

Louis kept staring at the giant array of lights in the city below. It was a massive ecosystem of electricity and opulence. Hundreds—no—*thousands* of animals were mindlessly walking through the iron jungle of the city, seemingly unaware of the rot consuming the very place they so carelessly inhabited. He didn't know if he should be disgusted or pitiful at the unaware populace. The world had changed, yet the people in it certainly still had a lot to be desired. The shutting down of the BAM was a wake-up call to many, yet the wool over their eyes remained, not *wholly* eradicated.

It had been a week. Seven days too many. Legosi never failed to report him immediately after every mission. The wolf was a dutiful partner in crime; the muscle to push the changes Louis desired across the city, much to the aging council's chagrin. Yet now, the one that freed him of his cursed flesh was gone, and he didn't even have the faintest idea of where he could possibly be. He knew it had something to do with those accursed elephants and the disappearances surrounding them. He just didn't expect Legosi to be on the list of victims. Despite how much he called him a dumb dog, the wolf was the person the buck trusted the most.

*They're no ordinary criminals, that's for sure.*

If it was anyone else, Louis would've taken as much time as he needed to catch them red-handed. He would've settled for nothing else than a full conviction for every crime they had inflicted on the city. Now? It was different. Staring at the sea of lights, Louis could only think of one thing; scorched earth. He had the authority to turn this entire city upside down, and he was *going* to use it, and he wasn't going to wait either.

"Boss?"

Louis cocked his head back. Agata—his youthful appearance standing even after having reached his late 30s—stood near the elevator, only having spoken up after a prolonged, suffocating bout of silence. The badge designating him as part of Horns Conglomerate's personal security team gleamed against the light pouring through the window. Straight out of jail, they had been given new identities so they could go back to at least a shadow of the relationship they had before; a pack of strong feline warriors parading around their cervid boss in an opulent, glamorous display of power. Yet even with their lifelong bond, none could manage to soothe the bubbling anxiety pouring out of Louis ever since Legosi's disappearance.

"What?"

"The detective's down in the reception. Do you want me to call him up?"

"You should've let him in as soon as he arrived." Louis flatly explained. "Escort him in."

"Will do, boss."

With a rather shameful bow, Agata left for the elevator. Louis was alone—*again*; it was how he spent almost every hour of the day ever since that fateful night. The drive to find his wolf was intense enough for him to not even care about the state of his office. Let the world see the endless stacks of paperwork and glasses of whiskey all around the multitude of desks and shelves in the room. He couldn't waste brainpower on presentation. He *had* to find him.

The elevator's ding echoed across the room. Louis turned around, his hands tingling as the thought of yet another swig of alcohol passed his brain. The only thing stopping him from doing so was that he wouldn't be able to absorb all the details the detective would give him if he was inebriated. *That's what all-nighters are for.* "Good evening. You must be..."

"The man you hired. Did you not look at the file I sent in the application?"

The man was a wolf. Dark, black fur coated his mildly muscular body. A twinge of nostalgia bubbled in his gut. The sight of any canine was already enough to drive a sour taste into his mouth, but to have it be a *wolf* let an afterglow that was downright foul. He held it to himself—no point in making enemies out of the people on his payroll—but that only meant that there was more to simmer in his already unstable mind. "Yes, thank you for coming. Please take a seat." With great effort, he put on his best friendly smile. "I'm sorry for the delay. We've had quite a difficult few days—"

"No problem with that. I did some digging into the matter, since your assistants were kind enough to explain the situation to me."

"...Oh, you did?" *What the hell?* He didn't authorize any of them to divulge any information about the search. Was it Free? God, it was *definitely* Free. He was going to tear him a new one as soon as he got his hands around his pompadour-bearing idiot self. "Well, what did you find out?" Now he had to do damage control. The last thing he needed was for any more information from being leaked. He also had to know *what* exactly was disclosed.

The detective cleared his throat. "According to what I found, Legosi, Gray Wolf, disappeared around a week ago. No one seems to know *why* he's disappeared, but everyone I've interviewed said that they saw him last at the Kibishis' party. He was also acting strange, although reading about him online, maybe it was just his natural behavior. Guy seems odd."

*He is.* "So, we're agreeing that he was kidnapped, right?"

"Pretty much. The Kibishis are a mob family, so they're definitely not above kidnapping. Heard that they've even blown some journalist's brain out and sent the video to their family for trying to interfere with an arms deal they were in the process of scoring with the Inarigumi." The detective explained the ghastly anecdote with a flat, monotone tone. "But Legosi doesn't seem to be a

high-profile individual. He's just a bug museum worker... I can only think that his kidnapping is a sort of bargaining chip to get money out of you."

*Go along with his hypothesis.* "Yeah, makes sense. I suppose that they linked us back to our days in Cherryton Academy."

"I arrived at the same conclusion. However, I don't think that they've taken him to a second location. One of the BAM's structural issues is that there aren't many entrances, and the mansion is one of the most regulated places. I think that he must be inside the mansion."

"...*Inside?*"

"With you *and* the police on the lookout, they wouldn't risk moving him. No point in killing him if they want to use him as a bargaining chip, so it's not like there's a body to dump either." The detective explained. "Meanwhile, those mansions are ancient. They were built to host hundreds of guests and servants at the same time. Not just that, but a lot of them were built with secret passages so they could hide their wealth in the case of a break-in."

Louis rubbed his chin. The entire idea seemed fantastical. Like a little kid was telling him a wild tale to send him on a wild goose chase. Normally, he would've already sent the wolf back to the elevator for having the gall to propose something so outlandish, but he wasn't in a position to be picky with his leads. Plus, he had never spent a day in a mansion before. Oguma was more partial to the ergonomic design of skyscrapers—supposedly it 'helped' him with work and refrained from any unnecessary purchases in the need to fill space and display wealth. "Alright, what do you propose we do?"

"There's another event happening in three days. There's going to be an auction for a series of collector's items and paintings hosted by Yuzu Shibiki, the father of the family."

"I see. Then we'll be off. I'm sure that my status alone can get me inside." His past tenure as the Shishigumi's boss was an open secret to the elite of the city. It was a double-edged sword; some thought of him unfit to lead, but those same deriders were usually afraid of getting a bullet in the head, so they kept shut. "Thank you for your assistance, Detective..." Dammit, he was so entranced by the first taste of information about Legosi in days that he didn't even ask for the man's name.

"Nova." He said bluntly.

Louis furrowed his brow. "Is that your real name, or a pseudonym? Doesn't sound Japanese or European."

"Maybe. I'd rather not give out too much information. The CEO of Horns Conglomerate is a great ally, but you could also be a great enemy."

The buck chuckled under his breath. “Smart move. I see that I’m working with an experienced professional.”

“A *very* experienced professional.” Nova re-stated, a harsh emphasis behind his words. “We’ll be meeting three streets down from the mansion to avoid suspicion. I need you to bring no more than two of your men. Any more and we’ll draw too much attention.”

“Needn’t tell me twice.”

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Louis was welcomed with a red carpet along with the other socialites. No one dared to question the animals that he brought with him; Nova, of course, then Free and Agata for muscle in case anything went awry. The auction wasn’t to be held until two hours. Yuzu wanted to get to know the people participating, at least that was what he said when someone asked why they weren’t starting immediately. The actual reason was probably giving himself some time to strike deals with congressmen and lobbyists; the perfect opening for their getaway.

“Louis.”

The buck turned his head to the wolf. They had been exploring the manor for a long time, thirty minutes by now. They had checked thoroughly through at least twenty guest rooms, finding nothing but lost bracelets and necklaces that the maids had probably pickpocketed. He had begun to lose hope, but still, he opened his ears.

“...What?”

“Look at this.” Nova began nudging a framed picture of what looked to be a fur-coated elephant out of place. The screws were incredibly loose and took no work to remove. Pushing it to the side, it revealed a small part of what was clearly a hidden passage behind the frame. “Do you want to go inside? I think this could be a path to where Legosi’s being kept.”

The buck couldn’t even respond. He motioned for his two lions to push the frame aside so he and Nova could get inside. His heart was beating so loud that he could hear the sound bouncing around his ears. Agata and Free were mumbling something to him, but he didn’t care. He didn’t have the *time* to care. Without a second thought, he jumped inside the passage and turned his flashlight on.

*Stone tiles. Uneven walls. This must be ancient...*

“Boss, do you think that we should go inside? I don’t think that this is a good idea.”

“Agata, If you want to leave, do it.” Louis snarled back. “I... need to find him, no matter what.”

The brown-furred lion whined, climbing inside alongside Free and Nova. Free elbowed before venturing forward, while Nova didn't even seem to pay him or Free any mind, focused completely on the buck.

“Louis.” The wolf called out. “I'm going to stay in the back in case we get ambushed. If you hear me scream, have you and your men draw your guns.”

“Roger,” Louis said.

Agata couldn't help but feel demeaned by the order. Slowly scooting up closer to Free, he leaned in closer to the Indian lion. “Yo, Free.”

“Whaddaya want?”

“Don't you think that there's something... *odd* with the guy that boss hired? He already knew about Legosi...”

“What?” Free scrunched up his face, turning back to Agata. “The fuck are you saying? Didn't you brief him before so that he would know what to investigate?”

“I didn't do anything like that! I thought that he was just really good at it!”

“...You didn't tell him anything?” Free asked, face contorting into a horrified grimace.

Agata desperately shook his head, expression filled with terror.

“We have to tell Lo—”

The sound of gunfire rang out across the tunnels. Louis stopped dead in their tracks, the lingering sound of death echoing across their ears. A lantern went flying into the air before rolling down across the floor.

“WHAT THE HELL?!” The ear-piercing shot kept ringing in his ears, sending his entire body into a panicked frenzy. Every inch of his muscles tensed up as he awaited a predator to strike out of the darkness, paranoically turning his head all over. Louis didn't understand what had just happened... at least at first. He turned his flashlight and gun to the source of the sound. On the floor, writhing in pain with his paw clenched against a bleeding chest, was Free.

“FREE!” Agata screamed out, kneeling next to his fellow feline as he cradled him in his arms. “Oh my go—”

With the sound of a second gunshot, he dropped on top of Free like a remote-controlled toy losing power abruptly, crashing against the bleeding lion like a ragdoll.

“W-what the...” He stared at the pair of now barely conscious lions on the floor. It all happened so fast. The last time he had been in a gunfight was *years* ago, and seeing his beloved lions lying limp and forming a puddle of blood underneath them, their suits turning a deep crimson, brought a kind of horror back that he thought he was free from. “This isn’t...” But the sound of a reload snapped him back to lucidity.

“Sorry,” Nova said flatly, not a sign of emotion on his face. “It’s for everyone else’s good.”

Louis opened his mouth to scream, but the sound that followed wasn’t a desperate wail of righteous fury. Another shot rang out, and the buck fell to the ground. His entire body stopped moving as a stinging, overwhelming agony spread across his muscles. He could feel the blood pouring out of the entry wound around the right side of his chest, staining his suit. The stained cloth pressed against his fur, a disgusting feeling that only made him clench his teeth in utter fury, sputtering whines and coughs nonstop.

“Y-you... *scum!*” He weakly whimpered out, barely able to keep his eyes open.

“Again, apologies. You’ll just have to see things from my point of view...” Finally, for the first time, Louis saw the wolf express himself without inhibition. A large, massive grin that showed off his fangs. “Good night, Mister Horns.”

Louis was about to curse back at the detective yet again, but before he could even manage to come up with something else to say, he collapsed into a deep slumber.

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An ear-piercing roar. It sounded nothing like the one belonging to a carnivore. It was something far more horrific. The wail that Louis heard was something out of this world. He couldn’t even begin to compare it to anything else. It was like a machine whirring horribly as it glitched out—a sound that *wasn’t* meant to exist. He immediately tried plugging his ears to mute the discordant cacophony, but his body wasn’t moving.

*Another bout of sleep paralysis? I thought I finally got rid of them...*

He was expecting to be greeted by the sight of his room’s ceiling and see... something. Sometimes it was one of the livestock traders that bossed him around. Sometimes it was an adult version of the young buck he sacrificed himself for only to be taken in by Oguma. Sometimes it was San and Kyuu. Sometimes it was himself.

However, he was sure that any nightmares he had or could ever have didn't involve a faraway stone ceiling and a wooly mammoth looking at him.

“You are finally freed from your slumber. Did you sleep well, CEO of Horns?”

Immediately, he tried to sit up to try and fetch his revolver. Of course, he found himself unable to move. His arms and legs were sprawled outwards, a set of four bands attached to the metallic surface he was lying on, keeping his wrists and ankles bound. Desperate to put on any kind of defiance against the mammoth, he tried to at least arch his head forward to look at him dead straight, yet he quickly discovered a fifth band around his neck that prevented him from doing so.

*Fuck.*

He was kidnapped. That hack detective took advantage of his desperation. Free and Agata... were probably dead. He wasn't sure, but he wanted to prepare himself for the worst. Their fake identities meant that any sleuths among his kidnapers wouldn't be able to pick up any information on them, which meant they couldn't know that they could serve as good bargaining chips. Louis wanted to scream, but he managed to hold out a wail of agony to not let his enemies see his weakness. He could only breathe sharply, huffing with ire to prevent himself from saying anything that he could regret.

*A wooly mammoth... I thought that they were extinct...*

“I'm sure that you must be confused. I knew that our dear Nova was all too eager to work on a case with someone of such a high profile, but I never expected that he would be so rash. My deepest apologies for such a bad impression.”

The man spoke in a fatherly, humble tone. It reminded Louis of one of the butlers Oguma tasked with taking care of him during his upbringing; an elderly, wisened-up elephant that Louis always suspected to have done something criminal in his past. He gave off the aura of a reformed criminal—the same vibe that he got from the mammoth speaking to him at this very moment. However, there was a sinking feeling that swam inside Louis' stomach. Instead of the wise, sage council of a parental figure, the way the hairy mammal was speaking felt like a corruption of something familiar. Refusing to play along, he scowled back at the man. He was Louis The Red Deer; he wasn't going to grovel at the feet of his kidnapper.

“Not too much of a talker. I can respect someone who thinks respect is earned, not given out freely.” The mammoth twirled his cane, humming a strange sort of melody that Louis thought was familiar, but couldn't particularly nail down the origin of. “What is going to happen next is going to hurt, but it's for your own good. I don't think we can come to an understanding without you first experiencing what we've experienced.”

“Are you going to torture me?” He asked drily, the question almost hypothetical with how obvious he expected the answer to be. “If so, just get this over with and kill me. I’m not going to tell you anything.”

“It’s certainly going to sting, but I wouldn’t call what we do ‘torture’. It’s something spiritual. Pain can connect us to things that are usually very far out of reach.”

“Say what you need to to make your cause sound righteous. I don’t care for what you have to say.”

The threat only seemed to amuse the mammoth. “As you wish. I’m sure that once we start, you’ll come around.” With a thundering clap, an orange-furred cat wearing robes arrived—a porcelain tray in hand. “Thank you, Rory.”

No matter how hard he tried budging his eyes toward the tray, the buck couldn’t see what the mammoth had gotten his hands on. The uncertainty was like a knife driving through his chest. The satisfied, smug expression on the mammoth’s face certainly didn’t help with his growing disquiet. His large, brown hands were *just* out of reach for him to look at. Louis had a feeling that the mammoth knew the fact was irritating him even further.

“Do you want a cloth to bite on?”

“Don’t give me your empty pity, worm.”

The mammoth chuckled. “Suit yourself.”

Louis felt a pair of smaller hands—probably the feline’s—press up against the pit of his elbow. *What?!* He immediately tried to push the carnivore away, thrashing as much as he could with his limited movement. *Get away from me!* Yet that didn’t do much, for he saw the mammoth join the feline. Louis blinked... and he felt his flesh pierced by a needle, blood being drawn towards a syringe. Louis gasped dryly, eyes wide as he tried his best to keep his composure. The feeling immediately brought him back to the horrible experiments done in the livestock towers to make them grow in specific ways that would please the buyers. Both of his captors were emotionlessly drawing the crimson liquid—far more than would be needed for a simple blood test—out of him. *S-stop! What are they... planning to do with me!?*

“Do you think he’s had enough, Master Thales?”

The cat’s voice was quiet, almost like a whisper. It reminded Louis of Legosi, which only made him clench his flat teeth in nostalgic fury. The feeling of his skin and muscles burned up as the needle continued sucking more and more out kept intensifying. It was a simmering sensation that made his entire skin crawl. He knew that trying to struggle would just result in them piercing the vein



even further. It was a bloody stalemate, forced to lie still and have his life *sucked* out of him as the Mammoth simply continued humming that song.

“Just a little... bit more.” Thales clicked his tongue, a smile hidden underneath his trunk. “I want to make sure that Louis can bond with us.”

“W-whatever you want... you won’t get it.” The constant flow had begun making him dizzy. His sharp mind was turning duller, vision becoming blurry. The more that was drawn out, the heavier his eyelids got. “If you kill me, there’s going to be someone to replace me as the CEO. Whatever vendetta you have, it’ll accomplish *nothing*.” It was like a hammer smashing against his head constantly, the throbbing growing unbearable.

“Vendettas aren’t something I’m interested in.” Thales said flatly. “I’m just interested in... broadening your horizons.”

“I don’t care what way you put it.” He choked out, just barely having managed to well up the tears in his eyes and prevent them from falling out. “Just get whatever you want over with.”

“Will do.”

To his surprise, Louis was met with one of the metal bands unlocked. By sheer impulse, he wriggled his freed neck. Every once-compressed inch of muscle ached with an intense sense of burning. He sighed in relief, finally feeling like he could fully breathe again. Turning to the mammoth, he immediately tried to question him, “Why did you—” but he was quickly met with a sharp shush.

“Watch.” He gently instructed.

Louis felt a chill down his spine when he realized that dozens—no. That number wasn’t right. *Hundreds* of animals were scattered all around the area with those same dark crimson robes. They looked like they had just arrived from a sermon, more and more coming from a large cathedral-like door at the end of the hall above one of the large stained glass windows—the one featuring a white equine kissing a rose while the thrones pricked his skin, drops of blood falling below.

Looking at the mammoth, he suddenly bent down, getting on one knee. There was a hole in the ground filled with liquid. It was definitely not water—it was too thick for it to be. Louis couldn’t tell at first with the combination of dim lighting and his position, but as he saw Thales unloading the contents of the syringe into the giant pool of crimson liquid, he finally realized what it was. His blood was diluted to join the rest of the sanguine pocket of liquid.

“W-what is the point of... all of this?” He asked, more befuddled than angry now. “Who *are* you people?”

“Who we are doesn’t matter. To recognize the ego of another person is to give away a piece of your soul to feed it.” Thales explained as he began to fill up the syringe again with the giant mixture of blood. “We prefer to bond spiritually, connecting with each other without ever wasting time trying to connect through meaningless, fake words.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying. It just sounds like the delusion of a sick, twisted freak to explain what they do.” He sneered, every word of his voice coated with almost *lethal* venom. “Spare me whatever rituals you want to use to endear me to you.”

“Not a choice that I can allow myself to make, unfortunately.” Of course, there wasn’t too much regret in his voice. It sounded like a distant mix of pity and amusement. “This will sting... a *lot* more than the previous injection. I recommend the cloth this time.”

Louis inhaled before he shot a swab of spit at Thales. It splattered across his maroon pants, a small stain on an otherwise pristine garment. The pre-historic titan barely even reacted, simply letting out heavy sigh before he took hold of Louis’ arm again.

“Go to hell!” Louis yelled before the syringe was jammed into him again.

The second he felt the stream of countless lifeforms flowing into him, it was like the world *broke*. The stone columns went from lines of rock that went up to the ever-expanding darkness to warped, wobbly gray strings that were being sucked by the dark void. The blood being forced inside of his arm rushed through his veins, igniting his body through unwanted fervor. Even his eyes were burning, the tears that he had managed to hold in just a few moments ago running down his face. “W-what did you do to me?!” He screamed out, thrusting his chest into the air only for it to slam back against the metal table, the sweat that had begun to secrete from every single pore splashing on the surface. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!” He wailed again, feeling as if he was running out of air.

Thales didn’t give him any words. Instead, he fetched a cigar and lighter from his suit pockets. The nicotine shell ignited, the gray segment lighting up into a vibrant red. His cheeks swelled up and his chest tightened, and like a gust of wind breaking through a flimsy wooden door, a gust of light blue smoke flowed through his trunk into Louis’ face.

“W-what is that supposed to...” The buck interrupted himself, accidentally inhaling the smoke. Amidst the coughing fit—spit flying through the air falling on his chest—the strong scent of blueberry entered his nostrils. *S-scented cigars?! Ugh, it’s so... intense...!* The smoke clouded his vision, obscuring the warping scenery around him. Through the blue cloud, he could at least spot the faint silhouette of Thales, but that quickly got lost in the expansive azure fog. *What the... this is not... a normal cigar...*

Just as the blood flowed through his body, the fog entered his nostrils and began circling through his respiratory system, but he also noticed that the smoke was traveling... *upwards*. Maybe it was something in the blood being injected into him, or maybe it was the sudden loss of blood from his initial drawing earlier now playing tricks on his brain, but it was like his brain was being massaged by the smoke itself. A strange flowing sensation that completely enraptured his mind—the feeling almost *physical* in how tactile and real it felt—to no end. It wasn't even painful, but certainly discomforting. He hated that it didn't feel good, that he couldn't treat it with derision. The audacity to try and make him feel *good* during a situation like this was enough to make his stomach churn, but bravado meant nothing in the face of unstoppable pleasure.

His immediate impulse was to spit at the mammoth to make him back away, but the buck quickly found his slack jaw. "Mmgh..." A wave of dread washed over him. He prayed that it was just a random spasm. His mouth twitched, muscles tensing up as he prepared to tell the mammoth to screw himself, but a mumbling diatribe of nonsense was all that came out. "Mghoouheell!" Louis mumbled, the shame and helplessness settling in. "HEEULL!" More saliva hurled out of his mouth, the desperation and adrenaline working overtime to keep him sharp as the smoke continued traveling up to his brain.

"I'm sure that you've noticed what's happening."

Thales' voice sounded as if it was being spoken through a faraway speaker. It echoed in his brain, loud yet not close enough for the message to go cleanly. It almost felt like Thales was trying to break into his dreams, speaking to not *him* but the impulses and instincts that made his brain tick.

The deafening sound of the shackles being undone was like the sound of gunfire directly next to his ear. The temptation of freedom was dangled above his forehead, and Louis should've known that it was too good to be true. Yet still, his first impulse was to spring to life and try to use his antlers to attack Thales. When the most he could do was a slight shuffle to the side, the result was as soul-crushingly disappointing as it was expected. He could barely feel his own body brushing against the metal, even the simple act of *thinking* felt like something that he wasn't doing willingly but a bodily function performed out of sheer impulse.

"Ah, that's the spirit. So many strange, contradictory feelings and wills swimming inside of you while my smoke nests inside your mind. The stage is set, Mister Horns."

*W-what are you talking about?*

"You will feel like you're floating. Every second that all that life energy passes through your body, you can feel a little part of everyone becoming part of you as well. The deepest form of bonding..." Finally, instead of pity or gratification, there was *passion* in his tone. The large, brown digits were shaking as they traced down the buck's chest.

*N-no... I don't want to... become part of your circus of freaks!*

Drool trailed from the side of his mouth, body relaxing to an excessive degree. His muscles felt like melting putty, every ounce of control leaving him. Internally, he was screaming at the top of his lungs as he tried to move with the grace equal to a rabid, meat-drunk carnivore slamming buttons on a machine expecting *something* to happen.

“And now, you’ll finally manage to understand why connection through blood is so important to us...” Thales inched closer, his mouth blowing hot air into the buck’s ear. “*Fray the vile self, purge the sacrifice away, let your soul be spirited away to a journey to the west of your body.*” He chanted in the same tune he had been humming for the past half hour.

Suddenly, Louis’ body shot straight up. The whiplash of his almost corpse-like posture and the sudden burst of activity left the deer perplexed. He thought that the blood somehow had stopped affecting him. He was ready to lunge his head at the mammoth... but nothing happened. Everything felt technically okay, but none of it was responding to his commands. *W-what is this?! What the hell did you do to my body?!*

“Hm...” Thales cupped his chin, stroking it as he gazed further into the deer’s eyes. The intense amber color of his pupils was now a dull, brownish gradient that had glazed over his eyes. Brown-furred eyelids covered almost half of it, a completely blank expression painted across an equally blank canvas. “Your flesh is no longer bound by your identity. It exists as its own entity, intact from all the poisons of the modern world.” He explained as if it was obvious, a mere mundanity in his life.

*No, turn this back right now! This is MY body!*

Wiping away the trail of drool going down his mouth, Thales clicked his tongue. “I cannot hear you, but I’m pretty sure that you’re still confused. Probably even more.”

Louis, even if only in his mind and one-sided, wasn’t willing to engage in conversation with Thales. He kept trying to move his body; trying to force a scowl on his slouched face, clenching his open palms into furious fists, trying to dig his antlers into the mammoth’s eyes and skewering the eyeball out of him. There was so much brewing, *intense* anger that he couldn’t express in any way. His mind, or maybe his soul—the semantics didn’t matter to him—the *real* him was stuck as a festering, enraging essence that seemed to be incorporeal.

“But don’t worry. You’ll see.”

Thales snapped his fingers, causing Louis’ body to jankily hop off the metal table. His movements were like the ones of a puppet with loose, frail strings. Every single instance lacked grace or poise,

clumsily moving to stand on his feet. His muscles were flexing intensely as the buck's mind desperately tried to make a sprint for it, but that simple movement was the only thing that he could do.

*Stop! Stop moving!*

“Undress now, buck.”

His body began unbuttoning his shirt. Louis wanted to cover his eyes, but he was forced to see at every agonizing second of his naked frame being revealed to the very man who kidnapped him. His tail was wagging. *Disgusting*, he thought. His chest was bandaged to cover the scar of the bullet wound. *Did they operate on me while I was asleep?* As his belt and pants dropped to the ground, the only thing that served to cover him was a pair of navy blue boxers. If he could blush, his entire face would be blood red with shame and embarrassment.

Thales circled Louis as if he were appreciating a fine piece of art. The slight tilt of the buck's head, the empty stare, the mannequin-esque posing that his vacant frame had; it was all *beautiful*. There was surely a lot going up in the deer's mind, but none of it was being transmitted outwards. The buck was now a mere passenger on his own body. Seeing flesh in such a state of serenity was like seeing coal being transformed into a diamond. “Seeing your face without a frown is such a treat. Did you know that so much stress on your facial muscles can cause wrinkles? You should be grateful that I took that away from you.”

*No, go fuck yourself! GET ME OUT OF HERE!*

“You clearly need some kind of relief. How about I give you a taste of what we have to offer?”

Thales performed a strange motion with his hands—too fast for Louis to see what it was. He bent down, one hand behind his back while the other reached for his crotch. The buck sharply inhaled as those large digits stroked his penis through his boxers.

*W-what the fuck!?! Get your hands off me, NOW!*

However, his body rejected his defiance. Immediately, his flesh was unable to resist the rush of adrenaline. It was like the sensitivity across it was turned up to a hundred. Just a single trace of Thales' fingers was enough to get him hard, a tent stretching around the base of his boxers. A dry, mumbling moan parted his open mouth, almost sounding like the groan of a zombie with how lifeless yet guttural it was.

*F-fuck... How does it feel... so good?*

It was like a switch was flipped. Blood rushed downward as even after Thales took his hands off his dick, it still throbbed, begging for more touches. The sensation was so violently intense that it felt like he was getting hard for the first time in his life. *I need to make this stop... Need to make it stop...* Because it felt *so good*. More and more dull, droning moans came out—an unwilling crescendo of forced arousal. The worst part of it all was seeing how smug Thales was about the entire endeavor. The mammoth clearly knew how corrosively fast his touch spread across his whole body. He knew that Louis *craved* more, and he was gleefully depriving him of more.

*You bastard! H-how dare you... Tease me like this!*

“I can see that you’re hungry for pleasure. You poor, *poor* thing.” Feeling peckish, he tapped Louis’ twitching tent again. The touch barely lasted a second, yet it hit the buck like a truck.

*G-GAH!* It was like a fire spread across his crotch. The desire was spreading through him like a poison. *Arms! Arms, I have to move my arms!* Even his own thoughts were tainted by pure desperation. His arms tensed up not just out of indignant revenge, but out of frenzied desire. His cock shifted more and more, a little bit of pre beginning to leak from the tip and onto the boxers. He had never been touched in such a way. His moans were now a constant, dissonant stream of noises that would sound like utter madness to anyone. Tears flowed out of his eyes as the insanity plaguing his mind increased.

“All from a little tap~” Thales whispered. “If you’re already so pent up like this, you’ll *love* it once I introduce you to the rest of the family.”

*N-no... I just... have to... Calm down...*

“Now, walk into the pool of life.” Thales stretched out his hand towards the crevice on the floor. “Witness the beginning.”

*N-no... Fuck... Gotta stop... but it’s so hard to think...* Even if he could get any input on his body, the desire growing in him would be too strong for him to resist. The spot of precum had begun to trickle down his leg, spreading further across the boxer’s surface. *What the hell did he do to me?* Every step he took was like a current of electricity passed through his body, his shaft twitching and growing needier every second. *I just gotta... get my hands on it... and NO! No, I have to—*

He stepped into the air, plummeting into the pool. The splash echoed in his head as he dropped deep into the liquid. Despite how shallow the pool seemed from the outside, Louis kept sinking and sinking, moving downwards like a rock. *What is this place?* The vast, red sea was endless. No matter where he looked, the only other thing besides an endless horizon of crimson liquid was the small rectangular entrance above him. *How... is this possible?*

He looked at his palm, wondering if he was in a dream. He opened and closed it, the sensation definitely feeling real.

*Oh.*

He could move again! He brashly wriggled his arms and legs, all the pent-up energy releasing. Without thinking, he took off his precum-coated underwear so that his seed wouldn't stick to his fur as he moved around. He swam back and forward, soaring through the blood as if it were water. It was much lighter than he expected, yet he didn't pay it too much mind. The experience was freeing after being stuck in his own body. For a few moments, he almost thought that he would forget how simple *movement* felt in his own skin.

Yet as he dove through the crimson sea, Louis' cock flopped against the water buoyancy. The push against his dick was minimal, but it was enough for the temptation to nest in his brain. *If I have to do it, I might as well do it where they can't see me...* Doing a double take that no one was looking at him from the entrance, Louis began to stroke his dick. He was sure that he could handle being underwater for a long time—he knew how to hold his breath well.

He pumped down on his dick, biting his lip. This was undignified and despicable, but the arousal had crept up through his body to such an extent that he couldn't find it in him to care too much. He would escape and then bury every single accursed witness to his debauchery. *No one will know, so I can just keep... doing this...* he teased the swollen head with his thumb, a smear of precum shooting out in the process. It was like his arousal was a force of nature, completely unstoppable. A hitched breath parted his lips, desperation dripping from his voice as each pump only intensified his craving.

*Why the hell am I not getting any closer? I need to get this over with...* He kept pressing his shaft, a fiery feedback loop of pleasure and unreachable expectations.

"This feels so weird... Wait." The realization that actual words came out of his mouth instead of garbled, bubbling nonsense hit him in the face. Something was wrong. *Am I... hallucinating? But I wasn't before... what?* Did he really go inside? The pool looked swallow before, so maybe he wasn't actually underwater. *I-I need to figure out what's going on. I need to—*

"You don't need to do anything, Shi."

The sound of his name—his *first* name—sent shivers down his spine. The voice was dreadfully familiar. Seeing him would've been a blessing—anywhere *but* here. He desperately glared at his erection, hoping that it would *somehow* make it go down. Someone already looking at him, stroking his cock and growing hungrier by the second, was already enough to send a concoction of humiliation that rustled something within him. Someone gawking at him as if he was a feral

animal, distinguished while he pumped and pumped against his own will; it was the deepest he could fall, but that fall was tantalizing—alluring like the blaze crackling from a giant car crash. The trepidation was already worming its way through his brain, and the element of familiarity was like gasoline poured into the growing flame.

“...San?”

The massive alpaca was floating adrift through the blood just like him. Matching him as well, the alpaca was rock-hard. His dick was thin but lengthy—almost like Legosi’s, but falling short by a few inches. His spiked wool pompadour flowed as if a current of wind was pushing against it, all while he approached Louis with a lovestruck smile on his face. The buck was so awestruck that he didn’t react as the alpaca inched closer, cupping his face between his hands.

“W-what are you...”

“Relax...” His voice was as distorted as Thales’ a few minutes ago. Louis wondered if what he was seeing was a mirage, but his hands felt so *real*; the texture of his slightly unkempt wool brushed against his face for a prickly, but most importantly *true* feel. “You’re just going to stress yourself. Don’t you want to play with us? It’s been so long, man...”

A second pair of hands planted themselves on his chest. They were petite and small, yet incredibly tender; almost like Haru’s, just a little bit more rougher and with the feel of some scars on the palms. With San there, the buck didn’t need to think to know who it was. “Kyu, are you here too?”

“Of course I am. We’ve been here for so long... waiting for you.”

“Yeah, we have. For *so* long.” San’s muzzle smashed against his’. The alpaca pushed his tongue inside, muffled moans escaping from his mouth and then Louis’.

The shock the buck took from the kiss was like yet another explosion going off right beside him. He couldn’t control himself, leaning in to return the kiss back. His member twitched as the barrage of stimulation only got closer and closer to a climax. In an almost mindless maneuver, he went to touch himself again, only to feel Kyu’s hand wrap around his shaft. He moaned even louder through the kiss, shocked at the sudden presence of the hare’s hands. She was much more gentle, taking her time with it and letting Louis *savor* the arousal.

### ***Didn’t you miss us?***

Their voices overlapped—they did so *perfectly*. It didn’t sound like two people speaking at once. There would be a margin of error present in that, even down by the millisecond. What Louis heard



was like two audios playing at the same exact time, but he couldn't focus on the oddities, because as soon as those words passed through his head, there was only one thing he could think back.

*Yes.*

The admission of longing made the stress flow out of his body. He let himself be taken in by his ex-cellmates' affection. Kyuu played with his balls, whispering about how sensitive he was down there. It made him feel so small despite dwarfing her in size.

San performed equally gracefully, moving his hands down Louis' neck before arriving at his nipples. He gently twisted them, forcing a higher-pitched moan that made him sound like a woman in heat. The origin point of his pleasure burned like fire, but the buck welcomed the pain. He was being made into nothing but base needs. He was an animal. He wanted this; love, sex, care. It all felt so good. He knew that he was in danger, but his body refused to acknowledge such a thing because the ethereal moments of swimming adrift with his friends and having them tend to him felt like the closest thing he could get to heaven.

*I don't ever want this to stop... So good...*

Both of them smelled like blueberry cologne combined with a very natural ocean scent. Louis breathed in it, basking in it as it was tainted by the combined smell of their bodies' sweat. Every moment was corruption. Every moment was a fall of grace filled with pleasure. Every stroke of his cock was like tasting the sweet, delectable bottom of the barrel. He was no different than any prostitute from the whore house the Shishigumi used to love going to.

*As long as it's like this...*

***Louis, are you finally here for me?***

The wolf's voice sounded as serene as ever. Every word he said was like a gentle lullaby. He could feel those sharp teeth pressing against his neck ever so slightly. They never did anything official, but he would always fantasize about situations like this. Being so tantalizingly close to the edge of death as he was enveloped by velvety, unending pleasure gave him emotions so potent that he couldn't even begin to name them. He was a piece of meat to the wolf, and Legosi was the only worthy one to eat it. No one hotter with a body is more formidable.

***You're finally seeing things our way.***

***Let yourself be consumed.***

***Give in.***

***Don't fight. Doesn't everyone deserve some***

He couldn't recognize the new bout of voices, but the words they said still settled deep inside him. They carried such pleasant thoughts that he couldn't resist being lulled into a fake sense of security. More and more hands began to touch his body, each trace a wonderful chip at his mental walls.

*Yeab, I want to... just for a little bit...*

Dreams went fast in real-time. Where was the harm in indulging? He could just sink a little bit deeper, and let himself be loved more. Just give in...

***You.***

This voice was different, however. It was commanding and blunt. Very familiar too... because it was his *own* voice. It felt different than his conscience speaking to him. It truly felt like he was being spoken to by another him.

***Just fall farther in. Embraced by what you've wanted for so long. Feels great, doesn't it?***

*Yeab...*

***The more you spend here, the less you want to return to the real world. A world full of pain. A world full of distrust. A world without the Legosi you once knew.***

The prospect made Louis' stomach churn. To leave everything behind; all the whispers reassuring him of his safety and his close ones coddling him with no caveat... it would be soul-crushing. The buck shook his head, San giving him some reprieve from the kiss before resuming it almost as fast as he paused it.

***You should let ME take care of it, then.***

Louis opened his eyes. San was gone. Kyuu was gone. Legosi was gone. The array of hands that had been all over his body was gone.

The only thing was himself. The only difference he could spot was that instead of his amber eyes, the other Louis had red eyes—crimson like the water that surrounded them.

“Who are you?”

***The new you.***

The Louis with the red eyes—*Rouis*, Louis decided to call him—reached for the buck's rump. He gasped, his other him's hands slowly massaging his behind.

***Neglected. How pathetic.***

Rouis began to pry his entrance open, spreading his cheeks. It didn't matter that he hadn't had sex in years. In his dream, he was loose and ready to be penetrated. This is what he wanted. This is what he *needed*. Another facet of him would take care of all the pain. He could just focus on what he wanted; pleasure.

***Now, when I count to three, we'll switch.***

"O-okahy..." He mumbled, saliva trailing down onto his chest.

***One. Only for as long as necessary. You can technically come back whenever you want to.***

"W-when will I want... to come back?" The world was spinning. Everything felt so good, but it was incomprehensible as well.

***Two. You'll still be there. Resting on the back of your head. Nice and cozy, like the pathetic hedonist you are.***

"Nice... and... cozy..."

***Three.***

///

"Do you think that he'll be resurfacing soon?" The orange feline asked, looking over at the buck's lifeless body floating across the surface of the pool.

"He'll be waking up in..." Thales glanced at his watch, looking over at the arrows. "...Two seconds."

Just as the mammoth uttered the words, Louis began to thrash around the blood. The sanguine liquid splashed all around the pool as the herbivore began to awake from what was a loooooong dream. The orange feline stared in awe, while Thales barely even blinked as he stared at his reawakened pet project.

The buck began to crawl out, coughing loudly as he got on his feet. Blood dripped from his fur, matting it and giving it a reddish tint. He looked like he had crawled his way out of a pile of corpses, a shell-shocked expression to match.

"What do you need to do?" Thales asked.

"G-gotta tell everyone what's going on..." He said, looking at his shaking hands. "Gotta tell... the world..."

“And what are you going to tell the world?”

Louis stopped for a second, still transfixed in his hands. “That there’s... nothing wrong. To call off... searches. Because everything is okay and there’s no conspiracy.”

Thales laughed. Rubbing his large hand across Louis’ head, he smiled. “Good boy.”