at the gap at the bottom of the door to see if he could simply slide the key underneath, but the clearance was far too tight.

"Okay—" Oliver made up his mind. He stood back up, slotting the key into the lock. "I'll just drop these off inside." He turned the key, hearing a click, and pushed the door open, peering cautiously inside.

"Wow..." The room was incredibly cozy. A large, plush bed sat on one side, surrounded by elegant wooden furnishings and warm lighting. There was even a beautiful balcony overlooking the city. "Looks a lot cozier than the hotel in Fontaine," he muttered in appreciation. Stepping fully inside, he called out once more. "Traveler, are you here? You left your keys back at the Knights' headquarters!"

Oliver stood in the center of the room, looking around. "He's not here," he said, shaking his head in confusion. "Okay, that makes no sense. The door was locked. He should be inside." He walked over toward the right side of the room near the bed. "Traveler? Are you out on the balcony?"

He wasn't. Oliver sighed heavily, turning back toward the center of the room. "I should probably wait for him to come back. It wouldn't feel right to just leave the keys unattended in here." He crossed his arms, tapping his foot. "Great. What did I get myself into? Poor Venti is going to be waiting forever for me to come back—"

Oliver's sentence died in his throat. His eyes had locked onto something sitting innocently on a dresser on the far side of the room. He squinted, stepping closer.
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It was a glowing, intricately designed golden teapot.

"Hmm," Oliver mumbled, tilting his head. "Is that... a teapot?" He walked right up to the dresser, inspecting the curious object. "Is that some form of decor for the room? Or is it a tea pot to use? Why is it just sitting out here?"

Without thinking, Oliver reached out a hand. "I don't recall teapots being a normal form of decoration—"

The exact moment his fingertips brushed against the cold brass of the spout, a violent, pulling sensation seized his body. The room around him warped and twisted into a blur of colors, and in the blink of an eye, Oliver vanished completely from Room 210.

Chapter 17: Inside The Teapot

A sudden flash of light flared, and then—*BAM!*

Oliver hit the ground hard, sending a spray of dirt and grass into the air. With a rough cough and a heavy groan, he slowly peeled himself off the earth.

"Oh, god," he mumbled, shaking his dizzy head. "Ugh..." He swayed, nearly toppling over again before finally finding his footing.

He blinked, squinting against the harsh glare. "Where... where am I?" Hot sunlight beat down on his shoulders. "Okay, it... it was just night a second ago," he muttered, rubbing his eyes. He blinked rapidly, his gaze darting around the unfamiliar landscape.

Lush grass surrounded him, leading up to a large, elegant wooden house. A serene lake shimmered nearby. "Am I..." he started, his mind flashing back to the peculiar teapot he had just touched. "Am I inside the—"

He cut himself off as he turned to his left. There, kneeling by a modest garden and digging in the dirt, was the Traveler.

Oliver stared. "Wait... that's him. What's he doing here?" He approached slowly. The Traveler was busy pulling vegetables—what looked like carrots—from the soil.

"Um, hello?" Oliver offered softly, standing just behind him.

"AHH?!" The Traveler spun around with a terrified gasp, instinctively hurling a freshly picked carrot straight at Oliver's face.

His yes widened, "OUCH!" Oliver yelped, stumbling backward as the root vegetable bounced off his nose and hit the ground.

Regaining his balance, Oliver saw the Traveler standing now, though looking incredibly confused.

"Wait a second, you're the guy Venti met," the Traveler said, raising a suspicious eyebrow. "How are you inside my Serenitea Pot?" He paused, stuttering as the reality set in. "W-Wait, how did you even get into my room?!"

"H-Hold on," Oliver stammered, frantically digging into his pockets for the hotel key. It was empty. Crap, he thought. He must have left it in the room, or he dropped it during the warp. He looked back at the Traveler.

"I think it dropped," Oliver confessed. "Uh, I-I was helping Jean out, and she asked me to bring you your hotel key because you left it in her office."

The Traveler blinked, his guarded expression instantly softening. "Shoot. I did?" He dusted the soil off his hands. "Well, thank you. I had no idea I'd even lost it."

Oliver tilted his head. "Wait... but then, how did you get in your room?"

"The door was already open," the Traveler explained with a shrug. "I figured the cleaning staff just forgot to lock it. I walked right in and locked it." He stepped a bit closer. "Do you have the key on you now?"

"I... I think I dropped it right as I got sucked in here," Oliver admitted. "It should be back in the hotel room." He glanced at the sprawling nice house and the garden. "Uh... how do I get out of here, exactly?"

The Traveler placed a hand on Oliver's shoulder and snapped his fingers on the other hand.

Suddenly, the scenery warped, and the two of them materialized back inside the hotel room.

Oliver gasped, his knees buckling slightly. "Ah?!" He whipped his head toward the Traveler. "Wait, you can teleport around, too?!"

The Traveler chuckled, shaking his head. "Not on my own. Only in and out of the teapot. Though, I can use the Statues of The Seven to teleport."

Kind of like Venti, Oliver thought. But not quite the same... he doesn't seem like he can teleport wherever he wants.

"So, where's that key?" the Traveler asked.

"Oh! It's..." Oliver scanned the table holding the magical teapot, his eyes tracking down to the floor. There it was, resting near the front leg of the table. "Right there." He crouched down, retrieved the small key, and dropped it into the Traveler's waiting palm. "Here you go."

"Thank you," the Traveler said genuinely.

Oliver rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a flush of embarrassment. "Sorry I basically barged in. The door was locked when I tried it, and no one answered my knocking. I realized I had the key, and the front desk worker was gone, so I didn't have anyone safe to hand it off to."

"I guess Paimon didn't hear you?" the Traveler said.

Oliver raised an eyebrow. "That tiny girl who was with you? She's in here?"

The Traveler nodded toward the bed, gesturing to a tiny, barely noticeable lump beneath the thick blankets.

"Okay," Oliver laughed softly. "There was no way I was going to spot her."

The Traveler laughed along with him. "Yeah she's pretty much lost under the blanket."

"Good thing I didn't decide to take a seat on the bed," Oliver joked, shaking his head.

"That would have been a disaster," the Traveler giggled, resting a hand on his hip as he cleared his throat. "So, how are things with your memory? Paimon mentioned Venti is trying to help you piece it back together."

"Oh!" Oliver perked up. "Yeah... we're still working on it. I have absolutely no clue when I'll get it all back. I've had a few moments where things slip back into place, apparently, but they usually wipe away less than five seconds later." He sighed, though a fond smile touched his lips. "But Venti has been an incredible help. I'm really grateful."

The Traveler smiled warmly. "I'm glad. And again, thanks for the key. I definitely would have woken up tomorrow in a panic, haha."

Oliver returned the smile and pivoted to leave. He made it a few steps before the Traveler caught his arm. "Wait a second... your hair—"

Oliver paused, looking back as the blond adventurer inspected his braid.

"Weird. Your hair looks just like mine, just a different color. I never realized." the Traveler noted with a playful grin. "Strange. Are you trying to copy me or something?" He giggled.

Oliver hadn't thought much of it. He'd noticed the similarity before, and so had Venti, but they usually just shrugged it off. Wait... Venti?

Oh, shit... Venti!

"Oh crap!" Oliver gasped, his eyes widening in horror. "Venti has been waiting for me at Good Hunter for so long! I have to go!" Then he reached for the door. "Bye Aether!"

"Oh! Alright! See you around!" the Traveler waved as Oliver bolted out the door. Then, he blinked. "Wait, what? H-How do you know my-," But Oliver was already gone.

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Sure enough, Venti was waiting by the Good Hunter counter, his arms loosely folded. Fortunately, he didn't look frustrated in the slightest about waiting so long. When he spotted Oliver sprinting over, he pushed off the wall with a bright smile.

"There you are!" Venti teased. "Gee, I was starting to think Traveler kidnapped you."

Oliver chuckled, panting slightly as he reached the bard. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Ready?"

Venti nodded emphatically. "Yes! But please, order something different this time. No more Sticky Honey Roast~," he giggled, shooting Oliver a playful look. "You've had that like four nights in a row."

Oliver rolled his eyes with a good-natured smirk. "Fine, fine... I'll try something else."

Sara stood patiently behind the counter, ready for their order.

"I think I'll take a break from apples today," Venti announced with a smile. "Just because I know Oliver is going to get on my case for telling him to branch out while I did not." He threw a playful glare at Oliver before glancing back at the menu. "Uhhh... OOH! You have Buoyant Breeze tonight! I think I'll have that!"

Sara nodded, jotting it down.

Venti beamed, turning to Oliver. "That's my absolute favorite dish. I mean, I like her apple salad, but I really, really love Buoyant Breeze. It is sooo good. I even got the Traveler hooked on it back when we cooked it together."

Oliver looked from Sara to Venti. "Oh? Your favorite?" He quickly looked back at the waitress. "I'll have that, too!"

Venti's cheeks dusted with pink, and he let out a delighted giggle. "Awww. Are you ordering it just because I said it's my favorite?" Smiling brightly, he leaned in and pressed a sweet kiss to Oliver's cheek.

Oliver giggled softly, his own face warming. "Yeah!" he said, grinning.

With a fond smile, Venti looped an arm around Oliver. "Come on, let's go sit~"

They chose a nearby table, sliding into chairs opposite one another. By now, the sky had surrendered to night, erasing the last slivers of the sunset. Not long after, Sara arrived with their meals, setting two steaming bowls down in front of them.
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"Enjoy," she said with a polite smile before returning behind the counter.

Venti picked up his spoon, his teal eyes sparkling as he looked at Oliver. "If you taste it carefully, you can actually taste the flavor of 'a wind that brings hope and tiny twists of fate.'" He winked. "That's what I always say to people when they eat this for the first time."

Oliver stared down at the hearty broth.

"Another name for it is Barbatos Ratatouille," Venti added. "But I almost never call it that."

Oliver lifted his spoon, but paused, glancing up at his companion. Ratatouille. "Huh." He blinked. "I don't know why, but the image of a literal rat just popped into my head."

Venti paused, then let out a sudden snort. "What? Is it because I said ratatouille?" He broke into a fit of giggles. "Were you trying to make a pun there? Oh my word, if Tighnari were here, he'd probably strangle you."

Oliver then took a hearty bite. His eyes immediately went wide. "Okay... yeah. That is good."

Venti beamed with pride. "Eeee~ he likes my dish~," he hummed happily.

Oliver flushed, hiding his face a little before going in for another spoonful. "So you do have taste after all," he teased.

"Oh, stop! Venti always has taste! I'm glad you enjoy it," he smiled.

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Later that in the night, a gentle breeze swayed their comfortable hammock back and forth. Oliver was lying beside Venti, but decided the proximity wasn't quite enough. Shifting his weight, he carefully climbed over to rest directly on top of the bard.

"Oh—" Venti let out a surprised giggle as Oliver dropped his weight onto him. "Oof! Hey, watch it~"

Once Oliver settled, burying his face comfortably into the crook of Venti's neck, the bard began running gentle fingers through his hair. After a quiet moment, Oliver started pressing soft, lingering kisses to the skin of his neck. Venti happily tilted his head, giving the human better access.

He hummed and giggled at the feather-light touches, his hand never stopping its soothing rhythm in Oliver's hair.

Oliver propped himself up slightly, meeting Venti's bright eyes. Knowing exactly what the human wanted to do, Venti smiled and let his eyes flutter shut. Oliver leaned down, pressing his lips to Venti's, and they shared a soft, unhurried kiss. Venti wrapped his arms around Oliver's back, pulling him flush against his chest as they made out softly.

Eventually, Venti pulled back just enough to speak, a mischievous glint in his eye. "You wanna play with my belly button at all~?"

Oliver's face flooded with deep redness, but he nodded eagerly. He looked a bit shy, just like he always did when Venti offered this. But beneath the embarrassment, he was super happy that Venti didn't care about what he liked.

Because the bard was already shirtless, there was no fabric to push out of the way after Oliver shifted downward. With gentle precision, he pressed his finger into the dip of Venti's navel.
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Venti giggled, his spine arching instinctively at the contact before he relaxed back into the hammock. He was growing accustomed to the sensitive feeling inside his navel; it still tickled immensely, but it was no longer unbearable. He looked down at Oliver having fun with a fond, teasing smile.

"You're so cute when you do that," he murmured, pushing his stomach up just a fraction toward Oliver's touch.

Seeing Venti so relaxed and accommodating made Oliver's heart hammer so loudly against his ribs that he feared Venti could hear it himself. He could only let out a giddy laugh.

"Who would have thought it would be my belly button to melt a person this much~," Venti teased, his tone swelling with unmistakable pride.

Venti bit his lower lip as he felt Oliver's finger dig a little deeper. "Eee~," he let out a breathy squeak. "Hehehe~ that part always feels so ticklish. You know, when you dig your finger against the bottom of it."

Encouraged, Oliver leaned down, pressing open-mouthed kisses to Venti's stomach. He traced the rim of the navel with his tongue before playfully plunging it deep inside.

"Oh!" Venti gasped, his eyes flying wide open before fluttering shut once more. A string of helpless giggles spilled from his lips. "Ahh~" he moaned softly at the squirming sensation inside his innie. "That feels so good~"

After a few more affectionate kisses to the area, Oliver stopped the licking. He crawled back up to rest his head on Venti's chest, wrapping his arms around him in a tight hug.

Venti giggled, returning the embrace immediately. "Awww? Done with my belly button so soon~?" He lifted Oliver's chin up, then Venti planted a sweet kiss on his's lips.

Oliver kissed back before settling his head down, his cheeks still burning. "Still kinda shy about my belly button fetish," he mumbled into Venti's skin.

"Hey~ I told you that you don't gotta be all shy about it. I like it," Venti promised, his hand resuming its gentle path up and down Oliver's back. "It's such a cute fetish to have."

"I-I know, but... I'm just taking my pace, I guess."

Venti's laugh was as light as a breeze. "Okay~," he whispered, pressing one last, loving kiss to Oliver. "You can take your time." He nuzzled his cheek against Oliver's head. "Get some sleep, okay? You've been up all day."

Oliver smiled softly. Enveloped in the warmth of Venti's embrace, he closed his eyes and drifted off.

Chapter 18: Heading to Sumeru

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Oliver's eyes fluttered open. He smacked his lips, letting out a muffled groan as he tried to shift his stiff body against the rigid transfer chair.

With a heavy sigh, he stared up at the ceiling. "Well," he blinked, the residual fog in his head slowly clearing. "That was definitely a day." He shook his head, a breathless laugh escaping his lips. "I rode a freaking waverider. And I met Gorou! I literally met Gor—"

He abruptly snapped his mouth shut, suddenly recalling exactly what he had blurted out to the Watatsumi general.

"...I called him a femboy straight to his face." Oliver squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm a dumbass," he groaned to the empty room, thoroughly embarrassed.

His mind flashed back to riding the boat toward Watatsumi Island, when the bard had told him to hum a tune to help recall his memories. Oliver blinked open an eye. "Was I seriously humming the Doctor Who theme song?" He would have face-palmed if his arms weren't strapped down to the armrests. "I'm such a damn nerd, bro."

Then, he remembered the boat ride back. "Geez, and I told Venti that I wanted to beat up Signora..." He nodded slowly to himself. "Always did," he grunted, a rougher edge bleeding into his voice. "Beat up my crush, I beat your skull in."

"Ugh, Venti would probably melted at that one. Am I overprotective?" Oliver frowned, starting to analyze the things Venti had told him. The bard still had his powers.

"He somehow used his fake vision to store some of the power from his stolen gnosis?" He stared straight ahead, a deeply confused expression plastered on his face. "But... that wasn't a thing in the actual game. Was it?"

Maybe the dimension you enter operates differently than the base game provides. Once, Oliver had managed to sneak into Doctor Barclay's office and read up on some of the notes the doctor had left regarding his theories and experiments. Barclay had warned him to stay out, feeding him the excuse that because the notes were purely theoretical regarding how the Fictional Universe worked, Oliver shouldn't be reading them.

But Oliver read them anyway.

One particular note explained that when a dimension is created off a piece of fiction that lacks enough world-building, the resulting world would either be unstable, or it would forcefully generate its own filler from whatever loose pieces it could gather.

That was heavily on Oliver's mind right now. Most of what Venti was experiencing could just be loose ends in the story, or literal fan theories physically manifesting to fill the gaps.

"I guess that's what's going on," Oliver muttered. He tilted his head back, looking upward at the monitor suspended above his chair, attached to the wall.

Vitals of subject: Fine

Dimension Gateway: Closed

Media: Genshin Impact

Media Type: Game

Fictional Universe Code: Sub-3921

Missing Elements: Missing some lore points, other subs have more; different locations — Stable for transfers.

His eyes lingered on those last few lines. Missing Elements: Missing some lore points, other subs have more; different locations.

"It doesn't have everything," Oliver mumbled. He turned his head forward again, leaning heavily back into the chair. "Missing Elements... maybe some entire areas aren't even there? And missing lore points... that's the big problem." He let out a dry scoff. "I mean, Genshin Impact itself is already missing lore elements. No one knows exactly what Venti really is." He looked back up at the ceiling. "I wonder if he's lying to me...? Or maybe in this version of the universe, he's actually being truthful?"

He turned his head toward the locked door at the far left end of the room. Doctor Barclay hadn't made an appearance since the last time Oliver saw him with that woman, Clair.

Oliver shook his head. "What is happening?" he mumbled. It wasn't that he wasn't enjoying his time within Genshin Impact. He was. He loved Venti, he loved free-roaming Mondstadt, and he loved eating the actual food.

But Doctor Barclay was proving to be incredibly shady, especially after what Oliver had overheard him telling his apparent assistant.

"He can't be like that, can he?" Oliver muttered, a knot forming in his stomach. "He wasn't like that before. There's no way. He asked for my consent to do things like this. Why would he not ask for other people's?"

Oliver closed his eyes, silently waiting for the machine to suck his consciousness back into the world.

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Wait a minute...

That wasn't his chair.

Oliver's eyes snapped open. The chair directly across from his was flashing an ominous, pulsing orange light.

"What?" Oliver gasped.

The parallel transfer chair began to vibrate and shake, the monitor above it glitching violently with streams of random numbers. Then, just as suddenly, it stopped.

Oliver blinked, straining his eyes in the dark room. He tried to lean forward to get a better look, fighting against his straps.

"AahH!?" a panicked gasp echoed from the chair in front of him.

Oliver's eyes widened. It was that kid Doctor Barclay had mentioned. But that didn't make any sense. Doctor Barclay had been bragging to Clair about how that specific experiment was a perfect success. The subject inside shouldn't have been pulled back out. The only reason Oliver was awake was because of an apparent bug in the system.

The teenager in the opposing chair began to thrash, trying to free his arms, but he was strapped down exactly like Oliver. "What the?! Where am I!? What's happening?!" he yelled, panic lacing his voice. "HELLO!?"

"H-Hey!" Oliver called out, his eyes still wide.

"HUH?! WHO'S THERE?!"

"Shhh—shhh! Calm down," Oliver urged, keeping his voice soft. "Remember, the experiment. You're here for the experiment." Oliver knew exactly how he felt. It was the same disorienting terror he felt waking up here, and remembered his reality. This guy must be going through the exact same thing. Oliver had assumed this other subject was in a completely different room, not right across from him in this darkened space before. Doctor Barclay must have moved him.

"Why am I strapped down!?" the teenager continued to yell, ignoring him. "What happened to my boyfriends!? Where's Gloyd, Swizzle, and Rancis?!"

Oliver's brain stalled. Gloyd, Swizzle, and Rancis? Boyfriends? He squinted past the boy, scanning the glowing screen above him for the media title.

Vitals of subject: Stressed

Dimension Gateway: Closed

Media: Wreck-It Ralph

Media Type: Movie

Fictional Universe Code: Sub-34

Wreck-It Ralph. Right. That's where those characters the teenager just blurted out were from.

"Look," Oliver started gently, "I want to ask you some—"

"DANGER KID, IF THIS IS YOUR DOING!" the teenager shrieked.

Oliver blinked. Danger Kid. He had heard that name somewhere before. Was it from the machine?

"I can promise you, I am not Danger Kid. I'll even tell you my name. It's Oliver," he reasoned. "What's your name?"

There was a tense, heavy silence for a moment. Finally, the boy spoke. "M-My name? It's... It's Richard."

Oliver frowned. That was absolutely not what the overhead screen said.

Last Name: Harper

First Name: Arnold

Oliver peered back into the darkness, still unable to fully make out the boy's features. "Are you sure?" he asked carefully.

"Yes! I've always been Richard! Is this some type of sick joke!? Ugh, are you a freaking Virus!? You must be Danger Kid! You're trying to lure me into a trap! Well, it won't work!"

Then, without warning—

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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"Huh?" Richard's voice wavered. "What was that?!"

Instantly, the room went dead quiet. The boy's chair slipped back into sleep mode, bathing his side of the room in deep, undisturbed shadows. The boy slumped, going completely limp against the restraints.

"He... He went back." Oliver's eyebrow shot up. "That name... wasn't his real name." He glanced back up at the boy's monitor. "Was that the name he was given in the world?"

Maybe that's what Doctor Barclay had meant by a perfect transfer. The boy had gotten molded seamlessly into that reality.

"Two things could be happening here," Oliver whispered to himself in the quiet dark. "Either the boy got molded so deeply into the dimension that he literally doesn't remember this universe anymore. Or... Doctor Barclay really did kidnap this kid, and that's why he didn't recognize the experiment." He shook his head. "But that can't be it either. Because he only had his mind in the fictional world,"

Oliver sighed, his chest feeling tight. "Still can't rule out the fact that Doctor Barclay might just be a terrible person. It's a sad possibility. But why would he need a teenager for this?"

Begin send back.

Oliver blinked at the ceiling. "Okay, that's mine..." He closed his eyes, letting his muscles relax as he waited to be pulled back to Teyvat.

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Oliver slowly drifted awake, realizing he was thoroughly snuggled against Venti's warm body. The only reason he had woken up at all was the soothing sensation of someone gently running their fingers through
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his hair. "Hmm?" He fluttered his eyes open and looked up to find Venti grinning softly down at him.

"Morning, windblume ~," Venti cooed. "Sleep well?"

Oliver stretched languidly before burying his face back into Venti's chest. "Yeah, I suppose," he mumbled. "Though... I think I had a weird dream. I just can't remember the details."

"Hmm. Poor baby~," Venti hummed, pressing a soft kiss to the top of his head.

Oliver smiled against Venti's skin, utterly melting at the affection. Without lifting his head, he continued, "It is getting a little better, though. At least I have glimpses of the weird dream now."

"You do? Wanna tell me about it?" Venti asked, his fingers never stopping their gentle scratching against Oliver's scalp.

"I..." Oliver lifted his head just enough to rest his chin on Venti's chest. "I dunno... just some weird, dark room."

"Dark room?" Venti blinked. "Hmmm," he mused thoughtfully. "You did say you were trapped somewhere."

Oliver arched an eyebrow. "I have?"

"Yeah," Venti said softly. "Remember when I told you what you said about Doctor Barclay? I know you can't remember it clearly, but you mentioned something about being trapped somewhere. Maybe these dreams are trying to tell you something."

"Hmm," Oliver muttered dismissively, burying his face back into the crook of Venti's neck.

Venti kissed his forehead. "Don't stress yourself, Ollie. Leave your worries to me~" He playfully nuzzled Oliver with his nose. "I'll try my absolute best to solve this mystery for you." He gently lifted Oliver's chin and planted a sweet kiss on his lips. "We're gonna have a slow day today~"

Oliver smiled, a small giggle escaping him. "But we've been having slow days a lot lately."

Venti beamed. "I know~ But yesterday you said you wanted to touch Gorou's ears, and then I brought up Tighnari!" He giggled brightly. "So, I'm taking you to Sumeru to meet him! He usually spends time with his boyfriend, Cyno." Venti shifted, gently sitting up while Oliver stubbornly clung to him like a he was glued to him.

Laughing at his boyfriend's clinginess, Venti reached down and booped Oliver's nose. "If you really wanna do something productive while we're at it, I guess Jean can give us a formal excuse to go. I know Tighnari has been wanting to study some more of the local flora we have here in Mondstadt. Jean can easily set up a commission for us to deliver some." Venti stretched his arms high above his head with a dramatic yawn. "Though, I'll definitely teleport us over there. If Tighnari is hanging out with Cyno in the desert, those plants will be dead and crispy by the time we walk them over. Plus, walking all that way sounds like pure torture." He glanced back down at Oliver. "So, what do you say? Sound like a plan?"

Oliver kept his arm wrapped around Venti, his head resting comfortably on the bard's shoulder. "Hmmm... Yeah," he murmured. His free hand rested against Venti's stomach, his index finger idly twirling around the inside of his belly button.

Venti giggled, shivering slightly. "Hey, either we go get breakfast, or you can dig into my belly button for the entire day—"

Oliver snickered, giving the navel one firm poke. "I pick the latter."

Venti burst into laughter. "Yeah, says the guy who was just complaining about having too many 'slow days.'"

Oliver smiled warmly. Giving the belly button one final poke, he leaned up to kiss Venti's cheek. "Okay, I'm up now." He finally unlatched himself from his boyfriend and opened his eyes fully to the bright morning light.

Venti leaned in, capturing his lips in a quick, sweet kiss. "Come on~ let's get some breakfast before we hit the road."

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A short while later, Oliver was happily digging into a massive stack of Good Hunter pancakes. Across from him, Venti was happily munching on an apple salad.

"Again with the apple salad?" Oliver asked, an amused smirk playing on his lips.

Venti rolled his eyes playfully. "What? Apples give great morning energy! And you're one to talk, ordering pancakes again~"

Oliver giggled around his fork. "Fine. You got me. You just can't go wrong with pancakes. Especially these."

They settled into a comfortable silence, enjoying the bustling morning air of Mondstadt. After a few minutes, Venti spoke up. "So, we gotta be a little prepared for Sumeru. Especially if we're heading straight into the desert. You'll have no problem, though."

Oliver knew exactly what Venti was referring to. He chuckled, glancing down at his own outfit. "Yeah... my clothes are very... revealing, to say the least."

"Right. It's absolutely perfect for hot weather. Me though..." Venti looked down at his heavy corset and layers. "I am going to literally burn alive in my bard clothes." He giggled, taking another crunchy bite of his salad.

Oliver tilted his head, looking genuinely perplexed. "Can you, though? I'd reckon since you're... you-know-who... your physical body wouldn't really be affected by things like temperature."

"Trust me," Venti whispered, leaning across the table with a sly grin. "We Archons can still feel the heat. I'll just change into something cooler. I don't normally switch up my attire, but I will make an exception for today."

"Okay, cool." Oliver wiped his mouth with a napkin. "So once we finish, we head over to... 'Sumeru'," he declared with dramatic flair. "Not the other word,"

Venti snorted, since he knew why Oliver did that. Then, he couldn't hold it in, and burst into louder laughing. "Oh my word BAHAHAHA 'SUMMER-RU'!!!" Venti howled, slamming a fist onto the wooden table as he doubled over. "I still cannot believe you called it that!!!"

Oliver immediately sighed and dragged a hand down his face.

Right at that moment, a shower of starry constellations appeared next to their table, and Paimon materialized out of thin air. "HELLO!" she yelled cheerfully.

Oliver gasped, nearly dropping his fork in surprise.
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"Traveler told Paimon that you gave him his key!" she grinned brightly. Then, her smile melted into a look of deep concern as she noticed Venti practically dying of laughter on the table. "Uhh? What's wrong with you, you Tone-Deaf Bard?" she demanded, crossing her tiny arms.

Venti was practically wheezing. "It's just... haha! Ollie over here thought Sumeru was pronounced Summer-ru yesterday!!" he gasped out between giggles. "First he thought Liyue was Lie-you, and then he even thought you pronounced Natlan as NATELAND!!!! PIFFFTTT!" Venti collapsed against the tabletop, shaking their plates. "BaHAHAHA! Where did NATE AND LAND even come from!?"

Paimon turned her gaze slowly toward Oliver, her expression utterly deadpan. "Dang. Not even the Traveler and Paimon flunked the names that hard when we first woke up."

That only made Venti laugh harder, tears pricking his eyes.

Oliver hid his face behind both hands. "Can everyone please stop bullying me—"

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Oliver leaned against the wooden wall of the shaded back alley near Good Hunter, exactly where Venti had told him to wait. The bard had gone to speak with Jean—and only Jean—to make sure he could teleport in peace without someone else from the Knights giving them the flowers.

So, Jean had set him up with some flowers to go deliver to Tighnari all the way in Sumeru.

After a few minutes, Oliver caught movement in his peripheral vision. Venti was jogging over, stepping into the cool shadows of the alleyway.

But the moment Oliver fully processed what Venti was wearing, his heart practically leaped into his throat.

Venti looked absolutely stunning in his "cooler clothes." He had swapped his usual attire for a breezy, pleated skirt and a drastically cropped shirt, both matching his signature teal, white, and gold color palette.

Either it was just the fact that his boyfriend looked undeniably gorgeous, or Oliver's specific fixation for his belly button was operating at maximum capacity right now.

...Yeah. It was definitely the latter.

Oliver flushed bright red, his jaw slightly slack. "Oh my god... Venti."

Venti, of course, knew exactly what he was doing. "You get to see my belly button all day now~," he purred, throwing Oliver a shameless wink. "Try not to get a *boner* out in the hot desert now~"

Oliver's mouth hung open in sheer disbelief. "You are *so* going to pay for that tease."

"Shut up~ You love it when I tease you~," Venti snorted playfully, stepping forward to press a quick, silencing kiss to Oliver's lips. "Come on, let's go~!"
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Chapter 19: Heatstroke



They didn't teleport to Sumeru right away.

Instead, Venti warped them just outside the gates of Mondstadt, dropping them into the lush greenery of Windrise. He made sure to keep them far enough from the main gates to avoid alarming any passing residents or guards with the sudden materialization. Oliver was finally getting the hang of teleportation; rather than feeling like he was about to lose his breakfast, he only stumbled slightly, gently catching himself on Venti's arm.

Blinking in confusion, Oliver took in the vibrant green grass and the bright blue sky above. "Uh... I was expecting the desert to be a little more... you know. Dead-looking." He squinted, catching sight of the massive oak tree in the distance, and realized they were still in the nation of Mondstadt. "Wait, we didn't leave—"

He glanced to his side, but Venti was already giggling.

"I know! Just give me a second!" Venti gently pushed away from Oliver and teleported off on his own, leaving Oliver standing alone in the breeze.

"O-Oh," Oliver muttered, stepping back and wondering where his boyfriend had darted off to.

A moment later, Venti reappeared, proudly holding a woven basket. "Can't go and give Tighnari flowers without the flowers now, can we?" he chimed.

Oliver nodded, though his voice wavered. "Right."

Oh god. It was hard to concentrate on anything. Venti wearing this revealing, warm-weather attire was seriously messing with his head. "Y-Yeah, we p-pick flowers... N-No... Uh... No rush! Haha!"

Venti immediately picked up on what was happening. He saw the glint in Oliver's eyes and noticed how desperately he was trying not to stare at his exposed midriff. "Yeah, yeah~ don't try to deny what you're looking at there, windblume~" Venti winked playfully, setting the basket down on the grass. "Here."

The bard handed Oliver a few pieces of parchment. They were beautifully drawn illustrations of flowers. "These are the ones we're looking for. They grow all over Windrise."

Oliver nodded, taking them from Venti's hands.

"When you find any, just drop them in the basket. I'm leaving it right here," Venti instructed. "Have fun~ They're all really pretty and smell amazing!" He held up his own set of drawings with a bright smile. "I'll help out too!"

With that, the two set off to forage.

Windrise was sprawling, especially out in this section. They were roughly four hundred meters from the city, and the massive tree where they usually slept was just a bit closer. Venti had warned him that venturing any further would lead to dangerous creatures like hilichurls, which was why he kept their search perimeter tight to the city.

Oliver was still somewhat paranoid about those slimes appearing again. The sword had magically materialized in his hand that day, but the phenomenon hadn't repeated itself since—not even when they had left the boat dock in Inazuma.

But with no anomalies in sight, Oliver relaxed and focused on matching the local flora to the sketches.

The first drawing depicted a striking red, pinwheel-shaped red plant titled Windwheel Aster. Luckily for Oliver, they were abundant. He gathered a hefty bundle, carried them back to the basket, and carefully lowered them inside.

Standing back up, he flipped to the next page: Cecilia. It looked oddly familiar. "Where have I seen this?" He brought the parchment closer to his face, studying the delicate white petals. "I've seen this somewhere, haven't I?"

Looking up, he spotted Venti standing on a raised patch of terrain in the distance, plucking his own batch of flowers. Oliver squinted, his eyes trailing up to the green, beret-style hat Venti always wore outdoors.

"Oh! Right!" Oliver nodded to himself. Venti had a flower tucked right at the base of his hat—it was the exact same bloom. "He must love Cecilias."

Scanning the grass, it became clear that Cecilias were much rarer than the Windwheels. Still, he managed to scrounge up a few and added them to the pile. "Okay—" He was about to review the final page when Venti bounded back over, his arms completely overflowing with flora.

Oliver was so startled he nearly dropped his papers. He watched in disbelief as the bard gently placed each individual stem into the basket. "Did you duplicate the plants? How the hell did you find so much?"

Venti giggled. "I have my ways! Also, I'm somewhat of a flower expert." He stood back up, stretching his hands out. "I found these, too!"

Oliver looked down at the bard's hands, which were holding four peculiar mushrooms.

"These grow near Wolvendom! I had to teleport over there to grab them. If I'm not mistaken, Tighnari has a massive soft spot for mushrooms, so I'm pretty sure he'll love these!"

Oliver blinked. "Huh." He looked down at his remaining drawing, thoroughly confused. "Hey, I couldn't find this last one. Do you know where it is? It says it's called Wolfhook."

"Oh! Did I give you that one by mistake? Sorry about that, I was meant to take that page! But no matter, I got them anyway!" Venti dropped the Wolfhooks he was holding into the basket, pulled out a lid, and

secured it. "There we are!" He lifted the basket with a small heave and beamed. "Okay, we're ready!"

Holding the basket in one hand, Venti reached out and touched Oliver's shoulder.

In a sudden warp of wind, the world shifted.

The hot desert.

It was Oliver's first time here, and the heat was instantly, unforgivingly brutal.

Oliver blinked repeatedly. "Okay, yeah. That is total whiplash." The cool, gentle green of Windrise had morphed into an endless, rolling ocean of sand dunes, distorted by shimmering heat waves. "I think this might be my first time actually standing in a desert."

Venti giggled, adjusting his grip on the basket. "Well, how can you know for sure? Unless your subconscious is telling you that?"

"I'm not sure," Oliver shrugged, scanning the barren horizon. "I... I feel like I've only seen deserts in books or something. Never in real life." He wiped his forehead, which was already damp with sweat. "Man, it's hot..."

Venti walked ahead, tossing a glance over his shoulder. "Hehe, are you gonna say that pick-up line again~?"

Oliver narrowed his eyes, let out a soft grunt, and shook his head. "Okay, I'm not that much of a dork to use the exact same pick-up line twice in a row."

Venti laughed lightly.

"But yeah. You're definitely hotter than the desert," Oliver added, murmuring the second half under his breath, "Especially in the clothes you're wearing right now."

But Venti heard it—because of course he did.

"Oh, really~?" the bard teased.

Oliver kept walking, trying to change the subject. "Is this that 'Archon Outfit' you told me about?"

Venti burst into laughter. "Oh, no, no, no! Not at all! Haha!" Venti smiled warmly. "These are just some clothes I rarely wear because they're a bit feminine~" He paused, giggling again. "Well, I suppose my Archon clothes are too, haha. But no, this is just something I wear on occasion when I need to visit somewhere with this climate. It doubles as a swimsuit too!"

"A swimsuit?" Oliver arched an eyebrow. "Then why didn't you wear this when you took me to the hot springs? You only wore... well, 'masculine' swim trunks."

Venti giggled, quickly trying to spin an excuse. "Hey! You were a brand-new friend back then!" He smiled coyly. "I wasn't quite comfortable wearing my feminine clothes around you yet~"

Oliver gave him a deadpan stare. "Said the man who was literally attempting to turn me on during day one."

Venti snorted, letting out a cute, breathless laugh. "Oh, Ollie, Ollie, Ollie~ I was teasing you. There's a difference!"

"No there isn't!" Oliver snapped playfully, looking away.

"There so is! Besides, you were so easy to fluster! You still are! Haha!"

Oliver grunted. Without warning, he grabbed Venti, and dug his fingers right into those exposed sides.

"BAAAHAHA!" Venti gasped, squirming away. "Hey! Nohoho! Watch it, Ollie! You'll make me drop the basket and ruin the flowers!"

Oliver relented, pulling his hands away—but not before swiftly poking his finger right into Venti's navel and giving it a firm wiggle.

"EEEEK?!" Venti shrieked at the sudden sensation. "Ollie! Come on!" Laughing hard, he balanced the basket with one arm while rubbing his stomach protectively with the other, poking his own belly button. "Hehe, I thought I was getting used to that feeling!"

Oliver stuck his tongue out in victory, but immediately squinted as a gust of wind threw sand in his face. "Ah, crap—"

"Wait!" Venti smiled brightly. He popped open the basket's lid, shifted a few flowers around, and pulled out a pair of dark shades. "I got these from Jean before I headed out. Sorry, I forgot to give them to you!" He gently grabbed Oliver's arms to halt his walking, stepped up on his tiptoes, and slid the sunglasses over Oliver's face. "There we go! Better, right? It should keep the sand out, and block the sun rays."

Oliver nodded, a grateful smile spreading across his face. "Yeah. Thanks, Venti."

"No problem," Venti giggled. "You look really cool wearing them, too. It really matches your outfit."

They resumed their trek through the dunes until Oliver realized something. "Do we even know where Tighnari is?"

"I do!" Venti beamed. "I wasn't lazy this time; I used the wind to track his voice. It helps that I know what he sounds like. That's exactly why we're in the desert! He's out here somewhere with Cyno. My hypothesis from yesterday was correct—he's hanging out with his boyfriend!"

Oliver nodded. "I honestly can't wait to meet them."

Venti giggled, nudging Oliver with his free elbow. "Maybe we can double date~"

Oliver laughed softly. "Yeah! That sounds nice."

As they kept walking, the oppressive atmosphere didn't let up. The heat was relentless.

Glancing over, Venti noticed just how heavily Oliver was sweating. "Oh my word," Venti gasped, his eyes going wide. "Your hair is literally raining."

Oliver let out a weak snort. "Yeah, that's one way to put it." He wiped his forehead with a shaky hand. "I'm actually really dying out here," he coughed. He wasn't being dramatic; the heat was genuinely taking a severe toll on his body, even if he had tried to tough it out.

"Well, don't worry, I got—" Venti patted his sides, then gasped loudly. "Oh, shoot! I didn't pack any water! OH NO! I thought I packed some for you!" He dropped the flower basket directly onto the sand. "Wait right here, let me grab some canteens from the Knights of Favonius!"

In a flash of teal light, Venti vanished, leaving Oliver entirely alone with a basket of flowers in the blazing wasteland.

The moment Venti disappeared, Oliver's condition rapidly deteriorated. It felt exactly like a heatstroke. He was confused; his clothes were breathable and didn't cover his whole body, so he thought he would have been fine. But his body felt like it was shutting down. Sweat poured from his scalp as if his hair were generating water.

Oliver swallowed hard. His throat felt like sandpaper. He could barely draw breath.

AVATAR OVERHEATING

Oliver's breath hitched. His eyes widened as his panting turned frantic. He heard a mechanical, synthetic voice, but when he looked around, there was no one. Not Venti. Not a stranger coming to greet themselves. Just him, the sand, and the flower basket.

Panic seized him. Something was fundamentally wrong. This didn't feel like a normal medical emergency. It felt like he was unraveling from the inside out. Unseen voices buzzed in his ears. Sweat stung his eyes, blinding him. "Ow—" he hissed, furiously rubbing his face.

AVA#T!R OV÷ETAAHEATING

There was that voice again. It sounded strained. As if it was glitching.

Oliver's vision warped. The distant sand dunes fractured into pixelated, shifting fragments.

Just as his legs threatened to give out, Venti reappeared in a frantic burst of Anemo energy, clutching an absurd number of canteens. As he materialized, several water bottles clattered to the sand, leaving only a few in his panicked grasp. "Ollie—I have—"

The bard froze, taking in the terrifying state of his boyfriend. "EH?!" he gasped. "Oh no!" Though panic was written all over Venti's face, his movements were lightning-fast. "H-H-Here! Drink this! Quick!" Venti ripped the cap off a canteen and practically dove toward him.

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot comme-ERROR

AVATAR SELF DESTRUCT IN 5...4... 3...

Venti shoved the spout of the canteen into Oliver's mouth.

2...

Barely clinging to consciousness, Oliver reflexively swallowed the chilled water.

1... ..... AVATAR RESTORED

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Venti let out the most profound sigh of relief in his entire long life as color finally rushed back into Oliver's pale cheeks. "Oh, thank the winds."

He threw his arms around Oliver, pulling him into a tight embrace, before suddenly gasping and pulling back. "Wait, I shouldn't do that right now, you need coolness, not more body heat—"

Venti took a deep breath, his expression turning unusually serious. "I shouldn't do this, but... just for you —" He closed his eyes, stood tall, and swept his arms out wide.

A sudden, magical, cool gale swept through their section of the desert.

Venti slowly opened his eyes to check on him. "I can only sustain this for a little bit. At least until Sumeru's Archon gets mad at me for messing with her local climate."

Under the cool breeze, Oliver's racing heart finally slowed. His body temperature dropped to a safe level. The chilled water and the magical wind had pulled him back from the brink.

"Do you want to go back to Mondstadt?" Venti asked softly, his arms still outstretched as he directed the currents. "We don't have to continue this."

Oliver cleared his throat, his voice raspy. "I... it's okay," he nodded. "I don't know what happened there." He shook his head, trying to clear the lingering digital static from his brain. "Maybe there was some truth to what I said about never seeing a desert before. My body completely rejected that weather. But I wanna continue,"

Venti gave him a soft, relieved smile. "Wow. You really want to pet that Valuka Shuna's ears, don't you?" He let out a fond sigh. Lowering his hands, the cool gale slowly dissipated back into the natural heat. "Please," he urged, pressing the canteen back into Oliver's hands, "stay hydrated for me."

Oliver nodded, instantly taking another massive gulp.

Venti scurried around, gathering the dropped canteens and stuffing them into a small pack secured around his waist. "Bennett gave me this one year," he noted brightly. "Finally finding a use for it!"

Stepping close again, Venti smiled gently. "Come on, stick by my side. You can lean on me if you need to, okay?"

~~~~~~~~~

They didn't have to walk much further before a small settlement appeared on the horizon.

"Ah! My wind brought us right to civilization! Maybe Tighnari and Cyno are in there," Venti cheered. Tucking the flower basket neatly under one arm, he took Oliver's hand and gently led him toward the buildings. "Let's find a shop. I can buy you some fruit to keep you hydrated, and the sugar will help you regain your energy!"

Venti was true to his word. Before tracking down the two boyfriends, he dragged Oliver over to a local merchant cart and purchased some vibrant fruit.

"These are Sunsettias! They're super good!" Venti handed one over. "I don't think you've ever tried one, have you?"

Oliver shook his head, taking the fruit. "I don't think so."

Venti closed his eyes happily. "Well then, eat up! It'll keep you going until we're ready to head home."

Oliver took a bite as they strolled away from the stand. "Wow. Okay, that's really good."

"I know, right! Though personally, I prefer apples," Venti mused.

"Oh, you do?" Oliver asked between bites.

"Truly the fruit of the gods, apples are!" Venti declared dramatically.
~~~~~~~~~

Oliver considered making a joke about Venti casually referring to "the gods" considering he always wants people to not know his true identity, but for some reason, a completely different phrase tumbled out of his mouth.

"Okay, Yoda," He said with a deadpan expression as he took a few bites of the Sunsettia.

Venti blinked, completely halting his dramatic stride. "Bahah?!" he let out a confused bark of laughter, raising an eyebrow. "Who?"

Oliver chewed, swallowed, and looked at Venti blankly. "You know... I have absolutely no idea."

Venti shook his head with a knowing smile. "I'm starting to think these random things you blurt out are fragments of your subconscious. Locked-away memories from your home world that only slip out when triggered."

"Yeah, but—" Oliver continued chewing, "What the heck is a Yoda?"

Venti snorted. "I don't know, you should be telling me that!" he laughed. "You said it after I talked about my favorite food. So either this 'Yoda' thing loves apples, or it had something to do with how I phrased my sentence."

Oliver shrugged, swallowing off the last of his Sunsettia. "Hmm~" he smiled, patting his stomach. "That was super good."

Venti smiled. "I should let you try an apple sometime!"

Oliver blinked thoughtfully. "I dunno, something in the back of my mind is telling me I've had an apple before. Like, I'm ninety-nine percent certain I ate apples before I lost my memories."

"Well, even if you did, it wasn't a Teyvat apple. Could be a completely different experience!"

As they navigated the town, they approached an open-door hut. Sitting inside were a boy with towering, dark ears, with pink inside, and a boy with tanned skin and striking white hair.

"I think that's them!" Venti beamed, nudging Oliver. "Let's go!" Gripping the basket tightly, he bounded over, with Oliver tagging along just behind.

Tighnari, the hybrid botanist, was sitting at a table covered in scattered papers and botanical samples, quietly reading a book. Cyno sat directly across from him.

Seeing their approach, Cyno lifted his gaze. Catching the movement in his peripheral vision, Tighnari turned his head as well.

"Hello, Tighnari!" Venti chimed happily. "I have no idea if you remember me, but we met once in Mondstadt! I mean, we bumped into each other a few extra times after that, but briefly!"

Tighnari blinked, then his face lit up. "Oh, right! Yeah! The... uh... oh! The Windblume Festival!" He smiled warmly. "You were the bard in the city, right?"

Cyno looked from Venti to Tighnari, then back again. "Oh, right," Cyno said, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. "I remember you. You're the bard who never stops drinking." Cyno let out a low chuckle, then looked directly at Tighnari. "Why does Venti never lose his wine?"

Tighnari instantly narrowed his eyes. "No, please don't—"

"Because it's always in de-vine hands," Cyno delivered flawlessly. "Get it? Divine hands. De-vine. Because Venti is an archon, and wine comes from vines." He paused, looking around the table at them. "...You may laugh now."

"I am not going to laugh at all," Tighnari groaned, massaging his temples.

Oliver blinked, looking from Venti to the Sumeru duo. "Uh..." He blinked again. "They know you're...?"

Venti tilted his head. "Huh? Oh! Oh, yeah. They're some of the few mortals outside of Mondstadt who know. They keep my secret incredibly well hidden," he giggled, shooting a glance at the General Mahamatra. "And as you can clearly see, Cyno loves his jokes."

Oliver giggled. "I can see that."

Yet, as he smiled, a strange feeling twisted in Oliver's gut. For some unexplainable reason, Tighnari and Cyno knowing Barbatos's identity felt... wrong.

It wasn't a sense of the two being untrustworthy. They seemed like perfectly good people who would never betray the bard. It was more a metaphysical sense of wrongness. Like this interaction defied a set of rules. Like.. it never happened. Like, it wasn't supposed to happen.

Why was he feeling like this? Unable to articulate the sensation, Oliver violently choked the feeling down. Maybe it's the damn heat frying my brain, he grumbled internally.

"I see you changed out of your usual clothes. Was the bard attire too hot for Sumeru?" Tighnari asked.

"Yeah! Haha," Venti laughed. "I would have practically roasted if I wore that into the desert!"

Cyno chuckled to himself. "So the bard swapped out hot clothes for something even hotter."

Tighnari froze. Slowly, methodically, he turned his head to glare at Cyno. "You know I am sitting right here, right?" he said flatly.

It took Venti a second to catch the joke, but when he did, he burst out laughing.

Tighnari just shook his head, looking back to Venti. "If he isn't making terrible puns, he's making dirty jokes." The hybrid then shifted his attention to Oliver. "I originally thought you were just a passing local. Are you with Venti?"

"Oh.. oh me?" Oliver blinked.

Venti laughed, throwing a proud arm around Oliver's waist. "This cutie right here is my boyfriend!" he beamed.

"Oh! When did you two meet?" Tighnari asked, pleasantly surprised. "I don't recall you mentioning a significant other the last time we crossed paths."

Venti straightened up. "Yeah, we met... about a week ago now? Long story short, the poor guy lost his memories, and we've been trying to help him out."

"Oh... I'm incredibly sorry to hear that," Tighnari said softly, his ears dipping slightly in sympathy.

Venti nodded, pulling Oliver a little closer. "But after spending time together, we grew really close. Now, he's practically all over me~"

Oliver stared at Venti for a solid three seconds. "Actually, it's the exact other way around."

Venti giggled, shooting Oliver a playful smirk.

"So, what's in the basket?" Cyno interrupted, pointing at the woven container tucked under Venti's arm.

"Oh, it's some flowers! Flowers are in there!" Venti smiled, opening his mouth to elaborate before Cyno cut him off.

"Wow. Oliver gave Venti a basket of flowers?" Cyno asked rhetorically. "I guess you could call it a Barbouquet-os."

Silence fell over the hut.

"Get it?" Cyno pressed. "Barbatos. And bouquet."

Tighnari violently lunged across the table. Books and loose parchment went flying into the air as he tackled Cyno.

"ACK?!" Cyno gasped.

Venti sighed, shaking his head at the chaos. "The flowers are actually for Tighnari," he clarified over the sounds of scuffling. "Jean and I brought them from Mondstadt so you could study them."

Tighnari instantly dropped Cyno's shirt collar. His ears perked straight up, and his tail fluffed out. "Really?! Ooh!" he chirped, abandoning his boyfriend on the floor. "I love Mondstadt's local flora. You shouldn't have!"

Standing up, he delicately took the basket from Venti's hands and peeked inside. "Woah! They're in pristine condition. Thank you," he smiled brightly. "I'll make sure to keep these safe until I can transport them back to the forest."

"So glad you like them!" Venti grinned.

Cyno grunted from the floor. "I deserve all the kisses I want after suffering this humiliation."

Oliver covered his mouth to hide a laugh, which prompted Venti to do the exact same thing.

Tighnari rolled his eyes affectionately. "Shut up, you dramatic desert lover. Fine—" He grabbed Cyno by the arm, hauled him up from the ground, and planted a quick, sweet kiss on his lips. "There."

"Awww," Venti cooed, placing a hand over his heart. "So cute~,"

Tighnari's cheeks flushed a vibrant shade of pink.

"Well, I'm glad the delivery was a success!" Venti smiled, grabbing Oliver's hand. "We'll—" The bard stopped, a sudden realization washing over his face.

"Oh!!!" Venti whipped back around to face the Sumeru pair. "I almost forgot, and I think Ollie did too!" He grinned mischievously, gently shoving Oliver forward. "Go on, babe. Tell the Dendro archer what you wanted."

Oliver gasped as he stumbled forward, completely disoriented. "Oh— I..."

Tighnari tilted his head, his massive ears twitching in confusion.

"I, uh..." Oliver's eyes naturally drifted up to the extraordinarily long, fluffy ears resting atop Tighnari's head.

Tighnari's eyes widened in realization, and he let out a heavy, defeated sigh. "They always want to." He shook his head slowly. "Fine. Since you and your boyfriend brought me such pristine botanical samples..." Tighnari lowered his head just a fraction, his ears twitching nervously. "They're not as soft as you're probably expecting."

Oliver didn't care in the slightest. Those ears were larger than his future. He reached out and gently ran his fingertips up and down the velvety fur.

Tighnari let out a squeaky giggle; his ears were highly sensitive, and the light touch tickled intensely. The dark ears twitched a little against Oliver's fingers.

"Someone asked for consent to rub his ears. He heard them out," Cyno commented from the sidelines.

"Okay, that was the absolute worst one you've ever done," Tighnari grunted, though his voice lacked its usual bite. "Please stop!"

Oliver shifted his hand, giving a very gentle scratch right at the base of the ear.

"eEeK!" Tighnari shrieked, instantly shooting backward as a full-body shiver wrecked his frame. His eyes were wide with shock.

Cyno burst into a loud snort, doubling over in laughter. "Holy shit!"

Venti was cackling right alongside him.

Tighnari's face was completely crimson. "Okay, that's quite enough of that," he stammered, crossing his arms as his ears continued to flick.

Oliver dropped his hand, but his gaze drifted down to the bushy tail swishing anxiously behind the botanist. "Can... can I feel your tail, too?"

Tighnari stared at him blankly, then released a suffering sigh. "You give them an inch, and they take a mile."

Cyno opened his mouth to deliver another pun, but Tighnari lightning-fast reached over and clamped a hand over his boyfriend's lips, shutting him up instantly. "MRRF!" Cyno's eyes went wide.

Tighnari let go, stubbornly turning his back to Oliver. His tail flicked upward, swaying side to side in an invitation. "Fine..." he muttered.

Oliver's face lit up like a child on Christmas. "Green fluffy fur~" he hummed, making eager grabby hands before gently taking the tail and running his fingers through the dense, soft fluff.

Tighnari stared at the opposite wall. "What is my life."

Venti giggled. "I mean, you definitely like it."

Tighnari rolled his eyes. "Well, I definitely appreciate how gentle your boyfriend is... unlike my boyfriend, who practically yanks my tail out of my ass!" he snapped, glaring over his shoulder at Cyno.

"Hey, I ain't that rough!" Cyno defended.

Oliver giggled, finally pulling his hands away from the incredibly soft fur.

Freed, the hybrid's tail swished happily in the air before he turned back around to face them, then he smoothed down his clothes. "Well, are you satisfied?"

Oliver nodded, a serene, blissful smile on his face.

Venti clapped his hands together. "Alright! Well, bye you two! Hope you have a wonderful rest of your day! Enjoy the flowers, Tighnari!"

"Don't worry, Venti, I will!" Tighnari smiled genuinely, clutching the woven basket safely against his chest. "And thank you again!"

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Now, Venti and Oliver were finally back in Mondstadt.

"Okay," Venti nodded firmly. "Next time... I am absolutely remembering to pack a massive ton of water for you, or honestly, any mortal I ever bring to the desert with me." He leaned forward, planting a tender kiss on Oliver's lips. They were standing just outside the main gates of Mondstadt, out of sight enough that the on-duty guards hadn't witnessed their sudden teleportation.

Pulling back from the kiss, Venti's expression shifted into one of deep guilt. "I am so sorry about that," he murmured, genuinely torn up. "I was in such a panic. I... I have no idea if you were going through a literal heatstroke or what..."

Oliver leaned in to kiss him back, offering a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, okay? I'm fine now. At least I was with you, you know? If you were just some mortal like me, it would have taken us months to trek back to Mondstadt from Summer-rue..." Oliver blinked, freezing as the mispronunciation slipped out. He hadn't even caught the fumble until it had already left his mouth.

Venti had been on the verge of tearing up; the memory of Oliver nearly collapsing in the heat weighed heavily on him, feeding his belief that it was entirely his fault. But hearing Oliver butcher the name of Sumeru so completely unironically shattered the tension. The bard let out an abrupt snort, catching his almost-tears in his throat. "Hah-ha... hahaha!" Venti burst into weak laughter, pulling away slightly. He sniffed, wiping his eyes.

Giggling breathlessly, the bard pulled Oliver back in for a deep, passionate kiss. "You complete idiot," Venti sniffled as they parted. "I love you."

Oliver blinked, a warm smile spreading across his lips. Yet, deep down, a strange block remained. For some unexplainable reason, he just couldn't force the words out to say it back. "I—" he started. He really was going to say it this time. But then, a very loud, very sudden voice cut him off.

"TONE-DEAF BARD HAS A BOYFRIEND?!"

"GAAAH?!" Oliver screeched, violently flinching away from Venti. His heart hammered against his ribs at the piercing, all-too-familiar pitch.

Whipping around toward the path from Windrise, the couple spotted the Traveler approaching, with Paimon floating excitedly by his side.

The Traveler was just chuckling to himself, but Paimon looked absolutely utterly flabbergasted. "Paimon is shocked, she tells you! SHOCKED!" she declared with maximum dramatic flair.

"Hey, I'm not that unlovable, am I~?" Venti chuckled, planting his hands indignantly on his hips as he faced the floating fairy. "People seriously wait in line to date the best bard in Mondstadt!"

"Sure, sure," Paimon deadpanned. "People seriously want to date the city's drunkest bard."
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As the Traveler and his companion drew closer, Paimon blinked, finally taking in Venti's outfit. "Uh? What are you wearing?" she asked, eyeing him up and down.

"What? Oh, this? I took Oliver to Sumeru and wanted to wear some... more Sumeru-friendly clothes," Venti chuckled, scratching the back of his head with a sheepish smile. "You know how brutal that desert heat can be."

The Traveler chuckled, leaning over to whisper to Paimon. "This is like seeing your teacher out in public with different clothes on,"

"Huh?" Paimon tilted her head before letting out a high-pitched giggle. "Oh! Paimon gets it! Haha!"

Venti, having heard every word, huffed out a laugh. "Hey! You're making it sound like I'm old!"

"Hmm~" The Traveler conspicuously looked away, while Paimon giggled and stared at the sky.

"Oh, stop it!" Venti rolled his eyes playfully. "Also, you don't have to hide the whole secret around Ollie here. He already knows."

"Awww!" Paimon teased immediately. "They're already soulmates~ Sharing all their little secrets!"

"Ugh, whatever!" Venti scoffed, though he couldn't hide a gentle laugh. "What were you two up to, anyway?"

"Oh! Well, Paimon and the Traveler were busy helping out the Adventurers' Guild with a commission!"

"Well, technically, I did all the work," the Traveler corrected.

"HEY!" Paimon yelled, instantly floating right up into the Traveler's face.

"Heh. And you call me lazy," Venti teased mercilessly.

"Hrmph!" Paimon whipped around, turning her back to them with her tiny arms crossed tightly over her chest.

The Traveler just giggled. "We're heading to get lunch at Good Hunter. Do you guys want to come?"

Venti nodded brightly. "Sure thing! But you two go on ahead. I have to take Oliver somewhere really quick first."

The Traveler nodded. "Okay! Just meet us there whenever you're ready."

"Come on!" Venti grabbed Oliver's hand and began pulling him over toward the massive oak at Windrise.

"Huh? Wait, where are we going?" Oliver blinked, stumbling after him. Then, a sudden, fierce blush rushed to his cheeks as his mind took a sharp turn. "Oh... Are... are you wanting to have sex again before we grab lunch?"

Venti stopped dead in his tracks and slowly turned to look at his boyfriend. A second later, he burst into a fit of hysterical laughter. "Oh, baby, no!" he wheezed. "I mean, do you want to, though?"

Oliver's face turned completely scarlet.

Still giggling, Venti leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. "Okay, we'll totally do that if you want, but that wasn't why I was bringing you to the tree!" The two of them stopped a few paces away, right in front of a stone monument. "I'm taking you to this!"

Oliver had certainly noticed this mini-statue before, but he hadn't given it any more than a passing glance. He hadn't even realized it was meant to be a carving of Barbatos.

"Now, I know you aren't from this world. So technically, you have no obligation to worship me," Venti explained, turning to face him. "But, when people pay respects at these statues, it sends a signal to the Archons, and they return the favor with a blessing. I don't know how weak your body actually got from that... heatstroke? If we're even calling it that. And I can't physically heal you directly on my own." Venti reached behind his back, pulling something out. "Take this—"

Oliver glanced down, staring at the small, intensely glowing blue orb resting in Venti's palm.

"It's called an Anemoculus. It's an offering specifically for the Anemo Archon. Barbatos. Me," he added. "Just hold onto it and present it up to the statue."

Oliver gently lifted it from Venti's hands. He glanced up at the stone carving of Venti's godly figure looming above them, then back down to the Anemoculus. With a breath, he raised his hands, aiming the orb toward the monument.

Almost instantly, the Anemoculus floated right out of his grasp. It drifted upward through the air, gravitating toward the top of the statue. Oliver gasped in awe as the orb seamlessly infused itself into the stone with a soft, resonant pulse of wind.

"Babe—" Venti's voice said.

Oliver blinked, and looked down at Venti.

The bard smiled warmly, placing a reassuring hand on his boyfriend's shoulder. "There we go."

Suddenly, a rush of soothing, revitalizing energy washed completely through Oliver's body. The lingering fatigue melted away, leaving him feeling deeply calm, grounded, and entirely collected.

"You're healed now," Venti smiled, leaning in for another kiss. "Yeah, due to the rules of this world, I physically can't bestow a godly blessing like that upon you unless you make an offering first," he chuckled softly. "I'm so glad it worked." He reached down and laced their fingers together.

"Wow... that was actually really cool," Oliver admitted.

Venti giggled brightly. "It was?" His smile turned a bit cheeky. "After lunch, you should definitely go take a bath. Because you're stinky."

Oliver blinked, offended. "Geez, rude much?" he barked out a laugh.

"Hey! That's what makes for a good boyfriend, right? We gotta be honest with each other!" Venti defended with a laugh.

"Fair enough. Well, what do you recommend? The hot springs?"

"Well, that would normally be a fantastic choice," Venti smiled. "It would definitely ease any lingering aches and pains your body went through from the heat. But, as I said: you're stinky. You actually need to be scrubbed clean."

"Oh, so those tubs you mentioned here in Mondstadt?"

"Precisely!" Venti beamed. "I'll just ask the Traveler if you can borrow the tub in his hotel room. I'm sure he won't mind at all."

Oliver nodded in eager agreement. "Honestly, soaking in a hot bath sounds completely amazing right about now."

"See! It's going to be perfect!" Venti smiled. "Come on now, let's go get lunch,"

Chapter 20: Worried He Will Not Love Him

Paimon and the Traveler stood outside Good Hunter. Paimon was waiting impatiently for Venti and Oliver to arrive.

Once the pair finally showed up, Paimon immediately let her frustration known. She was starving, and the Traveler had been making her wait. "Ugh!" she grunted, folding her arms tightly. "Where were you two?! Paimon is hungry!"

"Oh, calm down, you floating bean," Venti teased, walking over with his boyfriend right by his side.

"Well, now that you're both here, we can finally order," Traveler said with a smile, turning toward the Good Hunter counter to speak with Sara.

Paimon pouted, crossing her arms again. "You two better not have snuck off to do some hanky-panky! Paimon needed her food!"

"WHA-?!" Oliver yelled, his face instantly flushing a deep, dark red. "N-No! We WeRE NOT!" Oliver's voice shot up into an incredibly high pitch, it probably rivaled Piamon's tone.

Venti froze, shooting a glance at Oliver. The Traveler did the same. Behind the counter, Sara dropped what she was doing and looked over, completely confused.

Oliver coughed, trying to save face. "I-I just worshipped the sTatUE!" His voice cracked horribly on the last words. Oliver froze, blinked, and slowly looked over at Venti.

A heavy silence hung in the air for five seconds. Then—

"BAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Venti burst into a fit of loud, hysterical laughter, practically clinging to his boyfriend for physical support. The Traveler and Paimon exchanged a look before they both started cracking up, too.

"Oliver, what was that?!" Traveler laughed, shaking his head. "You worshipped the statue? What statue? You mean the Barbatos statue outside the gates? The Statue of The Seven?"

"Paimon thinks it was a different type of worshipping, if you know what Paimon means~" Paimon smirked. She turned around and floated over to Sara, who just looked exhausted by the whole display.

Venti was finally beginning to calm down, taking deep, steadying breaths. "Ollie. Oh my word, Ollie," he giggled. "You're going to kill me one day with your silliness."

"You say that so much," Oliver grunted, turning his head away.

"Because it's true!" Venti laughed.

Up at the counter, the Traveler was ready to place the order. "You guys know what you want?" he asked, turning back to face them.

"If she still has Buoyant Breeze, I'll gladly take that delicious dish!" Venti declared dramatically.

Traveler chuckled, then turned his gaze to Oliver. "And you?"

"I-I will have what Venti is having," Oliver murmured.

"Of course~" Paimon facepalmed.

Traveler giggled, "Alright." He turned back to Sara.

"Hey! You didn't even ask what Paimon wanted!" Paimon exclaimed. "Paimon wants Fisherman's Toast!"

The Traveler nodded. "Yeah, that's because Traveler already knew what you wanted."

Paimon smiled brightly and clapped her hands. "Yay!" she cheered. Then, she paused. Her eyes went wide, and she gasped. "HEY! Are you making fun of how Paimon talks?!"

Sara simply sighed and turned toward the kitchen.

"No~" Traveler giggled, teasing her.

"Hmrf!" Paimon grunted.

~~~~~~

A short while later, all four of them were sitting around the outdoor table—well, except for Paimon, who simply floated in place at the edge of the table.

"You know," Oliver said between bites of his food, "for someone who always calls Venti lazy, it's pretty funny since I've never actually seen you use your legs."

"EEEH?!" Paimon's head whipped in Oliver's direction. In her shock, she dropped her food, and the toast landed on the table with a soft splat.

"Ooooh~ Burn~" Traveler said, covering his face to muffle his laughter.

"Damn, you really went there, Ollie," Venti snorted. "Oh my word, look at her face—" The bard laughed, pointing a finger at Paimon.

Traveler snorted in agreement. "She looks like you personally offended her."

"Urrrrg!" Paimon drifted through the air, zipping straight next to Oliver's arm. She began to repeatedly punch his shoulder, though her tiny fists did absolutely nothing. It was the equivalent of a mouse throwing a punch.

Paimon finally stopped and zipped back over to the Traveler, but not before Oliver made a daring move. Reaching out quickly, he tickled Paimon right under her arm.

"EeEEaK?!" Paimon squealed, darting instantly behind the Traveler's back.

"Oh!" Traveler gasped.

"BAHAHAH!" Venti roared. "The look on her face! Haha!"

"Heyyyy!" Paimon tried to sound intimidating and mad. "Don't tickle Paimon!"

"Hmm," Traveler mused, glancing over his shoulder at her. "Don't tickle, eh?" He reached back, gently scooping her up, and began to tickle her all over her small body.

"NOHOHOHO! TRAVELER, STOPPPP! STOP TICKLING PAIMON!!!" Paimon shrieked with laughter.

Eventually, Traveler relented and pulled his hands away. Paimon caught her breath, slowly drifting down to the edge of the table to retrieve her food.
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"Meanies!" she snapped at all of them, taking an upset, aggressive bite out of her Fisherman's Toast.

Venti snorted. "So adorable!"

"Paimon is not adorable!" she grunted.

"You kinda are," Traveler giggled, reaching out to give her head a few affectionate pats.

Venti giggled, "Hehe." He looked over at the Traveler. "Hey, Traveler?"

"Yeah, Venti?" The Traveler glanced over at the bard. "What is it?"

"Oliver over here wanted to use the tub inside your bathroom later, if that's alright?" Venti asked. "Since we traveled through that hot desert all day, he really needs a nice soak."

Traveler nodded happily. "Of course. I wouldn't mind at all!" he smiled, closing his eyes warmly.

Venti giggled, clapping his hands together a few times. "Great!" He looked over at Oliver. "You wanna go later? After I go drink my wine, I mean?"

Paimon let out a loud scoff. "There's our bard. Always going straight for the wine."

Venti just giggled. "But wine is so tasty! Especially when it's sweet and not too bitter! Best wines ever!"

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The small bell above the Angel's Share tavern door jingled as Venti and Oliver walked inside. The Traveler had headed back to his hotel room ahead of them, wanting to clean up and freshen up the bathroom so it would be completely ready for Oliver's bath when they will arrive later.

Inside the tavern, Diluc was standing behind the counter. Jean was sitting quietly at one of the tables, and Bennett was hanging out over at the side of the bar counter.

Diluc looked up from his work, noticing Venti walking through the door. The bard was now out of the desert attire he had picked out earlier and was back in his signature green clothes.

"You know, where did you even change?" Oliver whispered.

"Hehe~" Venti giggled mysteriously.

"Oh! Hello," Jean smiled, turning around to greet Venti and Oliver.

"Hey, guys!" Bennett waved, a big smile on his face.

Venti smiled back and hopped onto one of the bar stools, slipping right into the space between Bennett and Jean. Oliver took the stool to Venti's left, sitting right next to Jean.

"Did you end up going to Sumeru?" Jean asked kindly. "Did Tighnari like the flower samples?"

"Oh, yes! We did. And definitely! Tighnari absolutely loved them. Haha, you know how he is. He was overjoyed!" Venti beamed.

Bennett looked astonished, his eyes wide. "Woah! You've been all the way to Sumeru?" he asked, leaning in. "How did you survive that intense heat?"

Venti chuckled, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. "Oh, trust me, Benny, we nearly didn't, haha."
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"Ha!" Bennett laughed. "Well, at least you two came back in one piece! Knowing my luck, I wouldn't have come back at all, ehaha!"

Diluc slid a full bottle of dandelion wine right in front of the bard. "You went to Sumeru? What for?" he asked, resting his hands on the counter.

"They did a little quest for me. Well, Venti was the one who suggested it, actually," Jean explained with a smile. "He and his new friend over there went to give Tighnari some flower samples."

Venti giggled into his hand. "'Friend'... hehehe," he muttered playfully.

Jean arched an eyebrow, glancing at him. "What was that?" she asked.

"Oh hoho, me and Oliver are not friends. We're boyfriends!" Venti proclaimed proudly, a massive smile on his face.

Jean gasped softly. "Oh!"

Beside them, Bennett gasped too, a huge grin breaking across his face. "You are? Congrats!"

"Heh. I already knew," Diluc remarked, a small smirk playing on his lips.

"Wait, when?" Jean blinked, turning a surprised glance toward Diluc.

Venti snorted, looking up at the bartender. "Yeah, that's because I already told you, you dummy," Venti said before taking a long, deep gulp straight from his wine bottle.

Jean smiled warmly. "Hahaha, well, that certainly explains why I've been seeing you two together all over town." Then, Jean glanced at the clock and sighed, realizing she had to go. "I'd stay to talk more, but..." She fished some mora out of her pocket and dropped it onto the counter for Diluc. "I have to get back to the Knights of Favonius headquarters. Still have some things I need to wrap up for the day."

Diluc gathered the mora and nodded. "Have a good rest of your day, Jean."

With that, Jean left the bar, leaving only a few quiet tavern regulars at the tables to the left, alongside Venti, Oliver, and Bennett at the counter.

Venti grabbed a clean glass for his boyfriend and poured some of his wine into it. "Here, have a drink."

Oliver smiled and nodded. "Okay!" He was honestly in the mood for it, so he picked up the glass and took a sip.

Well, it turned out to be a bit more than a sip. Within a few moments, he had drained the entire glass. Feeling a sudden rush, he asked Venti for another.

But after Oliver finished the second glass, Venti giggled and pulled the bottle back out of reach. "Hey," he smiled gently. "You were the one who told me you're a total lightweight. Maybe drinking any more will be a bit too much."

And Venti was probably right. For some reason, Oliver was already looking a little loopy, his eyes scanning the room unsteadily.

Diluc blinked, looking back and forth between the bard and the silent boy next to him. "Is... is he drunk?"

Bennett laughed. "From only two glasses? Geez, even with my terrible luck, I can at least hold four glasses on a good day!"

"What are you talking about?" Oliver spoke up, his words slurring heavily at the end. "I am not drunk," he insisted, flashing a wide, goofy smile.

"Yeah." Diluc nodded flatly. "He's drunk."

Venti sighed affectionately. "In his own dorky way."

AVATAR MALFUNCTION

"I swear, I am fine!" Oliver smiled. He looked up at Diluc, blinking slowly. "Your face looks like a squashed bean."

Diluc blinked once, his eyes widening slightly in sheer disbelief. "What?"

"GeRK~" Venti tried to hold in his laughter. He really, truly tried this time, but Bennett burst into hysterics next to him, causing the bard to completely erupt into giggles.

"What do you mean by that?!" Diluc demanded, his voice rising.

Venti banged his fists onto the wooden table. "Hahaha, oh nohoho!" he giggled. "Okay, drunk Ollie is really something else!"

"I'm not drunk!" Oliver protested. He went quiet for a moment, thinking. Then, after a short silence, he slid off his bar stool and quietly walked around to the back of the bard.

The remaining three at the counter watched Oliver with deeply curious expressions.

"What are you up to now?" Venti laughed.

Oliver crept up behind Venti, reaching down to grab the edges of the bard's green cape. He gathered the fabric along with Venti's arms, pulling them upward and stretching them out wide behind him.

"He's Batman!" Oliver declared, dropping his voice into a deep, brooding, raspy growl.

Venti just sat there, completely yielding and letting Oliver manipulate his limbs however he wanted. The bard blinked in utter confusion, glancing across the counter at Diluc, who looked profoundly bewildered. "Whahahahat?!" Venti laughed, looking over at Bennett, who was giggling furiously behind his hands.

"Ollie, who in the world is Batman?!" Venti laughed.

Oliver continued with his drunken antics, keeping his voice dark. "The Dark Knight!"

Diluc gasped, completely dropping the glass he was cleaning. It clattered against the counter. "W-WHAT??"

Venti snorted. "The what, babe?" Venti asked, throwing a quick, amused glance at Diluc.

Oliver finally let go of Venti's cape and arms. "You know! Batman! THE DARK KNIGHT!"

Diluc stared wide-eyed at Oliver, then glanced at Venti, and then over at Bennett. He began taking frantic glances back and forth between Bennett and Oliver. "A-Are you talking about the... the... Darknight Hero that helps out Mondstadt at night?"

"No—" Oliver muttered, completely losing his balance and collapsing onto the bard's back with a soft thud. "I'm talking about the Caped Crusader..."

Diluc had the absolute most perplexed look on his face.

AVATAR RESTORED

Oliver let out a sharp cough and instantly sat up straight. "Woo! Massive head rush! Wait... what was I just saying?" He blinked, looking around.

"You talked... about the Darknight Hero," Bennett chuckled, shaking his head.

"I think you were just drunk," Venti giggled. "But it's still kinda weird. Because you... shouldn't even know about him if your memories are supposed to be gone."

"And you talked about me—I mean, cough—the hero, as if he were a bat. They don't... he's not a bat," Diluc muttered quickly, adjusting his posture.

Oliver rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on. "I dunno."

Venti giggled softly. "Okay. Well, now we know never to give you more than a couple glasses of wine. Or else you turn into even more of a dork than usual," he teased.

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Keeping to his promise, the Traveler let Oliver use the wooden tub inside his hotel bathroom. It was a beautiful, rustic setup—no modern shower, just a large tub sitting right in the middle of the room. Traveler had already filled it to the brim with warm water, and thick soap suds coated the surface, making it look incredibly welcoming.

"If you need me or anything, just let us know!" Venti called out from the main room. He and the Traveler were hanging out just outside the door, chatting while they waited for Oliver to finish.

Oliver stripped off his clothes, carefully setting his shirt, pants, and underwear on the floor far away from the tub so they wouldn't get wet from any accidental splashes. He stepped up to the edge, dipping one foot into the warm water before stepping fully inside. Turning around, he slowly lowered his body into the bath.

"Ahhhh," Oliver let out a long, relaxed sigh. "Okay, yeah. That feels amazing," he whispered to himself, leaning his head back against the edge. "That definitely hits the spot."

All the tight tension in his muscles from walking through the scorching Sumeru desert all day began to slowly wither away. He knew he needed to wash up with the soap, but for a few minutes, he just wanted to relax. He closed his eyes, absentmindedly swirling his fingers through the water.

Suddenly, a violent, electric zap shot straight through his mind.

"Ah!" His eyes flew open, and he winced violently. "Ow, ow, ow, ow!" He brought his hand up to his forehead, water running off his fingers and trickling down his arm.

AVATAR MALFUNCTION

As the sharp pain finally diminished, Oliver's eyes snapped fully open. He darted his gaze around the room.

His memory. It was completely back.

"It's back...," Oliver mumbled, his voice trembling. "Why does this keep happening?"

He wanted to call out to Venti right then and there, but he hesitated. For some reason, every time his memories returned, they would eventually fade away again, or something would happen to interrupt him.
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He stared down, his fingers swirling the warm water absentmindedly as he watched the steam rise into the air.

Oliver squinted, deep in thought. The steam. The warmth of the water. Heat...

He blinked as a realization washed over him. Heat.

"The heat..." Oliver mouthed, his eyes widening. "Oh my god, the heat—"

The heat was the answer. Every single time his memory had come back in these sudden, jarring bursts over the last few days, heat had been involved. The hot shower back in Fontaine. Fighting those hot Pyro slimes near Windrise. And lastly... the biggest trigger of all: his severe 'heatstroke' back in Sumeru.

"Oh fuck, I should have known!" Oliver berated himself quietly. "That was written in one of Doctor Barclay's notes!"

One of Doctor Barclay's written logs had explicitly mentioned that the Avatars had a severe vulnerability to heat within the Fictional Universe. Being exposed to high temperatures could cause catastrophic system malfunctions. Being in hot water or near minor Pyro slimes had only caused slight glitches. But being out in the open desert of Sumeru had almost caused his entire avatar to self-implode.

"Oh fuck, what would have happened to me if it actually imploded?" Oliver mumbled, panic rising in his chest. "Would my consciousness have just gone back to my body? Or would I have been dead for good?"

Neither option sounded great. Even if he survived and got pulled back to the transfer chair, the avatar body here would have likely blown up in a fiery explosion. It easily could have killed Venti, who was standing right next to him at the time. And even if Venti survived the blast, he would have been completely devastated seeing that play out.

Oliver noticed the hot water wasn't cooling down anytime soon, meaning his window of clarity was wide open. Bracing himself, he decided to call out. "Venti?!" he shouted. "I... uh, I need something in here!"

Outside, Venti gasped. "Sure thing! Coming in!"

A moment later, the bard slowly cracked the door open, slipping inside before closing it tightly behind him. "Hey," he smiled, walking over. "Looking pretty cute sitting in the water naked like that~" he teased playfully.

"V-Venti," Oliver blushed, his face heating up for a completely different reason.

Venti giggled, easing up on the teasing. "Hehe. What is it, then? Do you need me to hand you more soap or something?"

"No, no, I..." Oliver trailed off, casting his eyes down toward the floor next to the tub. "Can you come closer, please?"

Venti nodded. "Sure," he smiled, crouching down right next to the tub. "Yeah, baby?" He leaned over, closing his eyes to give his boyfriend a gentle kiss.

Oliver gasped and pushed Venti's face away.

"Hmm?" Venti's eyes snapped open, blinking in confusion.

Oliver immediately regretted the reflex, a wave of guilt washing over him. "I-I am so sorry, I..." He had a desperate reason for pushing Venti away, and it wasn't because he didn't love him. He loved the bard with everything he had. But there was something massive nagging at him.

"Venti," Oliver started, his voice serious. "The memory. It came back. And this time, I don't think it's going to go away anytime soon."

Venti's playful expression instantly dropped into utter shock. His voice fell to a breathless whisper. "Tell me everything." He gently placed a supportive hand on his boyfriend's wet shoulder.

"I..." Oliver took a deep, shaky breath, leaning against the edge of the tub closer to Venti. "I'm a college student, Venti. I was supposed to do an internship working for a company known as Barclay Computer Sciences. Doctor Samuel Barclay is the head founder of the entire program. Venti, I am not from this world. I need to get that out of the way first."

Venti listened intently, his eyes locked on Oliver.

"Doctor Barclay told me what I'd be doing, which was venturing off into different worlds using a machine he called the Transfer Chair. It literally transfers your consciousness into a constructed avatar within a digital dimension. My real body is still sitting in that transfer chair back in my universe, hooked up to a massive series of wires and tubes that feed me daily vitamins and minerals," Oliver explained, taking a breath to steady himself.

"But Doctor Barclay has proven to be completely untrustworthy. He's apparently conducting these experiments on all kinds of people—even teenagers. There's a severe glitch within the system, or at least within my avatar, that makes me completely forget about the real world whenever I arrive here. The avatar body malfunctions when I'm around heat, causing me to temporarily slip back into my true mind. The hot shower in Fontaine. This tub I'm sitting in right now. And the extreme heat of Sumeru."

Venti swallowed hard, processing the overwhelming influx of information. "That Doctor Barclay sounds incredibly dangerous. And mysterious."

Oliver let out a heavy sigh. "He is. I thought it was just a normal internship so I could pass my college class and shoot for a job within the field. But after accidentally getting jolted back into my real body a few times during malfunctions, I saw that I'm being kept in a completely different room now! And there are other people trapped there that he's used. I have no idea if he kidnapped them or what."

"Hmm..." Venti muttered, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Well, is there a way to send you back permanently? To stop him, or unstrap you from the chair? Don't think I forgot, Oliver. I remember when you had that brief slip back in Fontaine. You told me you were tied down."

Oliver nodded grimly. "Yes. I am locked down by heavy mechanical clamps. I can't move them," he shook his head. "I'm new to computer sciences. Doctor Barclay was supposed to be just an internship for me to pass my class. Not whatever this is..."

"Okay," Venti said determinately, nodding his head. "We can form a plan. But first, finish up your bath. I'll be right outside the door if you need me again." Venti began to stand up, but Oliver suddenly reached out of the water and grabbed his hand tightly.

"Wait!"

Venti stopped, looking back down at Oliver in the tub. "Oh? Do you want that kiss this time?" he asked softly. He quickly crouched back down to the edge of the tub and planted a deep, loving kiss onto Oliver's lips.

When Venti finally pulled away, he noticed tears streaming down Oliver's cheeks.

Venti gasped, his expression morphing into pure worry and alarm. "O-Ollie? What's the matter?" He quickly placed both of his hands gently on Oliver's wet cheeks.

"I...," Oliver sobbed, completely breaking down now. He leaned his head heavily into Venti's palms. "You're not going to love me anymore..." he sniffled.

Venti's heart shattered at the words. "No, no! Ollie, don't say that! Why would you ever think that, honey?" He leaned closer, pressing their foreheads together. "Baby... baby, please don't cry. Tell me what's wrong. Tell me what's bothering you, baby," he pleaded, kissing Oliver's forehead.

Oliver sniffled, gasping for air between his sobs. "I already know who you are. I've always known."

They pulled back slightly so Venti could look him in the eyes.

"Do you know what a video game is?" Oliver asked through his tears.

Venti tilted his head in confusion, then slowly shook it.

Oliver nodded understandingly. "Wait, yeah. Of course you wouldn't. Okay, well... think about a fictional storybook," he explained, wiping his nose. "Do you have that concept in your mind?"

The bard nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay. Now, imagine you're able to physically jump inside that book's world. You become a character within the story, abandoning your old reality to live in the reality of the book."

Venti caught on instantly, his eyes widening. "I'm... I'm a fictional character within your world?"

Oliver sniffled, wiping at his eyes again. "You... you caught onto that really quickly."

Venti looked down at the water, blinking in amazement. "Wow. I..." He paused. "But... how does that work? Have my godly deeds and achievements throughout the years somehow drifted into other dimensions as stories?"

Oliver blinked. "Well, not exactly. The story is mostly about the Traveler, if anything..."

"The Traveler..." Venti repeated quietly. He looked back up at Oliver. "What exactly is a video game, then?"

Oliver looked away, trying to find the words. "It's... well, think about a book again. But imagine you can see the book being played out right in front of you, like a stage play. And imagine you are in total control of that stage play, using your fingers to tell the characters exactly where to go and what to do. You have total control—well, as much control as the pre-written story allows."

Venti blinked slowly, taking it in. "That sounds magical... a very strange kind of magic. Completely different from what we have here in Teyvat."

Oliver let out a breathless, watery chuckle. "Well, that's one way to put it for a boy stuck in medieval times, I suppose."

Venti's thumbs began to gently stroke Oliver's cheeks, wiping away the tears. "Was that why you were crying?"

The profound sadness came rushing right back into Oliver's chest. "No... It's something else, Venti. Something else entirely." His voice wavered violently. "Venti, I look completely different in my world. I don't look like this."

He glanced up at the bard, his voice trembling. "I mean, I still have some of my features. The avatar was modeled after my basic looks, after all. But... there are huge differences."

Venti didn't hesitate for even a second. "Oh, Ollie."

He reached forward, pulling his boyfriend up out of the water and hugging him tightly against his chest, causing the bathwater to splash gently over the sides of the tub. He pressed a firm kiss to Oliver's shoulder, holding him close. "Oh, honey, the love I have for you right now knows absolutely no bounds. I don't care what you look like, okay? I am at a point where I truly, deeply love you. So even if you turned into a worm right now, I'd still love you to the ends of the earth."

Oliver's eyes welled with fresh tears as his face pressed into Venti's chest. He sobbed openly, feeling Venti's hand rubbing soothing circles into his back.

"Venti, you don't understand," Oliver cried. "I'm from a completely different... style. I don't look like you or anyone here."

Venti blinked, pulling back just enough to look at Oliver, though he kept his hands firmly on his cheeks. "Why would you need to look like me for me to love you?"

Oliver took a deep, agonizing breath. "Venti. You are what we call a 'manga' or 'anime' style in my world. I don't look like that. My eyes are smaller, my features are different, I'm probably incredibly tall compared to you in reality... even the world around me would probably leave you in shambles because it just doesn't look like the beautiful style of Teyvat." Oliver looked away, his voice breaking. "I look totally different, and I was so sure you'd just... stop loving me."

Venti narrowed his eyes slightly, his tone becoming unusually stern. "Hey. Look at me, baby."

Venti gently took Oliver's chin, forcing him to look back into his eyes. His expression immediately softened. "Oliver, please know that I am telling you the absolute truth. I love you. And like I said, even if you turned into a worm right now, that wouldn't change." He looked deeply into Oliver's eyes. "You said you've seen me in a fictional story. I assume you know my history, yes?"

Oliver sniffled, nodding his head. "Well, most of it. Hoyoverse is very stingy,"

Venti rubbed Oliver's cheeks with his thumbs. "Then you know that I wasn't always in this body, right? I was a wind spirit. A tiny, creature no bigger than a small stone you could hold in the palm of your hand." He looked at him intently. "If I suddenly changed back into that tiny form right now, you'd still love me, wouldn't you?"

Oliver blinked, the realization hitting him. He nodded immediately. He absolutely would. He loved every single version of the bard.

"So why in the world would you think I wouldn't do the same for you?" Venti asked softly.

Oliver looked down. Venti was entirely right. "I-I... I'm sorry."

"No," Venti murmured, leaning forward to plant a flurry of sweet, peppering kisses all over Oliver's face. "Don't be sorry, baby. I understand, you know? I can see where you're coming from with these fears. But I just want you to know, once and for all, that I will love you no matter what you look like. Okay? Please don't ever feel insecure about that again."

Venti leaned in, nuzzling his nose affectionately against Oliver's.

Oliver let out a long, peaceful sigh, completely melting against his boyfriend. "You know... once I get out of this tub and my body cools back down, I'm going to forget this entire conversation ever happened. Well, until I get hot again."

Venti kissed his cheek one more time, a determined look in his eyes. "But I won't. I'll never forget this, Ollie. You've given me so much more information than you did back in Fontaine. And if I ever need to talk to the real you to get more answers? Well, now I know exactly how to do it safely—and it's right here in Mondstadt!" He pointed at the steaming water.

Oliver chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Yeah, I guess you're right. We can always use this tub, assuming Aether lets us."

Venti smiled warmly, wrapping his arms around him in one final, tight embrace. "I love you, Oliver."

Oliver looked up into the eyes of the bard, feeling a profound sense of peace. "I love you too, Venti," he whispered, blinking away the last of his tears. "So, so much."

Chapter 21: Trying To Undress The Bard... It's Hard

Venti had slipped out of the bathroom, giving Oliver some privacy to finish up his bath. With a quiet sigh, Oliver scrubbed the last remnants of soap from his skin and stepped out of the tub, the warm water cascading off him and spiraling down the drain. He felt fresher now.

But the moment the cooler air of the room hit his wet skin, the lingering warmth evaporated, and his mind began to cloud over once again—almost as if that heartfelt conversation with his boyfriend had never happened at all.

Oliver grabbed a towel, dried himself, and pulled on the fresh set of clothes the Traveler and Paimon had so kindly washed for him.

He stepped out of the bathroom, swinging the door open to find all three of them gathered in the room.

Venti's eyes lit up the moment he turned around. "Feeling better now?" the bard asked, a bright smile on his face. "Nothing like a nice warm bath after walking for hours!"

"Tell me about it," the Traveler chuckled in agreement.

Oliver couldn't help but smile back as he walked over to them. "Yeah, I feel totally better now."

"That's good," Venti murmured, leaning in to press a sweet kiss to Oliver's cheek.

Floating nearby, Paimon groaned and covered her face with her tiny hands. "Just because we know you're dating this guy doesn't mean you gotta kiss him in front of us!"

A soft blush crept up Oliver's neck at her outburst.

Venti just looked in her direction, completely unfazed. "Hey, it was just one kiss!"

"Which is one of many kisses we're going to have to see!" Paimon shot back.

"Sounds like the small floating bean is jelly~!" Venti teased, playfully nudging Oliver's side. "Come on, let's get out of here and see what fun we can find around town before nightfall."

Oliver nodded, his smile returning. "Okay."

"You pick what we do~," Venti hummed cheerfully.

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"I shouldn't have let you pick what we do," Venti grumbled a little while later, though a tiny, bubbly giggle betrayed his feigned annoyance.

Oliver hadn't known what to choose, so he had ultimately decided they should help the Knights of Favonius instea dof doing something 'fun'. Lisa had needed a hand tracking down some overdue books that had been left unreturned to the library.

"I swear, you're going to join the Knights one of these days, I'm telling you," Venti sighed playfully, shaking his head. "Diluc from back then wouldn't approve." The bard chuckled at the memory. "You're like him in a way. Though, he likes them now."
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"Hey, I just wanted something to do, you know?"

Venti giggled, pulling Oliver flush against his side. "What we could do is cuddle and kiss all night," he grumbled through a yawn, planting another kiss on Oliver's cheek.

Oliver certainly wouldn't mind that one bit. But, ugh. The teasing bard was back in full force. Not that he ever really left. "You're being a tease again—"

"And you're being a dork again~"

Oliver blinked, deadpan. "Well, let me just tick this one on the list." He raised a hand and pretended to draw a tally mark in the empty air. "Tally two."

Venti tilted his head, feigning innocence. "What? Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You being a tease. I still gotta pay you back for what you said to me this morning before we left for Sumeru."

Venti blinked, a look of realization dawning on his face before he snorted. "Oh!" He giggled. "Oh, yeah, you did say that. When I said don't get a boner out in the heat—"

Oliver let out an embarrassed grunt and slapped his hand directly over Venti's mouth.

Venti gasped against his palm. "Hey!" he protested, his voice completely muffled. Laughing, he grabbed Oliver's wrist and pulled the hand away. "How do you even remember that, Mr. Memory Loss Boy~?"

Oliver slowly turned to look at Venti, his eyes narrowed playfully. "Okay," he said, drawing another invisible mark in the air. "Three strikes, you're out."

Venti just snorted again. "Oh, I'm so scared~," he teased.

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The two boyfriends spent the next two hours helping Lisa round up the missing books. Before heading to Good Hunter for dinner, they retreated to a hammock to rest—a cozy little habit they had fallen into over the last couple of days.

They lay there just chilling as a cool Mondstadt breeze drifted over them. Breaking the comfortable silence, Oliver turned his head toward Venti. "Ready for your punishment~?"

"Still going on about that?" Venti rolled his eyes with a dramatic sigh. "What could you possibly do, huh~?"

Without warning, Oliver lunged, digging his fingers right into Venti's armpits.

"eEEK!?" Venti shrieked, instantly thrashing. "WHAHHAHEHEIIIT!!!" He yelled, desperately trying to shove Oliver's hands away, but his boyfriend was relentless, scattering his fingers all over Venti's upper body and up and down his sides.

"BAHAHAHAHAHAAHA! OLLIE NOOOOHOHOHOOO!!!" Venti howled, his loud giggles echoing around them. Sthahahaop itttt!!!" The bard shoved at Oliver's chest, but he couldn't dislodge him. Or, perhaps, he didn't really want to.

Oliver tried to shift his tactics, attempting to slip his fingers under Venti's corset to get at his stomach and belly button—Oliver's absolute favorite spots to tickle. But the corset seemed to be laced extra tight today, and he couldn't even get a finger under the stiff fabric.
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Venti, still breathless and hiccuping residual giggles from the armpit attack, looked down to see his boyfriend essentially wrestling with his clothes. The bard snorted, breaking into a fresh fit of laughter. "Oh my, look at your face~," he teased. "You silly boy~."

"Ugh, help me out here," Oliver pouted, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

Venti giggled, leaning down to press a swift kiss to those pouty lips. "Really? I should help you~?" Venti grinned, pulling back slightly. "So, you attack me with tickles, and then beg me for help so you can continue the tickles, all because you can't get under my tight corset?"

Oliver's pout deepened. "But this is your punishment for being a tease!"

Venti couldn't contain it; he threw his head back and laughed loudly, a bright, musical sound. "Oh my word, I can't!" He gasped, taking a moment to catch his breath. "You're so funny!" He let out a few more stray chuckles before a mischievous spark lit up his teal eyes. "Tell you what. I won't take off my clothes for you~ I won't even use the wind to help this time. You will take it off~ In fact, all of it!"

Oliver's face burned bright red. "M-Me? Take off your clothes?"

He had never done that before. Whenever they did anything exceptionally lovey-dovey, Venti would always just remove his own clothes or playfully use his Anemo powers to whisk them away in a breeze. Oliver had never unraveled every complicated layer by hand.

He blinked, realization dawning on him. "Hey! Wait a minute, this is supposed to be your punishment!"

Venti snorted unapologetically. "Oops~."

"I-,"

Venti pressed his fingers gently against Oliver's lips to silence him. "Uh-uh-uh~ The Anemo Archon has spoken~."

Oliver just stared blankly at the bard, his lips still squished beneath Venti's fingers. "Bringing in your god title to be even more of a tease, I see," he muttered against Venti's fingertips, before gently kissing them.

Venti smirked, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Only for you~"

Oliver rolled his eyes with a heavy sigh. "Fine," he declared, puffing out his chest. "This will be easy. A piece of cake!" His eyes drifted down to Venti's intricate, multi-layered outfit. He blinked. Fuck, this is gonna be hard.

"And remember," Venti giggled. "All my clothing."

"Geez, is the top part not enough?" Oliver grumbled. "Alright. Well, let's start with the easiest—" He reached up, plucked the beret from Venti's head, and set it carefully to the side. "There we are. That's that."

Venti snorted. "Still got a lot more to go, cutie~."

The bard wasn't kidding. Staring down at the corset, Oliver realized he had absolutely no idea how it functioned. "I— Do I—" He gently tried to roll Venti's torso to the side to check the back, while Venti just sat there, giggling as he watched his boyfriend try to solve the puzzle of his wardrobe.

"Oh—" Oliver had expected there to be laces to undo, but after he gently rolled Venti around to face him again, he finally noticed the three golden buttons on the front of the corset. "Ah!" He touched them, only to realize he had no idea how to unfasten them. "Uh—"

Venti let out another snort.

"Don't laugh!" Oliver grumbled, his brow furrowing in concentration. "I got this!" He ran his fingers along the edge of the corset, finally finding a hidden crease. "Oh! I see, so I just pull it off from this end!" He gave it a tug, but something caught it tight. Oliver blinked, tracing the fabric until he found the culprit: A belt? The strap holding Venti's glowing Vision was completely blocking the corset from opening.

"Damn it," Oliver muttered.

Venti wheezed, clapping a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter.

Defeated but determined, Oliver shifted his focus to the Vision belt.

"Don't put that too far now," Venti warned between giggles. "I mean, remember I said I use it to store some of my powers. I need it close by so I don't lose everything."

"Well, that'll be helpful to know once I figure out how to get it off at all!" Oliver grunted in frustration.

Venti was a total giggling mess by now. This was hilarious to him—the sight of Oliver struggling this hard over his everyday clothes.

Finally, Oliver discovered the trick. It detached from the back. He unclasped the belt-like accessory and carefully set it down nearby in the hammock, ensuring it wasn't too far, just as Venti had instructed.

With the obstacle cleared, Oliver returned to the corset, popping the buttons free and pulling the stiff fabric around Venti's waist to remove it completely.

But looking back at venti, Oliver realized his job was far from over. Venti still had the frilly white blouse, the teal cape, and his elaborate bow.

Oliver shook his head in disbelief. "I can completely see why you use the wind to dress yourself." He reached over, grabbing one of the tails of the bow and tugging until it unraveled. He pulled it free and tossed it onto the discarded corset.

He moved his hands toward the white blouse, but stopped short, realizing the cape was still pinned in place.

"Okay, if I was really horny and we needed to have sex, the mood would have been gone a long time ago," Oliver laughed gently, shaking his head.

Venti giggled along with him, leaning comfortably back into the hammock netting. "I told you, that's why I use my wind! Haha!"

Oliver leaned in close, his face hovering right above Venti's as he tried to examine the clasps holding the cape.

"Hmm~ hey there~," Venti hummed, never missing a chance to tease. When Oliver's eyes flicked up to meet his, the bard leaned the rest of the way in, planting a sweet, lingering kiss on his lips. "I think you're getting it~ you got the cape loose."

Oliver giggled into the kiss. This boyfriend of his was way too much. He gently slid the dark fabric off Venti's shoulders and pulled it away.

"Yay!" Venti cheered softly. "He took off the cape. Or, shall I say, the 'Bat man' cape," he giggled. "I'm still wondering why you called me that. Ugh, I should have asked while you were in the tub."

Oliver blinked, a little confused by the memory gap, but shrugged it off. He had tunnel vision now; his focus was entirely on the white frilly blouse. "Wait, how do I—" He paused.

Venti bit his lip, eyes sparkling. "Having trouble there~?"

Oliver looked down and realized the shirt was securely tucked into Venti's poofy shorts. "Oh. Okay." He reached down to Venti's waist and began to gently tug the hem of the shirt out, half-worried he was going to tear the delicate fabric. But it held together perfectly.

Once it was untucked, he grasped the bottom and pulled it upwards. Venti smiled, happily raising his arms so Oliver could slip the blouse smoothly over his head.

Oliver tossed the shirt onto the growing pile of clothes beside them in the hammock.

Venti giggled and clapped his hands together. "Yay, he did it!"

Oliver rolled his eyes playfully. Then, without a single second of warning, he lunged forward, tackling Venti and immediately ruthlessly tickling the breath right out of him.

"BAHAHAHA! Hey, a little warning at least!!!" Venti shrieked between breathless giggles.

"Punishment time~!" Oliver cheered, his fingers immediately going to his favorite body part, digging ruthlessly into Venti's exposed belly button.

"EEEHEHEHEHEEEEKK~!!!!" Venti wailed, his arms and legs flailing wildly against the hammock as Oliver finally went to town on his navel.

Chapter 22: Embrace Part III

Oliver was having the time of his life. His fingers still ruthlessly tickling his boyfriend's sides. The bard's laughter was pure, contagious, and just utterly adorable. It was absolute music to Oliver's ears. He was completely melting.

Oliver dug his fingers just a little deeper into Venti's side, earning a sharp, giggly, *"EeEEK~!"*

Venti squirmed, weakly attempting to bat Oliver's hands away. "HAHAHA! Noooo! Stop~!" But despite his verbal protests, there was no real force behind his hands. He wasn't putting up a fight at all; he was loving every second of all the tickles.

"Hahahaha!" Venti erupted into another fit of giggles as Oliver's fingers dug playfully at his ribs. The bard thrashed and squirmed, letting out those adorable, breathless bursts of laughter over and over again.

Eventually, Oliver eased up on the tickling—but not before giving the bard's belly button one last, quick dig.

"EEP!" Venti jolted.

Once Oliver finally retreated his hands, Venti let out a breathless sigh and collapsed backward into the hammock, his arms sprawling out to his sides. "Oh my word," he panted, his chest heaving as quiet giggles still bubbled up from his lips. "That was fun."

Oliver's eyes drifted down to Venti's midriff, mesmerized by the way it slowly rose and fell with each of the bard's recovering breaths.

"Oh Ollie," Venti giggled. "Your fingers are definitely something else when it comes to tickling. Honestly, I can't even remember the last time I was tickled before I met you. But I can definitely say it's exciting and super fun~"

Oliver smiled softly, bringing his gaze back up to his boyfriend's face.

"Though—" Venti giggled again, adjusting himself until he was sitting upright. "You failed what you were supposed to do~" Venti shook his head in mock disappointment, flashing that signature, teasing smile of his. "You didn't take off all of my clothes~" He cast a pointed glance down at his shorts.

Oliver blinked.

Oops.

Venti did say that, didn't he? Caught up in the moment of delivering his boyfriend's ticklish 'punishment,' Oliver had completely forgotten about the pants.

"But since I'm nice, I'm gonna let it slide~," Venti said, giving him a playful wink.

Oliver rolled his eyes. This brat...

Venti smiled. He reached down, resting his hand gently against his stocking-covered leg. "But that doesn't mean you can't take them off now," he murmured, his voice dropping into a sweet, seductive tone. "Take them off now, to see what's inside again?"

Venti moved his hand over his crotch, pressing down against the fabric to outline his penis below the fabric.

Oliver's heart rate spiked.

"That is if... you're up for another round of this with your bard boyfriend~," Venti spoke seductively. "Well, are you~?"

Oh, Oliver definitely was. He wanted Venti again. Moving closer over the bard, he slowly lowered his hands to the waistband of Venti's shorts. He pulled them down gently, revealing Venti's undergarments. They weren't exactly modern underwear, but a pair of those old-school bloomers Oliver knew he'd seen in a somewhere, even if he couldn't quite place exactly how he knew them.

Oliver gulped. He gently ran his thumb over the small lump beneath the fabric, feeling it twitch slightly in response.

"Hmm~," Venti bit his lip, his eyes softening with a hazy, turned-on look. It was so gentle, and undeniably cute.

Oliver rubbed the spot a few more times before gripping the hem of the underwear and slowly tugging it down. Inch by inch, he revealed more of the bard's pale skin. With a final, slightly firmer pull, Venti's small, twitching penis sprang free.

Oliver's eyes flicked up to Venti's face. The bard was still wearing that highly seductive expression. "Have fun, windblume~"

Shifting lower in the hammock, Oliver pressed a soft kiss near the base of Venti's shaft and testicles. He trailed gentle little kisses over the bard's balls before working his way up the shaft, peppering the front, back, and sides with affection. Finally, he reached the tip, leaving a few soft, lingering kisses right at the head.

Venti was absolutely melting into the hammock, blissfully reacting to all the love being showered on him. The feeling of his boyfriend's lips ghosting over his sensitive skin was intoxicating. When he felt those lips fully press against the head of his penis, a soft moan escaped him.

"Oooh~," Venti gripped the fabric of the hammock beneath them, his back arching beautifully. "You do that so good~"

Opening his mouth, Oliver swirled his tongue around the head, keeping his eyes locked affectionately on Venti's face.

"Ahh!" Venti's hips twitched, his back arching even higher. "Feels so good~" Then, a new, teasing edge entered the bard's voice. "Take it in~," he whispered.

Oliver didn't hesitate. He took Venti's small length into his mouth, his eyes fluttering shut. He loved the taste of his boyfriend. He bobbed his head back and forth along the shaft, soft noises of total bliss humming in his throat. "Mmrf~"

Venti groaned, his hips rolling upward. "I'm gonna cum," he whispered breathlessly. "You want it this time?"

Oliver nodded eagerly, his tongue giving the tip one last good flick.

That final touch completely undid the bard. "AhhHH!" Venti moaned loudly. His body jolted, and he shot a heavy load of cum directly into Oliver's waiting mouth.

"Hrmf!" Oliver's eyes fluttered as the warmth splattered against his tongue. He sucked harder, dutifully swallowing every last drop.

Once Venti finally relaxed, Oliver pulled away with a soft pop, a single strand of saliva connecting his lips to Venti's penis for a fleeting second.

Wiping his mouth, Oliver looked up at the softly panting bard. "You're seriously so good at that," Venti murmured.

Oliver smiled softly. He pulled himself up the length of the hammock and pressed a deep, loving kiss to Venti's lips. The two of them held each other close, gently making out as a soft, cool, and peaceful breeze brushed over them.

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"I want to show you my... secret, before we go eat dinner at Good Hunter," Venti said quietly.

Oliver, who was snuggled deeply against Venti's side, arched an eyebrow. "Secret?"

"Yeah. My... uh, Archon clothes."

Oliver blinked. He looked up at Venti, who was staring blankly ahead with an unusually still expression. "The... revealing clothes you mentioned?"

It took a moment, but Venti nodded. "Yeah."

"Let's go." Venti held Oliver tight, slowly picking him up as he lowered themselves out of the hammock, dropping safely from the tree branches to the solid ground below.

"Meet me at the church," Venti said, his voice sounding distant. In a blink, the bard vanished into thin air, leaving Oliver standing alone in the night near the great tree.

"Oh... Okay." Oliver turned his head, his gaze drifting toward the glowing city of Mondstadt in the distance, before glancing up at the towering statue of Barbatos, its stone arms stretched out. He nodded to himself, and made his way over.

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It took a while to trek back to the city alone, and even more time to navigate the empty streets all the way to the cathedral at the far end of Mondstadt.

There was barely a soul outside; most of the shops were locked up tight for the night. Only Good Hunter and the taverns stayed open this late.

As he approached the heavy gates of the Favonius Cathedral, Oliver realized he had never actually been inside before. A few days ago, he remembered hearing someone talk about attending a service to worship Barbatos, but Venti hadn't said a word about it. Then again, Venti had been incredibly drunk at the tavern at the time. He probably hadn't even heard the man.

"I wonder why he drinks so much anyway," Oliver mumbled to himself as he pushed open the massive doors. "It's not like he can get drunk easily. Does he purposely get drunk?"

Stepping inside, the layout was exactly what you'd expect from a grand church. Symmetrical rows of wooden pews, towering stained-glass windows lining the walls, and a grand altar at the very front.

"Venti?" Oliver called out into the cavernous space. The church felt dead and empty.

"Over here," came the bard's soft voice.

Looking to his right, Oliver spotted Venti standing quietly near one of the massive stained-glass windows. As Oliver stepped fully inside, the heavy door slammed shut behind him with a thunderous BANG, startling him out of his skin.

"Oi?!" Oliver jolted. In the dead silence of the cathedral, the echo was magnified tenfold between the door, and also his scream.

A gentle laugh fluttered through the shadows of the church. "Just get over here, you dork," Venti chuckled softly.

Oliver hurried over to his boyfriend. "Hey," he said, keeping his voice low. "Why did you want me to... see you in here?"

Venti kept his gaze fixed on the stained glass. He remained silent for a long moment before answering, his tone fragile. "I dunno. I guess because there aren't many people here." Venti let out a heavy sigh, letting his eyes fall shut. "I... You see..." He cleared his throat. "I want to show you my Archon clothes. I really do."

He turned his head slowly to look at Oliver. "But... it's not really clothes. I mean, technically it is, but it's also a form. My true form. My form as an Archon... as the god that I am."

Venti looked back up at the vibrant glass. It really was beautiful. The moonlight piercing through the colors made the figure in the glass seem to glow. Oliver didn't need to guess who it was. The artwork was a magnificent depiction of Barbatos.

"My Archon form is tied to... so many memories. Good ones," Venti sighed, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Bad ones," He closed his eyes, then reopened them. "I've... experienced so many things. I've witnessed Mondstadt go through literal hell, right up until I was able to fix everything and give my people their freedom."

Oliver looked at his boyfriend, his heart aching softly. He didn't have to try hard to understand the gravity of Venti's words. "Venti..." he started gently. "If you're feeling like this, you know you don't have to show me your form. It sounds like something you shouldn't force yourself to do if you aren't completely comfortable."

"No," Venti said firmly. "It's nothing like that. Oliver... I want to show you. You deserve to see all of me. You're my first boyfriend who ever found out that I was Barbatos. None of my previous partners ever knew. Well—actually, some did figure it out, but they left me really quickly after that. Thankfully, they listened to my wishes and kept my identity a secret. All of them did... heh, even friends..."

Venti turned fully to face Oliver, his expression incredibly vulnerable. "I feel... very loose around you for some reason. I feel like I can share everything, even though it's been super hard, and you're a mortal. I want to share everything with you."

"Ve-Venti... I-I..." Oliver was entirely speechless. He had no idea Venti had been carrying this much weight inside. He desperately wanted to pull the bard into a tight hug, but he held back, letting Venti finish.

"Barbatos... he... I have done so much. It's too much for a mortal mind to grasp. But for some reason, you don't care. Would you care... if I told you that I was the one who shaped most of this land? Mondstadt, I mean?" His voice dropped to a faint whisper. "I'm so powerful I could probably reshape all of Teyvat if I wanted to. But I choose not to."

Oliver blinked. Then, he simply shrugged. "So what if you can do all of that?"

Venti blinked in shock. A moment later, he sniffled, wiping at his eyes. "How did I ever end up with you?" he giggled, the heavy tension breaking slightly. "Oh my word... I mean, it's not exactly rare for an Archon to date a mortal, but it usually ends quickly when they realize that we're... very powerful." Venti looked up at Oliver with wide eyes. "If I flew up into the sky right now and started shifting all the mountains around... you wouldn't think dating me was... too much?"

"Well," Oliver smirked. "If you do that, you better look sexy up in the sky while you're doing it~"

Venti froze. A few seconds passed before he completely lost his composure. "Bhahaha!" he cackled, clutching his stomach. "Okay, okay, you might need to work on your teasing, but that was actually a bit smooth~"

Oliver smiled warmly, stepping closer and wrapping his arms around Venti. "But seriously, Venti. No. I wouldn't mind. After how incredibly nice you've been to me? Look, I know my memory is all fucked up, but... I don't think I was ever in a good relationship before this. You've been so amazing. You care about me. You care about the things I like. You've never been mean to me intentionally. Haha, you're just a massive tease! And I like that! There, I said it. I love it when you tease me, because it shows how comfortable you are with me. You're sweet."

Venti placed a hand over his chest, beaming up at his boyfriend. For a moment, he couldn't form a single word. His heart was simply too full.

Oliver smiled and leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to his lips. Venti melted against him immediately.

They stood there in the moonlight shining through the window, gently making out in the silent cathedral until they eventually pulled apart.

"Thank you, Oliver," Venti smiled. "But I... I don't think I can change into my Archon form just yet. I mean, I really want to, but—"

"Hey," Oliver squeezed Venti's shoulder. "You don't have to show me right now. Not until you're one hundred percent ready."

"Yeah, but... I did say I wanted to. Mostly because—" Venti shot a mischievous glance back at the stained-glass window of Barbatos. "—my clothes in that form show off my entire bare midriff. And I know you'd completely melt."

Oliver sighed dramatically, shaking his head. "Typical Venti. Ignoring all of his deep-rooted insecurities just because he found a way to tease me with my kinks."

Venti beamed, letting out a bright laugh. "Hey, what can I say? You're prime teasing material." He leaned affectionately into Oliver's side, and Oliver wrapped an arm securely around his waist.

"I love you, Ollie," Venti said softly. "Other people with your fetishes would be stepping all over my boundaries right now. I'm sure some people would try to force me into that form this very second just to satisfy their fetish."

Oliver smiled, holding Venti a little closer. "I like to think I'm not like that, haha. Well, I'd hope not, anyway."

Venti giggled. "You definitely aren't."

"And hey, if you really want me to see your midriff, you could always just... you know, wear that two-piece swimsuit you wore to Summer-rue..." Oliver clamped his eyes shut in instant regret.

Despite his best efforts to brace himself, Venti still let out an explosive, deafening, "PIFFFTTT!!!"

Oliver took a deep breath and looked away in defeat. "I absolutely hate the name of that nation..."

"Bhahaha!" Venti howled with laughter, shaking his head. "You sound so mad! That name seriously has it out for you!"

Oliver couldn't help but smile. "The freaking name just completely hijacked the entire seriousness of this emotional moment!"

"Babe..." Venti snorted, wiping a tear from his eye. "It was serious, right up until you started talking about my two-piece."

"Hey! Sexiness is a very serious matter!" Oliver smirked. "And actually, I gotta ask. Why did you even wear that in Sumeru? How did you not get a tan?"

"Ollie... that is the one thing we Archons literally cannot do," Venti laughed. "No tans, nothing. I am pale forever, all thanks to the friend whose form I took." Venti's gaze dropped for a brief, somber second before bouncing back to Oliver. "Does that make you feel weird, too? That my godly form—even this 'Venti' form—can't be physically altered by the sun?"

"Ven... if anything, I'm jealous. I'm pretty sure I get serious sunburns if I'm out in the sun for more than ten minutes. I got the weakest dark skin ever. All my African ancestors are shaking their heads in disappointment."

Venti laughed brightly. "Well! I suppose that really is something to be jelly about, haha." He nudged Oliver playfully. "What about tans for you?"

"Dude, my brown skin isn't exactly gonna get any browner."

Venti blinked, then slapped a hand over his mouth as laughter bubbled up again. "Oh! Haha!" He reached up and pressed a sweet kiss to Oliver's cheek. "Right. Good point. You said sunburns you can definitely get?"

"I'm pretty sure. I don't even know what happened back in Sumeru. I... wow, I think I nearly died out there. The desert life is definitely not for me."

Venti smiled. That was definitely something he needed to discuss with Oliver soon. He needed to explain to the "cloudy-minded" version of his boyfriend exactly how extreme heat affected him. But, that conversation could wait a little longer.

Taking a happy sigh, Venti laced his fingers through Oliver's and started leading him toward the heavy doors. "Let's go eat~," he hummed happily. "And since you even love my tummy noises so much... I'll let you listen to all the food swimming around inside me later. Getting all slurpy and grumbly... I..." Venti completely lost it, bursting into chaotic laughter. "BHAHAHAHAHA OH MY WORD... Why did I make it sound so... ew!"

Oliver rolled his eyes heavenward. "Okay, there was absolutely no need to explain my kink like that," he grumbled, though he couldn't fight the massive grin taking over his face.

"But it is like that, is it not~?" Venti teased relentlessly.

"No! I just like the tummy... growls..."

Venti snorted. "Fine, fine~ I'll still let you listen anyway, because I love you to death!" His expression softened into something purely affectionate. "Also, you deserve it for being such a sweetheart. You deserve everything you love~"

"You're way too nice to me..."

Venti smiled, squeezing his boyfriend's hands tightly. He leaned up, capturing Oliver's lips in one more sweet, lingering kiss.

"Because I want to be, baby."

Chapter 23: August

Venti carefully set Oliver down onto the left side of the hammock before slowly drifting down to settle on the right side next to him.

"I can't believe you ate over three bowls of your favorite soup," Oliver chuckled, shifting to make himself comfortable. He watched his boyfriend gracefully float the rest of the way into the hammock.

Venti giggled once he was fully settled, turning to Oliver with a bright smile. "Well, I had the extra mora! I wasn't exactly hungry, but I just wanted to taste more of my favorite dish~" His smile turned slightly sheepish. "But maybe I did overdo it... Even though I'm a god, I can still get overstuffed in this form." The bard rested a hand over his corset, patting the tight fabric. "I gotta take this off. My tummy is literally straining in this..."

Deliberately, he chose not to use his wind to remove the garment. Venti had a mischievous idea—he wanted to see exactly how Oliver would react to what he was about to do.

Reaching behind himself, Venti gently undid the strap holding his Vision. He placed it down near his hip, keeping it close. Then, after stealing a quick glance to make sure Oliver's eyes were fixed squarely on him, he pulled the corset off entirely, tossing it lightly on top of the Vision strap.

"Ahhh, there we go~," Venti sighed, arching back into the hammock. In his frilly white shirt, his stomach protruded ever so slightly from the heavy meal. "Maybe I really did eat too much~," he hummed, patting his rounded middle and shooting Oliver a teasing look.

Oh no... that entire display was making Oliver melt into a puddle. "I-I... e... a..." His brain short-circuited, entirely incapable of forming actual words.

Venti fought to hold back a burst of giggles. He yanked the hem of his frilly shirt up, taking it from being tucked in his pants. "Like, look at this," he prompted, gazing down at himself. "It's so round! I definitely went overboard~" He gave his stomach another rhythmic pat. Slowly, his fingers traced their way to his belly button, teasingly ghosting over his navel as he arched his back. "Ahh~ Look, it's even deeper than usual~" Then he fingered it deeply inside, biting his lip.

Oliver couldn't take it anymore. *"EEEE!"* he squealed, practically zipping away and covering his burning face as if he'd just witnessed something forbidden. While it was no secret between them that he had a profound fondness for stomachs, the bard was being incredibly bold today, dishing out these teasing gestures completely unprompted.

What was new anyway, with his bard?

"Pffft!" Venti snorted into his hand, unable to contain his amusement. "Oh, look back over here, you dork~ I did say you could listen to my tummy, didn't I?" Keeping his shirt pulled up, he patted his middle once more. "Come on! Lay your ear on it, just like you did that one morning, my little windblume~"

Oliver slowly peeked through his fingers at the bard. Venti possessed that insufferable, teasing glint in his teal eyes—the specific glint that promised to make Oliver's heart pound like crazy. "Ugh..." Oliver grumbled playfully, shyly shifting his way back down the hammock as it swayed gently in the breeze.

He cast one more glance at Venti's belly before lying down, marveling at how the usually slim midriff was now visibly sticking out, completely filled with three large bowls of Buoyant Breeze. His gaze drifted

back to Venti's navel. Catching the look, the bard smiled warmly and playfully wiggled a finger inside his belly button again to tease him further.

Oliver blinked, glancing up at Venti's face. Of course, he was smirking, but it was a light, profoundly warm expression.

Finally relaxing, Oliver got comfortable and rested his head directly against his boyfriend's stomach. He pressed his ear flat to the warm skin, eager to catch any little noise echoing from within. As Venti began to gently run his fingers through his hair, Oliver let his eyes flutter shut.

Glerrrgg~

A little gurgle came bubbling up from deep inside Venti's stomach. Oliver had his eyes closed, but his cheeks dusted with red.

"Hmm~ you liked that one, didn't you~?" the bard teased softly.

Despite his shyness, Oliver muttered, "Yeah."

More bubbling sounds came from inside of the bard's stomach.

Blorrergg~

Oliver snuggled closer against the comfortable warmth. The growls weren't particularly loud—just a chorus of busy little bubbles, nothing that intense for someone to have eaten over three bowls of soup.

Gloroo-ooerr-glerrr~

That one sounded a bit different. It was bubbly, but with that heavy, wet, and slushy resonance that never failed to make Oliver's heart race. Venti immediately noticed the subtle shift in Oliver's expression.

"Oooh~," he teased smoothly. "Was that the *'wet and sloshy'* sound my little cutie talked about~?"

"S-Shut up," Oliver mumbled into the skin.

Venti just snorted affectionately.

Turning his head slightly, Oliver pressed a soft, warm kiss to his boyfriend's stomach before settling back down. A deep calm washed over him, completely comforted by the rhythmic rumbles and the sensation of Venti rubbing his head.

"Goodnight, Ollie," Venti smiled softly. "Sleep tight."

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Error....

.... Reconnecting...

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Error....

.... Reconnecting...

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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"Mrf—" Oliver mumbled to himself as the grogginess of reality hit him. He was waking up in the chair again. He let out a dry cough and fluttered his heavy eyes open. "Ugh... I seriously gotta wipe my eyes, and I fucking can't..." He instinctively tugged at his arms, giving up almost immediately. The heavy clamps still held him entirely immobile.

He planned to just lay back and wait for the chair to kick back online and send him back to Genshin. But then, he heard someone...

"Hey... are you... Did you wake up?"

The voice rang out from the oppressive darkness. Oliver blinked hard. Was it the kid from the chair in front of him? Had he been pulled back, just like him? Millions of thoughts rushed through Oliver's mind at once. Maybe that 'Richard' kid's chair was completely broken now, and he was getting sent back here constantly.

But no... the voice was coming from the left, near the door.

It wasn't Doctor Barclay. IT sounded nothing like him. Oliver couldn't see fully into the dark room, but he could just make out the silhouette of a figure standing by the door.

"W-Who's there?" Oliver asked cautiously.

"Give me a second," the voice replied. "I'm going to turn on the light, so be prepared, okay?"

Oliver narrowed his eyes in suspicion but followed the instruction, shutting his eyes tightly. Even through his eyelids, the sudden flare of the overhead fluorescents was blinding.

Carefully, he cracked one eye open. Then the other. Blinking away the harsh glare, he focused on the figure at the door.

"Hi," they said simply.

It was a boy. A teenager, at most.

"I—?" Oliver blinked, utterly bewildered. Who the fuck was this? And why were they just casually walking around? For a split second, he assumed again that it might be 'Richard', but a quick glance at the chair directly in front of him proved otherwise. Under the harsh lights, he could clearly see the other boy still slumped limply in his transfer chair.

So that scratched off this new guy of the list of being him.

"W-Who are you?"

The boy cautiously made his way over to Oliver's chair. "Hi," he repeated awkwardly. "I was... uh, in Extraction Room 2. I was the only transfer chair in there." He looked around the room for a moment, taking in the few other transfer chairs lined up against the opposite walls. "This is Extraction Room 1. Well, apparently. That's what the sign outside said, anyway." He outstretched an arm, offering Oliver a handshake.

Oliver just looked down at the boy's hand, blinked, and slowly looked back up at his face.

The boy quickly retracted his arm. "Oh! Haha," he chuckled nervously. "Can't exactly shake my hand, can you?" He coughed into his fist. "Sorry..."

"Who are you?" Oliver demanded again.

"Oh... Well, I'm August," the boy said softly. "August Barclay."

Oliver blinked once, processing the name. "August Barclay?"

August nodded solemnly. "Yeah. I'm Doctor Barclay's son." He looked around the sterile room once more. "I don't understand this... Dad said he didn't have any more of these... This doesn't make any sense." August looked back down at Oliver.

"Okay, let me get this straight," Oliver said, holding August's gaze. "You're telling me that Doctor Barclay is doing these experiments on his own children?"

"Well—" August rubbed the back of his neck defensively. "I did volunteer. But... I lost contact with Dad while I was in the world I got sent to. I was able to talk with him from within the world at first, but then I couldn't anymore." August let out a heavy breath. "It was hard, but with the help of... uh, someone I met in the world, I was able to shut down the machine and force myself out." He shook his head in disbelief. "This isn't even the same building I was in."

Oliver wanted to ask just a few questions. The biggest one: how exactly did this kid manage to shut the chair down from within the world? If he could get that information, maybe he could pull off the same trick with Venti's help. He would just have to formulate a solid plan the next time he was inside the warm water of the tub.

Oliver wanted to press for the answer, but his skepticism held him back. He couldn't fully trust this kid yet —whether it was because he was the son of an increasingly shady scientist, or simply because he was

freely walking around a secure lab while Oliver was still bolted down.

"Why are you here, then?" Oliver settled on a different angle. "Why don't you just leave? Fetch us some help? Sorry to break it to you, kid, but... your dad is kinda... shady. I'm starting to think he's kidnapped most of the people in this room."

August nodded grimly. "Yeah, I'm starting to question things too. Something isn't right." He glanced back toward the door. "And about me fetching help... I can't leave the building. Like I said before, I don't recognize this place at all. I was in a small room before. Inside our house. But this... this is a full-on lab facility. I haven't explored much, but..." August looked back at Oliver, his expression tight.

"I've been outside. Well, out in the hallway, at least," he said, pointing toward the door. "Like I said, this is Extraction Room 1. I woke up in Extraction Room 2, according to the sign on the wall."

"There was an Extraction Room 3, too, but the door was locked tight. I couldn't get inside."

Oliver blinked. "Extraction Room 3?" He looked down, his brain racing. Shit. That meant there were more people inside this building. Doctor Barclay had more possible victims.

August kept talking. "If you make a left out of this room and head down the hallway, there's a break room. For workers, I'd assume. And then there's another room with a giant portal rim..."

Oliver's eyes widened sharply. "A portal rim?" he interrupted.

The boy nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't connected to anything. Well, I think it wasn't. I don't know how the hell it works, you know? It could be wireless for all I know. But there was a sign on it that said 'Unfinished.' Apparently, it's an experiment designed to connect to..." August furrowed his brow, struggling to remember. "Something about a game hallway... I don't know. It was as if the portal rim was supposed to breach into something else entirely. I'm not sure."

"Every time I wake up back here, it's some new bullshit. What the fuck is going on?" Oliver mumbled bitterly.

Hearing him, August shook his head. "And that's not all, either."

Oliver shot him a tense look.

"When you asked why I didn't just get help... the front doors are completely locked. And if you're wondering if I can lock-pick them or something, I can't. There aren't even any handles," August explained. "There was a window, though. A small window. So, breaking it wouldn't do any good, because I wouldn't be able to fit through it unless I was the size of a cat."

Oliver absorbed the information. "Oh. Well, yeah, that's out of the question then. But what did you see through the window? Was it the front door? Did you see outside?"

August nodded. "Yes! I could see outside! Though... all I saw were hills and hills of snow."

Oliver stared blankly at August for a long moment.

Snow?

Snow?!

Oliver's face scrunched up in utter confusion. "What?" he muttered.

August shrugged helplessly. "I assume you're from the same town as me? Well, at least the same state, I hope. California, right?"

Oliver slowly nodded his head.

Yeah. California. The state famous for not having hills and hills of fucking snow near L.A.

"Wait, wait, wait—" Oliver squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stave off a headache. "So that means we're not in the same place at all. Like, whatsoever. We're probably not even in the same state. Fuck, we might not even be in America anymore!" He snapped his eyes back open, glaring at August. "You must have a phone on you, right? If there's service, maybe you can pull up Google Maps and figure out our exact location."

August's expression fell, and he offered an apologetic shrug. "Sorry, I don't! I know for a fact I had my phone in my pocket before I got into the transfer chair. But when I woke up and got out, it was gone."

Oliver sucked his teeth in frustration. "Fucking Doctor isn't stupid..." he muttered darkly. He refocused on the teenager. "You need to tell me how I can shut off the chair from within the world. I don't usually remember anything about this place when I'm inside, but—"

"Oh, you don't?" August asked, surprised. "Funny... I did."

"Well, I don't. Not usually. But when I'm around a certain temperature, I can. The avatar is weak to it. Plus, I can get my... uh..." Oliver blinked, hesitating. "...friend..."

Sorry, Venti, Oliver mentally apologized.

"...to help me. Or, at least, find a way to help me."

August tilted his head. "So, you want me to tell you how to do it?"

Oliver nodded fiercely. "Please. Yes!"

"But you just said you wouldn't remember."

"I will remember when my body heats up when I'm back. So please tell me,"

August gave a single, firm nod. "Okay. Get ready, because it's kind of a lot to take in. And getting to this specific place within the dimension is an incredibly tedious task. It's not easily accessible at all to outsiders."

Oliver braced himself, nodding for August to continue.

~Begin Send Back~

The violent gasp that ejected from his lungs was deafening.

"Oh, fuck!" Oliver gasped out. He frantically whipped his head back toward August, about to scream at him to hurry the hell up, but it was already too late.

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...
~~~~~

~~~~~~

Error....

.... Reconnecting...

....

....

....

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

~~~~~~

Oliver slowly opened his eyes, wincing as his vision adjusted to the dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy of leaves above him. He blinked gently, watching the green branches sway lazily in the breeze. He could hear the cheerful chirping of birds in the distance; one even fluttered onto a branch just a few feet away.

Staring up through the leaves, watching the birds dart across the brilliant blue sky, a profound sense of calm washed over him.

Beside him, he heard faint snoring. He turned his head to see Venti facing him, still alseep, one arm draped lazily over his chest.

Oliver couldn't help but smile, as he gently rested his own hand over the bard's.

Usually, Venti was awake long before him in the mornings, but it seemed those three massive bowls of Buoyant Breeze had thoroughly knocked him out.

Oliver's smile softened, allowing himself to simply enjoy this quiet, peaceful moment nestled so closely beside his boyfriend.

Then, he heard a sharp ding.

Suddenly, a piece of paper materialized in thin air directly above him. It started as a cascading stream of glowing numbers that rapidly condensed into a solid, physical object.

Slowly and gently, the paper fluttered down through the air until it landed squarely on his stomach.

Oliver propped himself up on his elbows, staring down at it in confusion. He plucked it off his belly. It was completely blank. Then, he flipped it over and found a block of text.

The Dimension Node. That is what you need. It's a hidden section inside ALL of the worlds of the Fictional Universe. It's a code room that can alter the dimension and change it to your will. If you're worried that YOU can mess with it, don't worry, you cannot. Only the dimension's Holder can. But, you will need to find the Holder of the dimension to even access the Dimension Node in the first place. I see that you are in Genshin Impact. Maybe the Holder is one of the Archons. Once you're there inside the
~~~~~~

Node, the only thing left for you to do is disconnect the chair. Once that happens, you can unlock your straps. — August

Oliver gripped the paper tightly, his eyes darting over the bizarre words again and again. Reaching the end, he looked past the note, staring blankly back up into the leafy canopy.

He looked back down at the paper—specifically at the signature.

"WHO!?" he whispered, his face a mask of utter bewilderment. "Where did this even come from?" He blinked rapidly, looking around the peaceful swaying branches. "Did it just fly in on the wind and land on my stomach?"

But then the memory clicked—it hadn't blown in from anywhere. It had literally materialized out of thin air as a string of numbers.

He glanced over at Venti, who was still snoring softly, entirely oblivious to the strange thing that just happened.

"I'll ask him about this during breakfast," Oliver decided quietly. He carefully folded the paper and shoved it deep into his pocket. Then, seeking comfort, he snuggled back down against Venti's side, pressing a quick, affectionate peck against his boyfriend's sleepy lips before letting his own eyes fall shut.

Chapter 24: World Destroyer Part III

At breakfast, Oliver brought up the mysterious paper he had found, after pulling the folded sheet from his pocket.

"Venti... this kind of just appeared above me this morning. I—" He dropped the paper onto the wooden table and unfolded it. "I have no idea what it is. Is it common for papers to just summon out of nowhere here?"

Venti was sipping on some wine he had picked up from Angel's Share. As Oliver set the paper down, he pulled the bottle from his lips, setting it on the table. He turned the paper toward himself, his eyes scanning the text.

The bard squinted, looking up at his boyfriend. "Did... someone write to you?" he asked.

Oliver shrugged, his expression utterly confused.

"Who's August?" Venti asked, glancing back down at the note.

"I don't know..."

"Okay," Venti nodded. "Maybe this is something your cleared mind would know. I'm taking you to the Traveler's hotel room again."

"Huh? What for?"

Venti flashed him a bright smile. "Let's just say a nice, hot bath works wonders for clearing the mind!" After they finished their breakfast, Venti stretched his hand out to Oliver. "Let's go."

~~~~~~~

They walked over to the Goth Grand Hotel. Venti pushed open the door and stepped inside, holding it open for Oliver.

"He's in room 210, right?" Oliver asked as he walked in.

"Yes," Venti replied.

The two of them made their way up the steps and down the hallway of the hotel until they reached the right room. Venti knocked on the door. Three seconds later, it swung open.

"Oh—" The Traveler blinked as he saw Venti. Opening the door wider, he noticed Oliver standing next to him.

Venti smiled. "Morning, Traveler! Is it okay if Oliver uses your bath? Again?"

"Oh! Uh, well, sure! It's a good thing you caught me right now; I was about to head into the Serenitea Pot...." The Traveler stepped aside, letting his two friends inside. "Help yourself," he smiled. "The tub is clean, so it should be ready. Just fill it up with water."

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Later, the tub was filled with warm, steaming water. Oliver blinked, staring down at it.

"Uh... are you just gonna stand there?" he muttered, a blush creeping across his face as he looked at Venti.

"What? Do you not want me to~?" Venti giggled.

"I—" Oliver looked back at the tub.

"Orrrr... do you want me to join you~?"

Oliver's face burned bright red, but he nodded. That sounded kind of hot to him. "O-Okay," he stammered.

Venti giggled. "Alright~." The bard snapped his fingers, and a magical gust of wind blew through the bathroom, sweeping his clothes off and settling them neatly nearby. He held onto his Vision and walked over to one end of the tub. "The tubs here are big enough for two people~," Venti hummed as he stepped one foot in, then the other, slowly lowering himself into the warm water.

Oliver nodded, stripping off his own clothes, and sat at the opposite end.

"Yeah," Oliver said shyly. He settled into the soothing warmth, then looked up at his boyfriend. "Feels nice though, right?"

Venti nodded. "Definitely. Though, it can't beat the hot springs."

Oliver leaned back slightly, but suddenly, a sharp pain pierced his head. "AHH!"

Venti gasped, quickly leaning forward to place a hand on Oliver's shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked, laced with worry.

Oliver slowly dropped his arm and looked up. He narrowed his eyes at his boyfriend. "Did you seriously try to fluster me when we were about to do something serious?"

Venti couldn't help but burst into a few giggles. "Ehehe!" He smiled. "Hey, I just didn't want to explain this whole tub thing to your 'cloudy-minded' self."

Oliver sighed. "Okay. So the paper... it's—" He looked over at his discarded pants lying on the floor. "Crap, it's in the pocket."

"Don't worry," Venti said, rising out of the tub. "I've got it."

Oliver blushed, watching his naked boyfriend step out of the water and walk across the room. He tried his best not to make it obvious that he was staring.

The bard dried his hands off, then walked over to Oliver's heap of clothes. He rummaged through the pockets until he found what he needed. Pulling out the paper, he asked, "So, what is this, Ollie?"

"Uhh... well, August is apparently a guy like me. One of the experiments." He looked down at the bathwater. "Apparently, he's Doctor Barclay's son. Which tells me Doctor Barclay is doing experiments on his own children. I didn't even know he had kids."

"Hmm," Venti hummed, glancing over the paper.

"Everything written on that... I think that was what August was supposed to tell me. That was before my transfer chair kicked back in, pulling me back here. So, he didn't get to tell me." Oliver narrowed his eyes. "To be honest, this makes me a little more suspicious of that kid... how did he manage to send what he needed to say on a piece of paper? It literally appeared right in front of me!" He glanced back up at Venti. "Do you know what a dimension node is?"

Venti squinted at the paper. "I... have a hunch."

Oliver's eyes widened. "Wait, you do?"

"Yes, but..." Venti took a deep breath. "But I'd need to take you to my realm first. That was the only way into that... weird place I found."

Oliver nodded. "Okay! So take me there."

"N-No, Ollie. I... I have no idea if I can take you there. I've never brought a human or any mortal inside my realm before," Venti said, scratching the back of his neck. "I dunno if I can do it. I don't want to hurt you."

Oliver blinked. He understood Venti's concerns, but he felt completely lost. It seemed like there were no other options for figuring out how to get the clamps off his arms back in his own realm.

"I promise you, it'll be fine. I mean, I'm just inside an avatar. My real body is in a realm far from here."

Venti took a deep breath, absorbing Oliver's words. "Okay. Then, I suppose we can try." He glanced at Oliver, who was still sitting in the water. "Do you still want to take a bath?"

Oliver looked down at the water. "Yeah... I guess. I might as well."

Venti slipped the letter inside one of his own pockets. "Okay." He kneeled beside the tub and pressed a soft kiss to Oliver's lips. Pulling away, he smiled. "I'll give you some privacy," he said before stepping out of the bathroom.

Oliver sighed, sinking a little deeper into the water to freshen up.

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"Thanks for letting him use your bath again, Traveler!" Venti called out as he opened the hotel room door to leave.

"Anytime!" Traveler's voice echoed back from inside.

Venti let the door swing shut behind Oliver and immediately drew his boyfriend close to his side. He swept a quick glance down both ends of the hallway, and saw that it was empty. Once he saw that the coast was clear, he looked back at the human.

"Alright. Here we go. Brace yourself,"

Oliver gave a small nod, squaring his shoulders.

Venti exhaled slowly and settled both hands onto Oliver's shoulders. He let his eyes fall shut. A gentle breeze curled around them both, lifting the edges of Venti's braids. The air shimmered. Unlike last time, nothing snapped into place right away. "This one's gonna take more out of me..." Venti admitted through gritted teeth. Still, he didn't waver. The bard kept his eyes closed. This wasn't a warp to another nation. He was trying to drag himself and a mortal human being into a plane that shouldn't even be reachable for him.

He pressed harder, clearing everything else out of his head.

But by now, the lingering warmth of the bath had left Oliver, and with it, the clarity of their previous conversation, so he once again has forgotten everything.

"Venti? Where are we going? You didn't tell me like you usually do."
~~~~~~~~~

"Shh," Venti said softly. "Let me focus. You can trust me, you know that." Venti pushed his soul to its limits, desperate to bridge the gap between his realm and the mortal plane.

Before Oliver could say anything else, the wind roared—and suddenly, they were somewhere else entirely.

The hotel hallway was gone. Now, it was a dark, endless void stretched out in every direction with no walls, no ceiling, no floor — just the faint sensation of something solid underfoot.

Venti opened one eye, then the other, looking up at his boyfriend.

"YES!" He threw both fists in the air. "I did it! I actually did it!" He grabbed Oliver and crushed him into a hug. "Oh, thank the winds—" He pulled back just far enough to press a quick kiss to his lips. "Welcome to my realm! Every Archon gets their own little pocket of existence. This one's mine!"

Oliver looked around the absolute nothingness. "So this is your realm? Uh... I was expecting your realm to be... more... Venti like."

Venti blinked, then chuckled. "What is 'Venti-like' to you?" He smiled playfully. "What, were you expecting wine bottles scattered all over the place or something?"

The corner of Oliver's mouth twitched into a small smile. "I mean..."

Venti giggled. "Okay, fair. But no — Archon realms are almost like the Traveler's Serenitea Pot. Just, you know, without the teapot. I could rework it in here to fit my own liking, but... eh. Too much unnecessary work. I prefer my hammock at Windrise."

Oliver shook his head. "Too much work, huh?" He smiled. "So, why are we here again?"

Venti let out a sigh. "Okay, I will explain it to you." He pulled out the paper he had taken from Oliver's pocket. "You told me about this. You had another moment of clarity and explained a few things. This was one of them." He held the paper up.

Oliver stared at it. "Oh — that's the note I got this morning. It just sort of... appeared. Drifted down out of nowhere,"

"Exactly what you told me," Venti said with a nod. "And I think I know what it means." His finger landed on the words near the top. "Dimension Node,"

"You do?" Oliver blinked.

"I do. It's part of why I don't spend much time in here, honestly." Venti tucked the paper away and took Oliver's hand. "I asked Zhongli about it once and he said he'd never seen anything like it in his own realm. Apparently I'm the only one who has it." He started walking, tugging Oliver along gently. "Come on. Follow me,"

"Zhongli?" Oliver asked.

"One of the other Archons," Venti repeated. "The Geo Archon, to be specific."

"If you just keep walking in here long enough," Venti said, quieter now, "you'll find a door eventually..."

Oliver kept his pace, holding tight to his boyfriend's hand. He was still quite out of the loop, but he felt completely safe at Venti's side, their fingers laced together.

"Shh," Venti whispered calmly. "I can hear your heartbeat. You'll be safe, I promise."

After walking through the endless, pitch-black void, they eventually stumbled upon a random door. It was just sitting out in the open, connected to absolutely nothing—no walls, no frame, just a door in the dark.

"That's it," Venti said. Still holding Oliver's hand, he walked up, turned the knob, and pulled the door open. He gently guided Oliver inside before shutting it behind them.

Oliver stopped dead in his tracks the moment he crossed the threshold.

The void was still there. But now there was ground you could actually see. A grated metal platform, maybe ten feet across in either direction, surrounded by a low fence. Directly ahead sat an enormous control panel covered in buttons, levers, and switches. And beyond the fence, where open air should have been, there were clouds. Deep blue, slowly churning clouds that pulsed with their own faint light, casting the whole platform in a cold glow.

Oliver turned to look at Venti who was standing by his side.

"What is this?"

Venti lifted his shoulders. "Genuinely? I have no idea." He nodded toward the panel. "That's what I wanted you to see. I made myself a promise a long time ago that I'd never touch that thing. Whatever it is, I think it's not something I want to mess with,"

Oliver himself wasn't eager to get any closer to it either.

"It looks like a control panel," Venti continued. "For what, I couldn't tell you. But whatever it controls, it's bigger than an Archon. Hell, it feels bigger than the gods in Celestia, and that's saying something," He glanced sideways. "I don't even know if they're the ones who put it here,"

Oliver squinted at the panel from a safe distance. The buttons were visible but unlabeled — nothing on them to hint at what they'd do.

Venti turned around, pointing upward. "There's a wall behind us."

Oliver looked back at the door they'd come through. From this side, it was set into a solid wall.

Venti pointed higher. "Look."

Oliver looked above the door frame.

~Dimension Node 1

of Sub-3921~

A text was above the door. Oliver gasped, and looked at Venti.

"See? Dimension Node," Venti said. "Exactly what was on your letter."

Oliver's eyes drifted sideways. He wasn't looking at the panel anymore — he was looking at the clouds beyond the fence. He followed the perimeter of the railing slowly, and found a gate. He blinked, slowly making his way toward it.

"Hey—" Venti was at his side in an instant, catching his hand. "Stay close by me in here, okay? You want to see what's out there?" He glanced through the gate at the rolling blue cloud cover beyond. "I've never actually gone out that way,"

Oliver looked back at him. "If any of this is supposed to help me figure out what's wrong with my memory, shouldn't we at least look around?"

Venti thought about it for half a second. Then he nodded and pushed the gate open.

Both of them stepped off the platform and into the sea of clouds. "What are these?"

"I don't know, Ollie," Venti sighed. "I wish I could answer you."

They pushed through until the clouds thinned and fell away. When they turned back, the platform with the panel was far behind them, just a shape in the dark.

"Okay," Venti nodded. "I think we should head back, babe. Trust me, we do not want to get lost in here."

"Well, you could just teleport us out of here," Oliver pointed out.

Venti nodded. "Well, true. But we still have to investigate the panel, and I don't want to risk teleporting you three times in a row for no reason."

They were about to turn back when something caught Oliver's eye. Off to his right, deep in the distance, a green light was flashing at slow, steady intervals.

He grabbed Venti's hand before he could take another step. "Venti. What's that?"

Venti paused, noticing the light too. He cast a wary glance back toward the distant panel, then looked at Oliver, who clearly wanted to investigate.

"Okay," Venti relented, walking toward the flashing light while keeping a tight grip on Oliver's hand.

In the darkness, it was hard to tell what the light was attached to. But as they drew closer, a massive wall materialized out of the gloom. Set into the wall was a heavy metal door. Above it, text wrote:

Fandom Storage

- Dimension Node 1 of Sub-3921 -

"Fandom Storage?" Venti repeated, confused.

Oliver blinked at the words. Something sparked deep in his mind, but the thought vanished before he could grasp it. He gently slid his fingers out of Venti's grasp and walked right up to the door.

Venti's breath hitched. "Babe! Be careful!" He grabbed Oliver's hand again, pulling him back slightly. "We do this together, okay?"

Oliver nodded, and they approached the door side by side.

The door was a solid metal slab with no window and no doorknob. Oliver pressed his hand flat against the center and pushed, but it didn't budge. If it was meant to be pulled, they were out of luck— as there was no handle to grab.

Venti looked at Oliver. "Ollie, let's go back."

Oliver stared up at the words one more moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Okay,"

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Oliver swung the gate closed behind him as they stepped back onto the platform. He immediately walked over to the giant console.

"You really have no clue what this thing does?" he asked.

"I have a vague idea. I just... it feels incredibly powerful. That's all," Venti said. "I did touch it once... Look —" Venti let his hand hover just inches above the surface.

Instantly, the panel sprang to life. Every button, every screen, the entire console lit up brilliantly.

"Woah!" Oliver gasped.

A screen at the center of the panel lit up, offering a handful of options. Venti tapped one labeled Characters.

Suddenly, the blue clouds surrounding the platform began to shift. Bright, floating bubbles materialized in the air around them, each displaying a different face. Seven of the bubbles were significantly larger than the rest.

"See?" Venti pointed.

Oliver looked closely. He immediately spotted Venti's face in one of the large bubbles.

"Those are the other Archons." Venti looked down at the glowing buttons. "I have no idea what this panel is actually meant for. And I don't know why the Anemo Archon was the one to receive such a terrifying tool... I..." Venti swallowed hard, staring at the screen. "I have the ability to completely erase someone."

On the screen, a prompt boldly read Delete, currently hovering over the selected bubble containing the face of Zhongli, the Geo Archon.

"I don't know what the gods in Celestia were thinking, giving an Archon this much power. That is, if it was even them who gave me this." Venti shook his head. "According to this, I could just..." He didn't finish the sentence. He stepped back from the panel. "I made myself a rule. I don't touch it. Whatever power this is, it's not mine to use,"

Oliver stared. Then he leaned closer to get a better look at the screen.

Venti watched him but didn't say anything. he trusted his boyfriend enough for him to not touch anything.

However, the moment Oliver leaned over the surface, a hidden hatch slid open, and a new button popped out.

"Transfer Chair user identified. Tap to disconnect Transfer Chair," a digitized, automated voice announced from the panel.

Oliver practically flew backward. "I swear I didn't touch anything!"

Venti nodded quickly. "Don't worry, I was watching you. You didn't touch it." The bard narrowed his eyes at the glowing button. "'Transfer chair'... that's exactly what you mentioned when your memory temporarily came back. It's how you got here." The pieces clicked together in Venti's mind.

"Babe... This is it." Venti blinked, staring at the button. "Hold on, I... Damn, I really hope this doesn't backfire. Babe, press it."

Oliver looked between Venti and the panel. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure, honey."

"Okay..." Oliver reached out and quickly tapped the button.

For a agonizing moment, nothing happened. Then, the machine spoke again.

Error.... Needs Holder Confirmation

Oliver slowly turned his head to look at Venti. Right in front of the bard, another hatch slid open, presenting a second button.

Venti took a deep breath and pressed his hand flat against it.

Scanning.... Scanning.... ***ERROR!***

The machine whirred loudly, and two more hatches popped open directly next to Venti's.

Genshin Imstatic*'s Holder needs confirmation from two Archons.

Oliver and Venti stared at the panel in disbelief, then slowly looked at each other.

Teleporting two Archons from Genshin Impact Sub-3921 to Dimension Node

Both Oliver and Venti gasped. "What?!" they yelled in unison.

With a blinding flash of light, two figures suddenly materialized on the platform right next to them.

One was a tall man, caught mid-bite with a pair of chopsticks near his mouth. His glowing amber eyes slowly widened as he lowered his hand, blinking in utter confusion.

The second was small. A girl with a watering can, still tilted at a pouring angle. The water hit the metal grating in a steady stream as she stared blankly ahead. "Uhhh..."

"I was in the middle of eating, you know—" The tall man cut himself off, his gaze landing on the bard. "Wait... Venti?" He blinked, looking around the bizarre void while still gripping his chopsticks.

Venti and Oliver exchanged a panicked glance. Venti recognized them immediately and placed a reassuring hand on Oliver's chest to let him know he had this under control.

"Zhongli," he said. Then, to the small girl with the watering can: "Nahida,"

"Venti, what is the meaning of this?" Zhongli asked, his deep voice remarkably calm given the circumstances. "Where are we? And who is that?" He offered a polite but confused nod toward Oliver.

Venti had absolutely no idea how to explain this. To make it make sense, he'd have to explain Oliver's entire existence as an experiment, the memory loss, the transfer chair, and the top-secret, mortal and god-deleting control panel hidden inside his realm.

"I—"

Before Venti could even get a word out, a violent rumble shook the entire platform.

Zhongli didn't flinch, merely resting a hand on his chin as his eyes darted around the dark space.

"What was that?" Nahida asked softly, finally dropping her watering can.

A blaring red light suddenly began flashing across the control panel. All four of them snapped their attention to it. The light pulsed aggressively, accompanied by a voice that was heavily distorted and full of static.

"I hear something... what's it saying?" Venti asked, straining to listen. He looked around at the others. "Can anyone else make that out?" Venti said, drifting closer.

Oliver stepped up and put his ear near the speaker.

Error...

Error...

Dimensional Breach... Error...

The main screen flickered wildly before stabilizing onto a terrifying log:

Dimension Breach Occurrences

10 days ago Transfer Chair connection from Honomono Universe

9 Days Ago : Unknown Entity from Unknown Universe

5 second ago: Unknown Entity from Unknown Universe

Sending emergency warps to characters within Node.

Before any of them could move, think, or speak, all four of them were thrown backward at once — and then there was nothing but green, blue, rushing wind, and the blurred smear of a hillside rising up to meet them.

"OUCH!" several voices cried out as they slammed into the earth, tumbling down a grassy hill.

Oliver had face-planted straight into the dirt. "Owww..." he groaned, thoroughly winded. He slowly pushed himself up, finding Venti already on his feet and offering a hand to help him. Zhongli and Nahida had fell over a bit, but the two got their footing really quickly.

"Venti," Zhongli said, low and controlled. "What did you do," he brushed off some dirt off of his coat.

Nahida looked around. "I think I lost my watering can..."

"I didn't do anything!" Venti defended, his focus entirely on Oliver. "You good?" he asked gently, checking him over.

Oliver nodded, rubbing his head. "Yeah, I think so..."

"Okay, we have to form a plan. What did that machine mean by—" Venti stopped mid-sentence when he felt a tiny tug on his cape. "Huh? What is it, Nahida?"

The Dendro Archon's eyes were wide as she pointed a small finger toward a patch of grass nearby.

Venti turned his head. Lying in the grass was a grotesque creature, its body oozing with a shifting, pitch-black mist.

Zhongli glanced at Venti, then narrowed his eyes at the entity. None of them knew what it was, but the Geo Archon was instantly on guard. "All of you, be prepared for anything. Because that thing does not look like a kind creature."

Venti nodded curtly. He grabbed Oliver by the arm and pulled him firmly behind his back, standing protectively between the human and the monster.

The creature groaned, shifting on the ground. "Must get away..." it muttered, its voice scraping like jagged metal. "I can't... I can't let him win..."

It slowly dragged itself up. The patch of vibrant green grass beneath it instantly withered, turning black and rotting away. Dark, ominous flames began to lick off its shadowy body as it stood to its full, intimidating height. It was facing away from them, completely unaware of the gods behind it, scanning the horizon.

"What world is this..." it breathed, head sweeping slowly across the horizon. "What world did I end up trying to escape..."

Zhongli looked between the other two Archons, his golden eyes sharp. Something about its words stirred a deep unease within him. World? he thought. He took a calculated step forward.

"State your business here," Zhongli commanded, his voice echoing with divine authority.

The creature whipped around at an impossible, neck-snapping speed, the very air around it crackling and distorting around its form.

All three Archons gasped, instinctively stepping back. Venti shifted his stance, making absolutely sure Oliver remained shielded behind him.

"No... No..." the creature muttered, its hollow, glowing white eyes darting between the gods and the mortal hiding behind them. "Not this world again." The mist violently flared as the creature's anger spiked. "I did NOT get to fulfill what I needed to do! I don't care if it was you residents of this world's fault. *BUT YOU WILL EXPERIENCE MY WRATH ANYWAY!"*

Its voice warped into a demonic, ear-splitting screech as it shot up into the air. The surrounding landscape of Windrise physically glitched, the serene blue sky instantly ripping apart to reveal a bleeding, digital red.

The three Archons slowly looked at each other. Without a word, they shared a single, resolute nod.

Taking a deep breath, all three of them unleashed their divine power. All of them let go of whatever shape they'd been holding.

Nothing else mattered right now—not the panel, not the teleportation, not the confusion. Whatever this entity was, it was an immediate, catastrophic threat to all of Teyvat.

A blinding tempest of wind erupted around Venti as he instantly transformed into his Archon state. His casual bard attire dissolved into a white, bare-midriff divine outfit, and a pair of luscious, massive white feathered wings exploded from his back.

Beside him, Zhongli shed his mortal disguise, shifting into his Geo Archon form. His chest was bare, glowing with golden geometric veins, and a stark white hood draped heavily down his back. With a swift motion, he pulled the hood up over his head.

Nahida simply summoned her magical catalyst, the floating green pages glowing with intense Dendro energy as she took her combat stance.

The three gods stood united, radiating overwhelming elemental power, ready to defend their world from this dangerous creature.

"GO!" Venti shouted.

As Zhongli and Nahida lunged forward into battle, Venti whipped around to face his boyfriend.

"Babe!" He had just realized his mortal boyfriend was completely exposed and completely defenseless.

"Zhongli!!!" Venti yelled out to the other Archon.

The Geo Archon stopped his charge, glancing back over his shoulder.

"Use your geo powers and put a protective barrier around Oliver here!"

Zhongli didn't ask questions. Though still immensely curious about who exactly this human was, he slammed his foot into the earth. A thick, impenetrable shield of golden geo energy instantly erupted around Oliver, sealing him safely inside of amber and stone.

Venti looked at Oliver for one more second, just making sure. Then he turned, wings spreading wide, and lifted off from the ground heading to the glitching terror in the sky.

"LET'S GO! ATTACK!" With a powerful beat of his wings, Venti launched himself into the red sky, with Zhongli charging right behind him.

Chapter 25: World Destroyer Part IV



The entire sky was stained a dark, ominous red. The clouds had vanished completely, and the rolling green fields of Mondstadt had lost their vibrant color, washed out by the crimson hue bleeding from overhead.

"I don't sense them," Venti called back, his divine wings flapping furiously as he hovered high in the air. "It's something far worse, I believe!"

Zhongli used his Geo powers to snap stone platforms into existence, leaping from one to the next to gain altitude. Nahida flew right alongside Venti, propelled by her own Archon abilities, though she struggled to match the Anemo Archon's frantic speed.

The massive, dark anomaly loomed in the sky just ahead of them, crackling with a volatile, pitch-black energy. The three Archons didn't hesitate for a single second, pressing their advance straight toward it.

The dark creature slowly rotated in mid-air, its gaze locking onto the approaching gods. "This world should possess high-dimensional energy... yet for some reason, it does not," it muttered. It remained hovering in place, casually watching the deities close the distance.

"I would have taken this world to my liking," the creature continued, its voice echoing with cold disdain. "But none of my plans work. Ever."

It raised a hand just as Venti surged forward with a fierce, determined expression. "And it's all the fault of that wretched, blue-haired Holder from Sub-7. You three will pay for it!"

With a violent motion, the creature thrust its hand forward. A massive blast of dark force slammed directly into Venti's chest.

"GAH?!" The breath left him all at once. His body spun backward through the air, wings scrabbling for leverage in the air, before gravity won out and he plummeted.

From the side, an amber formation erupted into existence. Zhongli vaulted off it and launched himself at the creature, one hand already gathering energy for a platform to come crashing down onto the monster — but the creature didn't even glance at him. It swept one arm sideways.

The raw force blasted the Geo Archon backward, sending him crashing hard into one of his own floating platforms. "gHAA!" Zhongli roared in pain, tumbling off the edge and free-falling toward the ground.

The dark creature shifted its focus to Nahida. The small Archon stood her ground on one of the remaining floating platforms Zhongli had left behind.

"Give up," the dark creature commanded, aiming its arm and unleashing a piercing beam of dark energy.

Nahida narrowed her eyes. In a flash of green light, she zipped to an platform nearby just as the beam obliterated her original foothold into flying chunks of rock.

The creature growled, instantly firing another beam at the Dendro Archon. Once again, she swiftly teleported to another platform.

Furious, the dark creature bared its glowing white teeth. "Would you fucking keep—!!"

Thwack!

Something struck the creature squarely in the back. "AHH!" it grunted, stumbling forward and nearly losing its balance. It was an arrow, crackling with Anemo energy.

Venti had gotten his flying back under control, circled wide, and come up behind the creature without a sound. "You flying little—" The creature reached back for the arrow, distracted — and that was all Zhongli needed. The geo archon was already back up, already moving. A massive amber platform tore through the air, slamming it into the enemy.

"AHHhhaAAA!" the monster shrieked. Losing its footing, it plummeted from the sky and slammed heavily into the grass below, leaving a deep crater in the ground as dirt and shattered flora erupted everywhere.

"Get down there! Don't let it get back up!" Zhongli commanded.

Venti dove toward the ground at breakneck speed. "And don't let it get to my city!"

They were just outside Windrise. Mondstadt sat less than a mile away. The creature seemed to have painted the whole planet red with that sky, but otherwise — the city was still standing. They just had to keep it that way, and keep this creature contained.

The dark creature slowly dragged itself out of the crater. "You're not the only strong things in this universe," it hissed. "This world will be mine to destroy. And when I'm done with this one I will got back to Sub-7, and destroy it. I am finished collecting energy. If I cannot claim it humanely, I will make everything and everyone suffer!"

Zhongli sprinted down his floating platforms, launching a rapid volley of stone and amber chunks. The dark creature dodged the first. Then the second. But the third caught it right in the chest.

"ArRRG!" It spun. "I MUSTN'T FAIL!" There was something raw in the voice now — desperate, worn thin. Exhausted. Like it had been fighting longer and harder than anyone here could imagine, and it still wasn't enough. "I am not like the other one!"

"What even is this thing?!" Venti yelled. He circled the anomaly at high speed as it lunged at him. Venti ducked and dove, weaving through the air while trying to land precise arrow shots. Realizing the battle was growing too chaotic, Venti decided to unleash his true divine authority. He pushed outward with a massive, invisible blast of Anemo pressure, throwing the creature back.

Venti grimaced; he knew the attack should have been devastating. But he hadn't used his Archon powers like this in centuries, and he was horribly rusty. Without his Gnosis, relying entirely on a fraction of power stored within a fake Vision, he was operating far below full strength.

Zhongli was pushing himself just as hard, but without his own Gnosis, every massive construct felt like an uphill battle.

"I'm starting to regret giving mine away," Zhongli muttered, heaving another chunk of amber.

Activating her powers, Nahida summoned a massive vine of leaves that whipped through the air, binding the dark creature just as it charged toward Venti.

"Wh—"

Before the monster could finish its thought, Nahida violently yanked the vine downward. The creature was dragged from the sky, crashing into the earth and forming a second crater right next to the first.

Meanwhile, Oliver was still safely enclosed inside the compact amber and stone fortress Venti had ordered Zhongli to build. He was breathing heavily in the cramped darkness, feeling utterly helpless. He couldn't help but notice the Archons' grand, godly attire—Zhongli's pristine white hood and Venti's stunning, midriff-bearing outfit. True to Venti's earlier teasing prediction, the human couldn't help but find it incredibly hot.

But Oliver shook his head, forcing his mind back to reality. The entire world of Teyvat was in mortal peril, the Archons were struggling, and he was stuck sitting on the sidelines.

"I want to help..." he muttered to himself. He peered through the narrow cracks in the amber casing, watching the battle unfold. "I want to—"

He pressed closer to the cracks in the stone and watched Venti take a hit, then watched Zhongli drop an entire platform onto the creature's head, sending it down to the ground, forming a third crater. "I need to do something—"

Zap

Oliver blinked. Suddenly, his hands felt heavy.

He looked down and gasped, immediately dropping the object onto the grass. It was a sword.

Oliver stared at the weapon, then looked back through the cracks at the three gods fighting the anomaly. He remembered being able to manifest this exact sword when the Pyro Slimes had attacked him earlier. He remembered how it had just... happened, without him really deciding anything.

Maybe this was his time to shine.

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"This thing just won't let up!" Venti shouted, narrowly dodging another dark blast.

"Keep your footing! We have triumphed over far worse than this," Zhongli replied calmly, launching another chunk of amber.

The dark creature raised its arms out to its sides, hovering just above the ground. "All of you fictional characters need to give up. I am getting bored. Only a Holder of a dimension or the wielder of a Keyblade can kill me. You all possess neither. So, surrender."
~~~~~~

"W-what is it doing?!" Venti cried out.

"This universe will be mine. All of it."

Suddenly, the world around them began to glitch. The ground, the air, and the red sky started fracturing into shimmering, floating strings of numbers and code.

"Zhongli, think of something!" Nahida shouted from atop an amber structure.

"I am at a loss," Zhongli admitted, his stoic demeanor finally cracking. "Our elemental powers cannot kill it."

"We could try banishing it to another realm!" Venti suggested.

"With the sheer scope of its power, it would likely corrupt the Abyss itself," Zhongli countered.

"You two have fought worse than this!" Nahida pushed.

"Nahida, the entire landscape is glitching out!" Venti panicked, spinning around in mid-air to look toward the horizon, at the city of Mondstadt. "Oh no... my nation!" A look of pure fury washed over the bard's face. "I will not let this wretch ruin what I have built, nor the rest of Teyvat!"

Venti aimed both hands at the earth. "Zhongli, Nahida, stand back! Because this god is going to shift the tectonic plates!"

"Venti, do not!" Zhongli bellowed, reaching out a hand to stop him. "You do not have your Gnosis! You will destroy yourself!"

Before anyone could move, a distorted rift tore open near the creature, drawing everyone's attention. The Archons stood paralyzed, completely out of options. The monster couldn't be killed; it could only be knocked down temporarily, and that was it.

Suddenly, the amber casing shattered.

Oliver stepped out into the open, his fingers tightly gripped around the hilt of his sword. He had absolutely no idea what he was doing or how a human was supposed to fight a sky-faring cosmic anomaly, but a strange, burning sensation was stirring deep within his chest. It felt exactly like it did this morning with the slimes. Things had just happened.

So, he didn't think. He just aimed his sword straight at the sky.

A brilliant beam of pure fire erupted from the blade, tearing through the air. The dark creature never saw it coming—it hadn't sensed Oliver at all. The fiery beam blasted directly into its back.

"Huh!?" Nahida gasped.

Venti's eyes went wide. He looked down at the ground and saw his boyfriend standing there, weapon in hand. The bard's heart practically stopped.

"OLIVER!" Every ounce of fear Venti had ever felt came out in that one word. "Get back in the casing! Right now! Get back inside!"

"He's armed?" Zhongli asked. "He can fight?"

"He needs to return to safety immediately," Nahida insisted.

The dark creature had stumbled from the blast, its concentration breaking. The digital glitching throughout the environment abruptly ceased, leaving the world stable once more. Its eyes narrowed into slits. With a terrifying burst of speed, it dived straight for Oliver.

"OLLIE!" Venti plummeted after it, his wings beating a million times a minute. "LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

As Venti drew close, the creature casually backhanded the air, sending a wave of force that knocked the Anemo Archon completely off balance. The monster landed heavily, its fists slamming into the dirt right at Oliver's feet.

Slowly, the dark creature stood up to its full height. "You're not from this world," it remarked, stepping closer to the trembling human. "I sense no universal connection to you to this world. In fact, I don't even sense a living soul. It's as if you're a machine." It paused, studying him. "Perhaps you're like Mark... No. You're that man I met. You're connected to an avatar."

The dark creature balled its hands into tight fists. "What did I say about messing with my plans?"

As the monster loomed over him, Oliver's vision began to glitch out. He tried to hold his ground. He tried to aim the sword. But his entire body felt like it was overheating, and the world around him started to violently distort and tear.

"Ahh—ahh—" He tried to scream, but only static, broken noises escaped his throat as his perspective began to unravel.

"Oliver!"

He could still hear Venti's voice, but it sounded distant, garbled, and metallic—like everything connecting him to this reality was fading away.

Then, suddenly:

AVATAR OFFLINE

~~~~~

Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Oliver woke up with a violent jolt.

"VENTI!" he screamed. He frantically looked around the room, the lights were on. His chest was heaving as his mind raced to catch up. Above him, the main monitor of the transfer chair was flickering wildly, emitting a harsh, glitchy static.

"W-Woah, are you okay!?"

Oliver spun his head around and saw August sitting on the floor by the door, holding a container of instant ramen. Oliver was too busy panicking to care. He swallowed hard, tentatively lifting his left arm.

It moved perfectly. He moved his right. He looked down at his limbs and realized the mechanical constraints were completely retracted.

"Wait, when did those open?" August asked, quickly setting his food aside and rushing over to the chair. "I was sitting here the whole time. Did it just do that on its own? You must have gotten my note. Did you do what I said?"

"N-No, no, no, I have to go back!" Oliver yelled, frantically trying to adjust himself. "I HAVE TO GET BACK!!"

August's eyes went wide. "Get back? W-What? What happened?!"

"They're in DANGER! I have to go back right now!" Oliver shouted, grabbing August's arm. "Put the clamps back on! Come on, hurry it up! Boot the machine back on!"

August just stood there, his mouth hanging open as he struggled to process the panic. "I — I don't understand what's—"

"There's some kind of dark creature in there! Not even the Archons can handle it!" Oliver explained frantically. "I haven't even finished playing all of Genshin Impact, but I know for a fact that thing is not supposed to be in the game! I need to go back and help them!"

"A dark creature..." August blinked, his expression turning grave. "I... I saw a dark creature back in the world I was sent to."

But Oliver was too spun out to listen. "Okay, cool. Just send me back!"

"O-Okay, but listen to me! Please!" August quickly turned to a laptop that was sitting on a side table next to Oliver's transfer chair. Oliver was so much in a panic, he hadn't even noticed that was there.

"It was a game I was sent into as well. Grounded was the name of the game. A game where you play one of four teens who have been shrunk down to the size of an insect. I became friends with one of the characters, Pete. Pete and I came across a dark creature once, I am not sure if it's the same one you're talking about, but if it is, you have to be careful!" August tapped the trackpad to wake the screen. "This is how I sent you that note. I managed to hardwire my laptop directly into the transfer chair's main override. I can actually alter your avatar's data from here. And I'm going to do exactly that. I'm making you invincible. You're in Genshin Impact, right? I'll just code in all the elements and max out every single stat. It's total overkill, but you need to be overkill to kill that thing."

August's fingers flew across the keyboard, typing at a blinding speed. Oliver could only watch as endless rows of code went across the screen.

"Jesus Christ..." August muttered, shaking his head. "Your avatar's source code has a ridiculous amount of bugs. What the fuck is this?" He continued to type furiously.

"Okay... done. Done!" He slid his fingers along the mouse pad, and clicked something.

August closed the laptop and looked Oliver dead in the eyes. "I can see why you're risking it to save them. These aren't just fictional characters, Oliver. These are real dimensions filled with real people. I already promised Pete back in Grounded that I'd find a way back to him one day."

"Go and protect them, and show that dark monster a thing or two about plot armor,"

Oliver nodded firmly, leaning back into the headrest and closing his eyes.

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Begin send back.
~~~~~

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

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Chapter 26: Holder at Maximum

The moment Oliver went limp, Venti surged toward him — but the dark creature shot an arm out, and the bard locked in place like he'd hit a wall.

"Arrrg!" Venti grunted, straining against the invisible hold with everything he had, but no matter how hard he pushed, his body refused to move. The only thing he could have done was speak. "Get away from Oliver!" he snapped.

The dark creature slowly turned around, peering at Venti. The other two Archons dove at the entity, but they, too, froze in their tracks.

"I have already lost in a place you wouldn't understand exists," the dark creature said, the shadowy flames rolling off its body flaring higher. "The entirety of the Fictional Universe will pay back for everything."

The Archons couldn't move; they were entirely paralyzed. They didn't understand this creature—it was entirely unpredictable. One moment, it felt as though they could overpower it, and the next, it pulled something otherworldly, seizing up their bodies and locking them down completely.

The world around them crackled with that sickening red hue, the sky continuing to glitch and stutter. All three Archons were silently racking their minds, individually trying to come up with a plan to best this monster.

But then, Oliver's body slowly pushed upward from the ground.

Venti's eyes widened slightly. He still couldn't break free from the dark creature's telekinetic grasp. He didn't dare call out Oliver's name, terrified that the creature would instantly strike his boyfriend down.

Then, Oliver did something entirely unexpected.

He held his sword high, sweeping it viciously to the side, and a massive gale of wind tore through the area.

"AHHH!" nearly all of them, including the dark creature, yelled out.

The howling wind slammed against the creature. "What is this?!" it yelled, struggling to keep its footing, but the sheer strength of the gale managed to blast it down into the dirt.

The second it fell over, its paralyzing grasp vanished. The three elemental gods dropped heavily to the grass.

Oliver swished his sword to the side and stood perfectly still, his head slowly turning to lock onto the downed creature.

"O-Ollie!" Venti scrambled to his feet, rushing toward him. "Oliver! What are you doing?! I knew you said you could use a sword, but you — you just —"

Oliver made a sharp downward motion with the blade, piercing it directly into the earth. A blazing blast of fire came raining down from the sky, slamming directly on top of the dark creature.

The Archons gasped, their eyes fixed on the impact zone, but as the smoke cleared, it barely left a scratch. The dark flames still roared from the entity's form. It slowly stood up, crackling with dark energy as it glared at the human.

"What did you do..." it hissed. "You were not this powerful before..." It slashed a wave of dark energy straight at Oliver.

Venti gasped and lunged forward to protect him, but before he could, the human brought his sword up to his face and slashed through the dark matter, sending the energy hurling right back at the creature.

The monster managed to dodge out of the way, its expression unreadable. "You have powers close to a Holder..." it said in a low, dangerous tone. "What is that avatar you're using?"

"Get out of this world," Zhongli suddenly commanded. He summoned a massive rock formation and slammed it down on top of the creature. The giant mound of amber and stone crashed into the grass, cratering the ground.

But the creature still wasn't defeated.

"We need help," Venti said. The Anemo Archon put his fingers to his mouth and blew a sharp, piercing whistle that echoed across the nearly destroyed landscape of Windrise.

"Venti, what are you doing?" Zhongli asked, readying another geo formation.

Nahida continued to zap the dark creature with her magic, but nothing she threw at it seemed to faze the entity as it slowly hovered up into the air.

Oliver tightened his grip on his sword, watching the dark creature rise.

Venti sucked on his teeth. "Come on, answer my call..." he hissed quietly to himself.

"Venti, what's the goal here?" Zhongli asked again.

Then a massive shadow swept across the red hue of Windrise.

The Archons didn't have to say anything else.

Davlin slammed down from the sky, knocking the dark creature out of the air. It tried to recover, but the blue dragon let out a deafening screech, sending a physical shockwave rippling through the land.

The dark creature kept its footing, barely moving an inch.

But then, Dvalin lunged closer, clamping his massive jaws onto the dark entity. The dragon thrashed it around violently before hurling it across the field. It slammed hard into the earth, tumbling aggressively before colliding with the giant oak tree.

The ancient tree shook with tremendous force. High above, the branch holding Venti's hammock snapped and plummeted. The heavy wood crashed down onto the creature, pinning it, as the hammock draped awkwardly over its head.

Venti let out a dramatic sound of defeat. "Noo, my hammock!" he grunted, growing even more annoyed when he saw the creature rising once again.

"Nothing is going to kill this thing," Zhongli said. He raised his hand. "The best we can do is keep it contained as much as we can." The Geo Archon summoned another amber formation beside the creature and rammed it horizontally into its body, launching it through the air.

As it flew, Zhongli summoned another rock for it to crash into, bouncing it backward. Before it could recover, he dropped a third formation from directly above, slamming the creature brutally back into the dirt.

Nahida summoned a barrage of thick, glowing leafy vines, wrapping them tightly around the rock and anchoring them deep into the earth. "Will the other Archons show up?" Nahida asked. "Will—"

Before she could finish, the creature violently burst upward out of the rock formation, rocketing up into the red sky. Nahida's vines were useless against the force, and with everything happening so suddenly, she didn't have time to let go. "Ahh!"

Standing beside her, Zhongli swiftly grabbed her leg, pulling her back down and safely depositing her onto the grass.

"T-Thanks!" Nahida panted, dusting herself off.

The creature loomed high in the sky, its dark, flaming body stark against the glitching red atmosphere it had created. Then, with terrifying speed, it dropped back down to the ground.

"Which one of you is the Holder?" its dark voice boomed, scanning the group.

Venti gasped softly, suddenly remembering that he might have been the Holder—whatever that meant, according to that strange device.

That subtle gasp was all the dark creature needed. What happened next was nearly unavoidable. Venti locked in place the second the creature raised its hand. But this wasn't like the telekinetic hold from before; this time, Venti started to glitch. The Wind Archon felt a sudden, strange, pain rip up and down his body.

"Barbatos!" Nahida screamed. She tried to intervene, but she couldn't. None of them could. Zhongli tried to summon more rocks, Oliver tried to slash with his sword, but they were entirely frozen again.

Because when Venti started to glitch, so did everything around him. The sound was unbearable — like the universe itself was being torn open at the seams.

The dark creature said nothing, just standing there intimidatingly as the dark flames whipped around its body.

Amidst the chaos, none of them noticed that something else was coming to help. Something that usually never intervened. But this threat was bigger than anything they had ever faced; as the entire universe was at stake.

The dark creature noticed it first. It looked up at the sky and saw a massive floating island slowly descending toward the ground. It was one large, central landmass surrounded by smaller orbiting chunks of earth, bigger than Mondstadt itself.

The central island featured a tall, imposing structure with a glowing area at its peak.

The creature narrowed its eyes. Whatever this was, it was completely unaffected by its powers.

Suddenly, a blinding golden beam shot down from the glowing peak of the building, striking the creature directly. "ARRRGGG!" the entity roared in agony, its hold on the world shattering instantly.

Venti dropped to his knees, weak and barely able to move. All of his friends collapsed to the grass around him as the glitching stopped.

The dark creature was bathed in the blinding golden light, struggling to stand but failing under the pressure. "What is this... stop this!" it yelled, thrashing wildly. "I'm not going to be bested by something as insignificant as this! You're not even real! None of this is!"

Zhongli was the first to his feet. He whipped his head around, looking up at the sky in sheer disbelief. The Geo Archon didn't speak, but his shock was palpable. He moved quickly to Venti, trying to pull the Anemo Archon to safety.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the blinding light ceased. The floating island backed away into the clouds and vanished entirely.

Holding Venti, Zhongli let out a frustrated grunt. "Why would they leave? It's still not dead!"

But it was severely weakened. The dark creature forced itself up, but now it was the one glitching. "No..." it hissed. "What type of world is this..." It grumbled, trying to muster its energy to fight, but its strength was gone. "I will not... be..."

Venti was still out cold. Zhongli kept him upright. "The dark creature is weakened." He looked at Nahida. "Hold him —"

Nahida tried to take him, but the larger Archon's dropped onto her. "OOF!"

Oliver quickly rushed over, lifting Venti securely off of Nahida.

"Thanks..." she breathed.

Zhongli raised his hand, and another jagged amber structure materialized in the air. But before he could swipe his arm down to launch it, a strange, shimmering sound echoed beside him. He froze, looking over his shoulder. Nahida and Oliver followed his gaze.

A glowing blue portal had torn open near them, swirling brightly against the corrupted red hue of the world. Above the opening, glitchy text floated in mid-air, spelling out: Sub-7.

Something... no, someone stepped out of it. Human? Monster? It had the silhouette of a person, but jagged blue crystals jutted out from their skin at all angles. Their face was entirely obscured, half-covered by a dark, obsidian-like rock material. Flashes of pale skin peeked through the crystals, hinting that there might be a human underneath it all. A blue cape swished behind them, and in their hands, they held a long, yellow crystalline weapon embedded with blue shards, ending in a shape that resembled the teeth of a key and the tip of the weapon.

Zhongli gasped, instantly ushering the group back. "Step back!" he commanded.

Oliver tightened his grip on Venti, gently dragging his unconscious boyfriend backward. But the new creature wasn't looking at them.

It was marching straight toward the dark entity.

The dark creature was still glitching, barely able to move, but it caught a glimpse of the crystalline figure. "No..." it panicked, thrashing in clear distress. "How did you find this dimension..." It tried to flee but couldn't move fast enough. "Get away from me!"

The crystal being aimed its key-like weapon at the dark creature, ensnared it with some unseen force, and with a single, fluid pull, tossed the entity straight into the blue portal. The caped figure slowly walked over to the rift, their grip tight on the weapon.

The Archons just stared in absolute disbelief.

The figure stopped right at the edge of the portal. Their blue cape, which had a large yellow number '1' stitched onto the back, fluttered in the faint breeze that was left in the world. They looked over their shoulder, glancing between the Archons before locking their gaze onto the unconscious Anemo Archon.

Zhongli stood firmly on guard, and so did Nahida. Oliver glanced between the gods, then shifted into a protective fighting stance with his sword.

The caped creature raised its weapon. The Archons and the human braced themselves.

"Heal," the caped creature said softly. The voice sounded distinctly like a young man's.

A glowing green flower suddenly materialized above the group. It bloomed open, and glowing green petals showered down over them.

Venti gasped awake, suddenly clutching his chest.

"Venti!" Oliver gasped, dropping his stance and holding him tight.

Zhongli blinked, staring hard at the caped man.

The crystal creature offered a single nod, looked back toward the portal, and leaped inside.

The moment the portal snapped shut, the universe righted itself. The sickening red hue vanished, replaced by the familiar, welcoming warmth of Mondstadt. All of Teyvat was back to normal. The birds began to sing again, and the unbearable glitching was entirely gone.

The three Archons looked at each other in stunned silence.

"Is everyone alright?" Zhongli asked finally.

Venti blinked, slowly pushing himself to his feet. "I... I think so."

"Hey, be careful—" Oliver said quickly, keeping a steadying hand on his boyfriend.

"Whoo!" Venti exhaled, shaking his head and ruffling the magnificent wings behind him. "Wow! That was a battle."

"That was almost near to impossible," Zhongli muttered, looking back up at the clear sky. "So terrible that... they got involved."

"Huh?" Venti blinked, flashing his wings. "Wait — who got involved? What did I miss?"

"Celestia," Zhongli said. "The entire landscape of theirs actually floated down here to weaken our threat,"

Venti blinked, looking at Zhongli with a thoroughly perplexed expression. "Seriously? They don't... normally do that."

"That's what I'm saying," Zhongli agreed. "Whatever that creature was, it was worse than any threat we've ever come across. Worse than the Abyss."

"And what was that crystal person?" Nahida asked.

Venti blinked again. "I'm sorry, the what now?"

"You were knocked out," Zhongli explained, which promoted Oliver to nod in agreement.

"Yeah," Oliver added, looking at Venti worriedly. "It did something to you, and it... nearly damaged everything..." Oliver wrapped his arms around Venti, pulling him into a tight hug. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Venti let out a soft sigh, melting into the embrace and hugging Oliver back. "Yeah," he said softly. "I feel... pretty good, actually."

Zhongli nodded slowly. "So do I. That last one — it healed us somehow."

Oliver pulled back from the hug, but a sudden flush of red crept up his neck as he fully realized that his boyfriend was still in his majestic, winged Archon form—the one he was always talking about. Oliver swallowed hard, his gaze dropping to Venti's bare midriff before flicking back up to meet Venti's eyes.

Venti, of course, was already smirking at him.

Zhongli stood nearby, silently observing the exchange.

"Venti," Zhongli spoke up, breaking the moment. "Are you close with this one?"

Venti looked over. "What? Jelly, Mr. Rock Man?"

Zhongli let out a flat grunt. "I'm simply asking," he said. "Because if he is, he's seen what you are now."

"Eh, he's been known!" Venti chuckled waving a hand dismissively. "Anyways, this victory calls for a celebration! To Diluc's, for his amazing dandelion wine!!!" The bard declared proudly, spinning on his heel and marching off toward the city.

Zhongli sighed. "Of course," he shook his head, watching Venti walk off. "With your archon clothes still on you?"

Venti froze mid-step. "Oh! Oops—" He snapped his fingers, and in a flurry of anemo magic, transformed back into his familiar bard attire. "There we go!" He adjusted his green hat, making sure the Cecilia flower was tucked perfectly inside. "Okay! To the tavern!"

"Why are you calling him Venti?" Nahida asked as she fell into step beside Zhongli. "I thought the Anemo Archon was called Barbatos?"

"Uh oh," Zhongli muttered. "Venti." He called out to his fellow Archon as his own glowing attire faded back into his standard mortal suit. "You might want to tell Nahida about your entire thing, or else she's going to ruin your secret in your own nation."

"Oh! Yeah, just call me Venti!" Venti beamed over his shoulder. Then, lowering his voice into a much more serious, pleading tone, he added, "Seriously..."

Nahida blinked in surprise, but then nodded with a bright, small smile. "Okay! ...Uh, Venti!"

Chapter 27: A Drink

Diluc was inside his tavern, quietly serving drinks to a handful of afternoon customers. The midday lull meant Angel's Share wasn't particularly busy. Then, the three Archons walked in.

He glanced up as Venti, Zhongli, and Nahida approached the bar, with Oliver trailing closely behind them.

"Hi Diluc!" Venti chirped, already making his way to the bar.

Oliver, the last one in, gently pushed the heavy tavern door shut.

The bard hopped onto a barstool. "You might be wondering who these guys are!" he giggled.

"Uhh... Yes," Diluc nodded, resting his hand flat against the polished wood of the bar. "I am." He looked between Zhongli and Nahida. He was obviously already familiar with Oliver, and his established boyfriend status with the bard, but as he stared at Zhongli, he blinked. Diluc wasn't overly familiar with the other nations and their rulers, but he has done his reading up on Liyue, thier neighboring nation more than the average Mondstadter "You're the—"

"Yes," Zhongli said, before he could finish. "I don't doubt Mondstadt has heard of me. That said, I'd prefer not to cause a scene. Discretion would be appreciated." He found a stool at the far end of the bar and settled into it with quiet dignity.

Oliver took the stool right next to Venti, of course. Nahida took the stool to the right of the bard, though she was having a hard time getting up onto it.

"Eh!" she grunted, trying to scramble up the tall wooden legs. "Ugh, come on, reach it!" she mumbled to herself.

Venti glanced sideways at her, trying not to smile, and gave a small twirl of his finger. A gentle current of wind curled up beneath her and lifted her smoothly into the seat.

"W-Woah!" she said, adjusting herself on the cushion. "Thanks," she said, a little breathless.

"I'd like my Dandelion Wine, please!!!" Venti announced loudly, leaning forward on his elbows and beaming at Diluc. He threw an arm around Oliver. "And this guy—my adorable, lightweight boyfriend—gets one glass. He still deserves to celebrate, he earned it!"

Zhongli looked toward Diluc. "If you have Osmanthus Wine, that will be great."

"Luckily, I have a few," Diluc replied. "They were imported; I didn't brew these myself."

Venti snorted. "Thought you were going to ask for some boring old tea."

"Your nation doesn't have what I'd want," Zhongli said, unfazed. "I'll wait until I'm back in Liyue for that. But we're celebrating. Wouldn't hurt to try something different, were are celebrating after all,"

Diluc moved to prepare the drinks. He didn't ask Nahida what she wanted. Didn't question why there appeared to be a child sitting at his bar between two apparent archons. He just quietly placed a cup of grape juice in front of her.

Nahida blinked down at the cup of purple liquid and let out a long sigh. "I'm over five hundred, you know—" she muttered.

Diluc blinked. "...Huh?"

Venti pressed his hand over his mouth, shoulders shaking as he laughed. "She's the Dendro Archon, Diluc."

Diluc's expression shifted considerably. "Oh." He looked back at his bottles, then at Nahida. "I apologize, ma'am. What would you like?"

Venti nudged her. "Would you like to try my favorite? Dandelion Wine is the best!"

Nahida thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Sure," she smiled.

Once Diluc had turned around and served all four their drinks, he finally asked the burning question that had been on his mind the second he realized three Archons were casually sitting at his bar.

"Do any of you want to explain why the three of you are here?" He tried to keep his voice hushed. There were a few other customers inside, and while they were seated at tables at the far end of the tavern, he didn't want them eavesdropping. "Three of you, in the same tavern, in the same nation. That's not exactly a usual afternoon."

The three Archons and the human, Oliver, all looked at each other, shared a confused expression, and then glanced back at Diluc.

"Have you not noticed what was happening?" Zhongli asked. "Surely, you must have. It seemed the entirety of Teyvat was under that red sky."

Diluc's face scrunched up. "Red sky? How long was that going on for?"

"Uhh," Venti blinked. "For about a couple of hours? A half hour ago, we all fixed it."

Diluc looked genuinely baffled. "I haven't seen anything like that in here. I haven't seen anything strange outside, either. I took a couple of breaks and stepped outside a few times and saw nothing," he shrugged. "Also, my customers came and went all day. If there was something going on, they would have spoken about it."

The group exchanged another look.

"This is peculiar," Zhongli mused. "That doesn't make any sense. Has time been reset upon getting rid of our threat?"

"Maybe it has," Nahida theorized. "It seemed to have a control on everything. Maybe time had slowed down?"

"Likely unintentional," Venti said. "That dark thing wasn't trying to protect anyone."

"Nah," Oliver shook his head in agreement. "It was wanting to destroy everything."

"Exactly," Venti nodded.

"Dark.... Thing?" Diluc asked.

Venti glanced at him from across the bar. "Yeah?" He blinked. "What's the—" Then, realization dawned on the bard's face. "Wait a minute... you—" Venti gasped, nearly dropping his wine bottle onto the counter. "OH MY WORD!" he yelled out, his voice suddenly filled with alarm. "The dark creature you said you saw! You—Oh, no! And I completely dismissed it that morning and turned it into a joke!"

He suddenly leaned over the counter and grabbed Diluc's hands, looking up at him with wide eyes. "I'm so sorry, Master Diluc, I... Oh no, why wasn't I more considerate? I should have known you of all people speak the truth with everything you see..."

Oliver was a little bit confused about what they were talking about, but he remembered it—somewhat. He remembered Diluc mentioning the dark creature that one morning. But he felt as if he remembered something else too, a missing piece his brain just couldn't put together. He wasn't sure if it had to do with his memory loss, or something else entirely.

"It's fine, Venti," Diluc said, resting his hand back onto the counter as the bard finally sat back down on his stool. He looked intently at the Archons before him. "I reckon this is why you mentioned a 'celebration.' You all must have done something...?"

Venti sighed heavily and nodded. "Diluc, this dark thing was something worse than the entire Abyss."

Diluc's eyes widened further. "That doesn't sound good."

"It's been dealt with," Zhongli said. "Thanks in large part to a... crystal entity, of some kind."

Diluc blinked again. "The what?"

"Exactly what I said," Venti let out a few breathless giggles. "I was... kinda hurt slightly, apparently, and was knocked out. Don't worry, though, I'm okay!"

Beside him, Oliver was drinking some more of Venti's favorite wine. The bard hadn't noticed when Oliver grabbed another glass. It was hard for Oliver to believe that he couldn't handle a mere two glasses, so he had just assumed his boyfriend was being extra, or exaggerating as usual.

But after taking a few more sips of the wine, something zapped sharply in his mind.

AVATAR MALFUNCTION

Oliver stared across the bar. Then, slowly looked at Zhongli. He was was mid-sentence, explaining something to Diluc. His voice was calm and measured as usual. Familiar, somehow, in a way that Oliver couldn't place immediately. He stared. He listened. The voice filled some strange slot in his brain, slotting into a shape that was already there—

Then, completely out of the blue, Oliver pointed a dramatic finger directly at the Geo Archon and shouted, "Hawk Moth!"

Zhongli stopped talking. He turned and looked at Oliver with an expression of complete, patient confusion. "I'm sorry—could you repeat that?"

"DARK WINGS RISE!" Oliver yelled.

Zhongli blinked very slowly, then looked over at Venti.

Nahida and Diluc both just stared, looking incredibly lost.

Venti was absolutely losing it. He had both hands over his face, shoulders convulsing, making very small squeaking sounds. He'd also just noticed how much wine was left in the bottle. "Babe," he wheezed. "Just when did you get past me huh?" he giggled, covering his mouth.

"What is a 'Hawk Moth'?" Zhongli asked with genuine scholarly interest. "Is it a breed of a type of moth?"

AVATAR RESTORED

Oliver blinked. He rubbed his eyes once. Looked around. "What was I saying?"

Venti just shook his head, smiling affectionately. "Nothing, cutie. It's okay," he chuckled. He turned back to his fellow Archons. "So, what do you all plan to do later?"

"Well," Zhongli started, returning to his usual dignified posture, "it's nice that we're sitting like this, having a drink like a family. But I have to get back to my nation."

Nahida nodded, both hands wrapped around her glass. "Same for me. Even if things seem alright here, I want to make sure Sumeru's okay." She glanced at Diluc. "Everything sounds normal here, but we can't assume it's the same everywhere."

Venti nodded. "Great idea." He set his finished bottle of wine down and beamed at the Archons. "Okay, you two should head back then. Don't be a stranger to me, though! My nation is always welcoming to kind visitors!" The bard flashed them a massive, bright smile. "The town's gates are always opened!"

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"Okay! Bathroom time!" Venti announced, already grabbing Oliver by the wrist and pulling him toward the door, pulling him out of Angel's Share.

"W-What? Again?!" Oliver stumbled after him. "I don't even feel like I need one! And don't say I smell again—!"

Venti burst out laughing as they walked out into the street. "Hey! But as I said before: As your boyfriend, I get to be 100% honest~"

Oliver groaned. He let himself be dragged anyway.

They cut across Mondstadt, Venti navigating with the ease of someone who'd walked these streets for centuries, until the familiar facade of the inn came into view. The bard pushed through the front door and hauled Oliver up the stairs without slowing down.

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"Again?!" Paimon shrieked.

The Traveler was already welcoming them in, fully prepared to let Oliver use the bath again without caring about what his tiny floating companion was complaining about.

"Haha," the Traveler chuckled. "That's okay, you two! At least I'm not paying them for using their water," he giggled. "It's all included in the rent I pay for the room."

Venti smiled widely and pulled Oliver into the bathroom. "Thanks, Traveler!" He grinned as he prepared to shut the door.

"You're going in there with him again?!" Paimon yelled.

Venti just winked at her and clicked the door shut.

"Paimon bets you're in there because you're going to have SE—"

The Traveler quickly clamped his hand over Paimon's mouth. "Okay, that's enough, Paimon," he sighed.

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The water filled the porcelain tub, the hot steam rising in a familiar, comfortable manner.
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Oliver stripped off his clothes, sank into the hot water, rested his head against the back of the tub, and closed his eyes.

Oliver stripped off his clothes, and dropped into the tub, and rested against the back of the porcelain of the tub, and closed his eyes.

Zap

Oliver fluttered his eyes open. He looked up to see his boyfriend kneeling down by the edge of the tub, watching him.

"Wow," was all Oliver could manage to say before letting out a soft laugh.

Venti nodded, smiling back. "Yeah... wow. Couldn't have said it better!" he shook his head, laughing with him.

Oliver let out a small breath. "There's... a lot I need to tell you."

"Take your time, honey," Venti murmured, reaching out to gently place a hand on Oliver's bare shoulder.

Oliver felt an immediate wave of calm wash over him at the touch. His eyes flickered up to Venti for a moment, and he leaned in slightly, his lips puckered just a bit.

Venti smiled warmly, leaning in the rest of the way to press his lips against his boyfriend's.

Oliver closed his eyes, kissing him back gently. After a few sweet moments of their lips moving together, they slowly pulled away.

"I hope that little moment didn't derail what you were going to say~" Venti teased with a giggle.

Oliver let out a small laugh. "It's okay, my mind hasn't gone down just yet," he chuckled. He cleared his throat and adjusted his position in the warm water. "Okay." He looked back up at his boyfriend.

"About August," Oliver started, getting serious. "When that dark creature came near me it... I dunno what its deal is with the avatar I'm using, but it caused it to malfunction. I don't exactly know why, but it did. I got sent right back to my realm, back to August. And... well, the straps were off of me."

Venti's eyes went wide. "They were?" He hesitated. "Then why didn't you—"

Oliver gave Venti a deeply sad, affectionate look. "Venti? Why would I have done that? I... Venti, I love you." He lifted a wet hand out of the water, droplets running down his wrist, and gently cupped Venti's cheek. "I love you," he repeated softly. "So why would I just leave, when I knew you were in danger?"

The bard's heart swelled painfully in his chest. He leaned into the touch, rubbing his cheek against his boyfriend's wet palm.

"Also, all of your realm was in danger. That would have been stupid of me to leave. I had to frantically tell August to hook me back up," Oliver explained, looking down at the water for a second before meeting Venti's eyes again. "Though, he was actually cooperative about it. Apparently, he knows about the dark thing. There's more about that dark creature than meets the eye. August has apparently seen it before."

Venti, who was now holding onto Oliver's hand against his face, went wide-eyed again. "Wait, really? You said August was like you, hooked up to another transfer chair. Did... he see it in the world he was inside too?"

Oliver nodded slowly. "Apparently," he confirmed. "Anyway, after telling August as much as I could in that short time, he altered my avatar."

Venti arched a curious eyebrow. "Altered your... wait... oh! That's why you... hold on, that is why you suddenly could use Pyro and...?"

"I think so," Oliver mused. "Though about the sword, I... maybe Doctor Barclay himself made me able to use that in the beginning. August just made me more powerful." Oliver sighed in frustration. "Though... I felt as if I could have done more. I think maybe the powers were too sudden. I didn't know what to do with them."

"No." Venti leaned closer and kissed the side of Oliver's face. "You still did good. You tried your best. And I'm super flattered you came back just for me, and to help out my world. You had every right just to abandon us, but you didn't. I appreciate that, baby." Venti wrapped his arms tightly around Oliver's neck.

Oliver melted into the embrace, closing his eyes happily.

"You don't think—" Venti parted from him slightly, though their faces remained very close. "That dark thing could be from Doctor Barclay?"

Oliver blinked, taking a moment to process the possibility.

It wasn't totally impossible. "I don't know," he admitted. "It could be, but... No... Nah, it couldn't be," he shook his head with more certainty. "Apparently, that dark creature didn't know Doctor Barclay. It... Yeah. Actually, it didn't even know what the lab was when I first encountered it," he told Venti.

"And what was that crystal guy?" Oliver added.

Venti blinked, then let out a small giggle. "Babe, you're asking the wrong person, because I was knocked out," he snorted after. "Now I'm the wrong with your memory loss~,"

Oliver rolled his eyes, laughing. "Oh, haw haw," he shook his head, smiling warmly up at the bard.

"What did it even look like?" Venti asked, getting curious.

"Well... it... it's hard to explain. I think it was a person. Like, a human? There were spots of skin all over it. But it was mostly covered in blue crystal shards. Also, some black stone-looking thing. Most of their face was covered with it," Oliver described, looking off to the side as he visualized it. "It saved us..."

He looked back at Venti. "If it wasn't for that guy, we all would have been dead, probably."

"Huh," Venti mused. "Kinda suspicious of it, even though I never saw it. But if it had good intentions, that's good."

"Also, it had a cape," Oliver continued. "There was a number on it. A Number one. I... I swear that number looked familiar."

Venti could see the gears turning in Oliver's head, watching his boyfriend struggle to grasp the elusive memory. Deciding not to let him stress over it, Venti purposely shifted gears to liven the mood. "Oh~! Gotta ask you a few things~"

Oliver blinked. That specific sing-song tone meant his boyfriend was about to go on one of his teasing sprees.

Venti giggled mischievously. "What is a 'Bat man' and a 'Hawk Moth'?"

Oliver flushed, instantly looking away. "I'm a dork, okay."

Venti burst into a fit of laughter, almost falling backward off his knees. He had to grab onto the edge of the slippery tub to steady himself. "But seriously!" he laughed. "What are those two things? Like you screamed at Zhongli! He looked so shocked hahaha!"

"Okay, well, you remember when I talked about fictional things? From my world? Well, 'Batman' is a character from a comic series. He dresses up as a bat and goes to fight crime at night. He has a cape behind him that he uses to glide."

"Oh!" Venti gasped in delight. "So that's why you grabbed my cape and lifted my arms? Is that how he glides, like you said? Interesting... a cape with a purpose." Venti giggled again. "Maybe next time I glide with one of Favonius's gliders, I can grab the edges of my own cape and pretend I'm this 'Bat man' guy!"

Oliver blinked, then burst out laughing.

"Oh no, that'll definitely be a sight!" he wheezed. "Venti using his cape like Batman... Yeah, definitely something to witness. If only Diluc had a cape," he snickered. "Would have fit even more."

"And... the Hawk Moth thing?" Venti snorted. "The way you just pointed at Zhongli like that! Bahaha! He was so confused though, and you looked so silly~"

Oliver blinked slowly. Explaining that required... a lot more context. He'd have to explain how Zhongli and 'Hawk Moth' shared the same voice. He had already explained the concept of the Fictional Universe to Venti, but telling him that people from his world gave them voices was a different beast entirely. He was a little nervous Venti might completely freak out.

"Uh... can we save that for a different moment?" Oliver asked hesitantly. "It's just... a lot to explain with that one."

Venti didn't push it. "Okay! No worries!" He leaned forward and placed a sweet kiss on Oliver's cheek.

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Venti eventually gave Oliver some privacy to finish up washing. After the human dried off and dressed, he walked out, fully expecting to see Venti sitting in the living room with the Traveler and Paimon.

He wasn't there.

"Aether?" Oliver asked, looking around the room. "Where's Venti?"

The Traveler blinked. "Uhhh... there we go again," he muttered.

Paimon blinked rapidly, then suddenly zoomed over to hover securely at the Traveler's side.

"'There we go'?" Oliver repeated, confused. Suddenly, his mind zapped again. The comforting warmth of the bath had completely worn off by now. "What are you talking about, Traveler?"

The Traveler just shook his head dismissively. "It's fine. Here—" He held out a folded piece of paper. "Venti left this for you."

Oliver glanced down at the Traveler's hands and took the note.

Hey Ollie~
~~~~~~~

Meet me at Cape Oath! You can't miss it, just walk out the main gates of the city, and you'll see the very large point that hangs over the ocean. Don't worry, it's an easy path up towards there. Meet me there.

I have something important to show you~

Oliver silently read over the playful handwriting.

"That bard wants you to visit him on top of the peak of Cape Oath," the Traveler said. "You should probably head over there now, since you're dressed."

Paimon had her arms crossed and was very pointedly not saying anything supportive.

Oliver nodded, folding the note. "Okay," he said. "I'll try to make my way there. I have never been... I don't think I have, anyway," he admitted. "I hope it isn't too far."

"It should be about a thirty-minute walk from here," the Traveler offered.

Oliver nodded again. "Okay. Well, see you then, you two! And thanks for letting me take a bath."

"As I said, anytime!" the Traveler smiled brightly.

"Hrmf!" Paimon grunted, still clearly annoyed by the whole ordeal.

"Paimon, shh," the Traveler scolded gently, patting her on the head.

Chapter 28: Embrace Part IV

Oliver made his way out of the gates and onto the bridge connecting to the mainland.

"No bard with you today?" one of the guards at the side of the town gates lightly teased. They were used to seeing Oliver joined at the hip with Venti, so seeing him without his companion looked a little strange, to say the least.

Oliver just cleared his throat, trying to hide his embarrassment, and continued his walk across the bridge. He looked ahead and saw a little boy throwing breadcrumbs to a flock of birds. Oliver made his way past him. He still had Venti's note in his pocket, wondering exactly where 'Cape Oath' was.

"He said to meet him there," Oliver mumbled to himself. "He said it was easy to find."

He reached the far edge of the bridge and paused, looking up.

The dirt path curved and wound ahead of him, weaving through the grassy slopes of Windrise, passing near the great tree, then disappearing into a roll of hills beyond it. But when he tilted his gaze upward and out toward the water, he could make out a cliff rising in the distance. "Huh..." Oliver muttered. "I... guess it's walkable."

It looked high up and pretty far out there, but other than that, it seemed doable given how the path continued. He just walked calmly; he didn't feel like running. "I wonder what he wanted to show me?" Oliver questioned as he strolled.

He had made it past the great tree and was far away from it now. "I've never come out this far before," he muttered to himself.

He had made it too far, actually.

He was now in monster territory.

Something zipped past his face and buried itself into the dirt with a sharp thwack. Oliver sucked in a sharp breath and snapped his head toward it.

Oliver blinked when he saw it was an arrow.

He turned the other way. A group of — people? Things? He had never seen anything like them. All seven of them were armed with crossbows, save for one holding a staff.

They were all in red clothing, except the staff-wielder, who wore blue. Behind them stood wooden structures that looked like a camp or a base of some sort.

"Hrrr!" One of them snarled, and loosed another arrow straight at him.

Oliver swiftly twisted his torso away, letting the arrow zip past him. Suddenly, his sword materialized in his hand, and he slashed the blade through the air.

A massive gust of wind unleashed from the sword. All of the monsters were blown backward, and their wooden structures were shattered to bits.

Only two of the monsters managed to keep their footing, looking shocked by the sudden destruction. But they didn't let up, charging forward to fight him.

Oliver narrowed his eyes and rushed at them.

As one tried to fire an arrow, Oliver zipped behind it—almost as if he had teleported—and slashed his sword across its back. The red-clothed monster dropped to the floor.

The one with the staff swung it toward him. Oliver's eyes widened as chunks of ice hurled in his direction.

He arched his back, bringing his sword up in defense. The blade grew scorching hot. Oliver squinted, slicing through a chunk of ice. "Nyaa!" he grunted, charging forward. He slashed and dodged through the barrage of ice until he closed the distance with the staff-bearer. Jumping into the air, he brought his sword crashing down, drilling it into the ground and emitting a burst of fire that scorched the grass.

The monster caught ablaze, withering away into dark ash.

Oliver pulled his sword from the ground and stood up, eyeing the remaining monsters behind him. He suddenly bolted toward them, instantly teleporting to one and slashing it down, then teleporting to another to unleash a shockwave of electricity. Teleporting to the next, he drove his sword toward the earth, causing sharp pillars of amber to pierce upward from the grass and stab into every monster in their path.

He thought that was all of them.

One monster was still there. One the human hadn't seen.

Something slammed into his arm. He went airborne, hit the grass hard, and tumbled. His sword left his hand and skidded into the dirt a few feet away.

"Urgg..." Oliver groaned, looking up. Seeing nothing in front of him, he checked behind. His eyes went wide. His sword instantly summoned back into his hand, and he brought it up just in time to block a sudden attack from a massive wooden shield.

The large monster wielding the shield was blasted backward by the force of Oliver's block and crashed to the floor.

Oliver took to the sky. Hovering in the air, he aimed his sword toward the ground, and a blazing strike of fire slammed down onto the monster, killing it instantly.

The human then dropped back to the grass, resting one fist on the ground and holding his sword in the other, pointing it away from his body.

With a fierce expression, Oliver looked up. He stood tall, slashing his sword at his side before it vanished into thin air.

But standing this close to the burning flames coating the grass made his memory zap back into place.

Oliver blinked, taking in the damage around him. "Did... I..." His eyebrow shot up. "If I actually did all of that in the game, Hoyoverse would have banned me." He looked down at his hands, where his sword had just been. "What exactly did August do with the avatar? Did he give me unlimited power? I... well, he did say that, didn't he? But... I have all the elements... I think."

He glanced up toward Cape Oath. "Venti wanted me to meet him up there. I shouldn't keep him waiting."

Oliver sighed and stepped away from the fire. As expected, as soon as he left the intense heat of the flames, his memory grew cloudy once more.

"What was I doing? Oh! Right, meeting Venti," Oliver nodded to himself.

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It was a long walk. Thirty minutes, just as the Traveler had told him.

Though he finally made his way to the very top of the peak, a strange sound made him glance to his left as he walked.

"What... the fuck is that?" Oliver's eyes widened.

Nearby, a large purple vortex hovered over a patch of grass. Just there. If anything, it looked like a black hole, but it wasn't destroying anything. It just floated there, emitting an ominous hum.

Oliver arched an eyebrow. "What is that?!"

Then, he heard a familiar, quiet giggle. "Don't mind that," the voice said. "That was opened up by the Traveler, but it's actually harmless!"

Oliver looked to his right, and there stood his boyfriend.

Venti had changed back into his Archon form. The great white wings behind him fluttered slightly as he stood proudly. "Hey Ollie~," Venti giggled. "This is what I wanted to show you. I reckon the Traveler gave you my note? Haha, I mean, how else would you be here?"

Oliver felt his heartbeat thumping harder and harder inside his chest.

He had seen the Archon form before, but that was during and right after the battle, and Venti had quickly changed back. But now, he could study his boyfriend's revealing attire much closer.

"I know what I said before," Venti started, his smile wavering a bit. "About me having so many memories tied to this. Good, bad... just everyone and everything connected to it. But after that battle earlier today, and how amazing you've been... not just with helping out today, but just amazing in general." Venti's smile grew warmer. "You're a good boyfriend. I really want to show you all of me. You deserve it."

Venti giggled at his boyfriend's shy expression. "Hey, come a little closer! Don't be shy, cutie~." He stood near the edge of the cliff. "And seriously, don't worry about that portal." Venti gestured behind them, out to the ocean below the cliff. "All that leads to is a small island out there in the water."

Oliver swallowed hard as he took Venti in. He was standing right in front of him now, just a few inches away.

Venti giggled, clasping his hands behind his back with a bright smile. "Now," he dramatically gestured to his exposed midriff before tucking his arm away again, "you can look at my belly button all you want~."

Oliver blinked, then looked up at his boyfriend's face. "Venti, you... you look beautiful with this on."

Venti giggled, covering his mouth. "You look so turned on~."

"I... I uh..."

"Do you wanna feel my belly? While I'm like this?" he asked.

Oliver swallowed, then nodded slowly. "Mmhmm."

"Why am I asking. Of Course you do~! Then touch it~," Venti winked. "Play with my belly button, my belly~ whatever you want!"
~~~~~~~

Oliver's eyes drifted back to Venti's exposed, pale, and beautiful midriff. His gaze wandered up to Venti's chest and the short top he wore. Just on a patch of bare skin, Oliver noticed his boyfriend had a tattoo. A light blue mark that seemed to be glowing.

"Is that a tattoo?" Oliver asked, gently tracing a finger along it.

"Yeah!" Venti giggled, stepping closer to Oliver.

"Huh." Oliver pulled his finger back to study it. "You were shirtless before when we... you know, did things. I don't remember seeing that."

"Oh, these tattoos don't appear on my mortal form," Venti smiled. "They appear on my Archon form." Venti turned gently, lifting one leg gracefully. "See? I've got one on my thigh, too," he said.

Oliver blushed as he stared at Venti's thighs. "Huh."

Venti snorted, setting his foot back down and turning to face Oliver again.

"You wanna feel my wings before you go to town on my belly button~?" Venti asked with a soft giggle. Oliver hadn't made a move yet, but the bard knew he was just too shy or shocked right now to do anything.

When Oliver looked up, Venti fluttered his wings gently. "Wanna touch?" he asked.

Oliver nodded, bringing his hands closer. He opened his palms, letting his fingers gently brush against the soft feathers. Venti closed the distance, wrapping his arms around Oliver and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

He let his wings enclose around Oliver, wrapping them in a snug, close embrace. "I love you, Oliver," Venti murmured into the human's neck. "I love you so much." He pressed a few more soft kisses to his skin.

Oliver held onto Venti tightly, tears pricking his eyes. He felt so flattered, so overwhelmed with love, that Venti trusted him enough to share such a massive secret. Yes, he had known Venti was an Archon for a while now, but Venti trusted him—a complete stranger with no real ties to Teyvat. He could have easily told everyone that he was Barbatos. Oliver would never do that, and Venti knew it.

Venti pulled back from the embrace, wiping a stray tear from his own eye. "Okay, enough of that sappy stuff," he giggled softly. "Have fun with my belly button, okay~?"

Venti stood, placing his hands behind his back once more.

Oliver reached out, gently sliding his index finger down Venti's middle until it reached his navel. He let his finger trace the rim of the indent, feeling the skin twitch delicately beneath his touch.

Then, he slipped his finger inside. The walls of the belly button twitched around his finger, as Venti's navel was highly sensitive. The bard let out a quick, breathless giggle, "Heheee~." But he quickly relaxed into the sensation, arching his back slightly.

Blushing furiously, Oliver continued exploring Venti's belly button with his fingers, captivated by his boyfriend's soft sounds of pleasure.

"Hmm~," Venti hummed, pushing his slim stomach into Oliver's hand to let the finger sink deeper into his navel.

Oliver flushed deeper. This bard knew exactly how to melt him. Even though Venti claimed he'd never heard of this fetish before they met, he knew exactly which buttons to press.

Oliver pulled his fingers out from the deep navel; the sensitive walls clung to his skin for a second before letting go with a soft little pop.

"Oh~," Venti gasped lightly, looking up at him. "Hehe~."

Oliver knelt on the grass at Venti's feet.

"C-Can I lick it?" he asked in a shy, breathy whisper.

"Anything you want baby~,"

Oliver glanced around nervously. "Uh... You're sure no one can see us? No one will come over?"

Venti smiled reassuredly. "Nobody ever really comes up here since the Traveler opened that portal. People think it's dangerous. Well, I suppose it kinda is, if someone actually goes in. They wouldn't come back from the island, haha!"

"Oh... Uh... what if I ended up in there?"

"Hey, you're smart, and you know it's there. Why would you end up in it? And besides, even if you did jump in, I could just fly over and teleport you back home!"

"Oh... right," Oliver said.

Venti giggled, swaying subtly on his heels. "So don't worry, and show my belly button some more love~."

Oliver's eyes trailed back to Venti's welcoming tummy. He leaned in close, pressing a soft kiss to the skin just beside the navel. He peppered multiple kisses around the midriff, showing the bard how much he loved his midriff. His lips lingered at the belly button itself before he gently parted his mouth, letting his tongue lap playfully around the opening of the navel.

"Ahhh~," Venti moaned softly, arching his back once more.

Then, Oliver plunged his tongue into the depths of Venti's navel, wiggling it against the sensitive skin inside.

"Eeeaahh~," Venti gasped, his hands coming down to gently hold Oliver's head. "Ah~ Ollie~ That feels really good~." The luscious white wings behind him fluttered in time with his breathing.

Oliver placed open-mouthed kisses over the navel, his tongue swirling inside with every pass. He looked up at his boyfriend right in the middle of it, making completely love struck expression.

Venti practically mirrored the look; they were both completely intoxicated by each other.

Oliver pulled away from the belly, leaving a glistening trail of saliva on the pale skin and deep within the dark depths of Venti's innie.

Staying on his knees, Oliver brought his hand back up and pushed a finger deep inside.

"Aaohh!" Venti let out a shaky breath, biting his bottom lip. A shiver ran down his spine. "Oh, Ollie~," he breathed.

Oliver dug his finger around gently, intentionally brushing against the sensitive knot at the very bottom of the navel.

"Hehehe~," Venti giggled breathlessly. Inside the small swath of clothing covering his waist, he grew hard with arousal.

Oliver continued to wiggle his finger inside his absolute favorite body part, and Venti was completely unraveling from the sensation. "Ah~," he moaned softly.

Eventually, the pleasure pushed him over the edge. Venti finally let loose and climaxed, a small wet spot appearing on the fabric. He let out a long, shuddering breath, still feeling Oliver's finger resting inside his deep navel. Fluttering his eyes open, he peered down at his kneeling boyfriend. He let out another soft sigh and smiled brightly.

"I love your fetish so much~," Venti whispered, reaching down to affectionately rub Oliver's cheeks while his wings fluttered happily behind him.

Chapter 29: A Show Off

The two of them were tucked against each other in the soft grass, side by side, watching the slow drift of clouds overhead.

Venti let out a quiet, content sigh. "Pretty nice, huh?"

"Yeah," Oliver replied, a gentle smile touching his lips. "It really is."

Catching the warmth on his boyfriend's face, Venti mirrored his smile before turning his gaze back to the heavens above. "It feels so good to spend time with a loved one like this. I couldn't tell you the last time I've done something so peaceful," he murmured softly.

They stayed like that for a little while. Then Oliver shifted, scooting in closer, leaning into Venti's side. Venti's arm came up automatically, curling around him from behind, pulling him in.

Glerrooogg~

This time, the rumbling came from Oliver's stomach.

Venti giggled. "Getting hungry? I wish we could have shared a meal with Zhongli and Nahida, but they had to rush back to check on their—" Venti blinked, a sudden realization hitting him. "Wait a minute..." He propped himself up on his elbows.

Still lying on his back, Oliver watched him rise. "Hmm? What's the matter?"

"Sometimes I keep forgetting I'm literally a god," Venti said, almost laughing at himself. "I could've just... used the wind." he closed his eyes, centering his focus.

To Oliver's eyes, nothing seemed to change, but for Venti, the world was shifting. The breeze around them picked up its pace, swirling with unseen whispers.

Venti reopened his bright eyes. "They're okay," he smiled, settling back down into the grass. "All their people, too."

The wind softly lulled back to a calm breeze.

Oliver beamed. "That's good," he said.

Glerrrgg~

"Oh! Right," Venti giggled, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You need food for your mortal tummy~" He reached over, playfully tickling his boyfriend's bare brown skin.

Oliver erupted into giggles, squirming gently. "V-Venti!"

"What?" Venti grinned. "You poke my belly button whenever you feel like it, but I can't return the favor~?" He pressed a finger right into Oliver's innie.

"Veheheentiii!" Oliver laughed loudly, thrashing about in the grass.

Venti melted. "You say my giggles are cute, but yours? My oh my~ It's melting my heart like butter~" Venti cooed, leaning over to press a sweet peck to Oliver's cheek.

Oliver giggled again, offering Venti a radiantly shy smile.

Hopping up to his feet, Venti offered a hand and pulled his boyfriend up beside him. The Archon stretched his arms out grandly. "Get a good look at my sexy archon outfit before I change back into my bard form~" Venti did a cute, dramatic little twirl.

Oliver blushed a deep red and let out a breathless giggle. But he didn't turn away, his eyes locked fondly on his boyfriend.

After giving Oliver a moment longer to admire, Venti snapped his fingers. In a sudden, swirling gust of anemo energy, his familiar bard attire materialized, seamlessly replacing the Archon clothes. "And there we have it—the finest bard in all of Mondstadt has returned~!" Venti exclaimed, striking a proud pose.

Oliver could only giggle at the theatrical display. "But noooo~ my belly button king disappeared~" he whined playfully, making his voice sound dramatic as possible.

Venti completely lost it. "BAHAHAH— baaabe!" He wheezed. "Okay. Okay. I'm still your belly button king regardless of the outfit, for the record~" He couldn't even finish that sentence without cracking up again.

He came back over and took Oliver's hands. "Ready?"

Oliver nodded firmly.

Suddenly, with a sharp crack of wind, they teleported.

When the rushing air settled, Oliver realized they had materialized right in front of a camp... filled with those monsters again.

Oliver gasped, taking a step back.

Venti blinked, looking around. "Oops... I think I overshot Mondstadt," he admitted sheepishly. But then, a sword materialized in Oliver's grip. "Oh? You wanna fight them?" Venti asked, an eyebrow raised.

Oliver blinked in surprise at himself, then nodded with determination.

"Alright, babe~" Venti stepped back with a little smile. "Show me what you've got."

Oliver gripped the sword. Then he exhaled. "Okay! Here we go!" Without another word, Oliver took off, sprinting straight toward one of the massive beasts holding the wooden shield.

"YO! MONSTER TRUCK!" Oliver screamed at the top of his lungs.

The towering mitachurl, and every other monster in the vicinity, turned their heads in confusion to stare at the boy charging them.

"YEAH, YOU! I'M TALKING TO YOU, *BIG BITCH!"* Oliver smirked, flashing out of existence to teleport directly behind the brute. He slashed his blade across its back. "Ha! Too slow!"

The enraged monster whirled around, swiping a massive hand to grab him.

But Oliver was quicker. He launched a kick that sent the huge creature stumbling down, spun his sword with a flourish, and pointed the tip right at it. "Too slow again! NOW FREEZE!" An icy shard blasted from the blade, slamming into the mitachurl and freezing it solid in a block of frost.

Oliver fluidly slid out of the way just as an arrow whistled toward his back, burying itself into the dirt. He spun around to find three hilichurl shooters drawing their crossbows.

"Ha! Missed me! You don't have aim-bot like a Minecraft skeleton!" Oliver mocked confidently. He slashed his sword through the air, whipping up a violent gust of anemo energy that hurtled straight at the trio. "WINDBLADE!" he roared.

Venti was watching from the sidelines, entirely unnoticed by Oliver, who was completely deaf to the fact that his Archon boyfriend was currently dying of laughter.

Behind him, the frozen mitachurl shattered its icy prison and climbed back to its feet. Oliver blinked, then grinned. "Big bastard wants more? Well, come and get it!" Oliver lunged, slashing his sword with enough force to make the beast stumble. One more devastating strike, and the monster dropped its heavy wooden shield.

Oliver dropped his sword, then hoisted the massive shield off the ground. "Heh, you dropped this!" Oliver chucked it at directly at monster's face. "There you go! You're welcome!"

Venti was in absolute shambles. The bard was practically rolling around in the grass, clutching his stomach.

Caught up in the adrenaline of battle, Oliver still paid no attention, completely oblivious to the fact that his gamer-bravado was making his boyfriend lose his mind.

Suddenly, something struck Oliver's arm. An arrow. But it didn't pierce his skin—it simply bounced off with a dull thud. Oliver blinked in surprise, staring down at the unmarked spot on his arm where the projectile should have lodged.

He slowly looked up over his shoulder, locking eyes with the hilichurl that had shot it. "You son of a bitch," Oliver muttered. He summoned his sword back to his hand and slashed out. A burst of vibrant green dendro mist erupted from the blade; thick vines shot up from the earth, tangling around the monster and crushing it instantly.

"Yeah, make like a tree and leaf!" Oliver quipped proudly. He swished his sword to the side, letting it vanish into thin air. That was the last of them.

But as the tension left his shoulders, a frantic, wheezing sound caught his attention. Oliver blinked, turning around to find Venti absolutely dying on the ground.

"Uh... V-Venti?"

Venti tried to calm down. It wasn't working. "I... haha, heeee... HAHAHAHAHAHA!" He let out a breathless string of giggles and guffaws before finally managing to push himself up onto his knees. "Oh my word... Ollie... Ollie! Oh no!" he sobbed with more laughter.

"W-What?" Oliver asked, suddenly self-conscious. "Did I not fight right?"

Venti let out another helpless giggle. "Oliver... Oliver! Okay, Ollie. I did something—" He gulped hard, trying to swallow back his amusement. "I did something before you arrived earlier. I checked on you with my wind. I wanted to see if you were coming, and I heard you fighting the hilichurls then. I was going to intervene, but it sounded like you had it all under control, what with how the monsters were yelling and screaming."

Oliver blinked, glancing around the empty camp. "Oh," he said. "But... uh... why were you laughing just now?"

Venti took a deep, shaky breath. "Because... babe, you sounded so serious when you were fighting them the first time! But just now, you turned into a complete and utter dork!" Venti lost his battle for composure, bursting into laughter once more. "All the yelling! The bad jokes! The 'BIG BITCH'—" Venti collapsed back onto the grass, completely undone. "BAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!" he wheezed, kicking his legs. "Babe—BABY, WHAT WAS ALL OF THAT?!" Tears pricked the corners of his eyes. "Were you showing off, or were you just trying to make me laugh?!"

Oliver's face instantly heated up, a furious blush spreading across his cheeks. "I—"

Venti stumbled back up to his feet, wiping a tear away. "Oh my word..." He rubbed his belly right over his corset. "My tummy literally hurts."

Zap

Standing so close to the crackling fire cause by him, Oliver felt a strange sensation—his mind snapped sharply back into place, if only for a fleeting second.

Venti noticed the subtle shift.

Oliver stared blankly at Venti for a moment before slowly looking away, utterly mortified. "I am an embarrassment."

Venti burst into yet another explosive fit of laughter. "PIrrrFfFfffftttTTTT!" he snorted, hunching over and clutching his aching stomach. "BAHAHHAHAHAHAAAAA!"

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Hours later, Oliver and Venti had finished a hearty dinner at Good Hunter and were heading back to their tree, ready to crawl into their hammock for a peaceful night's sleep.

But as they arrived, Venti was in for an unfortunate surprise.

"Oh, shoot," the bard grunted, stopping in his tracks.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Oliver followed his gaze and let out a soft, "Oh..."

The hammock, along with a sizable chunk of the branch it was tied to, was lying in a heap on the ground at the base of the oak.

"I forgot it broke off while we were in the middle of that fight with that dark thing," Venti sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Wait right here, I can fix it. I just need to find a sturdy new branch to attach it to up there." He made his way over to the pile, kneeling down to toss the broken wood aside before gathering up the soft fabric. "Be back in a flash!" With a gentle whoosh of wind, the bard took off into the canopy.

Oliver waited patiently on the ground. Eventually, he felt a sudden, soft kiss pressed to his cheek.

"Ready!" Venti announced, wrapping his arms securely around Oliver's waist and lifting them both into the night sky.

True to his word, Venti had secured the hammock to a thick, strong branch high above. This time, however, it was facing a completely different direction, offering a breathtaking, unobstructed view directly toward the glowing city.

Venti carefully lowered his boyfriend into the suspended bed. "Good as new, yeah?"
~~~~~~~

Oliver nodded, adjusting himself comfortably among the blankets Venti seemd to have gotten fresh ones. "Very good," he agreed softly. "And it's a really nice view of the city from this side."

"I know! I dunno why I never picked this side to begin with," Venti said, smoothly lowering himself down to cuddle next to his boyfriend. He looked up at Oliver. "Wanna play with my belly button before we go to sleep?"

Oliver nodded, a soft smile returning to his face.

Venti beamed. He took off and tossed his corset aside, before unclipped his glowing Vision belt, and hiked up his frilly white shirt. Settling onto his back, he gave his bare tummy a little pat. "Have at it~"

Oliver giggled softly, resting his hand against his boyfriend's warm skin and gently poking his navel.

Venti smiled, a deep warmth blooming in his chest as he watched Oliver's eyes flutter and drift closed.

"Good night, my sweetheart~"

~~~~~~~~~~

But Venti didn't go to sleep just yet. He decided to stay awake this time, wanting to watch over Oliver as he drifted off first.

The bard lay perfectly still, his bright eyes wide open, staring up through the intricate canopy of moving leaves from up above. He gently tapped a finger against his own stomach. Oliver's hand was still resting on his belly, his finger still lazily hooked into Venti's navel. Venti wouldn't dare move it for the world.

After a long, quiet while, Venti gently rested his own hand over Oliver's, tenderly stroking his skin.

Being send back

The robotic voice was incredibly faint, barely a whisper. But in the dead quiet of the night air, Venti heard it clearly.

His head snapped to the side, looking closely at Oliver's face. "Babe?" he called out, his tone laced with sudden uncertainty. Venti reached up and tapped Oliver's shoulder softly.

System reboot commencing.

Venti blinked, his turquoise eyes widening in alarm. "Babe?" he asked, to make sure one more time.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

Oliver's body gave a sudden, gentle shudder. And then, he went completely, unnervingly still in the hammock.

Avatar offline

Frantic, Venti gently shook Oliver, but the boy didn't move an inch. It was as if he was entirely lifeless.

"He... he's not here right now," Venti mumbled to the empty air. "He's back in his world. So... this is what happens." Venti murmured the words heavily. He had never been awake to witness this happen to Oliver before.

Slowly, the bard sat up. "And... he probably won't come back right now," he reasoned quietly. "He's got a whole life in his own world."
~~~~~~~~~~

Venti knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Oliver loved him. But deep down, a painful ache rested in Venti's chest—the grim reality that Oliver wasn't always going to be around. The simple fact that Oliver was operating a immortal avatar meant he could never truly stay in Teyvat, no matter how hard Oliver himself might push for it to happen.

Venti placed a trembling hand on the unresponsive shell of his boyfriend.

"Ollie," he whispered. "I'm going to miss you." He looked down at the peaceful face. "I really am. I know you're probably not going to come back tomorrow morning. So... I doubt you can hear me right now in your real realm... but just know that I really love you. I love you, my little windblume."

Leaning in close, Venti pressed a lingering kiss to Oliver's cold forehead.

Avatar offline

Refusing to let that be the end, Venti placed both his hands firmly on the chest of the lifeless avatar model and pushed with the wind.

But unlike the time when he met Oliver for the first time... he saw something.

Venti gasped and violently yanked his hands away. "What?" His eyes widened in shock.

He stared down at the empty vessel in disbelief. Glancing wildly around the dark tree branches, and then back down at his boyfriend's motionless form, Venti steeled his resolve. He placed his glowing hands right back onto the avatar's chest. He squeezed his eyes shut, and pushed.

The bard's mind was suddenly flooded with a dizzying glimpse of a strange room—a place entirely beyond the scope of anything he had ever seen before. He caught a fragmented flash of two people, though the details were blurred.

Venti pushed harder. And harder.

Until, suddenly, it felt like he was being grabbed. He was being pulled, violently sucked through into something unknown...

Warning warning... Dimensional Breach

Chapter 30: Fiction Meets Real

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Begin send back.

System reboot commencing.

Body transfer in 3... 2... 1...

~~~~~~

Oliver's eyes shot open. He blinked rapidly as the harsh fluorescent lighting of the extraction room burned his retinas. He strained to move his arms, his muscles feeling leaden, as if he hadn't used them in months. The restrictive straps were gone. He was no longer connected.

He tried to stand up. The moment his foot touched the cold metal floor, his legs gave out completely, and he hit the ground face-first. "OW!"

A sharp gasp echoed nearby. "Hey! Easy there, Oliver!" Rapid footsteps rushed to his side, and he felt hands gripping his arms. "Take it easy. Sitting in these things for so long, we lose so much circulation in our legs."

Oliver was slowly hoisted up. Turning his head, he saw August supporting him.

"Here," August grunted, guiding him back toward the chair near the wall. "Grab hold of that big computer server thing next to it. I was going to tell you to sit back down, but I think it's actually best for you to stand right now. To get your blood pumping again, you know?"

Oliver did as he was told, blinking against the stark light. Even though he had been back to this room almost every night, right now, it felt profoundly strange. To actually stand up and walk around in his home world felt alien. He watched as August stepped away.

"Where are you going?" Oliver asked, his voice raspy.

"To this guy," August replied, walking over to a third boy huddled on the ground.

Oliver gasped, finally noticing the other teenager. "Who's that?" he asked.

The boy looked terrified. He had his knees pulled to his chest, hugging himself tightly as he pressed his back against the cold wall.

"His name is Arnold Harper," August explained gently, crouching down to the boy's eye level.

"T-That's not my name," the boy muttered, pulling his knees closer. "Stop calling me that,"

August glanced over his shoulder at Oliver and silently mouthed, See? That's not his name.

Oliver's heart dropped into his stomach. He glanced over at the transfer chair across from his old one; it was completely empty.

"How... How did you get him out of the chair?"

"I sent them all the same note I gave you," August said. "Did I tell you that? I don't remember." He shook his head and stood back up. "I got it to work with... well, Richard here, but now he's just completely lost."

August frowned. "It's strange. Do you know what this is?"

Oliver blinked, piecing it together. "I think I do," he murmured. "Doctor Barclay... He mentioned that this experiment was a complete success. Maybe a little too much of a success. It seems like the poor guy got rewritten by the world he was sent into, and now he doesn't remember his real home."

August's jaw went slack. "That's not good..."

"No, it is not," Oliver agreed grimly. "What if the other one ends up like that? What the heck are we supposed to do then?"

"I don't know." August looked back at Oliver, his expression softening. "But what about you? Are you okay? Is everything okay with... whoever you made friends with in that world?"

"I..." Oliver blinked, his gaze drifting back to his transfer chair. "I... I do not want to leave Venti. But I want to help you."

"You don't have to leave right away," August assured him. "I can probably handle this on my own... that is, if the other one comes back. I don't know if they'll be like you and remember their normal lives." August let out a heavy sigh. "If they don't, I'll definitely need the extra help."

Oliver steeled himself. "I can stay," he decided. "Maybe Venti will understand once he figures out that I left." He lowered his voice to a mumble, "I really hope he does."

Suddenly, a loud grumble broke the tension. August blinked, looking down at Arnold. "I think I just heard his stomach. We're not connected to the chairs' IVs anymore, so..."

Oliver's eyes went wide. "Oh— shit." He stared across the room at him. "We're not connected anymore. We need food. And you said this lab is stranded in the middle of nowhere, and we can't leave!"

"It might be doable," August said calmly. "One of the rooms down the hall is a break room. It has a vending machine filled with junk food—chocolate bars and stuff. I smashed the glass with a chair earlier. It's not the healthiest diet, but it can get us by until we figure out how to escape this building."

August knelt back down, extending a hand to the trembling teenager. "Hey..." he said softly. "I know you're still in shock, and you're confused and don't trust us. But you sound hungry."

From his spot across the room, Oliver watched Arnold hesitate. The boy looked incredibly timid, but slowly, he reached out and took August's hand.

August stood up, turning to Oliver. "Arnold and I will be back in a little while."

With that, the two of them shuffled out of the extraction room.

Oliver let out a deep, shuddering breath. He glanced around the sterile environment, took another huff of air, and stretched his stiff limbs. "Yeah... that felt good." He felt like he hadn't moved his real body in ages. "I never felt like this inside the Genshin universe..." He looked back over at his old transfer chair. "I was always having energy,"

"Should I go back?" he muttered to himself. He wanted to, desperately. But knowing how messed up his avatar currently was, he wouldn't be able to log back into his realm until the next night when he fell asleep —or if his avatar suffered severe damage.

"Plus, I wouldn't even remember anything unless I was near a fire or warm water..." Oliver sighed, running a hand over his face. "And with my luck, it wouldn't even occur to Venti to let me use Aether's bath again."

He leaned against the wall near Arnold's empty chair, squinting against the glare. "The lights in here are bright as shit," he grumbled. He was half-tempted to go hunt for the switch. "I think I honestly liked it better when they were off." Still, he made no effort to move, letting a whirlpool of anxious thoughts consume him.

Beep

Oliver's head snapped up. "What was that?" He scanned the room until his eyes locked onto the Genshin Impact transfer chair.

"Hey!" August's voice echoed down the hall. "Can you come in here?"

Oliver looked toward the open doorway. "Y-Yeah, sure!"

Stepping out of the extraction room for the first time, Oliver finally took in the facility. To his right, there was a heavy door with a small window—the exit. Outside, a flurry of white snow whipped against the glass. To his left was a darkened, ominous hallway with depressing gray walls. "Uhh... where are you exactly?"

"Down here!" August called out. "Towards the only hallway that's actually lit up!"

Oliver took a step, but then—

Beep

He stopped, grabbing the doorframe and peering suspiciously back into the extraction room.

"Are you coming? Or do you just have the world's quietest footsteps?"

Oliver shook his head, pulling himself away from the door. "Sorry, I just keep hearing this beep." He walked past the exit and stepped into the lit room on the left.

The break room was mid sized. A few tables, a few chairs, and at the far end, the vending machine with its shattered glass front sat dormant with a lot of treats left. August was leaning against one of the tables. "Don't worry about the beeping," August said, tossing a candy wrapper. "Sometimes the transfer chairs just do that. I don't exactly know why. But for the most part, the people in them seemed perfectly fine."

Oliver nodded, but his mind drifted. He wandered back out to the hallway, drawn to the heavy exit door. August didn't call him back, knowing the other boy was just curious.

Pressing his face near the cold glass, Oliver stared at the rolling hills of pure white snow. "Where the hell is this...?" he muttered, his eyes tracing the jagged landscape. "Those look like cliffs... This definitely isn't California."

A chilling realization washed over him. How long had it been? He hadn't even dared to ask.

For him, it had been November 12, 2023. Or, at least, that was the last date he remembered.

"Hey... uh... August?" Oliver called out, his voice trembling.

"Yes, Oliver?" August answered through a mouthful of chocolate from the room.

Oliver couldn't tear his eyes away from the falling snow. "What's the date?" he called out.

"Well," August started. "The dates are actually displayed on the screens above the chairs. I read them yesterday. So, today should be... December 10th."

Oliver blinked.

December 10th.

That would explain the snow. But he's from Cali. It doesn't show much. But... just a month?

"August... What's the year? Do you remember?"

"The year? Uh... It's 2026."

Oliver froze. His breath hitched in his throat as his wide eyes stared blankly at the frosted glass. "Four years...?" he whispered.

"What was that?" August asked. "Hey, Oliver, I know you're amazed by the snow, but please come back in the room so we don't have to keep yelling back and forth,"

Slowly, mechanically, Oliver pushed himself away from the window. He shuffled into the break room with a profoundly lost expression, stopping dead in front of one of the tables.

"I... I have been trapped in there for four years?" He looked up, horrified.

August paused mid-chew. "Come again?"

"2026..." Oliver blinked back sudden tears, looking down at his feet before meeting August's gaze. "This was the year I was supposed to graduate."

He wasn't angry about the missed degree. He was just utterly baffled. How had four entire years slipped by? He wasn't hooked up in the Genshin Impact world for that long. It had only felt like a few days!

"I'm so sorry, dude," August said softly. "That's rough. I know how long it's been for me, and it was only a month."

"This doesn't make any sense!" Oliver spun around, pacing. "I was with Venti for just a week and a few days! I wasn't in there for years!"

"Do you have family?" August asked carefully.

Oliver hesitated. "Not... really, to be honest. I was mostly on my own," he admitted. "I just wanted to get my degree to work in the field I loved." He ran a hand over his face. "I wasn't in there for four years. I couldn't have been—"

"Wait... how did you even end up here in the first place? I forgot if you told me."

"Doctor Barclay," Oliver spat the name. "He posed as someone who worked at my school. He had me sign up for some fake internship. It must be that... It was never real."

August looked deeply pained. "I'm sorry, but this is all just so hard to believe."

Oliver sighed heavily. "I know. It's your dad."

"Yes. He never showed any signs of doing something like this," August tapped his fingers anxiously on the table. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I do believe you! It's just... a lot."

Not wanting to push the sensitive topic, Oliver glanced over at Arnold. "How's he holding up?"

"He's eating, at least. And we're the same age, so maybe that helps," August said, turning to the boy, who was slowly nibbling on a Snickers bar. "Are you doing okay, dude?" August asked, placing a reassuring hand on Arnold's shoulder.

Arnold didn't respond immediately. He just stared blankly at the tabletop, his knuckles white around the candy bar. "I went through this twice..."

Both boys froze. "What was that?" August asked softly.

Arnold kept his gaze averted. He remained silent for a long moment before his quiet voice cracked the silence. "Forgetting who I am. Heading into a new realm... only to realize I was always a part of it." Tears welled up in his hollow eyes. "What am I...?" he sniffled.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. Just... just take deep breaths," August soothed, gently rubbing Arnold's back. "Shhh, it's okay. I know this is a nightmare to adjust to, but Oliver and I will make sure you're comfortable. You don't have to lift a finger. Just focus on calming down, alright?"

Oliver took a heavy breath. Arnold was clearly breaking down. At least he's not going through it alone, Oliver thought.

Suddenly, a horrendous, grinding noise echoed down the hallway. It was followed by a rapid, frantic series of electronic beeps and violent glitching sounds.

Oliver gasped, whipping around to look out the doorway. Flashes of intense light were spilling out from the right side of the hall.

"I told you I heard something!" Oliver shouted.

August was already on his feet. "Wait here!" he ordered Arnold before sprinting past Oliver.

Oliver chased right behind him. They rounded the corner and skidded to a halt. The harsh overhead lights in the extraction room had completely died. Inside the pitch-black room, a blinding white light that was not from the fluorescent lights was strobing violently.

"What is happening in there?!" Oliver yelled over the noise.

"I dunno!" August bolted into the room. "I don't know! Get in! Maybe the guy hooked up to Fallout has something wrong with the chair!"

Oliver dashed in after him. "Has this happened before?!"

"No, but—" August slid to a stop next to the occupied chair, freezing in confusion. "Huh?" There was absolutely nothing wrong with the Fallout chair. "There's nothing—"

Slowly, August turned his head to the right. Across the dark room, it was Oliver's old transfer chair that was going berserk.

Oliver realized it at the same time. "August... what's wrong with... my chair?"

A booming, mechanized voice erupted from the chair's hidden speakers, vibrating in their chests:

WARNING! WARNING! DIMENSIONAL BREACH! WARNING! WARNING!

August stumbled backward, waving his hands frantically to tell Oliver to back out of the room.

Oliver felt his heart leap into his throat. He remembered hearing that exact warning before. That dark, monstrous creature had spawned from the chair once, heralded by the exact same alarm. Cold sweat beaded on Oliver's forehead. He was completely defenseless in his real body. That creature was bigger than anything in the real world. Not even the laws of Genshin Impact could have dented it. If it's angry self was still alive, and came to the real world, they'd be finished.

WARNING! WARNING! DIMENSIONAL BREACH! WARNING! WARNING!

The heavy metal chair began to vibrate violently, shooting sparks into the dark room.

Panic took over. Oliver grabbed the back of August's shirt and yanked him toward the door. "Quick! Get out and shut the door!"

"But what about Jasper?! We can't just leave him in here!" August protested, fighting against the pull.

"Who?!"

"Jasper!" August screamed over the noise. "The last guy hooked up in the Fallout chair!"

Before either of them could make a move, the violently shaking chair abruptly stopped. The sparking ceased. The strobing lights died out, and the blaring alarms fell dead silent. The room was plunged back into darkness, illuminated only by the faint glow spilling in from the hallway behind them.

"Uhh—" The two boys exchanged terrified looks.

But before they could breathe a sigh of relief—

CRACK— A blinding flash of wind and light exploded from the chair, illuminating the entire extraction room like a lightning strike. *CRASH*— something flew from the chair, hurtling across the room and violently slamming into Arnold's empty chair. The impact sent the heavy machinery ricocheting off the wall before it slid across the floor, sparking and fizzling, until it crashed to a halt right at August and Oliver's feet. Loose wires dangled uselessly from its side.

"Oh, no..." August whispered in horror.

Oliver knew for a fact they were doomed. He had no weapons. He couldn't summon his sword—that magic belonged exclusively to his avatar, and he was no longer in Teyvat. He was just a normal guy again.

"What do we do?" August hissed, panic lacing his harsh whisper.

"I don't know!" Oliver whispered back frantically.

"Well, we gotta think of something!" August whisper-yelled. "We've got an unconscious guy and a practically brain-dead boy to protect! We gotta—"

"Ahh... ow, that hurt," a soft-sounding feminine voice groaned from the darkness across the room.

Oliver froze. His eyebrows furrowed. That voice...

Squinting into the pitch black, Oliver slowly pushed past August, stepping over the threshold.

"Where are you going, bro?!" August hissed, grabbing for him.

Ignoring him, Oliver carefully crept toward the far end of the room. He could vaguely make out a silhouette shifting in the dark. Leaning closer, his eyes caught faint splashes of color. An unmistakable green. Crisp white fabric.

"Ow..." The figure stood up, rubbing the top of his head.

Oliver blinked repeatedly. His eyes widened to the size of saucers. He stumbled backward.

"Oliver, what is happening down there?!" August demanded. "Ugh, screw this—" August reached around the doorframe, wildly smacking the wall until he found the panel. "Why did these even turn off?!" With a sharp click, he flipped the switch.

Harsh, blinding fluorescent light instantly flooded the room.

"Ahh!" Oliver squeezed his eyes shut against the sting. When the spots cleared, he cautiously opened them again—only to find himself staring directly into a pair of massive, luminous, aqua-green anime eyes.

Oliver gasped, leaping backward so fast that his feet tangled together. He tripped and fell flat on his butt. "Ouch!"

Venti was standing right in front of him.

in front of him.

In his realm. In the real world.

Oliver scrambled frantically back to his feet, staring at the bard in utter disbelief.

Venti blinked his oversized eyes. "You...." He tilted his head, his voice lacing with uncertainty as he took a cautious step forward. "Oliver?"

Oliver looked around wildly. "Uhh..."

Venti reached up, adjusting his beret and straightening the Cecelia flower pinned to it, before slowly closing the distance between them. "Oliver? This is you, isn't it?"

"What? No! I'm not you! I mean, I'm me! I'm NOT I— Oh, fuck—!" Oliver stammered helplessly.

Venti stared at him for a second longer before bursting into a fit of bright, musical laughter. "Oh my word, it is you!!! Oh my, it worked! I had absolutely no idea if that was going to work!!!"

Venti launched himself forward. "Come here, you big dork!" He wrapped his arms tightly around Oliver's waist, pulling him into a bone-crushing hug. "Oooohhh~," Venti cooed, nuzzling into his chest. "I can't believe I actually did this!"

Oliver stood completely frozen, his arms hovering awkwardly in the air as his boyfriend hugged the life out of him. He slowly looked straight down... at the top of Venti's hat.

Oh, fuck, Oliver realized. The bard was definitely, undeniably short compared to Oliver's real-life height. Venti's head barely reached his chest.

Over near the door, August stood completely paralyzed. "Uhh... How did that happen?" he muttered, staring wide-eyed.

Venti pulled back slightly, looking up. He let out a fond giggle at the dumbfounded expression frozen on Oliver's face. "So, this is what my boyfriend really looks like, huh~?"

Oliver just blinked.

"Wait... Boyfriend?" August interjected.

Venti smiled brightly, stepping back to slowly circle around Oliver, taking in his entire appearance. He hopped back in front of him, beaming. "Why were you so sad about this? You're adorable!"

Oliver's cheeks flared hot, and he looked away. "You're just saying that."

"No! I'm being perfectly honest!" Venti insisted. The bard reached up, gently cupping Oliver's face in his hands. His thumbs softly brushed against Oliver's brown skin. "You do look different, but I can feel it's still you. Same energy, same lovely personality.... Same dorkyness~"

"B-But my eyes are smaller..." Oliver mumbled insecurely.

Venti just shrugged. "So? You look kinda similar to the people who walk around Mondstadt. It's nothing too strange!"

"B-But I... I... I'm not—"

"Babe." Venti pressed a soft finger to Oliver's lips, silencing him. "You are beautiful."

Oliver blinked rapidly as a wave of emotion hit him, tears swelling in the corners of his eyes. "But—"

"No buts!" Venti stood up on his tiptoes and pressed a sweet, silencing kiss to Oliver's lips.

Oliver melted instantly, his eyes fluttering shut as he gently kissed back.

When they finally pulled away, Venti smiled up at him, reaching out to toy with one of Oliver's braids. "Your hair looks different, too..."

"Yeah," Oliver breathed out, still slightly dazed. "Uh... they're called braids. Short braids, actually. They're not like the single long braid Aether wears... Or my avatar,"

"I see," Venti smiled warmly, fascinated by the texture.

"Ahem."

Venti leaned to the side, peeking around Oliver to see who had cleared their throat.

Oliver turned around. Standing in the doorway were August and Arnold, both staring blankly at the bizarre scene unfolding before them.

"Well, since the cat is out of the bag that you're dating Venti..." August crossed his arms, a small smirk playing on his lips. "I was dating Pete in Grounded," he chuckled.

"O-Oh?" Oliver managed to say.

Venti just blinked and smiled pleasantly, completely oblivious to what was going on or what Grounded even was. How could he possibly know?

Arnold, however, looked from the literal anime boy standing in the middle of a sci-fi lab, back to Oliver, and frowned in profound distress.

"Am I back inside the internet?"

August paused, looking down at his traumatized companion. *"What?"*

Chapter 31: A Break

Now, all of them were sitting on the cold metal floor, with coming to terms with their new face...

Or rather, their new, fictional face.

Oliver sat cross-legged in front of Venti, both of them looking like two kindergarteners at story time. August and Arnold had stretched out beside them, legs extended, leaning back on their hands.

Oliver looked over to Venti. "Babe, this is August."

August offered a friendly wave.

Oliver then looked at the younger boy hugging his knees. "And this is Ar—" He caught the sharp, uncomfortable look the kid gave him. "I-I mean, Richard."

Clearing his throat, Oliver looked to his right, gesturing toward the transfer chair resting near the doorway. "And in that chair—sadly, he can't talk right now—that's Jasper. Though, to be fair, I haven't officially met him yet. None of us have, actually."

Oliver let out a heavy sigh as he wrapped up his explanation to Venti. "So, basically, we're all victims of Doctor Barclay." He blinked up at the bard. "Most of us were supposedly kidnapped by him so he could pull off whatever experiments he wanted to do regarding dimensions beyond his own."

Venti gave Oliver and the other boys a soft, empathetic look, his bright eyes filled with profound sadness and worry for their situation.

August straightened his posture, leaning his weight back onto his hands. "What I wanna know, though—" He locked eyes with the bard. "Is how exactly you ended up in here."

Oliver blinked, instantly turning to look at his boyfriend.

Realizing all eyes were on him, Venti rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Oh! Well, uh... I actually stayed awake tonight," he began. "So, for the first time, I was able to see exactly what happens to Oliver when he goes back."

Oliver gasped. "Oh! I totally didn't even think about that!" It had never occurred to him that Venti would have to witness his avatar just going completely limp every single night.

"I always fell asleep before you did," Venti continued. "So I had never seen it happen until—"

"Wait," August said. "You two were sleeping together?"

Oliver narrowed his eyes at August. "We are supposed to be having a serious conversation right now, you know," he said in a deadpan voice.

Venti snorted, quickly bringing a hand up to cover his mouth. He let out a few muffled giggles before trying to force his expression back into something serious. "Anyways! Tonight I tried something different. I used my anemo energy on his lifeless avatar. I pushed... and I pushed, and... well, here I am!" Venti beamed brightly. "My word..." He shook his head in absolute wonder. "Who would have ever thought my powers would allow me to traverse universes?" He blinked down at the floor, still amazed by it all.

Oliver tapped his fingers nervously against his knee. "We can't keep Venti here, though."

August looked at him sharply. "Huh? Why not? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? What do you mean, 'what's wrong'?!" Oliver snapped, his anxiety spiking. "Dude, as much as I desperately want my boyfriend here with me, what are we supposed to do with him if we ever actually leave this building?!" He threw his hands out toward the exit of the room. "I can't exactly parade around my hometown with a literal anime boy by my side!"

August glanced over at Oliver's abandoned transfer chair. "Maybe we can just hook Venti up to the chair and send him back?"

Oliver winced, staring at August as if the suggestion physically pained him. "Dude. No! Wouldn't that just create an avatar version of him in his world? Then the exact same nightmare that happened to me would happen to him! The whole cycle would just repeat itself!" Oliver shook his head vehemently. "I would never want Venti to go through that, and I highly doubt the residents of Teyvat would appreciate their bard's memory vanishing, either. It would make for a hell of a world quest though, but no!"

August nodded slowly in concession. "Good point, good point." He sucked on his teeth, deep in thought. "I guess we'll have to figure out a different way to handle this... but how?"

Oliver sighed, his gaze dropping to his lap. "I don't know. But we have to actually get out of here first."

"Maybe that boy could help."

Oliver squinted. "Boy?" He looked at August, thoroughly confused. "Uh, who?! Which boy? The Jasper dude?" He pointed toward the chair on the right side of the room. "Isn't he still trapped in his Fallout world?"

"No, not him," August said. "I didn't tell you yet, but a night or so ago, a random guy just showed up here. He looked pretty young, around your age, I think. He said he got a 'reading' on this place and came to check it out. When he saw me and the rest of you guys connected to the machines... he told me he'd be right back as soon as he finished something incredibly important."

"What...?" Oliver muttered. "A reading on the place?"

His mind instantly snapped back to that one night he woke up back here and encountered the dark creature. The monster had said something eerily similar. A reading... The creature had gotten a tip-off about Doctor Barclay's dimensional experiments and came to investigate. Still, Oliver was completely lost as to what the dark creature's actual goals were.

"W-Was it another monster you saw? Like... the dark thing?" Oliver asked, his heart rate picking up.

"No." August shook his head firmly. "He was a human. Well, at least, I'm pretty sure he was a human. He showed up before I managed to disconnect Arnold from his chair, so it was just me who saw him."

Oliver arched an eyebrow. A human? "So... then how the hell did he get in here? Through the front door?"

"No, no, he literally teleported in," August explained, gesturing with his hands. "Like, a massive golden portal just ripped open right in here—just over there." He pointed to the back wall. "And he just waltzed right out of it."

Oliver blinked in utter disbelief. What?! "Huh!? Who was it?" Now his head was really spinning. Was this a human from his real world who somehow had magic, or did a being from one of the fictional universes manage to break out?

"Like I said, I don't know," August shrugged. "But this dude did give me a name. He said his name was Mark. He couldn't open the exit door either. He said he tried using his weapon—which he claimed could

'open any lock'—but since our door doesn't technically have a physical lock, he gave up. I... didn't even get a good look at what the weapon was."

Oliver froze. "Open any lock? ...Why does that sound exactly like... a Keyblade?"

"What?" August asked, looking totally lost.

"A Keyblade," Oliver said. "Kingdom Hearts? Please tell me you know what Kingdom Hearts is,"

August just shrugged blankly. "I have absolutely no idea what that is."

Oliver gasped, looking deeply offended. "How do you not know what Kingdom Hearts is?! Have you been living under a rock your whole life?!"

"Woah, woah! Calm down!" August laughed, throwing his hands up in a defensive surrender, a nervous smile on his face.

"How do you not know it?!"

Venti, who had been listening silently, finally chimed in. "Well, I don't know what it is either," he offered with a soft, helpful giggle.

Oliver shot his boyfriend an exasperated look. "You're literally not from this world, babe, you get a free pass." He whipped his head back to August. "But you are!"

The ridiculousness of the argument made Arnold, still curled up beside them, let out a soft, genuine giggle.

August blinked, looked down at the timid boy, and couldn't help but chuckle himself. "Well, at least we're entertaining him."

Oliver let out a soft huff of laughter, his tension breaking slightly. He looked back at the wall where the portal had supposedly opened. This situation was getting more bizarre by the minute. "So where did this Mark guy go, then? He just decided to give up and bounce? He didn't stick around to help?"

"He said he had something urgent to take care of," August explained. "Something massive. Apparently, he can travel between worlds on a whim. Like I said, he was in and out of here incredibly fast. He mentioned something crazy happening in another world... something about..." August trailed off, shrugging. "A dark thing..." He glanced back at Oliver, catching his eye. August smiled a grim, knowing smile, realizing they were on the exact same page.

"Oh, no." Oliver looked from Venti to August, dread pooling in his stomach. "Why is everything suddenly circling back to this dark creature?! What even is it?!"

"I don't know," August admitted. "But judging by how frantic Mark was to get back, it must be bad. Very, very urgent."

August let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head. First, they had Doctor Barclay to deal with—and they still had zero solid information on the shady scientist. Now, they apparently had some cosmic demon tearing through the multiverse.

"This entire situation is giving me a major migraine," August groaned, staring blankly at the cold metal floor.

"He was in a rush, but he tried his best to explain what was going on before he dipped. He said something about a 'Holder' going absolutely berserk to destroy the dark creature. Apparently, this Holder started chasing the thing across the entire multiverse," August recalled.

A spark of realization hit Oliver. "Holder?" He shot a quick glance at Venti, who mirrored his surprised expression. Oliver looked back at August. "I know... well, I don't know much, really. But apparently..." He looked fondly at the bard. "Venti is a Holder. I think that's how I was finally able to leave his world. I needed a Holder's help, and he was one. He had to use his power to turn something off inside the game's node."

August nodded thoughtfully. "Right. The Holder. I know a little bit about them from the research files I managed to read. Remember the note I gave you? A Holder is essentially a being that keeps a specific universe anchored and together. But that whole talk about a Holder 'going full Holder' and attacking... I didn't understand that part."

Oliver's mind was racing. A Holder had gone completely berserk to hunt down the dark creature. It was traveling through different worlds just to kill it. Oliver's thoughts immediately snapped to the crystalline creature that had intervened back in Teyvat.

His eyes widened as he remembered the dark monster's terrified words.

"No..." It had panicked, thrashing wildly.

"How did you find this dimension?!" It had tried to flee, "Get away from me!"

Oliver grabbed Venti's arm. "Venti! The crystal creature!" He whipped his head back to August. "That was it! It has to be, right?! That crystal guy was another Holder! A Holder from an entirely different realm!" Oliver looked down, his brow furrowing. "But... which world?"

Venti let out a small, apologetic laugh. "Honey, remember I don't have any knowledge of that creature you and the other two Archons saw. I was knocked out cold, remember?"

"Right," Oliver nodded, rubbing his temples. "I know, I know..."

"So, you actually came face-to-face with this mysterious Holder Mark was talking about?" August asked, leaning in.

"Yeah! But we didn't trust it at first. At that point, we were all totally on edge because of the dark creature. I mean, we couldn't even put a dent in that shadowy thing, and then suddenly some glowing guy covered in blue shards crashes the party? You can't just trust that!" Oliver laughed nervously. "But I guess now we know he was one of the good guys!"

"Well, let's not jump to conclusions," August warned. "We still don't know what it is, or what its actual endgame is. Just because it was trying to kill the dark creature doesn't automatically make it a good person. They could just be competing for power, for all we know."

Oliver blinked, his hope faltering. "But... if it's a Holder?"

August shook his head grimly. "According to Barclay's notes, a Holder doesn't inherently have to be a savior. Some of them can be incredibly dangerous."

Oliver deflated, his shoulders slumping. "Oh... well, that's not good." He let out a long, exhausted sigh. There were just way too many moving parts. Too many threats. "Did Mark explicitly say he would return?"

"Yes," August confirmed. "He promised he'd come back. What exactly he's going to do to help us, though, I have no idea."

A dark, terrifying possibility suddenly crept into Oliver's mind. "Why are we just sitting here, then?" he whispered. "What if Doctor Barclay comes back? Or his assistant, Clair?"

August narrowed his eyes at the name. "Huh... Clair," he chuckled softly. "I haven't thought about her in a minute. She's my dad's assistant. She was nice."

"I know that she was his helper," Oliver said urgently. "But what if they both walk through those doors right now? During the brief times I woke up in the past, they came in here to check on us."

August met Oliver's worried gaze. "I've been unhooked and awake for a few days now, and... I haven't seen a single trace of them. I'm not saying it's impossible, and you're right, we definitely should be on high alert." August let out a heavy breath. "But right now, Mark is our only beacon of hope. If he comes back, and we manage to free Jasper... we might actually have a fighting chance of getting out of this place."

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A million different anxieties were still buzzing around in Oliver's head, but the most prominent one was sitting right beside him: Venti was here. In the real world.

Oliver was internally panicking about the logistics of their eventual escape. He absolutely had to take Venti with him. Leaving him behind in this sterile lab was completely out of the question, and hooking him up to a transfer chair was a horrific non-starter.

His mind raced through a dozen different scenarios. Maybe I can ask Venti to strip out of his bard clothes and change into some normal clothes from my world so he blends in. But then he reconsidered. Or maybe he could just keep the outfit... people might just think he's doing a really dedicated Venti cosplay!

But reality quickly crashed down on that idea. Venti didn't look like a human cosplaying a character. Venti was the character. He had massive, glowing, literal anime eyes. Up against the dull realism of the real world, he looked incredibly uncanny. Anyone who looked closely would instantly see through the illusion and realize the Fictional Universe was bleeding into reality.

Sunglasses! Oliver thought triumphantly. That could work. He just had to somehow find a pair with the darkest, most opaque lenses possible.

"You okay, babe?"

The four of them had relocated to the lab's break room, desperate to escape the blinding, headache-inducing fluorescent lights of the extraction lab.

At one of the plastic tables, August had kicked his feet up, leaning his chair back against the wall, fast asleep. Arnold was curled up against his side, also completely knocked out.

At a different table near the back of the room, right next to the shattered vending machine, sat the bard and his human boyfriend.

Oliver snapped out of his thoughts and glanced down at Venti. He had his arm securely wrapped around the archon, pulling him close to his side. "Yeah? Yeah. I'm okay, yeah," he lied smoothly, though his rambling cadence completely gave him away.

"Are you sure? You look incredibly stressed."

"Really, I'm fine," Oliver insisted softly. "You're the one who should be stressed out. You just dropped into an entirely new dimension... even if the only part of it you've seen so far is this... incredibly shitty break room."

Venti giggled softly. "I see," he hummed. He pointed a delicate finger at the smashed appliance. "I am curious about what that thing is, though. I assume it's... broken? The glass on the front is completely shattered."
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"Yeah," Oliver nodded. "It's called a vending machine. You're supposed to slide money into it to buy snacks and drinks." He sighed. "It's shattered because August smashed it open earlier. Obviously, none of us have any cash on us right now, so... he had to... uh, commit a crime." Oliver rubbed his face guiltily. "We basically just stole a bunch of food."

Venti let out a mischievous giggle, affectionately rubbing his cheek against Oliver's shoulder. "Hehe! I think a little thievery is totally called for in this situation! Besides, like you said, this is Doctor Barclay's lab. The evil man who locked my boyfriend in a chair. So, I say, rob him blind!"

Oliver completely lost his composure, bursting into laughter before frantically slapping both hands over his mouth to avoid waking the others. "B-bahaha, babe!" he wheezed.

Venti smiled proudly. "Well, am I wrong?"

Oliver couldn't help but smile back. He cast another glance at the shattered vending machine. Thankfully, it had been fully stocked, leaving them with plenty of snacks to survive on. They had also discovered a stash of instant ramen noodles at the very bottom. August had instituted strict rationing, saving the ramen for actual meals since it was the only substantial food they had.

Oliver's eyes scanned the colorful wrappers still hanging from the coils—Reese's, Snickers, Kit Kats, and various bags of chips. All stocked. He gently untangled himself from Venti's side and stood up.

"We've been trying to be careful with the stash," Oliver whispered, stepping over to the machine. "These are candies from my world." He reached in and grabbed a chocolate bar, holding it out to Venti. "Do you wanna try one? It..." He hesitated. "Well, it'll definitely taste different than the sweets you're used to in Mondstadt. These are absolutely packed with a shit ton of terrible preservatives."

Venti blinked blankly, having absolutely no concept of what a preservative was. "Uh... well, if you need to save the food for the rest of you, I really shouldn't. Besides, remember that I am an Archon! A divine being like me doesn't need to eat nearly as much as a mortal, so I will happily pass on taking your limited stash."

Oliver waved him off dismissively. "Nah, that's fine," he reassured him, keeping his voice to a low murmur. "We're mostly hoarding the ramen at the bottom. There's a literal mountain of junk food in here; we're definitely not going to run out of candy anytime soon."

"Hmm," Venti hummed intriguingly. He gracefully slipped out of his plastic chair and padded over to Oliver, peering into the depths of the broken machine. "Do any of these happen to carry wine?"

Oliver snorted, immediately clamping a hand over his mouth again. "V-Venti..." he wheezed quietly. "N-No, vending machines don't sell wine... well..." He paused, correcting himself. "Maybe one of the crazy, high-tech ones you'd find in Japan might. But—" He patted the side of the generic machine. "—This one? Pumping out stale Snickers? Definitely not."

Venti pouted slightly, but reached out and took the Snickers bar from Oliver's hand anyway. "I'll take this, then," he declared. He examined the wrapper. "Chocolate? With... oooh, peanuts!" He paused, tilting his head. "What in the world is a peanut? Is it a type of nut?" Venti repeated the word to himself, a slow grin spreading across his face. "The hell is a 'pee nut'? That sounds... so weird."

Oliver clamped a hand over his face, shaking his head as he fought back giggles.

"And... Nougat? What in the world is that?"

Curiosity getting the better of him, Venti tore open the plastic wrapper and slid the block of chocolate out. The bard blinked, holding the lumpy, brown rectangle up to the fluorescent light and narrowing his eyes at it critically.

"Babe..." Venti deadpanned, glancing sideways at Oliver. "I'm not gonna lie to you. This looks exactly like a turd."

"BAHAHA!" Oliver absolutely lost it, letting out a loud bark of laughter before slapping both hands over his mouth in a panic.

Venti giggled gleefully. "PifffFtt! I'm sorry! But... it really does!"

"Venti, Venti!" Oliver hissed through his fingers, tears of mirth in his eyes. "Shhh! Those two are sleeping, remember?!"

"Oh, right! Sorry!" Venti whispered back, looking at the chocolate bar again. Steeling his resolve, he brought it up to his lips. "Alright... down the hatch the turd goes—"

Oliver gently pushed his boyfriend's arm. "Ugh, Venti, stop being gross!"

Laughing against Oliver's hand, Venti finally took a bite. The caramel stretched in a long, sticky string between the bar and his mouth. Venti blinked, freezing in place as he chewed slowly, looking up at Oliver.

"My word... this taste..." Venti swallowed hard, staring down at the half-eaten candy with sheer disgust. "...is really, really bad."

Oliver snorted into his hand. "I... I honestly don't blame you for thinking that. Everything you eat in Teyvat is made from natural ingredients. This is just heavily processed, artificial chocolate."

Venti chewed the remnants in his mouth a few more times before forcing it down with a grimace. "Sorry," he giggled apologetically, shaking his head. "Here, you take the rest," he offered, shoving the candy back into Oliver's hands.

Oliver smiled fondly, accepting the rejected snack. "I swear they pump these full of addictive chemicals just to get people hooked. It's probably for the best that you didn't like it; we definitely don't need this becoming a bad habit like your wine."

Venti sighed dramatically. "I would do unspeakable things for a fresh bottle of Dawn Winery's finest Dandelion Wine right about now."

Oliver's smile softened into something warm and promising. "Well, I am legally over 21. The second this 'Mark' guy comes back and gets us out of here, I'll take you straight to a wine store and buy you a bottle of whatever wine you want."

"A wine store?" Venti echoed, confused. "You don't have taverns?"

Oliver blinked. Right. His realm doesn't even call them taverns anymore. They called them bars. If someone would call their store that, it was just the owner trying to be different and fancy.

"I mean, we have bars, yeah. But most people here just buy their drinks at a liquor store and take them home."

"How entirely unromantic," Venti noted.

Oliver made a mental note that if he did take Venti to a bar, he'd have to disguise the bard from head to toe so no one would see his glowing braids or massive eyes.

With a heavy sigh, Oliver sank back into his plastic chair. Venti immediately followed, pulling his chair close so their knees bumped.

"I just don't know how long we're going to be trapped in here," Oliver murmured, staring at the floor. "I mean, at least we have some decent rations and a restroom down the hall..."

Suddenly, an idea struck him. He sat up straighter. Venti had teleportation abilities, didn't he? "Hey, Venti? Can't you just... teleport us out of this building?"

Venti's bright expression dimmed slightly. "Uh... I don't think I can, Ollie." He looked down at his hands. "I felt it the exact second I crossed over into your realm. A massive chunk of my godly power was just... stripped away. I can still sense that I can summon my bow, but the vast majority of my Anemo power... I can't access it anymore."

Oliver felt his heart sink like a stone. "Venti... that's... that's really not good. That's terrible—"

Venti quickly waved his hands, forcing a bright, reassuring smile onto his face. "It's okay, really! It makes perfect sense! This is an entirely new dimension, so obviously, my connection to Celestia is completely severed here. Strangely enough, I can still feel a little bit of Anemo humming inside me, just... not enough for the massive, miraculous things I used to do."

Oliver bit his lip, looking around the bleak room, clearly spiraling into stress on his boyfriend's behalf.

Seeing the panic setting in, Venti leaned in and planted a firm, sweet kiss directly on Oliver's lips.

"It is okay, Ollie," Venti whispered against his mouth. "I'll be perfectly fine, I promise. To be completely honest, it actually feels a little freeing to take a vacation from all those heavy godly responsibilities. So please, don't worry your pretty head over little old me, alright~?"

Oliver's dark cheeks flushed a deep, beautiful red at the kiss and the sweet reassurance. Once they finally pulled away, he gave a slow, relieved nod.

"Good." Venti smiled warmly, scooting his chair even closer. "Now then," he purred. The bard casually unclipped his glowing Anemo Vision from his hip and tossed it onto the table with a loud clack. "We can just disregard that, seeing as it's practically a paperweight at the moment~."

Not stopping there, Venti unbuttoned the front of the corset, expertly loosening them before pulling the garment off entirely and tossing it next to the Vision.

Oliver's face flushed even hotter. He had a very good feeling about exactly what Venti was doing.

"I wanted to ask you something," Venti whispered, his tone shifting into something soft and genuine. "You really do like... my belly button, right? Even now that we're in your real world?"

Oliver swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah," he admitted softly.

Venti's smile was radiant. He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Oliver's warm cheek. "I wanted to ask... why?" he asked, his voice full of innocent curiosity. "I never got the chance to ask you properly when you were using the tub back in Mondstadt."

There was absolutely no judgment in the Archon's voice. It was clear he just genuinely wanted to understand every little piece of the boy he loved.

Oliver hesitated, looking deeply into Venti's bright, accepting eyes. "Ven... I don't honestly know why," Oliver confessed, his voice barely a whisper. "It... it was just always something that was a part of me, you know? Something about the shape of them... how completely unique and different they are on every single person. I... I just don't know."

Venti smiled, his eyes crinkling. "I think your little fetish is beautiful."

Oliver offered a shy, vulnerable smile.

"I really, really do," Venti affirmed warmly.

Oliver took a shaky breath, suddenly fighting back a wave of tears. "A few of my past partners... they thought it was way too weird," he admitted, his voice cracking as he sniffled. Two different people he had dated in the past had been completely repulsed by what he liked, turning a harmless quirk into a massive source of shame. He tried so hard never to think about those painful memories.

Yet here was Venti. His literal fictional crush—the ethereal being he had sworn he would never, ever have a chance to be with—sitting in a dingy lab break room, accepting him completely and unconditionally.

"Well, mean people like that simply don't deserve to have someone as amazing as you in their lives," Venti declared fiercely. The bard shifted his body, turning fully in his chair to face Oliver head-on.

Oliver turned to meet his unyielding gaze.

Slowly, the bard leaned forward, rising slightly from his seat to press his forehead gently against Oliver's. Closing his eyes, Venti's voice dropped into a soothing, melodic rhythm.

"The wind collects their mocking cries,Then scatters them across the skies.Why fret o'er whispers, sharp and small?They've never known your heart at all...So come, let's laugh, let's dance, let's roam—Wherever you're with me is home."

Oliver felt his heart physically stutter in his chest. Venti had just done the most Venti thing possible.

He had composed a beautiful, rhyming poem on the spot. A poem specifically meant to comfort him, to validate him, and to chase away his darkest insecurities. It was peak Venti the Bard.

"V-Venti... I- I don't..." Oliver stammered, completely overwhelmed by the love radiating from the boy in front of him.

Venti just smiled softly, pulling back just enough to press a lingering kiss to the center of Oliver's forehead.

Oliver beamed, wiping a stray tear from his eye. "You know... this is actually the very first time I've ever heard you do that in person."

Venti giggled lightly, settling back down into his plastic chair. "Hey, just because I am a world-renowned bard doesn't mean I have to speak in riddles and poems every other sentence," he teased playfully. "Besides, if I did, some people might not be able to keep up with my sheer brilliance! Also, maybe someone from above wouldn't be able to keep up with me either!"

Oliver tilted his head, a fond, confused smile on his lips. "Huh?"

Instead of explaining, Venti suddenly grabbed the hem of his frilly white shirt and pulled it up to his chest, exposing his smooth, pale stomach. "Here. Knock yourself out with my tummy~."

Oliver blinked. He cast a quick, panicked glance over his shoulder at August and Arnold, who were still completely dead to the world at the other table. He looked back at Venti, who was sitting there with a cheeky, expectant smirk, holding his shirt up out of the way.

Oliver let out a long, deeply contented sigh. He stared at his beautiful, perfect bard with an expression of pure, unadulterated adoration.

Sitting in the middle of a nightmare, trapped in a cold, sterile lab, Oliver had never felt like the luckiest fictiosexual in the entire world until right this very moment.

Chapter 32: Jasper

Gently swirling his finger inside his boyfriend's belly button, Venti let out a soft, melodic giggle. He tried his best to keep his laughter muffled, but then he felt Oliver's finger dig just a little bit deeper, hitting the sensitive knot deep inside his navel.

"Eek~!" Venti shrieked softly.

Hearing that sudden squeak instantly snapped Oliver back to reality. Remembering there were actually other people sleeping in the room with them, he frantically yanked his hand away, sitting up bolt straight in his chair and staring straight ahead like absolutely nothing had just happened.

Venti just giggled softly, his shirt still pulled up. "Why did you leave me~?" the bard teased in a whiny whisper. "Don't you want more of my belly button~?" Swaying his hips ever so slightly from side to side, Venti leaned in. "Don't you want your bard's tummy just a little bit more?"

Taking matters into his own hands, Venti teasingly dipped his own finger into his navel, wiggling it around. "Ahh~," he let out a breathy, dramatic sigh, pushing his stomach out against his hand. "Erng~ so deep~"

Oliver was dying.

"Venti!" Oliver hissed, his face burning bright red.

But the bard kept up his teasing act, happily digging into his own navel just to watch his boyfriend squirm helplessly in his seat.

"V-Ven... Ve... please stop! Other people are in here, you know!"

Suddenly, there was a shift from the darkness across the room.

"YEAIIE?!" Oliver yelped, his eyes going wide with panic. In a flash, he spun around, slamming his elbows onto the plastic table and resting his chin in his palms as he faced the other side of the room. "Haha! Heyyyy! ***How's it going?!"*** he blurted out, flashing a painfully nervous, wide-eyed smile.

August, who had just started waking up, opened his eyes fully at Oliver's loud outburst. He stared at his acquaintance with an expression of pure, unadulterated confusion. "What?" he croaked, tilting his head as he studied Oliver's guilty, frantic face.

"Ah-ha! I... uh—" Oliver stammered helplessly.

Behind Oliver, Venti had turned away entirely, face buried in his hand. *"Pffft—"*

August blinked slowly. He shook his head, clearing the sleep from his eyes, and glanced at the table. Resting right there on the plastic surface was the bard's leather corset and Vision strap. August blinked again, looking from Oliver's flushed face to the discarded heap of clothes.

"Hmm," was the only thing August said. With a heavy sigh, he stood up.

Oliver swallowed hard, watching in silence as August walked out of the break room, turning right down the hall toward the extraction lab.

Glancing over at Arnold—who was miraculously still dead to the world at the other table—Oliver let out a fake, composing cough. He sat up straight and turned back to his boyfriend.

Venti was still facing the wall, his shoulders shaking with silent giggles.

"You absolute asshole!" Oliver whisper-yelled. Despite his embarrassment, a laugh bubbled up in his chest. In retaliation, he launched a merciless tickle attack on Venti's sides.

"Bahahaha! Hey, noooo! Ollie, sthahahahaop!!!" Venti instantly spun around, his hands frantically swatting at Oliver's fingers to stop the assault. "Stop ihehehehittt!"

Oliver finally withdrew his hands, flashing Venti a triumphant smirk. "That's exactly what you get~," he teased, reaching out to softly boop Venti's nose.

Venti let out one last giggle before happily leaning his weight back against Oliver's side

Out in the hallway, August walked past the break room door again, heading toward the main exit. Most likely, he was going to look out the small window.

Oliver watched him pass, his brow furrowing. "What's he doing?" he muttered, straightening up in his chair.

"I have no idea," Venti hummed.

A few moments later, August re-entered the break room. "I went to check on Jasper. Nothing's happened with his chair yet. I really hope he didn't disregard the note sent him..." August sighed, walking over to Oliver and Venti's table. "And I also looked out the door's window," he added, gesturing over his shoulder. "The sun has mostly set. It's almost night. I'm incredibly grateful we have a window to the outside in this hell hole, because there isn't a single clock in this entire building."

Oliver's eyebrow went up. "Seriously? No clocks?"

"Nope," August confirmed grimly. "Like I said, thank god for the window. Anyway, since it's getting dark, we need to eat something." He walked over to the shattered vending machine. "I'm gonna grab a few of those ramen bowls from the bottom."

"I'll pass, remember?" Venti chimed in gracefully. "An Archon like me doesn't require much sustenance."

August nodded, reaching through the broken glass and pulling out three instant ramen bowls.

By now, Arnold had finally woken up. He let out a soft stretch and rubbed his sleepy eyes, watching August rummage through the machine. "I-I can share a bowl with you," the other boy mumbled softly.

"Oh?" August pulled his head out of the machine, looking surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Arnold nodded shyly. "Just so we don't have to burn through our food so fast. Besides, those bowls are kinda big."

"Right. Good point," August agreed. He slid the third bowl back onto its coil. Holding the remaining two cups, he walked past Arnold toward the small kitchenette area of the break room. "Another thing to be grateful for: this room actually has a working sink and microwave. I'm guessing whatever scientists used to work in here practically lived off this ramen."

Venti stared intently as August walked over to the counter. The bard had seen a sink before, of course, but he had absolutely no idea what the metal box was.

Curiosity winning over, Venti slipped away from Oliver and padded over to August. He watched in pure awe and confusion as August ripped the paper lids off the ramen, filled them with tap water, and placed them inside the microwave, closing the strange glass door.

"What in Teyvat is that strange contraption?" Venti asked, his massive eyes wide.

Still sitting at his table, Oliver laughed warmly. Venti sounded exactly like a time-traveling old man seeing modern technology for the very first time.

With an affectionate sigh, Oliver pushed himself up and walked over to stand behind his boyfriend. "It's a microwave," Oliver explained softly.

Venti blinked at the appliance. "Micro... wave?"

"Yeah. It sends microwaves directly into the food to heat it up super fast."

"Huhhhhhh?" Venti tilted his head, utterly mesmerized. He stared through the grated glass window as the ramen bowl began slowly spinning on the glass tray inside, bathed in a weird yellow light. "Wave? Like... the waves in the ocean?"

Oliver snorted. "N-No... uh.... You know what a sound wave is, right? Like when you play your lyre? Sound waves traveling through the air?"

"Oh!" Venti snapped his fingers. "Yes! I know those! But what makes this a... micro version?"

"It's just a specific, very short wavelength of radiation that makes the water molecules heat things up," Oliver explained, trying to remember his high school science classes. "Technically, it's actually pretty dangerous. That's why the door has that metal grill built into the glass—to stop the radiation waves from escaping and cooking us."

"Ah... I see," Venti breathed, stepping back slightly just in case. "My word... I don't think even the brilliant minds in Fontaine could come up with something as crazy as this."

Oliver smiled fondly, shaking his head. He is going to completely lose his mind when he sees a TV, Oliver thought to himself.

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A few minutes later, they were all settled back at their respective tables.

August and Arnold sat together, quietly sharing their bowl of ramen with cheap plastic forks they had found. Across the room, Venti and Oliver sat at their own table.

Venti leaned over, squinting curiously into Oliver's steaming cup of noodles. "Oh! Ramen! Right!" Venti snapped his fingers in recognition. "That's a very popular soup over in Inazuma! I've had it a few times during my visits. It's actually quite delicious!"

Oliver smiled. "Wow, I wish I could actually try the real deal over there." He dug his fork into the cup, twirled a clump of noodles, blew on them, and took a large bite. He chewed, slurped, and finally swallowed.

He blinked slowly. "Okay. Yeah. After temporarily living off the wonderful, fresh and tasty foods of Teyvat—" He gave Venti a deadpan look. "—this tastes like absolute trash."

Venti snorted loudly.
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"Okay, Mr. Big Shot," August laughed from across the room. "Not all of us were lucky enough to be trapped inside a luxurious fantasy RPG, okay? I spent my time fighting for my life against giant bugs, and then eating said bugs just to survive. Not exactly a five-star culinary experience."

Oliver winced, laughing apologetically. "Sorry, sorry! Hey, what game were you actually trapped in, again?"

"Grounded. From what I could gather, it's a survival game where you're shrunk down to the size of an ant and have to fight insects in a backyard," August explained grimly. "If it wasn't for Pete helping me out, I probably would have completely lost my mind... I really don't do well with spiders. It... it was definitely the ultimate 'face your fears' situation." August shuddered visibly. "I still absolutely hate them."

"Hmm." Oliver sympathetically slurped up some more salty noodles.

"So, you guys have ramen in your world, too?" Venti asked, looking back at the cup.

"Yeah," Oliver nodded. "But this is the dirt-cheap, college-student kind. If you want the actual good stuff, you have to go to an authentic Japanese restaurant. You'd know it's good when it's filled to the brim with people and there's a lot of slurpage going on,"

Venti laughed gently. "Haha! I think I understand what you mean. So many people slurping up those noodles,"

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As the night wore on, exhaustion finally claimed them all. Just like their previous naps, they were forced to sleep sitting up in the stiff break room chairs.

August and Arnold were completely knocked out, heads resting on the table.

Oliver was fast asleep too, slumped heavily against his boyfriend's side. Venti had rested his cheek softly on top of Oliver's head, his own eyes closed in peaceful slumber.

For a moment, it was almost tranquil. It wasn't completely silent—the broken vending machine emitted a low, steady hum that served as a comforting white noise against the isolation of the bunker.

Oliver shifted slightly in his sleep, adjusting his weight against the bard. Venti immediately awoke, shifting his posture just enough to let his boyfriend get perfectly comfortable. "You okay, baby?" he whispered into Oliver's hair.

"Hmm," Oliver mumbled, half-asleep. He tilted his head up, clumsily pressing a soft kiss to Venti's cheek, before instantly falling back asleep.

Venti hummed happily, a soft smile gracing his lips as he hugged Oliver closer.

"BEGIN SEND BACK."

Oliver's eyes flickered open in the dim light. "Huh?" he muttered groggily. "Did you say something, babe?" He looked up.

Venti's eyes were wide open, staring sharply toward the open doorway. "That wasn't me," Venti whispered.

A heavy silence stretched for a few seconds.

"SYSTEM REBOOT COMMENCING."
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The loud, mechanical voice was echoing directly from the hallway.

Oliver gasped. His adrenaline spiked instantly. He leaped away from Venti, practically vaulting over the plastic table as he bolted toward the door. "Guys! Guys, wake up!" he shouted. "I think that Jasper dude is coming back!"

"Huh? What?" August groaned, sitting up groggily and untangling himself from Arnold. "What's going on?"

But Oliver was already sprinting out the door.

"Jasper! His chair is booting up!"

August's eyes flew wide open. "I'm coming!" He shoved his chair back so hard it screeched against the floor. He grabbed Arnold's arm. "Come on, get up! You too!" he called out to Venti.

Venti nodded sharply, instantly jogging out of the room right behind them.

Oliver burst into the extraction lab, skidding to a halt right in front of the transfer chair belonging to Jasper. He quickly looked up at the glowing monitor above the machine:

Vitals of subject: Great

Dimension Gateway: N/A

Media: Fallout 4

Media Type: Game

Fictional Universe Code: Sub-374

Oliver quickly looked back down at the unconscious boy strapped into the seat. Hearing the heavy footsteps of the others rushing into the room, he threw a hand out behind him. "Don't turn the overhead lights on yet!" he ordered quietly.

"BODY TRANSFER IN 3... 2... 1..."

The massive metal chair suddenly vibrated. With a heavy, mechanical groan, the backrest slowly hoisted itself into an upright position, releasing a loud hiss of pressurized steam from its base.

Suddenly, the man strapped inside jolted awake with a violent gasp. "Gah!" Jasper panted heavily, his chest heaving as he frantically looked around the dark room. "What?! Where—..."

"Shh! Shh, it's okay!" Oliver quickly hushed him, waving his hands urgently to signal the others to stay back.

Oliver's heart was pounding. He had absolutely no idea if they were dealing with another Arnold/Richard situation, where the victim completely lost their real-world memories. They really couldn't afford to deal with another case of amnesia right now.

Slowly, Jasper's frantic breathing began to steady.

Oliver gently gripped the boy's shoulders, praying this guy remembered who he was.

After a tense, agonizing moment... Jasper blinked.

"Right..." Jasper breathed, his voice heavy with a sudden, crushing realization. "The experiment..."

Oliver let out a massive puff of relief, his shoulders dropping. "Thank goodness."

But the relief was short-lived, as Jasper's words added a horrifying new question to the puzzle. The experiment. If Jasper knew he was part of an experiment, that meant Doctor Barclay had actually explained things to him. He had asked for his consent.

"I... I..." Jasper twisted in the seat, squinting into the shadows of the lab. "I don't remember this room." He shook his head violently, aggressively rubbing his temples. "Where's the Doctor? Are you his assistant? Fuck... Why does it feel like I was trapped inside that place for actual years?"

Jasper's hands suddenly dropped from his face. He stared blankly into the darkness, his eyes wide and haunted.

"I... I'm..." he whispered, his voice cracking. "I am dating a Ghoul..."

Realizing the boy was spiraling, Oliver signaled to August in the dark to hit the light switch. "Close your eyes tight," Oliver warned Jasper gently. "The bright lights are gonna turn on."

Jasper, still looking completely shell-shocked, gave a small nod and squeezed his eyes shut.

Venti reached over and flicked the switch. "Hmm... just like the mechanisms in Fontaine," he mumbled to himself. "Just... smaller,"

The blinding fluorescent lights flickered violently before blazing to life.

Jasper slowly peeled his eyes open, squinting against the harsh glare until his vision adjusted. He looked at Oliver, then slowly scanned the rest of the group. "Woah..." he rasped. "Wasn't exactly expecting a welcoming committee..." He looked at August and Arnold. "Are you guys Doc's helpers?"

A heavy, solemn silence fell over the group.

"No," August said softly. "We're not. We're just like you."

"Huh," Jasper muttered, his brow furrowing. "That's... strange. He explicitly told me I was the only one."

"Yeah," Oliver scoffed, rolling his eyes bitterly. "That seems to be his absolute favorite lie to tell."

Jasper looked back up at Oliver, but his gaze drifted past him, sweeping the room until it locked onto someone who fundamentally did not match the gritty realism of a sterile science lab.

Jasper blinked hard. He leaned forward in the chair, squinting in pure disbelief. "Is that... an anime boy?"

"Uhhh...." August scratched the back of his neck, looking awkwardly at Venti.

Venti just blinked innocently, looking at August, and then offering Jasper a polite little wave.

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Eventually, the others cleared out of the extraction lab, giving Jasper some much-needed space to breathe and to clear his mind.

Oliver volunteered to stay behind, wanting to offer the guy some company without overwhelming him with a crowd.

Jasper had finally left from the chair, but his legs were still dangerously unsteady. He stood hunched over, gripping the cold metal armrest of the machine just to keep himself upright. "My legs feel like jelly," he muttered, wincing as he shifted his weight.
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"Yeah," Oliver nodded sympathetically. "Being hooked into those chairs will do that to you. Especially if you were trapped in there for a long time."

"I felt like I was in there for a lifetime," Jasper whispered, staring blankly at his own hands.

Oliver looked at him cautiously. "Maybe your avatar got overwritten inside the dimensions' world," Oliver suggested. "It's kind of a miracle that you didn't end up like Arnold, honestly. He completely forgot he was ever a human from this world."

Jasper looked over at him, his eyes heavy. "Is everything you just told me true?"

While the others had been leaving, Oliver had given Jasper a crash course on the truth: the kidnapping, the transfer chairs, and Doctor Barclay's true, sinister nature.

But Jasper was struggling to reconcile that reality with his own memories. For him, the Doctor had been a willing collaborator who asked for his consent.

"It just doesn't make any sense. He didn't give off that 'evil mastermind' vibe at all," Jasper murmured, shaking his head. "Talk about hiding your true motives... he played me perfectly."

Oliver just looked down at the metal floor, not knowing what to say.

"What was it like? Inside Fallout?" Oliver asked, trying to gently change the subject.

Jasper blinked, pulling himself out of his dark thoughts. ".... I... I don't honestly know. I was—" He let out a sudden, humorless laugh. "I was an absolute badass."

Oliver's eyes widened in surprise, and a small, genuine giggle escaped him. "Oh? Really now?"

"I'm not even exaggerating! I have absolutely no idea why, but I was insanely good with weapons. Nothing could stand in my way. Radroaches, Super Mutants, feral Ghouls? I wiped the floor with all of them."

Oliver couldn't help but smile. It sounded like whatever OC Jasper had manifested as within the Fallout universe, the system had severely buffed him all the way up. A small part of Oliver was actually relieved that Jasper seemed to have at least partially enjoyed his time in the world.

"You mentioned something earlier... about dating a Ghoul?" Oliver asked carefully, remembering Jasper's panicked realization when he first woke up.

Jasper froze. He refused to meet Oliver's eyes, staring firmly at the wall. "Y-Yeah."

"Must have been a non-feral one. Was it that Ghoul from the new Fallout TV show?" Oliver asked, completely forgetting that the Amazon show character wasn't actually an NPC in Fallout 4.

"What? No—and wait..." Jasper turned to look at Oliver, completely bewildered. "Since when was there a TV show for Fallout?"

Oliver blinked. Before he could explain, Jasper kept talking.

"It... It was Billy."

Oliver's jaw dropped. "Billy?" He tilted his head, his mind racing through the game's lore. "Wait, you mean the ghoul kid trapped inside the fridge in that one side quest?!" His eyes went perfectly round. "That Billy?!"

Jasper slowly covered his face. "For some bizarre reason, the transfer machine completely de-aged me within the world. I was physically and mentally thirteen years old again." Jasper dropped his hands, looking exhausted. "I was the exact same age as Billy."

He gestured vaguely at his own body. "I went from a 19-year-old guy here... to a 13-year-old kid in there."

"Oh... that's interesting!" Oliver said.

"I just don't understand why it felt like I lived an entire, authentic life in there," Jasper whispered, his voice trembling slightly. "I remember having wasteland parents. I remember growing up as a toddler in the Commonwealth... I remember my parents being slaughtered, leaving me to survive and fight completely alone. I remember finding Billy later on, and how we instantly clicked because we were just so desperately happy to find someone our own age..."

Jasper stared at the floor, his eyes completely hollow. "But waking up here... I remember my actual childhood. I remember my real parents. My real friends... It's like my brain is trying to process two completely different lifetimes at the exact same time." He aggressively dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. "It's just... a massive, agonizing headache."

Oliver was entirely at a loss for words. It sounded like absolute psychological torture. He was incredibly grateful that his own Avatar in Teyvat had been plagued with a billion system bugs, preventing him from ever fully immersing. The memory loss glitch had essentially protected his real-world sanity.

Jasper looked up at the glowing monitor above his chair. "But Billy... there was a note he found. He helped me decipher it. It said something about a 'node' we had to find, and we had to sneak into an abandoned bunker called Vault 111 to find it..." Jasper gripped his hair. "Oh, god... Half my brain is screaming that Vault 111 is a real, dangerous place we had to infiltrate... and the other half knows it's just the starting area of a video game."

His legs finally gave out, and Jasper slid down the side of the chair, sitting heavily on the metal floor. "I just need a minute to rest..."

Oliver watched the broken boy on the floor. Taking a deep breath, Oliver crossed the room and sat down right beside him. They just sat there in silence for a few minutes, bathed in the harsh, buzzing fluorescent light.

"I was incredibly overprotective of him," Jasper finally spoke, his voice quiet. "Maybe the harshness of the Wasteland just got to my head. A lot of the Raiders eventually caught on that a smoothskin human was traveling with a Ghoul, so they just assumed the only reason I kept him around was because he knew where some pre-war riches were buried... or something. We had Raiders hunting us up and down the entire Commonwealth and all of the Wasteland."

Oliver listened intently. "So... I'm guessing you had to fight for him?"

"I blew every single one of their fucking heads off," Jasper stated, his voice suddenly going dead and cold as he picked at a scratch on the floor.

Oliver swallowed hard, but he understood perfectly. "It sounds like you... really, truly loved Billy while you were in there."

"Yeah," Jasper whispered, his voice cracking. He violently cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. "Anyway... who the hell is the anime guy? He completely threw me off guard." Jasper forced a weak chuckle. "I know tech is getting crazy, and dimension hopping is apparently more real then ever now, but Doc never said anything about literal cartoon characters crossing over into our dimension."

"Yeah... honestly, I barely understand it myself. Not even Venti knows how he did it, and he's completely shocked too. Unless he just doesn't wanna tell me the truth, which would be peak Venti behavior," Oliver sighed fondly. "But... he's already helped me so much, so I'm incredibly grateful."

Oliver tried to make his voice high pitched, doing a terrible impression of his boyfriend. "'A god simply cannot give away all of his divine secrets, you know!'—or whatever poetic nonsense he'd say," Oliver chuckled.

"A... God?" Jasper blinked, looking at Oliver like he was insane.

"Yeah! You have to know who Venti is, right? The Anemo Archon from Genshin Impact by HoYoverse?"

Jasper just stared at him blankly, slowly shaking his head. "I have absolutely no idea what that game is, or who that company is."

Oliver groaned dramatically, throwing his head back. "Oh, come on! Genshin Impact?! The most viral gacha game on the planet that literally took over the entire world?!" Oliver joked, laughing in disbelief. "But seriously, how do you not know it? Ugh, you are literally just as bad as August not knowing what Kingdom Hearts is!"

"I'm serious, I don't know it. It became viral?" Jasper asked, genuinely confused. "The last game I remember going viral is Five Nights At Freddy's,"

"Come on! You must have seen ads for it at least! It blew up massively during the COVID lockdowns. Honestly, the only reason half the world played it at launch was because everyone was trapped inside with literally nothing better to do."

Jasper narrowed his eyes, leaning away from Oliver. "Now what the hell is that? Covid? Lockdown? What are you talking about?"

Oliver's smile instantly dropped. He slowly turned his head to stare at Jasper, his stomach suddenly tying itself into a cold, tight knot. "Uh... you know... the global virus outbreak?"

Jasper just tilted his head, completely lost.

"You know... the massive 2020 pandemic?" Oliver pressed, his voice trembling slightly.

Jasper's brow furrowed in deep confusion. "2020? You mean... 2020 as a year?"

Oliver slowly nodded, his blood running cold. Uh Oh...

Jasper rubbed his forehead, looking at Oliver like he was speaking a different language. "Wait... is it not 2014 anymore?"

Oliver's shoulders completely slumped. His eyes went terrifyingly wide, and his jaw went totally slack. Without saying a word, he slowly, mechanically stood up from the floor. "Just... wait right here."

Oliver sprinted out of the extraction room, taking the corner so fast he almost slipped, and burst back into the break room where the others were waiting.

They were all sitting around a table, quietly chatting amongst themselves.

"Oh! Ollie's back!" Venti beamed brightly, kicking his legs happily under the table.

August turned around in his chair. "Hey!" He gestured gently to Arnold. "He's feeling a little bit better now. Well, relatively speaking. He's actually talking again." August stood up and crossed the room to meet

Oliver, dropping his voice to a low whisper. "Though... he still firmly prefers to be called Richard. And he still doesn't remember a single thing about his real life."

Oliver nodded absently, his face pale. "Well, that might just take more time to heal," he mumbled.

"Yeah, hopefully," August agreed.

Before August could turn away, Oliver grabbed his arm in a panic. "August... we have a massive fucking problem."

August froze. Behind him, Arnold and Venti stopped talking, both turning to look at Oliver's terrified face.

"Jasper... I..." Oliver let out a shaky breath, his mind spinning. "I always thought I was Doctor Barclay's first experiment. But I'm not."

August narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Oliver swallowed hard. "Jasper... he thinks it's still 2014."

August audibly gasped, physically stumbling a step backward. "What?!" He whipped his head to look at door out, then back at Oliver in pure horror. "Are... are you sure?!"

"Yes! He literally just told me! And to make it worse, he has absolutely no idea what Genshin Impact is, and he has never heard of the fucking COVID pandemic!!"

August's jaw was practically on the floor. "Okayyyy... yeah, I was gonna say that not knowing an anime game isn't exactly proof, but not knowing about the global lockdown?!" He stared at Oliver, panic setting in. "What the hell do we do about this?"

"I don't know!" Oliver gripped his own hair. "I'm from 2023! Jasper has been asleep since twenty-freaking-fourteen!" Oliver threw a desperate hand out toward the timid boy sitting at the table. "And we don't even know what year he's from! This is getting completely chaotic!"

There was nothing they could do. The only option left was to wait for Mark to return. And, in the meantime, somehow try to break a decade's worth of lost time to a boy who just woke up, for the the first time since 2014.

Chapter 33: Documents

Their newest face had officially joined them in the break room.

August immediately stepped up to lay down some ground rules. "So, we have a vending machine in here, and you're free to take from it," he explained to Jasper, gesturing toward the shattered glass. "But don't touch the ramen unless you're absolutely famished. We have no idea how long we're going to be stuck down here, so we need to ration our food as much as possible."

Jasper nodded slowly. "Makes sense. So you guys really are trapped here, huh? Guess I'm added to the bunch."

"For now," August said. "We're waiting on someone. Once he shows up, we figure out the rest. So until then—" he pointed at the ramen, "—don't touch those unless you need to. Speaking of which, so you need to eat? Are you hungry right now?"

Jasper shook his head, staring tiredly at the floor. "To be honest... not really."

"Good." August nodded. "We can stretch them out a little longer then,"

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After everything that had just happened, none of them wanted to pressure Jasper. The poor guy was already going through enough without having to overthink the fact that he had essentially time-traveled a decade into the future.

Eventually, exhaustion took over the room. Most of everyone was sleeping—except for Jasper, who was sitting silently on the floor, leaning against the wall furthest away from the group.

Oliver, who was also wide awake, noticed him sitting there in the dark. Beside him, Venti was awake as well.

"I'm gonna go check on him," Oliver whispered.

Venti gave a soft, understanding nod. "Go do that," he murmured, gently pulling away to let his boyfriend up.

Oliver slipped out of his chair as quietly as possible, careful not to wake August or Arnold. He made his way across the dim room and approached the newest victim of Doctor Barclay's twisted experiments.

The situation with Jasper felt eerily similar to Arnold's, but with one agonizing difference: Jasper was essentially processing two completely separate lifetimes simultaneously.

"Hey," Oliver whispered as he approached.

Jasper looked up, his eyes heavy. "Hey," he replied quietly.

"Mind if I sit?" Oliver asked, gesturing to the empty floor space beside him.

Jasper nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Oliver plopped down, crossing his legs and adjusting his posture against the wall before looking over. "You feeling okay?"
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Jasper just stared straight ahead into the gloom of the break room. "I don't know," he admitted, shaking his head slowly.

Oliver watched him with deep sympathy. He knew Jasper was going through hell—in some ways, it was even worse than Arnold's amnesia. "I know... you must feel so lost right now. The whole thing with living in a different reality, getting your mind completely rewritten, and then... waking up to realize you've been gone for over a decade in your original world." Oliver let out a heavy sigh. "I wouldn't even know where to begin explaining all the things you've missed."

"It's not even about that," Jasper muttered.

Oliver tilted his head. "What is it, then?"

Jasper was quiet. "Billy," he said. "It feels wrong. That I had feelings for him,"

Oliver blinked, completely confused. "Why?" he asked. "Is it because he's a Ghoul?"

"No... it's because... he was thirteen in the realm I was in."

Oliver's expression immediately softened in understanding. "Hey, do not stress yourself out over that," he said earnestly, placing a comforting hand on Jasper's shoulder. "You were rewritten in there. You physically and mentally became thirteen again yourself. You were a completely different person living a completely different life. That wasn't you sitting here right now making a choice,"

"I-I know," Jasper stammered, staring at his hands. "But... now that I'm back here, I still have those feelings for him. That's what feels weird,"

Oliver kept his hand firmly on Jasper's shoulder. "Listen, I don't know exactly how long you were trapped in the Fallout realm, but based on how you described it, you lived an entire lifetime in there. If you came back here at thirteen, that means you lived thirteen years in there. You probably knew Billy for what, one or two years? So of course it left a mark. That's not something that just switches off because you woke up in a different place,"

Jasper shrugged helplessly. "I don't even know how long I knew him... we just clicked the moment we met."

"And I can completely see why that would happen," Oliver assured him. "I've played a few of the Fallout games, so I know exactly how miserable and terrifying that environment would be to actually live in." He gently gave Jasper's shoulder a squeeze before pulling his hand back. "You're not a bad person, Jasper. Please don't think that. We have much bigger things to worry about right now. Besides, knowing his in-game lore, Billy is technically over two hundred years old anyway. He just looks 13."

Jasper's gaze remained glued to the floor. "Do you think I'll ever meet him again?"

Oliver offered a sad, helpless shrug. "I don't know. So far, the only way to meet people from the games is through those transfer chairs. And we both know how... incredibly problematic those can be." Oliver slowly pushed himself up from the floor. "Just try not to overthink it right now, okay? Try to get some sleep."

Leaving Jasper to rest, Oliver quietly made his way back across the room to Venti and slipped back into his seat.

"Was he okay?" Venti whispered, immediately tapping his lap, silently offering it as a pillow.

Oliver smiled tiredly. He pulled his chair a little closer to Venti's, then laid down flat across the seats, resting his head comfortably on Venti's thighs. He looked up at the bard's glowing eyes. "He's just feeling

conflicted about something, that's all. He thinks he's a bad person. But I promised him he's not."

"Hmm," Venti hummed softly, his cool fingers gently tracing Oliver's forehead.

"Hmm," Venti said, as he gently rubbed Oliver's forehead.

Oliver's eyes drooped almost immediately. "God, I'm tired," he said, and covered a yawn with the his hand.

Venti smiled affectionately, his fingers moving from Oliver's forehead to gently card through his hair. "Get some sleep, then."

"Can I stay right here?" Oliver whispered, already half-asleep.

"Duh~," Venti giggled quietly, playfully sticking his tongue out.

Oliver let out a quiet, sleepy gasp. "Rude~,"

Venti just smiled warmer, reaching down to gently boop Oliver's nose.

Smiling to himself, Oliver finally relaxed, letting his eyes flutter shut.

As his boyfriend drifted off, Venti cast a quiet glance across the room at Jasper. Whoever you are, I hope you feel better, the Archon thought to himself. Taking a deep breath, Venti leaned back. He didn't actually require sleep, but he had to admit, the sensation felt incredibly nice. Being stuck with Oliver in this mortal world for the past week had given him a taste of human life, and... he was honestly loving it.

Venti decided to close his eyes, to drift off.

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The next morning, Venti was the first one fully alert in the bunker. He shifted slightly in his chair, looking down to see Oliver still sprawled across the plastic seats.

At some point during the night, Oliver had rolled over; his face was now pressed directly into Venti's stomach.

Venti let out a series of muffled, melodic giggles, quickly covering his mouth to stay quiet. "Ehe~!" he whispered, lowering his hands to gently stroke Oliver's messy hair. "Of course he got all snuggly with my belly."

Venti glanced around the shadowy room. The only illumination came from the dim morning light filtering through the small window on the front door, spilling faintly down the hallway and into the break room.

Well, at least I know I can sleep just about anywhere, Venti thought proudly. Stripped away from his home dimension and practically drained of his power, yet he still slept like a log. He stretched his arms above his head, letting out a quiet yawn before settling back down.

Across the room, he noticed August beginning to stir.

Venti couldn't help but marvel at how fundamentally different the people of his boyfriend's world were compared to the citizens of Teyvat. It wasn't a bad thing at all—in fact, Venti found it entirely fascinating. It was thrilling to be somewhere so completely foreign. Still, a small part of him wished he could just peek into his own world for a moment, just to make sure everyone was safe. After the near-catastrophe they had just faced, a lingering unease tugged at him being so far away from home.
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On his lap, Oliver groaned, shifting slightly as he began to wake up. He turned his head, finally moving his face away from his boyfriend's stomach to blink up at Venti's face.

He rubbed his eyes, letting out a groggy yawn. "You know," Oliver mumbled, his voice thick with sleep, "I almost forgot you were here with me."

Venti beamed. "You did, huh?"

"Yeah." Oliver gave a sleepy giggle. "I was half expecting to open my eyes and see Teyvat all around me, instead of this crappy place."

"Comforting," Venti said sarcastically.

Oliver didn't move to get up, entirely content to just lie there looking up at the bard. "How did you sleep? Sleep well?"

Venti continued to gently scratch Oliver's scalp. "Actually, yes!" he chirped cheerfully. "I guess that means I can adapt to sleeping absolutely anywhere. Or~," he flashed Oliver a teasing, wicked little smirk, "maybe it's just because you're here with me."

Oliver's cheeks instantly flushed a bright, dusty pink. He didn't even know how to respond—it was way too early in the morning to handle this level of cuteness. "Ventiiiii," he whined playfully, turning his head to bury his burning face right back into Venti's stomach.

Venti just giggled, happily continuing to play with his boyfriend's hair.

"Morning, guys," August called out, rubbing the back of his neck as he stood up. "Are any of you hungry? If not, we don't have to touch the ramen yet. We can wait until lunch time or whatever..."

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Oliver chuckled, finally sitting up and resting his elbows on the plastic table. "Gotta 'save the rations'."

August walked over to their table, looking a bit more focused than the day before. "I'm going to try to break into Extraction Room 3 today," he announced. "I need to see what's in there."

"Oh, right," Oliver said, blinking the last of the sleep from his eyes. "I forgot you mentioned there was a third one."

August nodded, gesturing toward the break room door. "Yeah, it's past Extraction Rooms 1 and 2 the one I was in. I have no idea if there are more victims in there, but god, I really hope not."

Oliver looked at Venti, then back at August. "Wait, how are we supposed to get in? Didn't you say the door was locked?"

August looked down at the table, then slowly shifted his gaze to the bard. "I'm not sure if... maybe your boyfriend could help?"

Oliver immediately turned to Venti, who was blinking innocently at August.

"Oh!" Venti straightened up in his chair. "Are you... suggesting I use my... uh..." Venti leaned closer to Oliver, dropping his voice to a loud whisper. "You did say I'm a famous character in your world, right? Does he know what I can do?"

Oliver gave a subtle nod, which was all the confirmation Venti needed.

"Alright then!" Venti announced, looking back at August. "I must warn you, though—I am no longer connected to Celestia, so my Anemo powers are severely weakened. I cannot use them to their full extent." He held up a single, confident finger. "But a mortal door? I'm pretty sure I can blast a door off its hinges. Should be no problem at all!" Venti smiled brightly, placing his hands proudly on his hips. "A mere slab of metal is no match for the greatest bard in Mondstadt!"

Oliver tapped his fingers thoughtfully against the plastic table. "Wait, if Venti can blast the door off the extraction room... couldn't he just blast the main door off the bunker so we can leave?!" He looked at August excitedly. "Right?"

But August quickly shook his head. "Even if it works, what do we do then? We still have absolutely no idea where we are, and there's a literal blizzard outside. We don't have winter coats, and if my dad really is the terrible mastermind we think he is, he definitely didn't build this place near—"

"—near civilization," Oliver finished, his excitement crashing. "Right. I get it."

"Exactly. Also it would be very stupid to do that and lead all that freezing cold air in. At least the temp is okay in here as it is. It's best we wait for Mark. We have enough food to survive for a few days if we ration it."

Oliver sighed, his thoughts drifting back to Extraction Room 3. "But if we find more people in there, that's just more mouths to feed."

"I know," August agreed grimly. "But we need to know if it's empty or not. Better to find out now rather than later. If there are people, I'll need to go through the whole unhooking process, and that takes time." He turned and headed for the hallway. "Come on. Let's do this before Richard and Jasper wake up."

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The three of them walked down the pitch-black hallway, passing by Extraction Room 1—where Oliver, Jasper, and Arnold had been held—and Extraction Room 2, which only housed a single chair.

The corridor ahead was engulfed in heavy shadows.

"I still don't know why the lights don't work out here. I haven't been able to find a single switch," August explained as they walked. "Only the extraction rooms have them. And for some reason, those lights are on a timer. You know, just to fuck with us even more."

"Wait, they are?" Oliver asked, surprised. "I guess they pick up movement, and if everyone's asleep with no heavy movements, they just shut off."

"Yeah, probably," August muttered.

The hallway came to an abrupt end. It was incredibly dark, but as Oliver squinted and carefully inched forward, he saw the dull gleam of a solid wall.

"Be careful, Ollie," Venti warned softly, staying close behind him.

"Don't worry, I got it." Oliver ran his hand along the cold metal. "Huh. It's a dead end."

"I know," August said. "I already checked down here." He took a step back and looked expectantly at Venti.

Venti rolled his shoulders, taking a deep, focused breath. He held out his left hand. The process was visibly slower than usual, but eventually, particles of glowing teal light gathered in his palm, coalescing into the familiar shape of his bow.
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Venti gripped the weapon, aiming it squarely at the heavy metal door on the right wall. "Stand back, you two!" he warned with a bright smile. "Unless you want to get blown away! Well... assuming my wind is actually powerful enough to do that right now."

Oliver and August quickly scrambled backward, giving the Archon plenty of space.

Venti pinched his fingers against the bowstring. A glowing arrow of pure Anemo energy flickered into existence. His playful demeanor vanished, replaced by an expression of intense, divine focus as he drew the string back, the tension humming in the quiet hallway.

Thwack!

Venti released the string. The glowing arrow shot through the dark and slammed directly into the center of the metal door, lodging itself deep into the steel.

Instantly, a violent vortex of wind erupted. The gale howled, swirling aggressively around the embedded arrow and violently pushing against the sealed door. Venti gritted his teeth, holding his hands out to manually control the tempest, desperately trying to focus all the kinetic energy directly into the door rather than letting it tear the surrounding walls apart.

He wasn't entirely sure how he was manipulating the element without the leylines of Teyvat, or Celestia, but he could feel the immense strain. It was substantially weaker than his usual power.

But it was enough.

The locked door shrieked, the heavy metal groaning as the raw wind pressure forced the deadbolts to their breaking point. With a deafening SNAP, the locks gave way. The massive sliding door was violently blasted off its tracks, flying into the dark room and crashing onto the floor with an earth-shattering clang.

The magical wind instantly dissipated. A flurry of loose papers went fluttering wildly through the dark room before gently fluttering to the ground.

Venti lowered his bow, a triumphant grin spreading across his face. "Boom shakalaka! As Paimon would say~," he cheered, turning to the other boys. "There we go!"

Oliver let out a breathy laugh, utterly amazed. "That just proves how insanely powerful you actually are, if that is what you consider 'low power'."

Venti giggled, dismissing his bow in a flurry of sparks. "Ehe! Yeah! Though, I'm honestly still surprised I can use my powers here at all. But... that doesn't matter right now! The door is open."

"Yeah, it is." August stepped cautiously over the threshold. He felt blindly along the interior wall until his hand brushed against a plastic switch. "Let's hope the power works in here."

He flicked it.

The harsh fluorescent lights buzzed to life, violently flickering before flooding the space with stark white light.

There were no transfer chairs. The room was completely devoid of machinery. Instead, it was packed wall-to-wall with towering stacks of heavy cardboard boxes.

August let out a massive sigh of relief, sagging against the wall. "I have never been so happy to see boxes in my entire life."

"Seriously," Oliver agreed, walking in and looking around in awe. "What's even in all of these?"

"No idea," August said. "But why were they locked up behind a reinforced door?"

Oliver stepped up to the nearest stack. Stamped across the side of every single box in thick red ink was the word: CONFIDENTIAL. "I think I know why," he murmured.

August was by his side, and with Venti on the other.

"You think they're documents?" August asked.

"Maybe," Oliver said.

"Do you think Doctor Barclay wrote all of that out?" Venti asked, tilting his head.

"Probably." Oliver focused on a single box sitting isolated near the front. It looked significantly newer and less dusty than the rest. He looked over his shoulder. "Venti, summon an arrow."

Catching on instantly, Venti summoned a single Anemo arrow, elegantly twirling the glowing shaft between his fingers. He stepped forward and cleanly sliced the sharp arrowhead through the thick packing tape sealing the box.

Oliver reached over, pulling the cardboard flaps open to reveal hundreds of neatly stacked manila folders. He narrowed his eyes, pulling out the very first packet of stapled papers.

Transfer Chair - Barclay Ficto-Avatar Model Prototype 1

Notes: The prototype can adapt to any environment it's sent into. It has the ability to copy its user's physical appearance and seamlessly convert them into the aesthetic style of the world they are traveling to.

Unfortunately, this prototype has severe bugs within its system. While it does not matter if its human controller can remember their old life (the primary goal is to completely rewrite the subject), the avatar is highly susceptible to heat damage. Furthermore, even without extreme heat exposure, the user may still recover real-world memories unprompted if they encounter stimuli within the fictional world that triggers a connection to their past life.

Documented Subjects that have used the prototype:

Jeffrey Daniels (Male, Age 26): Sent to Minecraft, Sub-284. Subject was killed by a Creeper within the universe. The heat from the blast melted the avatar. The Avatar system failed to send his consciousness back to his physical body. Documented Year: 2012

Vanessa Chambers (Female, Age 30): Sent into Silent Hill, Sub-34,485. Subject successfully replaced the protagonist, Heather Mason. The machine completely lost connection with her, leaving her real body dormant for an extended period. The nutrient tubes eventually ran out, as I could no longer afford the upkeep during that time. Documented Year: 2017

Billy Anderson (Male, Age 10): Sent into Five Nights At Freddy's, Sub-Unknown. The universe for this game seems highly unstable; I am unfamiliar with its mechanics. It is as if the logic of the world simply refuses to function. The subject was mutated into some form of "Springtrap," a character from the game series. After documenting the boy's status, I observed he was once again exposed to fire, which completely fried the avatar connection. Documented Year: 2021

Ashton Blackwood (Male, Age 16): Sent into WALL-E, Sub-59,393. Unlike previous subjects, this individual was sent into a cinematic universe rather than a video game. The experiment was proceeding flawlessly, and the results were fascinating. For a substantial period, my plan worked perfectly—the boy's mind had been successfully rewritten. However, the avatar eventually lost connection once again. Could not find the reason. Documented Year: 2022

Oliver Radcliffe (Male, Age 22): Sent into Genshin Impact, Sub-3,921. With the other subjects, they all had to undergo a period of "stasis" to perfectly pair with their avatars. Every time I retrieve a damaged avatar from a failed subject's realm to assign to a new user, the adjustment period takes significant time. Oliver's pairing took a little over 4 years to complete. However, it seems to have been worth the wait, as his avatar has not experienced many fatal errors. There is still a minor glitch occurring, but so far, the subject is stable. Documented Year: 2023

Oliver, August, and Venti stared down at the paper in absolute, horrifying silence.

"They're... they're all dead?" Venti whispered, his eyes wide.

August snatched the paper from Oliver's trembling hands, his eyes frantically scanning the text again. "I... I don't believe this..."

Oliver stared blankly at the box. "Doctor Barclay didn't explain a single piece of this to me. And—and that stasis thing?! No wonder when Claire told him to go inside the worlds himself, he panicked and said what he had..."

"There are more documents," Venti noted grimly, peering into the box and then looking at the dozens of other ones.

"We can't possibly read them all..." Oliver said, his head spinning.

Venti reached into the box and pulled out another sheet of paper.

Documented Anomaly:Alongside my primary experiments, I have observed a dark entity lingering around the subjects at specific times. I have no idea what it is, or what its ultimate goals are. It appears to be omnipresent, as I have documented it existing in two entirely different dimensions simultaneously. Occasionally, it ignores the avatars entirely, but when it does interfere, violent battles break out, and it rarely ends well for the subject. Though I possess very little data on it, I have discovered the name of this strange creature: Nerraw. I must investigate this anomaly further.

Oliver and Venti leaned in close to read the document together. "Well, I guess this definitively rules out the theory that the monster was working for Barclay," Oliver muttered.

"Yeah," Venti agreed softly. "And did you catch its name? Nerraw."

Oliver squinted at the typewritten text, reading it out loud again. "Nerraw... wait. Isn't that just Warren spelled backwards?"

Before they could process that, they heard the sound of ripping cardboard.

"Hang on," Venti called out, quickly summoning his glowing arrow again and hurrying over to where August was struggling to tear into a second box.

August stepped back, letting Venti slice the tape. He dragged his hands down his face, looking completely shattered. "I still cannot believe this," he whispered, shaking his head. "Don't get me wrong, Oliver, I never disbelieved your story, but... he's my dad." August turned to look at Oliver, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "And it's not like he was some abusive, terrible father where I'd instantly say, 'Oh yeah, no shit he'd do something evil like this.' No... he was always there for me. He was kind. To learn that he was secretly sending literal children into these death traps... it just doesn't seem like the man I knew."

Oliver completely understood the horrific cognitive dissonance August was going through. Before he could offer any comfort, Venti pulled the flaps of the second box open.

"More papers," Venti announced smoothly. "This Doctor certainly loved to write, didn't he?"

"Is that all that's in here? Just endless documentation of his crimes?" Oliver asked, walking over and pulling the top sheet from the new box.

Strange Structure Within a Realm:Using the main terminal, I can establish a weak visual feed into the realms my test subjects currently inhabit. I have discovered a hallway located within Kingdom Hearts, Sub-2, that I desperately need to investigate. However, for reasons unknown, Sub-2 of Kingdom Hearts is heavily fortified by a foreign energy. No matter what avatar I attempt to send into the realm, the system aggressively rejects the transfer.The hallway itself is incredibly anomalous. It appears to act as a physical nexus, with various other worlds attached directly to doors. I cannot visually identify what those connected worlds are, nor can I extract their specific Sub-Codes. This is a critical mystery I must solve, but the primary obstacle remains bypassing the security of Sub-2.

"Hallway?" Oliver blinked in shock. "And Kingdom Hearts? Wow... no way. I actually played a few of those games before..."

August grabbed the paper out of Oliver's hands, his eyes narrowing as he analyzed every single word. Slowly, he lowered the document, his face pale. "The hallway..." he breathed. "The metal door on the opposite side of the break room... the one that leads down to that massive portal rim at the end.."

Oliver and Venti snapped their heads toward him. "Oh, right! You mentioned that yesterday." Oliver said.

"Now I know exactly what it was built for," August said.

"Wait, didn't you say the door to that portal room was just completely unlocked?" Oliver asked, crossing his arms. "I haven't gone down there yet, but... a giant, dimension-hopping portal rim sounds incredibly dangerous. Why would Doctor Barclay leave that completely unsecured, but lock all of these basic paper notes behind a reinforced steel door?"

"Well, isn't it obvious?" August gestured to the boxes. "The portal is unfinished. It's probably completely dead and unusable. But these?" He tapped the side of the box. "These are his handwritten confessions. If anyone found these, he'd be locked away for life."

Oliver stared at the sprawling sea of boxes. "Well, they're not a secret anymore, thanks to Venti. Once we get out of here, we have all the evidence we need to report him to the authorities."

"That is if we ever get out of here," August sighed heavily. He turned toward the door. "We can read through the rest of these later. Let's just... go make sure the others are okay. I need to check on Richard. If he's still stressed out, I don't want him sitting alone in the dark."

Oliver nodded, turning to follow him out. But Venti suddenly grabbed his hand, stopping him.

"This man sounds incredibly dangerous," Venti said, his voice dropping into a rare, serious tone. "Inhumane human experiments? It honestly reminds me of a certain 'Doctor' back in my own world..." Venti let out a heavy sigh.

Oliver immediately knew exactly who Venti was talking about. "Well, the good news is, our Doctor is incredibly weak compared to you. Honestly, even with your magic drained, you could still flick any normal human in this world and send us flying and then we're all dead."

Venti snorted, his playful demeanor instantly returning. "My word, you make it sound like you and your fellow world-mates are all just fragile little twigs!"

Oliver laughed. "I mean... compared to the elemental magic in Teyvat, and the fact that humans here have absolutely zero powers? Yeah. Even Bennett could probably wipe the floor with us. Dottore is a terrifying,

god-level threat. Doctor Barclay? He's just a weak, pathetic old man in a lab coat. You could literally kill him with a single puff of wind."

Venti shook his head with a dramatic sigh. "I suppose your entire race is just pretty looks and nothing else, hmm?" he teased, closing his eyes and shaking his head playfully, before cracking one eye open to see Oliver's reaction.

Oliver's face instantly burned red. "Oh, come on... you seriously cannot think I'm that pretty in my real-world body..."

"But you are, though!" Venti smiled brilliantly, rising up on his tiptoes to plant a sweet, sudden kiss directly on Oliver's lips.

Oliver blushed furiously, his eyes fluttering shut as he happily returned the kiss.

Venti pulled away with a soft giggle. "My cute Ollie~."

Oliver let out a flustered, happy sigh, his face radiating heat.

Fingers comfortably intertwined, the two of them finally walked out of the extraction room, following August down the dark hallway.

"I do wonder why Doctor Barclay chose to hide all of his documents down here, of all places," Venti mused.

"Well, we still don't actually know where this bunker or whatever is located," Oliver pointed out. "But honestly, now I'm really starting to believe we're in the absolute middle of butt-fuck nowhere."

Venti burst into a fit of laughter. "WHAT?!" he giggled loudly.

Oliver giggled along with him.

Venti calmed down. "Yeah. It almost looked like Snezhnaya out there," Venti noted.

Oliver blinked a few times, looking at his boyfriend in confusion. "I'm sorry, what?"

Venti giggled at his confusion. "Snezhnaya! It's a very cold, snowy region in Teyvat."

"Oh." Oliver shrugged. "I've... never actually heard of it."

Chatting comfortably, the two of them walked back into the break room to join the others, ready to face whatever slow, agonizingly boring day awaited them in this place.

Chapter 34: Catching Up

"So... what exactly did I miss from all that time?"

Jasper was sitting at the plastic table along with the rest of them. They had all gathered around a single cluster of chairs: August, Jasper, and Arnold sat on one side, while Oliver and Venti mirrored them on the other. Jasper lifted his head, looking among the group. "Oliver mentioned something about a... COVID? Whatever that meant."

"Uh... yeah," Oliver nodded sadly. "It was a massive global virus outbreak. It started around 2020. It's still kinda lingering around now, but it's not nearly as bad as it was."

Jasper blinked, his eyebrows shooting up into his hairline. "Shit..." he breathed. "That kinda makes me glad I skipped all of that. Was... was it bad?"

"Not as bad as some of the historical plagues, but it was still incredibly dangerous," Oliver said. "But yeah, maybe that's the one single silver lining about you missing the last decade."

Venti looked back and forth between them, listening intently. Since he wasn't from their world, he was slowly piecing together the chaotic history of Earth from what he could gather. The same went for Arnold—even though he was technically from this world, his mind had been completely rewritten, so he didn't remember any of it anyway.

"I'm guessing Obama isn't the president anymore?" Jasper asked.

"Nah, it's Trump," Oliver replied.

Jasper stared blankly at the table for a second. He blinked rapidly, then snapped his head up to look at Oliver with a deeply confused expression. "The rich guy?"

August let out a loud snort. "You sound exactly like Doc Brown when Marty McFly told him the president was Ronald Reagan."

Jasper let out a breathless, exhausted laugh, shaking his head. "Seriously, this is what this is, isn't it? I'm essentially a time traveler."

"Honestly, this situation is a lot more like SOMA if anything," Oliver pointed out. "You're basically Simon Jarrett."

August immediately pointed a finger at him in agreement. "Yes! We are all exactly like Simon Jarrett. These transfer chairs are basically just the Haimatsu Pilot seats from that horror game."

Oliver slowly turned his head to stare across the table at August, his expression deadpan. "So... you know all the lore to Soma, but you don't know what Kingdom Hearts is?"

August blinked. "Really? We're bringing that up again?"

Arnold snorted quietly, quickly covering his mouth.

Venti shook his head, a giggling fit bubbling up in his chest as he looked at his boyfriend. "You seem to be incredibly protective of whatever this 'Kingdom Hearts' is," he teased.

Oliver just rolled his eyes playfully.

Clearing his throat, Jasper shifted his attention to Arnold. "So, what's his story?"

August quickly leaned over, dropping his voice to a hushed whisper near Jasper's ear. "Try not to call him by his real name. He prefers Richard right now. Apparently, he went through the exact same thing as you—his mind was rewritten to fit the world he was sent to. But unlike you, he only remembers that timeline. He has absolutely zero memory of his real life."

"Oh," Jasper murmured sympathetically. He offered the younger teen a gentle wave. "Hello."

Arnold looked up shyly. "Hi," he replied softly. He stayed quiet for a moment, his eyes darting nervously from Venti to Oliver, before he finally spoke up again. "I don't really understand what's going on... I just... I really miss my boyfriends, and my friends."

Jasper paused. "Boyfriends? Plural?"

August offered a soft, reassuring smile. "He's mentioned them a few times. He was trapped inside the universe of Wreck-It Ralph. Apparently, three of the racers in Sugar Rush became his boyfriends. He's polyamorous."

"Huh," Jasper blinked in surprise.

August looked at him closely. "You do know what Wreck-It Ralph is, right? It—wait, no, you definitely should. It came out in 2012."

"Right, yeah, I do know it," Jasper nodded. "I watched it when it first hit theaters. Fun movie." He dropped his gaze back to the table, rubbing his temples. "This is all just so insane... I can clearly remember my childhood here, but... my brain is also flooded with memories from the Wasteland. Like, when we were talking about presidents? I remember Obama perfectly, but... a huge part of my brain insists the last real president was from pre-war America."

"That's the Fallout lore talking," Oliver said gently.

"Right." Jasper let out a heavy sigh. "And... B-Billy." He looked away, his voice faltering slightly. "I... I actually played Fallout 3 a lot before I got sent into the world. But for the life of me, I don't remember Billy being in that game at all."

Oliver looked up. "Billy isn't from Fallout 3. He's a side quest character from the fourth game."

"Huh?!" Jasper's head snapped up. "Wait, what? But... Doctor Barclay explicitly told me the machine was calibrated for Fallout 3. Fallout 4 isn't supposed to come out until next year! Or... well, you know what I mean."

Oliver and August looked at each other.

Jasper rubbed his chin, trying to make sense of it. "Well, I guess that explains why I didn't recognize Billy from my old playthroughs once I woke back up. I just assumed I missed a quest or something. Strange... wait. You said it's 2026? Heh... Fallout 7 must be out by now, right?"

Oliver blinked. "To be brutally honest, they haven't even released Fallout 5 yet."

Jasper stared at him. "Well, that is slow as fuck."

Oliver snorted. "Yeah, I know. I mean, we did get Fallout 76, but..."

Jasper's face contorted into the most baffled expression any of them had ever seen. "76? Why the hell would they make 76 before they made 5?!"

Venti looked back and forth between Jasper and Oliver, completely lost.

Oliver couldn't help but laugh. "It's called that because it's based around Vault 76!"

"Oh!" Jasper breathed. "Okay, I see now."

"Sadly, the game got terrible reviews at launch," Oliver added. "It was an online multiplayer survival game. Though, considering I've technically missed the last four years, I have no idea if Bethesda actually managed to fix it." Oliver glanced over at Venti and had to laugh at how adorably confused the bard looked. "Poor Venti. So lost."

Venti cracked a bright smile, leaning his elbows onto the table. "I truly am! These 'video games' you all keep talking about... it seems to be something everyone in this world loves. They must be fantastic!"

Jasper squinted at the anime boy. "What's his deal again?"

"He's from the world I was sent to," Oliver explained fondly. "He somehow managed to break out of the game's world to follow me here."

"Huh," Jasper muttered. "And what game was that again?"

"Genshin Impact," Oliver said. "It's a massive open-world gacha game, It came out in 2020. Which is why you've never heard of it."

Jasper sighed heavily, resting his forehead against the cool plastic table. "What do we even do now? When we actually manage to leave, I mean. We can't exactly just... walk back into normal civilization. If anything, we've all been declared missing persons for years."

Oliver swallowed hard. He hadn't even let himself think about that yet. He suddenly realized that whatever plans he had for his college degree were probably entirely completely out the window now.

"I was still in high school," August muttered. "So I have absolutely no idea how that's going to work. You see this kind of crazy stuff happen in movies, and everyone just magically goes back to normal afterward... but this is real life. What are we supposed to do?"

None of them had an answer. The reality of their situation was just too heavy to process.

Breaking the oppressive silence, August stood up and walked over to the shattered vending machine. He carefully reached his hand through the jagged glass. "Does anyone want a Snickers or something?"

Grrrroooowll~

A loud, rumbling noise echoed from the table.

"Damn, someone's hungry," August chuckled, turning around.

Jasper gave a weak, embarrassed laugh, his cheeks flushing pink. "That was me. I guess the adrenaline is finally wearing off. Yeah, I could use a Snickers."

"Well, like snickers say: you're not you when you're hungry." August pulled out a handful of chocolate bars and tossed one to everyone, except Venti, who politely waved it away.

Oliver giggled as he peeled the wrapper off his candy. "You really don't like this candy, do you?"

"Nope!" Venti shook his head playfully, leaning his weight comfortably against Oliver's shoulder.

Oliver took a happy bite of his candy bar, perfectly content to snuggle against his boyfriend's side.

August leaned against the vending machine, watching Oliver and Venti's closeness with an amused smile. "I just find it incredibly funny how almost all of us ended up finding someone within the fictional worlds," he mused. "You got Venti." He smiled at Oliver, then glanced at Arnold. "Richard over here got his Sugar Rush racers." Then he looked at Jasper. "And you had Billy, right?"

"I really don't wanna talk about him right now," Jasper said quickly, averting his eyes.

"Oh—" August blinked. "Okay, sorry. And I ended up dating Pete Boggs! Honestly, I'm just so glad I met him. Because dealing with those giant, horrifying spiders completely alone would have sent me to a padded room."

"Had you ever played that game before you got sent into it?" Oliver asked.

"Actually, no. I'd never even heard of it," August admitted. "My dad picked the world for me. Even though I technically volunteered for the experiment, he didn't let me choose the it. If it were up to me, I definitely wouldn't have picked Grounded. I would have gone with something significantly less bug-infested." He looked at Oliver. "But you played your game before you went in, right?"

Oliver nodded vigorously. "I did!" Then, he shyly rubbed the back of his neck, his cheeks flushing. "Probably a little too much, actually! Haha... I was always a bit slow on keeping up with the deep lore, but I was completely obsessed with the gameplay." He glanced down at Venti. "And—"

"And you definitely gawked at him on your screen way too much, didn't you?" August teased smoothly.

Oliver's face instantly flared bright crimson. "What?! No!" He whipped his head toward August, stammering defensively. "I—uh! Well... okay, maybe just a little bit..." He snuck a glance at Venti. The bard looked slightly confused, clearly not understanding the exact context of a "screen," but he definitely understood the teasing tone. Realizing how much Oliver adored him, Venti flashed a wicked, triumphant little smirk.

Oliver quickly turned away, unable to handle his boyfriend's smugness. "Let's just say I got incredibly overexcited anytime Venti showed up in a quest..."

A soft chuckle rippled through the group.

"Funny," August noted. "I think you're the only one out of all of us who was actually exposed to the media beforehand. Like, you actively had a fictional crush on him before you got sent into the world. I mean, we can't really say the same for Richard, since we don't know his past."

Oliver's blush slowly faded as August's words sparked a sudden thought. Why did Doctor Barclay suddenly start asking for people's consent? Even then, he was doing it in a completely manipulative way, hiding the brutal truth about the stasis period and how long they'd be trapped.

He desperately wanted to read more of those hidden documents.

As the other boys began to settle into a lazy, post-snack lull around the break room, Oliver subtly tugged on Venti's sleeve. "I'm going to go take another look at those files," he whispered. "Wanna come?"

Venti was facing the opposite direction.

"Venti?" Oliver whispered again.

Slowly, the bard turned around. He had puckered his lips dramatically and had wedged one of his dark teal braids firmly between his nose and upper lip, mimicking a thick blue mustache.

Oliver blinked. "What?"

"Pffft—!" Venti completely broke character, wheezing out a loud snort of laughter. The braid dropped from his face as he covered his mouth, shoulders shaking. "The look on your face was priceless!"

"What were you even doing?!" Oliver giggled.

The commotion drew the attention of the others. August just playfully rolled his eyes, turning his chair around to lean back against the wall.

Oliver smiled, shaking his head. "Venti, you are so random sometimes."

Venti giggled again, straightening his posture.

Oliver gently rested his hand on the bard's shoulder. "So... do you wanna come or not?" he whispered.

Venti placed his hand over Oliver's and nodded firmly. They both quietly stood up and slipped out of the break room, unnoticed by the rest of the group.

"There are just way too many boxes in that room," Oliver murmured as he and his boyfriend hurried down the dark corridor. "But I really need to read more."

"I don't blame you. I'm curious too," Venti agreed.

They reached the end of the hallway and turned into Extraction Room 3. Stepping carefully over the massive metal door Venti had blasted off its hinges earlier, Oliver took a deep breath, staring up at the towering mountain of cardboard.

"I mostly want to find files that explain his actual experiment process better," Oliver said quietly. "Or, even better, files on his most recent plans. Though, I'm not sure if his newest notes will even be in here... unless he has tape and boxes to waste."

Oliver stepped up to the box they had already sliced open. Peering inside, he sifted past the top layer of folders, grabbed a random manila envelope from the middle of the stack, and pulled out the stapled documents inside.

New Age In My Experiments:

Notes: I have hired a new, trusted assistant: Claire Davidson. She was in a rough spot and desperately needed a job in her scientific field, and I was the only one she could turn to. Normally, I would never take the risk of hiring an assistant to witness my work.

Claire has attempted to challenge my ethics. She insisted that I must start acquiring explicit consent from my subjects. Originally, I had no intention of listening to her and planned to terminate her employment immediately. However, I have noticed a fascinating anomaly: when a subject is genuinely excited or willing to enter a Fictional Universe, their Avatar experiences a significantly lower rate of system failure. I have yet to determine the exact neurological cause behind this, but the data is undeniable.

Therefore, starting in 2014, I will begin asking for "consent" from my subjects. However, I will strictly withhold the true duration of their stay, as well as the agonizing reality of the stasis process.

Oliver finished reading the first page. He glanced over his shoulder to see if Venti was reading along; the bard was practically reading over his shoulder.

"You okay?" Venti whispered. Seeing Oliver's tense expression, he leaned up on his tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. "You don't have to keep reading these if they're upsetting you, you know."

"No, it's okay. I need to know." Oliver flipped the first page over and began reading the second sheet.

New Age In My Experiments (Page 2): Test Subject: Jasper Daniels (Male, Age 19)

Notes: I met Jasper at a computer sciences convention. I learned the young man was eager to further his education, so I offered him an "internship" in my lab.

Following Dr. Claire's advice, I informed him that he would be adventuring into virtual worlds. Naturally, he did not initially believe that physical, inter-dimensional travel was possible.

I did not disclose everything. I omitted any mention of the stasis period, as I am certain he would have backed out of the program. The world he has been assigned to is from the Fallout franchise. Originally, I intended to use Fallout 3. However, a fourth game is slated for release in the coming months. I have decided to calibrate his machine for Fallout 4, anticipating that the Fictional Universe will latch onto the collective consciousness of the world. (The Fictional Universes manifest from human thought and written concepts long before the media's physical release).

I am undecided on whether I will actually compensate my subjects financially. Perhaps, when the time is right. I will continue to document Jasper's journey in the Main Terminal. Documented Year: 2014

Oliver carefully angled the paper so Venti could read the final lines. He furrowed his brow, completely baffled. "I don't understand. My avatar is classified as Prototype 1... which means it was the very first model." He pointed at Jasper's file. "Jasper went in a decade before me. If my avatar was completely broken and experimental, why did Doctor Barclay practically dust it off and use it on me after he had already built functional ones?"

Venti rested a comforting hand on Oliver's back, gently rubbing circles. "I don't know, love," he muttered.

"And look at this—" Oliver tapped the paper. "He deliberately switched his destination to Fallout 4. I bet when he first pitched the idea to Jasper, he promised him Fallout 3, but just conveniently left that detail out of his final notes."

Venti reached over, tapping a specific sentence near the bottom. "He also claims he was going to pay you all."

Oliver rolled his eyes, a bitter scoff escaping his lips. "Pfft, yeah, right." He flattened the paper out. "I highly doubt that. And honestly? Even though I'm broke, I don't want a single cent of his dirty money. He was literally kidnapping innocent people before Claire forced him to stop. Remember that first file we read?"

Oliver handed Venti the Jasper document, reached back into the box, and yanked out the very first packet they had discovered. He pointed aggressively at two specific names: Billy Anderson and Ashton Blackwood.

"Look at this," Oliver said, his voice trembling with anger. "Billy literally burned to death, and Ashton is lost forever in the system. One was a ten-year-old kid, and the other was a teenager. I don't want this monster's money. As I said, if it wasn't for Claire he would have continued all of this. And to be frankly honest, he's still doing, just with a different tactic,"

Venti's expression darkened. "I agree with you completely, babe. As an Archon, what this man is doing is a foul, unforgivable sin. I would have every divine right to smite him where he stands." Venti crossed his arms tightly. "Sadly, my divine powers like that are completely severed at the moment..."

"I know," Oliver sighed, leaning against him. "You're cut off from Teyvat. And even if you were still there, you can't reach Barclay from inside your world anyway."

Venti glanced at the towering stacks of boxes. "And you're right. He is still kidnapping people. August and Arnold are just kids too."

"Teenagers, but yeah," Oliver corrected. "Doctor Barclay is absolutely finding loopholes around Claire's rules."

Oliver picked up the New Age packet again and flipped to the third page.

New Age In My Experiments (Page 3): Test Subject: Oliver Radcliffe (Male, Age 22)

Notes: Still adhering to Claire's restrictive guidelines, I recruited another young man from a local college under the guise of an internship. I have opted for a different tactic this time: I am reviving Prototype 1. I believe the original model still holds immense potential, and I need to run further tests.

The year is 2023. He will remain in stasis for a full 4 years to ensure absolute synchronization with the avatar. I theorize this is why previous iterations of the prototype failed—I rushed the stasis process. At the time of writing, Radcliffe is safely asleep in stasis. Once he awakens in his designated world, I will transition all further documentation to the Main Terminal. Documented Year: 2023

Oliver looked up, "So he basically threw me in a broken prototype just to see what would happen."

"Hmm," Venti murmured, tracing a finger over the page. "I suppose that answers why you were put in it after Jasper."

"Yeah, it does," Oliver said, tracing the text with his own eyes. "But wait... look at this." He pointed to the exact same phrase that had appeared in Jasper's file. 'Main Terminal'.

"If I'm not mistaken, that was mentioned in one of the other documents August read too," Oliver realized, looking around the cluttered, windowless room. "This bunker isn't that big. We've checked every single room. There's no other place a massive 'Main Terminal' could be hiding."

"Maybe it isn't in this building?" Venti suggested with a shrug.

Oliver's eyes widened. Venti was absolutely right. They had zero idea what the exterior of the bunker actually looked like. There could be an entire complex of buildings out there in the snow. "We could just have you blast the front door down... but August was right. It's freezing outside. The temperature in here is completely climate-controlled at least. If we blow the door off and realize we're fifty miles from civilization, we'd be trapped in here with a massive hole letting in sub-zero winds. We'd freeze to death."

"Then I truly hope this Mark fellow returns soon. He sounds like a very interesting person to help," Venti noted.

"I wonder if Mark is from one of the Fictional Universes too? Doesn't sound like he's from my world..." Oliver said.

Venti gently nudged Oliver's shoulder, pointing at the packet. "There's one last page stapled to the back."

"I know," Oliver braced himself, flipping to the final sheet. "I bet anything this one is about Arnold."

New Age In My Experiments (Page 4): Test Subject: Arnold Harper (Male, Age 16)

Notes: I am writing this document a few months post-extraction. The operation was a complete success—even more so than Daniels'. While Daniels barely retained fragments of his original world, Harper's mind wipe is flawless. There are virtually no faults within his rewritten consciousness.

We did experience a minor system hiccup that nearly derailed the project. At first, I feared I had celebrated prematurely when the target world was suddenly rewritten by an unknown entity (I am still investigating the cause, though I suspect the dark creature, Nerraw, is involved). However, Harper's avatar managed to pull through the anomaly intact.

This might be it. This boy might be the perfect subject.

To achieve this, I was forced to disregard Claire's advice entirely. I kidnapped Harper. However, I believe I have done the boy a massive favor, as his real-world home life was highly abusive. The last time I monitored his feed, he was having the time of his life within the Fictional Universe. Thanks to me, he is living the life he always deserved.

I will wait for the opportune moment to officially patent my transfer machine. Once secured, we can drastically expand our testing pool and generate billions from these locked, hidden worlds. Documented Year: 2025

Oliver aggressively shook his head as he finished reading, thoroughly disgusted. "So he did go back to kidnapping. He literally stole Arnold." Oliver let the paper drop to his side. "And he even had the nerve to make up a twisted savior complex excuse for doing it."

Venti took the paper from his hand, checking the back to see if there was anything else, but it was blank. "Hmm... are there no documents regarding August's transfer?"

Oliver scanned the dozens of untouched boxes. "I guess since August was his absolute last experiment, those notes haven't been archived yet. They might be in a different box, or... maybe they're on that Main Terminal."

"Oliver? Venti? Where did you guys go?"

August's voice echoed faintly down the hallway. The others had finally realized they were missing.

"Come on," Oliver said, grabbing Venti's hand and pulling him toward the door. "Once we finally find a way out of here, we have more than enough physical proof to lock Doctor Barclay away for the rest of his life."

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It was nighttime once again. Another long, strange day had finally come to an end, leaving the group stranded with the lingering, exhausting question of when exactly they would be able to leave this place.

But Venti was restless.

"Why can't I sleep?" the bard whispered to himself.

It wasn't just because he was in a bizarre new place. He was well past that initial shock, and besides, he had his boyfriend right by his side. Oliver was currently pressed heavily against him, dead to the world, his mouth hanging slack with a tiny trail of drool escaping the corner of his lips.

Venti couldn't help but giggle softly. Reaching down, he gently wiped the drool from Oliver's chin. "Silly," he whispered affectionately. With a quiet sigh, he leaned against his boyfriend, resting his head on top of Oliver's.

Maybe Venti just missed Teyvat. He hadn't confessed it to Oliver, but a deep, gnawing worry about being away from Mondstadt was eating at him. The nation could survive without its Archon—it had done so for centuries—but it still didn't sit right with him to leave it behind like this. Worse, his divine connection to
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his world was completely severed. Something terrible could be happening in Mondstadt right at this very second, and he would never even feel it.

He took a slow, steadying breath. It's fine, he reassured himself. It'll all be fine. Mondstadt's fall isn't meant to happen for at least another billion years... it's fine.

Distracting himself, Venti began running his fingers gently through his sleeping boyfriend's hair. He didn't want to burden Oliver with his anxieties; the poor boy was stressed enough as it was.

His expression softened as he gazed down at Oliver's peaceful face. "Never would have expected myself to do this again," he murmured, a fond smile gracing his lips. "Running around with some mortal boy." He gently played with one of Oliver's braids on the back of his head. "I love you, Oliver."

He leaned back into the chair, letting Oliver snuggle comfortably into his lap. As Oliver shifted in his sleep, his nose pressed close to Venti's stomach.

The bard shook his head in fond amusement. "Even in your sleep, you're drawn to my tummy."

Venti let his eyes wander the dim break room for a moment before finally letting them flutter shut.

Thump

Venti's eyes snapped open. He glanced down at Oliver, who was still fast asleep, his mouth slack as he let out a soft snore.

Scanning the room, Venti saw Arnold sprawled out across a table, while August was hunched uncomfortably over the back of a chair. Jasper was out cold too.

"What was that?" Venti muttered.

There was nothing in the room that could have made that strange thumping noise. "Must have been nothing," he told himself, though his heart beat a little faster. "This world is highly advanced, right? Maybe it's just heavy pipes, like in Fontaine..."

His gaze swept past the open doorway, then instantly snapped back.

Venti blinked, his eyes widening in pure disbelief as his stomach dropped. He wasn't sure if his eyes were playing tricks on him in the low light.

Oliver was standing in the doorway.

Confused, Venti looked down at the real Oliver snoring in his lap, and then back at the door.

The figure lingering in the door frame wasn't his boyfriend. It was the digital avatar Oliver had used in the Fictional Universe.

Venti was still struggling to grasp the complex science of this world, but he certainly wasn't stupid. He knew this shouldn't be happening. Why was an empty digital shell standing at the door? How was it even moving without anyone piloting it?

The avatar slowly pulled back from the frame, ducking out of sight and disappearing down the hall.

Venti swallowed hard. He looked down at Oliver. "Please don't wake up, baby," he whispered, carefully and methodically untangling himself from his boyfriend. Once he had gently maneuvered Oliver onto the adjacent chair, the bard slipped away from the table, taking light, silent steps to avoid waking the others.

Standing in the center of the room, he took a deep breath to steel his nerves. He didn't know what was happening, but he prepared himself. He drew upon the faint, lingering traces of Anemo energy he had left, ready to summon his bow if things turned violent.

He crept toward the hallway. As he rounded the corner, he was startled to see the avatar just standing there.

It was completely motionless, its dead, lifeless eyes staring blankly straight ahead. It looked almost as if it weren't entirely physically there.

"What are you?" Venti whispered.

It looked exactly like Oliver's form from the realm it got sent into. The same dark braid hanging down its back, the same chocolate-brown skin, and the same large purple eyes. But the spark of life was entirely missing.

Very slowly, the avatar turned its head toward a door across from the break room.

It was the one room August had explicitly warned them not to enter—the room housing a portal rim. To keep everyone safe, August had ordered that it remain strictly off-limits.

The avatar began to move toward it. Its movement wasn't natural or human; it moved with a stiff, robotic stiltedness. It pushed the double heavy doors open and slipped inside.

Venti watched in stunned silence for a moment before letting out a soft gasp. "W-Wait—" he hurried over and pushed the door open.

He had expected a normal laboratory room. Instead, he found a small, square concrete space dominated by a descending staircase plunging deep underground.

Walking to the top step, Venti peered down. He could see the bottom, but the stairs fed into a long, dark corridor. He couldn't do anything from up here. The shrinking silhouette of the avatar told him it was already making its way down.

Venti gulped, taking the stairs one by one. 'Come on, Venti. Don't be scared. What is this compared to the things you've seen?' He slowly descended into the concrete hallway.

At the very end, he spotted the avatar standing perfectly still, its back to him.

As the bard approached and peered around the avatar, he found himself in a large, boxy room cluttered with complex machinery. Sitting dormant right in the very center was a massive metal portal rim.

Venti hesitated.

Then, the avatar jerked forward, stepping into the center of the room and coming to a halt before the machine.

Venti slowly stepped inside. "You can't be Oliver, can you?" he asked, instantly realizing how stupid the question was. His boyfriend was safely asleep upstairs.

Standing at a safe distance from the avatar, Venti's eyes wandered away from the giant rim and landed on a piece of paper resting on a nearby workbench. He slowly made his way over and picked it up.

It was a typed note.

Attention Workers: Clients working in this building are strictly forbidden from turning on this portal until the time is right. It is for an upcoming experiment I have planned.

While running recent tests, I have located a massive spike of energy at a specific coordinate within the Fictional Universe grid. It appears to be a hallway of some kind—a source of immense power, though I cannot yet fathom its true nature. Readings indicate the presence of another portal rim on the other side. The portal rim I have constructed here is designed to infiltrate it.

However, my portal remains unstable. Several more tests are required before it can be safely activated to ensure the structural integrity of this building.

Please, only open this portal upon my direct command. -Doctor Samuel Barclay

Venti glanced up from the paper to see the avatar standing directly in front of the portal.

"What are you?" Venti demanded, his voice hardening. "And what are you doing?"

The avatar slowly turned its head to look at him. Suddenly, pitch-black flames erupted around its body, the digital skin glitching and distorting violently.

Venti's eyes flew wide open. His fingers involuntarily clenched, crushing Doctor Barclay's note in his fist.

The corrupted avatar took a slow, menacing step toward him. "I've been damaged," a distorted, unnatural voice rasped from its throat. "Thanks to that wretched Holder, and you." The avatar's eyes flickered a dangerous, glowing red. "This empty shell is the only thing sustaining me..." The entity glanced back at the portal rim. "I can barely see in this digital suit... so you are going to turn on the portal."

Venti was terrified, but he planted his feet, holding his ground. "I will not do that."

"Turn it on," the dark creature snarled, the black flames flaring higher around Oliver's stolen avatar. "Or I will kill you and every single one of your friends."

Venti desperately pushed for the wind. He tried to draw upon his Archon form, to summon a gale to blast the creature away. But there was nothing. An empty void where his divinity used to be. He couldn't do much of anything.

He had no choice. The dark creature was here, and if yielding meant keeping Oliver and the mortals safe, he would do it.

"O-Okay..." Venti stammered, dropping his gaze.

He approached the giant machine. He had no idea how to operate it, but after poking around the rear, he spotted a heavy main switch. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, the bard flipped it.

A low droning sound immediately emitted from the metal rim.

Venti gasped, stumbling backward.

A bright blue spark snapped in the dead center of the ring, vanishing as quickly as it appeared. Then it sparked again, the flashes compounding until the entire room was bathed in an eerie blue hue. The mechanical whirring grew to a roar, the metal rim vibrating against the concrete walls that stood closely by it.

Suddenly, the erratic sparks spiraled into a swirling vortex, smoothing out into a seamless, glowing gateway.

Venti blinked, shielding his eyes as he peered into the active portal.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was looking at.

It appeared to be a hallway, but it was horrifyingly decayed. Doorways lined the walls, but the doors themselves had been violently ripped from their hinges. Beyond the empty frames lay a sprawling, bright blue void, swirling with a strange, cloud-like substance. Thick, dark, pulsing vines choked the walls, crawling wildly across the floor and ceiling.

At the very end of the corridor was a blindingly bright light.

The dark creature didn't hesitate. It stepped right through the portal.

Venti stayed rooted to the spot he was, refusing to follow.

Inside the decaying hallway, the dark creature paused, looking up and taking in its surroundings. "This is my work," it hissed in dark satisfaction. "I did this. But it's still not over yet."

Then, movement caught Venti's eye.

Emerging from the periphery of the portal's view on the other side, creeping up behind the dark creature from the other end of the hall, was a strange, crystalline being. The creature's body was covered in jagged blue shards, and in its hands, it gripped a gleaming golden weapon.

Venti gasped softly. He recognized them instantly. That was the entity the two Archons and Oliver had told them about.

The crystal creature raised its golden weapon, silently preparing to strike.

Chapter 35: Thomas

The strange crystalline creature struck without warning.

Nerraw didn't see it coming. The golden, key-like weapon slashed violently against the dark creature's side. The sheer force of the blow hurled Nerraw through the air, sending him crashing hard into the wall beside one of the shattered doorways. He slid down the decayed wood and slammed on the ground.

Before Nerraw could even attempt to stand, the crystalline creature was looming over him, the tip of its bizarre weapon pointed directly down at the monster's chest.

Slumped weakly against the wall, Nerraw stared up into his enemy's face. "Look at you," the dark creature rasped. His voice was low and strained, betraying how physically drained and injured he truly was. "I know why that stupid necklace makes you so powerful now," he breathed heavily. "A mix of being the Holder of your realm, and the Fictional Leak... the answer was always right under my nose..."

He tried to force himself up, but the crystalline creature ruthlessly jabbed its weapon into Nerraw's chest, pinning him to the ground.

Nerraw shifted his glowing eyes white, his gaze landing on Venti, who was standing just outside the portal rim. He had been curious, and slowly had stepped into the portal rim.

"You..." the dark creature hissed. "You knew he was here. That is why you opened the portal."

Venti blinked in surprise before his eyes narrowed into a fierce glare. "You told me to open it," he shot back, his stance shifting as he prepared to summon his bow. "You threatened my boyfriend and our new friends."

Nerraw looked entirely at their mercy. But weakness was incredibly hard to judge when dealing with a being of such unfathomable power.

Suddenly, Nerraw swiped his hand to the left. A massive wave of invisible force caught the crystalline creature, tossing it aside and slamming it brutally down the hallway. Free from the blade, Nerraw sprung up from the floor with terrifying speed and charged straight toward Venti.

Venti gasped, reaching out to manifest his bow—but for some inexplicable reason, the weapon refused to appear in his hands.

Before the bard could react any further, an overwhelming force slammed into his chest. He was hurled backward, crashing violently through the swirling portal and tumbling onto the hard concrete floor of the laboratory room.

Groaning, Venti tried to push himself up, but his blood ran cold as he watched the dark creature step seamlessly through the glowing portal, making its slow, deliberate way toward him.

Venti was at a complete loss. This creature was just as terrifyingly unpredictable now as it had been when they fought it back in Teyvat.

More than anything, Venti desperately needed to keep the monster out of the rest of the lab. Not with the others sleeping completely defenseless upstairs.

"I will not let you go to them—!" Venti yelled. He scrambled to his feet near the base of the staircase, desperately trying to force his bow to materialize again.

But Nerraw was far stronger than usual. With a casual, dismissive swipe of his arm to the right, Venti was tossed like a ragdoll toward the far end of the room.

"Gah!" The bard skidded harshly across the concrete floor, slamming back-first into the wall.

Instead of finishing him off, Nerraw simply dissolved into a thick puff of black, slithering mist and shot rapidly up the staircase.

"N-No—" Venti gritted his teeth, forcing his aching body to stand. "Shit..." He scrambled upward, sprinting up the stairs after the shadow.

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Up in the breakroom, Oliver stirred gently in his sleep, his subconscious immediately registering the cold empty space beside him.

"Hmm?" he mumbled groggily. He cracked his eyes open, looking around the dim space. "Huh? Babe?" He patted the seat around him, feeling for Venti. When his hands met nothing but empty plastic, his eyes fluttered fully open. He realized he was lying horizontally across the chairs. He had been snuggled up in Venti's lap just moments ago.

Oliver slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes as the reality set in that his boyfriend was nowhere to be found. "Where did he go?"

He glanced around the room. August, Jasper, and Arnold were all still fast asleep in their uncomfortable positions. "Venti?" he whispered into the quiet room.

Did he go back into the document room? Oliver wondered to himself. He stood up, creeping toward the open doorway to see if the room lights had been turned on.

Instead, he was met with a terrifying sight. A tall, pitch-black shadow was lingering just outside the doorway. In the low light, he could barely make out its shape.

What is that? Oliver blinked, his sleep-addled brain struggling to process it. Is that Venti?

He slowly slipped away from the other tables, and crept closer to the door.

He narrowed his eyes, peering out into the hall. "Ven? Is that you—?" he whispered.

But as he took another step closer, the horrifying realization finally clicked. By the time his brain registered the danger, it was a second too late to run.

The dark creature lunged, its shadowy hands grabbing Oliver by the throat. It reared back, fully intending to hurl him against the concrete wall—but a sudden shout echoed down the hall.

Venti bolted around the corner, sprinting wildly toward them. And this time, his glowing Anemo bow was clutched firmly in his hands.

With a frantic, desperate pull of the string, Venti let an arrow fly. The Anemo projectile pierced straight into the creature's misty form. A gale of wind erupted from the point of impact, blasting the creature downward and forcing it to drop Oliver to the floor.

In a flash of light, Venti teleported across the hallway, materializing right beside his boyfriend and catching him before he hit the ground. "Got you!"

The dark creature was already recovering. It rose to its feet, turning its glowing white eyes toward them.
~~~~~~

Oliver and Venti scrambled up, standing shoulder-to-shoulder. "Stay behind me babe," Venti said, as he moved in front of Oliver.

"What's happening out there?!" a panicked voice yelled from the breakroom. It sounded like August.

Venti's heart hammered in his chest. He wasn't terrified for himself—he wasn't afraid of Nerraw. But he knew Oliver's world had its own laws. They probably wouldn't be able to handle such a force like this.

But then Venti remembered: the creature was weakened. It didn't have much of a fight left in it.

Suddenly, the air behind Nerraw warped. A shimmering golden portal tore itself open right in front of the building's main exit.

At that exact moment, August bolted out of the doorway. "What's—?" He froze in his tracks, his eyes widening in pure horror as he saw the shadowy monster standing mere feet away. He gasped, looking frantically between the creature and Venti.

Venti shot August a desperate look. "Keep the door closed! Keep yourself and the rest of them in there, and stay safe!"

August nodded frantically, throwing himself backward and slamming the heavy breakroom door shut behind him.

Nerraw slowly turned his head to look at the locked door, then back to Venti. "You really think a locked door can faze me?"

With a swift, brutal motion, the dark creature thrust his hand toward the breakroom. A sudden, massive blast of telekinetic force slammed into the room. The door was instantly blown entirely off its hinges, taking a massive chunk of the wall with it. The metal door and jagged pieces of debris blasted inward, slamming violently into the far wall of the breakroom.

Inside, the three boys screamed in terror.

Venti gasped, gripping his bow tightly. He risked a rapid glance into the destroyed room and let out a breath of relief. They were shaken, but miraculously, none of the debris had hit them. "Stay in the room!" the bard commanded over the chaos.

Down the hall, the shimmering golden portal behind Nerraw was still spinning. Both Venti and Oliver noticed it. They shared a quick look, an unspoken hunch passing between them. If this was the 'Mark' guy August had mentioned, they didn't want to tip off their enemy. And if it wasn't Mark—if it was another enemy—well, it couldn't possibly be worse than what they were currently dealing with... Hopefully.

From the doorway leading down to the basement, the crystalline creature silently emerged, rejoining the fight. Nerraw, his back turned, didn't see it approach. The crystal being seemed to have completely regained its footing; perhaps Nerraw's attack hadn't injured it at all.

Then, a man stepped out of the golden vortex.

He had dark skin and messy brown hair, and in his hands, he wielded a weapon remarkably similar to the crystal creature's key-like blade. He was dressed in a dark blue outfit adorned with several yellow belts, and wore an open jacket with no shirt underneath.

The new arrival lifted his weapon, his gaze flicking over to the crystalline creature.

The two of them exchanged a single, silent nod, then turned their full, dangerous attention to Nerraw's exposed back.

Venti noticed all of this, but kept his mouth firmly shut. Oliver did the same.

But just as the two new arrivals braced themselves to strike, Nerraw's glowing white eyes slowly shifted to the left.

Venti's eyebrows shot up. Nerraw knew they were behind him. He had sensed the ambush. He had sense they were going to attack him.

Venti didn't even have a fraction of a second to intervene. Nerraw snapped his body around, unleashing a devastating, concussive wave of dark energy.

The dark-skinned man and the crystalline creature were blasted backward by the shockwave. "Gah!" they grunted in unison, but they managed to keep their footing, stabbing their heavy weapons into the floor to anchor themselves against the gale. The crystal creature's blue cape fluttered wildly in the wind as the dark force radiated from Nerraw's hands.

With his enemies temporarily pinned, Nerraw glanced back over his shoulder at Venti and Oliver.

Then, he looked back at the two people fighting against his magic.

The dark-skinned man's eyes widened as he instantly realized what the monster was planning.

"No! Don't!" he shouted over the roaring wind.

Nerraw just smirked. He raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

The air around Venti and Oliver violently warped, folding in on itself in a flash of dark energy, and the two boys were instantly teleported away, along with Nerraw.

Reacting with lightning-fast reflexes, the dark-skinned man reached into a pocket on his attire, pulled something out, and hurled it directly into the collapsing warp just before it closed, sending the mysterious item teleporting away with them.

As the dark wind abruptly died down, the man panted, lowering his weapon. "It went with them," he muttered. He turned to look at the crystalline creature. "Thomas, go check on the others in that breakroom. Make sure they're alright. I have to go back to the hallway and try to track down where he sent them."

The crystal creature—Thomas—gave a firm nod and turned toward the damaged breakroom.

The dark-skinned man summoned his portal once more, and without a second of hesitation, leaped into the shimmering golden vortex.

Chapter 36: Sub-9000

CRACK—

The world violently shifted. The ground beneath them vanished, and suddenly, Venti and Oliver were hurling down a blinding, swirling dimensional warp.

"Ahhh! WHAT THE HELL?!" Oliver screamed, flailing in the chaotic vortex.

Venti desperately reached out, fighting against the immense gravity of their fall into the dimensional tunnel. His fingers grazed his boyfriend's before he finally managed to snatch his hand. "Got you! Hold on!"

"Venti, what is happening?!" Oliver yelled over the roaring vortex.

"I don't know! Just hold on to me!"

Suddenly, a booming, mechanical voice echoed through the tunnel of light. It sounded distorted, skipping like a broken record.

"Entering Five—[glitch]—hts at Fre—[glitch]—Sub-9000."

"What?! What was that!?" Oliver yelled.

Venti tried to pull Oliver closer to his chest, but the swirling void around them abruptly collapsed. Directly beneath them, the floor rushed up to meet them.

Venti gasped. Before he could even summon a cushion of wind, the two of them slammed into the solid ground, tumbling harshly over the floor before finally skidding to a halt.

"Owww..." Oliver groaned, his face pressed against the cold, dirty concrete floor.

Venti was the first to scramble to his feet, immediately dropping to his knees beside his boyfriend. "Got you, baby," he soothed, gently gripping Oliver's arms and hoisting him upward. Oliver clung to him, his legs shaking.

"That..." Oliver blinked, trying to clear his spinning vision. "That was worse than a roller coaster." He shook his head. "Hell, that was worse than your warps."

Venti chuckled softly, rubbing soothing circles into Oliver's back. "I don't know what a roller coaster is, but yeah... even I'd say that was worse than my wind currents." His smile faded as he scanned their surroundings. "Where is that monster?"

They took a good look at the new world they had been thrown into.

It was pitch black. The only illumination came from a few grimy, flickering fluorescent lights buzzing weakly overhead. They were standing in a wide, cavernous building. A long, dirty hallway stretched out in front of them, disappearing into a wall of absolute darkness. Whatever was at the end of that hallway, they couldn't see it.

"Where the hell are we?" Oliver whispered.

"I dunno," Venti admitted, keeping his voice low.

Suddenly, a soft clattering sound broke the silence. Something small rolled across the tiled floor from behind them, slowly coming to a stop near their feet.

Oliver looked down. It was a small, white spherical pendant attached to a delicate chain. "Venti? What's that? It looks like it's glowing."

Venti knelt and carefully picked it up.

"Be careful, Venti..." Oliver warned.

Venti opened his palm, examining the strange object. "Looks like a necklace of some sort," he noted, gently poking the glass-like ball. "There's some kind of white mist swirling inside of it. It's pretty."

BANG.

A loud, heavy sound echoed from the depths of the darkened hallway.

Oliver snapped his head toward the pitch-black corridor, his heart jumping into his throat.

Venti immediately moved forward, an arm outstretched. "Stay behind me."

As the two crept cautiously down the dim hall, Oliver nervously eyed the walls. Slumped against the dirty walls were heavy, lifeless mascot costumes. There weren't many, just a scattered few, but their dead, staring eyes sent a chill down his spine.

"What is this place..." Oliver murmured. "Are we... in another realm?"

"I think we are. Nerraw must have done something. He caused us to warp here I think," Venti said.

"How are we supposed to get out then?" Oliver asked, panic edging into his voice. "Maybe you can break out? Do what you did when you came to my realm?"

"I can't, babe," Venti replied softly. "I used your avatar to leave, remember? You're not piloting it anymore."

"Oh..." Oliver deflated, shaking his head. "Right."

"And besides, even if you were, why would I leave my boyfriend behind?" Venti slowed his pace, falling into step beside Oliver. He firmly grasped the boy's hand, lacing their fingers together. "We do this together. Just like when we were in that Dimension Node place."

Oliver blushed, a small smile breaking through his fear. He squeezed Venti's hand. "Right. Together."

As they continued walking, Oliver couldn't help but stare at the dormant, bulky suits. "Why are there so many of these creepy things?"

Venti smiled softly, unbothered. "Those are scary to you?" He giggled. "They look no different than the mascots they use at the resort in Natlan!"

Oliver blinked, stopping in his tracks to look at his boyfriend in pure confusion. "There's a resort in Natlan?"

"Of course! I thought you said you 'played' my life in a video game? Surely you'd have come across that."

Oliver blinked again. "If... if it's something that was added after 2023, I wouldn't know," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I hate that I missed four entire years of Genshin Impact lore."

Venti let out a bright, musical giggle, pulling Oliver along. "That's all you're worried about right now? You sound like a total nerd whining about missing the latest volume of a novel!"

"Hmm~ maybe I am a nerd," Oliver smiled back.

Venti giggled again. "A cute one, though!"

As they walked, Oliver's eyes caught something painted on the wall ahead. He stopped abruptly, forcing Venti to halt as well.

"Look at that—"

Painted in large, faded block letters across the decaying wall was a logo:

MCM

Murray's Costume Manor

"Well, that would explain the furry costumes lying around," Venti noted, placing a hand on his hip. "Easybreeze could order some mascots from here!" he joked. "That is, if Teyvat ever decides to dabble in multiverse travel. Which will never happen, mind you."

Oliver studied the text, his brow furrowing. "Strange. Seeing a sign usually helps things click, but this world still doesn't make any sense to me. That name doesn't ring any bells." He shivered slightly. "This place feels... scary."

Venti nudged him playfully. "Oh, come on, Ollie. Can't handle a little darkness?"

"N-No! It's not that... it's just..." Oliver gestured vaguely to the lifeless suits. One was a bee. Another was some weird purple creature. Sitting in a corner was a slumped elephant. "Darkness... creepy mascots... It feels like something else I know. But the details are wrong." He looked back at the faded logo. "I've never heard of Murray's Costume Manor."

They reached the end of the hallway and stepped through a set of double doors into a massive, cavernous room. It looked like a giant storage warehouse. Towering metal racks filled with dusty boxes and spare parts stretched into the gloom. To their left, a small set of stairs led down to an unknown area. To their right sat a small, enclosed room with its door wide open.

"A building inside of a building," Venti said, blinking. "Huh."

Oliver stared at the looming shadows of the warehouse, then pointed toward the enclosed room. "Let's check that out."

"Okay," Venti agreed, but he quickly stepped in front. "Stay behind me. You're not in that avatar anymore, so you don't have your powers,"

As they approached the small, square room, Oliver looked up. Printed on a dirty plaque above the doorframe was a single word: SECURITY.

"Huh," Oliver breathed, freezing in his tracks.

Oliver narrowed his eyes at the letters above him. "No way this is what I'm thinking about, right?" He looked to the left, at a lifeless furry mascot standing nearby.

Venti stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "Something wrong, babe?"

"I dunno. But if this is what I'm thinking it is, we need to be on high alert," Oliver warned, cautiously stepping into the open doorway. "At least you do. You're the only one here who can actually fight."

Stepping into the cramped space, they found themselves in a dilapidated security office.

"Wow..." Venti murmured, looking at the monitor and messy desk. He shook his head in amusement. "You know... jumping across dimensions? Not something Venti, or even Barbatos, is used to!" He giggled lightly. "I definitely never saw myself doing something like this. Which is strange, because after giving up my Gnosis, I should have seen a mortal like you coming into my life. Oh well! It makes it all the more fun being with you."

Oliver blushed at the sweet sentiment, though his hands were already busy fiddling with the dusty keyboard hooked up to the main monitor. "This has to be Five Nights at Freddy's," he muttered, his eyes scanning the desk. "Everything is screaming FNAF. Creepy animal mascots? A dingy security room? Unless this is some weird knock-off. Because what the hell is Murray's Costume Manor?"

Venti hopped casually up onto the desk, leaning back on his hands beside the glowing monitor. "I honestly have no idea what any of those words meant," he snorted. "I only caught the 'Murray' part because of the wall outside of here."

"Five Nights at Freddy's..." Oliver repeated absentmindedly. "It's another video game from my world. A famous one."

"Hehe." Venti reached out and gave Oliver's shoulder a playful shove as the boy typed. "These video games are seriously just like the books in my world, aren't they?"

Oliver smiled, not taking his eyes off the screen. "Well, we have books too. We just have other, more interactive forms of entertainment." He tapped the enter key. "Huh... the screen did something."

"Oh? That's a... I forgot what they're called. I've seen something similar in Nod-Krai!" Venti beamed.

Oliver blinked, slowly turning his head to look at Venti in pure confusion. "Nod-Krai? What the heck is Nod-Krai?"

"A nation!" Venti smiled brightly. "Back home in my realm!"

Oliver tilted his head, his mind racing. He had been trapped in stasis for years. The Fictional Universe grid contained billions of Sub-Dimensions, There's billions of realms connected to one dimension. That's what the subs are. Sub-3921 was the sub he got sent into for Genshin Impact. That sub must have been a sub with some elements of Genshin Impact from this year... 2026, or an earlier year. It just couldn't have been any earlier than 2023.

"I must have... missed that update," Oliver said. "Just like when you mentioned Snezhnaya,"

"Hmm. So you mean, because you were trapped in that lab, the 'game' I'm from continued to develop and grow?" Venti asked, his eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Oliver nodded. "I think so."

"Fascinating!" Venti clapped his hands together. "So these video games... whatever they truly are, they evolve? They grow beyond what they originally were? They shapeshift!" He grinned widely. "And you always say your world is boring. That doesn't sound boring at all!"

Oliver chuckled softly. "Well, of course it doesn't sound boring to you. This is all entirely new territory."

"To be completely honest, all of this machinery seems incredibly advanced... which Celestia would absolutely hate, I'll tell you that straight up." Venti leaned in closer to Oliver, a mischievous glint in his teal eyes. "And since Celestia has no power in this realm to hear what I'm about to say: Screw them! Your world seems to be completely free of tyrannical gods and their restrictive rules! If they have God's, they're very laid back about advancing! So you're allowed to just invent and advance! You mortals here are free to literally be free! And coming from the God of Freedom, that is a beautiful way to live!"

Oliver looked at his boyfriend, his heart swelling at the sheer earnestness in Venti's voice. He smiled gently. "You know, you have a really good point."

"The best bard in Mondstadt always has a point!" Venti beamed proudly.

Oliver playfully rolled his eyes. He desperately wanted to just sit down and talk to Venti about all of this—about his world, about freedom, about the chaos of his realm. It felt so incredibly liberating to just talk to him. But they had a literal monster to deal with.

"Hold that thought, babe," Oliver said gently. "Let me focus on this for a second, okay?" He tapped a few more keys. "Because if this really is a FNAF dimension... we're going to have to deal with... well, I have no idea what we're going to deal with, since I don't recognize this specific place. But Five Nights At Freddy's is a horror game with threats."

"Horror?" Venti tilted his head. "Like, scary? Ooh! Like one of those thrilling suspense dramas they play out in Fontaine?"

"Something like that," Oliver muttered, his eyes scanning the text scrolling across the monitor.

"This is strange... why is the system log showing—" Oliver took a step back, his brow furrowing. "Huh?"

At the very top of the screen, the log header read: DIMENSION NODE

Oliver blinked in disbelief. "That doesn't make any sense. This... this dingy security office can't be the Dimension Node for this entire realm, can it?" He looked around the cramped, dirty space.

Venti hopped off the desk, coming to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

The terminal text updated, flashing brightly:

ERROR

That was all it said. The word cascaded down the screen in an endless loop. Oliver reached for the computer mouse, but before he could click anything, a robotic, synthesized voice spoke from the monitor's speakers.

"Error. The Holder has been killed."

Oliver froze. He narrowed his eyes at the screen. "What?"

He and Venti shared a deeply concerned look. "The Holder?" Oliver whispered. He looked back at the monitor. "The Holder is the entity that keeps the sub-dimension stable. If the Holder of this world is dead... how is the world still together?"

Suddenly, a mechanical clanking noise echoed from the right side of the office. Oliver jumped, backing away from the desk. "What's that?"

"Careful babe," Venti called out.

Built into the wall was a strange, bulky machine covered by a segmented metal door—like a miniature garage door. Oliver noticed a heavy lever on the far right side of the console. Hesitantly, he reached out and yanked it down. The metal door rattled and slid upward.

Oliver peered inside the dark compartment. Resting on a sliding tray was a strange object. He reached in and carefully pulled it out. "What is this?"

It was a massive, heavy plastic cartridge, resembling a floppy disk blown up to three times its normal size. Printed boldly across the front label were the words: MEMORY CHIP.

Frowning, Oliver flipped the heavy cartridge over to read the faded sharpie text scrawled on the back.

Billy Anderson

Oliver's eyes went wide as saucers. "Holy shit..." He spun around to face Venti. "Ba—"

Oliver gasped, nearly dropping the massive chip as he jumped in surprise. Venti had been standing right over his shoulder, practically breathing down his neck to keep an eye on him.

"Oh!" Venti snorted, taking a step back. "Sorry, did I scare you?"

"A little, yeah!" Oliver breathed out, quickly holding up the cartridge. "Look! It says Billy Anderson on the back. The kid! The kid from the missing persons document who got sucked into the FNAF dimension!" He looked frantically between the cartridge and his boyfriend. "Two things. First, this proves we are definitely in the FNAF sub-dimension. Second..." He stared down at the plastic casing. "I don't know what this means. Is Billy's consciousness trapped inside this chip? Is he even still alive?"

Venti reached out, gently taking the heavy cartridge from Oliver's shaking hands. "If Billy's soul is trapped inside this machinery, how do we get him out?"

"That... I have absolutely no idea," Oliver blinked.

Venti handed the cartridge back. "Hold onto that tightly. When we find a way out of here, you can give it to August. He seems to know more about this science stuff. Maybe he'll know what to do."

Oliver nodded, tucking the heavy chip securely under his arm. "I hope the others are okay up in the lab. What if Nerraw went back for them?"

"I don't know," Venti sighed, his shoulders dropping slightly. "If only I could read the wind in these places. It feels like I can, but when I try to cast my senses out, I get nothing but static." He shook his head, offering Oliver a reassuring smile as he rubbed his back. "But we'll never get out of here if we start spiraling into negativity. Let's stay positive, okay?"

Oliver nodded, taking a deep breath.

"Come here." Venti leaned in on his toes, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to Oliver's lips. When he pulled away, he grinned. "Feel better now~?"

Oliver couldn't help but giggle. "Yeah."

"Good~" Venti teased, his eyes darting downward. "I'd let you play with my belly button to calm your nerves, but—"

Oliver's face instantly went beet red. "BABE, NO!" he hissed, glancing around the empty room in sheer embarrassment. "We—come on, no teasing right now! We have to save the multiverse!"

Venti snorted, covering his mouth to stifle a laugh. "Yeah, yeah~!"

Oliver shook his head, fighting a smile as he walked back over to the monitor. "Alright... what to do..." he muttered to himself.

"That 'monitor' thing really does look just like the tech I saw in Nod-Krai," Venti mused, looking at the glowing screen.

Oliver scoffed lightly. "Of course. Teyvat somehow invents advanced supercomputers before they invent the microwave. Makes perfect sense."

Venti giggled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh I dunno, just that Teyvat has its own laws or something of the sort~," Oliver smirked at Venti.

Thump.

A heavy sound echoed from the warehouse outside.

Oliver and Venti's head swiftly turned to the doorway, which was still open, as none of them had closed it.

Oliver immediately noticed a glowing electronic panel mounted on the wall next to the doorframe. He slammed his hand against it, hoping to trigger the security door, but the panel just did nothing. "Huh? Why won't it close—"

"Babe," Venti interrupted, pointing to a yellow sticky note taped above the panel. "I think you need a specific key. Some kind of mechanism."

Oliver leaned in to read the hastily scribbled note. 'Requires Data Diver to operate lockdown.' Below the text was a crude drawing of a strange device.

"What the hell is a Data Diver?" Oliver blinked. "And why does the drawing look like the Omnitool from SOMA?" He blinked again. "It even opens doors just like it too!"

"I think we need that to lock the door? Open it? Heck, to do anything at all with the door," Venti said.

Oliver expression twisted to slight anger. "Well, fuck us sideways if Freddy Fazbear comes stomping down that hallway yelling 'hor hor hor-hor hor-hor' and then just hors all over the fucking room then!" Oliver yelled in frustration.

Venti froze, staring blankly at Oliver for two whole seconds.

Then, the Archon burst into absolutely uncontrollable laughter.

"WHAT THE HECK?!" Venti screeched, doubling over.

"Wait!" Oliver panicked, his eyes going wide as he frantically waved his hands. "Shh! Keep your voice down! What if—"

It was too late. Venti was absolutely dying.

"BHAHAHAHAAH! WHAT WAS ALL OF THAT!? PIFFFFRRTTTFFFFTTT!" Venti wheezed, stumbling backward until he slammed into the wall beside the doorway, clutching his stomach as he laughed at the top of his lungs.

From the pitch-black hallway outside, Oliver heard a distinct, heavy scraping sound.

Oliver scrambled away from the doorway, slamming the memory chip down onto the desk in a panic.

Venti was slowly sliding down the wall, tears streaming from his eyes. "Hors all over the room!? PufffIFFTT!!!" he shrieked, erupting into another fit of giggles.

Suddenly, a rapid, heavy squeaking sound echoed from the dark.

A massive, decaying Elephant mascot was charging full speed down the hallway, sprinting straight for the open doorway.

"AAHH! Venti! MASCOT! SCARY MASCOT IS COMING!" Oliver shrieked.

Venti, still collapsed on the floor in a fit of giggles, looked up with a teary smile. "Whahahahat?"

The massive elephant blindly barreled into the room, but its bulky cody caught hard on the narrow doorframe. With a loud CRACK, the mascot violently bounced backward, falling flat on its massive, fuzzy ass in the hallway.

Venti, who was still recovering from Oliver's joke, watched the pathetic display. "Haha—WOAH!?" He jumped up, spinning around to peer out the doorway. He looked down at the goofy mascot sprawled on the floor.

"Oh." Venti blinked. He slowly turned to look at Oliver, his lips quivering. "Was that Freddy? And did it hor all over the ground? PIFFFFTTTTT!!!!" Venti wheezed so hard he couldn't breathe, clutching his ribs.

"Venti! Stop it! Now is the time to be serious!!!" Oliver yelled.

Suddenly, the mascot twitched. It began to slowly, mechanically rise from the floor.

"Oh FUCK MY GIBLETS—" Oliver squeaked, diving under the desk.

Venti was wheezing like a deflating tire, slowly collapsing back onto the dirty floor in amusement.

"V-VENTI!!!" Oliver screamed.

"Ugh, I got it, I got it! This is nothing to me. What even is this? Just some heavy furry thing?" Still giggling, Venti summoned his bow in a flash of teal light. "Piece of cake!"

Without even taking a proper stance, Venti lazily drew back the string and fired. A howling gale erupted from the bowstring. The Anemo arrow slammed into the elephant's chest, blasting it backward with the force of a hurricane. The heavy suit crashed into the floor and skidded wildly into the darkness.

"See? I told you! Just a goofy mascot! Nothing for me!" Venti brushed his hands off, strolling confidently out into the hallway.

A few yards away, the "scary" mascot was slowly rising to its feet once again. Venti sighed, dropping into a proper combat stance. He extended his left arm, planting his back foot firmly against the floor, and drew the bowstring taut. He released the arrow with a sharp twang. "Got ya!"

Once again, the mascot was blown violently backward by a blast of wind.

"Is it dead yet?!" Oliver called out weakly, peeking from the edge of the doorway.

"No! But it doesn't seem very smart!" Venti smirked, getting another glowing arrow.

His confident smirk faltered when he saw what the mascot did next. Its bulky head twitched and glitched violently. Then, the elephant mimicked Venti's exact pose. It dropped its back foot, extended its arm, And

held onto... well, it looked as if it was holding onto the bow. But it had no bow.

It then "fired" arrows at Venti, but because it did not have a bow, there was no arrows coming to hit the bard.

"Uhhh..." Venti blinked, lowering his bow slightly. "Hey, uhhh, Ollie? I think your scary mascot is broken."

Oliver, still hiding safely inside the office, refused to look. "Yeah! Is it doing that weird, fast head-twitching thing?! It's tweaking out, I bet! YEAH, BECAUSE IT'S POSSESSED!"

"What? Nohoho!" Venti giggled, utterly delighted. "It's mimicking me... and completely failing at it!" Venti shook his head with a laugh. "Just look at it!"

Oliver nervously peeked around the doorframe. He watched in utter bewilderment and saw the mascot shooting nonexistent arrows from a nonexistent bow.

"The hell?" Oliver muttered.

Venti snorted. "There's your scary guy, babe."

Suddenly, a terrifying, dark voice erupted from inside the foam suit.

"OH, SCREW THIS!"

The sheer volume and malice in the voice made both Oliver and Venti jump.

"This is what I get for taking control of an abomination programmed to mimic actions!" the voice roared.

With a sickening sound of tearing fabric and snapping foam, the mascot suit ripped open from the inside out. A towering, rusted metal endoskeleton violently clawed its way out of the costume. Thick, suffocating black mist swirled aggressively around its steel joints.

Oliver and Venti's eyes widened in sheer horror.

It was the dark creature. Nerraw.

He had hijacked a body in this world.

Venti's playful demeanor vanished instantly, replaced by the deadly serious focus of a god of war. "Babe. Stay in the office," he commanded, his voice cold and sharp. "Nerraw is doing exactly what he did with your avatar. He's weak, so he's possessing things to shield him."

Oliver didn't need to be told twice. He threw himself back behind the wall. "Just be careful, please!"

"The bard is always careful," Venti replied quietly, raising his bow. The dark entity was now inhabiting a bare, lanky robotic skeleton, but the sheer amount of dark energy radiating off it made the air heavy. "I can take this."

Venti drew the string back and fired a high-speed wind arrow.

The heavy endoskeleton sidestepped with terrifying, unnatural speed. The Anemo arrow tore past its metallic head, slamming into a distant storage rack. The explosive burst of wind shattered the shelving, sending metal poles and empty mascot heads flying across the warehouse floor.

The robotic skeleton charged straight at Venti.

Venti dove to the side, rolling gracefully across the floor. Unable to stop its momentum, the massive robot violently crashed into the security office's doorframe.

Oliver screamed in terror as the metal beast slammed against the wall inches from where he was hiding. The endoskeleton blindly reached its long, metal claws into the doorway, swiping wildly at the space, but its bulky metallic shoulders were too wide to fit through the narrow opening.

"Ah! Get away from me!" Oliver yelled, scrambling backward against the desk. "You're a bare endo! You shouldn't even be freaking attacking!"

Out in the warehouse outside of the office, Venti aimed a glowing arrow straight up at the high warehouse ceiling and fired. "Get away from my boyfriend," he snarled.

A swirling, violent black hole of Anemo energy—his burst—ripped open mid-air just above the robot. Venti thrust his hands out, carefully manipulating the vortex's gravity so it wouldn't tear the entire building down. "Oliver is not a threat to you. I am."

The vortex violently sucked the heavy endoskeleton upward, tearing it away from the doorway. With a flick of Venti's wrists, the Anemo singularity forcefully ejected the robot, hurling it dozens of feet across the room where it smashed violently into a distant wall.

Venti summoned another arrow, his eyes locked in the direction the robot landed in. "Stay in the office, babe. I'll handle this." Without waiting for a response, Venti bolted past the office, sprinting into the maze of warehouse shelving after the machine.

Oliver stayed frozen in the office, his heart hammering against his ribs. He slowly crept forward and peeked out of the doorway, but Venti had already disappeared into the gloom.

Deep in the warehouse, Venti navigated through the towering aisles of storage racks until he spotted the endoskeleton lying in a mangled heap. It had crushed several heavy shelves during its crash landing.

Slowly, unnaturally, the metal skeleton rose from the rubble, its joints sparking and groaning.

Venti stood his ground, drawing his bowstring tight.

The robot suddenly raised its heavy metal fists and slammed them brutally into the concrete floor. A jagged wave of pitch-black energy erupted from the impact point, tearing a deep trench through the solid floor as it violently snaked toward Venti.

The Archon leaped high into the air, using a burst of wind to propel himself over the shockwave. The dark energy missed him completely, slamming into a towering storage rack behind him and blowing it clean through the warehouse wall.

Venti landed lightly on his feet, snapping his gaze back to the machine. "Whoo! Getting stronger? Or is that just a new trick?" He fired another arrow.

The endoskeleton tried to dodge, but Venti had anticipated the movement. The arrow bypassed the robot entirely and lodged deep into the wall right beside it. Instantly, the arrow generated a violent, sucking vortex of wind.

The endoskeleton was caught in the localized gale, its metal feet scraping loudly against the concrete as it tried to resist the pull. It was no use. The sheer force of the wind sucked the heavy machine backward, slamming it brutally against the wall with enough force to shatter it.

"So different than the Ruin Guards back home," Venti observed quietly, watching the dust settle. "Thinner, lighter... but it packs a serious punch. Too bad I'm stronger."

With a deafening mechanical screech, the robot surged out of the rubble, charging through the scattered debris with terrifying speed.

Venti gasped. The machine closed the distance instantly, throwing a devastating punch aimed right at his head. Venti twisted out of the way, the metal fist grazing his cheek. The robot immediately followed up with a vicious punch with his other fist, but Venti leaned back, letting the heavy arm swing harmlessly past his chest. Using its momentum, the endo spun entirely around, launching a devastating backhand.

Venti leaped gracefully backward, floating out of range. The robot's fist connected with the solid concrete wall instead, punching a massive, spiderwebbed crater into the stone.

"Getting weaker?" Venti taunted, maintaining his distance to maximize his archery range. "When your enemy starts fighting with such frantic, drastic movements, it's a sure sign they're throwing everything they have left!"

The bard aimed his bow, his eyes glowing with teal light, and unleashed a rapid-fire volley of Anemo arrows. One, two, three shots grazed the machine, throwing it off balance. The fourth shot struck true, piercing the very center of the endoskeleton's chest.

The arrow erupted into a downward, crushing pillar of wind pressure. The immense weight of the gale slammed the robot flat against the concrete. The floor beneath the machine cracked and buckled under the localized atmospheric pressure.

The endoskeleton strained and sparked, but it was completely pinned. It couldn't move an inch.

Breathing heavily, Venti glanced upward toward the distant security office. He couldn't see Oliver inside. He knew his boyfriend was probably just hiding out of sight, but he desperately needed to make sure he was safe while the creature was incapacitated.

Venti bolted toward the office, effortlessly vaulting over the pinned robot as he ran.

But the bard had severely miscalculated how long his wind trap would hold.

Just as Venti was halfway to the office door, the Anemo pressure violently snapped. The robot's hand shot out with terrifying speed, its metal claws clamping viciously around Venti's ankle.

"AHH!" Venti screamed in shock, and fell forward.

Before he could react, the machine violently whipped its arm forward, hurling the Archon through the air like a ragdoll. Venti flew straight into the office door and smashed head-first through the large window overlooking the desk.

Inside, Oliver had been huddled against the wall just left of the door. "Ah?!" he shrieked, throwing his hands over his head as the window exploded outward, showering the desk and floor in shards of glass. He barely had enough time to process what just flew into the door.

"Venti?! What happened!? Babe?!" Oliver scrambled up, ignoring the glass crunching under his shoes, and ran to the desk. He frantically peered through the shattered window frame. Beyond the glass was a massive drop-off leading into an entirely different, deeper section of the warehouse filled with massive shipping crates.

"VENTI!!!" Oliver screamed down into the darkness, straining to see over the edge of the desk. "Was that you?!"

Stomp

Oliver gasped, his blood running cold. He spun around.

The hulking metal endoskeleton was standing right outside the narrow office doorway, its glowing yellow eyes locked directly onto him.

"Ah!" Oliver yelled in pure terror. He frantically scanned the room for a weapon. He looked at the heavy CRT monitor—too heavy to lift. His eyes fell on an old, bulky radio receiver sitting near the keyboard.

Without thinking, Oliver snatched the receiver, violently yanking the thick cables out of the wall, and hurled it with all his might at the doorway.

"Get away from me, you FNAF 2 endo reject!"

The heavy metal radio sailed through the air and smashed dead-center into the robot's exposed chest. The sudden impact knocked the machine entirely off balance. It stumbled backward and collapsed onto the hallway floor with a loud, metallic crash, tangled in the receiver's thick wires.

"Babe."

Oliver gasped. He spun back toward the shattered window.

Rising slowly out of the darkness of the lower warehouse, buoyed by a swirling cushion of gentle wind, was Venti.

"Venti! You're okay!" Oliver cried out in overwhelming relief.

Venti nodded, his expression deadly serious. "Now let's make sure that you're going to be." He stretched both of his arms out toward the broken window.

Oliver didn't hesitate. He climbed onto the desk and stepped carefully through the jagged window frame. Venti wrapped his arms securely around Oliver's waist, pulling him tightly against his chest. Holding his boyfriend securely, Venti turned mid-air and rapidly descended into the massive, cavernous lower warehouse, landing softly on the floor next to of a cluster of giant wooden shipping crates.

"Oh shit..." Oliver blinked, looking around at the sheer scale of the room. "How big does one costume warehouse need to be?"

Venti didn't answer. He was glaring up at the shattered office window high above them.

Oliver followed his gaze.

The metallic endoskeleton was leaning menacingly out of the broken glass, its yellow eyes glowing in the gloom as it stared down at them.

Without a moment of hesitation, the heavy machine vaulted out of the window. It plummeted through the air and slammed into the concrete floor below with a devastating supervillian like landing. The shockwave rattled the massive crates that were nearby, and a one stack of boxes tumbled over with a deafening crash.

"What the?!" Oliver yelled in disbelief. "Bro, is this even FNAF anymore?! What is this Ironman shit?!"

"Whatever you remember this world as," Venti started. "Remember, that physical shell is being piloted by Nerraw. I can assure you that whatever dark magic it's using to fight us is absolutely not part of your video game's story."

Oliver nodded quickly, his fists clenching. "Right."

Venti let out a slow, steadying breath, dropping into a protective stance. "Stay behind me, Ollie. Seriously. I will not let it touch you."

Chapter 37: Horror World

Venti stood firmly in front of Oliver, a protective shield against the gigantic robotic machine. He fired another arrow, the blast knocking aside a stack of heavy wooden crates.

Oliver knew Venti had the situation under control, but a gnawing anxiety chewed at his stomach. How long were they going to be trapped in this realm? They had no easy way out, and they barely even knew how they had gotten here in the first place. Clearly, this was all the dark creature's doing. But if Nerraw was their only ticket in and out, they had hit a massive brick wall.

Oliver patted his pockets. "Shit..." His eyes widened in panic. "V-Venti," he whispered urgently as the metallic endoskeleton slowly staggered to its feet, broken panels of wood tumbling off its metal body. "Uh... Venti, I—I left that memory chip thing up in the security room!"

Venti didn't flinch, his grip tightening on his bow. He shot a brief glance up at the shattered office window high above, then looked back down at the dark creature. The possessed robot was fizzing violently, sparks showering from its metal joints as it lumbered toward them.

The bard took a deep, steadying breath. "I've gathered enough energy for a special move." He aimed his bow upward, pointing at a random support beam near the ceiling, and fired. "I have to keep this thing contained, and I can't let it out of my sight while you're exposed," he explained. The glowing Anemo arrow hurled through the air and embedded itself deep into the steel beam. A violent, swirling black hole ripped open from the arrowhead. "My burst will do the trick."

The metal roof groaned and buckled, straining against the localized singularity as it began to violently suck the surrounding debris inward. The heavy endoskeleton lost its footing, dragging across the concrete as it was pulled toward the vortex.

Seizing the window of opportunity, Venti launched himself into the air on a cushion of wind, darting straight up to the shattered office window. He glided inside effortlessly, his eyes scanning the messy room until he spotted the bulky memory chip resting on the desk. Snatching it up, he flew back out the window and descended swiftly, landing gracefully in front of Oliver. The moment his shoes touched the floor, the burst dissipated. The endoskeleton crashed heavily back down to the ground. The entire warehouse shuddered violently, the concrete floor cracking beneath the machine's immense weight.

"Here." Venti spun around and handed the heavy cartridge to his boyfriend. "Remember, I said to keep this in a safe place."

"Sorry," Oliver winced, taking the chip. "I tried to! I left it on the desk because I thought it was safer away from me."

Venti turned his attention back to the machine. It was already beginning to drag itself upright again. He raised his bow, preparing to fire another arrow, but the robot suddenly slammed its metallic fist into the ground. This time, Venti wasn't prepared.

A jagged fissure of dark, corrupted energy tore through the concrete, snaking at blinding speed straight toward them. Before either could react, a shockwave blasted them sideways. Venti slammed hard against a massive wooden crate, while Oliver was thrown in the opposite direction, crashing into another.

"Ahh!" they yelled in unison.

Oliver groaned, his vision spinning. He strained against the heavy wooden panel that had collapsed on top of him. After a heavy grunt of effort, the wood suddenly felt weightless, drifting upward as a gentle gust of wind swept under it. "Huh?"

Oliver quickly realized it was his boyfriend. Venti was already back on his feet, effortlessly tossing the debris aside with the wind.

"V-Venti!" Oliver yelled, scrambling up.

The powerful Archon stood tall, not a single scratch on his delicate frame. "I'm fine, Ollie. I'm always fine. Like I said, this thing is nothing. At least, the robot it's controlling is."

Oliver's panic was mounting. They were running out of options. He didn't care if the dark creature was weakened; seeing the sheer devastation it had caused in Teyvat terrified him. "I don't know how powerful you actually are, Venti, but... please, if you can, just... go full power or something!"

Venti narrowed his teal eyes at the approaching animatronic. "Without my Gnosis, I'm weaker... and... without Celestia or the Leylines... I'm—" Venti paused, blinking in realization. He had completely obliterated that heavy door earlier. He was still in full control of the wind... for some inexplicable reason. "Maybe I can..." He glanced over his shoulder at his boyfriend, then back to the dark creature. "Okay... This isn't even to save myself. It's to save you, babe."

Oliver froze. Zhongli's grim warnings about the loss of Venti's Gnosis suddenly echoed in his mind. "Wait! Hold on, if doing this is going to end up hurting you, don't—don't do that!"

Venti didn't listen. In a flash of light, his bow vanished. "This factory warehouse place isn't all that important, is it?"

"I dunno?!" Oliver panicked. "It's from Five Nights at Freddy's apparently, but I've never even heard of Murphy's! I have no idea!" He could see the absolute determination etched onto Venti's face. He was going to do something reckless. "Venti, wait!" Oliver surged forward to grab him.

"Babe, I told you I've got this!" Venti flashed his arm out. A powerful, yet incredibly gentle, torrent of wind wrapped securely around Oliver's body, locking him safely in place. Venti snapped his gaze back to the approaching robotic abomination. "Let's play," he whispered, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

Venti thrust his free hand forward. The sheer force of the howling gale nearly blasted the creature backward. Then, the bard gracefully raised both hands near his head before swinging his arms outward in a devastatingly powerful arc.

The wind was deafening. The power was absolute.

Oliver barely had a second to process what was happening before the entire warehouse in front of them was blasted to absolute splinters. Heavy wooden beams, reinforced steel pipes, and solid brick walls were shredded and launched into the horizon as if a Category 30 hurricane had instantly manifested inside the room.

"HOLY—!" Oliver trembled, suspended safely within Venti's swirling pocket of calm air. The human's jaw unhinged as he stared at the utter devastation. There were barely any walls left standing. More than half of the massive building had been completely atomized. He slowly turned his head to look at his boyfriend. Venti was still holding the pose—his left arm extended outward toward the destruction, and his right arm aimed back toward Oliver, maintaining the protective wind grasp.

Slowly, Venti stood up straight and lowered his arms.

The wind around Oliver dissipated, gently lowering him until his feet touched the solid floor.

Oliver sprinted over to the bard and threw his arms around him in a desperate hug.

Venti gasped softly at the impact but immediately wrapped his arms around Oliver in return. "Hey, don't make me fall," he giggled softly, rubbing soothing circles into Oliver's back. But his playful tone quickly vanished. "That thing is still out there," he said, his voice dropping into a serious tone. "I can still feel its presence."

"What is that thing," Oliver mumbled, his face buried into Venti's sleeve. "Why is it so powerful..."

"I don't know," Venti spoke softly. "And I don't know why I'm suddenly able to use my powers like this again. I thought I had lost them." He shook his head in utter bewilderment. "Now that I'm really thinking about it... I shouldn't even have a 'little bit' of power left anyway. I should be completely drained. It doesn't add up... I'm completely disconnected from my world—no, my universe. This shouldn't be possible."

He looked up. With more than half the warehouse obliterated, the night sky of this strange world was completely visible. The stars were shimmering brightly against the dark expanse, and a full moon hung heavy in the sky.

"Bennett was cut off from the Leylines in his own world, and he went through absolute hell because of it..." Venti muttered.

"Could just be his bad luck thing..." Oliver offered weakly.

"Well, yes, but not really. It was more that he is actually from Natl—"

Suddenly, a sharp, terrifying crackling sound echoed beneath them. Venti immediately fell silent, grabbing both of Oliver's hands. "Stay close. I don't know what that was..." He squeezed his boyfriend's hands tightly. "Do you still have that memory chip?"

Oliver nodded rapidly. "It's heavy, but it's in my pocket. Honestly, I'm just glad I'm wearing a tight belt, because otherwise my pants would be dropping down all the time."

Venti couldn't help but crack a soft smile. "Ehehe, well, I definitely wouldn't mind seeing that sight~!"

"Okay, Venti, now is not the time!"

Suddenly, the concrete floor beneath their feet shook, with violent cracks appearing.

"Uhh..." Oliver blinked, looking down. He instinctively clung tighter to Venti's hands.

The cracks started small, but they spread like lightning. A blinding, swirling blue light began to bleed through the fissures.

"UHHH... Venti?!"

Venti reacted instantly, yanking Oliver flush against his chest to launch them into the air, but he was a fraction of a second too late. The entire floor gave way, dissolving into a massive, swirling blue abyss.

The human and the bard plummeted into the vortex.

"Oh NO, NOT THIS AGAIN!" Oliver screamed.

As they tumbled downward, they caught one last glimpse of the surface. Standing at the edge of the crater, peering down into the abyss with glowing white eyes, was the dark creature. Then, the rift snapped shut.

"Entering So—[glitch]—A[glitch]—Sub-10."

"Stay close to me!" Venti commanded, summoning as much wind as he could muster against the overpowering gravity of the blue, spiraling vortex. The current yanked Oliver directly against him.

"Weii?!" Oliver gasped, before slamming hard into Venti's side. "OOF!" He wrapped his arms around the bard, holding on for dear life. "Oh god, I'm gonna be sick!" he yelled over the rushing noise. "Why is this thing so loud?! It freaking looks like the portals from Lego Dimensions, but they didn't have to scream in that!"

"Babe, calm down, I've got you!" Venti tried to soothe him as they plunged deeper into the swirling blue tunnel.

Suddenly, the ground rushed up to meet them, just like last time.

"Brace yourself!" Venti shouted, hugging Oliver tightly against him. They slammed into the solid floor, tumbling and rolling violently across the ground.

"Ow!" Oliver yelled as his body bounced across the hard surface.

Venti recovered instantly, springing to his feet and throwing a hand out. A cushion of Anemo energy caught Oliver just before he could crash head-first into a metal wall.

Oliver gasped, his eyes crossing slightly as he stared at the metal wall hovering merely an inch from his nose. "Woah..."

Venti gently eased his powers, letting Oliver drop the remaining few inches to the floor. Oliver scrambled up, hastily dusting off his clothes. "I... I definitely wasn't scared... I wasn't screaming," he lied terribly.

Venti snorted, shaking his head. "Sure," he giggled. He stepped close to Oliver, gently brushing his fingers through the boy's hair to shake the dust out. He lovingly adjusted a few of Oliver's braid strands before straightening up. "Come on," he said softly. "Let's see what this place is."

Oliver looked around, his nose crinkling in confusion. "I don't know if it's the dark creature doing this, or what..." He scanned their surroundings. "But it really seems to like trapping us in hallways."

Venti crossed his arms. "At least this one has the lights on," he noted, reaching out to lace his fingers with his human's. "Come on. Let's look around. Not much else we can do."

The environment felt incredibly sterile. Cold, metallic, and utilitarian—almost like the secret lab back in Oliver's home world. But something felt incredibly off. It wasn't just the layer of grime covering the supposedly pristine facility, making it feel abandoned. Something about the architecture was triggering a deep sense of déjà vu.

"This feels a little familiar," Oliver muttered.

"Another one of those 'game' worlds again, I assume?" Venti asked.

Oliver shrugged helplessly. "Well, it seems like that's all we're traveling through right now. Though, I still don't understand why Nerraw is... dragging us to these specific places just to fight us."

"It's weak. Remember, it's taking control of things. Or... well, that's what it looks like from our perspective," Venti reasoned.

"Some weakness," Oliver sighed heavily. "It's so 'weak' that we can't even put it down."

The corridor branched off into another long hallway. And from there, yet another intersection was visible in the distance. "Okay... This is a freaking maze," Oliver complained.

Beep Beep

Oliver's eyebrows shot up into his hairline. The distinct, electronic chime echoed from somewhere deep within the metallic labyrinth, though the source was hidden.

"What was that?" Venti blinked, going on high alert.

Oliver squinted, his brain scrambling to place the audio in his memory. "Why did that sound so... familiar?" he whispered, his mind racing through years of gaming memories. "I swear I've heard that exact sound effect before..."

"It sounded very mechanical," Venti said, but his tone was laced with wariness. "Something is not right here..." The bard squeezed Oliver's hand. He could sense an oppressive energy radiating from down the hall. Acting on instinct, he tugged Oliver backward, but the boy was completely frozen, staring blankly at the floor panels as he tried to force his memory to click.

"Woah!" Oliver gasped as Venti yanked him hard by the arm.

The bard hauled Oliver backward, shoving him safely behind the corner of the intersecting hallway. Oliver peeked around the metal wall, and Venti leaned over his shoulder, peering down the corridor.

The long stretch of hallway was bathed in the sickly, flickering glow of dying blue fluorescent lights.

Oliver squinted into the gloomy lighting.

Venti subtly gathered Anemo energy in his free hand. He wasn't sure if Nerraw was preparing to ambush them again, either in its true form or another hijacked body. The lights continued to buzz and flicker violently.

Then, they heard the noises.

Wet coughing. A horrific, rattling wheeze. The heavy, moist slapping of bare feet on metal grating, accompanied by low, guttural growls.

Oliver's blood ran ice cold. His eyes widened in sheer terror. "Oh my god..." The memory slammed into him like a freight train.

A shadow rounded the far corner of the corridor. Both Venti and Oliver instantly ducked back behind their wall.

Venti pressed his back flat against the cold metal, his breath hitching. "I don't think that's the dark creature," he whispered urgently into Oliver's ear. "The energy is completely different..."

The coughing and wet slaps drew closer. The flickering lights had finally reached them.

"What is that?" Venti breathed in horror.

Lumbering past their hiding spot was a massive, grotesque monstrosity. It was so tall it nearly scraped the ceiling. Its skin was covered in weeping, bulbous tumors, and its face was a horrific, disfigured skull devoid of humanity. Its lanky, malformed limbs twitched erratically as it walked.

Oliver's breath hitched in his throat. "Holy fuck," he whimpered.

Venti winced, his face contorting in disgust as he got a clear look at the abomination. "I've seen many disgusting creatures in my long life... but that? That is vile."

Oliver was violently trembling. "It's fucking Terry Akers..." he whispered, crushing Venti's hand in his grip.

"W-Who?" Venti whispered back, his eyes locked on the creature as it shambled toward a heavy bulk door at the end of the hall. Mounted on the wall next to the frame was a glowing electronic panel.

Oliver nearly stopped breathing when he saw the distinctive green grid of the hand scanner.

The monster mindlessly slammed its mutated, lanky hand against the panel.

Beep Beep

The heavy metal door slid open with a pneumatic hiss, and the creature slowly staggered inside. A second later, the door slid shut behind it, sealing it away.

Oliver leaned against the wall, panting heavily as the adrenaline spiked. He looked up at the wall adjacent to them and saw bold, stenciled text painted on the steel:

PATHOS-II ~ SITE THETA

"Ven, we gotta go!" Oliver whispered-yelled, violently yanking Venti by the hand.

"Woah!" Venti stumbled forward.

"You never stay in one place in SOMA! You have to always be on the move!" Oliver panicked, dragging Venti down the opposite corridor.

Venti effortlessly matched his boyfriend's frantic sprinting speed. "So this is SOMA? I remember you mentioning this to August!"

"Yes! But—oh fuck! I don't remember this specific part!" Oliver stammered in a panic as they navigated the dizzying maze of hallways. "Ugh, it's been a while since I played the game! I need to remember where the exit is! Maybe it'll be locked... but then you can just blast the door down! Yeah!"

"Babe! Maybe you should slow down!" Venti cautioned, glancing over at him. "I don't want that monster hearing you! And I really want to conserve my powers if I don't absolutely need to use them!" Venti was painfully aware of his anomalous strength. He was somehow still a powerhouse outside of Teyvat, but he didn't want to blindly abuse an anomaly he didn't understand. He needed to be careful.

But Oliver was too panicked to listen, and he didn't slow down in time. As he rounded another sharp corner, he slammed face-first into someone.

Both Oliver and the stranger tumbled hard to the metal floor.

"AHH, WHAT THE?!" the person screamed in terror.

Oliver and the mystery man were now a tangled, groaning heap on the cold floor.

"Ow..." Oliver groaned, rubbing his head.

Venti didn't hesitate. He was there in a flash, hauling Oliver up by his arm and pulling him safely away from the stranger. "Oliver, are you okay?" he asked frantically, checking him over for injuries.

"Y-Yeah... I... I think so," Oliver mumbled, rubbing his forehead.

Venti turned, fully prepared to help the stranger up, but his combat instincts flared. He was completely on edge, having no idea what threats lurked in this facility. He stepped protectively in front of Oliver.

"What... what is that?" Venti blinked in sheer confusion.

The person on the floor slowly pushed themselves up. "Ugh..." the man groaned. "What just happened..."

The figure sitting before them appeared to be wearing a bulky, deep-sea diving suit. But when the man looked up, there was no human face behind the reinforced glass. Instead, two glowing red lights, attached to a complex robotic mechanism inside the helmet, stared back at them. The lenses whirred, flicking up and down as they scanned the duo.

Oliver's jaw unhinged. He knew exactly who this was. And he was instantly torn between the overwhelming excitement of meeting a gaming legend, and the crushing, agonizing guilt of knowing the horrific fate that awaited this man.

"W-Who..." the robotic man stammered, his natural human voice laced with disbelief. "You..." He scrambled backward, pressing his back against the wall. "A human? That's not... you're not... Where did you come from?! It's not even safe down here!"

Oliver opened his mouth to speak, but the words died in his throat. He had no idea what to say.

The robotic man slowly shifted his gaze to Venti. "What?" He leaned in closer, his mechanical lenses whirring as they focused on the bard's colorful attire. "Why are you... Why do you look like a manga—"

Oliver violently coughed, desperately trying to change the subject. "Simon, I—"

The robotic man flinched, reeling back. "You know my name?"

"I..." Oliver's eyes darted down to the Omnitool clenched tightly in Simon's hand. He looked back up at the glowing red lenses. His mind was blank.

The dark creature was nowhere to be seen. This was completely different from the FNAF world; the environment felt empty, almost scripted. SOMA's tragic story was actively playing out right in front of him, and Oliver was terrified of the consequences of interfering.

"Oh god, what if I change everything..." he muttered.

"What?" Simon asked nervously.

"Babe, what's wrong? Who is this... person?" Venti asked, glancing between the two.

"B-Babe?" Simon's red optical sensors flicked rapidly between the human and the magical bard.

Oliver was spiraling. He didn't want to explain Simon Jarrett's life in front of Simon Jarrett. He knew Simon remained blissfully, painfully clueless through the majority of the story, and Oliver refused to be the one to trigger a mental breakdown before he even reached Omicron.

Omicron. The name flashed into Oliver's mind. That's where we are... He blinked, second-guessing himself. Wait, no... Theta! He rubbed his temples. Have I gotten mixed up?

Oliver didn't realize he was visibly mumbling to himself until Venti gently nudged his shoulder, asking if he was alright.

"Okay, other humans," Simon spoke up, his voice shaking with a mix of fear and desperate hope. "You two are the last ones," he deduced. "Are you? Is there more of you? There has to be more, right? You two don't even look like you'd be working in this facility. I need to ask Catherine about this,"

"Well, I—" Oliver started, still trying to formulate a safe lie, when a shadow shifted behind Simon.

Venti sensed the malice instantly and summoned his bow in a flash of teal light.

Simon froze, staring blankly at the glowing weapon that had just appeared out of thin air. "I'm sorry... what?"

Neither Venti nor Oliver could act fast enough to stop the horror. The dark creature violently lashed out. With a sickening, metallic tear, a shard of pure, concentrated darkness sliced horizontally through Simon's waist.

"Ahh!?" Oliver gasped, scrambling backward in horror.

The top half of Simon Jarrett's robotic body went completely limp, sliding off his severed torso and crashing onto the metal grating. Black, viscous WAU structure gel and blood violently sprayed from the wound, accompanied by showers of electrical sparks.

Venti threw himself in front of his boyfriend, drawing the bowstring back and aiming dead center at Nerraw's chest. But before he could loose the arrow, the very fabric of reality around them began to violently glitch and tear.

Venti gasped, his aim faltering as his bow instantly dissolved into glowing dust.

"What's happening?!" Oliver screamed, looking around wildly. "What's... why are the walls doing that?!"

Massive, digital cracks spider-webbed across the metal walls, revealing a terrifying, infinite dark void underneath as the floors, walls, and ceiling rapidly withered into nothingness.

Venti channeled his Anemo energy, swiftly lifting both himself and Oliver into the air on a powerful updraft. They were airborne just a microsecond before the metal floor gave way completely, swallowing the two halves of Simon Jarrett into the abyss.

Terrifying, distorted screams and wet coughing echoed around them. They watched in horror as multiple Terry Akers mutants plummeted helplessly into the endless void as the dimension collapsed around them.

Nerraw floated amidst the destruction, a cruel, twisted smirk on its face. "Welcome to when a Dimension loses its Holder. Ta ta~"

In a violent puff of thick black mist, the dark creature vanished.

Oliver gasped, wrapping his arms around Venti and clutching him with terrifying desperation. "Venti! What... what is happening?!" he shrieked.

Venti held on as tight as he physically could, his eyes scanning the terrifying emptiness. There was absolutely nothing left. Just a cold, suffocating, endless dark void.

"I don't know. But I am so grateful I can still use my wind," Venti whispered, slowly drifting them forward through the nothingness, refusing to let Oliver go for even a fraction of a second.

Oliver buried his face in Venti's chest, taking rapid, hyperventilating breaths. "W-What do we do?" he choked out, his voice trembling uncontrollably.

"I'll think of something. Or maybe something might help us. Or someone."

"W-Who!?" Oliver yelled.

"The wind. I know... you're not from my world, but... The wind may help us. I feel something..."

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It was quiet back in the real world.

In the breakroom, the rest of the boys sat in uneasy silence, their eyes fixed on the crystalline boy standing guard at the blown-out doorway. Nerraw had done a serious number on the frame, leaving the edges jagged and ruined.

Jasper leaned over to August. "You think that guy is safe?"

"No idea," August whispered back. "Oliver and Venti mentioned this thing... I didn't trust it when he talked about it. But... apparently, it's working with Mark."

"But... is Mark trustworthy?" Jasper pressed, his voice barely audible.

August shrugged. "I dunno! But we don't exactly have a lot of options right now." He looked at the ruined entrance. "It's a good thing that dark creature didn't blast the front door down. Or worse, break the wall and expose us to the outside... assuming there even is outside air on the other side of that wall."

Jasper shot a nervous glance at the crystal entity. "None of us have even spoken to the guy. Should we say something?"

August let out a long sigh. "I guess it's worth a shot." He raised his voice slightly, looking up at the glowing, shard covered figure. "Hey! Uh... Mr... uh... crystal guy thing?"

The creature slowly turned his head to look at August. "My name is Thomas."

"Oh!" August blinked in surprise. "Ohhhh-kay." He looked at Jasper, who just shrugged back. August turned his attention back to Thomas. "I wasn't expecting a British accent..."

"I wasn't expecting words at all," Jasper muttered under his breath.

August cleared his throat as Jasper nervously addressed the being. "So... uh? What are you?"

August winced. "I... I don't think that's a polite thing to ask—"

"I'm a human," Thomas interrupted, his voice steady. "But I was also a Holder in my dimension."

August and Jasper exchanged looks. "Really?" August asked, though he already knew that he was.

"Yes," Thomas said softly, his gaze dropping to the floor. "Nerraw attacked me... and my loved ones. He..." Thomas paused, the dark stone structure covering half of his face shifted in sorrow. "It's hard to talk about. I got angry. And that anger hit something deep within me. It made me tap into the true, raw power that all Holders are supposed to possess."

"And that is...?" August asked.

"The power of the universe," Thomas replied simply.

August looked completely astonished. "Wow. So... you're like a god or something? That's what the Holders are?"

Thomas didn't answer right away. "More or less," he finally conceded. "Though my powers right now are substantially weaker, since I'm not in my home world."

"Ah... well, I guess that makes sense."
~~~~~~~~~~

Jasper leaned over to August again. "I guess that explains why the dude lowkey looks like a galaxy manifested into a person..."

"Nerraw." Thomas stated firmly, his grip tightening on his weapon.

The two boys jumped. "What was that?" Jasper asked.

"That is the dark creature's name, if you didn't know already. Nerraw."

A sudden, shimmering sound echoed from the hallway outside. With a burst of golden light, Mark jogged into the breakroom.

"I cannot, for the life of me, figure out where those two have gone." He walked past Thomas at the broken doorframe and approached the boys. He gestured toward Arnold, who had miraculously slept through the entire ordeal. "He's not doing too good, is he?"

"To be frank, none of us really are," Jasper muttered.

"You seriously can't find Oliver or Venti?" August asked, his mind hyper-fixated on his new friends' wellbeing.

"I thought it was going to be easy to track Nerraw. I really thought so," Mark sighed, pacing the length of the breakroom. "I had almost gotten a lead, but on my way, it was as if the world had simply gone offline."

Jasper shook his head in confusion. "It shouldn't be that hard to track them, right?"

"Easy for you to say. There is an infinite number of Fictional Realities," Mark countered.

Jasper narrowed his eyes. "Infinite? But—" He looked at August for backup. "That can't be true. It's all based on fictional media, right? There isn't an infinite number of movies, games, or books."

Mark stopped pacing and looked around. "Do any of you know where I could get a whiteboard? And a marker? If this lab even has any?"

August quickly stood up and headed for the door. "I actually saw one down in the portal room. Whether or not there are markers, or if they even work, is beyond me." He gestured for Jasper to follow. "Come on, bro. Help me carry it up the stairs."

~~~~~~~~~~

"Okay," After clearing a few tables to make room, Mark set the whiteboard up at the back of the breakroom. He popped the cap off a dry-erase marker and drew a large, bold circle right in the center of the board.

"This circle represents our world," Mark instructed. "The Honmono Universe."

Jasper raised his hand like a student. "Uh? Why is it called that?"

August gave him a weird look. "This isn't class, dude, you don't gotta raise your hand..."

"Oh—" Jasper blinked, awkwardly lowering his arm. "Sorry, I saw the whiteboard and my brain just went into school mode."

Honmono (Japanese): Meaning "real life" or "genuine thing."

"It's Japanese," Mark continued, tapping the board. "A Japanese scientist from the 1930s was the very first person to open the Fictional Universe gateway."
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Both Jasper and August's jaws dropped.

"Wait, seriously?" August looked stunned. "Really? Wow... Not gonna lie, I assumed it would have been an American or something!"

"Wait? Seriously?" August looked shocked. "Really? Wow! I... Not gonna lie, I was gonna assume it would have been an American or something!"

Mark ignored the shock and drew a mid-sized circle above the large one. Then another next to it. And another. Soon, three smaller circles orbited the massive central one. "These smaller circles represent pieces of media." Mark wrote Dark Souls over the first, Kingdom Hearts over the second, and Genshin Impact over the third.

"These are just examples," Mark clarified.

"Or maybe just your favorite games..." August whispered teasingly.

Mark sighed, letting out a small, defeated laugh. "Maybe." He pointed to each of the smaller circles, drawing lines connecting them back to the massive Honmono circle. "When a person from our world thinks about something, it spawns a universe where that thought is real. And if I were to draw them all out, I'd need an infinite number of whiteboards."

Jasper gasped, the realization finally hitting him. "Wait, so it's not just officially licensed media?"

"No. The Fictional Universe does not discriminate. As long as you have a thought in your head, it will create a reality where that thought is tangible." He pointed to the board again. "It depends, though. If a fictional thought—or media, in this case—is incredibly popular, its universe will be tethered closer to the hub of the Honmono world."

"So this is what you meant by it being infinite." Jasper nodded.

"Yes. But it gets even deeper than that," Mark said. "You see this?" He pointed to the Kingdom Hearts circle, quickly scribbling dozens of tiny dots inside of it. "Imagine an infinity of tiny circles inside this one bubble. Those? Those are Sub-Dimensions."

August bolted upright in his chair. "Sub-Dimensions? That's... wait! The papers! In the third extraction room! And the worlds we've been sent to—they're—"

"Sub-Dimensions," Mark confirmed, twirling the marker between his fingers. "Sub-worlds of the main media or original thought. Each of these realities starts at Sub-Dimension 1, which represents the raw, canonical story the original creator came up with. But Sub-2, 3, 4, 5, and every number beyond that, is heavily influenced by the fandom of that media."

August and Jasper shared the same bewildered look.

"That fandom influence is exactly what allowed you to enter the world in the first place," Mark said, turning to face them completely. "It always happens: So, spill the beans. Have either of you ended up dating someone in the world you were transported to?"

August's face immediately flushed red. "Oh—uh..." He giggled shyly, rubbing the back of his neck.

Jasper suddenly looked incredibly uncomfortable, averting his gaze and staying dead silent.

"I... well, I was sent into Grounded, and ended up dating Peter Boggs," August admitted.

Mark nodded, pointing the black marker directly at August. "If it wasn't for the fandom influence, you wouldn't have been able to date him."

August dropped his hand from his neck. "Oh, uh... wait, you lost me," he shook his head. "I don't follow, actually. How does the fandom have a say in me dating Pete? Is there secretly someone writing fanfiction about me and Peter? Heh..."

"N-No! That's not what I mean," Mark quickly waved his hands. "The fandom influence loosens up the media. It makes it bendy. It derails it from the strict canon tracks to make it whatever it chooses to be. It branches from Sub-1 into the infinite subs beyond it. If you went into Sub-1 just raw like that... Pete may or may not have even reacted to you. You'd basically have been a ghost in his world; he'd never see you, even if you were standing right in front of him."

August nodded, the concept finally clicking into place. "Ohhh! Okay. So Sub-1 is like... the blank slate?"

"Something like that," Mark nodded. "Depending on how much work the creator put into their story, Sub-1 may be fully developed. But still, even then, you may or may not be able to actually interact with anyone in that dimension."

Jasper cleared his throat, steering them back on track. "Okay, it's cool and all hearing this lore drop. But... where are Oliver and Venti?"

"I have no idea. That is my point. It is an infinite world. And there are infinite worlds within those worlds. Raw-dogging this search... I'd be looking forever."

The two boys stared down at the desk. This was a lot to process. "You're right," August said quietly. "You cannot... just wing something like this."

Mark capped the marker and set it down on the whiteboard tray. "I did throw a second necklace into the portal before it closed. I just have to hope either of them picked it up."

August scrunched up his face. "Huh? Necklace?"

Mark glanced over at Thomas, who was still standing like a statue at the broken doorframe. "I gave him one. It's a necklace made with a tinge of pure light from the Kingdom Hearts dimension. Nerraw is terribly weak to it. The necklace shouldn't be overly powerful on its own, but it became a weapon of mass destruction when Thomas over there used it. Between a mix of him being a Holder and the Fictional Leak, it turned the necklace into a war machine against Nerraw's darkness." Mark sighed heavily. "I hope my intuition is correct: If Venti is a Holder, he'll be able to wield that light to help destroy Nerraw for good."

August's mind raced. He remembered that term from one of his father's scattered papers. Fictional Leak. But it had been an unfinished report, and he hadn't been able to find any more information on the subject.

"Fictional Leak?" August asked.

"It's when the Fictional Universe leaks over into the real world," Mark explained. "It's the reason why, when fictional characters come here, they can still use their powers. Heh... it's the reason why Thomas over there is still in his full Holder form. If it wasn't for the leak, everything would have stopped at the threshold. Granted, the one good thing that would have come from that would have been the end of Nerraw. Sadly, Nerraw is part fictional, so that's exactly why he's able to go on a full rampage across all the universes."

"Because of this... 'leak'," Jasper realized.

"Exactly," Mark said.

They all fell into a heavy, oppressive silence. There was nothing more to do but wait... and hope that Oliver and Venti were still alive.

Chapter 38: Blocks

Venti gently held Oliver against his chest as he slowly drifted along the currents of his own wind power through the void. Oliver tried his best to keep his breathing steady, but being suspended in an endless area of nothingness was terrifying, to say the least.

"You're very strong, actually," Oliver spoke, trying to suppress his mounting fear by focusing on his boyfriend's voice. "Carrying me like this. I don't even think you're using the wind to physically pick me up, are you?"

"Yeah," Venti smiled softly, pulling Oliver just a little closer. "Just keep your head buried in my chest, okay? Don't look around. I can tell this... dark abyss is making you scared."

It felt as if they had been floating for an eternity. Venti was just trying to find something. Anything. He was at a complete loss. The darkness stretched on forever, but it had a strange body to it—shape, depth, and texture. It looked like massive dark clouds in the distance, swirling with a heavy greyness. The Archon had never seen something like this before. He had dealt with various beings of immense power in his long lifetime, but nothing quite like Nerraw. He didn't know how to combat the being of darkness with how it presented itself. As Venti had said many times... Nerraw was unpredictable.

Venti could feel Oliver gently vibrating in his grasp as they drifted through the heavy, dark air. "You wanna talk about anything?" Venti asked, hoping to distract him. "Since I've met the real you, you haven't really told me anything about what you actually do in your dimension."

Oliver didn't answer right away. He rubbed his cheek against Venti's chest, the fabric of the bard's bow brushing against his face. He kept his eyes snapped tightly shut to block out the void. "Well, I... I already told you that I went to college," he finally murmured, letting out a small sigh. "Though that's... worthless now, since I've been basically missing for four whole years."

"Well, besides the college. What else did you do?"

"Hmm." There was something else the human had done. Something fun he used to do in his free time. "Well, I did do something cool. Though thinking about it makes me sad, because... I doubt I can ever grow on it anymore."

"Hmm?" Venti hummed encouragingly.

Oliver cleared his throat. "You won't know what this is, but... I had a YouTube channel."

"You... tube?" Venti scrunched up his face. "What's that, babe?"

"Uhh... well..." Oliver blinked, struggling to figure out how to explain the concept of digital video. "Well, we have cameras. And you... can make a video with it. Uh... one way to call it is moving pictu—"

Venti cut him off, his face lighting up. "Ohhh! I know those! Yeah, Kameras! We have them! I know in Fontaine they use them to make films!"

Oliver, keeping his eyes firmly closed as he snuggled against Venti, shot one eyebrow upward. "Films? Like a movie?"

"What's a movie?" Venti blinked.

Oliver gave a small, genuine chuckle. "Once again... Teyvat never fails to amuse me. Movies before the microwave."

Venti snorted and started to giggle. "What is it with you and this 'microwave' thing?" He laughed softly, his chest rumbling against Oliver's cheek. "And hey! Don't make me laugh while I'm holding you."

"Well, that'll be all your fault, you giggly boy."

"Giggly boy?" Venti scoffed playfully. "Oh, you're gonna pay for that one when we get out of here."

Oliver giggled softly, cracking one eye open to peek at the darkness around them. Still the void, he thought to himself, quickly squeezing his eye shut again.

"So tell me more about this you tube thing," Venti prompted. "You... made films? Didn't know you were into showbiz."

"Well, no, not showbiz," Oliver corrected. "YouTube is a platform for anyone to make anything. Literally anything. I recorded myself playing video games."

"Oh..." Venti blinked, processing the concept. "That's... people watch that?"

"Yeah. It might sound silly, haha. Watching someone do something 'mundane,' I guess," Oliver smiled warmly at the memory. "I... had about five thousand people following me."

"Uh..." Venti's eyes widened. "Five... wait... Ollie... are you famous in your world?"

Oliver let out a loud, sudden laugh. "Oh! No! Not at all. Besides, all those five thousand people who were subbed didn't even watch me. I only had about twenty to thirty people on my streams."

"Streams?" Venti squinted into the darkness. "Why are we talking about rivers now?"

Oliver let out a snort. "No—not... streaming is when you record a video live to people as it happens."

"Oh! I see. I think the Kameras back home can do that. But you need a special system for it," Venti noted.

"Oh? Cool." Oliver smiled. "Yeah. So I streamed games."

"What... games did they watch you... uh, 'play'?" Venti asked.

"The game that you're from," Oliver said softly.

"I see. What was it called again? Genshin...?"

"Impact." Oliver slowly opened his eyes, trying to be brave about the heavy darkness enveloping them. He knew his boyfriend would never drop him. "Genshin Impact. People joined my streams to watch me complete different quests and other stuff." He turned his head, hiding it into Venti's chest again. "None of us have any phones back in the lab, so... I haven't been able to check where my account stands now. I wonder if any of my followers wonder where I've been. I didn't have a big following, so probably not."

"I'm sure someone was worried," Venti reassured him softly. "They're probably wondering if you're okay this very moment."

"I doubt that."

"You said five thousand. That's a lot of people."

Suddenly, something sparked in the darkness. A faint, distant light caught Venti's eye, causing him to slowly drift to a halt.

Out of nowhere, walls and floors began to bleed out of the dark void, forming around them with a strange, shimmering hum. Then, in a sudden, blinding flash of light, an entire room was fully constructed.

An unknown, synthesized voice echoed from everywhere at once:

"SOMA: Sub-92"

Venti looked down. He was still hovering with Oliver securely in his grasp, his shoes hovering just inches above a solid metal floor. He looked forward and saw a strange, heavy door to his left—it looked like a massive vault door, the kind equipped with a heavy locking wheel. To the right stood large, metallic cabinets that looked like they housed heavy-duty equipment, though Venti couldn't place what.

Dead in the center of the room was another door. A standard one, but it featured a reinforced glass window. Venti peered through it. Sitting perfectly still in a chair was that same man—Simon Jarrett.

Venti's mind raced: Wasn't he killed by the dark creature?

Then he remembered the Sub-Dimension name. When they had first arrived, the voice had announced Sub-10. But just a moment ago, it had declared Sub-92.

Venti slowly turned in the air to check behind him. There was another large door, elevated by a small set of stairs on the right side.

By now, Oliver had reopened his eyes, squinting against the harsh, fluorescent lights. "Huh? Woah, uh... where did the void go?" Oliver pulled his head back from Venti's chest, looking around in awe.

Sensing Oliver was calm and awake, Venti slowly lowered his wind currents, letting his feet touch the solid floor. "Okay, solid ground," Venti said smoothly. "I'm going to set you down, baby." He gently placed his boyfriend onto the metal floor, staying close by his side.

Oliver spun in a slow circle. "Wait a minute, I know this... This is still SOMA!" He blinked rapidly, his gamer knowledge flooding back. "Yes! It is!" Oliver pointed to the staircase leading up to the heavy door with the red hand-scanner. "There! One of the WAU creatures chased Simon through there, and he ran in yelling at Catherine to shut the door..."

He pivoted, rushing over to the massive circular vault door. "Oh! And look! That leads outside to the ocean floor! You use it to take the lift down to the deepest part of the place, the Abyss!"

"The Abyss?" Venti arched an eyebrow, not liking the sound of that.

Oliver was already standing over the control panel near the vault door. "And... yeah!" He smiled, pointing to an empty slot on the console. "The Omnitool goes right there! It allows Catherine to talk to Simon!" He spun around again, pointing to the open, empty lockers. "And over there is where Simon gets his new Power Suit to survive the descent into the Abyss, because his old suit would implode from the pressure. So he had to..."

Oliver froze mid-sentence. His eyes widened. "Wait a minute... this means we're in Omicron..." He slowly looked back at the empty lockers, then over to the closed door with the glass window. "And they're empty, which means..."

Oliver jogged over to the central door and peered through the window. He let out a sharp gasp, seeing Simon slouched in the chair. "Oh no..." Oliver muttered. "Well... his glowing red eyes tell me that Simon didn't kill Simon."

Venti had been hanging back, watching Oliver dart enthusiastically around the strange, mechanical facility. But at that last sentence, utter confusion plastered itself across his face. "Uhhh?" Venti walked over to his boyfriend, leaning over by tiptoeing to see through the glass. "What do you mean... by that, Ollie?"

"Uhh... Okay... So when Simon was transferred into the scuba suit back in Upsilon, he later realized the suit was partly organic and contained the body parts of a woman named Imogen Reed right in this room," Oliver explained rapidly. "He found that out after coming here. Well, anyway, to get down to the deeper parts of the ocean, he had to change suits. So he did that over there—" He pointed to the empty lockers. "Changed suits so he was ready to go."

Venti was having a massive amount of difficulty following. Who the hell was Imogen Reed? And changing suits?

"Ollie... What do you mean he changed suits? I see him right in there. And I think he's looking at us," Venti said, gesturing to the glowing red dots inside the dark room.

"He's not looking at us," Oliver corrected. "He's in a standby mode. He's basically sleeping." He turned to Venti, his face serious. "And about what I said... he wasn't physically moved. His consciousness was copied to this suit, and then copied again to the new suit."

Venti's eyebrows shot up. "Why does this kinda sound like... you... and the avatar you controlled?"

Oliver let out a soft, heavy sigh. "Yeah, there was a reason August made that reference to this game. Though, it's a little different. At least there aren't multiple copies of me running around. I was simply just dormant in the chair. There are currently two Simons right now. This one in the room here, and the other one down in the Abyss..." He looked down at his feet. "And... there's going to be a third one eventually, if... it hasn't happened already."

Venti folded his arms, not knowing what to add to the terrifying existential dread of this universe.

Oliver looked back up, his brow furrowed. "What I don't understand... is that Nerraw killed him," he said, looking off to the side. "Nerraw broke the timeline or something. The universe self-imploded or something."

"It definitely did," Venti confirmed.

"So... what happened? Why are we here?"

"I think something shifted. The world changed. Like the universe fixed itself," Venti said.

"Yeah... the Sub-Dimension," Oliver realized. He folded his arms, a pit forming in his stomach as his mind raced back to the terrifying papers he had read in the lab. The talk of the transfer chairs making him remember. "Doctor Barclay... he used children without consent, man..." Oliver shook his head in disgust. "And not even just teenagers. Literal children... ten years old, man!"

Venti leaned gently onto Oliver's shoulder, offering silent comfort. "He's a terrible man." Venti paused, then asked, "Do you still have that memory chip? You didn't drop it?"

"I didn't." Oliver shook his head, patting his pants. "It's still in my pocket."

Then, a chilling voice echoed from behind them.

"So, you figured out what finally happens."

Venti spun around instantly, his bow materializing in his grip.

"A dimension loses its Holder, the dimension goes sayonara."

"Haven't you caused enough damage? You're weak, you being of darkness! Surrender now!" Without hesitation, Venti stepped in front of Oliver, placing himself between his boyfriend and the threat.

"Weak or not, I'm stronger than you. I just love to play around with my enemies. You don't have the key to kill me," Nerraw smirked, his shadowy form flickering under the harsh facility lights. "You cannot put a dent in me, Archon. You never will. Yes, you may make me stumble. But you will never stop me." Nerraw shifted his empty, glowing gaze past Venti. "And your little human boyfriend there is even more worthless —"

Venti narrowed his eyes, a glowing Anemo arrow snapping onto the string as he drew it back taut. "Call my boyfriend that one more time."

Nerraw let out a single, dark chuckle. "Not even your bond with each other can stop me, because you're not even in your home world for the barrier to even work." Nerraw lifted his arms, his hands sharpening into jagged, dark shards. "I'm done playing games. I will kill both of you now."

Nerraw slowly advanced on Venti. The Archon didn't budge an inch, standing firm and pulling back harder on the bowstring, ready to unleash a powerful gale.

"You're not in your world anymore. You're not connected to anything." Nerraw lunged, rearing back to slash Venti into ribbons.

But before the strike could land, an invisible, overwhelming force erupted. Nerraw was blasted backward, slamming violently into the heavy control panel behind him, bouncing off the metal, and crashing into the vault door leading out to the ocean.

Venti and Oliver both froze, glancing at each other in shock.

What just happened?

Venti hadn't done anything. He was still holding the drawstring back; he hadn't released his arrow.

Oliver glanced down and saw something emitting a blinding light from Venti's pocket. Without thinking, Oliver reached into the bard's pockets and pulled out the necklace Venti had found back in the FNAF world. The white orb, swirling with ethereal clouds, was glowing with a fierce, blinding intensity.

"Woah..." Oliver breathed, mesmerized.

Nerraw groaned, slowly pushing himself up from the metal floor. "No..." it grumbled, its voice distorted with sudden fear. "No... No..."

Oliver quickly looked back at the dark creature, glancing down at the necklace in his hands, then back up at the creature of darkness.

"Where did you get that..." Nerraw clenched its fists. The glowing white eyes flared, and the dark flames licking across its body burned fiercely with rage. "WHERE DID YOU GET IT?!?!!?" The dark being bellowed, its voice raw, demonic, and shaking the very walls of the facility.

Oliver gasped, instinctively clinging to Venti's arm.

Venti didn't flinch. He adjusted his aim, ready to let the arrow fly.

But in a panic, Nerraw violently punched the heavy vault door leading out to the ocean floor. The metal groaned and snapped outward. The massive door blew completely off its hinges, smashing into the other

door.

Instantly, the crushing pressure of the deep ocean rushed in.

The water hit the far wall at the lockers full force, instantly flooding the room. Venti had to instantly redirect his energy. He dropped the bow, shoving both hands forward, and manifested a powerful, swirling sphere of Anemo energy around himself and Oliver. The millions of gallons of seawater violently crashed against his barrier.

"Oh fuck, Venti! What do we do!?" Oliver screamed over the roaring water.

Venti gritted his teeth, straining with every fiber of his being to keep the wind currents spinning fast enough to hold the crushing ocean at bay so they wouldn't drown.

Suddenly... the floor beneath them cracked.

At first, they thought the water pressure was destroying the facility, but an blue, glowing light began shining through the metal plates.

"Oh no! It's happening again, Venti!"

The cracks spiderwebbed outward, the floor completely giving way into the massive blue vortex. The human, the Archon, and thousands of gallons of deep-sea water plunged straight through it.

The water violently pushed them through the rift. Tumbling in the chaotic current, Venti lost his balance and his connection to the Anemo barrier. He tried to fight the rushing tide to grab Oliver, but he couldn't reach him in time.

An automated voice glitched out around them:

"Entering Min—[Glitch]—Aft—[Glitch]—Sub-24,345"

Venti could hold his breath just fine, but absolute panic set in for Oliver.

The ground came rushing up to meet them. They slammed into solid earth, tumbling wildly as the ocean water crashed down from the rift above them, drenching the entire landscape.

A moment later, the rift snapped shut. The rushing water abruptly ceased.

Oliver and Venti lay completely soaked on the ground of yet another new world.

Oliver coughed violently, rolling onto his side to spit out a mouthful of water. "Bleh!" He clamped a hand over his mouth, grimacing. "Ugh, that is salty as fuck..."

He opened his eyes, wiping the moisture from his face, and suddenly shot upright.

Blocks.

Blocks everywhere. Blocky trees with square leaves. Blocky, vibrant green grass. Blocky, pixelated clouds floating in the sky. Blocky mountains in the distance.

Oliver knew exactly what this was. Anyone from his world—even a grandma—would recognize this immediately.

"We're in fucking Minecraft! Venti! We're in Minecraft!" Oliver scrambled around and saw Venti already pushing himself up to his feet. "Venti—"

The bard hurried over to him. "Are you okay? Geez, that dark monster threw me off guard with that move... that was totally unexpected."

"Yeah, I'm okay," Oliver panted, wringing out his shirt. "I mean, I'm totally drenched, but I'm good."

Then, the dark creature's voice echoed across the blocky plains. It sounded darker now. More evil. But beneath the malice, it sounded genuinely weak. It was fighting with everything it had left because it now knew exactly what Venti possessed.

"You two will DIE here and now! Minecraft will be your end. And if it isn't, I will play this game as long as I need to, until I find a world where I can finally KILL you."

A block of brown Soul Sand materialized in thin air, dropping heavily onto the grass block in front of them. Then, another block appeared directly above it, slamming down. Then a third, forming a short pillar.

Another brown block materialized to the right, attaching to the top block. Then one to the left. It formed A T-shape.

Oliver gasped. The blood drained from his face as his gamer instincts screamed at him.

"Venti! Oh... Oh shit! Get your bow ready!"

The bard didn't hesitate. The bow materialized in his hands. "What even is that? And what is this world, anyway? Why is everything made of blo—"

The structure was finishing as Venti spoke. It just needed the final pieces.

A blackened skull dropped onto the right side of the T-shape. Then another on the middle. Then the final one on the left.

Instantly, the blocks of Soul Sand and skulls evaporated into a blinding light, manifesting into a massive, floating, skeletal three-headed monstrosity.

Oliver trembled, backing away. "That's a Wither, Venti! It shoots—"

Before Oliver could finish his warning, the Minecraft boss launched a glowing blue skull projectile. It narrowly missed them, exploding into the grass nearby and sending dirt blocks flying into the air.

"Ah!" Oliver yelped, covering his head. "It shoots explosives!" he screamed to Venti.

Suddenly, Nerraw's dark, shadowy form appeared right behind the Wither. With a violent thrust, the dark creature surged into the boss, possessing it completely. The Wither violently glitched, its blocky form shimmering with corrupted, jagged dark patterns as Nerraw hijacked its body.

Venti stood his ground, drawing his bowstring back, fully prepared to take on whatever the hell this blocky monstrosity was.

Chapter 39: In The Deep Dark

Venti let the bowstring slip from his fingers, and his Anemo-infused arrow soared through the air and lodged directly into the Wither's skeletal chest. The elemental energy erupted, blowing the three-headed monstrosity back a few feet, but it wasn't nearly enough to take it down.

Having seen the sheer destruction this creature was capable of, Venti didn't think twice. He thrust his hand out, quickly enclosing Oliver in a swirling, protective barrier of wind.

The Wither launched a glowing, explosive skull toward the bard. Venti swiftly twisted his torso to the right, letting the projectile zip past his shoulder. It slammed into the terrain behind him, blowing a massive crater into the blocky grass.

He readied his golden bow again, aiming high at the floating target, and let another arrow fly.

Oliver could only watch helplessly from the safety of the wind barrier. Venti wasn't exactly struggling to evade, but the creature wasn't getting any weaker, either. "Venti, be careful!" Oliver yelled over to him. "That's a Wither, it's strong as hell! Not to mention it's being possessed by that dark thing—that's just making it even worse!"

Venti dodged and weaved effortlessly around the explosions, but none of his Anemo arrows were doing significant damage. He wanted to unleash his burst... or tap into his full Archon powers like he had in that world with the robots. But his energy hadn't fully replenished yet; he was forced to rely on his basic powers.

The Archon sprinted toward the creature, sliding across the blocky ground right beneath it. He fired an arrow straight up into its underside, rolled gracefully to his feet, and fired another shot at its back. "This really isn't working," Venti grunted, his boots skidding against the grass, looking back up at the monster.

"It's not going down!" Oliver yelled.

"I know that, Ollie!" Venti called back, still firing. "I'm only able to use my basic powers right now until they replenish naturally! If I had my Gnosis, that would have been instant!" Venti gasped as another skull explosive hurtled toward him. He leaped out of the way, landing in a crouch with one fist planted in the dirt. He narrowed his eyes at the Wither. "If only I had another elemental user with me who had a Vision other than Anemo... I could trigger a basic Swirl reaction." Venti analyzed the floating boss. "That would probably stagger it long enough for me to prepare my burst at least..."

Venti glanced back at Oliver, who was still safely tucked inside his wind enclosure. The bard's eyes widened slightly as a spark of inspiration hit him. I could do that... Venti thought to himself. But I haven't made one in so long...

He shot a few more arrows to keep the Wither distracted. He debated the idea furiously in his head. He didn't want to put Oliver in the line of fire, but... Oliver was already in mortal danger just by traveling through these hostile dimensions with him. I don't have a choice.

The bard abruptly stopped shooting. He diverted his full attention away from the monster and toward his boyfriend. "Ollie! I have an idea!"

"Huh? What idea!? What is it?" Oliver yelled back.

"No time to explain, literally!" Venti shouted. "Even though I have to, we gotta rush!"

Oliver looked past the bard and saw the Wither hovering directly behind him. His eyes widened in absolute horror. "VENTI, LOOK OUT!"

Venti didn't react fast enough. The Wither launched a point-blank explosive that slammed into the ground between them. Grass and dirt blocks went flying into the air as the sheer force of the blast shattered the surface, giving way to a massive, hidden cave system directly below.

Knocked off balance, Venti's focus broke, and the wind barrier around Oliver instantly dissipated. Together, the human and the Archon went tumbling into the dark abyss of the cavern.

Venti recovered quickly in mid-air. He re-centered his senses, aiming his hands downward to form a swirling cushion of Anemo energy beneath them.

Oliver panted heavily, clutching onto his boyfriend for dear life as Venti slowly and gently lowered them both down to the stone blocks below.

"There we go," Venti said softly as their feet touched solid ground.

Oliver blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dim lighting as he looked around at the incredibly familiar sight of a Minecraft cave system. He shook his head and looked up at the massive, jagged opening high above them. Sunlight trickled through the hole, but it barely reached the cavern floor. "I think it's still up there," Oliver said softly, but his voice echoing slightly. "I... I thought it would have followed us." He frowned, looking toward the dark tunnels. "It's being controlled by Nerraw. You'd assume it'd be a bit smarter, right?"

"Right," Venti nodded, glancing up at the distant sky. "I can get us back up there, no problem. But... not when you're naked with nothing."

Oliver nodded, "Yeah, I—WAIT, WHAT?!" Oliver choked on his own breath.

Venti quickly waved his hands, shaking his head. "I mean, naked of powers! Hehe! Not like that!"

Oliver blinked, still recovering from the heart attack. "Powers? But... I thought we established that I'm not in my avatar anymore."

"Yes, I know," Venti nodded, a mischievous glint in his eye. "But the wind may find a way!" Venti winked and suddenly turned his back to Oliver.

Oliver just stood there in the damp, cold cave. In the distance, he heard the low, eerie scrape of ambient cave noises. He leaned to the side, trying to see what the bard was doing.

Venti, still facing away, caught Oliver out of the corner of his eye. "Hey! No peeking!"

"What are you doing?" Oliver arched an eyebrow.

"It's a surprise!"

Oliver could see Venti's hands moving rapidly, as if he were shaping or grabbing something out of thin air, but from his angle, he couldn't make out the details. He sighed and stayed planted in his spot.

Venti glanced over his shoulder again. Oliver blinked as he noticed Venti's eyes intensely scanning his face, as if he were searching for a specific detail. Then, the bard looked forward again.

"Uhhh... What were you looking for?" Oliver asked, deeply confused.

"Just checking to see if you have an ear piercing, and hooray! You do!" Venti beamed.

"Ear piercing?" Oliver touched his earlobe. "Oh! Yeah, I..." Oliver squinted. "Huh. I've been in stasis for so long, I'm surprised the hole didn't close up..." He shifted his attention back to his boyfriend. "Venti? What are you doing? Why did you even ask about a piercing?" He suddenly noticed a bright, icy blue glow radiating from Venti the front of Venti. He tried to lean over for another peek.

Venti giggled. "Hey, I said no peeking!" He playfully sent a gust of wind directly into Oliver's face.

"Ah!" Oliver gasped and stumbled slightly, blinking rapidly. "What—hey!"

"Hehe! When I say no peeking, I mean it~!" Eventually, the brilliant blue glow faded. "Alright. I'm done!" Venti turned around, one hand balled into a tight fist.

Venti smiled warmly and slowly opened his fingers. Resting in the palm of his hand was a glowing, icy-blue Cryo Vision, flawlessly embedded within a silver earring casing.

Oliver gasped, his eyes darting between his boyfriend's face and the divine artifact sitting in his palm. "V-Venti, you..."

"I am bestowing a Vision upon you!" Venti declared with a proud smile. "Normally, humans would have to go through years of training, hardship, and trials before they could be awarded a Vision by the gods of Celestia or an Archon. But this is a dire situation, and I need some help!" Venti stepped up close to his boyfriend, rising onto his tiptoes as he reached up to carefully slide the earring into Oliver's piercing. "This is why I was looking."

Oliver blinked repeatedly. The lore theories... were they real? Or was this just a thing just for Sub-3921?

A warm blush crept across Oliver's face from the sudden, intimate proximity of Venti being so close to him. He couldn't help but get lost in Venti's bright teal eyes. "But why an earring, though?"

Venti smiled as he secured the backing. "Ehe, well, I think it looks classy, for one! It really complements your beautiful brown skin! But I also chose it for practical reasons. It is entirely possible to lose a Vision. Since you haven't lived the typical life of a Vision-bearer in Teyvat, you might lose it rather quickly if I just made it a heavy pin attached to your shirt." Venti gently flicked the crystal. "But you can't lose an earring, right? Ehe, unless it's too loose, but I made this one perfectly!"

Venti stepped backward, admiring his handiwork. "So, besides the newfound elemental power, how does the earring itself feel?"

"It feels... great, actually!" Oliver nodded, gently touching the casing. "It honestly feels more comfortable than the earrings I used to buy for myself!" He smiled, fascinated by the sensation. "Like, seriously, it feels really good. Kinda... cool, too? It has a slight chill to it."

"That would be the Cryo energy," Venti giggled.

Oliver arched an eyebrow, his gamer brain kicking in. "Why Cryo, though? If an Archon can actually forge Visions on the spot... wouldn't you make one of your own element? Shouldn't I have an Anemo Vision?"

Venti shook his head. "Archons can forge any Vision they feel is a perfect fit for the person they wish to bestow it upon. Though, I do see where you are coming from, as that makes more historical sense. But I believe it works best like this. Especially now, with how united the Archons are becoming, none of us are strictly limited to our own nations' elements anymore. We can give any, but can't use any for ourselves."

"Have you ever given someone a Vision before?" Oliver asked in awe.

"Not in a very, very long time. I was going to make one for the Traveler in the past, but he had already found his own way with the Statues of The Seven, so I decided not to interfere."

Oliver gently traced the smooth glass of the glowing orb in the earring casing. "You still didn't answer my question, though, why Cyro?"

"Oh, do you not like Cryo?" Venti tilted his head, looking slightly worried. "Sorry, I was in such a rush, I didn't even bother to ask what element you liked best. Though, if you had asked for Anemo, I would have had to deny it."

"No, it's nothing like that! Cryo is cool..." Oliver blinked, realizing what he just said. "No pun intended..."

Venti snorted. "Tighnari would have strangled you for that one."

Oliver laughed. "Haha... basically, I was just asking why you picked this specific element for me."

"Well, babe, everyone in this cave right now knows that I am an Archon. But, as you also know, I don't have my Gnosis." Venti pointed to his chest. "Archons can still use their powers without it, but it's greatly severed. Using my raw powers to blow up that warehouse took a massive toll on me, and I have to wait for that strength to naturally build back up. At the moment, I can only use basic Anemo attacks."

Oliver nodded along, following the logic. "Oh, so you're weaker right now? Wait, so you needed me as a support to help?"

"Exactly!"

"But... what can Cryo do? If basic wind can't do squat, how could this?"

Venti placed his hands on his hips, slipping seamlessly into his instructor self. "My basic powers still rival a master Vision-holder in terms of sheer strength. When another element mixes with my Anemo currents, it triggers a powerful—"

Oliver's eyes widen as he pointed a finger at Venti, "SWIRL! SWIRL, I KNOW THIS!!!" Oliver shouted, completely cutting Venti off, smiling greatly.

The sudden, passionate outburst startled Venti so badly he froze, his eyes wide.

Oliver quickly cleared his throat, his face burning red. "S-Sorry. Just... the Genshin Impact fanboy coming out of me..."

Venti snorted, bursting into laughter. "Haha! I sometimes forget you already know how my world's mechanics work. But yes! Swirl! My wind and your new Cryo powers will chain-react and stun that 'Wither' until I'm ready to use my full strength again! Though I'll probably just use my burst and not my raw Archon powers." He looked at Oliver seriously. "Does this world have innocent residents? I don't want to take that risk. I refuse to hurt innocent people. I'm not like my immature and brash self from when I was in my hundreds."

Hearing that last part made Oliver chuckle. "Wow. That sounds incredibly cursed."

"Hey! What can I say? An Archon ages slowly and beautifully!"

Oliver giggled. "And you say you were immature. You're still completely silly, you know~"

Venti playfully rolled his eyes. "Hey, there is absolutely nothing wrong with being playful! It's good for the soul!" He gently shoved Oliver's shoulder. "Now, let's have you do a little practice run before we head

back up to the surface, yeah? Try to..." Venti stopped dead in his tracks. He blinked slowly. "Wait... oh, crap."

Oliver tilted his head. "What is it?"

"A weapon is needed to channel a Vision's power," Venti groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "Out of all the things for me to forget, it's the most basic rule."

"Oh... Uh.... I don't have a weapon."

"I know," Venti sighed. "Any weapon would have done. A sword, a bow... but I cannot just conjure weapons out of thin air. Great. The Vision is practically useless now unless you have a weapon. I'd hand over my bow for you to use, but then that puts me out of a weapon, ehe..."

Oliver looked around the damp, dark, blocky space. His eyes scanned the stone walls until they landed on exactly what he was looking for: a block of raw, Iron Ore.

"Venti, could any weapon work?"

"Any?" Venti dropped his hand and looked at Oliver. "Well, yes. Anything can act as a conduit for the Vision. But even as an Archon, I can't just spawn a sword on a whim as I said. So, I cannot make one for you."

Oliver didn't look away from the ore. "This is the world of Minecraft."

Venti straightened up, intrigued. "Does this place has weapons? Ooh! You're thinking of finding one! How long will that take?"

Oliver pointed to the Iron Ore embedded in the wall. "It's more like you have to make your own." But as Oliver said it, the agonizing logic of the game's world set in. To mine iron, he needed a stone pickaxe. To get stone, he needed a wooden pickaxe. To get wood, he needed trees. And the trees were currently on the surface being guarded by a Wither.

Oliver stared into the pitch-black depths of the cavern tunnel stretching out before them. "We could look for an abandoned mineshaft..." Oliver muttered quietly. But the thought sent a shiver down his spine. Minecraft on a computer screen was a fun survival game. In real life? It was a claustrophobic horror film.

He did not want to venture into the deep dark.

And literally... the Deep Dark. His absolute worst nightmare would be wandering into a near a Sculk sensor and coming face-to-face with the Warden.

"A mineshaft? In here?" Venti asked.

Oliver hugged his arms. "It could be anywhere... we could be walking for hours and never find one. And we don't have torches or tools anyway. Also, the cave might just be a dead end."

Venti smiled his trademark radiant smile and suddenly grabbed his boyfriend's hand, his optimism unwavering. "Well, we definitely won't find it just standing around in the dark all day, will we? Come on! Let's go!"

"B-But what about the Wither up above?" Oliver stammered as he was pulled along.

"It didn't even follow us down here," Venti reasoned.

"Which makes zero sense to me! I don't think Nerraw is stupid. Why would it just let us go?"

"I dunno. But either way, we have to find a sword for you."

Chapter 40: Creeper? Aww Man.

Navigating the blocky cave system was a grueling in reality . The terrain wasn't a smooth; it was a jagged staircase of massive, meter-high stone cubes. Steve could have hopped up them without breaking a sweat, but for a standard human? It was an exhausting, full-body workout.

"Ugh," Oliver grunted, his shoes scrambling for purchase as he hauled himself over the edge of a stone block. "This is definitely a workout..."

Venti, light on his feet and blessed by the wind, was already several blocks ahead, scaling the cavern effortlessly. He turned, looking down at his struggling boyfriend. "Huh? Is it hard for you?"

"It is..." Oliver panted, wiping his forehead. The sheer scale of the blocks from a his perspective was daunting. He couldn't just casually leap up the blocks like how Steve would.

"It wasn't so hard for me," Venti teased lightly. As Oliver neared the Archon's area, Venti reached down, grabbed his boyfriend's arms, and easily hoisted him up the rest of the way.

"You have the power of Barbatos and anime on your side," Oliver joked between breaths, letting out a breathless laugh.

Venti giggled, dusting off Oliver's shirt. "Yeah, whatever that was again. I remember you saying something about this 'anime' thing." He gave Oliver a brief, comforting hug and pressed a quick kiss to his lips before pulling away with a bright smile. "And I am Barbatos! So... I get all his power regardless!"

Oliver smiled warmly, his heart fluttering from the kiss. He recalled one of Venti's voice lines from the game and giggled. "Thank Barbatos..." he paused, squinting at Venti. "Wait a minute..."

Venti had started walking ahead again, but hearing the phrase made him stop and giggle. "Why do I have a feeling I might have said that before...?"

"Maybe you have~," Oliver giggled.

The deeper they trekked, the darker the cave became. But soon, a faint, flickering orange glow began to bleed into the tunnel from the distance.

"Ooh! Some light!" Venti pointed ahead. "Could that be the surface? Or, ooh! That mineshaft you mentioned?"

Oliver was instantly wary. "Maybe, but stay close," he warned, grabbing onto Venti's arm. The reality of Minecraft mobs was setting in. They hadn't encountered any yet, but if they were going deeper and deeper underground, it was only a matter of time.

Venti giggled at how tightly Oliver was clinging to him. "Babe, I'm the one with the bow, remember? Are there other monsters around? Hopefully not as dangerous as the Wither."

"No, not typically," Oliver whispered, his eyes scanning the pitch-black corners of the tunnel. "And they're usually really loud. We'd hear a zombie or a skeleton if one were close." He swallowed hard. "All except one... one that's completely silent. It just creeps up right behind you."

"Hmm," Venti hummed, curious. "Which one would that be?"

Oliver opened his mouth to answer, but he wasn't prepared for the reality of the game's most infamous sound.

Sssssssss.

Neither of them had time to react before the explosion violently rocked the cavern. "Woah!" Venti shouted. The Archon instantly found his footing, throwing an arm out toward his boyfriend. In a split second, a tempest of Anemo energy swirled around him, locking him safely in place against the shockwave, befoire he got slammed into the wall.

Oliver squeezed his eyes shut. When he slowly opened them, he was staring face-to-face with a block of coal ore.

Venti sighed, slowly dropping his hand and letting the wind barrier fade. "That was close."

Oliver let out a shaky breath, standing upright on his own as the adrenaline faded. He frantically dusted the pixelated dirt off his clothes. "Okay," he joked, his voice trembling slightly as he tried to keep the mood light. "I think I've had enough of Minecraft: VR Edition. Or Minecraft: Ready Player One Edition."

Venti stepped up behind him, gently rubbing circles into his back. "Babe, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

Venti rubbed his chin, looking genuinely concerned. "Babe... I don't mean this in a mean way... but it seems like the people of your dimension aren't... the strongest. Like... you know..." He struggled to find the right words, desperate not to offend his boyfriend.

But Oliver didn't take it to heart. He just laughed and waved Venti off. "Venti, I told you!" he giggled. "That's why I said you could probably take on Doctor Barclay and he'd just wither away into nothing. Even Diona could probably kill him with just one burst of her Cryo energy. We just aren't built like you guys. We're... very basic."

Venti smiled, but his worry lingered. "Yeah, but... will you be strong enough to actually handle the powers I just gave you?" He pointed to the icy-blue earring. "It won't be too much for your body to handle?"

"Well—" Oliver blinked, considering it. "I'm not sure. But I don't think so. I think I'll be fine." He reached up, gently fiddling with the casing on his earlobe. "I haven't actually used it yet since I still need a sword. But I do feel... cold? Like the Cryo is actually flowing through me." Still, feeling it and channeling it were two different things.

"Oh! I have an idea!" Venti gasped suddenly.

"You always do~," Oliver smiled.

"But come on, before I explain, let's get into the light first." Venti pointed toward the glowing area up ahead of the cavern.

As they stepped out of the narrow tunnel, the source of the light revealed itself. Tucked away in a massive stone hollow was a bubbling, mid-sized lava lake, bathing the surrounding cavern in a bright, searingly warm glow.

"My word..." Venti marveled, stepping right up to the edge of the pit. "Is that straight-up lava?"

"Yep," Oliver said, quickly grabbing Venti's arm and yanking him back a step.

"At least it feels warm and cozy!" Venti beamed, stretching his arms out to soak in the intense heat. "I was feeling a little chilly in those tunnels!"

Oliver could only laugh. Of course Venti would find comfort in a pool of deadly, molten rock. "Just don't fall in."

"Trust me, I won't! We've got plenty of room." Venti turned his back to the heat. "So, about my idea!" He held out his hand, and in a brilliant flash of teal light and swirling wind, his beautiful bow materialized in his grasp. He flipped it around and held it out to Oliver. "This!"

Oliver blinked, stunned. He slowly reached out to take it. "Uh? Your bow? But I thought you said you wouldn't give me your weapon because then you'd be defenseless."

"Well, I'm not giving it to you for battle! It's just to see if your Cryo Vision actually works with you," Venti explained, pointing to the weapon now resting in Oliver's hands. "Anyone can use any Vision with a weapon. Even though mine is paired with Anemo, it can temporarily act as a conduit for another element."

"Oh!!!" Oliver's eyes lit up as the game mechanics clicked in his head. "Oh, right! I remember I used to use your bow on Childe, just to try out the different playstyles with him since he was Hydro, and I—" He stopped dead when he noticed Venti staring at him in utter confusion. "...You... don't understand a single word I'm saying."

Venti snorted. "Not really. But I do know it's about that 'video game' you said you played!" he giggled. "And wow, you know Childe? The Fatui Harbinger?"

"I know almost everyone in the game," Oliver smiled. "Mostly the male characters, though, because I am extremely gay."

Venti was about to reply, but the sheer, blunt honesty of the statement caught him off guard, and he burst into a fit of laughter so hard he nearly tipped backward into the lava.

"I... I don't know where that came from. It just slipped out—" Oliver stammered, his face burning red.

"Oh my word," Venti giggled, clutching his stomach and shaking his head. "Why do I get the feeling you had a crush on me before you even met me? Like you saw me in this 'video game' and instantly fell for me?"

Oliver blushed furiously and looked away. "Yep, that's exactly what happened... Haha..."

Venti gasped playfully, covering his mouth. "What? You saw my Archon outfit, got one glimpse of my belly button, and just melted right on the spot?"

Oliver swallowed hard. The memory hit him like a truck— He remembered when he heard Genshin Impact had a comic on Webtoon, and went to cheek it out. Seeing Venti in his Barbatos attire, that midriff, that deep, coin-slot navel on full display at the front of the page... he remembered having to physically put his phone down to stop his racing heart.

And now, that feeling was back with a vengeance. It wasn't just the lava lake making him sweat anymore, and the Cryo Vision chilling his earlobe wasn't doing a damn thing to cool him down.

Venti noticed the dramatic shift in Oliver's expression and his playful teasing melted into a soft, apologetic smile. "Oh no~ I'm sorry! Getting you all flustered when we're trapped inside a tight cave~ Shame on me~"

Oliver gripped the bow tightly, desperate to change the subject. "C-Can we just... you know, do the training?"

Venti snorted. "Okay, okay, fine~!" He winked, then clapped his hands together, shifting back into instructor mode. "So," he pointed to the weapon. "This is one of my bows. It's called—"

Oliver, still flustered but eager to prove his nerd knowledge, blurted out, "Skyward Harp!!!"

Venti blinked. "Uh? No?" he corrected gently. "That's not the Skyward Harp. That's my oldest bow. This is my newer one: The Daybreak Chronicles. I mostly use this one now when I really want to pack a good punch."

"Wait? It's not Skyward—" Oliver brought the bow closer to his face, inspecting the intricate design. "Oh, right. It's not. It's... not even Elegy for the End?" He looked back up at Venti. "What did you say it was again?"

"The Daybreak Chronicles," Venti smiled proudly. "Guess you don't know everything, haha."

Oliver stared at the unfamiliar weapon, his gamer brain rapidly calculating. "Orrrr... maybe this was added in a update while I was in stasis." He grimaced, a profound sense of loss washing over him. "Which means I missed a chance to pull for this... damn it."

"Pull?" Venti asked, tilting his head.

Oliver quickly coughed. He did not have the energy to explain the brutal, soul-crushing gambling mechanics of Genshin's gacha system, nor did he want to explain how he nearly smashed his monitor after losing a 50/50 to Qiqi while they were standing by a Minecraft lava lake deep in the caves. "Well, uh... about the bow... what do I do?"

"Oh! Well, it should come naturally. Just let your new energy flow into it."

"Okay." Oliver took a deep breath. He hadn't mentioned it to Venti yet, but the second he gripped the bow, he did feel a shift inside him—a cold, surging hum echoing from his earring down into his fingertips.

"Your power should channel the moment you draw the string. Instead of my Anemo arrows, it should conjure Cryo arrows."

"But... I don't have any arrows," Oliver pointed out.

Venti facepalmed. "Oh, right! Duh..." He quickly held out his hand, summoning a glowing arrow from thin air. "You wouldn't have any since you're not naturally a bow user. I'll have to lend you one." He placed it gently into Oliver's hand. "This is an Anemo arrow, but it should transmute to Cryo the second it senses your Vision."

Sure enough, the moment Oliver closed his fingers around the shaft of the arrow, the swirling green wind snapped into a sharp, crystalline spike of pure ice.

"Woah..." Oliver breathed, captivated by the frost radiating from his hand.

Venti giggled. "Ehe!" He stepped out of the way, gesturing grandly toward the bubbling pit. "And look what we have here! The perfect target practice. Shoot the lava, to see if your Vision works,"

Oliver looked down at the legendary bow and the single, freezing arrow. He had used a bow exactly once in his life... playing Wii Sports Resort.

Definitely not the same thing, but he figured he knew the basics. He gripped the handle tightly, raised the bow, held on the icy arrow then slid it into place, and pulled back the glowing draw string. Closing one eye, he lined up his shot with the center of the molten pool.

He let go.

The Cryo arrow sliced through the heated air, striking the top layer of the pixelated lava. It didn't burn. Instead, a massive web of frost erupted from the point of impact. The piercing cold violently, and rapidly expanded, instantly solidifying the thick liquid into a pitch-black sheet of obsidian. The freezing energy surged outward until the entire lake was choked out, plunging that section of the cavern back into darkness. Jagged icicles instantly formed and hung from the stone ceiling above.

Oliver lowered the bow, staring in absolute awe at the frozen wasteland he had just created. "Woah..."

Venti beamed, clapping his hands excitedly. "It works! Your Vision is working perfectly!"

Oliver smiled, a proud, ecstatic grin spreading across his face. "Woah, I just did that! And I'm not even in my avatar! I'm... I'm literally using magic!"

"I'm so glad you can channel it! Now we just have to find you a sword so we can get out of here!" Venti reached his hand out, waiting for his bow.

Oliver happily handed it back. "It was a thrill holding your weapon," he chuckled. "Even if it was just for a minute. I actually used it!" It was, undoubtedly, one of the best moment of his life.

Venti giggled, taking it back. "I don't just let anyone handle my gear, you know! Ehe~! You get boyfriend privileges~!" As soon as Venti touched the bow, it vanished in a quick, pulsing breeze of teal light.

Oliver watched the particles fade. "So, where does it go? When you do that?"

"When I dismiss it?" Venti asked. "Well, all Vision holders are granted a tiny pocket of invisible space. It's almost identical to the domains we Archons have, only mortals can't step inside those—they only fit weapons and small items." Venti tapped his chin. "I just store mine in my personal Archon domain since I do not have a vision. You should have one tied to your new Vision. Well, I'd assume so."

Oliver nodded enthusiastically. "Wow, it's literally Hammerspace!" The cartoon logic thrilled him. He wondered if he could stash a comedically large mallet in there and pull it out to smash a Hilichurl like a Looney Tunes episode. "You think I have one?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Venti admitted. "I'd hand my bow back to let you test it, but if you stash it and can't figure out how to summon it back, I'd be out of a weapon!" Venti chuckled. "And even though you're my boyfriend, I can't have you taking my prized weapons~!"

Oliver laughed, placing a hand over his heart. "Hey! If that happened, it would be a total accident!" Though, he understood the fear. If Venti's signature weapon randomly glitched out of his inventory in the actual game, Oliver would probably cry, too.

With their elemental test a massive success, the two set off deeper into the cave, determined to find the materials for a sword.

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Back In The Real World:

The sterile, fluorescent hum of the facility pressed heavily on the boys as they waited for Oliver and Venti to return. Some paced the sterile corridors, but most remained anchored in the breakroom—the only place with actual chairs.

Mark and Thomas had departed earlier to search for the missing duo. Though Mark had bluntly stated that tracking them down across an infinite multiverse of dimensions was a near-impossible task, they all agreed
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it was better than sitting idly in the lab.

Mark had popped back briefly, dropping off provisions that were significantly better than the breakroom's stale offerings. "Here," Mark had announced, setting two perfectly square, pixelated cakes and a plate of blocky cookies on the table. "I managed to breach the Minecraft dimension while tracking them."

"Oh, wow... that's actual Minecraft food?" August asked, leaning forward in his plastic chair to inspect what Mark had brought..

"Yep," Mark replied, pointing to the pixelated icing. "Eat up. It's perfectly edible." Without missing a beat, he summoned his weapon, sliced a tear into reality, and stepped through the portal. "I'm heading back out. If I don't find them, let's hope they show up here." The portal snapped shut behind him.

August picked up a blocky cookie, admiring its strange texture, and took a bite. "Hmm! This is really good!" He turned to Jasper, who was already standing up. "Way better than all the bugs I had to eat, haha. Though, believe it or not, some of them weren't terrible." He paused mid-chew. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just heading to the restroom," Jasper replied quietly. "I'll be back."

August nodded, then turned his attention to Arnold, who was sitting silently beside him. "Hey, Richard, wanna try?" August offered him a cookie.

Arnold stared blankly at the treat. "I'm not that hungry," he muttered.

"You sure? It really is edible," August encouraged with a soft smile. "Beats the stale candy in the vending machine or those flavorless cup noodles."

Arnold hesitated, his eyes lingering on the pixelated chocolate chips. Finally, he sighed and took it.

"Seriously, it tastes amazing," August promised.

"I'll be the judge of that," Arnold took a small, tentative bite. He chewed slowly, his dull expression shifting slightly. "Okay. It's very good."

"See? Told you!"

Arnold swallowed and took another, larger bite. "Tastes just like I remember."

"Remember?" August blinked, momentarily confused before the horrific reality of Arnold's situation dawned on him. "Oh... you were inside of..."

Arnold was still trapped in the in his altered existence.

"Geez..." August shook his head sympathetically. "Your memory... it's just tied into the world you went inside,"

"Yeah," Arnold whispered, staring at his hands. "I still don't fully understand it. But... that's what my life is now." He wiped a few blocky crumbs from his mouth. "I thought I was just a human. Just a teen living his life. Then, it turns out I was a fictional character named Kid Powers, and now... now we have this shit." He looked at August, his eyes hollow with a deep, existential grief. "Richard. Kid Powers. And now... Arnold? That name doesn't even ring a bell! When I thought I was Richard, hearing the name 'Kid Powers' at least struck a chord deep inside me. But Arnold? Nothing."

Of course it meant nothing, as August thought. Arnold had his timeline rewritten. The old Arnold may as well be long dead, even if his physical body is functioning. "What was the life you actually lived in there?" August asked gently.

Arnold blinked, staring at the floor. "It's confusing." He swallowed hard. "I am the grandchild of Mr. Litwack."

August recognized the name instantly from his childhood of watching Wreck-It Ralph. The arcade owner. Arnold had been integrated into the universe's lore. "So... your full name is Richard Litwack?"

Arnold nodded slowly. "Yes." He hugged his arms around himself. "Well, I was? Am? Both... work." He let out a long, heavy sigh. "I'm not a human. I'm a game character from the Kid Powers cabinet. Grandpa found my cabinet in a junkyard and hooked it up to the outlet. But there's more to it... I was always an experiment. I had a brother who was the first experiment... And... he was a virus. It... he was the reason all the game characters came alive in the first place."

August was speechless. The sheer depth of the lore was staggering. Arnold wasn't just dropped into a story; he had been intricately woven into the foundation of its world, complete with family ties and a tragic backstory. And August knew exactly who was responsible for this nightmare, as did everyone in this lab.

Desperate to offer some small comfort to the broken boy beside him, August pushed the plate closer. "Here. It's probably way too much sugar, but at least it's not from our depressing world, right?"

Arnold took another cookie with a weak, appreciative smile. "Yeah. Video game food is always the best. My boyfriends would tell you how much I love the pancakes in Sugar Rush."

August smiled back, reaching for another cookie himself. He was just about to take a bite when a cold, synthetic voice suddenly echoed from the facility's PA system above them.

"Motion Detected... Transfer Building 2, Front Door."

August froze, the cookie halfway to his mouth. "Huh?" He looked over at Arnold, whose weak smile had instantly vanished, replaced by mirrored panic.

August dropped the cookie, bolted out of his plastic chair, and sprinted from the breakroom. He skidded to a halt in the main hallway and whipped his head to the right, facing the heavy, knobless exterior door at the end of the corridor. He rushed forward and peered through the small, reinforced glass window.

Outside, the blistering blizzard was still raging. Through the howling, thick white snow, a solitary figure was trudging slowly toward the facility's entrance. The person was heavily bundled in a massive, thick winter overcoat—the kind designed for an Antarctic expedition. The heavy hood was pulled up, completely obscuring their face.

August gasped, his breath fogging the cold glass as his eyes went wide with terror.

"Oh, fuck..." He scrambled backward, his heart hammering against his ribs. "Is that... is that my dad?" he stammered, frantically looking back out the window. "I can't tell!" he panic-whispered to himself. "Shit!"

He spun around and sprinted wildly back down the hall, realizing with sickening clarity that there was nowhere to run. The facility was entirely open. There were no hiding spots. DId he gather up everyone and play alseep in the chairs? Shit... August can't do that... Arnold's old transfer chair was complety busted.

"Guys! Guys!" August screamed as he slid back into the breakroom. "We have a massive problem!"

Chapter 41: Diamonds Tonight

The bard and the human finally reached the end of the long cavern tunnel, but the path forward abruptly vanished. They stood at the edge of a massive drop-off, staring out into a sprawling, pitch-black abyss.

"Woah, that goes on forever," Venti breathed, leaning cautiously over the sheer ledge.

Oliver stepped up behind him, peering over the bard's shoulder. "That's right..." Oliver muttered, a sudden realization washing over him. "I completely forgot Minecraft updated to this!" The hollow space beyond the ledge seemed infinite. Jagged stalactites hung from a ceiling that was easily a hundred blocks above them, and the cavern floor plunged at least a hundred blocks down.

"The Caves & Cliffs update dropped a year or so before I got picked for the internship..." Oliver whispered, shaking his head at the overwhelming scale of the generated terrain. "I seriously forgot how much bigger this game got." He sighed, looking out at the expanse. "I'm not saying we can't explore all of that, but how do we even get down without breaking every bone in our bodies?"

Venti stepped away from the edge and smiled brightly. "We do what I always do when my sweet little human gets stuck up high~!" The bard wrapped his arms around his boyfriend, pulling Oliver flush against his chest in a tight, secure hug.

Oliver gasped softly. "Oh! Right!" He giggled, melting into the embrace and burying his face into the crook of Venti's neck.

With a powerful surge of Anemo energy, Venti launched them both off the ledge. The wind caught them perfectly, carrying them out of the tunnel and into the massive, open expanse of the cavern. "What are we looking for again?" Venti asked over the soft, rushing air.

"Iron!" Oliver replied. He pulled his head away from Venti's neck, squinting at the dark terrain rushing by below. "But... I think that's Deepslate down there. It only spawns in the lowest parts of the Overworld, beneath the stone layer. I have no idea if you can even break it with wood. I don't remember how it works." Oliver pressed his cheek against Venti's chest again. "Still, keep an eye out for a mineshaft. If this works exactly like the game, the shafts should have chests. Hopefully, I can find some good loot."

"Ooh! Chests, you say?" Venti beamed, his eyes lighting up. "Interesting! We have treasure chests scattered all over our world, too. Who placed them there? Only time knows!" Venti chuckled cryptically.

Oliver blinked. He looked up at Venti's face. "Wait, seriously? Who did place the chests?"

"Hmm~ No idea!" Venti hummed innocently.

Oliver sighed. Of course Venti would dodge the question. "Too much of a lore drop?"

"Well, if you must know, I placed... a few," Venti giggled. "Only a few! I have no idea who found them later on, though!" Venti chuckled. "Forgot which ones I placed though, and ended up finding my own stuff... A little embarrassing,"

Oliver snorted. "Very~!" he shook his head with a smile, turning his attention back to the cavern floor. "Just look for the mineshaft, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Venti nodded confidently. "I'm sure I'll recognize one, no problem. Even if it is made out of those cubes. Would it be tucked into the side walls of the cave? If it is, we might need to get a little

closer to see."

"Closer to the walls?"

"Yeah," Venti said. "Hang on!" He held Oliver tighter as he shifted the wind currents, drifting them smoothly toward the jagged perimeter of the massive cavern.

"Woah!" Oliver gasped as the stone wall rapidly approached.

"Don't worry, I've got you. Just like when we were in that dark abyss place."

"Ugh, please don't remind me of that. I was absolutely sure we were gonna die," Oliver groaned, hiding his face in the bard's tunic.

"Well, I would have made sure that didn't happen," Venti said softly. As they glided along the cavern perimeter, his teal eyes scanned the shadows. "Hmm," Venti hummed. "I see something ahead, but it doesn't really look like a mineshaft. It looks more like a... half-finished wooden bridge?"

"Huh?" Oliver pulled his face away, twisting his head to look. "Wait! That's it! That's the mineshaft inside of the deepslate area!"

Venti arched a skeptical eyebrow. "Really? That doesn't look like a mine to me. Why does it stick all the way out here, just hanging over the abyss?"

Oliver shook his head, "Yeah Minecraft's got some... questionable terrain generation,"

"Alright. Well, I'm landing here," Venti announced, hovering toward the floating wooden structure. "This wood should be solid, right?"

"Definitely. Physics doesn't exist in Minecraft! Haha!" But a split-second later, Oliver froze. He vividly remembered the grass blocks flying chaotically through the air when the Wither attacked them. "Uhh... actually, on second thought, fly into the actual tunnel entrance in the stone wall. Let's not risk standing on the broken bridge."

"Sure thing," Venti smiled. Instead of touching down on the oak planks, he glided smoothly over the gap, steering them straight into the dark, wooden-framed tunnel embedded in the deepslate wall.

Venti gently lowered his feet to the pixelated floor. "There we go! Solid stone blocks!"

Oliver let go of the bard, stepping back to get a look at their surroundings.

"So, are we good? This is a mineshaft? A good one?" Venti asked, looking around at the cobwebs and support beams.

Oliver nodded slowly. "It's a mineshaft, alright. Whether it's good is up for debate. There's no telling if it'll actually have chests. Or even exposed ores."

"You said something about needing wood earlier," Venti pointed to a thick oak planks acting as a support beam. "Is that wood good enough?"

"Hmm." Oliver stepped up to the beam. He reached out, his fingers tracing the blocky surface, genuinely captivated by the texture. "This dimension is literally just Minecraft with ray-tracing on," Oliver muttered in awe. "Look at the fibers in the wood. It's like having shaders on. But it's still pixel-like. Interesting,"

He took a step back and balled his hand into a tight fist.

Venti arched an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

Oliver didn't answer. He just pulled his arm back and punched the wooden block as hard as he could.

"Ahh!" Oliver instantly recoiled, cradling his hand against his chest. "Ow, that hurt..."

Venti stared in utter bewilderment, wondering why his boyfriend had just randomly squared up with a pillar. "Babe? Are you trying to break it like that? I... I don't think it's physically possible to break solid oak planks with your bare hands. Unless you're built like Varka, of course. And even he would have trouble with wood this thick." But as Venti looked closer, he noticed a faint, jagged crack spiderwebbing across the block's surface. He blinked. "Wait a minute. That wasn't there before. Babe, did you do that?!"

Venti spun to look at Oliver, a teasing grin spreading across his face. "Are you secretly a little sexy powerhouse~?"

Oliver just giggled, rubbing his bruised knuckles. "I—well, this is just game logic! Steve can break stuff by just punching it!" He narrowed his eyes at the plank, raised his fist, and slammed it into the wood a second time.

"Ahh!" He winced louder, shaking out his hand. His knuckles were already turning an angry red.

Venti quickly lunged forward, catching Oliver's wrist before he could take a third swing.

Oliver didn't fight it. He let out a defeated sigh. "Yeah... it looks like the dimension does work like the game. See? The block is cracking. But I'm... I'm not Steve. I'll break my hand before I break the block."

Venti nodded firmly. "Which is exactly why I'm not letting you punch it anymore. Come on, we must be able to find a tool lying around."

Oliver nodded, turning back to the dark tunnel. "Let's try to find a chest. Hopefully, there's an axe inside. Or better yet, a pickaxe."

"They don't have swords?" Venti asked.

"Swords? In a mineshaft? I don't think they spawn in these loot chests..." Oliver thought out loud. "I guess for logical reasons... well, as much logic as Minecraft can actually have." Oliver said. "Swords do spawn in Ancient Cities down in the Deep Dark, though. But there is no way in hell I am ever going—"

Skurlk.

Oliver froze. His blood ran cold at the sickening, wet sound, instantly followed by a low, vibrating hum that echoed through the stone.

Venti stopped dead in his tracks. "What was—"

Oliver moved with speed, slapping his hand directly over Venti's mouth. He stood entirely paralyzed, his eyes locked onto the ground in pure panic. Venti arched an eyebrow, looking up at his boyfriend with wide, deeply confused eyes.

Slowly, carefully, Oliver lowered his hand from the bard's lips. The mineshaft tunnel split into a four-way intersection just ahead of them. Hugging the wall, Oliver crept forward and carefully peeked around the wooden support beam to look down the corridor to their left.

A sickening, bioluminescent blue hue pulsed faintly in the distance, bleeding into a suffocating, pitch-black abyss. The sculk infection had completely overtaken the tunnel, breaking off all the torches and drowning the area in unnatural darkness.

Venti leaned over Oliver's shoulder. "Ew! What is all that glowing blue muck?"

The exact second Venti's voice broke the silence, the Sculk Sensor triggered.

Which, in turn had instantly setting off a Sculk Shrieker hidden in the dark.

An agonizing, soul-piercing screech violently bounced off the cavern walls. The sheer volume of it made Oliver—and even the Anemo Archon—flinch in sheer terror, they almost shit their pants.

Instantly, the torches in their section of the mineshaft flickered violently before snuffing out completely. A oppressive darkness swallowed them whole.

Ba-dump

A massive, terrifying heartbeat echoed from the depths.

Oliver slowly backed up, his heart pounding out of his chest, and looked frantically down the opposite tunnel. After a few agonizing seconds, the torches flickered back to life. The darkness lifted.

The Warden wasn't coming.

"C-Come on, Venti," Oliver whispered frantically, grabbing Venti's hand and practically dragging him down the fully lit hallway. "We are not going into the Deep Dark."

For once, Venti didn't argue. He hurried alongside Oliver. "Normally I'd be all hot and ready for a fight, but something about that was genuinely unnerving," the bard admitted, glancing over his shoulder. "More so than the Wither."

"Hearing that from you is surprising," Oliver managed a weak, shaky smile.

"Though I'm sure I could have taken it on!" Venti quickly defended himself, puffing his chest out. "But the great Archon is on a break from big surprises like that right now."

"Hey, Venti..." Oliver said softly. "It's okay to be scared."

Venti giggled, the tension leaving his shoulders. "Trust me, I know. And I was! ehe!. That was definitely a scare. It felt like a completely different vibe entirely. I mean, regular dark caves are nothing, but there was something so wrong with that sound."

"Trust me," Oliver exhaled, finally slowing his pace. "We all thought the exact same thing when Mojang dropped that update. Jeb must have been chugging Potions of Swiftness when he and his team came up with that shit!"

Venti burst into a fit of soft giggles. He had no idea what Oliver was talking about, but the human's exasperation was hilarious.

"The weird part is that it still feels like Minecraft to me, but it's genuinely terrifying," Oliver shuddered. "And actually being here? Experiencing it in person? No thanks. Shit, I didn't even feel this stressed in SOMA's dimension..."

Venti laughed. "Yeah, this place is something else altogether!"

As they walked, the stone floor transitioned into wooden planks lined with old, rusty minecart tracks.

"Yes! Okay, this means we might actually find a chest!" Oliver cheered.

And right on cue, as they rounded the next corner, a lone minecart sat abandoned on the rails, a wooden chest resting squarely inside it.

"AH HAAAA! YES! FOUND IT!" Oliver sprinted toward it. "Let's hope for good loot!"

"It has to be great loot if I'm around!" Venti smiled proudly, planting his hands on his hips. "Now, if Benny were with you, maybe not so much~"

"Hey, don't be mean to Bennett!" Oliver laughed as he threw open the heavy wooden lid. He peered inside and immediately gasped. "Yes! Look! Jackpot!" He reached into the chest and pulled out a massive, pixelated tool. "And it's Iron, too! Such a lucky find!"

He held it up to the torchlight, admiring the blocky craftsmanship. "So cooool!" Oliver cooed, swinging it experimentally through the air. "I'm literally holding a Minecraft tool! And it's surprisingly light!"

Venti stepped up, eyeing the strange, pixelated object. "Hmm. Why does this remind me of Ajaw looking at this?"

Oliver froze mid-swing. "Uh, who?"

"Ajaw. He's always hanging out with Kinich."

Oliver blinked slowly. "Again... WHO!?" He let out a frustrated, dramatic groan. "Who the heck is Ajaw, and who the hell is Kinich?!" Oliver dragged a hand down his face, the reality of his situation setting in. "I should practically just give up on Genshin Impact. Even if I ever get a normal life back in my dimension, I've missed way too much shit to catch up."

Venti snorted, giggling into his hands. "Yeah, Kinich. He always has Ajaw by his side."

"He?" Oliver's eyes widened. "And I missed another male banner. Welp, there goes my dream of collecting all the guys."

Venti burst into a fresh fit of laughter. "Okay, I really need to see what this game looks like in your world. For you to react like this, it must be something dire!"

"Well, not really. It's not like I need it to breathe." Oliver paused, a terrible idea of a pun forming in his head. He looked at Venti with a totally straight face. "Well... I do need you to breathe. Because you knock the wind out of me~ Mr. Anemo!"

Oliver immediately cringed, his entire body shutting down in regret. That entire thing... definitely sounded better in his head.

"I am never doing that again," Oliver muttered, staring at the floor.

Venti threw his head back and howled with laughter. "Hahaha! Wow! I mean, the setup was there! But you executed it terribly!"

"Man, that was horrible," Oliver groaned, hiding his burning face behind his free hand.

Shaking off the embarrassment, Oliver reached back into the chest. "Ooh! Look what else I found!" He pulled his hand out, holding up a bright red, perfectly cube-shaped fruit. "Look!"

Venti gasped, his eyes going as wide as saucers at the sight of the square fruit. "OH MY WORD! AN APPLE?!"

Oliver snorted and handed it over.

"Awwww, for me!?" Venti beamed, taking the blocky apple like it was a sacred artifact. "Awww, thanks!" He inspected it from every angle. "Look how ripe and juicy it is! It's so perfect, and... CUBEY!"

Without hesitating, Venti took a massive bite out of the cube. His eyes fluttered shut in pure bliss. "Hmm~ mmm~ HMM, SO GOOD!"

Oliver had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Some of the words he was saying, was definitely lines he heard in the game, but with a more frantic twist. "Geez. Are apples just a drug to you?"

Venti giggled, chewing happily. "They're just sooo good! I love apples. And this? This blocky goodness? SOO GOOD!" He took another huge bite. "Mmhh-mmm! Such a nice treat to have after that scare earlier!" He swallowed the last piece and tossed the pixelated core onto the ground. "Hmm, that hit the spot! I was feeling a bit peckish earlier," Venti sighed contentedly, patting his stomach.

Oliver blinked. "Oh crap, were you hungry? You should have said something."

"Well, remember, I am an Archon! I don't need to eat much." Venti tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Though, it has been a while since my last meal. I forgot how many days it's been. An Archon can live up to five months without food. Still, our tummies do start to growl after just a week, ahaha." He shot Oliver a cheeky, sideways glance. "Not that you ever mind hearing them rumble, though~!"

Oliver rolled his eyes, blushing furiously. "Okay, don't start teasing me!" He quickly looked back down at his new tool to distract himself. "Huh... it's glowing purple. That means it's enchanted, too! Score!" He looked back at Venti with a wide grin. "Though... I have absolutely no idea what it's enchanted with."

"Enchanted?" Venti asked.

"Yeah. You usually do it with Enchanting Tables or anvils." Oliver turned toward the solid stone wall, making absolutely sure he was facing away from the Deep Dark biome.

With a giddy smile, Oliver swung the Iron Pickaxe into the stone block. It shattered instantly, dropping a tiny cube of cobbled deepslate.

"Hehehehe!" Oliver giggled, utterly delighted. "I'm playing Minecraft in real life!"

Venti smiled warmly at his boyfriend's joy. "You seem to be having fun now! At least we're not terrified anymore."

"Yeah, this part is incredibly chill." Oliver swung the pickaxe again, quickly mining out a small, 2x1 tunnel into the rock face.

"I guess you're making your own tunnel? Are we looking for more ores?" Venti asked, walking closely behind him.

"Yes!" Oliver said over the sound of breaking stone. "To make a sword. Though, I actually have to find enough iron to make an axe first. I need wood to craft sticks for the sword handle. And I'm not planning to punch that oak support beam with my bare hands again."

"I definitely won't let you," Venti agreed. He paused, tilting his head as he processed Oliver's logic. "Ollie? You're mining for ores to make an axe so you can harvest wood, right? But... don't you also need wood to make the handle for the axe?"

Oliver froze mid-swing. Slowly, he let his head fall forward until his forehead hit the deepslate block with a dull thud.

Venti snorted. "I'm sorry!" he giggled, trying and failing to hide his amusement.

"Ugh, Minecraft," Oliver groaned into the block. "You gotta get this thing, to get that thing, so you can get the other thing! It's an endless loop." He lifted his head, shaking it in frustration. "Well, at least it's not like a typical Silent Hill game, where you have to find a key, to open a tool chest, to find another key that opens the breaker room, just so you can flick on the lights to see a hidden key in the dark, and then take that key to unlock a puzzle. You solve the puzzle, and what do you get? Another fucking key to open the main door. You do all of that just to get clapped in the ass by Pyramid Head."

Venti had absolutely no idea what a single word of that rant meant, but he laughed brightly anyway.

Oliver sighed and went back to mining. Swinging the pickaxe was actually effortless, the tool doing all the heavy lifting. As he carved deeper into the tunnel, a familiar rhythm took over, and he started to gently bop his head.

"So we back in the mine—" Oliver swung the tool into the stone. "Got our pickaxe swinging from side to side—" He rhythmically bashed the left wall, then the right. "Side-side to side!"

Venti froze, watching in bewildered amusement as Oliver spontaneously broke into song.

"This task, a grueling one, hope to find some diamonds tonight, night, night—" Oliver struck the walls on beat. "Night-night, diamonds tonight!"

Venti burst into laughter, completely losing it. Oliver started giggling too, but he refused to stop his performance.

"'Cause, baby, tonight, the creeper's tryna steal all our stuff again!!!!" Oliver belted at the top of his lungs, echoing down the empty tunnel.

"Ollie, what are you singing!?" Venti wheezed, clutching his stomach. "When did you become a bard~?"

Oliver laughed, leaning on his pickaxe. "Haha, it's just a song from my world."

"No duh~!" Venti teased, wiping a tear from his eye. "Where else would it be from? It sounded like you were just narrating exactly what you were doing! Trying to find diamonds, eh~?"

"Well, believe it or not, judging by the deepslate, I'm pretty sure we're exactly on diamond level! And I have an Iron Pickaxe to mine them. So if I come across any, I am definitely taking them." Oliver grinned, imagining the sheer power of the weapon. "A blue Diamond Sword infused with Cryo energy? That would be legendary!"

Venti giggled, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "Well, let's find some diamonds, then! Might as well make your new weapon truly your own!"

Chapter 42: Claire

Jasper had just stepped out of the restroom when a sudden, terrified scream echoed down the hall. Arnold, who had been sitting quietly by himself, shot to his feet.

"August!?" Arnold gasped, his eyes wide. "What—what's wrong?!"

Jasper spun toward Arnold, then quickly looked back at the doorway, closing the bathroom door behind him. "What did I miss?!"

Before anyone could answer, August burst into the room. He scrambled through the shattered doorway, skidding wildly across the floor and nearly crashing into the plastic tables.

"Woah, woah, calm down, man!" Jasper gasped, lunging forward to catch August before he could fall. "What's going on?"

August was breathless, sweat rolling down his pale forehead. "S-Someone is coming!" he choked out, panic lacing his voice. "We have nowhere to hide!"

Jasper and Arnold's eyes widened in shared horror. "Coming?! From where!?"

"They're walking to the front door right now!" August pointed frantically back toward the hallway. "They were moving through the snow outside, they're—"

A sharp beep interrupted him, followed by a mechanical, automated voice echoing from a speaker tucked somewhere in the breakroom ceiling.

Door Opened.

The three boys froze instantly, snapping their mouths shut.

"W-What do we do?" August whispered, his face crinkling in sheer distress.

Heavy footsteps began echoing down the hall.

Door Closed.

The footsteps grew louder, closer, until a figure stepped into view just outside the broken doorway. The person stopped abruptly, looking up and down at the destroyed frame.

"Jesus Christ, what happened here?" The person pulled back the thick hood of their oversized winter coat, revealing a woman's tired face.

August let out a soft, shuddering gasp as the sheer terror bled out of him. It wasn't his father. It was Claire.

"Who came in here before me and made such a wreck of this place? Thought I was the only one here for now," she grumbled to herself. She hadn't noticed the three boys yet, turning to survey the damage as she backed into the breakroom. "They better not have been playing with those weapons in here again. Barclay explicitly said he wouldn't allow that." She spun around and stopped dead in her tracks, finally seeing the three boys staring right back at her.

Claire squinted, taken aback, before blinking in surprise. "Oh?" A profound look of relief washed over her features. "Did he actually listen to me?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned and left the room. The

boys heard the harsh sound of a zipper, and a moment later, she returned, having shed her heavy, snow-covered coat.

"The doctor finally let you all out? Surprisingly, he actually listened to me this time. Strange, though," Claire said, placing her hands on her hips. "He told me he wasn't coming to this facility for another couple of months. I thought he would have at least contacted me if he changed his mind. Though, he is always unpredictable."

The three boys exchanged nervous glances. Doctor Barclay had been gone for a long time. August hadn't seen him in days, having spent practically all his time out of his own transfer chair to keep an eye on Oliver while he was still plugged into his own chair.

"Honestly, the least he could have done was bring you all some real food if he was coming up here," Claire sighed. "Don't tell me you boys have just been eating junk food since you woke up." She gestured lazily toward the vending machine. "Well, I suppose after sitting in those chairs for so long, it's probably not good to consume a heavy meal anyway." But as her eyes focused on the machine, she did a double-take. The glass was entirely shattered, sparkling across the floor in tiny, fractured pieces. "Good God, what happened there?" She blinked a few times, eyebrows raised. "Why is everything falling apart in this room?"

She walked slowly up to the ruined machine, staring at the wreckage. As she turned her head, her gaze finally landed fully on August. For a split second, she froze.

"August?" she breathed.

She blinked, standing up a little straighter. "August?" she repeated, her tone sharpening. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at your dad's house?"

August stared at her. He slowly shook his head, unable to find his voice.

Claire opened her mouth to speak, but closed it, her brow furrowing.

August swallowed hard. "I... I was in Extraction Room 2."

Claire's expression instantly darkened into one of deep, furious upset. "That's why he told me not to go in there," she muttered bitterly. She looked back at the other boys. "But... he freed all of you now?"

"No, Claire," August admitted quietly. "I—I was the one who freed them. I figured out how to eject my avatar from the world I was sent to."

"So Doctor Barclay had nothing to do with this?"

"N-No," August stammered.

Claire let out a heavy sigh. "That prevaricator..." she hissed, gritting her teeth. "He can never be trusted. He never once tells me the straight truth." Her voice dropped into a hollow, defeated whisper. "What ever made me think I could change the man who took my life away from me..."

Jasper stepped forward, looking her dead in the eye. "You work for him, right? Why? It doesn't sound like you like him very much at all, so why are you still here?"

August opened his mouth to defend her, to point out that she probably couldn't just leave, but Claire beat him to it.

The older woman fixed a tired gaze on Jasper. "It's not that easy," she said grimly. "You've all seen what he can do. This lab, the experiments he pulls off... you don't think a man with that kind of power wouldn't

hold a gun to the head of someone he ropes in? He has threatened me multiple times. Threatened my family. I had no choice but to do whatever he told me."

"You can't call the police?" Arnold asked softly.

Claire looked down at the smaller boy, her eyes softening as she sighed. "Sweetie, no. I cannot," she murmured. "With how remote this facility is, the police would never find it."

August tensed. "Claire? R-Remote? What do you mean by remote? How remote are we talking? Since when did my dad even own a building like this?" He already knew they weren't anywhere close to home—the blinding blizzard outside had made that obvious.

Claire met his gaze steadily. "This lab is built right in the middle of Greenland."

The boys' eyes went wide. It was deeply shocking, yet somehow, perfectly fitting.

"Well, that explains all the snow," Jasper muttered. "And it definitely explains why the police can't find us."

"It's not just the that," Claire continued, her tone darkening. "The transfer chairs and the avatars they generate... they're not just vessels for humans to pilot. They also act as black holes, establishing a two-way link between the avatar and the chair. They can suck things directly out of the worlds they go to."

August looked sharply at Jasper, a sudden, heavy realization washing over him. "Venti," he muttered under his breath. It hadn't been Venti's own godlike power that brought him here. The lifeless husk of Oliver's glitched avatar was the anchor that had dragged the bard into their world.

"Barclay discovered that effect and used the avatars to collect things. He has countless fictional weapons hoarded all over this facility," Claire's voice dropped to a cold, deadened pitch. "That man is a cold-blooded demon." She shook her head slowly. "He even has a weapon from one world that can kill a person and instantly dissolve their remains."

A chill ran down the boys' spines. They didn't need to hear anything else. Barclay could use a weapon like that on anyone who got too close or asked too many questions, erasing all evidence of the murder in seconds.

Claire looked utterly exhausted just talking about her boss. "Doctor Barclay is not a good person," she reiterated bitterly. "I have no idea why I keep trying to find the good in him." She rubbed a hand down her tired face. "And just so you know, I'm the only employee actually from this world. All the other workers he 'hired' are people ripped from other universes and brainwashed. I'm the only one from Earth. It's pathetic that I had to get roped into all of this."

Jasper blinked, stunned. "He actually did that?"

August folded his arms tightly across his chest, refusing to meet anyone's eyes.

Claire saw the pain written plainly across his expression. She knew exactly how he felt. "August, I am so sorry," she said softly. "Knowing that he's your father... and having to hear all of this..."

August took a long, shaky inhale, letting it out in a slow sigh. "I already had a hunch," he admitted. "I broke into Extraction Room 3 and found his physical files. The boxes were stacked up practically to the freaking ceiling."

Claire looked at him in genuine surprise. "I've never even been inside that room either. I only had clearance for this one. Extraction Rooms 2 and 3 were strictly off-limits to me. You're saying Room 3 is full of documents?"

"Yeah," August nodded. "An entire room full of them."

Suddenly, a strange, shimmering sound vibrated through the air nearby.

The three boys' expressions instantly warped back into sheer panic. In the stress of Claire's arrival, they had completely forgotten about Mark, who was currently out trying to track down Oliver and Venti. Claire, meanwhile, remained completely ignorant of this other massive problem they were dealing with.

A portal tore open in the middle of the room, and Mark stepped casually through it. "As I expected, I still can't find them anywhere," Mark announced, stepping fully onto the ground. His large, key-like weapon vanished from his grip in a flash of light, and he dusted off his clothes. "I think I'm going to have to try a totally different approach for this." He summoned the weapon right back into his hand, immediately looking annoyed with himself. "Why did I desummon this when I need it to close the portal?" he grumbled. He casually turned the Keyblade in a turning motion, and the portal snapped shut behind him.

In his free hand, Mark was holding a large cardboard box. "Figured you all needed some real food. Actual meals, not just sweets. So... to be completely honest, I have no idea what world I just went to, but I saw a food stand and grabbed this."

Mark set the tray of nutrient-rich, hot food down on the plastic table, a massive upgrade from the sugary cakes and cookies he had fetched from the Minecraft dimension earlier.

As Mark stood up from the table, he finally noticed the three boys staring at him with terrified, wide-eyed expressions. "Are you three alright? Remember, don't worry, food from fictional universes is completely edible in your world," he assured them, misreading their panic. "Or are you just uneasy that Oliver and Venti are still missing? Well, good news! I actually have a little way to—"

Mark abruptly stopped talking. August was aggressively nudging his head to the left.

Mark blinked, arching a curious eyebrow before slowly turning around. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of the woman. "Oh." He looked Claire up and down, then quickly turned back to the boys, utterly baffled. "Since when was there a fifth transfer chair?"

"S-She's not one of us," August blurted out. "That's Claire. She's my dad's assistant."

Claire looked completely bewildered, but she held her ground. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Are you from a fictional universe? You just walked out of a magical portal. Or are you... are you one of Barclay's brainwashed otherworldly workers?"

Mark took a wary step back, glancing at the boys. "An assistant? I don't think I'm comfortable telling you absolutely anything if you work for the maniac who started all of this."

August quickly stepped up, grabbing Mark's sleeve. "Mark, wait. I think it's okay," he insisted. "I always trusted Claire... and honestly, I really don't think she actually wants to be working for him."

Mark looked down at August. "I'm still not taking that risk. I refuse to," he whispered back fiercely. He turned his stern gaze back to Claire. "Whoever you are, please step out of this building, or go back wherever you came from in the first place."

Claire blinked. "B-But who are you? Are you—"

"Please step out," Mark repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Claire swallowed hard and nodded. "Okay," she agreed, choosing not to fight it. Her expression was painted with deep worry as she slowly backed away.

Neither of them was truly in the wrong. Mark was rightfully cautious about trusting an employee of Barclay, and Claire—if she truly hated her boss as much as she claimed—was entirely justified in being terrified of a stranger who could casually summon magical portals.

As Claire backed out of the breakroom, Mark followed her closely, stopping at the shattered doorway to ensure she actually left. He watched her walk down the hall, grab her heavy coat, and pull it on. She punched a quick sequence of numbers into the keypad by the main exit.

Door Opened.

The heavy metal door swung outward, allowing a violent blast of freezing, snowy air to whip down the hallway before it slammed shut, cutting off the storm once again.

Door Closed.

August peered around the doorframe beside Mark, gripping the broken frame. He watched through the tiny reinforced window as Claire's dark silhouette slowly disappeared into the blinding white blizzard.

Mark glanced sideways at August. "It's a shame that door doesn't use a traditional lock," he noted dryly. "I could have just used my Keyblade to seal it."

August blinked. "So it is a Keyblade," he muttered. "Just like Oliver mentioned."

Mark didn't confirm or deny it. He simply turned around and strode back to the center of the breakroom. "Okay. Now that Claire is gone, I have actually found a much better way to track down Oliver and Venti."

"How?" Jasper asked, perking up.

"Meet me in Extraction Room 1."

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"What exactly are you doing?" August asked.

They were all gathered inside Extraction Room 1. Mark had walked right up to a transfer chair. He didn't seem to care which one it was, but August had been incredibly wary of him touching Oliver's old rig, considering how dangerously glitchy it was. He couldn't use Arnold's old chair either, since it had been completely fried and blasted into the wall by Venti's explosive arrival. That left only Jasper's active chair.

"Y-You're not actually thinking about using the chair, right?" Jasper asked nervously.

"Please don't," August pleaded. "They're highly unpredictable, and we might not even have a way to pull you back out!"

"Don't worry," Mark said calmly. "I'm not connecting myself to the avatar. I'm just hoping these machines are a little more advanced than they seem." Mark ran his hands along the heavy metal casing at the back of the transfer chair. "Hmm... it should be right about here." He dropped down onto one knee, feeling blindly along the chassis.

"More than they seem?" Jasper echoed, confused.

Mark's fingers caught on a slight groove. "Got it. Yes, I feel an access panel." With a sharp tug, Mark ripped the metal plating clean off the machine and tossed it carelessly aside.

Reaching into his pocket, Mark pulled out a small, blocky electronic device. He pulled out a bundle of colored wires from it and began expertly splicing them directly into the exposed circuitry of the transfer
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chair.

"What is that thing?" Jasper asked.

August watched Mark's rapid handiwork closely. "Are you altering the avatar coding? I did something like that with Oliver's to free him. But... wait, if you're hacking it... That means you are you planning to go into the chair?"

"No," Mark repeated. "These transfer chairs are complex machines that project human consciousness into entirely different universes. There has to be something more to how they fundamentally function. They need an incredibly powerful energy core to maintain that connection."

August narrowed his eyes, a memory sparking in his mind. "Claire did say they acted like black holes, or something like that..."

Mark paused. He stopped splicing wires and looked up at August. "Huh." He turned his attention back to the exposed motherboard with a satisfied grin. "Well, that's all the confirmation I needed." Mark held up the small device.

The machine featured a glowing digital screen displaying a faint, empty grid.

"If these chairs truly house that magnitude of energy, I can use this remote to tap into it."

"What... is that thing, exactly?" August asked. The other two boys leaned in, trying to get a better look.

Mark adjusted the device in his palm, making sure the wires connecting it to the chair weren't tangled. "It's something I call a Dimensional Scanner," Mark explained. "I built it a few years ago, but I've had very little use for it. It only works if it's directly connected to a massive energy source that naturally acts as a gateway to another universe." Mark tapped rapidly on the screen. "You said Claire claimed these are black holes? She must have mistakenly said that. She probably meant they contain the equivalent energy of a localized black hole. They can't literally be black holes, otherwise this entire facility would have been gone."

Suddenly, thousands of tiny dots populated the digital grid, flooding the screen with light.

"There we go," Mark smiled. "I'm in... well, almost."

August blinked at the glowing screen, utterly confused by the messy data. "But... what about the portal?"

"What portal?" Mark asked, not looking up.

"The massive portal rim downstairs. Couldn't you have used that instead? Surely whatever this 'energy' is, that giant machine has it too, right?"

"You're not wrong," Mark said. "And I did consider it. But that portal rim holds exponentially more energy than these chairs. Probably more than all of them combined. The rim acts as a grand hub bridging countless worlds. Theoretically, it would require the raw power of ten, maybe fifteen black holes to be stable. Hooking this little scanner up to that much raw output would likely blow us all to kingdom come. But the energy in this chair?" He patted the metal chassis. "It would need to be condensed. It couldn't be the raw power like that. So, it's safe to use the device on it,"

August swallowed hard, the technical jargon making the terrifying reality of their situation settle heavily in his gut. Needing space, he quietly stood up and slipped out of the room.

Arnold, who had been peering over Mark's shoulder, immediately noticed August walking away. Arnold could tell from the look in August's eyes that the other boy was spiraling. Stepping away from the scanner,

Arnold quietly followed him out into the hall. He found August standing just a few feet away from the doorway, slumped heavily against the metal wall with his arms wrapped tightly around his own chest.

"Hey," Arnold said softly. He let out a sigh. "I was going to ask if you're okay, but... none of us really are right now, are we?" He offered a small, empathetic smile.

August was silent for a long moment. "I still just cannot believe my dad built all of this," he muttered, his voice hollow. "I know I keep repeating myself, but... I knew he was a brilliant scientist. I knew about some of the tech he developed. But all this extra shit? Brainwashing people? Dissolving them?" He shook his head in disgust. "I guess the ignorance is on me. If the man can literally build a chair that projects human consciousness across the multiverse, no shit he's built other crazy, dangerous stuff."

Arnold reached out and placed a comforting hand on August's shoulder.

"I just..." August trailed off, looking down at the floor. "The thing that shocks me the most is that he's actually hurting people. You heard Claire. She's terrified to even quit her job."

"I know," Arnold agreed gently. "I'm handling this terribly, too, you know? I don't remember a single thing about this world. You and everyone else keeps insisting I was born here, but..." Arnold sighed, his shoulders slumping. "Every time I go to sleep in this facility, I convince myself it's just a nightmare. I think I'm going to wake up back home with my boyfriends by my side, returning to my normal life. But I always wake up stuck here."

"What do we even do when we finally leave this place?" August asked quietly. "I think we've had this conversation before, but what the hell are we supposed to do when this is all over?"

"I don't know..." Arnold muttered softly. "But... Mark is here to help us now. Besides, I think our only priority right now should be getting Oliver and Venti back."

August pushed himself off the wall, standing a little taller. He nodded. "Yeah. You're right."

Arnold beamed, offering a genuine smile.

"Thanks, Richard," August said gratefully. "For... checking up on me."

Arnold's smile turned warm. "Hey, you were there for me when I woke up in that chair for the very first time. I figured I should return the favor." He gave August's arm a friendly pat. "Let's go back inside. Let's see if Mark needs any help."

August nodded, feeling slightly grounded again, and followed Arnold back into the extraction room.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, Jasper waved them over. "Hey!" he called out. "Mark got into the thing... or, well, he did something. I really don't understand what I'm looking at, to be honest."

"He did?" August asked, hurrying back over to the chair.

"Yep," Mark confirmed, gesturing for them to gather around. "Come take a look at this, guys. I think I found something."

Once they huddled closely behind him, Mark pointed to the glowing screen of the scanner. The display now showed a vast blue map overlay. A massive circle dominated the center, but it was absolutely suffocated by millions of overlapping, chaotic dots. Every time Mark panned the screen, hundreds of thousands more dots rendered, flooding the grid into a solid block of light.

"Uhhh... it just looks exactly like it did before," August noted.

"Yes, but watch when I do this," Mark said. He twisted a small dial on the side of the scanner. Instantly, millions of dots vanished, leaving only a scattered handful on the grid.

"Oh!" August exclaimed, but then he narrowed his eyes. "Wait... that explained nothing,"

"These transfer chairs were originally bridged directly to the Genshin Impact universe," Mark explained. "So, I calibrated the scanner to isolate a specific character signature. Right now, it's pinging the location of every single version of Venti across all possible sub-dimensions of Genshin." Mark sighed, shaking his head. "But it's still way too broad. There are millions of instanced sub-dimensions. If there was just some way to know the specific sub-number of the Venti that Oliver is with, this would be a million times easier."

August blinked. He slowly looked up at the large diagnostic monitor mounted above the transfer chair. Thankfully, the screen had survived the earlier chaos and was still displaying data. He looked back down at Mark.

"Mark. The sub is 3921."

"3921?" Mark repeated, twisting around to look at August in surprise. "How do you know that?"

August simply pointed up at the monitor.

"Huh?" Mark turned back around, leaned back and followed his gaze to the ceiling. "Oh!" His face broke into a relieved grin. "Well, that's incredibly helpful. Good catch, thank you."

Mark quickly punched the numbers into the scanner's keypad. The chaotic map on the screen fizzled for a moment before snapping into sharp focus. All the stray dots vanished.

"There we go," Mark muttered. He dragged his finger across the digital map until he isolated a single, aggressively pulsating green dot. "Found him."

"Why is there only one dot? Isn't Oliver with him?" Arnold asked anxiously.

"The scanner is strictly calibrated to lock onto Venti's character. Oliver isn't a fictional entity, so he doesn't have a signature I can track," Mark explained. He squinted at the screen, a deep frown forming on his face. "Wait a minute..." Mark swiped through the data logs. "How many worlds have they..." His tone shifted into pure disbelief as he reviewed the localized tracking history.

"Five Nights at Freddy's? SOMA? Minecraft?" Mark read aloud, shaking his head in absolute bewilderment. "Just how many worlds have they been ripped through? Why the absolute hell is Nerraw dragging them across the entire multiverse?"

Mark pinched the screen, zooming in tightly on the pulsating green dot to see their current exact location. "Okay, right now they're in Sil—"

Suddenly, the screen glitched violently. A terrifying, dark face flashed across the display for a fraction of a second before the scanner completely shorted out, dying instantly in Mark's hands.

Mark and the boys gasped as they stared at the dead device.

"Oh, no," Mark breathed. He scrambled to his feet instantly. "I managed to pull the sub-code for the Minecraft dimension they were just in!" He turned on his heel, ready to bolt out of the room.

"Wait!" August yelled, grabbing Mark tightly by the arm. "Where are you going now?!"

"I can pick up their tracks if I at least go to the realm they were in last!" Mark explained frantically. "I couldn't get the sub-name for the world they just dropped into, but I got the Minecraft one. I need to get to

that realm right now. It was... uh... Sub-24345! I'll be back in a little bit, hopefully with Oliver and Venti!"

Without wasting another second, Mark thrust his hand out, summoning his keyblade. Then, he swished it upward, and his portal tore open in the air. He threw himself into it, vanishing instantly and leaving the three boys completely alone in the silent room.

Jasper stood frozen, staring at the empty air where the portal had just closed. He blinked slowly and looked at the other two.

"...How did he remember such a huge number?"

Chapter 43: Dungeon Filled With Monsters

"It might take forever to find the diamonds, you know," Oliver sighed, his voice echoing faintly against the cramped stone walls. "When I played the actual game, I always had terrible luck finding them."

Venti smiled, swinging Oliver's hand gently as they navigated the dimly lit tunnel shaft. "Hey, you have the greatest bard in Mondstadt with you! Not to mention, he's an Archon! That's double the luck! We'll find those diamonds in no time—" Venti gasped, his mouth snapping shut as they rounded a jagged corner. They had nearly stumbled right into the creeping, pulsing blue-green mass of yet another Deep Dark infestation.

Oliver looked off to the side, biting his lip to suppress a giggle. "The good luck has worn off already, hasn't it?"

Venti smiled softly. Letting out a little breath, he squeezed Oliver's hand and pivoted on his heel, pulling his boyfriend down a branching path that steered clear of the Warden's domain. "Seems like that stuff is everywhere down here."

"It's probably surrounding the entire mineshaft," Oliver murmured. The thought made his skin crawl. He hadn't even found a single piece of iron ore yet, and here he was blindly hunting for diamonds. "The Deep Dark is horrifying in reality." There was no way he was going to be excited to see the Ancient City.

"Can't argue there, babe," Venti agreed. "Though, that's probably just because I'm new to it! Once I get used to this place, I'll probably be able to handle it!"

Oliver had no doubt about that. From what he remembered, the Warden was just physically devastating and incredibly loud. It was nothing a literal god couldn't handle, and it certainly wasn't as dangerous as Nerraw.

"You did give up on digging out your own tunnel a little ways back," Venti noted, glancing over at Oliver as they walked hand-in-hand. "Why did you? I'm sure if you just kept at it, we would have found something."

"I know," Oliver groaned. "But ugh! Sometimes I get so impatient with Minecraft's survival mode. It's... well, it's why I mostly played in creative mode." He kicked a loose pebble across the blocky floor. "Along with the massive problem we have waiting for us on the surface, I'm not exactly the most patient person at the moment."

Venti lifted Oliver's hand and pressed a sweet, lingering kiss to his knuckles. "I know. But you were patient with me. You waited through everything when I made you your new Vision, and you were very patient when I told you to practice with my bow."

"Well, that's because I trust you," Oliver said softly.

Venti beamed. "Aww~" He tiptoed as he walked—which proved a bit difficult on the uneven, pixelated ground—so he jumped slightly to plant a kiss directly on Oliver's cheek.

Oliver froze, then burst into giggles. "Venti, that was super silly right there, what the heck was that?" He laughed, his tension melting away. "You could have just asked me to stop walking to kiss me."

"Oh~? But I thought you were in a rush to get those diamonds?" Venti smirked mischievously.

Oliver rolled his eyes. "You—" He lunged forward, tickling Venti mercilessly under the armpits.

The bard instantly clamped his arms shut, bursting into a fit of musical giggles and stumbling backward. "Hey! No tickling the bard in the cave~!" he laughed, breathless.

"The blocky cave, mind you," Oliver corrected with a grin.

"Hehe! We don't want my beautiful voice to echo and wake something up!" Venti giggled. "Who knows what could be out there?"

"To be fair, you're loud enough that it was already echoing!" Oliver shot back, smirking.

Venti draped a hand dramatically over his heart. "Oh no! I've been wounded!"

"You were almost as loud as Paimon, to be honest."

Venti threw his hand across his forehead, swooning as if he were about to faint. "To be compared to that flying pixie thing~! Oh, how my heart aches~!"

Suddenly, Venti stepped forward and pinned Oliver against the wooden beams of the mineshaft wall. It wasn't rough, but the suddenness of it knocked the breath out of Oliver's lungs.

Oliver gasped, his cheeks instantly flushing a deep crimson as he stared into Venti's bright, teasing eyes.

Venti giggled, leaning in to press his lips firmly against Oliver's. The human melted instantly, wrapping his arms around the bard's waist and pulling him flush against his chest. The flickering torches mounted on the walls bathed them in a soft, warm glow, chasing away the oppressive chill of the mineshaft. They kissed softly, the quiet sounds of their shifting breath mingling in the dark. Oliver reached up, gently cupping the bard's face and stroking his soft cheeks.

Venti gripped Oliver's shoulders, deepening the kiss until they finally parted.

Oliver's breathing had slowed. The frantic, nervous energy that had been buzzing in his chest since they dropped into this world was completely gone. "Wow... I feel way better."

"The power of love~," Venti giggled.

Oliver smiled, his fingers drifting down to playfully twirl one of Venti's vibrant blue braids. "You know, that's the name of a song in my world."

"It is?" Venti's eyes lit up with pure fascination. "I have to hear to it!" He reached up, resting his hands over Oliver's as they toyed with his hair. "In my world, I know every song—past, present, and future. But I know absolutely nothing about your world, because I'm not from your dimension. I can't wait to learn! It's actually incredibly exciting, being in such unknown territory."

Oliver smiled warmly. "Yeah, the song came out in the 80s, I think. It was popularized by Back to the Future..." He blinked, chuckling under his breath. "I hope some 'The Power of Love' purist doesn't kill me for saying that." He looked back down into Venti's eager eyes. "But remember, this isn't my dimension right now. So you can't learn anything about my actual world here yet."

Venti nodded enthusiastically. "Geez, I know, Ollie~! I'm not dumb, you know! I may be a silly bard, but I'm still a smart Archon!" He giggled. "Yeah, we're in this Minecraft place as you called it,"

Oliver sighed, his gaze drifting down the dark tunnel. "As much fun as it is being here with you, I'm ready to leave."

Venti nodded, his smile softening. "Ehe, same here." He pulled away just enough to reach for his boyfriend's hand again. Fingers interlaced, they resumed their trek down the pre-built mineshaft, with Venti chattering happily to fill the silence.

"You have talked about a few things, though," Venti mused. "When we were in those last few worlds. Something about a 'You tube', and something about your world having a lot of massive technological advancements!"

"You really do have a sharp memory sometimes."

Venti didn't reply, just offered a smug little giggle.

Oliver squeezed Venti's hand tight, abruptly stopping in his tracks.

The bard stumbled to a halt and spun around. "What's wrong?" He stepped close, placing a comforting hand on Oliver's chest. "You okay?"

"I heard something."

They both stood frozen in the stifling silence.

Groooooaaannn

Venti blinked. "What is that?"

"A zombie." Oliver's eyes darted frantically across the dark crevices of the cave.

"Zombie? You mean, the undead?" Venti's eyes widened.

Oliver clamped his free hand over Venti's mouth. "It has to be around here somewhere. It could be right inside the walls..." Oliver scanned the area. "Come on." He dropped his hand and pulled Venti down the shaft.

As soon as they rounded the next corner, they practically tripped into a cobblestone room. Sitting squarely in the center was a flaming, boxy cage. Oliver gasped and frantically signaled for Venti to summon his bow.

The bard didn't hesitate. His ornate, glowing bow materialized in his grip instantly. "Blocky undead? Not a match for me! Look how slow they are!" Venti drew back the bowstring. Anemo energy swirled violently around the arrow before he let it fly.

The arrow struck the top of the black monster spawner. Instantly, a howling vortex of wind erupted. The miniature hurricane sucked the staggering zombies directly toward the center of the room, crushing them under the sheer pressure of the Anemo magic.

The creatures exploded into a flurry of white, pixelated mist and vanished. As the wind finally died down, the spawner in the center of the room was left with a massive, jagged crack down its iron bars, the miniature spinning zombie inside visibly damaged.

Oliver, though endlessly impressed by Venti's power, winced slightly. "H-Hey, Venti, shouldn't you be saving your power for the dark creature up above?"

Venti waved him off with a breezy flick of his wrist. "Nah, this is totally fine! That was just my Anemo arrows on maximum. It actually doesn't take much strength from me at all. What does take strength is my burst and my actual Archon powers. This? Nothing. Though, admittedly, this basic strength still wouldn't be enough to defeat Nerraw anyway. So I'm good!"

Oliver nodded in understanding. "Makes sense." He pointed to the ruined spawner. "Obviously, they wouldn't be as strong as Nerraw, much less the Wither."

"Exactly!" Venti agreed. He turned his head and gasped. "Ooh! Wait, it's one of those chest things again! But... oopsies! My wind knocked them over, sorry about that!"

There were two wooden chests flanking the broken spawner. Both had been blown onto their sides, their heavy lids thrown open. The loot inside had completely spilled out, scattering shimmering ores, rotten flesh, and various items across the dungeon floor.

"My word! Is that gold?!" Venti laughed, rushing forward. "Wow, we're going to be rich!" He reached down to scoop up a heavy, pixelated ingot.

"Yeah, but gold isn't actually worth much in Minecraft's universe," Oliver pointed out.

Venti froze. "Eh?!" His eyes widened in absolute horror. "Oh... hmph! Guess it wouldn't be worth anything if I brought it back to Teyvat, then." Venti dramatically slumped forward, letting his arms dangle in defeat. "And here I was thinking I could use it to buy a year's worth of dandelion wine from the Dawn Winery," he pouted.

Oliver bit his lip, trying incredibly hard not to laugh, but a few giggles escaped anyway. "Hey, stop being so dramatic. Who knows, gold is gold. It shouldn't matter what universe it comes from... I'm sure it might be worth something in Teyvat if gold is worth something over there." Oliver stared down at the gleaming blocks scattered on the stone. "Thinking about it... hey! Maybe I can take some back to use in my world."

Venti perked up instantly, standing tall. "Yeah! Maybe you can do that!" he beamed.

Oliver giggled. "You recovered real fast."

"My mood can change faster than the wind can blow! I'm hardly ever sad. Especially when I'm around the person I love~!"

Oliver shook his head, a fond smile gracing his lips. "It's difficult to see this side of you from the actual video game I used to play. I'm thinking we should change your title from the Anemo Archon to the Lover-Boy Archon," he teased.

Venti giggled softly. "Ehehe! So what do you plan to buy with the gold? Assuming it's worth something in your world."

"Well..." Oliver thought about it, the playful energy draining slightly from his posture. "I'm actually not planning to be, like... extra rich, or anything." He picked up a gold ingot, feeling its heavy, dense weight in his palms. "The guys back in the lab, and me... we're not going to have a life when we finally leave that facility."

Venti's eyes narrowed in deep sympathy. "Aww, Oliver—"

"It's true." Oliver turned to meet his boyfriend's gaze, his expression solemn. "It's a harsh reality. Doctor Barclay took absolutely everything from us. I just missed out on four years, but Jasper has missed over a decade. And who knows how long Arnold has been out for. If I can sell this gold..." He looked back down at the ingot. "We can build our lives back, slightly. Any other method would be almost impossible. This isn't a movie, Venti. All of this is real life. Even this world right here—" Oliver gestured to the dusty, pixelated dungeon around them. "The Fictional Universe is still real life for us. We're here, breathing." He let out a heavy, exhausted sigh. "My point is, expecting our lives to just magically go back to normal is wishful thinking."

He looked up, forcing a small smile for the bard. "Not you, you know. You can just go back to Teyvat and live your life exactly as you see fit."

Venti shook his head instantly, his expression fiercely determined. "If you think I'm abandoning you, you're severely mistaken, babe," he said, gently poking Oliver's shoulder. "You're my boyfriend now. I love you. And even though I'm only acquainted with the others, they deserve help too. I'm not leaving you. Not until I know that you are safe and well. And the same goes for the rest of them."

Oliver's heart melted completely. He leaned forward, pulling Venti into a tight hug. "I love you, Venti."

"I know," Venti smiled brilliantly, closing his eyes and melting into the warmth as he wrapped his arms tightly around Oliver.

When they finally parted, Oliver knelt down to rummage through the rest of the loose loot, slipping the gold into his pocket. He pushed aside a broken Music Disc 11—which he internally freaked out over, but kept his cool to focus on finding a diamond—when his fingers brushed against cold metal.

"Huh?" Oliver pulled the object from the pile, his eyes widening.

"What? Another one?" Venti tilted his head.

It was yet another heavy, metallic memory chip.

Oliver slowly turned it over.

Jeffrey Daniels

Oliver blinked, a chill running down his spine. "Why do we keep finding these? My pockets literally can't hold anymore."

"I'll hold onto this one," Venti offered, gently taking it from Oliver's hands. "I'll keep it safe."

Oliver shook his head, his mind racing. "There has to be a reason we're finding these, right? Nerraw is the one actively taking us to these different worlds. I doubt he's the one showing us all of this,"

Venti pressed a thumb to his chin, staring thoughtfully at the floor. "You don't think Nerraw could be one of the victims of that Doctor?"

"It could be a possibility..." Oliver muttered. "But... did they go evil? Did they break out of this?" He pointed to the chip in Venti's hands. "If they broke out, how the hell did they manage it?"

"Well, it's just speculation," Venti reasoned. "Nerraw has strange, god-tier powers. I can't exactly speak to how god-like creatures function outside of my own realm—I mean, that's the whole point of different universes, right? They all have different rules and cultures, just... a little more extreme. But going strictly off my knowledge of Teyvat, only the Ruler of Death has powers like that. Though, even by her standards, Nerraw is pretty unprofessional if this is supposed to be his job."

Oliver squinted. "The ruler of what now?"

Venti smiled softly, shaking his head in amusement. "Seriously, so much for you knowing absolutely everything about my realm."

"Hey!" Oliver snapped playfully. "I told you—"

"I know, I know, you missed four years. But still, if you missed all of that in just four years, that story you read about me—"

"Not read, watched," Oliver corrected.

"Whatever~," Venti giggled. "Watched about me. Well... if none of that was explained at the very beginning, there might as well have not been a story at all!" He laughed. "Why wouldn't they establish all of that right at the start?"

Oliver blinked. Well, Venti certainly wasn't wrong about that.

"Well, that's something you'd have to take up with Hoyoverse," Oliver sighed, shaking his head. "They take the concept of a 'slow burn' and stretch it all the fuck out."

Venti snorted. "I'll say."

"Seriously. It takes hundreds of hours to complete the main story. And mind you, that's just the main questline. There are probably hundreds more hours needed to complete all the side quests."

Venti's eyes widened in sheer horror. "Oh my word..." he breathed. "I couldn't ever dream of reading a book that long."

"W-Well—" Oliver remembered Venti mentioning that films existed in Teyvat. "It would be more equivalent to seeing a film. So, you... well, watch it."

"Still!" Venti groaned. "Sitting in a chair for hundreds of hours, staring at a screen and watching some cheesy drama play out sounds so borrringggg!!!" He whined dramatically. "Ugh, not even all the dandelion wine and apple cider in the theater could hold me over! I'd quite literally prefer to go into a deep slumber again..."

Oliver had to laugh. "Wow, you are seriously so dramatic sometimes."

Venti giggled, flopping his entire body weight heavily against his boyfriend.

Oliver stumbled back. "H-Hey! You almost knocked me over!"

Venti clung to him with a cheeky grin. "Only you could entertain me! Especially if we were sitting in the dark theater, right in the very back row. We could make out in the darkness with no one to catch us~ and I'd take off my corset, and pull my shirt all the way up to tease you with my belly button you love so dearly~"

Oliver's face instantly went nuclear red. "V-V... Ven..." He couldn't even form words. He just groaned, closing his eyes and letting out a shaky breath. "More like—" he opened his eyes, glaring weakly. "You'd be entertaining yourself and not me, you big tease!"

Venti just giggled, leaning up to kiss his burning cheek. "Don't deny it! You'd definitely do it, and you'd want to! I bet I filled your pretty little head with so many dirty thoughts just now~"

Oliver looked away, then slowly met Venti's gaze again. "Okay, yeah," he admitted, his voice cracking slightly. "T-That whole thing sounded pretty hot."

Venti beamed triumphantly. "See? That wasn't so hard to admit, was it?"

"Shush," Oliver smiled, his heart fluttering. "Anyway, back to what we were saying. You don't have to sit at the screen for hours on end to play a video game."

"You don't?" Venti perked up, genuinely shocked.

"Nohoho!" Oliver laughed. "You definitely don't. I mean, I'm sure some people do. But modern video games allow you to save your progress and come back to it whenever you'd like. Now, if you're playing Sonic The Hedgehog on the Genesis, well, you're never saving that game. Though, it doesn't take hours to beat Sonic anyway. Unless you're pretty shit at the game..." He paused, blinking. "Like me."

The bard let out a massive sigh of relief. "Ohhh! I swear, I thought one had to sit down for hundreds of hours straight just to enjoy one of these 'video games'! Okay! Well, that makes me feel a little bit better, hehehe!" Venti smiled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Phew! I was hoping you'd show me one of these 'games' if we ever left the facility, so I was really worried for a second!" He straightened up, looking back down at the pile of loot. "You haven't finished looking through everything. Don't you want anything else?"

"Well—" Oliver knelt back down in the dirt. "Taking some of this... I mean, it would do great with a hardcore Minecraft collector back home. But if I bring this stuff back, it puts the Fictional Universe at risk of being discovered. Which... I don't think is a good idea."

Venti pointed a finger at him. "But you're bringing back the gold?" he pointed out. "The gold looks blocky, which I assume doesn't naturally exist in your world. So wouldn't that cause the same problem?"

"You're not wrong," Oliver conceded. "It looks blocky, but it feels and weighs exactly the same as a real gold ingot. People mostly sell gold by smashing it to pieces or melting it down anyway. I assume this gold wouldn't look any different to ours once it's melted."

Venti nodded approvingly. "Good plan."

"Yeah." Oliver shifted through the remaining rubble. Suddenly, a flash of deep blue caught his eye. He gasped. "Venti! I think I—!!!"

He pulled it out, and his face instantly fell.

"Shit. It's just freaking Lapis," Oliver groaned, rolling his eyes. "Fooled in the actual game, and now I'm fooled in real life."

Venti's eyes went wide. "Lapis?"

"Yeah," Oliver said, confused as to why Venti suddenly sounded so stunned.

Venti blinked rapidly. "Rex Lapis?" he whispered. "Zhongli?"

Oliver gasped, suddenly realizing exactly where Venti's mind had gone. "N-No! Not him!" he burst out laughing. "It's just an ore that happens to share the same name."

"Oh!" Venti laughed, placing a hand over his chest. "Ah! Okay, for a moment I thought Zhongli had taken the literal form of a rock. I know he's the Geo Archon and all, but turning into a pocket-sized stone would have been a bit extreme, even for him..."

"Pffft!" Oliver couldn't hold it in, laughing so hard his sides ached. "Wow, that... that was pretty funny!"

Venti giggled along with him. "I don't even know why I thought that! This realm obviously doesn't connect with ours whatsoever! Haha!"

Oliver looked at the lone chunk of Lapis ore, shrugged, and slid it into his pocket.

Venti raised an eyebrow, smirking. "I thought you said you weren't going to take anything else?"

"Well, I changed my mind," Oliver let out a defeated sigh. "I mean, I'm literally inside Minecraft. If other Minecrafters found out I was here and didn't take at least something as a souvenir, they'd probably nail me

to a wall." He shifted through the loose loot one final time.

His fingers brushed against something else. Something icy blue and perfectly shiny.

Oliver gasped, his breath hitching in his throat. "Venti! I... I found..." A massive, triumphant smile broke across his face. "Diamonds!"

"Really?!" Venti dropped to his knees next to him on the stone floor.

"Look! I—" Oliver dug deeper into the pile and pulled out a second gem. "Oh, wow! I hit the jackpot! I got more!"

"Wow, so cool!" Venti cheered, clapping his hands together.

"I can make the sword!" Oliver stood up, clutching the two gleaming diamonds tightly against his chest. "A diamond sword just needs two of these!"

"Now all you need is the wood!"

Oliver nodded eagerly, but then froze perfectly still. "Oh, shit... I don't have an axe."

A moment later, a second, far more terrifying realization hit him. "Wait a minute!!!" He nearly dropped the priceless diamonds in his sudden panic.

"What's the matter?" Venti asked, gently placing a hand on Oliver's back.

"How do I even craft the sword in real life?!" Oliver stressed. "In the game, you use a crafting table, but... it uses a digital interface. Will... will there be a floating interface in real life?"

"Okay, well, let's take it one step at a time," Venti suggested calmly, grounding him. "What exactly is a crafting table, and how do we find one?"

"You have to make it," Oliver explained, his mind racing. "Out of wood. But I don't have an axe to cut any down."

Venti tapped his chin thoughtfully. "And I assume that pickaxe wouldn't be of much use?"

"No. It wouldn't. Bec—" Oliver stopped talking, his eyes widening. "Wait, hold on... no, it... it might actually still work."

Venti looked up at him, tilting his head curiously.

"In the game itself, you can use literally anything to break any block. Some items won't drop the resource you mined if you use the wrong tool, but pickaxes can still break wood blocks and give you the wood," Oliver said, nodding to himself. "Even your bare fists work! But... punching that wood last time actually hurt my knuckles."

Venti nodded firmly. "Exactly, so please do not do that again."

"But... it was working," Oliver pointed out. "The block of wood was actually splintering and breaking. Which means that even though being here feels realistic to our bodies... the physics are still very much governed by Minecraft rules." Oliver leaned over and hoisted up his pickaxe from where he'd leaned it against the wall. "So this means I can use this. It'll take longer to mine the wood, but we're in no rush. It would take way more time to hunt around in the dark for a fully constructed axe in these chests than to just mine four pieces of wood with this anyways."

Venti smiled, nodding in full approval. "As long as it's a method that won't cause you any pain, I'm all for it."

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Oliver's plan actually worked.

After leaving the monster spawner behind, they had wandered down a random branching tunnel until they found a sturdy wooden support pillar holding up the ceiling. It took quite a bit of effort—and a lot of rhythmic, echoing thwacks against the plank—but Oliver eventually managed to break down enough of it to gather four solid planks of oak wood planks.

His hands were perfectly fine, though the heavy labor had definitely worked up a sweat on his brow. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, letting out a triumphant breath.

But then came the next challenge.

"Huh..." Oliver stared down at the four heavy, blocky planks resting on the sonte block floor. He had the materials, but he had absolutely no idea how to physically form them into a crafting table in real life.

"How did you do it in the game?" Venti asked, leaning over his shoulder curiously.

"That's the thing..." Oliver muttered, rubbing his chin. "The game has that digital interface I talked about. You just open your inventory and drag them into a square." He knelt down and picked up the blocks, awkwardly placing them together two-by-two.

Suddenly, the air around the wood shifted. A bright, crackling spark shot out from the seams of the four blocks, and in the blink of an eye, they fused together, transforming instantly into a waist-high wooden crafting table, complete with tools strapped to the sides.

"Oh!" Venti gasped, clapping his hands.

"Yes!!!" Oliver cheered, punching the air. "Haha, it actually worked!" He grabbed his pickaxe again and spun back around toward the wooden support pillar. "I need more wood for the sticks!"

After furiously chopping down another section of the pillar with his completely mismatched tool, he gathered the fresh planks. "Hmm... Will this work the same way?" He aggressively slammed two of the wooden blocks together. Another bright spark flashed, and the heavy blocks instantly snapped into four long, pixelated sticks.

Venti arched an eyebrow, thoroughly amused. "This universe is... rather strange."

Oliver turned back to the crafting table, but the moment he stepped close to it, all of the raw materials he had tucked under his arm suddenly shrank.

"Huh?" Oliver blinked in surprise.

It was as if the loose items had magically scaled down in size just by being in the presence of the table. They were now miniature, fitting perfectly into the palm of his hand—which meant they were exactly the right size to be placed onto the table's surface.

Wasting no time, Oliver stepped up to the bench. A faint, glowing three-by-three grid hovered just above the wooden surface. Carefully, he placed one stick in the bottom center square. Then, in the two squares directly above it, he placed his two precious diamonds.
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With a brilliant flash of blue light, the materials vanished, and a heavy, pixelated diamond sword slammed down onto the table.

Oliver looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel as he stared at the glowing blue weapon. "EeeeEEEE!" he practically squealed, making eager grabby hands before snatching the sword up by the hilt.

Venti giggled quietly, covering his mouth. "My, my," he teased softly. "You're quite excited!" He shook his head in awe. "And wow, if only forging weapons was that easy back in Mondstadt. We wouldn't even need Wagner! Haha!"

Oliver swished the sword through the air, feeling the weight of it. "I think I actually know how to use this!" he laughed. "I used that sword back when I was trapped inside my old avatar, so I still have some of that muscle memory! But holy shit, this handle is going to take some getting used to—" He looked down at his grip. The blocky, rigid handle was incredibly awkward to hold, digging into his palms. It felt absolutely nothing like the soft foam diamond sword he'd bought from GameStop a few years ago.

Venti opened his mouth to ask him about his new Vision, but before the bard could get a word out, a sudden, piercing chill ripped up and down Oliver's spine.

"Wow..." Oliver gasped.

His eyes flashed a brilliant, icy blue for a fraction of a second. A swirl of freezing, misty air erupted from his hands, spiraling rapidly up the length of the diamond sword until the blade was wreathed in a layer of biting frost. "Oh..." he breathed, staring at the weapon in pure awe.

Venti beamed, planting his hands proudly on his hips. "Seems like I got my answer! Haha! Congrats, Oliver! You are officially a Vision Holder! You've got your own Vision, your own sword! How do you feel?"

Oliver looked over at Venti, a massive, uncontainable smile spreading across his face. "I feel so happy!!!"

Venti giggled softly. "Haha! Just make sure to use your new powers wisely. Or don't use them at all, there's no problem with that either! Hey, you can even use your Cryo powers to chill a drink that's gone warm."

Oliver snorted. "Haha, I'll definitely keep that in mind."

"Good! So—"

Suddenly, a bright, pulsing white light began to shine from Venti's pants pocket, cutting through the dim gloom of the mineshaft.

Oliver blinked, his gaze dropping to the glowing part on the fabric. "Venti?"

Venti gasped, his eyes going wide as he quickly dug into his pocket. He pulled out the shining white orb that he had been holding onto since they dropped into the first world they had been too.

"Wait—" Oliver stared deadpan at the bard. "Babe, please don't tell me you completely forgot about that."

Venti cringed, offering a sheepish, guilty smile. Because he absolutely had. "This was something that dark creature didn't like, right?"

"So much for you having a sharp Archon memory," Oliver teased, rolling his eyes fondly.

"Hey!" Venti protested with a laugh. "It happens! Even to deities! But yeah, I guess we did all of this mining for nothing... Wait, no! Not nothing!" he corrected himself quickly. "Either way, you needed a

weapon to defend yourself just in case Nerraw ever got too close to you specifically! So this was still an incredibly good thing!"

Oliver looked down at his frosting diamond sword and nodded slowly. "Yeah, you're right. I do feel like much less of a burden now. I can actually fight back against Nerraw."

"Hey! Don't say that." Venti stepped right into Oliver's space, reaching up to press a sweet, lingering kiss to his lips. "You are never a burden." He pulled back just enough to pepper a few more soft kisses across Oliver's cheeks, then his nose, and finally one more on his lips, melting the boy completely.

Venti giggled, pulling back with a fierce, determined spark in his eyes. "A glowing artifact he hates? My Anemo power, and your new Cryo power that will surely cause a massive Swirl storm? He doesn't stand a chance against us! Let's go~!"

Oliver gripped his sword tighter, his confidence surging. "Let's go!"

Side by side, hand in hand, the human and the Archon turned back down the tunnel, determined to find their way to the surface and face Nerraw—hopefully for the very last time.

Chapter 44: The Wither

They finally made their way back to the surface. After a few frustrating wrong turns deep in the sprawling labyrinth of the mineshaft, the cramped, suffocating stone finally gave way to a steep tunnel leading upward.

Emerging from the blocky dirt and stepping onto the vibrant, pixelated grass, Venti threw his arms up, stretching his hands high above his head. "Ahhh, it feels nice to be in fresh air again!" He let out a relaxed sigh, taking in the blocky, geometric landscape. "Even though this isn't my world, at least I can find comfort in the warm breeze."

Oliver stood by his side, scanning the horizon. His brand-new diamond sword was clenched tightly in his fist. The adrenaline pumping through his veins completely masked the dull ache of the weapon's jagged, pixelated hilt digging into his palm. He turned his gaze past the square canopy of the trees, and his breath hitched.

Looming in the distant sky, slowly drifting above the plains, was the Wither.

"It's over there," Oliver murmured, stepping closer to Venti. "I guess we didn't wander off too far underneath it after all." He narrowed his eyes at the three-headed monstrosity. "Or maybe... it moved on its own."

Venti shook out his arms, loosening his shoulders. "Alright, I'm ready!" In a flash of teal light, his ornate bow materialized in his grip. "My burst is just about fully charged, but let's stagger it first!" He flashed a confident smile. "Remember the plan—"

"The Swirl," Oliver nodded, his grip on the sword tightening. "I know."

The air around them was comfortably warm, a stark and welcoming contrast to the freezing, oppressive dark of the caves. The sunlight and fresh air breathed new life into them, charging their energy for the fight ahead.

Venti dropped into a ready stance, his eyes locking onto the floating terror. "You can keep up with me, right?"

Oliver mimicked his boyfriend's posture, bending his knees slightly. "I can try."

"That's the spirit!" Venti beamed. "I'll charge at it and fire an Anemo arrow to activate my wind. You run in right behind me, jump, and slash with your sword using your new Vision. The blast from the freezing cold will trigger the Swirl!"

Oliver nodded firmly, though a sudden spike of doubt made him blink. "Y-You're sure I can jump that high? Remember, I'm... I'm still just a regular guy from a pretty pitiful universe."

"The best we can do is try," Venti said softly, offering a reassuring wink. "If all else fails, I'll just protect you with my wind again."

Oliver swallowed his fear, replacing it with sheer determination. "Okay. Let's do this."

"Now!" Venti shouted. The bard took off like a shot, sprinting across the blocky grass with his bow at the ready.

Oliver swung his diamond sword to his side and bolted after him. Despite having only wielded a sword while trapped inside his old avatar, the muscle memory was surging back with clarity. It felt natural. His mind, after all, was still inside of that avatar when he was in control of it.

He stayed right on Venti's heels, weaving through the square trunks of oak and birch until they burst out into the open plains, directly beneath the hovering Wither.

Up ahead, Venti skidded to a sudden halt. He drew back the bowstring, Anemo energy violently swirling around the fletching of the arrow, and then he let it fly.

The projectile shrieked through the air and lodged itself into one of the Wither's skeletal skulls. A massive eruption of wind exploded from the impact, knocking the colossal beast off balance. The Wither screeched, its three heads snapping down to glare at the bard.

But before the monster could retaliate, Oliver surged past Venti. He planted his foot against the grass and launched himself upward. The human didn't know how it was happening—he was soaring far higher than his physical body ever could back home.

"NYAAA!" Oliver roared, twisting in mid-air. He swung the diamond blade down with everything he had. A devastating blast of biting, frosty mist erupted from the edge of the sword, hurtling directly toward the staggered Wither.

The moment the biting Cryo energy collided with Venti's lingering Anemo energy, the elements reacted violently. A miniature, howling blizzard materialized in the sky. The sheer, concussive force of the Swirl reaction blasted the Wither backward. It thrashed helplessly in the vortex before completely losing its buoyancy and plummeting from the sky.

Everything fell perfectly into place.

Directly beneath the falling beast was a shallow, pixelated water lake. Minecraft's native elements seemed to perfectly obey the laws of Teyvat's physics—the second the Wither crashed into the water, the intense Cryo energy instantly froze the entire lake solid, trapping the monster in a massive block of ice.

"Ahh! Perfect!" Venti cheered. He dashed toward the frozen lake, rapidly firing a barrage of wind-infused arrows at the trapped creature.

Oliver landed smoothly and didn't waste a single second. He sprinted onto the ice, slashing his diamond sword violently across the Wither's exposed ribcage, vaulting over its frozen heads to strike at them.

But the victory was short-lived.

The dark energy inside the Wither pulsed violently. The ice splintered and shattered. With a deafening growl, the beast broke free and immediately launched itself high back into the air.

Oliver gasped, swinging his sword in a desperate move, but he hit nothing but empty air as the Wither retreated out of reach.

"Don't fret!" Venti called out, quickly moving to Oliver's side. "We'll take this terror down! You're incredibly quick on your feet with that new sword, babe!"

Oliver smiled, catching his breath before glaring back up at the hovering boss. "Same thing as before?"

"Yep! Swirl!" Venti readied another arrow. "The good news is, this creature probably isn't used to elemental reactions. Just a guess on my part. So it definitely wouldn't grow none the wiser! It'll be completely ignorant to our ways of attacking,"

As Oliver tightened his grip on the freezing hilt, a wild, reckless idea sparked in his mind. "Hey! Venti? I just got an idea, but it might sound completely insane."

"What is it? To me, no idea is ever truly crazy!"

"Okay! Uh... you can heal, right?" Oliver asked quickly.

Venti lowered his bow slightly, tilting his head. "Heal?" He blinked. "You mean like when I healed you with the Statue of the Seven? Well, yes, but we don't have the Seven here. I can heal on my own without them, but it takes an astronomical amount of energy—even more than my burst! It doesn't hurt me, but I wouldn't be able to use my burst again for a while!" Venti's eyes suddenly widened in sheer panic, and he nearly dropped his bow. "Babe?! Are you hurt?! Do you need to be healed?!"

"N-No!" Oliver quickly reassured him, his eyes glued to the sky. The Wither was glowing faintly, performing a strange, pulsing idle animation that Oliver had never seen in the game before. It was absolutely Nerraw's influence mutating its behavior.

He suddenly realized that the white orb in Venti's pocket was no longer glowing. It seemed the artifact only reacted when Nerraw's true form was directly exposed. That's why it's possessing these things, Oliver said to himself. It's using them as meat shields... We found that out on the first world with that robot. He did it then...

The only way to win was to get rid of the Wither itself. That'll leave Nerraw exposed.

"Babe, come on, make your move!" Venti urged, shifting nervously. "Do you need healing, or are we fighting?!"

"The healing wouldn't be for me!" Oliver shouted over to Venti . "It would be for the Wither!"

Venti's eyes narrowed in pure bewilderment. Normally, the bard wasn't one to judge, especially not the mortal he loved so dearly, but he was completely stumped. "Ollie... you are aware we are trying to kill it, right? If I heal it, it'll... well, be fully healed! We'd have to start this fight all over again!"

"No! In the actual lore of Minecraft, undead mobs are weak to healing magic! If you throw a splash potion of healing at them, they take massive damage!"

Venti's eyes lit up with brilliant realization. "Wow! Wait, really?!" he gasped. "Are you serious?! It's actually weak to healing?!"

"Yes! But... I'm not entirely sure if it'll react to your specific type of healing!"

Venti didn't hesitate, though his expression tightened. "Healing without the statues will drain me significantly, Oliver! If I do this, there is no turning back!"

"We have to try! The Cryo and Anemo aren't doing enough permanent damage!"

Venti let out a heavy breath. "Okay. I trust you, babe."

The bard lowered his bow and aimed both palms up at the monstrosity in the sky. He closed his eyes, his brow furrowing as he dug deep into his core. A brilliant, emerald-green light flared around his hands. "Here goes nothing!"

A massive, concentrated beam of pure, restorative Anemo energy shot from his palms, blasting directly into the Wither's skeletal chest.

The monster shrieked.

Oliver's theory was flawlessly correct. The Wither thrashed violently in the air, its dark, corrupted body violently rejecting the pure, Archon-level restoration. The sheer potency of a god's healing was infinitely more devastating than any potion.

The Wither's ribs cracked open, brilliant green light tearing through its hollow chest. It let out one final, agonizing scream as it literally withered away under the absolute purity of the magic, erupting into a massive cloud of white ash.

Venti instantly dropped to one knee, driving his fist into the dirt to keep from collapsing entirely. He was panting heavily, desperately trying to hide just how severely the magic had drained him. But a proud, exhausted smile fought its way onto his lips. "How dare I ever judge you?" he wheezed softly. "You know these worlds far better than I do."

But the battlefield wasn't over just yet.

From the center of the falling white ash, a thick, suffocating darkness began to ooze outward. The dark entity, Nerraw, hung suspended in the air, its hollow, glowing white eyes glaring down at them.

Venti gritted his teeth. He knew his body was completely spent; he couldn't even summon a gentle breeze right now. Moving as quickly as his trembling hands allowed, he slipped the necklace with the glowing orb into Oliver's pocket.

"Never could have seen that coming," Nerraw hissed, its voice echoing like grinding stones. "Using healing to kill. Never would have guessed it."

Oliver felt a sudden, intense warmth blooming against his hip. He looked down and realized the orb was practically blinding through the fabric of his pocket. He glanced over at Venti, his heart dropping at the sight of the exhausted Archon. "Venti!"

"Don't worry about me!" Venti forced out, locking eyes with him. "You have a Cryo sword, and you have the orb! Go fight it!"

Oliver nodded. The human didn't hesitate for a fraction of a second. He gripped his diamond sword and launched himself into the air, straight at the entity.

"Since when did you become so... fictional?" Nerraw snarled, swiping a long, jagged arm of pure darkness at Oliver's approaching form.

But Oliver didn't dodge. He vanished.

With a sharp crack, Oliver teleported out of the blade's path, leaving behind a dissipating cloud of shimmering ice crystals.

"What?!" Nerraw roared.

Oliver materialized flawlessly behind the dark creature, his diamond sword swinging in a devastating, icy slash. The freezing blade tore through the entity's back. Nerraw stumbled forward with a howl of pain, spinning around to see Oliver practically hovering in mid-air, buoyed by the freezing mist.

"When did you become like this?!" Nerraw yelled, its dark form flickering defensively. "You're not inside the avatar!"

Before the entity could launch a counter-attack, Oliver reached into his pocket and ripped out the silver necklace. He thrust the blinding white orb directly into Nerraw's chest.

A concussive shockwave of pure light exploded across the plains, nearly blinding the entire area. The dark, flaming monster was blasted out of the sky like a meteor, slamming very hard into the blocky dirt that it carved out a massive, jagged crater yards away from where Venti knelt.

The bard, still taking deep, recovering breaths, couldn't help but smirk. "Pretty sexy watching you fight, babe."

Oliver, still descending gracefully on a cushion of frost, flushed red. "Okay, let's not distract me, please—"

Down in the crater, the dark creature slowly, painfully pulled itself out of the rubble.

"It's exactly like what he had dealt with. Time is repeating itself," Nerraw muttered, its voice dripping with venomous disbelief. "Down to every last sickening detail... A human meeting a fictional character and getting together with it..."

Oliver landed softly on the grass, his eyes narrowing in fury. "Venti is not an 'it'."

Nerraw slowly turned its glowing eyes up to meet Oliver's. "The Fictional Universe is exactly what it says it is. It is fictional. You are risking your life for a delusion!"

"The dimensions inside it are real to the people who live in them!" Oliver snapped back, leveling his frost-coated blade at the creature. "And they have more heart than you ever will! Tell me—do you work for Doctor Barclay? Or are you just another one of his victims?"

Venti blinked, watching the confrontation closely. He was drained, but he forced his muscles to stay tense, keeping just enough reserve energy to jump in if his boyfriend needed him. He would never leave Oliver hanging.

"The doctor running those experiments?" Nerraw sneered, the darkness around it flaring aggressively. "He is the exact type of delusion I was talking about. Playing pretend with worlds that aren't his own for what? Money? A false sense of worth? All I want is to fulfill my master's plans..."

Venti's eyes widened. Master's? he repeated silently in his head.

"But my master has proven to be a traitor to himself!" Nerraw screamed, ascending back into the air in a terrifying flurry of dark energy. "But he created me for one purpose, and I will see it accomplished, no matter the cost!"

The entity thrust its arms forward, firing a rapid barrage of razor-sharp dark shards directly at Oliver.

Oliver gasped, parrying the first shard with a swift crack of his diamond sword. He quickly raised the glowing orb in his other hand. The second dark shard slammed into the artifact, violently rebounding off the light. The projectile purified instantly, transforming into a brilliant bolt of white energy that shot back and struck Nerraw squarely in the chest, blasting the creature back into the dirt.

Nerraw rose slowly from the new crater, its form wavering violently. "Curse that wretched necklace..." it hissed, closing its eyes. "Time for new scenery..."

The dark creature raised a hand and snapped its fingers.

Venti gasped. "Oh SHIT!"

A jagged, chaotic blue crack violently spider-webbed across the green, blocky terrain. It completely ignored the structural physics of Minecraft, shattering the ground like thin glass.

The ground violently split open, revealing a roaring, terrifying blue vortex beneath them.

"VENTI!" Oliver screamed.

The bard, completely devoid of energy, couldn't leap to safety fast enough. The ground gave way beneath him, and he tumbled backward into the void.

Oliver didn't think. He didn't hesitate. Gripping his sword tightly, he dove headfirst into the rift, chasing after the man he loved.

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Minutes later, a separate, perfectly circular portal opened on the blocky grass nearby.

Stepping out from the light was a dark-skinned man holding a massive, key-like weapon.

Mark had been meticulously tracking the chaotic energy trails left behind by Oliver and Venti, hunting for any sign of their whereabouts.

"I tracked them to Minecraft...This better be Minecraft..." Mark lowered his Keyblade, his eyes scanning the incredibly square trees and perfectly flat dirt walls. "Yep. Definitely Minecraft."

The Keyblade wielder analyzed his surroundings closely, searching for any bodily proportions or environmental damage that defied the game's rigid style. From where he stood, everything looked infuriatingly normal.

He pulled out his handheld scanner, tapping the screen, but it was dead quiet. "They must have traveled to another world already," Mark muttered in frustration. "I wonder if I can figure out where."

He walked toward a nearby lake, the pixelated water shimmering in the sun. But as he stepped onto the shoreline, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Hmmm," Mark hummed gently, crouching down.

In the center of the lake were massive, jagged shards of ice. But the ice wasn't pixelated. It was realistic, highly detailed, and completely alien to the environment.

"No doubt about it, someone who didn't belong in Minecraft was just here," Mark deduced, tracing a gloved finger over a frosty shard that had washed ashore. "But who uses ice? Last time I checked, Venti doesn't use Cryo magic." He stood up, crossing his arms. "And Nerraw doesn't use ice either. He's supposed to be a mirror to Dark-Blade; he's too blinded by pure darkness to wield other powers. Very odd."

Suddenly, his scanner began beeping frantically.

"Why is it picking up such a massive energy spike all of a sudden?" Mark looked around, tracking the directional ping. It couldn't have been Nerraw's lingering presence. Even though the entity was devastatingly powerful, it didn't leave signatures that looked like this.

"It must be picking something else up. But what? What could possibly give off this much raw energy in Minecraft?"

Mark carefully navigated the uneven, blocky terrain, following the intensifying beeps. As he crested a small dirt hill, a bizarre, static-like shimmering sound reached his ears. He glanced down at the scanner—the energy signature was rapidly diminishing, as if the source was evaporating. "Huh..."

Mark looked up from the screen and instantly scrambled backward with a sharp gasp. "Gah?!"
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He had nearly stepped right off the edge of a massive, jagged blue rift embedded directly into the earth.

"Holy..." Mark stood frozen, staring into the swirling vortex. "Did Nerraw do this?"

He stepped carefully to the edge of the tear. The jagged, blue-lined edges were visibly shrinking, pulling inward toward the center of the void. The rift was closing rapidly. He had to make a choice, and he had to make it right now.

"Should I... jump in?" Mark muttered.

He had to. There was no doubt this was where Oliver and Venti had vanished to; he was closer to finding them than he had ever been.

Mark made his choice. He summoned his Keyblade, held it tightly at his side, and dove headfirst into the collapsing rift.

As the rushing blue energy swallowed him whole, the digital readout on his scanner flared brilliantly before turning off.

"Entering Sil—[glitch]—ill—[hlitch]—Sub-7414"

Chapter 45: The Silent Hour

Oliver tumbled blindly out of the rift, slamming hard onto the ground. This drop felt completely different—the portal had spat him out at a harsh, disorienting angle rather than dropping him from the sky, with him usually rolling around. At least he didn't hit a wall.

"Ugh..." he groaned, his cheek pressed against cold, unforgiving concrete. He slowly pushed himself up, his muscles aching from the sudden impact. After dusting the grit off his knees and arms, he finally took a look at his surroundings.

He was at the top of a short flight of steps leading up to a large, imposing building. Beyond the steps lay a desolate street. The architecture looked modern—much closer to his actual home world than the blocky places or other exaggerated worlds they had traversed over the last few hours. For a split second, a wave of relief washed over him, as he thought he was back home.

But after staring at bit at the sights around, something did not feel right. "This isn't home, is it?" he murmured, the relief instantly evaporating. It was night, but it was an unnatural, suffocating pitch-black. The few flickering street lamps barely pierced the gloom, casting long, distorted shadows. An overwhelming sense of dread hung heavy in the stale air. It was definitely not his home world, this was another world off of the fictional grid.

"Venti? You... seeing this?" Oliver called out, glancing over his shoulder. "This doesn't look great. I feel uneasy... way more than the other worlds we've been to—"

He froze. He turned to his left. There was no one there.

"V-Venti?" Oliver called out, his voice trembling slightly. He whipped his head to the right, scanning the oppressive darkness. The bard was nowhere in sight. "V-Venti?! BABE?!"

His heart hammered against his ribs. Panic began to claw at his chest. Where is he? Did we get separated in the rift? Did he exit the rift at all?

He stumbled backward, grabbing onto a rusted support pillar beneath the building's awning. He forced himself to take deep, shaking breaths, trying to stop the spiral of terror gripping his mind.

BANG

A heavy thud echoed from inside the building behind him. Oliver gasped, spinning around to face the entrance. Beside the door was a large, smudged window. He stood frozen for a long moment, staring into the dark glass.

"What was that?" he whispered to himself.

Gathering his courage, he crept up to the glass. "Venti?" he hissed, hoping against hope that his boyfriend had somehow ended up inside this building behind him. "Are you in there? Babe!"

He peered through the grimy window. His eyes adjusted to the gloomy darkness, scanning a rotten lobby lined with rotting chairs and a reception desk. It looked like an abandoned medical facility. He grabbed the door handle and yanked. But the door was locked. He pushed his weight against it, but the heavy door wouldn't budge.

Stepping back, Oliver reconsidered. He could break the window, but reason quickly caught up with him. If Venti had made that sound, the bard most likely would have been at the door already trying to open it. Plus, the building was radiating a deeply unsettling aura. He didn't want look at this door, much less open it.

Oliver slowly backed away, turning to face the dark street. "I have to find Venti..."

He walked forward, taking the concrete steps down one at a time. A rusted gate stood open in front of him, leading out to the desolate street. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. Halfway to the gate, he glanced back at the massive hospital.

"Is it closed? It can't be closed. It's a hospital."

Oliver's eyes slowly wandered from the doors up to the frame above the entrance. He read the name imprinted on the building:

Brookhaven Hospital.

Oliver's eyes widened. The dark streets. The decayed look of everything. The suffocating dread he'd been feeling... it all made horrifying sense now.

The diamond sword suddenly materialized in his hand. Cryo energy slowly began to circle the blade, shimmering with tiny, ethereal snowflakes. "I have to find Venti..." he whispered.

A sudden noise made him spin around. There stood Nerraw, staring at him with a painfully wide, glowing smile, his bright white eyes piercing through the oppressive dark. But just as quickly as Oliver had turned, the dark creature vanished, as if he'd never been there at all.

Oliver gripped his sword tighter. He remembered he still had the necklace in his pocket—the magical orb that Nerraw seemed to be truly weak against. But right now, his mind was consumed with worry for his boyfriend. Wherever Venti was, he didn't have the orb to protect himself.

Oliver realized he needed to pick a fight with Nerraw to stall him here, before the creature could get to Venti... if he hadn't already.

But before Oliver could shout anything, Nerraw's voice slithered through the dark.

"You think you belong here? In the Fictional Universe?" The dark voice echoed around Oliver, impossible to pinpoint. "Try to fend off this universe's dangerous foes... Then you'll see why you do not belong here."

The air shifted, as if reality itself had warped. Oliver heard the shuffling of uneven footsteps next to him. He turned to see a woman covered in blood, her face obscured by grotesque bandages. She clutched a rusted steel pipe, staggering toward him as if she couldn't stand straight.

"Ah!?" Oliver gasped, sweeping his sword through the air. An icy blast shot from the blade, striking the Nurse. She stumbled back, her body partially freezing over. Oliver seized the opening, charging forward and slashing the diamond sword across her chest, sending her flying until she crumpled across the street.

He turned around and saw three more approaching down the sidewalk. Setting his jaw in determination, Oliver vanished in a blur of speed, reappearing behind the creatures. With quick, decisive strikes to their backs, they all collapsed to the ground.

Oliver didn't know what prompted it, but an instinct screamed at him to turn around and raise his guard. He threw his diamond sword up just in time. A massive, crushing force slammed into his blade. The Cryo energy sparked, repelling the blow and sending whatever had hit him bouncing back to the ground.

Lowering his sword, Oliver stared in shock. Pyramid Head was recovering from his knees.

The human blinked, slowly backing away while gripping his sword handle with white knuckles. The executioner picked up the Great Knife, stabbed it into the asphalt, and hoisted his massive frame upward. Oliver gulped as he stared at the iron helmet of this dangerous man.

Pyramid Head swung the Great Knife in a lethal arc. Oliver was quicker, slamming his sword against the heavy blade and forcing the monster to stagger backward. Taking advantage of the stun, Oliver sprinted forward. He stepped onto the monster's massive arm, ran up over the rusted metal helmet, and leaped into the air. Spinning gracefully midair, he brought the diamond sword crashing down.

Pyramid Head collapsed, dropping the Great Knife, and lay dead on the road.

Oliver blinked, staring at his own trembling hands. "What...? How did I just kill this guy..?"

"Just what Dark-Blade had mentioned about Mark," Nerraw's voice echoed again. "This is something I should have put more effort into anticipating... a human crosses into the Fictional Universe and gets granted power... and they become more powerful than the main characters of that realm."

Oliver tightened his grip on his sword. "You're not even doing this right," he grunted. "These monsters are supposed to be born from your own mind... you're just making me fight James's subconscious..."

"Oh," Nerraw purred darkly. Suddenly, the being of darkness materialized mere inches from Oliver. "I'm sorry, how ignorant of me. Is that what you want, human?"

Oliver gasped at the sudden proximity and stumbled back.

Nerraw vanished in a puff of dark mist, reappearing right at Oliver's ear. "Your parents died when you were fifteen, leaving you all alone. Do you want manifestations of that?" Nerraw vanished and reappeared on his other side. "What about when your past partners kink-shamed you over a stupid little fetish? What about manifestations of those?"

Again, the dark being disappeared, reappearing directly in front of Oliver's face, that horrifying smile stretched wide. "Or how about the time when you—"

"I have already gotten over those traumas," Oliver cut him off. He had no idea how Nerraw was digging into his mind, but he wasn't going to let it work. "Putting me through those would be redundant, and quite frankly, not very Silent Hill."

Nerraw froze. The wide smile instantly vanished.

"You barely understand what you're doing," Oliver snapped. "Why are you even doing this? Who and what even are you—"

Oliver's words were cut off as Nerraw suddenly seized his throat, hoisting him off the ground. "AaK!" Oliver choked, kicking his legs.

The dark creature pulled Oliver close, the dark flames of his body flashing violently. "My name is Nerraw," the entity hissed. "Created by my master from the body of Warren, I failed to have finished what my master did not complete. So now, I will destroy the Fictional Universe for good. Nothing can stop me. I will NOT LET IT—"

Desperate, Oliver jammed his hand into his pocket to grab the necklace. But Nerraw's reflexes were too fast; the creature grabbed Oliver's wrist before he could pull the orb out.

"I will not let you use that—" Nerraw snarled, hurling Oliver to the concrete.

Oliver slammed hard against the ground. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and his diamond sword clattered away into the dark. "OUCH!" he yelped.

Nerraw slowly floated down. "Is it me you want to fight? Then so be it."

Groaning in pain, Oliver tried to scramble up. He reached for his sword, but a sudden unseen force blasted the weapon away, sending it scraping violently across the asphalt until it hit the side of a building. Oliver gasped, falling back onto his hands as he tried to scramble away.

Nerraw calmly walked over. "I'm done with this." He snapped his fingers.

The glowing orb attached to the necklace forcefully tore its way out of Oliver's pocket.

"No!" Oliver gasped, swiping at the air to catch it.

The necklace hovered effortlessly in front of Nerraw's face.

"I'm more powerful than all of you. It's time I act like it." The dark creature barely glanced at the necklace before it exploded into jagged pieces of glass. The white mist trapped inside shimmered and faded away into nothing.

Oliver's breath hitched, his back pressed tight against the brick fence of the hospital. He had never seen the creature do anything like this. Desperately, he tried to summon his sword back, opening and closing his hand, hoping for his pixelated blade to return. But nothing happened. Nothing worked.

Why isn't it working?! he screamed in his head.

"These fictional worlds have so many safeguards and rules... it's hard for me to accomplish anything," Nerraw mused softly. "But in this world... Silent Hill... I feel limitless."

Nerraw's right arm morphed into a massive, jagged dark shard. Oliver's eyes widened in pure terror. He kept trying to summon his weapon, but he was completely defenseless.

"All of you will pay for my failure to extract Sub-7's energy—" Nerraw raised his bladed arm, preparing to kill him.

Suddenly, a portal ripped open in the sky just a few feet away.

Nerraw stopped, slowly turning to look. Hovering over the street was a massive portal disc, angled downward like a chute meant for dumping garbage. The few lit streetlights flickered wildly in tandem with the portal's blue, liquid energy.

"What now?" Nerraw grumbled, taking a step back from Oliver and staring up. The portal wasn't even fully formed yet; it was just a swirling pool in the sky.

"To hell with this—" Nerraw aimed his arm up at the anomaly. "I'll destroy this, it's just something else to mess with my pla—"

Before the creature could finish, a colossal stone statue ejected from the portal, dropping straight down and crushing Nerraw into the pavement.

Oliver screamed as the shockwave ripped through the street. The impact shattered the asphalt, revealing the rusted, metallic Otherworld grating beneath. The iron groaned under the immense weight before snapping, swallowing chunks of the statue into the dark void below, while the largest pieces remained wedged in the street.

The portal flickered and snapped shut.

Oliver blinked, coughing through the dust, trying to comprehend what had just happened. The dark creature was gone. It was nowhere to be seen. Surely he couldn't have died from that.

Slowly, the human pushed himself to his feet. As the dust settled, he got a better look at the massive chunk of stone that had saved his life. Something about it looked incredibly familiar. The curve of a wing....

Oliver stepped forward, peering over the rubble. His eyes went wide.

"VENTI?!"

The bard was lying motionless on his side among the debris, facing away from Oliver. His signature green hat had been blown off, resting on the cracked asphalt a few feet away.

Panic seized Oliver all over again. "Babe! I'm coming!" He vaulted over the broken stone, nearly tripping over himself in his desperation. Nothing else mattered right now.

"Venti!" Oliver dropped to his knees. "Babe, are you okay?!" He gently took Venti by the shoulders and rolled him onto his back. Venti was barely moving.

The bard's attire was torn and scratched, his cape practically shredded. Oliver's trembling fingers found the pulse point at Venti's neck, and thankfully, he got a pulse.

Oliver took a shuddering breath. At least Venti was alive. But what the hell had he been through? Despite his ruined clothes, there was no sign of blood. Through the tears in the fabric, Venti's pale skin looked completely unmarred.

"Venti?" Oliver whispered, his thumb gently brushing across the bard's cheek. "Please be okay..."

At his touch, Venti's eyes fluttered open.

Oliver let out a loud gasp of relief. "BABE—"

Before he could finish, Venti shot upward, wrapping his arms around Oliver in a desperate, bone-crushing hug.

Oliver froze in shock for a second before melting into the embrace, his arms wrapping securely around the smaller boy. "Venti? Are you okay?"

"Just hold me..." Venti whispered. His voice was incredibly fragile, on the verge of cracking. "Please..."

Oliver didn't hesitate. He gently rubbed circles into Venti's back, his mind racing. "D-Did the dark creature attack you?" If Venti had fought Nerraw, he usually would have been boasting or complaining about it. This sheer vulnerability was terrifying.

"No," Venti breathed against his neck. "I didn't see him."

They sat in silence for a moment, the only sound being Venti's quiet sniffles.

"My friend..." Venti whispered.

Oliver's hand paused on Venti's back. "Your friend?"

Venti buried his face in Oliver's shoulder. "I don't know how long you and I were separated... but... there was this town with fog—" Venti's voice broke. "And... these monsters. The monsters weren't the problem,

but it was what... the things I saw. It was... as if it was a reflection of every single bad thing that has ever happened to me in my long life..."

Oliver's eyes widened in sudden, horrifying understanding.

"I felt like it had been hours... hours of being reminded of everything that I failed to do as an Archon—"

Oliver's heart broke for his boyfriend. He knew exactly what Silent Hill had done to him. "Venti, no. You're not a failure."

Venti sniffled again. "You're really the only person who tells me that. Everyone else just calls me a tone-deaf drunkard, but—"

"No—" Oliver interrupted gently, pulling back just enough to look Venti in the eyes. "In my opinion, you're the best Archon in Teyvat."

Venti blinked at him, tears clinging to his eyelashes. "I am?"

"You are," Oliver said firmly. "Your nation is one of the only places where everyone feels genuinely free. That was your goal, wasn't it? To free your people. And you did exactly that! You freed them, and ever since, barely anything has touched Mondstadt. Everything is always peaceful there, even while the surrounding nations are constantly crumbling in flames."

Oliver leaned forward, pressing a tender kiss to Venti's lips. "Who cares if you're drunk all the time? An Archon who accomplished that much deserves all the wine breaks in the world."

Venti wiped a tear away, a watery smile finally gracing his face. "I... I really don't deserve you."

"Hey, don't steal my lines," Oliver murmured, resting his forehead against Venti's.

Venti let out a wet chuckle, hugging Oliver tightly again. "We were both there for each other..."

"Yeah. If it wasn't for you helping me out back in Teyvat, I'd probably be dead meat probably,"

Venti sighed, resting his chin on Oliver's shoulder. "I don't know what that place was... it was so foggy, and all I saw were signs I couldn't really grasp. Then there was this weird... alarm sound? Everything warped around me and turned blood-red. I was so scared, I don't even know how long I was trapped there —"

Oliver kissed him again, softly silencing the panic rising in Venti's chest. "Shh. It's okay. I'm here now. This is Silent Hill. That's... what this place does. It reads your mind and morphs the town into your worst traumas..."

"You mentioned that name before," Venti recalled, his breathing finally steadying. "When we were back in that blocky world. You said something about finding keys or something." Venti pulled back, sitting up straight with an exhausted sigh. "I had to use my powers for so many things just to survive, I'm totally spent..."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Ugh, this is another one of those 'video games' you play in your world? Why would anyone put themselves through this torture?"

Oliver offered a small, apologetic smile. "Horror is amazing until you actually go through it in real life."

"I prefer the fictional stories... take me away from the real thing," Venti said.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that, Venti."Oliver looked at his boyfriend worriedly.

"It wasn't your fault, baby," Venti reassured him, resting a hand on Oliver's cheek. "For what it's worth, you were my beacon of hope. You were always on my mind, and that's why I pushed through that nightmare. I kept telling myself that I would see you again. That I'd get to experience your sweet kisses, and you playing with my belly button again."

Oliver giggled, a flush creeping onto his face. "Does my belly button fetish really matter that much?"

Venti nodded earnestly. "It does. It's a thing that connects us both. So I cherish it. I cherish everything we do together."

Oliver smiled warmly, leaning in for another kiss as they sat together amidst the rubble.

When he finally pulled away, Oliver looked around at the massive chunks of stone scattered around them. "What was this?"

Venti swallowed hard. "My statue. The Statue of Barbatos. It was a dark... a weird version of Mondstadt. The sky was red, but it didn't look like an Abyss invasion. This... this was different."

"Silent Hill definitely had it out for you..."

Venti nodded. "Yeah."

Oliver sighed, his expression twisting into disgust. "Honestly, this entire thing... I've felt this way since we got stuck inside Minecraft, but actually being physically trapped inside the fictional worlds I've played... it makes me never want to look at fiction the same way again." He looked up at Venti. "I feel like I don't ever want to touch a video game again if I get my normal life back."

Venti gently covered Oliver's hands with his own. "I don't think you should view it that way, babe. Sure, it was terrifying being here, but it shouldn't drive you away from the things you love. It's no one's fault that a fictional story sparked a separate reality. The story itself—what you read and play—is its own thing... you understand what I mean?" Venti gave a small, encouraging giggle.

"I... think so," Oliver said.

Venti hugged him again.

"The dark creature was here," Oliver said after a moment.

"Nerraw?" Venti looked up in surprise. "He was? I didn't see him where I was. I thought all the horrifying stuff happening was his doing, but I soon realized it wasn't."

"We got separated," Oliver said.

"Yeah." Venti looked around at the oppressively dark street. "It wasn't this dark. All I saw was fog. Not even the Abyss looked this pitch-black."

"I wonder if it was like when we were in Soma... just without the world-destroying part," Oliver mused. "We went into two different sub-dimensions."

"The Sub-Dimensions?" Venti asked. "Well, if it matters, I remember the sub being 7414."

"Huh—" Oliver tried to recall the number before he first landed. "I can't remember the exact number, but it definitely wasn't 7414. It was a single digit—oh! Wait, it was 1! Sub-1, yes."

"Sub-1?" Venti blinked. "Would that make it like... the prime world, then? I mean, for it to be 1,"

"I have no idea," Oliver said. "But it sounds right on paper, I guess."

Venti pushed himself to his feet. "My word, I am so ready to leave."

Oliver quickly stood up beside him. "I can tell you're still not feeling great."

Venti, despite how he usually tried to play things off, shook his head honestly. "I can't pretend. I'm not. The whole thing shook me up pretty badly. But... in a weird way, I feel closure?" Venti offered a weak shrug.

Oliver nodded, "I think seeing your traumas forcibly played out like that does bring a weird sort of closure. I am glad you feel that way, though. You must have had all of that bottled up inside you." Oliver took Venti's hands. "When we get back to my realm, we're cuddling immediately."

Venti let his hands be held, a genuine giggle escaping him. "Cuddle? Where? In that dingy breakroom?"

"Hey, emergency cuddling doesn't discriminate against the setting!" Oliver joked.

Venti laughed, squeezing Oliver's hands. "Haha! Oh my word. I just hope you didn't see anything close to what I saw."

Oliver looked up at the pitch-black sky—if the Otherworld even had a sky. "I think Nerraw had complete control over this sub... though he didn't understand what the hell Silent Hill was supposed to be. I jabbed at him that he wasn't doing it right, and he went full petty and read my mind. He dragged up past traumas that I've been over for years, like losing my parents—"

Venti gasped, placing a hand over his heart. "Oh babe—" he looked stricken. "I had no idea you were an orphan—"

"Hey, don't worry about me with that," Oliver smiled, waving it off easily. "I already moved past it. Nerraw was just being an idiot, thinking he could use it against me. The dumbass even tried to use my exes breaking up with me over my belly button fetish as ammo."

Venti's expression instantly shifted to indignation. "He is an asshole for doing that!"

Oliver chuckled, waving Venti off again. "Also, past that. Well, maybe I wasn't completely over it before meeting you. But since then? You've been so sweet to me regarding what I like. So, trauma healed!" Oliver smiled brightly, leaning forward and planting a loud kiss on Venti's lips. "Muah!"

Venti giggled against him, kissing back with a bright laugh.

Oliver pulled away, shaking his head. "That dark dumbass didn't even do the trauma horror right. The town is supposed to morph into my insecurities. Not have a dark flaming bitch just recite them to my face."

Venti snorted, covering his mouth. "Hehehe. Yeah, what a dumbass. A Hilichurl would have done a better job." He looked around the ruined street. "Where is he, anyway?"

"I don't know," Oliver admitted. "You made quite an entrance with your statue. It slammed straight into him, and then he just noped out of existence."

"Well, knowing him, he's definitely not dead," Venti noted grimly.

They stood together for a few more minutes, catching their breath. There wasn't much else to do, and neither wanted to panic just yet.

Suddenly, the air rippled. A small portal tore open, and a familiar figure stepped through.

Venti and Oliver both jumped back.

Blue crystal shards jutted across the creature's body, while a tough, black obsidian-like material obscured most of his face. A blue cape bearing the number '1' draped softly from his shoulders.

The crystalline creature, Thomas, instantly summoned his golden Keyblade. "Where is Nerraw?" he demanded.

Oliver looked at Venti, then back to Thomas. "I don't know. He was just here, and then he disapp—"

Thomas marched past Oliver before he could even finish, his eyes locked on the rubble of the Barbatos statue scattered across the asphalt.

Before anyone could speak, another portal flared open. Mark stepped out.

"Ah! There you are!" Mark sighed in profound relief, rushing over to Oliver and Venti. "You have no idea how long I've been searching for you two! The others back at the lab were getting incredibly worried. I jumped into Sub-7414 and panicked when I saw it was Silent Hill. I couldn't find anyone, but then my scanner picked up another reading. I jumped through another rift, and here we are! I am so grateful you're both safe."

Mark paused, noticing Thomas glaring down through the broken metal grating into the abyss below. "Oh! You're here too? I thought you went back to the lab to keep an eye on the others."

Thomas tightly gripped his golden Keyblade. "He's here..."

Mark blinked. "He? Uh... Nerraw?" He glanced urgently at Venti and Oliver.

Oliver nodded. "He was here, but he disappeared. I don't know where he went."

Mark immediately summoned his own Keyblade, the magical weapon flashing into his hands. "Okay. We need to be on high alert. Oliver I threw you all a necklace as the portal closed back at the lab. Did either of you pick it up?

"Well... Yeah, venti did... We did use it but..." Oliver winced guiltily. "I... uh... Nerraw somehow broke it."

Mark's eyes widened in horror. "What?!"

Thomas whipped his head around from the grating, staring at Oliver. Even Venti looked shocked.

"Well, that is incredibly bad news," Venti muttered. "That was the only thing it was actually weak to."

"Okay," Mark said, raising his Keyblade high. "Let me make another one... ohhhh, I just hope the light of Kingdom Hearts can reach us way out here—7414 is pretty far out from the leak..."

Mark swung his weapon upward, aiming at the pitch-black sky. He took a deep breath. "LIGHT!!!"

A blinding white beam shot down from the heavens, piercing the Otherworld's oppressive dark. A giant heart moon appeared in the sky. It was so intense it almost blinded them. Mark gripped the Keyblade with both hands, slowly twisting it in the air. Like turning a lock, the massive beam of light slowly condensed, simmering down until it was nothing but a glowing, marble-sized morsel hovering in the air.

"Thomas, quick. Give me a casing," Mark ordered.

The heart shaped moon in the sky vanished.

Thomas rushed over, pulling an empty glass pendant from his cape and holding it up. Mark gently guided the speck of pure light into the casing, sealing it tight before dismissing his Keyblade. Thomas secured the pendant and handed it straight back to Oliver.

Oliver took it, completely in awe of the magical display. Beside him, Venti looked equally stunned.

"How did he destroy it?" Mark asked, his brow furrowed. "I've never seen him manage that before." He looked at Thomas. "Has he ever done that with yours? Wait, no—what am I saying, of course not. Yours transformed into the Keyblade you're holding."

Oliver stared down at the glowing orb in his hand. He frowned, remembering what the creature had said.

"These fictional worlds have so many safeguards and rules... it's hard for me to accomplish anything... but in this world... Silent Hill... I feel limitless."

Oliver quickly repeated Nerraw's exact words to Mark.

"Limitless?" Mark blinked. "I wonder..." He quickly pulled out his scanner, tapping the screen a few times.

"Interesting," Mark muttered.

Oliver tilted his head. "What's the matter?"

"We're in Silent Hill... Sub-Dimension 1," Mark explained. "I already went over this with the other boys, but not you and Venti. Sub-1s are practically blank slates that aren't supposed to exist for travel. I theorize that this is exactly what Nerraw meant. In a Sub-1, the normal rules of reality don't apply. He can do almost anything he wants here. Despite Sub-1s being a linear world, if outsiders do mange to come, they can... be free,"

Oliver's eyes widened. He didn't fully grasp the sci-fi mechanics of Mark's explanation, but he completely understood the terrifying implication of Nerraw 'doing whatever he wanted.'

Venti clearly felt the same way. "So... wouldn't it be extremely wise to get out of here? Go to literally any other realm? Especially if we end up having to fight him again?"

"Yes." Mark snapped his fingers at Thomas. "Come on, any realm is better than this one."

Mark quickly slashed his Keyblade through the air, tearing open a fresh portal. Thomas didn't waste a second, aggressively ushering the bard and the human toward the glowing exit.

Nerraw was still missing, but none of them had any desire to stick around and find out where he went.

Chapter 46: World Destroyer Part V

"At least your portal felt better than Nerraw's," Oliver breathed as they stepped through the exit of the rift Mark had opened. Despite getting shoved through by Thomas, the transition was mercifully smooth—nothing like the nightmare of the violent blue vortex he had endured with Venti.

They emerged into the gritty shadows of a city back alley. Venti, still pressed tightly to Oliver's side, quietly looked around at their new surroundings.

Mark stepped through behind them and spun around. "What was the other portal like?" he asked.

Oliver shuddered at the memory. "Like this... blue vortex or something. Every couple of minutes, it would just tear open in the ground and suck both Venti and me into it."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. "Ah. Those aren't made from Nerraw. Those are the actual rifts between the worlds that link them together. Though I'm still wondering if he was even the one opening them. My tracker showed it was tearing you two through different worlds, but that's usually not his method... he prefers to use his own portals." Mark looked down, lost in thought.

Oliver made sure his hands never left Venti. Even safely out of the portal, he kept his arm wrapped securely around his boyfriend's waist, stealing a quick glance to make sure the bard was holding up. Then, he looked back at the newcomer. "So you're Mark, right? August mentioned you, but we barely had any time to talk before... you know, Nerraw and all of that."

"Yes! Sorry, I didn't get to properly introduce myself in the chaos," Mark said, turning to face them. "My name is Markus Baker. I'm just like you—a human from the 'real world'."

Oliver blinked in surprise. "You are?" He looked down at the massive, intricate weapon in Mark's hand. "But you have that?"

Mark chuckled. "I can only guess you got that in the same way you got this," he smiled, pointing to the pixelated diamond sword that Oliver still held materialized in his free hand.

Oliver glanced down at his left hand, momentarily confused. "Huh?"

"Heh," Mark smiled. "The Fictional Universe wasn't opened by me, but it opened in my house for the first time since 1939. That was back in 2018, when I was just turning seventeen."

Oliver looked up at him, amazed. "Really? Wait... how did you get that weapon then?"

"It's a keyblade," Mark explained. "I met Sora from—"

Oliver cut him off with a sharp gasp. "SORA?!" His arm accidentally tightened around Venti, squeezing a little squeak out of the bard.

"Oh! Sorry!" Oliver quickly relaxed his grip.

Despite still feeling drained, Venti couldn't help but giggle at his boyfriend's sudden fanboying, even if he had no idea what the two humans were talking about.

Mark smiled and continued. "Yes, Sora. He bestowed the power to wield the keyblade onto me, and almost instantly, I was able to use one."

Oliver gasped again, his mind racing. "Wait, really? But... it's not supposed to be that easy to use the Key —" He paused. He remembered seamlessly channeling Cryo energy, and materializing the Minecraft sword out of nowhere. Venti had mentioned that mastering a Vision took years of intense training—He definitely knew about that anyway, he's a Genshin Impact fan after all—yet Oliver had managed it effortlessly.

"Residents of the 'real world' are gifted by the Fictional Universe to use the worlds' resources. It was something that was embedded into these universes since they were created," Mark explained.

Oliver's eyes narrowed. Nerraw had said something similar. But following that train of thought brought up a much more pressing question. "Then... will we be able to kill Nerraw then?"

"Not easily," Mark admitted. "Nerraw can only truly be killed by a few specific things, and he's smart enough to avoid worlds where he can actually die. For one thing, he's made of darkness. Literally. The negative energy from Kingdom Hearts. Naturally, only the power of the Keyblade can truly destroy him. We've been beating him with our keyblades for years; he's slowly getting weaker, now he's fighting with everything he has left like a cornered animal."

"But who is he?" Oliver asked. "I played Kingdom Hearts constantly as a kid. I don't remember any villain named Nerraw. Even if he was a secret boss in one of the older games, the fandom would have talked about it..."

"Who is then? I've played Kingdom Hearts so many times when I was a kid, I don't remember there being a Nerraw in the story. And even if he was in a previous game, I am sure the fandom would be talking about it..."

"Yeah, well, he's from our world too... in a sense," Mark said. "He's not exactly from Kingdom Hearts,"

Oliver tilted his head. "What?"

"The fictional leak," Mark said. He paused as Oliver's expression twisted into utter confusion. "Huh? Didn't I tell—? Ah, right. I told the other guys, not you two." Mark sighed. "The short version: aspects of fictional realities have leaked over to our world. It's the reason we can use fictional items if we bring them over. It also affects neighboring worlds. It's why Venti here can still use his magic, even though he is not in Teyvat."

"Oh!" Oliver looked down at Venti in realization.

Venti blinked, looking at his hands. "Well, that explains why my Anemo powers still work."

"Exactly," Mark said. "Anyway, Nerraw was created in a weird way. There was this boy... I don't know if I mentioned him to you guys, but his name was Dark-Blade. He was in a really dark place mentally, and he used Kingdom Hearts magic to extract the darkness from his friend's body. That extracted darkness manifested into Nerraw."

Something clicked in Oliver's head. "Let me guess... was that friend named Warren?"

Mark looked surprised. "Yeah. How did you know?"

"I just put two and two together. When Nerraw was fighting me earlier, he talked about being created from someone else's body."

Mark nodded. "Yeah. He likes to monologue. The fictional villain tropes have definitely gotten to him."

"Where is he, anyway?" Oliver asked, finally taking a good look at their surroundings. "And where are we for one?"

"Uhh..." Mark checked his scanner. "Not entirely sure. I wasn't paying attention to the destination coordinates on the scanner; I just needed to get us away from Nerraw so you two could catch your breath. He will follow us."

They could hear the bustling sounds of heavy traffic out on the street beyond the alley.

"I mean, it looks like a city-," Oliver blinked. "Just... hard to see it from this back alley-,"

"I think we're in Zenless Zone Zero," Mark noted, tapping his device. "That's what it says,"

Oliver's eyes flew open. "One of Hoyo's other games?"

"I know you probably want to explore," Mark said quickly, catching the look on Oliver's face, "but like I said, Nerraw will track us down. Let's stay hidden in this alley. The second he appears, we warp to another world. I cannot let Nerraw attack us here. We're in the middle of a densely populated city; hundreds of innocent people will die if we fight here."

Oliver nodded. "Right,"

Mark looked at Venti with genuine concern. "Is he seriously okay? He's been looking a little lost. I have a healing potion if he needs it."

"He's—" Oliver looked down at Venti, his heart aching slightly. "We got separated when we entered Silent Hill. He had to go through it... like, literally go through his own personalized Silent Hill nightmare."

Mark winced. "That's... really not good." He turned to Venti with sympathy. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that." Mark opened his palm, and a bottle of glowing green liquid materialized in a flash of light. "Here, take this."

Venti slowly stepped away from Oliver's side and accepted the bottle. "What is this?"

"A potion from the Kingdom Hearts universe," Mark explained. "Don't worry, it's completely safe. Thanks to the leak, it'll heal anyone."

Venti closed his hands over the glass, and the green bottle vanished into thin air.

Oliver blinked. "What did you do with it?"

Venti looked up at him with a soft, reassuring smile. "I stored it in my realm."

Suddenly, Mark's scanner erupted into a frantic series of beeps.

Mark's head snapped up. "Get ready. He's coming. When he appears, I'll open a portal, and Thomas will smack him into it. You two, stay back and do nothing."

Oliver nodded tightly. He looked down at Venti, who was standing quietly. "Babe, you okay?"

Venti didn't answer with words. He simply closed the distance between them and leaned heavily against Oliver. "Not sure yet," he whispered.

Oliver wrapped his arms securely around him. "We can hug for as long as you need to."

Venti smiled softly. He looked up, pressed a sweet kiss to Oliver's lips, and then buried his face into Oliver's chest.

"Stay on your toes, you two," Mark warned, his grip tightening on his keyblade. "He could appear any second."

The words had barely left his mouth when a swirling, pitch-black vortex tore open the air above the alleyway.

"Remember the plan, Thomas," Mark ordered the crystalline creature standing ready beside him. "We can't fight him here. Hit him straight into the rift I will make."

Nerraw slowly descended from the dark vortex, his glowing, hollow eyes locking onto them. "You all will never quit, will you?" the entity hissed, its voice echoing unnaturally. "You may have found new friends to hide behind, but I will make sure you do not succeed..."

"Now," Mark whispered. He swung his Keyblade upward, channeling his magic to rip open a glowing portal directly behind Nerraw.

Thomas moved like lightning. He launched himself into the air and swung his golden Keyblade like a baseball bat. He slammed the weapon into Nerraw before the creature could even react, sending the entity flying backward straight through the glowing rift.

"Come on! Follow him!" Mark shouted, diving into the portal.

Oliver summoned his diamond sword and grabbed Venti's hand. "Ready?"

Venti nodded with determination. Together, they leaped into the light portal

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They ejected from the portal into empty space—literally miles up in the sky of an unknown world, surrounded by nothing but clouds.

Oliver let out a terrified gasp as gravity immediately seized him. The ground was miles down from his feet.

Before panic could even set in, Venti's magic flared. Swirling currents of Anemo wind wrapped around Oliver, suspending him effortlessly in the air. Oliver panted, staring at Venti with overwhelming gratitude. Leave it to Venti to feel completely drained and traumatized, yet still instantly catch the person he loved.

Floating securely in his boyfriend's winds, Oliver looked ahead. Mark and Thomas were suspended in the air in front of them, weapons drawn. Mark held his Keyblade down at his left side, while Thomas mirrored him on the right, his blue cape whipping wildly in the high-altitude winds.

Above them all loomed Nerraw, floating ominously against the clouds.

"This isn't right," Mark turned to Thomas. "We're back in your world—... I didn't choose these coordinates on my scanner... What is with this thing..."

"This is where he decided to pick fights with me," Thomas said, his voice cold and hard. "So this is where the fuckin' knob dies." He tightened his grip on his Keyblade and rocketed upward toward Nerraw.

Mark nodded once and took off right behind him.

Nerraw hovered motionless as the two key warriors charged. At the last second, the dark creature swiped his arm, unleashing a jagged spark of dark energy. Mark barrel-rolled out of the way and slashed his Keyblade through the air. A shockwave of pure light slammed into Nerraw, causing the entity to stumble.

"You—" Nerraw snarled, vanishing instantly before Thomas had caught up to him, so once he did Thomas had swiped his Keyblade into nothing.
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Nerraw materialized directly behind Mark and delivered a brutal kick to his spine. Mark tumbled forward, rapidly losing altitude.

Thomas blinked to Nerraw's side, swinging his Keyblade at the creature's shoulder, but Nerraw threw his hand up. A wave of dark gravity seized Thomas, freezing the crystalline fighter completely in place.

Mark recovered his balance and charged back upward, but Nerraw merely extended his other hand, locking Mark in the air alongside Thomas.

Watching from below, Venti's expression hardened. "I'm going to help them," he whispered to Oliver.

Oliver looked at him, his voice laced with worry. "A-Are you sure? Are you up for this right now?"

"Babe," Venti said softly but firmly. "What I saw in that town... it was just my past. I've already lived through it. Everyone needs help right now, including you. I'm not going to let this monster add another tragedy to my list."

Oliver stared at him for a second, then nodded.

"Can you fight?" Venti whispered.

"I think so," Oliver whispered back. "I couldn't fly just now because I panicked, but I was flying earlier when I fought him. I don't know how I did it, but I can."

"Okay." Venti slowly let his Anemo currents die down around Oliver.

Oliver gasped, quickly channeling his Cryo energy. The cold power surged through him, and to his relief, he remained hovering steadily in the air on his own.

"Just be careful," Venti said, his glowing eyes locked on Nerraw. "Let's end this."

Oliver pulled the repaired glass pendant from his pocket and summoned his pixelated sword. "Ready."

Venti shot upward like a comet, Oliver flying right beside him.

Nerraw caught their movement out of the corner of his eye. He dropped his telekinetic hold on Mark and whipped around, attempting to freeze the Archon in place. But he hadn't accounted for the necklace.

Oliver thrust the glowing orb forward. The pure light slashed through Nerraw's dark aura, making the creature shriek and recoil.

"How do you have that?!" Nerraw roared. "I destroyed it!"

Venti summoned his bow, pulling back the glowing string and firing a rapid volley of Anemo arrows. Nerraw desperately dodged the projectiles, teleporting through the air until he appeared directly in front of Venti. He grabbed the bow and violently yanked it out of the Archon's hands, trying to snap it over his knee. but it wouldn't break.

"What?!" Nerraw yelled in frustration. "Why is this indestructible?!"

While trapped in Silent Hill, Venti hadn't been able to use his powers, but his elemental energy had been quietly pooling the entire time. His burst was fully charged.

Venti extended his arm and snapped his fingers.

A massive singularity of swirling Anemo erupted directly behind Nerraw. The black hole of wind generated an immense gravitational pull, sucking the distracted creature backward. Nerraw clawed at the

air, trying to resist the vortex, but the suction was too powerful.

Venti snatched his bow back from the struggling creature's hands. He drew the string back and fired a concentrated Anemo arrow directly into Nerraw's chest, the impact blasting the dark being deeper into the wind.

As the vortex violently dispersed, Oliver flew in. He slashed his diamond sword across Nerraw's back, then followed up by smashing the glowing necklace directly against the entity. The burst of light did massive damage, searing away chunks of darkness.

Mark recovered and flew in, driving his Keyblade into Nerraw's side. Thomas flanked from the opposite direction, his golden blade striking.

But Thomas wasn't finished. He spun in midair, charging at Nerraw with unrelenting fury. He aimed the tip of his Keyblade directly at the creature. "FIRE!" he roared. A massive fireball erupted, though Nerraw barely managed to contort out of the way.

Thomas fluidly spun his weapon again, tracking the dodge. "THUNDER!" A jagged bolt of lightning shot from the blade. It was a direct hit onto Nerraw.

"ARURRRGGG!" Nerraw screamed as the high-voltage magic violently coursed through his form.

Oliver dove down, driving his Cryo-infused sword into Nerraw's shoulder, but the creature barely flinched. As the stun from the electricity wore off, Nerraw swiped viciously at Oliver. The human teleported just in time, reappearing behind Nerraw to slash him again.

"Why is it taking damage from that, but not from me?!" Oliver yelled.

"It's the Keyblade!" Mark shouted back. "Only it's magic can truly hurt him! Even if it's electricity, or fire, but it has to be summoned from the keyblade to truly hurt it!"

Thomas zoomed circles around their suspended battlefield, catching Nerraw off guard again. "WIND!" A gale-force blast slammed into Nerraw, tossing him through the clouds.

Venti blinked, thoroughly impressed. "Huh. Your weapons can channel the elements? Interesting..."

"Thomas, be careful!" Mark warned. "Don't use too much magic! I don't have much ethers left!"

Suddenly, Thomas's crystalline body began to violently spark. The blue shards across his skin flared with blinding, unstable light.

Mark went pale. "Oh no."

"W-What is happening?!" Venti asked.

"He's tapping into the Holder's power again!"

Oliver dodged a stray blast of energy. "The what?!"

"Nerraw hurt him on a deeply emotional level, so he's fighting with pure rage!" Mark yelled over the wind. "It gives him raw power, but Nerraw is only weak to the Keyblade's light! He'll never die if Thomas just beats him with brute force!" Mark turned toward the glowing crystal fighter. "Thomas! Refocus!!"

Thomas either didn't hear him or didn't care. He rocketed forward, his hand snapping around Nerraw's throat. He hoisted the dark being up into the sky. "You're going to pay for everything you did to my world."

Thomas hurled Nerraw upward, then flew after him at breakneck speed. He slammed a glowing fist into Nerraw's face, sending him flying further. He caught up instantly, delivering another bone-crushing punch, then swooped below the creature and delivered a devastating uppercut.

Mark seized the opening. He flew above Nerraw's trajectory and brought his Keyblade crashing down on the creature's head, sending Nerraw plummeting.

Venti thrust both hands out. A localized wind, the strength of a hurricane, wrapped tightly around Nerraw, and only Nerraw, suspending him helplessly in midair. With the creature trapped, Mark unleashed a relentless flurry of Keyblade strikes, the light tearing away Nerraw's darkness.

Oliver flew down and pressed the glowing necklace against Nerraw's chest, burning away more of the darkness. Thomas snapped out of his rage-induced haze just in time to join the assault, his golden Keyblade striking in perfect rhythm with Mark's.

Under the combined assault of two Keyblades, the necklace of pure light, and Venti's holding magic, Nerraw's form began to aggressively unravel. He tried to lift a trembling arm to defend himself, but he was entirely depleted.

"Venti," Mark ordered. "Lock him down completely. Let's finish this. He's done."

Venti nodded, raising his hands to tighten the Anemo cage. But before he could channel the energy, a deafening, mechanical roar ripped through the sky.

Venti froze, looking around in utter confusion. He spotted something colossal tearing through the clouds straight toward them. "WHAT THE HECK?!"

Not knowing what the metal behemoth was, Venti instantly cast a massive wall of wind, violently shoving Oliver, Mark, and Thomas out of its flight path.

"Woah!" Mark yelled as he tumbled backward through the air.

"Ahh! What's happening?!" Oliver screamed.

The turbulence of the massive object hit them like a physical blow, violently disrupting their balance. It smashed directly into the immobilized Nerraw.

As it sped past, Oliver finally got a clear look at it.

It was a jet airliner. They were miles up in the sky, after all.

Venti struggled against the deafening roar of the jet engines, hastily throwing a protective barrier of wind around their group to keep them from being shredded by the wind being kicked up to whisk them away from the plane.

Oliver stared in disbelief as the plane disappeared into the clouds. "Well, that was something I'll never forget."

"Is everyone okay?!" Mark yelled.

"We're fine, thanks to Venti," Oliver said, giving the bard a grateful smile. "Thanks, babe."

Venti offered a soft smile and dropped the wind barrier. "Where is Nerraw?" he asked urgently.

Oliver looked down and spotted a wispy, disintegrating figure tumbling toward the earth. "There! He's falling!"

Thomas was already diving after him like a hawk on it's prey.

"Come on!" Mark commanded.

Oliver and Venti dove after them, Oliver angling his diamond sword downward as they plummeted.

Venti surged ahead of the group. He thrust his arms out, wrapping a fresh cocoon of Anemo energy around the falling creature and halting his descent entirely.

Suspended in the sky once more, Nerraw was completely at their mercy. Normally, beating down an immobilized opponent wouldn't be a fair fight, but a monster like Nerraw was the exception to every rule.

"Get ready!" Mark yelled, raising his Keyblade for the final blow.

But as they closed in, Nerraw's glowing eyes snapped open. The dark being was severely weakened, his form flickering like a dying flame.

"Lose, I must," Nerraw rasped, his voice echoing in their minds. "But if I must lose..." The creature locked eyes with Thomas. "You're going down with me."

Before any of them could strike, Nerraw unleashed a final, desperate pulse of magic.

"Errgg!" Oliver groaned as an unseen force locked his limbs in place. Beside him, Venti and Mark were similarly frozen in midair.

Everyone was immobilized except Thomas. He raised his golden Keyblade to strike, but Nerraw suddenly shot a beam of concentrated dark energy directly into Thomas's chest.

This wasn't an attack. The dark energy wasn't destroying Thomas—it was funneling into him. Mark's eyes widened in sheer horror as he realized what was happening, but he couldn't move a muscle to stop it.

"THOMAS MOVE!" Mark screamed.

Nerraw gave Mark a brief, hollow glance, then turned his focus back to Thomas. The last remnants of darkness flowed rapidly down Nerraw's arms and seeped into Thomas's crystalline body.

As the darkness vacated its host, Nerraw's monstrous exterior dissolved completely.

Revealed beneath the fading shadows was the face of a human boy. He had dark skin, brown hair, and an expression of profound exhaustion.

"It's been a good run..." the boy whispered. His eyes rolled back into his head, his body went entirely limp, and he plummeted silently toward the earth far below.

With Nerraw gone, the paralyzing hold on the others shattered. But there was no time for relief. They had a much bigger problem.

Nerraw had transferred his remaining essence into the crystalline creature. Thomas was floating erratically, clutching his head in agony as his blue shards violently glitched between light and dark.

"Thomas!" Mark yelled, flying toward him.

"C-Can you hit him with the Keyblade?!" Oliver shouted in panic.

"I can't hurt him!" Mark cried out.

Before anyone could make a move, a loud, electrical ZAP cracked through the air.

A concussive blast of energy slammed into Oliver and Venti, launching them backward through space. The sky vanished in a blur of colors, and suddenly, they slammed hard onto a solid floor. They tumbled violently across the linoleum until they crashed into the legs of a heavy chair.

"AHGRG!" Oliver yelled, clutching his arm. He frantically scrambled to his feet. "Venti?! Mark!?"

He spotted Venti groaning on the floor beside him and quickly hauled the bard to his feet. "Venti! Are you okay?"

Venti didn't answer. He was staring dead ahead, his eyes wide.

Oliver followed his gaze.

They were back inside the lab. Specifically, the transfer chair room.

"What?" Oliver muttered, his head spinning as he looked around the sterile environment. Mark was gone. Thomas was gone. "Why are we back here? Did Mark send us back?"

"Who's that...?" Venti whispered.

Then, Oliver turned his head.

Standing at the door frame was someone else. Oliver's eyes widened in sheer panic, and he instantly grabbed Venti's hand, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs.

It was definitely not someone Oliver wanted to see right now.

Chapter 47: Burned To A Crisp

"Ugh... When are they coming back?" Jasper groaned, sinking deeper into his chair. "It's been hours..."

Across the plastic breakroom table, August blinked sluggishly, his head propped up on his arms. "And where is Claire? She hasn't even come back yet."

"I don't trust her," Jasper muttered. He stood up, stretching his stiff limbs. "I understand her whole situation—how she's trapped working for Doctor Barclay—but still."

"I know," August mumbled. "I just hope Mark and that Thomas guy get back soon. He had a lead, I think."

Arnold looked up from his spot. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I think he'll be back soon. With the others, I hope."

Jasper nodded. "And then we can finally make a plan to get out of here."

August shook his head. "A solid plan will probably take another few days to work out," he grumbled.

"Anything is better than being in this damn breakroom," Jasper said, pacing slightly. "Getting sick of being inside of here,"

August let out a dry chuckle. "Haha... I'm the one who should be saying that. I've been awake the longest, keeping an eye on all of your transfer chairs and making sure you got the notes to turn them off from your end." He sighed, finally sitting up straight. "But yeah, your pain is still valid, no doubt about that. We all need to get out of here. There's only so much stale candy and cheap ramen we can take before we start losing our minds."

"At least Mark gave us some decent food," Arnold said with a heavy sigh. He looked over at August, his expression softening. "Hey—thanks, dude. For being there for all of us. If it wasn't for you, we'd still be stuck in those chairs."

Jasper paused his pacing and gave August a firm, respectful nod. "Yeah. Thanks, seriously."

August smiled warmly. "Come on, guys, it was nothing."

"No! You helped us out a ton! I'm really grateful," Arnold smiled.

Leaning back in his chair, August looked up at the ceiling. "I wonder how Pete is doing..."

Arnold tilted his head. "That was the guy you were dating?"

August nodded, a faint blush dusting his cheeks. "Yeah. He was so nice to me. Helped me out a ton," he murmured. "Plus, he's really cute."

Arnold giggled.

August looked at Jasper. "You've barely talked about the person you were with in the Fallout world," he pointed out. "I know you must have been with someone."

Jasper's face went red, and he quickly looked away. "When do you think Claire is coming back?"

Arnold blinked, glancing at August, who looked just as confused.

"Dude," August said. "What's wrong? You've been dodging the question so many times. Did something happen?"

Suddenly, the intercom buzzed to life again

Motion Detected - Front door

August quickly stood up and hopped over the table. "Guys, wait here." He ran out of the breakroom. "I need to check if that's Claire or not..." He jogged up to the door and peered through the small window, his stomach twisting. If it was Claire or Barclay, he wouldn't be able to tell right away—they both probably wore the same heavy, company-branded coats.

August stepped back as a hooded figure walked up to the door and leaned forward to punch numbers into the keypad.

The door swung open, and the figure stepped inside, pulling back their hood to meet August's gaze. It was Claire. "Has that other boy gone?" she asked.

August sighed, the tension leaving his shoulders.

"Is it Claire??" Arnold yelled from the breakroom.

"Yeah!" August shouted back over his shoulder. He turned his attention back to Claire. "Yeah, he's gone. Not sure when he'll return. There is this dark creature... he's been terrorizing all of us."

"A dark creature?" Claire asked, her brow furrowing.

"Yes. I remember seeing it in the world I was in, though he didn't do anything there. I'm not sure if Arnold has seen anything. He keeps talking about this 'Danger Kid' thing, but obviously, that's not it. And I'm not sure if Jasper has seen it, since he barely wants to say anything about Fallout." August sighed heavily. "But Oliver has seen it. Literally almost every time in the world he was in, according to him. It came here, and Mark—that other guy you met—wants to help."

Claire looked like she was struggling to follow along, but she nodded anyway. "I don't understand much of that," she admitted. "But Oliver is in trouble."

"So is Venti," August added.

"Venti?" Claire blinked.

"Yes, one of the characters from the world Oliver went to," August explained. "The two of them became really close."

Claire's eyes widened slightly. "But he's here? Venti, I mean?"

August nodded.

"That could only mean Venti came from the chair," Claire murmured, pieces clicking together in her mind. "The black hole from the chair."

"That's... not a problem, is it?" Arnold asked as he stepped out to join them. "You mentioned that before, and the boys and I put two and two together. We assumed that's how Venti got here after Oliver was sent back."

"Trust me, if it was bad, you'd have noticed," Claire said grimly.

August blinked. "What does that mean?"

"From my knowledge, if the chairs were to malfunction with the black hole, it could have sucked out more than just this Venti character. It could have pulled just about everything in the universe the chairs were hooked to and pushed it out into our world," Claire explained.

August's eyes widened in horror. "Well... yeah, we definitely would have noticed that. Literally, the entire facility would have blown up if Teyvat got dropped in here..."

Claire nodded. "Right."

"Lead the way to the breakroom," Claire instructed. "Let me see how the others are holding up."

August nodded and led her over.

"And may I ask..." Claire paused, looking thoroughly confused as she stepped over the scattered shards of the broken door frame. "What happened here?" She walked into the room, taking in the wreckage.

"That dark creature I talked about," August said, following her in. "All of this was him. The vending machine, though? That was on me."

Claire shook her head. "Don't apologize for that, honey. Actually, don't apologize for anything. Your father doesn't deserve this building, or the job he has."

August walked ahead of her, gesturing to the group. "Let's start this again. Guys, this is Claire."

Arnold nodded, offering a soft smile. "Hi."

"You're his assistant, right?" Jasper asked. "I've never seen you."

Claire smiled faintly. "Well, you're from 2014, right? I... I believe I was only 19 back then. I was just starting college. I met Doctor Barclay in 2016, but he didn't show me all of this until I was in my twenties..." She looked down, her expression darkening. "That's when I slowly started to realize I had no way out... ha."

Jasper shook his head, wrapping his arms around himself. "I still can't believe it. I was 19 in 2014 too. Do the chairs preserve us or something?"

"In a sense, yes," Claire nodded. "They do. So, yeah... you'd technically be my age."

"Damn..." Jasper muttered. "I don't feel any older—"

"Yes, because the chair preserved your body from aging," Claire said softly. "But you're free to feel whatever you want right now. In the end, it... it doesn't matter. I don't know how you all will live a regular life after this. I don't even know how we'll go about it. We still have to deal with Doctor Barclay... and... it's just too much."

Motion Detected Front Door

They all froze in place.

"That can't be..." Claire whispered, spinning around to stare through the broken breakroom doorway.

"That's not..." August stammered.

"It can't," Claire said, her voice laced with disbelief. "He's away. It's the entire reason I'm even here at all."

Front door opened

They waited for what felt like an eternity. Time seemed to drag to a agonizing crawl.

Front door closed

Slowly, they heard footsteps. They weren't fast. They were heavy, dragging, deliberate steps. Eventually, a hooded figure slowly rounded the corner. He stopped, staring at the broken doorway. A heavy, furious breath escaped him as he took in the disaster. He didn't even look into the breakroom.

"CLAIRE?!" the voice bellowed. The figure backed away from the broken doorframe and marched down the hall toward the extraction rooms.

The group in the breakroom exchanged terrified glances. "Was that...?" August whispered.

"It was him," Claire said quietly. "Your father."

They waited in suffocating silence until his voice boomed again.

"WHERE ARE THEY!?"

They all knew exactly what he had found: the empty room, and the singular, shattered transfer chair tossed on the ground.

"CLAIRE!!" the voice roared again. "Where is she?!"

They heard the frantic shuffling of his footsteps coming back down the hallway.

Suddenly, a burst of harsh static buzzed from the two-way radio on Claire's hip. Her eyes widened in panic, and she frantically pulled her shirt up to dial down the volume.

But it was too late. Doctor Barclay had heard it.

He stepped into the doorway, staring them down. He slowly dragged his gaze over the boys, then settled his furious eyes on Claire.

The situation was deteriorating rapidly, and Claire knew it. Without hesitating, she stepped protectively in front of the boys.

Doctor Barclay stared her down. "Just what are you doing, Claire?" he hissed through clenched teeth. "The extraction room is a mess. The breakroom door is busted. Look at the vending machine!" He gestured wildly at the shattered appliance. "And now I see that my four subjects are out of their chairs!"

Claire was trembling, but she held her ground. "I can't let you do this anymore."

Doctor Barclay took a deep breath, reaching up to lower his hood. "Claire..." he began, his tone patronizingly calm. "We both know I cannot do that. Do you have any idea what will happen to my company—to me—if I let them go?" He pointed a sharp finger at Arnold. "And you've gone and broken his chair. It was completely destroyed. What did you do, Claire? Did you know you could have killed them by taking them out so forcefully?"

Claire let out an angry grunt. "To hell with your business! You shouldn't be doing this to teenagers, much less adults! Nothing is wrong with your business on paper, but you never asked for their consent! And when you did ask for consent, people like me in... you threatened us with death just to keep your sick little secrets hidden!"

August stood silently for a moment, his chest heaving. Then, he stepped forward.

"Son, stay out of this," Doctor Barclay warned.

"No!" August snapped. "Dad, I... I never in a million years thought you'd do something like this. I always knew you were a scientist, and I thought it was amazing. My dad can breach into different universes! But... hurting people? You've literally become a comic-book mad scientist! You're hurting others!"

"Again, this does not concern you," Doctor Barclay said coldly. "Once I deal with Claire and my other subjects, I will deal with you. For now, go back into Extraction Room 2."

"Is that all you view us as?" Jasper said, stepping up beside August. "Your... subjects?"

"You all should be on your knees thanking me," Doctor Barclay scowled. "I took you from this miserable world and placed you into worlds of fiction. Something everyone dreams of! You shouldn't be upset. You should be grateful!" He jabbed a finger at them. "I know you all found someone in those worlds. I've been monitoring you for years. Looking at all of you, none of you had any chance with anyone from this reality. You're lucky those fictional beings wanted anything to do with you."

Claire's eyes flared with disgust. "What a sick thing to say to them, Barclay. And no, they should not be grateful. Sure, they might have been happy, but you took them without consent! No consent from Arnold's parents. No consent from Jasper, or Oliver! And you got consent from August, but you conveniently left out the part where you planned to keep him locked in a chair for years!"

"I am going to tell you this one last time." Doctor Barclay took a slow, menacing step toward Claire. "Step. Out. Of. The. Way."

Claire didn't flinch. "I said I will not."

"Hm." Doctor Barclay straightened up, his face hardening. "And what do you think will happen, hm? You have no way out of here."

"We can take you on," Jasper said, balling his fists.

Doctor Barclay looked at him, amused. "You?"

"I've spent over ten years fighting off mutants, raiders, radroaches, and creatures ten times your size," Jasper spat. "You? You're nothing compared to the things Billy and I faced."

"Yeah," Arnold chimed in, finding his courage. "And I spent over five years fighting Danger Kid. You're nothing compared to him."

August swallowed hard, standing taller. "And you're a joke compared to the giant insects I had to survive."

Doctor Barclay let out a dry, mocking laugh. "Even my own son stands against me." He shook his head, looking down at them with absolute pity. "Those were all things you did inside your avatars. It was nothing but a simulation for you! Now it's just a nothing more than a thought—a feeling! You can't do any of that here. You are all just as weak as you were before you sat in those chairs!"

"Even so," Claire interjected, "it's four of us against you. One person. A frail, aging scientist."

Doctor Barclay's eyes snapped back to Claire. "Frail? Aging?"

"Is that not what you are?" Claire challenged. "You're old and fragile. One hit and you're on the floor."

"That is what you believe," Doctor Barclay said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "But I know for a fact that I am not old. Or fragile. Or weak."

He slowly lowered his arm toward the ground.

The four of them watched in confusion.

Suddenly, a massive, glowing purple hammer swirling with an unnatural, crackling energy materialized directly into his grasp. Doctor Barclay gripped the heavy handle and leveled the weapon at them.

"Ahh!?" The four of them gasped, scrambling backward.

Doctor Barclay laughed, a cruel, echoing sound. "Who's fragile and weak now?"

As he spoke, a thick, violet armor materialized out of thin air, locking into place around his body. "Thanks to the Fictional Universe, I can extract certain elements into our reality. Come on, Claire, you should have known this! Now... sadly, I will have to dispose of you. I cannot let you leave this room with what you have done."

Claire gulped hard, her knees shaking, but she absolutely refused to move away from the boys.

"It was nice working with you, Claire. But it ends now. Our business relationship is over." The doctor raised the sparking, purple hammer, ready to bring it down on his assistant. "Your turn to join the rest I have killed,"

Then, he froze.

"Wait... where is the other boy?" He slowly lowered the hammer.

"Oliver." Doctor Barclay's voice ticked up in anger. "Where is he?"

Claire stammered, unable to force the words past the lump in her throat.

"Speak!" Doctor Barclay roared. "Where is he?! He's not in here with you. Did you let him out!?"

"H-He's in another world!" Jasper blurted out.

Arnold violently slapped Jasper's arm. "Dude!" he hissed.

"Maybe it'll distract him!" Jasper whispered back frantically.

"Ugh!" Doctor Barclay grunted. He spun on his heel and stormed out of the room. But he wasn't stupid—as he passed the threshold, he casually swung the hammer upward. With a blinding flash of purple light, the shattered pieces of the door flew through the air, perfectly reconstructing themselves. The doorway was sealed.

August gasped, lunging forward and slamming his hands against the newly repaired metal.

It was locked tight.

The door never had a traditional handle; it operated via a wall panel. But no matter how frantically August smashed the button, the door refused to budge.

"ARG!" August screamed, punching the solid metal. "Now what do we do!?"

"Hey, hey, calm down, August." Arnold rushed over, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. "If they come back, Doctor Barclay doesn't stand a chance against Venti. Or Mark, for that matter."

"Or that crystal creature looking thing," Jasper added.

Claire fluttered her eyes, rubbing her temples. "Venti and Mark you've talked about... and who is the crystal one?"

August blinked, the panic slowly receding as a realization hit him. He stepped back from the door. "You're right," he whispered. "You're so right! Dad has no idea Venti is with Ollie! And he doesn't even know Mark exists..." A wild grin spread across his face. "He is definitely not going to know what hit him!"

Arnold smiled, patting August's shoulder. "See? So what if he has a glowing hammer? There's no way he can match the raw strength of an Archon, or a Keyblade wielder!"

August let out a long breath, resting his forehead against the cool metal of the door. "I feel sick to my stomach knowing I share a last name with him."

"Oh, come on, sweetie," Claire said softly. "Don't be hard on yourself. What he did is not your fault. None of this is."

"I was his accomplice. I contributed to this," August argued.

"By that logic, we all did," Jasper pointed out.

"Yeah, but I did it willingly..." August muttered.

"You said it yourself," Claire reminded him. "That was before you knew the truth. All you saw was a cool dad with fancy gadgets. He didn't come off as evil to you. Please, do not put a single ounce of this blame on yourself."

August pushed himself off the door, his expression hardening with resolve. "Once Venti sees him, I know he'll stop him. Knowing how fiercely he loves Oliver... if my dad so much as breathes on him, Venti is going to destroy him."

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Doctor Barclay opened the door to Extraction Room 1. "Just look at what they did to my equipment," he muttered, shaking his head. "These machines cost a fortune, and they toss them around like toys!"

He stormed over to Oliver's old transfer chair. "I can't even use this one, the internal casing is dead! They broke this too! Oh, I'm definitely killing them when I'm done here." He leaned his heavy hammer against the wall. "I'll kill them, repair the chairs, and hire better assistants."

Doctor Barclay knelt down, gripped Oliver's ruined chair, and hauled it out of the way with a grunt. Dusting off his hands, he glared at the mess. "Maybe I won't pick stable subjects next time. I'll pick subjects who can't think for themselves. That way, if this ever happens again, they'll be too stupid to fight back."

He marched over to Jasper's chair and dragged it into the spot where Oliver's used to sit. Moving back to the broken chair, he violently tore out the back panel and ripped out the internal memory chip. He carried it over to the new chair, only to realize the back panel had already been forced open.

"Who the hell has been messing with all of this? Ugh, damn these kids..." He shoved the chip into the slot and hooked the chair up to the main monitor. "Let's see here..."

He reached into the wall-mounted storage panel to grab his diagnostic laptop, noticing the locker door was left ajar. "They tried to steal my laptop too?" But as he pulled the door wide, he saw the device was still sitting securely inside.
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"Then who opened this and didn't take this out?" Doctor Barclay grumbled. He grabbed the laptop, wired it into the chair's mainframe, and began typing furiously, routing the commands to the massive overhead screen.

He clicked through a few menus, booting the chair into BIOS mode. He scrolled down until he found the history logs.

Avatar History Location:

1. Genshin Impact - Sub-3921 (December 2023)

2. Honmono Dimension - Sub-1 (December 2026)

Doctor Barclay scowled at the screen. "That's not what I want. Where is the option to turn on the chip I had implanted in their real bodies..." He hammered a few more keys until a new window popped up.

Tracking Chip Location:

1. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Extraction Room 1

2. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Breakroom

3. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Extraction Room 3

4. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Breakroom

5. Error

6. Error

7. Error

8. Error

9. Error

10. Error

11. Error

The doctor squinted. "Come on, I built this tracking chip so it wouldn't fail like this! Work, you stupid machine." He aggressively tapped in a new command sequence.

He glared up at the screen. "You better show me. I'm on my absolute last nerve. I have to know where he is."

1. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Extraction Room 1

2. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Breakroom

3. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Extraction Room 3

4. Doctor Barclay Corporation - Greenland Site - Lab 5 - Breakroom

5. Five Nights At Freddy's - Sub-9000

6. Soma - Sub-10

7. Soma - Sub-92

8. Minecraft - Sub-24345

9. Silent Hill - Sub-1

10. Zenless Zone Zero - Sub-4829283

11. Thomas The Tank Engine - Sub -7

Doctor Barclay froze, staring at the impossible data. "That's... that's not possible," he whispered. "How is he jumping to other worlds without the avatar?" He ran a hand over his face. "Just what have Claire and those brats been hiding from me?"

Desperate, the doctor highlighted the most recent anomalous ping and clicked Override.

"This probably won't even work, without the avatar. Let's hope it does. It's still theoretically connected to the chip,"

WARNING... WARNING... ACTIVATION OF TRANSFER CHAIR EMERGENCY WARP. WARNING... BLACK HOLE PROTOCOL ENGAGED.

"If those damn kids make me tear apart my own lab for this..." Doctor Barclay slammed the Confirm key.

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"It's been a good run..." the boy whispered. His eyes rolled back into his head, his body went entirely limp, and he plummeted silently toward the earth far below.

With Nerraw gone, the paralyzing, suffocating hold on the group shattered instantly. But there was no time for relief. They had a much bigger problem.

Nerraw had transferred his remaining essence into the crystalline creature. Thomas was floating erratically in the air, clutching his head in absolute agony as his glowing blue shards violently glitched between light and dark.

"Thomas!" Mark yelled, flying toward him.

"C-Can you hit him with the Keyblade?!" Oliver shouted in panic.

"I can't hurt him!" Mark cried out.

Before anyone could make a move, a deafening, electrical ZAP cracked through the air.

A massive, concussive blast of energy slammed directly into Oliver and Venti, launching them backward through space. The sky vanished into a sickening blur of colors, and suddenly, they slammed hard onto a solid floor. They tumbled violently across the cold linoleum until they crashed in a heap against the heavy metal legs of a chair.

"AHGRG!" Oliver yelled, clutching his bruised arm as he frantically scrambled to his feet. "Venti?! Mark!?"

He spotted Venti groaning on the floor beside him and quickly hauled the bard up. "Venti! Are you okay?"

Venti didn't answer. He was staring dead ahead, his bright eyes wide.

Oliver followed his gaze.

They were back inside the lab. Specifically, the transfer chair room.

"What?" Oliver muttered, his head spinning as he looked around the sterile environment. Mark was gone. Thomas was gone. "Why are we back here? Did Mark send us back?"

"Who's that...?" Venti whispered.

Oliver whipped his head around.

Standing in the doorframe was someone else. Oliver's eyes widened in sheer, unadulterated panic. He instantly grabbed Venti's hand, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs.

It was the absolute last person Oliver wanted to see right now.

"D-Doctor Barclay..." Oliver stammered.

Venti's eyes darted between the doctor and a terrified Oliver.

The doctor's eyes narrowed into slits. "Just what the hell is this?" Doctor Barclay yelled. "Why are you out of the avatar? Why are you standing next to a fictional character in real life? What did you do to the chair?!"

Venti gasped softly. "Babe, this is him?"

"Yes!" Oliver hissed, pulling Venti slightly behind him. "Though I have no idea what the hell he's wearing..."

"It looks like armor of some sort..." Venti noted, stepping casually out from behind Oliver. "So. You're this doctor I've heard so much about, huh?" Venti smirked.

Oliver gasped. "V-Venti, wait!"

Oliver knew Venti had been ready to throw hands the moment he found out the scientist was just a regular human from his 'boring realm'... but the crackling purple armor the doctor was currently wearing definitely did not look boring at all.

"You're the character I've watched him date," Doctor Barclay sneered, analyzing Venti. "How are you manifesting in this reality? No one was in the lab to activate the black hole warp to pull you through. And that shouldn't be physically possible since Oliver isn't logged into his avatar."

Oliver had been trying to yank Venti backward by his cape, but he suddenly froze. His entire face flushed beet red as the scientist's words registered, completely drowning out the rest of the threat. "HUH?!" Oliver squeaked. "You watched us!?" Now he felt embarrassed.

Venti blinked, completely unbothered. "Hm!" He placed his hands confidently on his hips. "Well! That just means you've seen that we truly adore each other, and that I'll do anything for him, because he matters a lot to me!"

Doctor Barclay scoffed. He opened the palm of his hand, and the massive hammer vanished from the wall, materializing instantly into his grasp with a heavy metallic hum.

"The hell!?" Oliver gasped, stepping back. "Bruh what hell are you?!"

"Ehe!" Venti smiled brightly, leaning in close to Oliver. "Seems your weak-boned doctor isn't quite as weak as you thought! Pretty strong, actually! I'm impressed." Venti turned his piercing gaze back to the doctor. "But I don't approve of you taking my boyfriend, or those other people, as your little test subjects. Especially without their consent. That is decidedly not cool, and it reminds me of a certain doctor in my world that many were not very fond of."

Roaring in anger, Doctor Barclay charged at Venti, swinging the glowing purple hammer.

"Ehehe! Goodbye!" Venti chirped.

With a casual snap of his fingers, a colossal bolt of blinding lightning tore down through the ceiling, shattering the concrete and zapping directly into Doctor Barclay with the force of a bomb.

"Heh!" Venti smiled, dusting off his hands. "Well, that's taken care of!"

Oliver stood absolutely paralyzed, staring blankly at Doctor Barclay's lifeless, charred body lying in a smoking heap on the floor, looking like a well-done barbecue. Slowly, very slowly, Oliver turned his head to look at Venti.

Venti met his horrified gaze with a cheerful blink. "What? I told you I'd smite him if I got the chance."

Oliver's jaw dropped. "Then why didn't you do that with Nerraw?!"

"Ehe! That's completely different! You can't just go around smiting cosmic immortal beings! It typically doesn't end well... hehe... believe me, I know that from experience," he smiled sheepishly. "But yeah! You always said Doctor Barclay was just a mortal, and he definitely smelled mortal, so—quick, easy smite! He's dead now!"

Oliver looked down at the doctor's smoking remains, his brain short-circuiting.

"HEY, IS EVERYONE OKAY DOWN THERE?! I HEARD A NOISE!!!"

A muffled shout echoed down the hallway.

"Who's that?" Venti blinked, turning toward the door. "Come on, let's go check!"

"Venti, wait! You really should have thought this through!" Oliver cried, grabbing his boyfriend's arm.

"Huh? What do you mean? He served no use to society. And that is something I rarely say." Venti's cheerful demeanor cracked for a second, a shadow passing over his eyes. "I always regretted never stepping in to help fight Dottore. Thankfully, Nahida and the Traveler and a few others were onto him... but..." Venti looked down, rubbing his arms. "I could have done something... That... that was something that Silent Hill place forced me to realize..."

Oliver softened, but the panic was still simmering. "Venti, it's not that! Don't you remember August? That was his dad!"

Venti looked up at Oliver, tilting his head like a confused bird before the realization violently crashed into him. His teal eyes went wide. "Oh no—" He immediately clamped both hands over his mouth.

Oliver winced. He knew August was already starting to resent him, but August and his dad had lived a good life together before all this. Breaking the news that his dad was now a pile of ash on the floor... that was going to be rough.

"WHY IS IT SO SILENT DOWN THERE!? OLIVER! VENTI! DID YOU COME BACK?! DID YOU DEAL WITH HIM?!" the muffled voice yelled again.

All of this had to be put on hold.

"Come on! Quickly," Oliver urged, pulling Venti out of the smoking room. "Who knows what Doctor Barclay was doing to them while we were gone... and where the hell did he get that armor from?!"

Chapter 48: In The Claire?

Once Oliver and Venti made their way over to the breakroom, they found the door locked tight. Oliver pushed the button, but nothing happened. He squinted and looked over at Venti, who simply shrugged.

"OLIVER! VENTI! ARE YOU DOWN THERE?!" yelled a voice from behind the door—so loud now since he were so close, that it made Oliver jump.

"Yes! Yes, we're here!"

"It's you!" the voice replied. "Is Venti with you?"

"Yes! The bard is here!" Venti smiled.

"August, is that you?" Oliver asked, pressing his ear to the door.

"Yes! It's me. I'm here with Arnold and Jasper. Oh! And Claire is here with us, too!"

Mark, pressed against the door, blinked in confusion. "Claire?" He squinted. "Okay, you may wanna run who that was by me again,"

"Claire! Doctor Barclay's assistant I told you about. Don't worry, she's cool."

"Wait! His assistant!?" Oliver yelled in realization. "She's really in there with yo—"

Venti gently nudged Oliver's shoulder. "Babe, how is the door repaired? Didn't the dark creature blow this up before we left?"

Oliver blinked. "Yeah... you're right." He raised his voice so the others could hear him through the metal. "Uh, hey! How exactly is the door fixed?!"

"Oh... uh... Dad used that hammer he had."

Oliver batted his eyes for a moment, glancing at Venti. Venti shrugged. Neither of them had any clue how Doctor Barclay had suddenly turned "fictionally," as Nerraw would have put it.

Oliver leaned in close to his boyfriend. "Babe," he whispered, "can you use your wind again?"

"No problem." Venti waved a hand, gesturing for Oliver to step aside.

"Okay!" Oliver yelled toward the door. "Everyone in there, stay away from the door! Don't even stand at the far wall. 'Cause It seems like my boyfriend has gotten a power high—" he joked.

Venti snorted softly. "Oh, stop. I'm just as powerful now as I was then." He summoned his bow, letting it materialize in his grip. "Day Break Chronicles is definitely going to break this door into the next day!"

Oliver slowly looked at Venti. "Really?"

Venti giggled, covering his mouth.

"As you'd say: 'Tighnari would strangle you.'"

"My jokes are better than Cyno's!" Venti beamed.

"Actually, it was worse," Oliver deadpanned.

"Uh... is something going to happen?" August called out from inside.

Oliver gestured his hand to Venti, then at the door. The bard nodded, pulling back on the bowstring. An Anemo arrow materialized between his fingers.

"Here goes," he whispered, letting it fly.

The arrow tore through the air and embedded itself deep into the steel. A howling wind circled around the tail of the arrow, driving it further into the metal. The door groaned and ached, the heavy steel bending violently inward.

Venti raised his hand and pushed it forward gently, giving the wind a final nudge. The door blasted off its hinges, landing deep inside the room with a heavy, echoing clang.

"There we go!" Venti smiled as he stepped through the opening.

But the moment he and Oliver entered, they were bombarded by a massive group hug from the other boys.

"Woah!?" Oliver gasped, nearly losing his balance.

Venti gasped too, but quickly melted into giggles. "Aww! It's okay guys, we're all fine! I promise!"

The group reluctantly broke apart. "We're okay," Oliver reassured them. "A little shaken up, but... we're here. Haha." He looked up and spotted Claire. He had only seen her a few times, usually when waking up in the extraction chair while he was still trapped in Genshin Impact. "You're Claire..." he said.

"Yeah," she replied softly. "If you don't trust me, I completely understand."

"Well—" Oliver looked around at the other boys. "If they do, I don't see why I shouldn't either. I assume you never actually wanted to work for him. I remember something you said once, back when I woke up here."

Claire narrowed her eyes slightly. "Wait, you've been waking up in the chair?"

"Almost every night since I got hooked into Genshin Impact. Though I don't think I ever woke up when I did the stasis thingy," Oliver explained. "If I did, I don't remember." He looked closely at her. "Anyways, you sounded as if you wanted to get away from him."

"I did," Claire admitted. "Speaking of him... what happened to him?"

"Seriously," Arnold chimed in, looking at Oliver.

Jasper nodded. "Bro suddenly summoned armor over his body, like things were on fleek."

Oliver blinked, staring blankly at Jasper.

Jasper's face instantly went red. "Do people not say that anymore?" He sighed, looking at the floor. "And just when I was getting used to the word..."

"It's better than 6-7," August said.

Jasper blinked. "What?"

Oliver wanted to laugh, but there were far more pressing matters at hand.

"Where is Doctor Barclay?" Claire asked again.

"Wait, hold on! Where is Mark!?" Arnold gasped, panic rising in his voice. "Shouldn't he be with you!? He was the one who went to find you. How did you come back without him?"

"Yeah, wait!" August added. "Surely he'd be here right now with you."

There was too much going on at once, and Oliver didn't know what to address first. More than anything, he wanted to avoid talking about August's dad.

"It's so hard to talk about... literally everything," Oliver groaned. "Mark came to rescue us. But Nerraw... that damn creature we had to fight. It's half-immortal. Impossible to fight." He glanced at Venti. "Only the Keyblade that Mark had could have killed it. And the one Thomas had too... but as a last resort, Nerraw seemed to give up his dark powers and shove them all into Thomas."

The boys stared in stunned silence. "What?" Arnold finally breathed.

"Thomas? That... crystal creature man thing?!" August blinked. "He's dead!?"

"I... I have no idea," Oliver said, rubbing his forehead. "All we saw was Thomas covered in the darkness Nerraw had on him, then everything warped and we got sent back here. I still don't know if us being back is Mark's doing or... Doctor Barclay's."

August stepped forward. "Okay, but where is my dad? You must have seen him. He couldn't have just left. Also, we heard a loud noise! It sounded like thunder or something. It scared us pretty badly because it was so damn loud."

Here it comes... Oliver took a deep breath.

"August..." Oliver looked down at the floor. "Your... your father is... he's dead," he managed to say. "He's dead. He's no longer here."

August went perfectly still. He didn't move. He barely seemed to breathe.

The rest of the boys, along with Claire, just stared at Oliver and Venti. It was impossible to tell if they were relieved or horrified by how quickly it had all happened.

Without a word, August pushed past Oliver and bolted down the hall.

"Wait! August!" Oliver called out.

He watched August sprint down the corridor before coming to a complete, shuddering halt at the door to Extraction Room 1. He froze in the doorway, staring at the floor inside.

Oliver winced and exchanged a pained glance with Venti. With a heavy sigh, Oliver stepped away from the broken breakroom door and walked down the hall to join him.

Peering into the room, he saw it: Doctor Barclay, lying dead on the floor, his body still smoking and scorched to a crisp.

By then, the others had caught up. Claire let out a sharp gasp. "Oh my god," she whispered, covering her mouth.

Arnold and Jasper exchanged an uneasy look before returning their eyes to the motionless body.

Oliver sighed. "August... I... I'm really sorry."

August didn't say anything at first. He just stood there, staring down at the man who was once his father.

"Come on—" Arnold gently grabbed August's arm. "Let's get you away from this room."

August softly pushed Arnold's hand away. "No, it's fine," he murmured. He took a hesitant step further into the room. "It's fine." He stepped past his father's body and stopped near the extraction chairs. "I just... I was disappointed in him," he said quietly. "He was a good dad to me. What caused him to do this?"

The room fell deadly silent.

"I don't know," Oliver shook his head gently. "I'm just... I'm sorry."

"Don't be," August said, his voice hardening slightly. "He had it coming. For him to do all of this—" He gestured wildly at the extraction chairs. "He had it coming. No consent. No nothing... killing others..." He looked over at Claire, who was watching him with deep empathy. "Attempting to kill his own assistant... that is not the dad I knew. He changed. What you killed wasn't my dad. If anything, you probably freed him."

August suddenly hugged his arms around himself. "And why is it so cold all of a sudden?"

Oliver blinked, then looked up. Oh, no.

There was a hole in the ceiling. It was deep enough that it pierced straight through the roof, and delicate white snow was slowly trickling down into the extraction room.

"Uhh... shit," Oliver gritted his teeth. He turned to Claire. "Do you know how much longer it'll take until this entire place freezes over?"

"Well—" Claire thought for a moment. "The heat is regulated pretty nicely in the facility, and with a hole that small, it shouldn't do much. The only difference would be a spike in Barclay's energy bill..." She managed a dark, faint smile. "A joke. He never used standard energy. Or even solar, for that matter. There's a giant reactor north of the facility outside that is currently extracting energy from multiple dimensions to keep the facility running."

Every boy's eyes widened. "WHAT?!" they yelled in perfect unison.

Claire sighed, her expression turning grim. "Multiple universes have collapsed to my knowledge. Anytime one dies, Barclay just hooked up another."

Oliver shook his head frantically. "Okay, no, no, no... we are shutting that shit off the second Mark comes back. And if he doesn't, we have to do it without him. We are not leaving without destroying that thing. Those are literally trillions upon trillions of people dying all for one fucking mortal. We can't let this happen anymore."

Venti stepped up, his expression fierce. "I've never seen a mortal with that much power before. I'm with Oliver. We stop that machine. That's completely uncalled for."

"It's more than trillions," Jasper pointed out quietly. "If universes are practically endless, there could be a number you can't even fathom of people living in them that all just... died at once."

Oliver nodded quickly. "Exactly." He looked back to Claire. "The boss is dead. Are there any other coworkers we have to look out for, or is it just you?"

"Oliver, I'm the last living coworker he used," Claire said. "He doesn't have anyone else. He sometimes used brainwashed beings from other worlds, but... I haven't even seen any of them in a month."

"Would they be walking around?" Oliver asked. "'Cause I'm stronger than I used to be." He lifted his arm and summoned his Cryo-infused diamond sword in a flash of blue light.

The boys, and Claire, stumbled back in absolute shock.

"When the hell did that happen?" Jasper sputtered.

"Yo! Is that a diamond sword from Minecraft?!" Arnold shouted.

August rubbed his eyes. "Okay, one, where did you get that? And two, how are you using it here?"

Oliver grinned widely. "As Mark said, the Fictional Leak!" He turned to Venti. "Also, Venti here deserves some of the credit! Thanks to him, I was able to get my very own Vision!"

"Vision? I don't know what that means," Jasper said.

"Wait, seriously?! What Vision is it?" Arnold asked, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Cryo! I'm totally ice-ice baby! Hahaha! Haha... haaa.... heh..."

The others just stared blankly at him.

Venti wanted to laugh so hard his ribs hurt, but he bit his tongue. He honestly had no idea what that reference was supposed to be anyway.

Oliver awkwardly cleared his throat and tightened his grip on the pixelated handle. "Anyways!" he coughed. "Uh... yeah! If there's anyone in my way, they're dead."

The other boys nodded firmly.

"But I think we should wait for Mark to come back first. At least so I can see if he's even alright," Oliver added.

Suddenly, the lights overhead violently flickered.

Oliver blinked, looking up. "What was that?"

Claire shrugged, looking uneasy.

"You heard that, right? There was a weird... drone sound for a second," Oliver muttered.

Jasper let out a heavy groan and leaned against the wall. "We had to wait for Mark before, and now we gotta wait again..."

"Well, hey! We're one step closer," Oliver said optimistically. "Closer than we ever were before."

"I'm sure you're all getting pretty tired of seeing this place," Claire offered softly. "I honestly don't blame you."

August just shook his head. "What do we even do when it's over? I know I asked that already, but tell me... what the fuck do we actually do? We're getting close to escape. We're getting close to the bridge we need to cross, but..." His voice cracked. "I don't have a father anymore. My mom is long gone. I don't have a family, period." He pointed at Arnold. "He doesn't remember a single damn thing from this world." He pointed at Jasper. "And he's a dude who's basically from a decade ago. What are we realistically going to do?!"

"I've thought of that," Oliver said gently. "Many times." He patted his pants pockets frantically. "I hope I still have it... ah-ha!" He reached in and pulled out a heavy, square, blocky gold ingot. "Straight from Minecraft!"

Claire's eyes went wide at the sight of the solid gold brick.

"What..." August blinked.

"This might help," Oliver said, holding it out. "It's still gold at the end of the day, even if it's blocky. We can sell this, and we should be able to get back on our feet when we leave." He pressed it into August's hands. "Here. Just don't lose it."

August stared down at the heavy ingot. "This... this could work."

"It will work," Oliver assured him. "As long as we sell it for a good price, I mean, it's a lot of gold. We'll be able to at least buy food and find a place. And hey... if we ever need more, we can just phone up Mark and have him take us back to Minecraft!"

Venti gently punched Oliver's shoulder. "Okay, don't get greedy now. You said you didn't want to take it just to get rich."

"Hey!" Oliver defended himself, rubbing his arm. "It's not about that! Sometimes buyers can rob you and not give you full value. It wouldn't matter to us since we'd have an abundance of gold to fall back on. Trust me, I'm not gonna, like, Biff Tannen this whole thing and get insanely rich off lottery numbers or somethin' like that. I'm sensible, okay!"

Venti tilted his head in pure confusion. "Biff Tannen?"

Oliver sighed heavily. "I forgot... you're not from here." He patted Venti's back. "Gotta show you some movies from my world sometime."

Suddenly, the lights flickered once again.

"Okay, what the hell is even that?" Oliver demanded, looking at the ceiling. "Surely the power can't be going out? Especially with what Claire said about it running on literal universes." He shook his head. "This is the last power supply you'd expect to fail..."

"Maybe the snow is too heavy outside?" Arnold guessed.

"Can't be," Claire replied immediately. "The facility is built to withstand two category five hurricanes at once; it can handle snow. Besides, Greenland snow isn't your ordinary snow, especially right smack in the middle of the island. Massive blizzards rage here every hour."

Oliver stared at Claire in utter disbelief. "We're in Greenland?"

"Yep," August nodded. "According to Claire."

Venti crossed his arms. "Greenland? Why is it called that when there's snow everywhere?"

Oliver blinked. "That... is a great question." He stared blankly at the wall. "They even went ahead and called an island with barely any snow at all, Iceland. Because you know, that makes fuckin' sense."

Venti snorted loudly at Oliver's deadpan delivery.

Oliver giggled, encouraged. "Well, they got one right. Faroe Island! Because it's pretty 'far-out' from England! Hahaha!"

The other boys groaned in unison. Even Claire didn't look amused. But Venti had to cover his mouth with both hands to muffle his laughter.

"What?! Come on, it was funny!" Oliver grunted.

"Its' not even said in that way! You say it as 'Fair'oe Island!" August rolled his eyes.

Oliver blinked, and did not say another word.

"Piffttt..." Venti covered his mouth again. "Oh nooo , it's the Lie-you thing all over again..."

Oliver gave Venti a deadpan stare. He glanced over at Jasper and realized the older boy wasn't groaning at his joke. He was staring dead ahead at the back wall of the room, facing the opposite end of the door.

"Woah... dude, you okay?" Oliver asked.

"I..." Jasper shook his head rapidly, aggressively rubbing his eyes.

"I think your pun hurt him on a personal level," Arnold quipped.

"Gerk~" Venti couldn't hold it in anymore. "Bahahahaha!"

Oliver gave Arnold a playful glare.

Arnold giggled nervously. "Sorry! Haha."

"No, it's not that," Jasper said, lowering his arms, his face pale. "I just thought I saw someone standing at the wall." He wiped his eyes again. "I thought I was seeing shit."

Oliver froze. "Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"Literally what I said. I saw someone standing right over there." Jasper pointed a shaky finger at the back wall.

Oliver looked at the other boys, and then at Claire, who just shrugged uneasily. He looked at the empty wall. "But nothing is there. We're all standing right here by the doorway with everyone—"

Arnold turned around to face the hallway door. "What the fuck—" he shouted, stumbling backward.

"Richard, what's wrong?!" August quickly moved toward him, but Arnold kept backing up until he bumped right into August's chest. He pointed a trembling finger at the doorway.

"There was someone... standing right there."

Oliver blinked rapidly, looking wildly between his friends, his confusion turning to genuine dread. "W-What's going on?"

"There was someone standing literally right there at the door!"

The lights flickered again, longer this time. The hum of the facility dipped ominously.

Everyone in the room snapped their heads around, searching the shadows.

Slowly, Oliver's gaze drifted downward. Back to Doctor Barclay's dead body. His eyes narrowed, his brow furrowing. As the lights danced crazily overhead, he kept his eyes locked on the corpse.

An icy, unnatural chill slowly slid up the back of Oliver's neck. His eyes went wide.

It couldn't be...

Then, a sudden tear in the fabric of space ripped open right in the middle of the room. Nearly everyone screamed, jumping out of their skin as a portal of light materialized.

"Hello! Glad you're all still here!" Mark smiled brightly, stepping through the portal. "Ah! I see Claire has joined you all." He did a quick head count. "Yep, all of you. So let's see—"

Mark froze mid-sentence, finally taking in the room. "Uhh... why does everyone look like they're in terrible distress?"

Oliver practically tackled him, desperate for answers. He had a million questions about the terrifying energy in the room, but one thing took priority. "Mark! How is Thomas!? What even happened to Nerraw?!"

"Oh! Is that why everyone looks so stressed? I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea why you and Venti suddenly left. I was going to chase after you, but I had to deal with the absolute mess Nerraw left behind, and I was completely distracted for hours." Mark rubbed his temples exhaustedly. "I'm so sorry I kept you all waiting."

"N-No! Don't be sorry! You had Thomas to take care of. Is he okay?" Oliver pleaded.

"He's doing perfectly," Mark assured him.

Oliver let out a massive sigh of relief. "Thank goodness."

"It's a long story on how the darkness from Nerraw left his body, but thankfully, even the power of the Holder has left him too. He no longer has the power of his universe. He's just little young Thomas again, no longer a dimensional anomaly." Mark rubbed his temples harder. "As for Nerraw, he's now a weak, pitiful excuse for a human. He used his power as a last resort, trying to turn Thomas into him."

"Thank goodness it never worked," Oliver breathed.

"Tell me about it," Mark agreed. "So don't worry about him. I know Oliver must have told you all about the situation, and I assume that's why you all look so panicked, so I assure you, Thomas is fine. I'm fine. Nerraw is powerless. We're all good."

Oliver swallowed hard. "Mark... that's not really the reason we all look like this."

Mark frowned, looking down at him. "Hmm? What's the matter?"

The lights flickered violently above them.

Mark blinked, his eyes darting around the room until they locked onto the empty doorway. "Huh... there was somebody standing there."

"See! What did I tell you!?" Jasper and Arnold screamed simultaneously.

Mark took a cautious step forward, and that's when his foot nearly clipped Doctor Barclay's corpse. "Wooooahh... who the hell is..."

"I-It's Doctor Barclay..." Oliver stammered. "Uh... Venti, uh..."

"Fried him to a crisp," Mark observed flatly.

August stood in the corner, holding himself tight, refusing to look.

"Hmm..." Mark turned to Arnold and Jasper, his expression turning deadly serious. "Judging by how you two reacted when I said I saw someone at the door, you must have seen it before I got here, yes?"

The two boys nodded frantically.

"Have you seen this event before this?" Mark asked, pointing down at the dead doctor.

They shook their heads. "Trust me, I would have seen that," Arnold said.

Oliver was quickly piecing together what Mark was getting at, but it defied all logic. "Mark... are... are you getting at... that person they keep seeing is...." He slowly pointed a trembling finger at the dead man. "Mark, that can't be! Ghosts don't... exist..." He snapped his head up to the older man. "Do they?"

"They never used to be in our realm," Mark explained grimly. "But thanks to the Fictional Leak, we now have souls that can manifest into ghosts. Though it's quite strange.... Normally, in stories, it takes a soul a while to accumulate enough energy to haunt. I assume you just killed him in the last few hours, so there hasn't been the required time for a haunting." Mark waved a hand thoughtfully. "Then again, if the Fictional Universe's energy is too concentrated in one place, it could severely accelerate the process. Considering we're in a facility that directly interacts with the Fictional Universe, it wouldn't surprise me if the ambient energy here is off the charts."

Claire cautiously raised a finger. "It probably is, since Doctor Barclay has a massive reactor outside that extracts raw energy from dying dimensions to power this stinkin' place."

Mark nodded slowly. "Yep, that'll do it—" He froze mid-nod, his head snapping toward Claire. "Run that by me again?"

Oliver sighed angrily. "Yeah. Some new shit we just learned from Claire. Doctor Barclay purposely killed worlds just for energy."

Mark put his hands on his hips, his face darkening with fury. "That would explain the random, massive loss of certain dimensions on my scanner. I could never find the cause. Entire worlds were just vanishing left and right, and I stayed up endless nights trying to protect the ones I was close to..." Mark looked from Oliver to Claire. "So it was all this doctor's fault?"

"We are destroying that reactor," Oliver stated firmly. "Whatever it takes."

Mark sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "New shit after new shit. Anyways, as I was saying. Since the leak happened—which started from my house accidentally—Kingdom Hearts has officially joined the party. That means all of us have Hearts."

"I think you told us this," Jasper murmured.

"I did?" Mark blinked. "Trust me, I say a lot of shit to a lot of people, I forget." He glanced back down at the dead doctor. "So, let's just be glad that with all this negative energy, his heart didn't succumb and turn him into a Heartless, because that would have—"

Before Mark could finish his sentence, Doctor Barclay's dead body was violently swallowed by a bubbling, inky darkness. The shadows writhed, looking terrifyingly similar to Nerraw's dark flames.

"Ah!?" Oliver screamed, leaping backward and clutching Venti's arm.

The others scrambled frantically toward the back wall.

Mark just stared. "Well, that's not good."

"Mark!? Is that Nerraw again!?" Oliver yelled in absolute terror.

The corpse levitated completely off the floor, swamped in pitch-black flames. Slowly, a glowing red emblem burned its way into the center of the creature's chest: the outline of a heart with a pointy shape from the bottom heading downward.

Oliver's stomach dropped. He recognized that symbol instantly.

"It is not Nerraw. Doctor Barclay has officially manifested into a Heartless," Mark stated coldly. "All of you! Get out of the room!" In a flash of brilliant light, his Keyblade materialized in his grip. "I'll handle this. Just one damn thing after another..."

"Come on, go!" Oliver shoved Venti, the three boys, and Claire out into the hallway as fast as they could.

The second they cleared the doorway, Mark lunged, slashing his Keyblade heavily into the Heartless. The creature shrieked, stumbling backward and crashing into the far wall.

Mark wound up to deliver a finishing blow, but the massive Heartless recovered with terrifying speed. It shot out a clawed hand, grabbed the metal shaft of the Keyblade while Mark was still holding it, and hurled him across the room.

Mark slammed brutally into the steel wall. He crumpled to the floor, his Keyblade clattering uselessly out of reach. "Ahh..." he groaned, clutching his ribs. "Whoo! That is a strong bitch..."

He scrambled to his feet just as the monster lunged. He summoned his Keyblade back to his hand in a flash, instantly throwing it up to block the Heartless's heavy, sweeping claw. Mark dug his heels in, parried the blow, twirled the blade fluidly, and slashed upward, knocking the creature flat onto its back.

Mark spun the Keyblade around, aiming the tip squarely at the monster's chest. "STOPZA!!!"

A massive clock face materialized in the air, chiming loudly as time around the Heartless ground to an absolute halt. Mark gasped heavily, the high-tier spell draining the absolute last of his magic.

Refusing to waste the window, Mark launched into a furious, relentless combo. He battered the Keyblade into the frozen monster repeatedly, sparking bursts of light with every brutal impact.

Slash!Hit!Spark!Bang!

The clock ticked down. Time violently sped back up, and Mark delivered one final, devastating swing. The massive Heartless went flying across the room, smashing into the doorframe before spilling out into the hallway.

It hit the floor with a terrible thud. Almost instantly, its dark, shadowy body began to dissolve into black mist.

From the center of the fading darkness, a brilliant, glowing red Heart floated upward, seeking the sky.

Mark's eyes widened in panic. "No!"

He lunged forward, thrusting the tip of his Keyblade directly into the floating Heart. A beam of light locked onto it, anchoring it in place. "I can't let you go to Kingdom Hearts!" he strained, gritting his teeth as the Heart pulled with immense force, desperately trying to tear through the dimensions to find the Heart Moon.

Mark gripped the hilt with both hands, boots sliding against the floor as he fought to keep it steady. "Come on... come on..." he growled. Pushing with every ounce of effort he had left, Mark violently twisted the

Keyblade in a locking motion.

CRACK!

The Heart shattered, exploding in a thick, explosive red mist that splattered across the sterile walls.

Mark collapsed to his knees, stabbing the Keyblade into the ground and leaning his full weight against it. He let out a ragged, exhausted sigh. "That's over."

Just then, Oliver cautiously poked his head around the corner to check if it was safe. He gasped at the bright red splatter coating the hallway walls. "Uhh... Mark? Are you okay?" He blinked nervously. "Is... is that blood?" He looked up at the fading black mist still hovering in the air.

Mark shook his head, breathless. "No. It's the Heart. The raw essence of it. You play Kingdom Hearts, right? When a Heartless is destroyed, the trapped Heart is released to rejoin Kingdom Hearts. But Kingdom Hearts isn't in this dimension. It would have had to violently cross dimensions to get there, and I'm not entirely sure a corrupted Heart could even survive the trip. It likely would have just manifested into a new Heartless somewhere else in the multiverse, and I couldn't let that happen. We all know who this Heart had belonged too," He looked up from his weapon. "So, I destroyed the Heart entirely. I normally would never do that... but we can't risk the essence of this terror of a man winding up somewhere else."

Oliver swallowed hard, nodding. "S-So he's really gone?"

"Yep." Mark forced himself to his feet, dismissing his Keyblade with a wave of his hand. "Now, onto the new shit. What were you saying? Something about a power plant?"

"Yeah," Oliver spun around, pointing down the hall. "Come on, everyone's waiting in the breakroom."

"I might actually need a break first," Mark admitted, limping slightly as he followed Oliver. "If you guys have any of the food I brought, please, toss me something. I wasn't sure how tough this Heartless would be, so I threw Stopza at it, and it completely drained my mana."

Oliver managed a small smile. "Well, that's why we're heading to the breakroom! To have a break!"

As Oliver and Mark approached the shattered doorway, Venti was waiting for them just inside.

"Wow," Venti shook his head, looking at Oliver. "You are really on a roll with the puns this hour, huh?"

Oliver just giggled, rolling his eyes playfully as he stepped over the ruined doorway.

Venti looked past him to Mark, his expression softening. "Is... everything okay out there?"

Mark stopped in the doorway and nodded slowly. "The doctor is permanently dealt with," he said. "Though, I can't say I've ever seen someone turn into a Heartless in the Honmono dimension before. This is a terrifying first." He shook his head grimly. "It's not good. Heartless are incredibly dangerous, and even though this universe has a massive Fictional Leak, the people living here aren't equipped with magic or Keyblades to defend themselves. It's as if this world is pulling all the apocalyptic threats from fiction, but none of the heroes or weapons needed to fight them. It's ridiculous."

Venti sighed softly, listening closely. "Well, uh... it's a good thing you're here to help them, right?"

"But there's only so much one person can do," Mark replied, rubbing his neck. "And I cannot ask Sora and his friends for help every time something goes wrong. They already have their hands full world-hopping and saving their own dimensions. They shouldn't have to constantly babysit mine."

"Hey! Mark, are you coming in!?" Oliver called from inside. "I thought you were starving!"

"Coming," Mark called back.

Venti smiled sympathetically and followed Mark into the room.

Mark walked up to the break table, looking around at the exhausted group. "Come on, let's all just eat something. Once we catch our breath, then we can worry about this power plant situation,"

Chapter 49: Lights Out

With their stomachs finally full after the absolute nightmare they'd just survived, the group settled in to formulate a solid plan to destroy the facility's dimensional power plant.

They had dragged the cheap plastic tables in the breakroom together, creating one large, makeshift war room under the harsh fluorescent lights.

"Okay," Mark started, leaning forward and resting his hands on the table. "Oliver mentioned a power plant that's actively feeding off energy siphoned from different universes." He looked around the circle. Oliver was seated right next to him, directly across from Claire. Mark shifted his gaze to the former employee. "Claire, you know this facility better than anyone here since you worked here. Where is it?"

Claire nodded slowly, her expression grim. "I do. It's just outside. Once you open the door of the lab, you'll see a cliff that drops down into a massive cavern below. There are a total of five buildings in this facility, with this laboratory being at the far end. There are three buildings just like this one, and two massive structures that interconnect—one being the main headquarters, and the other being the power plant." She took a deep breath. "Stepping out of this building, you need to take a left. The path is... rough. The foundation of the facility is stable, yes, but it was built directly onto the uneven, jagged terrain of this part of Greenland. It is incredibly dangerous to navigate on foot in the snow."

The rest of the table leaned in closer, hanging on her every word.

"When we came to work here, Doctor Barclay provided different vehicles he had extracted from various fictional worlds," Claire continued, her voice echoing slightly in the quiet room. "Mostly hovercrafts, to give us easy, safe access between the buildings. But when I came back today, I noticed all those machines were completely missing, leaving me to walk the entire way on foot... which was not fun,"

Mark folded his arms, "I assume there are a lot of hidden ridges and rocks buried under the snow?"

"Exactly," Claire nodded. "That's why walking is so dangerous."

August blinked, looking between the group. "Well, who's volunteering to go turn the thing off then?"

Jasper tilted his head, shooting a deadpan look at Claire. "Obviously her," he said bluntly. "Pretty self-explanatory, isn't it? She worked here, she knows the layout, she should know how to shut it down."

Claire sighed heavily, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I don't." She shrugged. "I had high-level clearance for almost the entire facility... everything except the power plant. It always confused me as to why I could go anywhere but the 'generator' room of all things, but after finding out what that plant is actually doing, it all made sense."

August ran a hand exhausted down his face. "Well, I guess she can't go. At least, definitely not alone." He looked across the table, his eyes landing squarely on Oliver and Venti. "You two have weapons. And Mark does too. Though, I still don't really understand how Oliver is casually wielding a blocky sword from Minecraft with a magical Vision from Genshin Impact... but whatever. Maybe you guys can just go over there and blow the power plant up?"

Claire's eyes went wide, and she frantically waved her hands at August. "No, no, no! That is a terrible idea! I don't know exactly what will happen if you attack the reactor, but basic instinct tells me that if you detonate a reactor actively drawing live energy from multiple dimensions... it will not end well for any of us."

August winced. "Okay, fair. You have a point."

"And either way," Mark interjected. "Even if Claire hadn't made that very valid point, I'd still be staying right here in case. I'm going to let Venti and Oliver go alone. I've seen them in action; they can handle themselves out there. Someone needs to stay behind to protect the rest of you in case things go south."

Jasper frowned, looking at Mark. "But isn't Doctor Barclay dead?"

"It wasn't him I was worried about," Mark replied. He glanced back at Claire. "Are you absolutely sure there aren't any other people working here with you today?"

"As I said, there used to be," Claire murmured. "But there hasn't been a soul around in the weeks leading up to today. I mean, it was never a crowded workplace, but I used to see at least one or two people walking by."

"Huh," Mark said softly. "Well, I'm staying here as a precaution regardless."

"Fine by me," Claire agreed.

"Also," Mark started again, "the other laboratory rooms. You said there are two other places exactly like the one they woke up in. Are there other test subjects trapped inside them? I did a quick perimeter check when I first arrived, but I didn't venture off into the depths of the snow to fully explore the surroundings, because judging by what I saw from my spot it was going to be a full day thing and I had other matters I needed to attend too,"

August leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "Yeah, if there are other extraction labs, obviously there are other people, right?"

Venti winced, his heart aching at the thought. "That's horrible! We have to go help them as soon as possible!"

Claire quickly shook her head, her expression completely solemn. "Those buildings are completely down. And by down, I mean they are dead." She looked down at the plastic table, her voice dropping to a whisper. "If you don't believe me, you're free to break the doors down and check. Not that it matters to me anymore—Barclay is dead. But the people who used to be in those labs... they've been gone for a long time. Barclay killed most of them ages ago and permanently shut labs down. The lab we are currently sitting in is the only one left functioning."

Venti gritted his teeth. He really, really hated Doctor Barclay. The bard desperately wanted to loudly declare how thrilled he was that the tyrant was dead, but he bit his tongue, acutely aware that August—the man's son—was sitting right across from him.

"Who else was working here?" Mark asked, steering the conversation. "You mentioned something about them being extracted from the Fictional Universe?"

Claire nodded. "Yes. He pulled them out using the black hole tech built into those terrible chairs. Strangely enough, all of his workers were... mortal. Well, as mortal as you and me. I heard a few of them got injured on the job and actually passed away. One of them even got a severe case of food poisoning and died."

Mark blinked, genuinely perplexed. "That's... Odd. If he had the power to extract anything he wanted from any fictional realm to guard this place, why not pull terrifying, invincible monsters? Why fragile humans?"

"I don't know," Claire said. "He never explained his reasoning, and it never made sense to me either. But they definitely had powers of some sort. They also wore these strange masks. I have no idea who or what they actually were. They looked human beneath their clothes, but they never took the masks off."

Oliver frowned. "That is strange... he had the power to extract anything, and he just brought over humans with a couple of basic powers?"

Venti nodded in agreement. "Strange indeed. The doctor himself was wearing some weird purple armor when we fought," the bard recalled, shaking his head. "Typically, a tyrant that deranged wouldn't stop at mortal guards when hunting for absolute power."

"Maybe he just wanted all the real power for himself," August grunted, his jaw tight. "There are a lot of secrets my dad kept from me. Finding out he was secretly a selfish megalomaniac isn't exactly a shock."

"Maybe he wanted all the power for himself," August grunted, his teeth gritting. "There's a lot of secrets dad has kept from me. Him being secretly selfish is nothing,"

"Okay!" Venti suddenly stood up, clapping his hands together. "Well, if we have the layout figured out, Oliver and I will be more than happy to head out there."

Claire looked at Venti in alarm. "Wait, hold on, we have to think this through! Look at what you're both wearing!"She gestured wildly at Venti's thin corset and shorts, and Oliver's casual clothes. "Neither of you is dressed for this weather. It is freezing out there!" She turned to Oliver. "I don't know much about what your partner can withstand, but you're from California. You are definitely not used to this kind of cold."

"I don't think anyone is used to this," Arnold spoke up quietly from the end of the table. "It's practically Antarctica out there."

"Not exactly," Claire corrected. "The South Pole can drop to negative sixty degrees. Greenland wishes it was that low right now."

Venti just smiled brightly, completely unbothered by the geographical statistics he didn't understand. "Well, it doesn't matter! I can withstand anything!"

"But..." August frowned, looking at Venti. "What about Oliver? Claire, you came in here with a heavy coat. Can't you give him one?"

"I don't think it would fit him. And besides, Barclay and I were the only ones who ever wore winter coats. All of his masked coworkers just wore light uniforms," Claire explained, staring blankly at the wall as she recalled the bizarre sight. "I always wondered if they were freezing, but they never seemed to care."

Venti waved a dismissive hand at Claire. "It will be totally fine, Claire! Watch!" The bard snapped his fingers. Instantly, a warm, glowing current of green Anemo energy wrapped itself around Oliver, swirling gently around his body like an invisible, heated blanket.

Oliver gasped softly, looking down in awe as the soothing, magical wind completely enveloped him.

"Now," Venti beamed proudly. "This little wind of mine will perfectly repel the harsh cold! He'll be perfectly toasty!"

The mortals at the table just stared in stunned, blinking silence as the bard casually did his magic.

"Well... I guess that's settled, then," Claire muttered. "Though, are you absolutely sure that... is going to work?"

"Hey!" Venti pouted, crossing his arms indignantly. "Don't question the bard's magic! I know exactly what I'm doing!"

Oliver snorted, quickly slapping a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter.

Venti spun to face him, a playful, warning smile on his lips. "Hey! Don't you dare laugh at me, mister!"

August sighed deeply, rubbing his temples. "It's literally like I'm stuck inside a Genshin Impact dialog cutscene."

That completely broke Oliver, and he burst into loud, echoing laughter before desperately trying to quiet himself down. August was completely right. Ever since this entire nightmare started, "reality" had been thrown completely out the window. Their lives were just one massive, chaotic fictional crossover now.

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"Please, be safe out there," Claire said earnestly as she stood by the heavy exit door.

"Don't worry, we'll be totally fine!" Venti reassured her, rocking back on his heels. "Now, uh... who has the passcode for the door? Can't exactly leave without opening it."

"Oh, right," Claire quickly tapped the metal panel. "It's 8149. That's the same code you'll need to enter to get back inside."

"And take this," Mark stepped forward, holding out a bulky two-way radio. "I snagged it from where Barcley turned into the Heartless in the other room. It belonged to him, so it should already be securely connected to Claire's frequency."

Claire nodded. "Yes, so if anything goes wrong, just radio in."

Venti nodded, confidently punching the four digits into the keypad. The heavy locking mechanism clunked loudly, and the thick metal door swung open, instantly letting in a howling, violent blast of freezing Greenland air.

"Don't worry about us!" Venti smiled over his shoulder as Oliver secured the radio in his pocket.

The rest of the group had gathered in the hallway to see them off. As the arctic wind whipped into the corridor, they all violently flinched.

"Ugh, man, that is brutal," August grunted, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Ehe! We'll be off then! See you soon!" Venti beamed brightly, completely unaffected by the sub-zero chill. "Off to destroy a multidimensional power plant!" The bard grabbed Oliver's hand and practically yanked him out into the blinding white storm. The heavy metal door slammed shut securely behind them.

Oliver glanced back over his shoulder. Through the small, glass window of the door, he could see August mouthing the words, Please be safe.

Oliver gave him a firm nod. I'll try, he promised silently.

"Come on, Ollie!" Venti's voice called out over the howling wind. "Let's go find that building!"

Oliver spun around. Venti was already a few yards ahead, standing brightly against the swirling white snow. Oliver stepped forward, marveling at the sensation. The raging blizzard was screaming around him, but inside Venti's glowing Anemo bubble, the air was as perfectly temperate as a spring afternoon in Mondstadt. "I... wow. I actually feel incredibly comfortable with your wind around me."

"I told you!" Venti cheered, his braids whipping in the breeze. "My wind is powerful! Now, stay close to me. Remember what Claire said about the hidden rocks and the cliff!" Venti pointed down toward a steep, jagged drop-off completely obscured by snowdrifts. "See? One wrong step, and you're tumbling into the cavern."
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Oliver immediately closed the distance, ensuring he stayed far away from the cliff's edge, walking practically shoulder-to-shoulder with his boyfriend. As they carefully trudged through the thick powder, Oliver's curiosity got the better of him.

"Okay, Venti..." Oliver started, his boots crunching loudly. "I have to ask you something."

"Hmm?" The bard hummed happily, glancing over.

"Are you seriously not cold?" Oliver asked, staring at Venti's exposed legs and arms.

"Babe, no!" Venti giggled musically. "Besides, I used to travel up into Dragonspine all the time back home whenever I needed a break from the city. I'm totally used to freezing temperatures!"

"Right, right, Dragonspine," Oliver nodded. "Okay, So... so uh, but the other thing...

"Yeah~?"

"Your clothes," Oliver pointed at Venti's pristine green, white, and gold bard clothes. "Weren't they completely shredded? When we finally escaped Silent Hill, your outfit was covered in cuts and tears..." Oliver furrowed his brow, completely baffled by the flawless fabric now adorning the Archon. "Now it's perfectly fixed, like it just came off the rack. Do you secretly have, like, magical sewing powers?"

Venti threw his head back and burst into bright, echoing laughter. "Pffft! Hahaha! Nohoho! I definitely don't, Ollie! I just used my realm!" he declared, as if that explained literally everything.

"Your realm?"

"Yes! I store all my weapons in there, remember? I told you this already. Oh! And my clothes too!" Venti explained cheerfully. "I actually own over a hundred exact copies of this exact bard outfit. Just in case one gets severely damaged! My clothes aren't invincible like I am, you know! Ehe! They get torn up all the time, and since I always lack the Mora to pay a tailor to carefully patch them up, it's honestly just cheaper to buy them in bulk!"

Oliver slowly nodded, absorbing the absolute absurdity of the logic. But he couldn't resist taking a playful jab at his boyfriend. "Lack of Mora, huh? I wonder if that's because all your money goes straight to dandelion wine?"

Venti snorted violently, reaching over to playfully shove Oliver's shoulder. "Bahaha! Nooooo, definitely not! Ehehehee!" Venti quickly looked away, a guilty, incredibly cheeky smile spreading across his face. "Well! Like I said! Tailors are simply too expensive! Bulk buying is just smart economics!"

Oliver giggled, shaking his head. "Nice save~"

"Oh, shush~," Venti teased back.

As they walked, a sudden thought crossed Oliver's mind, making him snicker quietly. "You know, you keeping a hundred identical outfits in a closet or whatever is literally exactly like that scene from the Bee Movie."

Oliver giggled, then did a terrible impression. "'Black and yellow, black and yellow, black and yellow... Ooh, black and yellow! Let's shake it up a little!'" Oliver laughed loudly. "And then he just picks the exact same outfit anyway! You and your bard clothes are exactly like Barry."

Oliver looked over, fully expecting a laugh, only to find the most profoundly confused expression he had ever seen on the Archon's face.

Oliver blinked. Right. Of course he would not understand.

"What in the world were you just talking about?" Venti asked, his tone perfectly balancing utter confusion and amusement.

"Uhhh," Oliver rubbed the back of his neck. "It's... it's a movie from my world."

Venti pondered this for a second. "Ohhhh! I get it! The films you mentioned before!" He looked down at the snow, his brow knitting together in deep thought, before looking back up at Oliver. "Wait. A film about a bee... trying on human clothing?"

Oliver groaned playfully. "No, no, no! Well, yes, but no! It was just a comedic bit in an animated movie." Then, he looked away, mumbling, "Technically the entire movie was a comedy,"

Venti blinked, still entirely lost. "I... I have never seen a film or play about an insect before."

"It was an animation," Oliver tried to clarify, immediately realizing his mistake.

"Animation?"

"Y-Yeah! There are lots of different types! Hand-drawn, 3D computer graphics! It's like—" Oliver stopped dead in his tracks when he realized Venti's confused expression was only deepening. He sighed fondly. "Okay, you know what? I'm just going to have to show it to you someday."

Venti giggled, his bright smile returning. "Yeah, that would be very helpful!" He folded his arms comfortably against the wind. "But we definitely need to get out of here first."

"I feel like we've been walking forever," Oliver grumbled, squinting through the falling snow.

"Hey, don't be so impatient!" Venti chided lightly. "It's only been a few minutes! And look on the bright side, the snow is relatively easy to walk through! Yes, there are hidden rocks, but honestly? It's nowhere near as treacherous as navigating Dragonspine. Trust me on that."

Oliver sighed, knowing Venti was right. "I know, but... ugh, it's just weird how spaced out these buildings are. Whoever worked here definitely got their cardio in before they reached the next building, geez..."

Venti laughed, a clear, ringing sound over the howling wind. "Hahaha! Well, it was good for their mortal bodies! Especially in a freezing place like this, you really need to get that blood pumping!"

Again, Venti made a valid point. But Oliver couldn't help the dark thought creeping in. Was that really the reason? Doctor Barclay wasn't exactly the type to care about his employees' cardiovascular health. Murderous, multidimensional tyrants rarely enforced corporate wellness programs.

Pushing the dark thoughts away, Oliver looked down at the thick, powdery snow crunching beneath his shoes. "You know... I've actually always wanted to see real snow."

Venti smiled brightly, skipping ahead a few paces. He spun around gracefully and began walking backward, just to keep his eyes on Oliver. "Well, there is a first time for everything!"

Oliver looked at Venti, his heart swelling slightly. "My family never really traveled outside of California. I mean, I've seen snow from a distance. In the winter, you can see it capping the mountains... but I've never actually been in it like this."

Venti's gaze softened affectionately. "I'm really glad you're at least getting to enjoy it, even under these circumstances!" The bard offered a sweet wink before spinning back around to lead the way.

Oliver stopped walking.

He stared at the pristine white powder at his feet. There was something he had always wanted to do if he ever saw real snow. But it required a few things: Snow. A friend. Or... a boyfriend.

Oliver knelt down, plunging his hands into the freezing powder—grateful for the Anemo shield keeping his fingers warm—and scooped up a hefty pile. He quickly packed it together, rolling it between his palms until he had a perfectly dense, spherical snowball.

He looked up. Venti was still casually walking ahead, completely oblivious, his back turned.

A wicked smirk crossed Oliver's face. "Hey, babe?"

"Yeah?" Venti asked, not bothering to turn around.

Oliver didn't say a word. He pulled his arm back and launched the snowball with surprising accuracy. It nailed Venti dead center in the back, exploding into a massive puff of white powder against his green cape.

Venti froze perfectly still.

Slowly, dramatically, the bard turned around. His face was a completely blank, unreadable slate. But the stoic facade lasted exactly two seconds before a mischievous, competitive smirk cracked across his features.

Oliver snorted. "Bahahah! Hehe, got you~"

"Oh, yeah~?" Venti purred, his eyes flashing with playful danger. "Oh, it is on~!"

The bard gave a sharp wink. In a blur of divine, Archon-level speed, Venti dropped to a crouch. Before Oliver could even blink, the bard had perfectly crafted over five snowballs.

Oliver's jaw dropped in sheer, playful terror. "Ah?!" he shrieked. "Hey! How did you do that so fast?!" he laughed, taking a frantic step back.

Venti snorted, his eyes sparkling. "Better run~!"

Instead of throwing them, Venti tossed all five snowballs straight up into the air. With a swift flick of his wrist, a burst of Anemo magic caught them, launching the snowballs forward like a literal scattergun.

There was no escape.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

"AHH?!" Oliver screamed with laughter as he was pelted point-blank in the chest and face. "Oh nooo, I've been snowball shotgunned!" He sputtered, wiping the cold powder off his cheeks and glaring playfully at his giggling boyfriend. "You are going to pay for that! That was entirely unfair!"

"There is absolutely no such thing as playing fair in a snowball fight!" Venti cheered, sticking his tongue out triumphantly.

"Oh, yeah?" Oliver laughed, pitching his voice into a cartoonish, exaggerated villain tone that immediately sent Venti into a fit of giggles. "Watch this!"

Oliver thrust his hand to his side. In a brilliant flash of blue light and swirling frost, his heavy diamond sword materialized in his grip.

Venti gasped, his hands flying to his cheeks. "Uh-oh!"

Oliver giggled wildly. Gripping the hilt tightly, he swung the massive, frosty blade in a low, sweeping arc just inches above the ground. The Cryo-infused swing caught the top layer of the snowdrift, kicking up a massive, blinding tidal wave of powdery white snow that crashed directly over the bard.

Venti yelped, completely buried in the sudden avalanche. He flopped backward into the snowbank, coughing and laughing hysterically as he sat up, brushing the thick powder out of his blue braids.

"Hahahahaha, okay!!!" Venti wheezed. "That was incredibly mean! But... I guess I totally deserved that one!"

Oliver couldn't stop laughing. He quickly let his the sword vanish and jogged over, offering a hand to haul his snow-covered boyfriend back to his feet. Once their breathless laughter finally died down into soft, affectionate smiles, they turned back toward the howling horizon, hand-in-hand, ready to find the power plant.

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It took a while before they found anything, but once they did, the building was impossible to miss. A massive, metallic structure cut sharply through the harsh white of the snow. Layers upon layers of varying sections stacked high, each part tapering off and getting smaller the higher it went. A giant tube sat at the very top, stretching upward until it ended in a large sphere.

"Woah," Venti blinked, staring up at the monolithic tower. "You'd only see a place like this in Nod-Krai."

Oliver didn't even bother asking. He knew that was just another detail from an update released far beyond the time he was originally from, though he did vaguely remember Venti mentioning it once before.

"How do we get inside?" Venti mused, crossing his arms. "Remember, the keycard Claire gave us only opens the main doors. The real question is—is this the main headquarters, or the power grid building?"

Oliver leaned forward, squinting up at the towering beam crowning the facility. "I dunno, that definitely gives off power plant vibes to me." They approached the entrance. It was identical to the heavy metal sliding doors back at the lab, save for the complete and eerie absence of windows.

"Venti, let me see the keycard," Oliver requested, spotting the reader mounted on the wall.

The bard handed over Claire's worn card. Oliver slid it through the slot.

Error

-You are not authorized-

"Hmmm. Just as I expected," Oliver sighed, folding his arms. "So this is the power plant." He passed the card back.

"Think I can blow it down with my wind?" Venti offered cheerfully.

"Well—" Oliver shrugged. "There's nothing else for us to do, and we have to get inside. At least, I don't think you blasting the door off will cause any damage to the power plant itself."

"Trust me, I can pinpoint my wind to do exactly the amount of damage I want." Venti summoned his bow, the weapon materializing in his grip with a familiar glow. "Stand back, please."

Oliver stepped aside. Venti drew back the bowstring and released a concentrated Anemo arrow directly at the heavy steel. The impact was instantaneous. A localized, violent gale ripped the door cleanly off its
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hinges, sending it crashing to the floor inside.

Oliver gasped. "Woah... that... that was fast."

Venti flashed a proud, bright smile. "Getting used to denting iron and metal. Plenty of practice with the Ruin Guards back home. Trust me, the wind can hit hard~"

Oliver beamed. "And that is exactly why you're the most powerful Archon." Stepping close, he pressed a quick, affectionate kiss to Venti's cheek.

Venti erupted into a flurry of giggles. "Hehehe! Awww~. You're just trying to flatter me~!"

Smiling, Oliver took his hand. "Let's head inside."

Instead of the sprawling reactor core they expected, they stepped into a cramped, boxy vestibule. A second set of heavy doors stood sealed shut in front of them.

"What is this place?" Venti blinked, staring at the small room and the broken door lying uselessly on the floor behind them.

"I guess you've gotta blow that one off, too?" Oliver suggested.

Venti raised his bow without hesitation, but a mechanical voice suddenly echoed from the walls.

Decontamination Started - Please Stand By.

Instantly, a fine mist began spraying from pipes lining the ceiling. Startled by the sudden hiss of liquid, Venti threw his hands up, summoning a swirling sphere of wind around them to violently repel the spray.

"Venti, wait! It's okay! It's just water!" Oliver shouted. He recognized the setup—a standard decontamination airlock to scrub off outside pollutants before entering a clean zone. But something was definitely wrong with the execution.

"Are you sure?" Venti asked skeptically. The moment he dropped his Anemo barrier, the accumulated water crashed down on their heads, soaking them to the bone.

Oliver sputtered, spitting out a mouthful of water. "Bleh!"

"Oops... sorry," Venti giggled. "But hey, like you said, it's just water~"

The system itself was fundamentally broken. Because Venti had obliterated the exterior door, the howling wind from the frozen wasteland outside was sucking most of the mist right back out of the facility before it could even touch them.

Decontamination Complete.

"This is such a sci-fi setup," Oliver muttered, wiping his face. "Though I guess it happens in the real world too."

"What was the point of that?" Venti asked as the inner doors finally hissed open.

Beyond them lay a cavernous, pitch-black corridor. "Geez, it's dark in there," Venti noted, peering cautiously into the gloom. He looked back at Oliver, waiting for an answer.

"It's an airlock. It cleans you so you don't track outside dirt or contaminants into sensitive areas that could get ruined."

"Huh," Venti murmured, stepping over the threshold.

Oliver swallowed hard and followed. "Honestly... seeing this just makes me hate Doctor Barclay even more."

Venti looked over his shoulder, confused. "Hmm? What do you mean?"

"He built a pristine decontamination unit to protect a machine, but couldn't be bothered to do the same for the lab where he kept the human beings he experimented on?"

Understanding dawned on Venti's face. "I see what you mean."

"Like, that is just pure evil," Oliver scowled. "He cares more about protecting his power plant than the people he stole."

"Well, at first I thought maybe he did this to stop the reactor from failing," Venti reasoned, his voice echoing slightly in the dark. "Like, to prevent a meltdown. If Claire is right and this place is connected to different worlds, I can see how chaos would rain down if this place broke in a catastrophic way."

"Sure, but he didn't do this to protect the multiverse," Oliver pointed out, stopping a few inches into the dark hallway. "He only added this because in his head: 'If there's a massive explosion over Greenland, the police and military will finally find me.'"

Venti let out a soft giggle. "Yeah, you're right. I was just hoping to find a shred of humanity left in him. No matter how evil someone is, they usually have at least one redeeming quality in their soul. Whether it's a love for animals, deeply caring for one specific person, or even a weird passion for cooking." He shrugged, then, his tone darkned. "Still. That doesn't overshadow the atrocities. Doctor Barclay and... Dottore. They are one and the same. It's sick to experiment on people. Maybe I shouldn't have killed Barclay, but..." He trailed off, looking to Oliver for reassurance.

The bard let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know..."

"Hey, it's okay, Venti," Oliver said gently. "Remember what you said? It was a trauma response. You hate Dottore, and I don't blame you. It's okay." He stepped in, capturing Venti's lips in a tender kiss.

Venti melted into it, pulling away with a soft breath. "Thanks, baby," he whispered. He turned back to the suffocating darkness. "Let's see what we can do about this."

"Yeah... we probably won't be able to just flip a switch to turn it off," Oliver guessed.

"Not without authorization," Venti agreed. "But maybe there's another method. First, let's just go see what we're working with."

They ventured deeper into the facility. The darkness was absolute; the pale light funneling in from the broken doorway behind them was rapidly fading into black.

"You know," Oliver started, trying to fill the heavy silence as they walked. "How did you manage to kill Barclay like that?" He was genuinely baffled by the memory. "That wasn't Anemo magic." He blinked, looking over at his boyfriend's silhouette. "Did you suddenly unlock Electro? Steal the Raiden Shogun's powers or something?"

That pulled a bright laugh from Venti, momentarily banishing the grim atmosphere. "Oh, no! Definitely not. It wasn't Electro either!" He smiled, his voice taking on a slightly more reverent tone. "It was a divine mechanism. Celestia has their nails, and we Archons have a very specific strike we call the Bolt of Judgment."

"Bolt of Judgment?" Oliver tilted his head. "I know about the Celestial nails, but... what the heck is the Bolt of Judgment?"

Venti stopped walking and leaned back against the cold wall. "Guess you never ran into that piece of lore? Probably from one of those newer 'updates' again."

Oliver stopped in front of him. "I guess so."

"Yeah, it's... sort of a forbidden power," Venti explained, shrugging. "Celestia grants it to the Archons to pass ultimate judgment on a mortal. But because it's an instant execution—and can only target a single, specific person—we're strictly ordered never to use it unless absolutely necessary. But... well, you already know how I felt with Doctor Barclay, and what you have told to me about him."

Oliver planted a hand on his hip. "But why didn't you use it on Nerraw? I mean, Doctor Barclay was a monster, but Nerraw was a terrifying threat to all of us!"

"Remember what I told you before," Venti said, his tone growing serious. "Nerraw was basically immortal. Not entirely immortal, since that key thing Mark and Thomas used could take him out, but I wasn't going to take any blind chances." Venti took a deep breath. "The Bolt of Judgment doesn't work on immortal beings. It's a built-in failsafe so an Archon can never turn it against Celestia. And it doesn't just protect the gods up there—an Archon cannot use it on another Archon. I couldn't smite Zhongli, and Zhongli couldn't smite me. Neither of us could use it on the Ruler of Death or the Ruler of Life."

Oliver listened in rapt attention to the massive lore drop Venti was saying. He was stunned he'd never encountered this in the game... surely a lore this massive would have been mentioned since Genshin Impact 1.0.

Venti kept going. "And it's a foolproof too. Well... I say that, but the results are rather explosive." He shook his head. "If I actually tried to use it on an immortal being—like, say, Xiao..." He blinked, peering at Oliver in the dark. "You know Xiao, right?"

Oliver nodded instantly. "Yeah, the Adeptus."

"Oh!" Venti beamed. "You really do know your stuff!"

Oliver giggled. "Well, he showed up pretty early in the game. You literally can't miss him if you play through the first half of the Liyue storyline." He smirked. "Plus, you two are a incredibly popular ship in the fandom!"

Oliver immediately clamped his mouth shut. Why did he just say that?

Venti blinked, genuine confusion washing over his pale face. "Ship? What do you mean, ship?" He tilted his head. "I don't remember ever riding a ship with Xiao..."

Oliver descended into a violent coughing fit. "Haha, well, uh..." he scrambled for a lie. "The... the ship in the game... you rode a boat together once..."

"Hmmm... that completely slipped my memory..." Venti tapped his chin, perplexed, before shaking his head to clear it. "Anyways! As I was saying, you cannot target an immortal. If you try, the Bolt of Judgment violently ricochets. It will fly off and hit literally anything except the immortal target you chose."

Oliver, still recovering from his mortifying slip-up, sobered immediately. "Oh..."

"Exactly," Venti nodded solemnly. "Who knows what kind of disaster would have happened if I fired it at Nerraw. It could have hit Mark. It could have hit Thomas. And, baby? I have more than enough trauma for

one lifetime... if it had ricocheted and hit you, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

Oliver's heart swelled. The choice made total sense now.

Venti stepped closer, threading his fingers softly through Oliver's hair. "I need you to live to see your hundreds, my windblume. I can't afford to lose you this early."

Oliver leaned into the touch, a soft smile gracing his lips. "I'm not going anywhere." He caught Venti's hand, pressing a tender kiss to his knuckles. Then, trying to lighten the mood, he glanced down the oppressive, pitch-black corridor. "You don't think you can use this 'Bolt of Judgment' as a flashlight, do you?"

That earned a bright laugh. "Oh baby, don't be silly!" Venti giggled. "Foolproof, remember? I can't just spark it on random objects." He smiled warmly. "Normally, I wouldn't resort to this, but if we were still home, I'd probably just call on another Archon for a favor."

"Who?" Oliver asked.

"I dunno. Maybe the Pyro Archon," Venti mused. "I'm friends with her."

Oliver blinked repeatedly. "The Pyro Archon?"

"Yep!"

Oliver frowned. "But I thought you called the Pyro Archon a wayward, warmongering wretch?"

Venti froze, then instantly waved his hands in a frantic panic. "Oh, nohohoho! That's the other one! The first Pyro Archon, not the second one!" He burst into laughter. "Hahahaha! Oh my word. Out of everything in my history, you latch onto that one line I wrote centuries ago... wow."

Oliver rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "There's a second Archon...? Oh! The Natlan update that's coming up..." He froze again. "Well, not really an update now, but ugh, you know what I mean."

Venti giggled, highly amused. "There we go again. My word, the overarching story of this thing really lacks cohesion in certain parts, doesn't it?"

Oliver sighed. "So... you can actually just call other Archons telepathically?"

"Yes, though we rarely do," Venti explained. "We all tend to work alone."

Oliver smiled. "You're all a bunch of Batmans, I guess."

Venti giggled. "Whatever that means." He hummed thoughtfully. "Hmm... let me try something..."

The bard raised his hands, his teal braids glowing softly as he closed his eyes. The static air of the corridor instantly shifted, a localized current of wind picking up and swirling around them.

Oliver stood perfectly still, watching Venti intently. He trusted him completely, but he was incredibly curious about what magic he was trying to pull off.

Suddenly, the wind died. Venti lowered his arms with a heavy sigh. "Huh... nothing at all," he muttered, shaking his head. "Though it's probably just because I'm not a part of this world."

"What were you doing?" Oliver asked.

"Trying to tap into the leylines—to get in contact with anything divine from your world," Venti explained. "But there was nothing... the frequencies were just dead. No gods... no Archons, nothing I could tune into.

Truly a... windless world." He shrugged. "Maybe it's just a dimensional barrier, but I know my power reached out. I felt it broadcast. The least your deities could have done was reply with a simple 'I cannot help you.'"

Oliver winced, his shoulders lifting in an awkward shrug. "Wellll... uh... Venti, there's actually a massive, ongoing debate about whether or not celestial beings even exist in my dimension."

Venti's arms dropped. He stared at Oliver, deadpan. "Really?"

"Either they don't exist... or they're very, very quiet," Oliver admitted. "I mean, we have countless religions and traditions... but none of them feature a god who physically walks around right in your face."

"Eh?!" Venti crossed his arms, a deep scowl furrowing his brow. "Huh... and my people have the nerve to call me a lazy Archon." He huffed. "Even though the Archons back home don't mingle with mortals as much anymore, we'd at least have the decency to acknowledge one of our own over the divine network."

"Heh..." Oliver offered a weak smile, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Eh, I guess I shouldn't judge. Most gods from my realm's past were incredibly secretive too. Some for good reasons, some for bad." Venti blinked, looking at Oliver, then pointed a thumb at his own chest. "And... I'm definitely one of those secretive ones, aren't I?"

Oliver desperately wanted to snort, but managed to suppress it. "I mean, you said it, not me."

Venti rolled his eyes playfully. "You were supposed to defend my honor and say I wasn't~" he giggled, reaching out to boop Oliver on the nose.

Right at that moment, the two-way radio clipped to Oliver's belt erupted in a harsh burst of static.

"Woah?!" Oliver jumped out of his skin.

Venti gasped, stepping back. "What is that?!"

Oliver unclipped the radio, frantically dialing down the blaring volume before holding down the side button. "Hello?" he said, releasing it and waiting.

"Oliver? That you? Is Venti with you? It's Mark. I'm with the rest of the crew back in the lab. We're all fine, just checking in on your progress. You guys good?" The radio clicked off with a sharp buzz.

Oliver pressed the comm button down again. "Yes! We're totally fine! Venti is okay. We just made it inside the power plant."

The radio buzzed back to life. "Oh! That's great!" Mark replied. "What's it—" Mark's voice suddenly grew muffled, like he had pulled the receiver away from his mouth. "Ask them about—" The audio cleared up. "Claire wants to know what it looks like in there, as she's never actually been given access to the reactor building."

Oliver and Venti shared a highly amused, guilty look. The place wasn't exactly easy to describe when they couldn't see a foot in front of their faces.

Oliver pressed the button. "Mark, guys, honestly, I have no idea. We... kinda just arrived..." It was a blatant lie. They had been standing in the hallway for ages, he'd been too busy flirting and yapping lore with his boyfriend. He cleared his throat.

"Just arrived?" Mark's voice crackled. "Must have been a rough trek through the snow."

"It's a pretty long walk," Claire's voice echoed faintly in the background.

Oliver pressed the comms again. "It's also completely pitch-black in here."

"Dark?" Mark asked instantly.

"How is it dark?" Claire's voice took over the mic, sounding baffled. "I know I haven't been inside, but... dark? It's a power plant hooked into an impossible, multidimensional power supply. The reactor building should be the very first thing on the grid to be lit."

"I dunno," Oliver said, staring blankly down the abyss of the corridor. "It's just void black. It's as if not a single light is on in this place,"

"Okay," Mark said after a beat of static. "Well, keep us updated when you find the main reactor core. And please! Remember what we discussed—no using destructive weapons. This is a reactor tethered to literal universes. Over and out."

The radio clicked off for good. Oliver secured it back onto his belt.

"What a bizarre device," Venti marveled, having watched the entire exchange in quiet fascination. "I've never seen anything quite like it. It operates almost exactly like the divine telepathy I was just telling you about. What do you call this strange contraption?"

Oliver giggled. "You sound exactly like my grandfather when I used to hand him a smartphone."

"Smartphone?" Venti tilted his head like a confused puppy.

"It's something everyone uses here. I'll explain it later. Or maybe Mark has one and I can just show you," Oliver promised.

"If it's something everyone uses, wouldn't you have one on you?" Venti asked as they finally began walking again.

"I do... well, I did, back in 2023. Doctor Barclay confiscated our phones right before we went into stasis for the experiment without telling us. Who knows where they are now. Honestly, I'm just glad I didn't have any sensitive personal stuff on it... though I am really going to miss my Spotify playlists," Oliver grumbled. "Cause I forgot what the hell the password was,"

As they walked, the hallway seemed to stretch endlessly. There were no doors, no windows, no side paths branching off into the dark. They could barely make out the skeletal frames of light fixtures overhead, all completely dead.

Suddenly, Oliver felt Venti's hand clamp around his arm, roughly pulling him to a halt.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Oliver whispered, peering into the gloom.

It was nearly impossible to see... but there was a distinct silhouette standing dead center in the hallway.

Oliver's eyes went wide. He looked at Venti, then back at the shadowy figure. "Uhh..."

Venti's bow materialized in a flash of anemo energy. "Stay behind me."

"That's... not Nerraw, is it?" Oliver asked, his heart hammering. He knew it shouldn't be—Nerraw was dead.

Venti moved with predatory silence, circling around to the front of the figure. The man was completely rigid, frozen in place like a wax statue. Venti boldly waved a hand directly across the man's masked face. Not a single flinch. "Huh. That's incredibly weird."

"Why isn't he moving?" Oliver whispered loudly.

"I have no idea."

"Could it be... one of Claire's coworkers?" Oliver offered, stepping a fraction closer. "It's possible right?"

Venti leaned in close, sniffing the air around the statue-like man. "He... smells mortal," he confirmed. "So that tracks."

"Hmm." Oliver frowned. "And since when can you smell if someone is mortal or not?"

Venti ignored the question entirely, his attention locked onto a different detail. "But why does he smell so... familiar?"

"Familiar?" Oliver asked. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know." Venti leaned in for another sniff. "I've definitely caught this scent before. He smells exactly like a Fatu..." Venti's eyes trailed up to the man's frozen face, finally registering the distinct design of the mask. Slowly, the bard backed away to take in the full uniform.

"This is a Fatui Soldier," Venti stated, his voice laced with disbelief.

That threw Oliver for an absolute loop. "F-Fatui?!" He stared wildly between the frozen man and the Archon. "What do you mean!? Fatui!? From Teyvat?!"

Venti nodded grimly. "It all makes perfect sense now. When Claire mentioned that Barclay used masked mortals infused with power to do his dirty work... the Fatui popped into my head immediately, but I dismissed it as a wild guess." He gestured to the towering guard. "But lookie here. I was right."

Oliver stared at the frozen Skirmisher in stunned horror.

Venti tapped his chin thoughtfully. "But the real question is... why would Barclay use low-level mortal grunts to guard the heart of his operation, instead of using a god like me, or some other devastatingly powerful entity? He had countless universes at his fingertips. He could have dragged Celestia itself down here to guard the reactor... but he picked Fatui foot soldiers?"

Oliver racked his brain, desperately trying to untangle Doctor Barclay's twisted psychology. Barclay was insane, but he was ruthlessly calculating. Everything he did had a paranoid, controlling logic behind it.

Suddenly, a terrifying puzzle piece snapped into place.

"I think... I think I get it," Oliver breathed.

Venti looked over.

"He brainwashed these people, right?"

"That's what Claire told us," Venti nodded. "Does that mean something?"

"Yeah," Oliver nodded slowly, the horror dawning. "I think it means everything. Barclay knew the brainwashing maybe wasn't a flawless system. If he used it on standard Fatui soldiers and they snapped out of the trance, Barclay could just shoot them or lock them down before they became a real threat. But if

he had stolen the entirety of Celestia... what would happen if a literal pantheon of gods broke out of his mind control?"

Venti's eyes widened.

"They would completely eradicate my dimension," Oliver finished grimly. "Barclay is evil and he's a control freak. He probably only thought of his company going down under, and not the state of the Earth being completely broken after Celestia had their way with just one man who did them wrong,"

"And they absolutely would have," Venti agreed darkly.

"So that's why he picked the Fatui. They're strong enough to be lethal guards, but mortal enough that Barclay could put a bullet in them if they ever went rogue."

"Okay, that explains the who and the what," Venti said, gesturing to the unblinking soldier. "But it doesn't explain the why. Why is he frozen like a statue?"

Oliver blinked up at the taller, frozen man. "I... I dunno..."

Suddenly, a low, echoing rumble broke the silence.

Oliver blinked, instantly looking at Venti.

"Heh, if you're wondering if that was my stomach, it wasn't. Sorry to disappoint," Venti teased.

But Oliver's mind was nowhere near his fetish right now. The stakes were too high. "Well, it wasn't me either. I ate a ton of the food Mark brought."

Slowly, the two of them turned their heads back to the frozen Fatui soldier.

Another loud, painful grumble erupted directly from the man's midsection.

Oliver felt the blood drain from his face. He looked at Venti.

Venti's blinked, and looked at Oliver again.

"I'm not a horn dog, you know," Oliver whispered, his voice trembling slightly. "Venti... I think something genuinely horrific is happening here. I think he's conscious."

"Baby," Oliver swallowed hard. "If Doctor Barclay is the one keeping him frozen like this... he is beyond evil. Because this man is alive. He's still breathing."

Venti didn't say a word. He just summoned a draft of wind, levitating smoothly until he was face-to-face with the towering soldier. He pressed his ear perilously close to the man's masked face. After a tense, agonizing moment, Venti nodded tightly.

"Yep. He's exhaling out of his nose."

Oliver felt sick to his stomach. "Venti... he's just standing there. He's trapped in his own body, and he's starving."

Venti lowered himself back to the metal floor. "Then what do we do? Did lights being turned off in here trigger a stasis lock? Are there hundreds of these guys frozen all over the building? Claire said she hadn't seen her coworkers in months. Who knows how long this poor guy has been standing here... his own stomach is about to eat him alive."

Panic edged into Oliver's voice. "What if we find a way to free him, and he just immediately tries to kill us?"

"Normally, the Fatui are an incredibly odd bunch," Venti reasoned. "But if you save them from a fate worse than death, they usually have the honor to return the favor with a 'thank you', and will leave you alone,"

"Venti, I know that! But these aren't normal Fatui soldiers! They're brainwashed by Doctor Barclay! They probably don't even remember they're Fatui, let alone that they're from Teyvat!"

Venti nodded gravely. "You do have a point there,"

Oliver cast a desperate look down the endless, pitch-black corridor. "We need to find that reactor core. Right now. We need to find out if it's what's keeping them like this."

Chapter 50: Power Plant

They didn't encounter any more frozen Fatui soldiers as they pressed deeper into the facility, searching for the reactor core. The suffocating silence of the pitch-black corridor gave them time to think.

"How did he even get the materials to build this entire place?" Oliver mumbled, his eyes straining against the gloom. "If we apply my dimension's logic, and factor in Doctor Barclay's paranoia... he wouldn't want a single soul on Earth knowing what he was doing out here."

Venti tapped his chin thoughtfully as he walked. "Maybe it's a case of him taking people from those other realms as well? He could have abducted engineers and builders from different universes and brainwashed them, just like the soldier we saw."

"Yeah," Oliver nodded slowly. "That's a real possibility." He sighed, his voice echoing faintly. "This hallway goes on forever... but wait, I think I see something up ahead?"

Venti squinted into the darkness. "I see it too. It looks like an opening." Without warning, he grabbed Oliver's hand and tugged him forward.

Oliver gasped, stumbling slightly before matching the bard's brisk pace. "W-Wait, Venti, hold on! We don't want to just burst right into danger!" He blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the shifting shadows. "It's hard to see in this darkness you know!"

Venti slowed his steps but didn't let go of Oliver's hand as they crossed the threshold into a sprawling, cavernous room.

The ground beneath them shifted from solid flooring to grated metal. From what little they could discern, they were standing on a suspended bridge flanked by heavy iron railings. The vast space beneath the walkway was a sheer, terrifying drop-off, plunging into a dark abyss. They could not see the end.

"We could really use some light in here..." Oliver muttered, his grip tightening on Venti's hand. "I wish Claire had given us a flashlight."

Venti adjusted his pace to a cautious stroll, keeping Oliver close. "Just match my speed, and step where I step," the bard murmured softly. "A bridge like this has to lead somewhere important. Maybe this is where everything works in the power plant,"

Oliver nodded, finding comfort in the steady warmth of Venti's hand. They moved deeper into the suspended void, the silence heavy and absolute, until a mechanical chime shattered the quiet.

"Motion Trigger... Circus Gal—" A violent burst of static tore through the female, automated voice. *" [zzzt]... Power Plant Energy Sphere."*

The two of them froze instantly.

Venti's head swiveled, his glowing braids casting a faint teal aura in the dark. "Huh... what was that?"

Oliver narrowed his eyes. Something about that audio clip dug deep into his brain. That woman's voice... and what it had said right before the violent static glitch. It sounded terrifyingly familiar, but with how stressful the journey had been, his exhausted mind hit a brick wall trying to place it.

"I don't know," Oliver muttered, shaking his head. "But we need to keep moving. We have to save those universes from collapsing."

They crept further along the metal grating until the bridge terminated at the base of a massive, metallic dome. High above the heavy, knobless door, faded industrial lettering read: **Power Plant Control Module**.

"Great," Oliver grumbled, eyeing the large door. "Another sealed door." He wasn't particularly worried about getting past it—Venti could easily blast it open—but Oliver was growing weary of the noise. If there were more brainwashed Fatui lurking in the dark, tearing down a blast door was a surefire way to invite them over, especially if they were not frozen like the last one they encountered, and were free.

But as Venti stepped up to the threshold, the heavy metal doors hissed and slowly slid apart on their own.

Oliver blinked, staring at the open entryway before glancing down at his boyfriend.

Venti looked up at him, an eyebrow raised. "Hmm... so there *is* power."

"That's weird... I thought it was completely down." Oliver remembered the motion trigger. "Then again, the PA system just spoke." He scratched the back of his neck, a pit of anxiety forming in his stomach. "Ugh, whatever. Let's just head inside. But slowly."

Venti nodded, stepping through the doorway. "Stay behind me."

Oliver followed, but offered a gentle protest. "Hey, I've changed, you know. I can look after myself." He offered a weak smile. "I have my diamond sword and everything."

Venti let out a soft, airy giggle. "I know you can. But I just want to keep you safe. You're my boyfriend~ It's my duty to protect you."

"It's my job to protect you, too," Oliver whispered back.

As they crossed the threshold, the mechanical voice echoed again.

"Motion Trigger... Funtime F—[zzzt]... Power Plant Control Module."

Despite the power technically being 'on,' the room was suffocatingly dim. It was a massive, circular command center. High above, a ring of faint auxiliary lights traced the ceiling of the dome, but their glow was too weak to reach the floor. A colossal, cylindrical beam dropped directly from the ceiling into the center of the room, plunging straight down into the floorboards.

"I think we should just keep walking straight," Oliver suggested, his eyes scanning the shadows.

But as they moved, the automated voice echoed in his head again. *Funtime F...* The words rattled against a locked door in his memory. There was something about it, but he couldn't lay a finger on it.

"Ollie?" Venti whispered, glancing over his shoulder. "Are you alright? You look lost in thought."

Oliver *was* lost in thought, and he was just about to tell the bard exactly what was bothering him, when something in the room caught his attention.

The room was filled with towering banks of supercomputers as they walked more deeper inside, their server racks blinking with tiny, scattered dim lights. But what caught Oliver's attention was a single, flickering fluorescent tube light mounted near the floor at an intersection of server aisles. It would buzz to life for half a second, illuminating a small patch of the grated floor, before dying with a sharp click, plunging the aisle back into total darkness.

It would die with a sharp, electrical pop, plunging the entire aisle back into an inky, suffocating blackness. The cycle repeated, completely devoid of any rhythm. Sometimes the darkness lasted for a second.

Sometimes it dragged on for ten.

Oliver noticed a row of identical lights lining the pathway, but they were all completely dead.

He stepped closer, Venti right beside him. "Is the power failing in here?" Oliver murmured.

"I dunno," Venti said, placing his hands on his hips. "Seems like it is. So the lights *are* working, just... not as intended, I suppose?"

Oliver squinted, using the brief, agonizing flashes of the broken light to peer down the long aisle of servers. "I'm surprised we haven't tripped over anything in the dark yet," he whispered.

"Well, haha, let's just be grateful for that," Venti giggled.

Oliver turned his head, staring down the intersecting pathway.

Click. Buzz.... The light flickered again.

In that split second of harsh illumination from the interval of the flashing florescent light, the shadows at the very end of the hall seemed to warp. It was just a shape, a towering distortion standing perfectly still at the very edge of the light's reach.

The light flickered of again, shrouding everything in darkness.

Oliver froze, his blood running cold. He blinked hard, the afterimage of the blinding bulb burning into his retinas, convinced the darkness was just playing tricks on his exhausted mind. He stood completely rigid, holding his breath, waiting for the bulb to fire again.

Click. Buzz....

Nothing now. Just an empty hallway, the shape was gone.

Oliver didn't relax. In a facility built by a dimensional terrorist, he knew gaslighting himself into a false sense of security was a death sentence. He didn't say a word to Venti, but he mentally reached for the familiar weight of his diamond sword, keeping the magic primed to eventually let lose for him to summon it.

The darkness dragged on... until the light flashed another time.

The silhouette was closer. Much closer. It hadn't walked; it had simply appeared further down the hall, like a photograph skipping forward in a slideshow. It was towering, unnaturally tall, standing completely upright. Just before the bulb died, Oliver saw the light reflect off something sickeningly glossy—and he watched its head twitch with a violent, mechanical jerk.

Venti had seen it too. The bard's playful demeanor vanished instantly. "What in Teyvat was that?" he whispered, his Anemo bow materializing in his grip with a soft, glowing hum. His eyes widened in sheer horror. He slowly turned his head to Oliver. "Ollie... what is that thing?" he looked back down the path again. "Oh? Was it... one of those Fatui soldiers?" he asked. "Were they frozen? I barely saw it, but there's something—"

Click. Buzz.

It was right on the edge of the light now, looming just a few yards away. A massive, bipedal fox. Its body was composed of gleaming, segmented white plastic accented with bright, garish pink. It didn't look like a robot designed for war; it looked like something built for a children's show. As the bulb flared, the

animatronic's glossy faceplates violently stuttered—snapping open and shut in a rapid, sickening whir of gears, revealing a grotesque, grinning endoskeleton woven with thick metal cabling underneath.

The darkness was absolute once the light turned off, but the horrible *shk-shk-shk* sound of shifting metal plates echoed in the black.

Oliver swallowed the lump of absolute terror in his throat and summoned his diamond sword, the blue blade casting a faint, icy glow in the dark.

Click. Buzz. The fox was mere feet away, crouched low in a predatory stance. Its head convulsed wildly, the faceplates spasming outward in a terrifying, mechanical bloom of steel and wiring. Its golden, unblinking eyes were locked directly onto them.

"Get your bow ready," Oliver commanded, his voice trembling but firm.

Click. Black. Total darkness enveloped them. And then, from the void just inches away, a booming, theatrical voice erupted from a hidden speaker box with deafening, distorted volume.

"It seems you couldn't make it to my show, so I brought the show to you!"

Click. Buzz.

The fluorescent light blazed to life, catching the towering animatronic mid-lunge. Funtime Foxy was airborne, its massive metal claws outstretched, its segmented face fully split apart to reveal the horrifying metallic skull beneath.

"It's time to take your final bow!"

Oliver didn't hesitate. He poured every ounce of Cryo magic he possessed into the diamond blade and swung with all his might.

At the exact same instant, Venti pulled back his bowstring and fired.

Oliver's blade slashed in a wide, freezing arc, tearing through the animatronic's plastic chest plate and embedding deep layers of frost into its internal wiring. A microsecond later, Venti's concentrated Anemo arrow slammed into the exact same spot.

The elemental reaction was instantaneous.

A massive Cryo and Anemo Swirl detonated between them. A localized, violent blizzard exploded outward, blasting the massive animatronic backward with the force of a freight train. Funtime Foxy slammed into the metal grating with a catastrophic crunch. Its plastic casing shattered, sending pink and white plates skittering off into the darkness.

The ruined machine convulsed on the floor.

"A-A-A-a p-p-per-per-fo-formance was-was dema-demanded of me-me-me-eeeee," the voice box glitched wildly, sparking as the frozen Cryo magic rapidly melted against the heat of the exposed circuitry. *"And now-n-n-n-now-now I have de-de-de-de-delivered. En-n-n-En-En-corr-cor-cor-eeeeeee!"*

With a final, violent pop of electricity, the water completely shorted the motherboard. The animatronic's glowing yellow eyes flickered out, and it went dead.

Venti stood frozen, blinking rapidly at the smoking pile of scrap metal, before slowly turning to look at his boyfriend.

Oliver let out a long, shaky breath and dismissed his sword, the diamond blade vanishing into thin air. He stared blankly at the ceiling.

"I just killed Funtime Foxy," Oliver said, his voice entirely monotone. "With a diamond sword. Infused with Cryo magic. Standing next to Venti from Genshin Impact." He slowly dragged his hands down his face. "I feel like I'm a self-insert OC in the most unhinged crossover fanfiction on the internet." He shook his head, a hysterical laugh bubbling in his chest. "Silent Hill... Minecraft... SOMA... Five Nights at Freddy's. What the actual hell."

Venti's small, supportive smile faltered, replaced by total confusion. He clearly had no idea what an OC was, let alone a fanfiction. "Ollie? Babe? Are you alright?"

Oliver dropped his hands, nodding slowly. "Yeah. Just..." He looked down at the dead robot. "Doctor Barclay really imported FNAF animatronics to guard this place. He's a psychopath, but he's not stupid." He looked at Venti. "We're right back to the mortal guard theory. Yes, these things can be destroyed easily enough with magic... but if an ordinary, baseline human wandered in here and saw Funtime Foxy stalking them in the dark? They'd have a heart attack before it even touched them."

Venti straightened up, planting his hands on his hips with a proud giggle. "Well, good thing we aren't 'ordinary Joes'! We're Venti and Oliver! World Savers!"

Oliver blinked, a genuine smile finally breaking through his shock. "World Savers, huh?"

"Is that not exactly what we're doing?" Venti beamed.

"I guess it is." Oliver looked back down the dark hallway, the broken light still buzzing faintly in the background. "And I'm the one who dragged us into this. So we're going to finish it. We have to."

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They left the ruined animatronic behind and pushed toward the center of the massive dome.

"Look, over there!" Oliver pointed.

Directly beneath the massive central pillar was a control console. It was the only thing in the room fully illuminated, casting a sterile, blue glow over the surrounding metal. "This has gotta be the main controls, right?"

Oliver ran up to it, staring down at the dizzying array of switches, dials, and keyboards. "Oh god... this is going to be impossible to figure out."

Venti floated up beside him, leaning over the console. "Look over there," he pointed.

Oliver dragged his eyes to the glowing screen set into the center of the desk. The interface was a stark, scrolling terminal feed. "Huh?" Oliver muttered.

SYSTEM OVERRIDE - INITIATED BY: SAMUEL BARCLAY

POWER ROUTING: 96% ALLOCATED TO DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL (EXTRACTION SITES)

POWER STATUS: ACTIVE AT BARCLAY'S OFFICE - MAIN TERMINALPOWER

STATUS: LIMITED IN POWER PLANT SECTOR

Oliver gasped softly. "Oh..."
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"What does it mean?" Venti asked, leaning closer.

"Look," Oliver tapped the glass. "The power isn't broken, it's being intentionally diverted. Almost the entire grid is being funneled directly into the transfer chairs for the extraction process."

"Surely the power plant itself shouldn't drain so much energy that it can't even keep its own lights on," Venti blinked, frowning at the screen.

Oliver reached out, tapping a few keys on the console to try and reroute the auxiliary power, or better yet, turn it off.

Instantly, the screen flashed red.

ERROR: INSUFFICIENT CLEARANCE.

MAKE SYSTEM CHANGES VIA MAIN TERMINAL IN OFFICE.

"Main terminal?" Oliver muttered. His mind raced, flashing back to the scattered files he had scoured back at the lab. Some of the printed logs had mentioned data being routed to a 'Main Terminal' instead of being written. He turned to Venti, his eyes wide. "Venti... we can't turn this off from here. I think it is in Doctor Barclay's office."

"Where would that be?" Venti asked.

"We have to go back outside I think," Oliver realized with a groan. "It has to be in the main building Claire told us about. There's no way his personal office is sitting in the middle of a dark power plant. Let's head over there now,"

Chapter 51: The Endless Rooms in The Back

They didn't linger inside the suffocating gloom of the power plant a second longer than they had to. Retracing their steps, they hurried back toward the decontamination chamber, passing the frozen, statue-like Fatui soldier standing rigid in the dark.

"Don't worry," Venti murmured softly, pausing just a fraction of a second as they brushed past the trapped man. "We'll find a way to free you soon."

Reaching the exit, Venti pressed the button on the inner control panel, causing the automated doors to slide open and hiss as they opened. A split second later, they burst out through the decontamination airlock and back into the brutal, freezing expanse of the Greenland wasteland. The arctic wind shrieked around them, instantly biting at the open air, but thanks to the swirling, invisible current of Anemo magic Venti had wrapped around Oliver, the worst of the sub-zero chill was kept at bay.

Venti stepped out into the blinding white, his bard shoes crunching lightly over the thick powder. He spun around, hands resting on his hips. "Now, where do you suppose that main building is hiding?"

Oliver looked left and right, greeted only by a swirling wall of whiteout snow. "Does it even snow this much in Greenland?" the human grumbled, "I mean, I know the country is covered in white... but still."

Venti crossed his arms, his gaze scanning the swirling storm. "Well, judging by what I've seen that mortal known as Doctor Barclay pull off, I wouldn't put it past him to somehow manipulate the local weather."

Oliver's eyebrows shot up. Given everything else they had witnessed, that was entirely within the realm of possibility.

"It would be nearly impossible for a mortal from my realm to accomplish something like that," Venti mused aloud, tapping a finger against his chin. "But this one from your world seems capable of the most bizarre things. Frankly, I'm still surprised my Bolt of Judgment even worked on him at all."

Oliver leaned back against the metal wall of the power plant near the jagged, blown-out doorway. "Mark mentioned something about that fictional leak thinh earlier. Ugh." He groaned, rubbing his temples. "It is still so much to process."

Krr-zz-kk.

Oliver jumped as the radio clipped to his belt crackled to life. He quickly fished it out of his pocket and pressed the button. "Hello? Mark?"

"Hello! Just checking in," Mark's steady voice cut through the static. "You two doing okay out there?"

Before Oliver could reply, the radio clicked off. He pressed the button down again. "Yeah, we're fine. We're not in the power plant anymore. We just made it back outside into the snow." He let go of the button.

A brief moment of static later, Mark's voice returned, sounding slightly bewildered. "Outside? You've already shut down the power?" A pause. "Hm. You don't sound very enthusiastic..."

Oliver let out a dry chuckle. "Yeah, well, that's because we didn't turn it off yet. The control panel gave us an error. It said we have to make changes from Barclay's office to turn it off."

Over the speaker, they heard the rustle of clothing as Mark seemingly pulled away from the receiver. "Claire... they said—" A few muffled words were lost to interference, and then Claire's voice broke

through clearly.

"Huh... I wasn't expecting that," she admitted. "As I said, I was never given clearance to enter the power plant, so that wasn't on my mind that you'd need a master terminal from his office to override it."

There was a slight pause on her end before she continued. "You'll need clearance to get into his office, though. I never had it. I'm sorry I didn't mention it sooner, but I honestly didn't think you'd need to go in there. Though, I suppose it makes sense now that I think about it..."

Oliver blinked, glancing over at Venti, who simply offered a helpless, shoulder-shrugging smile.

Oliver raised the radio to his mouth and pressed the button. "Great. Clearance again."

"Yes," Claire replied smoothly. "But it's just a standard office door that last time I checked. It's actually made of wood—not cheap wood, mind you, but I've seen what your Venti companion can do with an iron door. Maybe he can just blast it down."

Oliver nodded to himself, clicking the transmitter one last time. "Do you even know where the main building is from here?"

"If you're standing outside the power plant exit, facing away from it, it's straight to your right," Claire instructed. "Just keep walking through the snow and you won't miss it. Remember, turn right."

"Got it. Thanks," Oliver said.

"Be careful you two," Mark chimed in before the line went dead with a sharp click.

Oliver lowered his hand and tucked the radio safely back into his pocket.

"Well," Venti chirped, stepping up close and giving Oliver's shoulder an affectionate nudge. "Ready to brave the cold elements again?"

Oliver nodded, letting out a small breath that plumed into white vapor. "Yeah, let's go. Not gonna lie, I'm actually pretty curious to see what his office looks like and what kind of stuff he kept in there."

Venti smiled, slipping his fingers seamlessly into Oliver's. They turned right, stepping out into the blinding white. Oliver squeezed the bard's hand, feeling a sudden, intense rush of warmth bloom in his chest.

"I'm really glad you're here," Oliver said softly, his voice barely carrying over the wind. "Like... seriously. I was ready to face all of this completely on my own—well, not totally alone, I had August—but getting up and walking up out of that transfer chair for the first time, I was just so ready to face everything without you... which felt so weird because we did so much together,"

Venti's expression softened into something intensely affectionate, his thumb gently stroking the back of Oliver's hand.

"I don't know how I... how any of us... could have managed to get this far," Oliver continued, shaking his head. "If it weren't for you, we'd still be stuck trying to open the door to extraction room three."

Venti let out a light, musical giggle. "Ah, that door was quite sturdy! But I am endlessly happy to be here with you too. It feels wonderful to finally be of genuine help! Now... if only those back in my world who called me a lazy Archon could see me now!" He closed his eyes, beaming with pride as they trudged through the drifts.

Oliver laughed. "Hey, don't let those guys get to you." As they walked, he squinted against the falling snowflakes. "It's still so bizarre that I can casually stroll through a blizzard and feel like I'm sitting in

regulated temperature."

"Ehe!" Venti giggled. "That's the glorious power of my Anemo wind keeping you cozy!"

"I know, but the whole situation is surreal," Oliver chuckled, shaking his head. "Cut me some slack, okay? I'm still just a normal guy from a painfully mundane dimension. Even though I've technically been to Teyvat, and survived Silent Hill, Minecraft, SOMA, and whatever else... it's still a lot to wrap my head around."

He knew he was mentally hitting a wall. After hours and hours of relentless chaos, his brain was fried. He was definitely going to need a massive emotional decompression session with Venti later—a full, unfiltered word-vomit of all his built-up stress, preferably in a warm room with zero dimensional anomalies.

Venti glanced sideways, his thoughts lingering on what Oliver had just said. "Well, so far, I have seen absolutely nothing mundane about your dimension!"

Oliver rolled his eyes playfully. "Okay the multiversal dimension-hopping doesn't count as standard worldly activities for me or anyone else here."

"Hehehe!" Venti giggled. "I don't mean that, silly! I'm talking about Doctor Barclay. That glowing purple armor he wore? Absolutely not mundane in the slightest."

Oliver shook his head. "Venti, that wasn't normal attire. I can promise you, you will never walk down a street here and see someone in glowing purple armor." He laughed a little. "Even if you go to New York, in the middle of Times Square, with all those people in costumes, literally none of them will look like that."

"Ehe! New York? A nation in your world, I presume?"

"Well, kinda... not really. America is the 'nation,' but New York is a state." Oliver winced. "You probably don't know what a state is."

"Nope," Venti said, shaking his head. "Is it a city within the nation?"

"Kinda, but..." Oliver couldn't find a way to word it. He gave up.

Venti wasn't easily deterred. "Alright, but what about all this snow? Not mundane to me!" He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Well, perhaps it is. It's certainly no Dragonspine. Much less... jagged."

Oliver shrugged. "Greenland's pretty flat, from what I know. If you really want to compare Dragonspine to something on Earth, your best bet is Mount Everest."

"Ooooh? Is it a massive mountain too? Is it close by?" Venti asked eagerly.

Oliver chuckled. "Oh, no. It's not in Greenland. It's in a completely different country, almost the other side of the world. And it's the biggest mountain here."

"Very intriguing!" Venti beamed. "I have so many questions about your world, ehe! But I suppose I should save them for when we're both comfortable. Let's get this mission over with."

Oliver sighed and ran a hand down his face. "Who knows how long that'll take. And once it's all settled, we still have to figure out ourselves. Like, where the hell are we even going to go? August said we'd cross that bridge when we got to it, but the bridge keeps getting closer, and it's not lowering."

They finally came upon a path. A metal path, lined on both sides with what looked like streetlights, running straight through the blizzard toward an enormous building. It was bigger than the power plant, with the same metallic color scheme and multiple stories. The headquarters. The main building of the entire facility. And just like the power plant, it didn't look like a normal building.

"Woah, look at that," Oliver said, pointing at the structure towering over them. "What I don't get is how the people up in the ISS don't see this place. Or any satellite camera. Can they even see it? It's huge! And it's built against pure white, surely someone would notice." He put a hand to his chin. "Do planes even fly over Greenland?"

Venti tapped Oliver's shoulder and strode ahead. "Let's head inside and find that office."

Oliver gulped and trailed behind. "You think we'll run into more people? So far it's only been that one Fatui guy and Funtime Foxy."

Venti giggled as the name finally registered. "Heheheahaha! Funtime, you called it? More like Badtime Foxy. That wasn't a fun moment."

Oliver snorted. "No. No, it wasn't."

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Stepping through the heavy automated doors of the main building, they found themselves standing in a cavernous, dimly lit lobby.

"It's going to take forever just to search this place, isn't it?" Oliver muttered, his eyes darting across the desolate room.

Unlike the pitch-black corridors of the power plant, the lobby had emergency backup lighting pulsing faintly along the walls, making it eerie but navigable. A massive, polished reception desk sat dead ahead, completely abandoned.

"Am I free to damage anything?" Venti asked quietly, standing at Oliver's side. Neither of them had moved from the door.

Oliver blinked, caught off guard. "Damage things? What for?"

Venti looked back at the door they'd just come through. "Well, at least the keycard worked on this one, so I didn't have to blow it off its hinges like the last. Mark warned us not to break anything in the power plant, but we're not in the power plant anymore." He turned back to Oliver. "So, am I free to break things if I need to?"

Oliver nodded, understanding now. "I assume so? We're nowhere near the core, so there's no risk of breaking something important. Are you worried we'll get locked out of somewhere?"

Venti's expression tightened into a subtle scowl. He didn't answer immediately.

Oliver noticed the sudden shift in his boyfriend's demeanor, a cold knot forming in his stomach. He stepped closer, dropping his voice. "Venti? What's wrong?"

"I... I just have a very bad feeling," the bard murmured, his hands dropping to his sides as his bow materialized in a flash of teal light. His eyes darted restlessly across the shadows of the lobby. "I sense a strange energy. An energy that feels far too familiar."

Oliver gently reached out, resting a hand on Venti's arm. "Ven? What are you talking about?"
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Venti took a slow, deep breath, trying to steady himself. "Let's keep moving," he urged, taking a decisive step forward. "If there's one thing I learned from wandering around that cursed Silent Hill place, it's that standing still gets you killed. Come on."

There was a massive hallway branching off to the left of the reception desk, while the right side opened up into a sprawling, wrecked waiting area. Dozens of office chairs were scattered haphazardly across the floor—some standing upright, others flipped completely upside down or smashed to pieces.

"Uh... babe, shouldn't we check the lobby out more thoroughly?" Oliver asked, but Venti was already pressing toward the left hallway, his knuckles whitening around his bow.

Oliver blinked. He took one more glance at the wreckage of chairs, then walked up beside the bard and laced his fingers into Venti's. "Venti, what's the matter? I know you. You're not one to suddenly get this serious and quiet." He paused. "Not unless something is really, really wrong."

Even on edge, Venti still acknowledged him, squeezing back as he looked up. "Ollie, I just sense something, that's all." His gaze slid down the hallway. "And what I feel... is familiar."

Oliver tilted his head. "Familiar?" He looked down, racking his brain. The only thing that came to mind was the Fatui. "The Fatui, maybe? That could be what you're sensing. They're probably all over the main building, to be honest. It could be where Barclay stationed most of them, especially since the main terminal is here, like we learned."

Venti narrowed his eyes. "Come on." He suddenly marched forward, yanking Oliver along with him.

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Navigating the massive building felt less like walking through an office complex and more like wandering through a shifting, architectural hallucination.

"This is literally a reverse-Tardis situation," Oliver grumbled as they trudged down yet another empty corridor. "From the outside, this place looked the size of an airport terminal. How are we constantly hitting dead ends?"

"Perhaps there are hidden passages?" Venti suggested, scanning the paneled walls.

"Hidden passages? All we've found are identical meeting rooms!" Oliver sighed in frustration. "Venti, we've walked in circles for twenty minutes. I'm pretty sure we just looped right back to the lobby!"

Which was entirely true. No matter which door they tried, or which hallway they took, they inevitably found themselves spat back out into the wreckage of the front waiting area.

Venti crossed his arms, staring down the corridor behind them. "It seems there is some sort of spell cast over the building pt something."

Oliver pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just great. Just what we needed. How many annoying magical tricks did this damn scientist have?"

"I still sense something," Venti said softly, turning his head to look back down the hallway they had just traversed.

"You seriously want to retrace our steps again?"

"Every time we loop back around, the sensation grows stronger," the bard insisted. "So yes. But do not worry, my love. I told you I won't let anything touch you."
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Oliver let out an exhausted sigh and followed. The hallway lights flickered erratically, casting long, dancing shadows. "I can't wait to get back outside into a normal, freezing blizzard."

"Don't worry, we will," Venti reassured him.

As they rounded a sharp corner they hadn't noticed before, the gloomy corridor finally ended. There were no more doors. There was only an elevator shaft embedded flush against the back wall.

"Ah! See? What did I tell you?" Venti brightened up slightly, though his serious edge didn't entirely vanish. "The energy is practically vibrating right here."

Oliver squinted as he stepped up to the metal doors, watching the indicator light glowing above the frame. "Is the building literally rearranging itself around us? Because I swear that elevator wasn't there a minute ago when he walked all along here. How did we not see that?"

Venti walked right up to the call panel and looked at the button. "This is a lift, right?" He placed his hands on his hips, eyeing the single button. "Hm... rather different from the one at Wangshu Inn."

Oliver glanced down at him, a tired smirk breaking through his stress. "You mean the rickety deathtrap supported entirely by hopes, dreams, and a single wooden plank?"

Venti dropped his tense expression, letting out a bright, airy giggle. "Haha... what? What does that even mean?"

"The elevator that's literally supported by just a plank of wood." Oliver shook his head, and stepped closer to the panel.

"What are you talking about?" Venti snorted.

Oliver rubbed his chin. The up button was broken, so he pressed down. The elevator dinged, and the doors swung open.

"Huh. Seems like it was already here," Oliver said.

The two of them stepped inside together. Oliver looked down at the button panel once he turned around. There weren't multiple floor numbers, nor was there an option to go up—the up arrow was physically smashed in. There was only one solitary button, glowing with a dull, sickly amber light.

Embossed neatly beside the button were the words: Barclay's Storage.

Oliver blinked. "Storage?" His finger hovered uncertainly over the plastic square before he looked over at Venti.

The bard shrugged. "If that's the only button, it's not like we have other options."

"You've got a point." Oliver pressed the button.

A heavy, mechanical clunk echoed through the shaft, and the elevator doors sluggishly groaned as they slid shut, sealing them inside the cramped metal box.

As the doors met in the middle, Oliver's eyes caught a fleeting movement through the closing gap. Standing in the empty hallway just a few yards away was a tall silhouette, silently watching them.

Before he could shout to Venti, the metal doors locked tight with a final, echoing thud.

Oliver's heart hammered against his ribs. He slowly turned his gaze down to Venti.

The bard remained remarkably calm, though his eyes were sharp. He reached out, taking Oliver's trembling hands in his own. "The energy felt intensely concentrated around that figure," Venti said softly. "But I promise you, I will not let them harm us."

With a violent shudder, the elevator cables groaned, and the box began to descend.

Oliver stared down at Venti, wide-eyed. "Venti... what the hell was that?" he stammered, fighting down a wave of panic. "Please tell me that wasn't Nerraw."

"It was not," Venti replied firmly, shaking his head.

Oliver let out a shaky, hyperventilating breath. Part of him was immensely relieved; dealing with Nerraw again after Mark had told them what happened to them, sounded like an absolute nightmare. If the entity was truly unkillable, it meant all their efforts were futile. So hearing Venti rule it out brought a sliver of comfort, but the heavy, suffocating dread in the air hadn't dissipated an inch.

Sensing his boyfriend's spiraling anxiety, Venti dropped Oliver's hands, wrapped his arms securely around Oliver's waist, and pulled him flush against his side.

"I know I seem unsettled, but you are not in danger," Venti whispered soothingly. He rose up onto his tiptoes, pressing a tender, lingering kiss to Oliver's cheek before settling back down. "You're safe with me, okay?"

The kiss worked like magic, immediately slowing Oliver's racing pulse. He leaned his head against Venti's shoulder, a small, grateful smile tugging at his lips. "Okay... I guess I'll take your word for it."

Venti beamed, rubbing his cheek affectionately against Oliver. "Remember when we rode that elevator in Fontaine, and you made me have that terribly loud laughing fit?"

Oliver stared blankly at the metal wall of the elevator as his brain furiously rewound through memories. It took a second, but then the recollection hit him like a freight train—an embarrassing, cringeworthy moment from weeks ago when they had first crossed paths. "Ugh... please don't remind me."

"Pffft—hahaha!" Venti snorted, desperately trying to muffle his giggles behind his hand.

Oliver cringed inward, wishing the elevator floor would open up and swallow him whole. "I'm just remembering how utterly awkward I was when I was in the avatar... Oh god, I made such a complete idiot of myself."

"You are still quite silly, you know," Venti teased gently.

Oliver rolled his eyes, staring fixedly at the closed doors.

A few moments later, the downward pull began to ease. The grinding screech of the cables softened, and the elevator gradually lost momentum.

"Oh..." Oliver blinked.

"I suppose we have reached our stop?" Venti murmured.

There was no automated voice announcing the floor, no cheerful chime. Just a heavy, definitive thump as the car locked into place. For a few agonizing seconds, the doors didn't move.

Venti's bow materialized back into his grip in a flash of wind and light.

Oliver instinctively tensed, summoning his heavy diamond sword, the frosty blade casting a pale blue glow inside the tiny car.

With a sudden hiss, the elevator doors finally parted.

A blinding, overwhelmingly harsh wave of yellow light flooded the elevator car, searing directly into their retinas.

"Gah—!" Oliver hissed, squeezing his eyes shut and violently flinching away from the glare. He raised a hand to shield his face, shaking his head. "Ugh, what is that? Are we back in a lab or something?"

He cracked one eye open, waiting for his vision to adjust, but as the details of the room came into focus, his breath hitched. His jaw dropped slack, and his heart felt like it had completely stopped beating.

Venti, completely oblivious to the cultural phenomenon of internet horror, blinked innocently against the glare. He let his bow dematerialize for a moment, stepping right out of the elevator car. His boots crunched softly over a layer of damp, stained yellow carpet.

"My word, what a strangly bright place," Venti looked around at his surroundings. "Are those lights? Huh. Not even the lights in Fontaine are this bright,"

"V-Venti!" Oliver hissed in sheer terror. He was still standing frozen on the threshold between the elevator and the surreal, infinite expanse. He lunged forward, desperately grabbing the back of Venti's cape to yank him backward. "V-Venti, get back in here! Right now!"

Venti didn't budge an inch. He turned his head back, looking utterly perplexed. "You know, a place like this must consume an astronomical amount of power. Is all the facility's diverted energy funneling into this?"

"VENTI!" Oliver screamed, his voice cracking with pure, unfiltered panic.

The bard finally jolted, startled by the sheer volume of his boyfriend's voice. He spun around. "Ollie? What is—what's wrong?" He let out a soft sigh, tilting his head. "Now I'm the one asking what's wrong. Though, I suppose you aren't obligated to tell me, considering I haven't fully explained my own worries either." He slouched his shoulders dramatically, letting his arms dangle at his sides.

"It's not that! It's—!" Oliver suddenly grabbed Venti and pulled him back in. Oliver whipped around, frantically slamming his fist against the elevator's call panel. "Close! Close the damn doors!" But nothing happened. The amber button remained lit, and the doors stayed wide open. "What?! Why won't it close?!" He banged his palm against the metal casing again. "Come on, *close!"*

Venti stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"The elevator is broken!" Oliver yelled, abandoning the panel in despair. He looked out from the doorway, taking in the endless, buzzing, monochromatic nightmare stretching out before them. Infinite rooms. Monotonous, mold-smelling wallpaper in varying shades of nauseating mustard yellow. The rhythmic, maddening hum of fluorescent lights overhead....

"Venti... this... I—" He pointed a shaking finger out into the yellow rooms. "Venti, I am not. Going. Into. The. Back. Fucking. ROOMS!" he screamed, aggressively gesturing to the liminal expanse. "I am not even joking right now! Liminal spaces make me genuinely, physically sick. I hate it here!"

Venti stood entirely still, blinking slowly at the meltdown his boyfriend was having.

Oliver opened his mouth to rant further, then abruptly snapped it shut. Right. Venti was an ancient fantasy entity from a medieval-ish anime world. The bard had zero concept of creepypastas, internet lore, or what

"The Backrooms" even meant. He probably didn't even know what the phrase "liminal space" implied.

To Venti, it probably just looked like a very aggressively decorated, brightly lit basement storage unit.

Oliver realized he was probably looking like a complete lunatic, but he didn't care. The Backrooms were the undisputed bane of his existence after countless late-night YouTube horror marathons.

Swallowing hard against the rising panic in his throat, Oliver forced himself to take a shaky breath. "As long as... as long as this is just this level ... it shouldn't be too horrific," he rationalized aloud, trying to calm his racing nerves. "And... let's just pray that the stick man thing ain't here..."

Venti offered a reassuring, albeit completely clueless, smile. "Whatever all of those strange words mean, my love... just trust me." He stepped back toward the threshold, reaching out to lace his fingers with Oliver's. "As I've been saying all along: I'll protect you."

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They stepped out of the broken elevator and crept into the sickly yellow corridors, the maddening, high-pitched hum of the overhead fluorescent lights vibrating right through their head. Oliver was practically vibrating with nervous energy. Every tiny creak around them, every rhythmic flick of the lighting made him flinch. It was an entirely different kind of dread. He hadn't felt this suffocating, psychological terror in the dark server rooms, or in the world of SOMA, or even in the world of Silent Hill, or even facing down Nerraw.

"Oh god, I'm so embarrassed," Oliver groaned, covering his face with both hands.

Venti blinked, glancing up at him. "Huh? What for?"

"You don't even know what this place is. All you see is just some blindingly bright, ugly maze, and you literally just watched me about to bust my balls," Oliver grumbled through his fingers.

Venti opened his mouth to offer a reassuring word, but hearing Oliver casually use the phrase 'burst my balls' made the bard lose his composure entirely. A sudden, sharp snort exploded out of him—"GeRK!"—and he instantly slapped both hands over his mouth to muffle a fit of giggles.

Oliver sighed heavily, dropping his hands. "Okay, yeah, I brought that one on myself,"

Venti giggled softly, his braids swaying. "Yes, you absolutely did," he teased, a warm, gentle smile breaking across his lips. "But please, do not feel embarrassed for being frightened. Honestly, I would be questioning your sanity if you weren't scared at this point! We have faced so many horrific things today. And as for me... ha! I think I have witnessed more bizarre, terrifying madness in the last twelve hours than I have in my entire two thousand years as an Archon, haha... and that is truly saying something."

Oliver managed a weak smile. Put into perspective like that, the sheer absurdity of their day was staggering. "I just want this to be over. I've had more than enough of the multiverse for a lifetime," he murmured, rubbing his arms against the damp, heavy chill of the air.

"So... how vast do you suppose this place actually is?" Venti asked, scanning the identical paneled walls branching off into infinite intersections.

"Venti, I honestly have no idea. I don't even understand how Doctor Barclay pulled this off in the first place. How did he hook The Backrooms into his facility? Just how many fictional dimensions has he hoarded?" Oliver's mind raced as he looked at the rotting wallpaper. "The Backrooms are supposed to be endless... I wonder if Claire even knows this is down here."

As they trudged deeper through the yellow labyrinth, the atmosphere violently shifted.
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Without warning, every single fluorescent tube overhead snapped off at once.

Total, suffocating darkness engulfed the corridor.

"That's not good..." Oliver stammered. He blindly grabbed for Venti.

"Don't panic, I'm right here, babe," Venti whispered instantly. The bard's warm hand clamped firmly around Oliver's forearm, grounding him. "Why did the power drop?"

"Venti, I don't know," Oliver muttered back, his heart hammering against his ribs.

A moment later, a sharp click-buzz echoed down the hall.

A tiny fraction of the lights flickered back on—not all of them, just a sparse, erratic scatter of overhead tubes every fifty feet. They cast isolated, sickly yellow pools of light across the damp carpet, leaving massive, yawning patches of pitch-black in between.

"Okay... do we keep going?" Venti whispered into the gloom.

Oliver swallowed hard. What other choice did they have? Stay here and wait for whatever roamed the dark? "Yeah. We keep going."

They moved cautiously, stepping from one spot of flickering light to the next, navigating tight corners and wide, unsettling spaces. As they rounded a sharp bend, Oliver spotted a narrow doorway set directly into the wall. It had no door, but mounted above the frame was a small, dusty plastic sign.

TRASH

Oliver blinked. "Trash?"

Just as they stopped in front of it, the overhead bulb inside the small room flickered, buzz-hummed, and flared fully to life.

Venti gestured toward the opening. "Let's check in there."

Oliver nodded. "Okay."

The room was cramped, stacked high with dusty cardboard boxes and crates that had been ripped open. It looked like a dumping ground for random salvage from a dozen different realities. Most of it was useless junk, but as Venti leaned over one of the crates, his eyes widened.

"Huh?" Venti blinked. "Are those... weapons? Guns?"

Oliver stepped up beside him, his eyes dropping to the crate. Heavy, metallic shapes rested inside. For a split second, a surge of survival instinct urged him to grab one.

Then he shook his head. He had his diamond sword—a blade he could summon at will, infused with biting Cryo magic. A standard firearm was child's play compared to that kind of elemental power.

"Do you... want to take one of these?" Venti asked, looking up at him thoughtfully. "As a secondary weapon?" The bard reached down, picking up a heavy, strangely designed pistol, and held it out for Oliver to inspect.

"Eh, no," Oliver shook his head, turning his gaze away. "I don't really need one. I've got my sword—I don't—" He stopped mid-sentence. His eyes snapped back to the weapon resting in Venti's hands,

squinting as his brain finally registered the distinct, iconic shape of the modified DL-44 heavy blaster pistol.

"Oh, you don't want it?" Venti asked, starting to lower it back into the crate. "Oh! Right, you have your own magic weapon now! Ehe! I suppose a frost sword is far more impressive than whatever a firearm can do, assuming one is skilled with it of course—"

Before Venti could drop it back into the pile, Oliver practically lunged forward and snatched it out of his hands.

"Eh?!" Venti blinked in surprise, taking a quick step back. "I thought you said you didn't want—"

Oliver didn't answer. He spun around, gripped the grip with both hands, aimed the blaster at a blank section of the rotting yellow wallpaper, and pulled the trigger.

PEW!

A brilliant, searing red bolt of plasma shot from the barrel, striking the wall with a sharp zap and leaving a black, smoking burn mark right through the plaster.

Oliver lowered the weapon, his jaw slightly slack as he slowly turned back to Venti. "I am not passing up on a real, working Han Solo blaster."

Venti stared at him, a warm, amused smile melting onto his face. He obviously had zero clue who "Han Solo" was, but the sheer, unadulterated joy radiating off his boyfriend was unmistakable. "Ehe, I thought you just said you didn't want a gun?"

"This isn't a gun! It's a blaster! From *Star Wars!"* Oliver gasped, admiring the heavy metallic weight in his hands. He looked back at the smoking hole in the wall, a sudden, terrifying realization clicking into place. "Okay... Doctor Barclay hasn't just been extracting people. He's been stealing artifacts from everywhere. Now I finally get why this elevator led to a 'Storage Room'." He looked up at Venti, his eyes wide. "Babe... the Backrooms are endless. That's why he put his storage vault down here. He literally built an infinite warehouse!"

"Unlimited space, huh..." Venti mused softly, stepping out of the small trash room. Oliver followed right behind him, tucking the blaster securely into his waistband next to his two-way radio.

"Well, it's supposed to be infinite," Oliver said as they stepped back into the flickering corridor. "I just have no idea if this specific one he took has an end—"

They both froze dead in their tracks.

Standing fifty yards down the hall, marching in a tight, rigid formation directly toward them, were three figures clad head-to-toe in gleaming, stark-white armor, complete with full-face helmets featuring wide, dark, bulbous eye lenses.

Venti arched a single, confused eyebrow.

Oliver's mouth went slack for the second time in two minutes. *'This day physically cannot get any weirder,'* he thought to himself.

The three Stormtroopers came to a sudden halt the moment they caught sight of the duo.

"Halt!" the lead trooper bellowed, his voice synthesized through his helmet speaker as he instantly raised his E-11 blaster rifle. The two troopers behind him snapped their weapons up in unison. "No unauthorized personnel are permitted are in this sector! Barclay's orders, and his assistant!"

"State your business," the second trooper demanded, slowly closing the distance with their rifles trained on the Archon and the human. "Do you work for the Doctor? Show your clearance keycard!"

Oliver and Venti exchanged a quick, bewildered glance.

"Show us your card!" the lead trooper barked again, coming to a stop a few paces away.

Oliver reached into his pocket and pulled out the security keycard Claire had given them. The lead Stormtrooper violently snatched it out of his hand, holding it up to his helmet visor to inspect the chip.

While the troopers were momentarily distracted reading the card, Oliver leaned in close to Venti's ear, whispering barely above a breath. "Babe, these guys are called Stormtroopers. Let them finally live up to their name, huh?"

Venti blinked, but he caught the mischievous glint in Oliver's eyes. The bard offered a sharp, confident smirk and nodded.

The trooper stared at the card, then slowly raised his head to glare at Oliver. "What is this, a joke?" He slammed the card onto the floor, stamping his boot on it, and re-aimed his rifle straight at Oliver's chest. "Unless you underwent a transition and also changed your entire skin tone, you are not this woman on the card! Blast 'em, fellas!"

Before a single laser could fly, Venti thrust both hands forward.

A concussive, howling tempest of Anemo magic erupted from the bard's palms, roaring down the narrow yellow corridor like a hurricane. The sheer wind pressure hit the three Stormtroopers like a solid wall, tearing them off their feet and slamming them violently into the far plaster. Their heavy white helmets popped clean off their heads, clattering noisy across the damp carpet.

For safe measure, Oliver whipped his newly acquired Han Solo blaster from his waist and fired three rapid shots—*PEW! PEW! PEW!*—striking each of the downed troopers squarely in their armor chest plates, neutralizing them instantly.

Oliver lowered his arm, breathing heavily as he stared at the unconscious men. "Okay... this is officially the unhinged peak of my entire life. I just killed Stormtroopers in the Backrooms using a Star Wars blaster while standing next to a Genshin Impact god... You know what, I'm not even gonna process it." He tightened his grip on the handle.

"Well, at least they were dealt with swiftly!" Venti smiled brightly, dusting off his hands.

But the bard celebrated a second too early.

From the intersecting corridors and dark corners of the maze behind them, the heavy, footsteps clatter of dozens of armored boots echoed through the walls. Suddenly, a wave of Stormtroopers came pouring around the corners, taking up tactical positions along the walls and crouching behind structural pillars, leveling a wall of blaster rifles directly at the duo.

"We have you surrounded!" one shouted.

"Drop your weapons and surrender immediately!" another ordered.

"V-Venti... get your wind ready again," Oliver hissed under his breath, stepping shoulder-to-shoulder with his boyfriend.

Venti nodded, his eyes sharp. "And summon your sword. Let's hit them with an explosive blizzard Swirl!"

Oliver nodded firmly, mentally reaching for his Cryo magic. But as he glanced over his shoulder, his blood ran cold. Another squad had flanked them from behind. There had to be at least fifteen or twenty armored troopers clogging the narrow halls, all with blasters aimed squarely at their chests and backs. One stray bolt could be fatal.

Before either of them could launch their attack, something completely bizarre happened.

Without a sound, one of the Stormtroopers on the far left suddenly collapsed. A strange, crackling spark tore through his chest armor, and he crumpled lifelessly to the floor.

"What the—?!" the trooper next to him gasped, turning his head—only for a similar, translucent needle of energy to punch through his helmet, dropping him instant.

One by one, in rapid, silent succession, the surrounding troopers began dropping like flies, their bodies hitting the carpet with heavy thuds.

This wasn't right, and it was frankly alarming. Both Venti and Oliver suddenly went on edge seeing multiple of the stormtroopers drop on the ground.

This wasn't an attack from Oliver or Venti. It was something else—something precise, cruel, and terrifyingly efficient. Both Venti and Oliver immediately dropped their offensive stances, backing into each other's space as a wave of intense, suffocating pressure filled the corridor.

"W-What is going on?!" Oliver gasped, his eyes darting frantically across the pile of unconscious or dead guards.

Venti looked around, his breath hitching. That lingering, familiar energy he had felt all through the main building... it hadn't just flared. It had materialized right in front of them. The bard's knuckles turned white. He knew who this was.

Slowly, deliberately, the rhythmic sound of soft, leather boots echoed from the dark hallway ahead.

A figure emerged from the flickering light. He wore a long, immaculate white coat that resembled a high-tech lab coat mixed with fantasy robes. His pale, icy-blue hair framed a smooth, calculating face, half-hidden by a dark, avian mask covering his eyes.

"How very interesting," the man spoke. His voice was deep, smooth, and chillingly collected, echoing through the yellow halls with terrifying authority. "The Anemo Archon himself... has come to this world,"

Venti's breath caught in his throat. Pure, unadulterated venom flashed across the bard's face, his eyes narrowing into slits as an ancient, burning rage ignited within his soul. In a flash of emerald light, his bow materialized, drawn taut and aimed dead center at the man's chest.

"Dottore..." Venti spat, his voice dropping an octave, heavy with hatred.

A faint, mocking smirk touched the Doctor's lips.

Oliver gasped, his head snapping back and forth between the icy Fatui Harbinger and his visibly trembling boyfriend. The Doctor?! Here?!

Dottore casually stepped over the fallen Stormtroopers, raising a gloved hand. "I have learned so much since entering this strange, magnificent facility. I have acquired... new perspectives." He gestured lazily, and without touching the body, one of the dead troopers levitated several feet into the air, suspended by invisible, translucent tendrils of force.

"Huh?!" Oliver blinked, taking an instinctual step back. "You—you don't have magic like that! How are you doing that?!"

The scientist turned slightly toward Oliver, his dark mask reflecting the flickering overhead lights. "Power is such a fascinating, malleable concept. In our old world, I never cared for it. Visions are crude, primitive tools—unsuited for a mind of true intellect." He glanced up at the rotting ceiling. "But this realm... the world beyond Doctor Barclay's laboratory... is entirely free of divine oversight. There are no Archons watching. No Visions. No Celestia dictating fate. The mortals here construct their own fragile rules, then destroy each other over them. It is breathtakingly pure."

Dottore closed his hand into a fist, crushing the suspended trooper's armor like an aluminum can before letting the body crash back to the carpet.

"Free of Celestial strings," Dottore continued softly, inspecting his own gloved fingers. "Doctor Barclay commanded me to guard this facility's infrastructure. In exchange, he granted me access to technologies beyond human comprehension—and augmented my form with powers drawn from unknown sub-worlds. He promised to return me to Teyvat once his grand design was complete... Imagine what I can accomplish back home with the knowledge I have extracted here."

He finally looked back at Venti, entirely unfazed by the glowing Anemo arrow aimed directly at his throat. "Doctor Barclay educated me quite thoroughly on the nature of these sub-dimensions. I take it you are an anomaly from a different timeline, yes? You must be... considering I personally put an end to your life in mine."

A violent spike of protective rage surged through Oliver's veins. He summoned his frost-coated diamond sword with a sharp crack of air, stepping in front of Venti—but before he could lunge, Venti made a sharp, soft sound.

"Nuh-uh. You stay right behind me, honey," Venti commanded gently, his voice surprisingly steady despite his trembling hands. He lowered his bow just a fraction, keeping his eyes locked on the Harbinger. "You know... Dottore, I actually agree with you."

Dottore tilted his head, genuine amusement flickering across his face. "I beg your pardon?"

Oliver narrowed his eyes, confused, but stayed put.

Venti took a slow, steady breath. "I have always asked my people: What does freedom truly mean, when demanded of you by a god? Freedom, if it is commanded by an authority, is no real freedom at all."

Dottore interlaced his fingers before his chest. "Fascinating. I find it difficult to believe those words could ever come from the mouth of an Archon."

Venti let out a sharp, bitter sigh. "I never liked Celestia myself. I understood your frustration with them, Dottore. But I could never support you, because to fight them, you chose to torture innocent children and murder mortals for your sick experiments. That is where any shred of understanding dies."

Dottore let out a single, dry chuckle. "Ha. Love for humanity... a pathetic, hardcoded directive forced upon all Archons by Celestia."

"That is a lie," Venti declared, his voice ringing with absolute certainty. "I learned what love was long before I ever had ascended to godhood—back when I was nothing more than a tiny wisp of wind in the air. My best friend showed me what true love and sacrifice meant. And that is something a hollow monster like you will never, ever experience."

Dottore's smirk vanished, his expression turning cold and clinical. "It seems my alternate self, or perhaps Signora, failed to execute you cleanly in your reality. Allow me to rectify their failure now."

Venti didn't hesitate. He snapped his fingers.

THOOM!

A blinding, violent bolt of jagged, golden-white lightning burst straight through the ceiling of the Backrooms, striking Dottore squarely on the top of his head.

The concussive blast rattled the entire hallway—but as the smoke cleared, the golden electricity didn't consume the scientist. Instead, the divine bolt violently ricocheted off Dottore's skin. Wild, branching arcs of lightning blasted outward in all directions, frying the yellow wallpaper into black ash, tearing through the plaster walls—and one thick, rogue branch of golden energy slammed violently into Oliver's chest.

Oliver was lifted off his feet, thrown backward through the air, and slammed hard against the far wall before crumpling to the floor, motionless.

Venti's heart stopped. The world went dead silent. He couldn't turn around. He couldn't force his eyes to look down at the ground behind him.

The Bolt of Judgment. The divine, forbidden strike meant for mortals... it had ricocheted off an immortal target, exactly as he had warned Oliver earlier.

"Ah," Dottore mused, a cruel, mocking smile spreading across his face. "The Bolt of Retribution, was it? My apologies, Barbatos. Doctor Barclay rendered my body entirely immune to the elemental laws and divine magic of our homeland as part of our bargain. He swore he was a man of his word, guaranteeing no Archon or Vision-holder could ever harm me while I served him."

Venti's mind was a chaotic, screaming void of panic. He forced himself to move. Glancing down at Oliver's unmoving, charred body on the carpet, his eyes caught the Han Solo blaster lying near Oliver's limp hand.

In a flash of desperate movement, Venti snatched the blaster off the floor, leveled it with both hands, and pulled the trigger. "Immortal to my world's powers, but not to anything else I'd assume,"

PEW!

Dottore simply raised a gloved hand.

The brilliant red plasma bolt froze dead in mid-air three feet from his face, suspended in a shimmering, translucent distortion field. The Harbinger casually inspected the glowing projectile before closing his fist. The plasma withered away into nothingness.

Venti's breath hitched, terror clutching his chest.

"You truly believed you could defeat me, Anemo Archon?" Dottore sneered, taking a slow, terrifying step forward. "I slaughtered you in my realm. I will take great pleasure in doing it again."

Venti fired another shot. Dottore froze it effortlessly.

Venti backed up, his shoes slipping on the carpet as the scientist closed the distance. He fired a third time—Dottore stopped it again, then flicked his wrist. A kinetic shockwave slammed into Venti, knocking the blaster clean out of his hands—"GAH!"

The weapon clattered against the wall.

Fate, however, had one final, chaotic card to play.

The sudden impact against the plaster caused the unstable, trigger mechanism of the blaster to misfire. A single, wild red plasma bolt shot out from the blaster at an erratic angle, and then hit straight through the scientist's chest.

"AHHHH!" Dottore shrieked in sudden, agonizing shock.

He clutched his upper body, staggering backward as his hands came away from his chest. In the center of his chest, a smoking, tiny-sized hole pierced cleanly through his torso, offering a clear view of the yellow hallway behind him. The plasma bolt had completely disintegrated his internal organs.

The Doctor let out a wet, rattling gasp, his eyes wide with disbelief, before collapsing face-first onto the damp carpet, dead.

Venti stood frozen, his fists clenched tight at his sides, his chest heaving. "I should have killed you when I had the chance back in my own sub world," he whispered, his voice trembling.

He spun around, dropping to his knees beside Oliver.

Oliver lay flat on his back, his shirt scorched and torn, his skin covered in severe electrical burns, completely motionless.

Tears instantly flooded Venti's eyes, pouring down his cheeks. But deep within his soul, a desperate, stubborn spark ignited. He needed absolute, unwavering concentration. Without it, he wouldn't be able to pull this off.

The Archon hovered his hands over Oliver's burnt chest and closed his eyes.

He dug deep into the ancient core of his divinity. In a burst of emerald light, his mortal bard attire vanished, replaced instantly by his true Archon form—the flowing white robes, the glowing, feathered wings extending proudly from his back, his teal braids illuminating the dim corridor with intense, radiant light.

Venti pulsed his divine energy outward, closing his eyes tight and frantically visualizing the towering Anemo Statue of the Seven from Windrise.

Come on... Mark said these worlds are leaking into each other... come on, come on, come on! I should be able to use this!

A sudden, sharp gale howled through the narrow halls of the Backrooms. The flickering fluorescent lights buzzed violently, matching the rhythmic pulse of Venti's heartbeat. In his mind's eye, the moon in the statue's hands flared with bright emerald light.

He pushed with everything he had, pouring his very life force into the magic. The wind whipped through his hair, tearing at the yellow wallpaper—

And then, the connection to his world snapped.

The mental image of the statue shattered into dust. The howling wind instantly died. The erratic flickering of the lights settled back into a dull hum.

Venti slumped forward, completely spent, his divine robes fading back into his green mortal clothes.

He thought it hadn't worked. He thought he had failed.

Venti couldn't bring himself to open his eyes. He buried his face against Oliver's chest, his fingers clutching tightly at the charred fabric of his boyfriend's shirt, sobs wracking his small frame.

And then, a sharp, ragged cough cut through the silence.

"Cough! Hack!"

Venti's eyes flew open.

Oliver groaned softly, his eyelids fluttering as his head rolled to the side. "Ahhh... what the hell hit me...?"

A gasping sob of pure relief escaped Venti's throat. "Oliver!" Tears streaming freely down his face, he scooped Oliver up, pulling him into a tight, desperate embrace, burying his face in Oliver's neck.

Oliver blinked, confused, weakly wrapping an arm around the bard. "Venti? What... what happened? Where's Dottore? Wasn't he just standing right—?" Oliver looked over Venti's trembling shoulder and spotted Dottore's corpse lying motionless on the floor with a hole through his chest. "Oh. You did that?"

Venti sniffed loudly, wiping his nose with his sleeve as he pulled back. "No. His own profound incompetence and arrogance in this world did."

"Incompetence? But he's a genius. Evil, but brilliant," Oliver noted, trying to sit up.

"Well, he was exceptionally stupid just now," Venti muttered, resolutely looking away. He couldn't bring himself to tell Oliver that his own magic had almost killed him. It was too much to bear.

Oliver frowned, noticing the wet tracks on the bard's cheeks. "Venti? You're crying. What actually happened?"

"Nothing!" Venti insisted quickly, aggressively wiping his eyes.

"Babe," Oliver said sternly, taking Venti by the shoulders. "Don't lie to me. Do not try to 'Venti' your way out of this."

Venti sniffed again, letting out a weak, watery chuckle. "I am being honest... really. Dottore just said some... deeply cruel things, and tried to attack me. I am okay! It just shook me up a bit... Hey! Don't give me that look! I may be an Archon, but I still have feelings, you know. Words can still hurt." Venti leaned forward, pressing a series of soft, desperate kisses against Oliver's cheeks.

Oliver blinked, still feeling a bit dazed, before looking down at himself. "Uh... why is my shirt completely scorched and shredded?"

Venti silently swallowed the massive lump of guilt in his throat, offering a sheepish, guilty smile. "Uh... well, I don't know! But the good news is, it's just your shirt, and definitely not your pants!"

Chapter 52: The More It Remembers... The Less It Does...

The corridors of the Backrooms stretched on indefinitely—or, at least, they were supposed to. But as Oliver quickly learned, the Backroom's logic had long since abandoned this place. Instead of an infinite, identical maze, the space began to warp, constricting into tight, claustrophobic pathways flanked by empty, sterile little rooms. It did not look like what Oliver thought it would at first

Oliver came to an abrupt halt, his hand shooting out to grab Venti's wrist and yank him back.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Venti gasped, stumbling backward before peering around Oliver's shoulder.

Just ahead, the hallway pinched into a sharp, blind 90-degree left turn. It was impossible to see what was waiting around the corner without physically squeezing through.

"Venti, please," Oliver pleaded, his voice laced with genuine anxiety. "I'm going to say this again: this is The Backrooms. The lore I read online says there are things that live down here. I know you could probably obliterate them, but can we please not just blindly run into danger?"

Venti softened, his grip tightening reassuringly around Oliver's hand. "Fine, fine. Though I still don't quite understand what has you so terrified," he murmured. "Besides, that dark, sickening energy I was sensing was entirely Dottore, and he's dead now. So no more bad vibes pressing on my chest!"

"Yes, I know, and I'm glad he's gone," Oliver muttered, staring uncomfortably at the narrow bend. "But we're still deep in liminal space territory. You have to watch where you step—drop-offs could literally be anywhere."

Venti blinked, peering into the narrow opening. "Drop-offs?" He stepped closer to the tight seam where the wall seemed to end in a sharp drop of shadow. He hesitated, pondering Oliver's warning. "I see. Well, that would certainly be unfortunate. I wouldn't want you falling into a bottomless pit..."

"Venti, be careful!"

"Don't worry, this feels quite tame compared to—what was that terrifying thing called from the world where you got your sword?" Venti glanced back with a grin.

Oliver was very close to Venti, to make sure he'll be okay, even though he was sure he would be. "Oh! You mean the Warden? Uh... yeah, what about it?"

Venti giggled. "I'm just saying, that was terrifying. This is nothing!"

"You're only saying that because it's blindingly bright in here!" Oliver grumbled, gesturing to the buzzing, piss-yellow fluorescent lights overhead. They had flickered off briefly during the chaos with Dottore, but now they were blazing at full, headache-inducing capacity again.

"Hehehe!" Venti laughed, "So? It's bright! At least I can actually see where I'm going!"

"Ugh, Venti, you genuinely don't understand what a liminal space is, do you?!"

Venti smiled, and walked into the narrow spot, then turned right. "Huh." He said.

"What is it?" Oliver asked, still hovering nervously at the entrance. "What do you see?"

Venti raised an arm, pointing down the narrow corridor. "A way forward, I suppose. It's quite dark down there, but I can see a faint light at the very end. It's a very tight squeeze, though," he called back, looking over his shoulder. "We definitely won't be able to walk side by side."

Oliver sighed. "Figures. The Backrooms loves its miserable architecture."

Venti pressed his back flat against the wallpaper, shimmying a few inches further into the slot. He turned his head, patting the yellow wall directly beside him. "Come on over here, Ollie. We'll have to crab-walk our way in."

"You don't want me to go in first,"

"No, I just want to make sure you're safe," Venti said softly, a quiet protective edge in his voice. "Not that you can't handle yourself, but... let me head first." He looked down. 'I do not want you getting hurt. Not again,'

Venti began sliding sideways along the drywall, and Oliver immediately followed, pressing his back flush against the opposing surface.

As they inched through the narrow slit, Venti paused, glancing sideways with a look of sudden concern. "You aren't... claustrophobic, are you?"

Oliver let out a dry, exasperated huff. "You're asking me now—?"

Venti giggled sheepishly into the gloom. "S-Sorry!"

"Not really, I guess. I'll manage for now," Oliver grumbled. "Though if something jumpscares me in this tunnel, I'm going to accidentally knock myself unconscious against the wall right in front of my face..."

"Alright... let's just keep moving, then. It isn't much further, we'll reach the end in no time," Venti encouraged, resuming his slow slide. "Say, do you want to try holding my hand while we shimmy down there?"

"Babe, I'd love to, but... I kinda need both hands braced against the wall so I don't faceplant onto the floor..."

"Oh! Right. Oops," Venti giggled. "Alright then, no hand-holding for the moment!"

As they continued their sideways shuffle, a weathered paper sign pinned directly to the wall caught their attention in the dim light.

"Woah, take a look at this," Venti whispered, stopping once more.

Despite the gloom, the lettering was surprisingly clear. It featured a crude red arrow pointing straight down the path they were traversing, and scrawled above it in bold marker was a single label: Doctor Barclay's Office.

"Well, I suppose that confirms we're on the right track!" Venti smiled brightly. "We're getting closer!" He kicked off his shuffling pace again.

Oliver followed closely behind, his eyes locked on the directional sign. "Doctor Barclay really used the Backrooms as a walk-in storage unit... I still cannot wrap my head around that. And honestly, I'm even more confused about how he managed to physically commute to his office through here."

"Eh, I imagine he used a method similar to what we're doing right now," Venti replied casually.

"Babe..." Oliver blinked. "This is a painfully tight tunnel. Doctor Barclay wasn't exactly a thin man."

Venti snorted, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. "Hahaha! Well, perhaps he had a secret elevator or a wider private entrance. Though, part of me is actually quite glad I'm an Archon. Because if I were an ordinary mortal, I'd probably have a rather round, chubby belly after consuming all those sweet apples and rich Mondstadt cuisine, ehe! I would never have fit through here unless I sucked in my tummy for dear life!"

Oliver instantly looked down, his face erupting into a violent shade of red as a squeak nearly escaped his throat.

Venti glanced back, catching his flustered expression. "Oh, no~ Don't tell me that imagery did something to you!" The bard cackled, clearly delighted. "What, the thought of me with a soft tummy flusters you? Well, look at that—it completely took your mind off the claustrophobia of this narrow tunnel!"

Oliver groaned, wishing he had enough room to bury his burning face in his hands.

A few feet ahead, the suffocating darkness finally gave way to a pale yellow glow. But as Venti reached the mouth of the tunnel, he froze dead in his tracks. "Oliver, stop right now. Do not take another step."

Oliver slammed to a halt, his anxiety instantly spiking through the roof. "What? What is it? Do you see something?"

Venti leaned forward, carefully peering out past the edge of the tunnel into an immense, open expanse. The yellow, monochromatic hue of the Backrooms abruptly ended down below, dissolving into a massive, pitch-black void that felt entirely unnatural. The space was cavernous—a colossal, box-like abyss. It wasn't quite infinite; Venti could just barely make out distant, looming corners far across the dark, and looking straight up revealed a distant, suspended ceiling identical to the one they had just left.

Thick, giant concrete pillars jutted out from the void below, stretching endlessly downward into nothingness.

"There's... a massive drop-off," Venti finally reported back to Oliver. "Stay right there. I'm going to hover out."

Not wanting to risk summoning a powerful gust of wind while crammed inside a narrow passage with Oliver right behind him—fearing the backblast might slam Oliver's head against the wall—Venti simply stepped out into the open air and let his Anemo magic take over. He floated effortlessly, hovering in the open space just outside the tunnel.

Oliver crept to the edge of the opening, gripping the wall tight as he peered out into the dizzying drop. He shook his head, a breathless, nervous laugh escaping his lips. "I never kept a diary in my life, but I am officially going to have to journal this unhinged day." He pressed his palms against the cool drywall on either side as he leaned forward to stare down into the abyss. "Holy fuck... I am actually in the Backrooms..."

Venti drifted back down to Oliver's eye level, a fond, amused smile on his face. "How many times are you going to say that, babe? And what a thoroughly silly name: The Backrooms," he mused, shaking his head. "Is this another one of those 'games' you mentioned before?"

"Game? N-No... well, kind of. It started as an internet myth, and then people on YouTube made horror shorts about it a year ago—" Oliver abruptly froze. "Wait... no... not a year..." He groaned, rubbing his temples. "Ugh. I still keep forgetting I skipped straight from 2023 to 2026..." He sighed. "So... yeah." Oliver looked back up at Venti. He knew his boyfriend didn't know what the internet meant.

Venti chuckled softly. "Well... I certainly remember you talking about this 'YouTube' thing from your realm when we were trapped in that miserable, world with the scuba-suit man. And those... ugh." Venti visibly cringed. "Those disgusting, wet-sounding fleshy things. Gross. That was deeply unpleasant to look at."

Oliver squinted for a moment. "Oh! Right... when we were in Soma and Nerraw broke the entire dimension,"

Venti floated a fraction closer, extending his arms. "Do you want me to carry you across, babe? Or would you prefer to fly across using your own Cryo magic?"

Oliver took one more agonizing look down at the endless, lightless void below. Yes, he could technically fly using his new elemental powers, but the sheer psychological weight of the Backrooms was frying his nerves. He wordlessly thrust his arms straight out toward Venti like a traumatized toddler demanding to be picked up. "Please," he whispered, looking thoroughly horrified.

Venti snorted, a bright, musical laugh echoing off into the abyss. "Hehehahaha! You absolute big baby, ehe!" He drifted right into the mouth of the tunnel, wrapping his arms securely around Oliver's waist and lifting him flush against his chest so there was zero chance of slipping. "Up we go!"

Oliver instantly locked his arms around Venti's neck, burying his face against the bard's shoulder. "Okay... this is Doctor Barclay's secret commute to his lab. How the hell did he even travel through here without losing his mind...?"

"I truly believe he must have had an alternative entrance," Venti said, carrying him smoothly out into the vast open air. "This was his facility, after all. But where that hidden pathway is located remains a complete mystery."

"It definitely does..." Oliver grumbled into Venti's collarbone. "Do you have any idea which direction we're supposed to fly at?"

"Well, since you're the resident expert on this bizarre dimension, I suppose I should be asking you!" Venti teased playfully.

Oliver let out a playful sigh, keeping his grip tight. "Well, from your vantage point, do you see anything weird sticking to the walls? The Backrooms is non-Euclidean nonsense. There could be random objects that make zero physical sense—"

"Ah. Yes, that certainly tracks," Venti interrupted, tilting his head toward a distant wall. "I see a... a full-sized oak tree just... horizontally embedded into the side of the wall over there."

"Yep." Oliver sighed, keeping his eyes firmly shut. "That's the Backrooms for you." He cracked one eye open, trying to peer around Venti's shoulder to scan the surrounding void. Venti was holding him flushed to his chest, so Oliver's head was resting on his shoulder. "I don't see anything from my angle."

"Neither do I," Venti murmured, descending a fraction lower. He paused, frowning slightly. "You don't suppose..."

Oliver's eyes snapped wide open, turning his head to look directly at Venti's ear. "I—In the void below us?"

Venti was clearly considering it. "I am not certain. Perhaps I can slowly drift downward and test the depth?"

Oliver's brows furrowed into slight fear. He couldn't even begin to guess what going into an infinite Backrooms void would do to a person.

But before he could speak, much less think, there was a loud voice.

"THERE THEY ARE! BLAST 'EM!"

A lone Stormtrooper had managed to squeeze through the tight crawlspace, dragging his heavy E-11 rifle behind him as he burst into the open ledge.

"Venti!" Oliver shrieked. "There's another Stormtrooper!"

"Unauthorized personnel are restricted from entering the office sector!" the Stormtrooper bellowed, frantically shoving his blaster barrel out of the narrow tunnel opening. "Get down!" He slammed his finger onto the trigger.

Venti's eyes flashed with annoyance. He tighten his grip around Oliver's waist with his right arm, the bard flicked his left hand forward. A concentrated, violent gale of Anemo wind slammed into the Stormtrooper with the force of a battering ram.

"ARGH!" the soldier yelled, thrown completely off balance. He slammed hard into the wall behind him, scrambled wildly to regain his footing, and blindly lunged forward—straight over the edge.

"AHHHHHHH!!!!!"

The Stormtrooper screamed in absolute terror as he plummeted headfirst into the pitch-black abyss, his heavy blaster flying out of his grip and tumbling down alongside him until both vanished completely into the shadows.

His terrified shriek echoed for several long seconds before slowly, chillingly fading into total silence.

Oliver swallowed hard, clinging even tighter to the Archon. "Okay... we literally just watched that man fall straight to his doom. Do we really want to go down there too?"

"Something tells me we don't have much of a choice," Venti replied calmly, eyeing the infinite drop. "There are no other exits in this space, and that sign back in the tunnel indicated the office lies straight ahead. Do not worry, I have a firm hold on you."

"Okay," Oliver whispered, burying his face back into Venti's shoulder.

Hearing his agreement, Venti angled his body downward and began a slow, carefully controlled descent straight into the dark abyss.

Oliver held on tight, tilting his head back to watch the opening of the narrow passage slide higher and higher above them. The giant pillars drifted past, stretching up into the light above as they sank lower.

Venti felt Oliver's hands tighten around him. He nuzzled his cheek against Oliver's, then turned his head to plant a small kiss. "Don't worry, Oliver. It'll be okay."

Oliver kept his eyes squeezed shut, listening to the heavy silence as they dropped lower and lower. The only sound in the vast emptiness was their breathing.

After several long minutes of descending, the pitch-black void abruptly shifted, opening back up into the same open space.

"Huh?" He didn't stop descending, but he glanced up. Where the ceiling had been before, there was only darkness.

Oliver peeked at the narrow passage, now far above them as they went lower. "What the...?"

Venti looked up again and spotted the oak tree jutting from the wall. "Okay..." He looked around. The pillars were gone. "Hm... those huge, strange pillars that were sticking out of the void have vanished." He kept going down, until the darkness swallowed them again.

"The Backrooms does weird shit..." Oliver muttered. "That was... probably just a glitch or something..."

Venti lowered them further, and the room returned.

This time, the lights were off, save for a few stubborn ones. The oak tree was no longer sticking out of the wall; it was sunk into it, only the top half visible, as though the lower half had been fused into the wall.

"What the..." Venti blinked.

Oliver looked up and noticed the narrow passage had grown wider. He opened his mouth to say so, but he kept his mouth shut.

Venti went back down into the void.

After a few seconds of drifting down, the room appeared again. Now, gaping holes yawned in all four walls, acres wide and pitch-black inside.

"Oh my..." Venti muttered under his breath, glancing at them. "Wow that...?" He blinked, now wondering what was going on.

"Ugh... I cannot wait until we are entirely out of this nightmare," Oliver grumbled.

They lowered again, into the darkness below, but then they came back into the room again, all the walls were just gone. It was just darkness.

Oliver closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"You're doing good," Venti said softly. He was working hard to keep himself in a perfectly straight line. In the pitch black, it was impossible to tell up from down or left from right, so he just kept going downward without stopping, afraid of losing his path.

The room faded into view again.

This time, medieval buildings jutted out from the walls, scattered all around them. Oliver's eyes went wide. "Why do those look like Mondstadt buildings?"

"I noticed that," Venti said. "But I'm not stopping. Whatever this is, going through it is clearly doing something."

They plunged into the darkness once more.

Now, along with the buildings, the Statue of Barbatos was duplicated everywhere, some copies even fused into each other.

"Hmm..." Venti glanced up briefly before looking back down. "That's bizarre..."

Okay, now it was getting strange for Oliver. "Why is..."

But the next layer came before he could finish.

The room shrank. One side of the wall, had an oversized Mondstadt building with smaller ones jutting out from it, a line of of them all shrinking in size as they spread across the wall. The few lights still on lit only certain patches, leaving the rest drenched in shadow, and it just made Oliver feel weird.

He took a breath and closed his eyes. "This is so uncomfortable to look at, Venti..."

The next sector was smaller still. The buildings were gone.

The next room shrank again. Then again. And again.

Slowly, the darkness began to thin out, parting to reveal a solid floor waiting far below them.

Venti gasped softly, rapidly firing off a burst of counter-wind to arrest their downward momentum just as a tiled subway platform materialized beneath them.

The sudden, abrupt upward jerk of Venti's braking maneuver scared the absolute life out of Oliver.

"EAAIIEEEE?!" Oliver shrieked, clutching the bard so hard his knuckles turned white.

Venti slowly lowered himself back down until his bard shoes touched the carpet, holding Oliver tightly the whole way so he could never slip. But that sudden, girlish scream had been so hilarious that he wanted to laugh so badly. This was a very serious moment, though, so he knew he shouldn't.

Oliver coughed loudly into his fist, frantically trying to play it off. "That... we... uh... handled that gracefully."

Venti lasted exactly as long as it took to set Oliver down on the carpet. "BHAHAHAHAHAH!" He doubled over, laughing his cute laugh. "Oh my gosh! I'm sorrhahahahrrryy, I'm sorry!!!" He wheezed. "Oh, that was definitely funny after all that tension!"

Despite himself, Oliver started laughing too. "Pffft—okay, fine. It was funny," he snorted. "I—I honestly thought you lost your grip! I was mentally preparing to plummet into the infinite void!"

Venti snorted, floated up a little, then leaned in, wrapped his arms around Oliver, and kissed him. He giggled as he pulled away. "Sorry about that, hehe~ Hopefully my kisses make up for it~" He peppered Oliver's face with little smooches. Oliver giggled and kissed him back, until their lips met and the little kisses melted into a real one. Venti's giggles softened, and he slid his arms around Oliver's waist, pulling him closer.

After a long, comforting moment, they finally parted. Venti opened his eyes, offering a radiant, loving smile, before gently setting down onto his feet. "Feeling somewhat better?"

Oliver smiled, nodding warmly. "Much better. Though... I think I'd feel even better if I got permission to poke and play with your belly button—"

Venti let out an explosive snort. "Hahaa!" He threw his head back in delight. "Oh, he finally asks without me even offering! True character development!" He winked cheekily.

"Ventiiii," Oliver whined, flushing bright red and immediately looking away. "I do want to, but—wait. What the hell is that?" He stopped dead in his tracks, staring past Venti's shoulder. "A TRAIN?!"

"Eh?" Venti blinked, turning around to follow Oliver's gaze.

Resting on a set of gleaming steel tracks that emerged from the dark tunnels of the station was a dingy, fully operational subway train idling quietly at the platform.

Venti giggled. "Goodness. You traded my belly button for a train? Now I truly feel rejected." He teased with a bright grin, walking side-by-side with Oliver toward the platform edge. "A train? How curious. Never seen one like that before."

"Should we... board it?" Oliver peered cautiously through the sliding doors which were opened. Inside the old, dirty passenger car, a small digital information screen flickered to life above the aisle.

NEXT STOP: BARCLAY'S OFFICE

"Venti, I think we use this to get there," Oliver said. "Since when do the Backrooms have an automated subway system? And more importantly... why on earth did we just pass through floating Mondstadt architecture to get here?" Oliver looked straight up, half-expecting to see the surreal abyss, but found only a completely solid, normal concrete ceiling.

"Wait, there's no darkness anymore..." Oliver muttered.

Venti hopped up lightly, floating an inch off the ground, and casually punched his fist upward against the ceiling. "Yep. Solid as solid rock." He dropped back down to his feet, dusting off his hands.

Oliver shook his head, staring at the subway car doors. "You know... in stories, whenever characters go through something, but it's basically nothing, they always just sigh and say, 'It's a long story.'" He looked over at Venti with an exhausted smirk. "When the guys back at the lab finally ask us what we did today... this is literally the definition of a long story."

Venti threw his head back and laughed, a rich, ringing sound that banished the last lingering echoes of dread from the old station. "You are entirely right, haha!"

Without a second thought, the bard grabbed Oliver's hand and pulled him right toward the opening subway doors.

"Woah!" Oliver gasped as they crossed the threshold.

The moment their shoes hit the interior linoleum flooring, a crisp, automated chime echoed through the empty car:

Doors closing

Ding-dong

Oliver instinctively grabbed onto Venti's arm as the heavy doors slid shut with a hiss, locking them securely inside. He looked around the empty carriage, letting out a breathless laugh. "Well... I always wanted to ride the New York subway... I just never expected my first time would be deep inside the fucking Backrooms with Venti from Genshin Impact."

Venti smiled warmly, leaning his head affectionately against Oliver's arm. "Come on, let's go sit down over there!"

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