Back at the Nexus Wars central control room Haleon was hard at work, code flying by on the screens that surrounded the entirety of his body save for the back where Santer and Athear stood. Since they were the first two to get hit they had the least amount of clean-up to do when it came to the corrupted code that had been spread throughout their realm. “So I just got the word that Jerkah’s realm is under partial quarantine,” Athear reported. “While the creatures that they used are heavily corrupted they managed to keep it contained to one area, though there are still reports that they can’t even handle them without starting to get affected by it.”

“The code has indeed grown stronger,” Haleon said as his digital eyes blinked from screen to screen, occasionally flashing with the strange symbols that filled the hovering monitors. “With every modification he got from one of our realms it appears that the virus was able to find and exploit weaknesses within what I had created for each of you. Had he gotten all ten… well, we might have not been able to stop whatever he was about to become.”

“Then are we sure that we want to continue with this plan?” Santer replied with a huff, his arms folded across his muscular chest and rubbing against his harness. “Seems like an awful lot of risk for something that we can just purge now and be done with. I know we want to find out who this entity is but if you say you can create a reliable firewall from the data or whatever you collected I don’t see the need to put any of us in harm’s way anymore.”

Haleon didn’t respond and the three of them sat in silence for some time. Though they had all had the conversation during this crisis at one point none of them had gotten everyone together to express the point that they just wanted this to be done and over with. The only reason they hadn’t was because of the one who objected to it, and with Renzyl being the primary pusher none of the other nexus creatures believed themselves able to change the stubborn rubber dragon’s mind. At one point they had all tried, even Haleon who was more than curious to see who was clever enough to bypass his systems.

“Well it him that’s getting hit next anyway,” Athear finally said with a sigh. “If he wants to put his realm at risk in this game then I say let him do it, as long as it can’t spill over to any of ours.”

“Every other realm is locked and secured,” Haleon responded. “Thanks to our little Trojan I was able to find several vulnerabilities that he had exposed and closed them down, so travel between realms is only going to be through the official channels and that will be stopped the second that he arrives back. If everything goes according to plan then once he enters Renzyl’s realm and gets the ninth mod it should funnel him naturally into the area I’m creating right now.”

“You’re still creating it?” Santer stated in slight surprise. “Aren’t we cutting it a little close here?”

“It’s not as easy as you think creating a secure pocket dimension within a pocket dimension we’ve already created in the Nexus,” Haleon explained. “Especially if we want to make sure that we can collapse it should things not go the way they want. But trust me, by the time Renzyl is done the trap will be ready and baited.”

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Julian panted heavily as he felt into his bed, pressing the sheets against his skin as though for the first time. Underneath he could hear his bed strain and crack slightly, which made sense given the extra pounds of muscle that were compacted onto his body. While he had originally intended to go straight into Renzyl’s realm to get another mod the overwhelming pressure of the mods on his body caused him to detour and head back home instead. The second he was there he let go of the mental control and his body immediately contorted and change to release the transformations he had been holding back. In only a matter of seconds the drow that entered the room was completely gone, replaced with an amalgamation of different creatures and types that made him look like a complete monster.

“Maybe I am one…” Julian said to himself, squeezing his reptilian eyes shut when he heard the audible hiss in his voice. “Maybe this was me all along…”

From the other side of the room he suddenly heard a ringing noise come from his computer, and though Julian didn’t want anything to do with who was likely on the other line a tingle in the restraints on his body told him that it wasn’t his choice to make. He heard part of his frame snap as he took his bulked up form and rolled up the bed, the moved over to his computer. “It’s good that you’re finally coming when summoned,” the voice on the other end replied. “Perhaps we’ll get you trained after all.”

Even though Julian had a number of colorful things to say running through his head he let them all remain there. “If you’re about to tell me what I need to do next I already know,” Julian said with a sigh. “There’s only two realms left, so it’s just go to Renzyl’s realm and snag a mod from him before dealing with the robot eagle himself.”

“That’s exactly why we needed to call you,” the voice said on the other side of the line. “We actually need you to take care of Haleon first, then move on to Renzyl. We don’t care how you get that mod, you just need to do it as soon as possible. Your presence is increasingly known and every second that you continue to wait the more likely it is that you’re going to fail your mission.”

“You… want me to go up against Haleon?” Julian replied in an uneasy tone. “But… he’s the one that created the game in the first place. It doesn’t seem right that I go against him without getting Renzyl’s mod first.”

There was a brief pause on the line before Julian began to feel a tingle in his neck, ankles, and wrists. “I think we already know that we can’t exactly trust your judgement when it comes to the game,” the voice replied with a hint of anger. “Now we know what we’re doing, so take a minute and get yourself into Haleon’s realm and get that mod. I would hate for you to fall short when you’re so close to the finish line.”

With that the call ended suddenly, leaving Julian to ponder what had just happened. He was already having trouble with keeping all the mods in and though he could use one of the various abilities that came with the mods he had stolen so far he doubt it would be anything that can get through the scrutiny of those that likely guarded the realm. It seemed… backwards in a way, but he knew that there was nothing he could do about it. Even if he didn’t agree with it this entity had complete control over him and at any point they could just remove their protections and once more turn him into a monster.

Despite the threat of completely losing himself still looming over his head he found himself still not logging back into the game right away, doing anything he could to stay where he was in his apartment. As the minutes ticked away he realized that it wasn’t just the fact that he was about to go into the lion’s den, or in this case the robot eagle’s nest, but the fact that he was about to reach the end of what he was about to do. While he had imagined himself running the place once he was done once he was out of the constant bombardment of lust the reality of the situation had come down on him hard. Were ten powerful creatures really just going to let him take over their game because he had their power and the backing of an entity that was keen on taking them out?

Just as Julian considered attempting to go out of his apartment there was a knock at the door that caused his blood to freeze. With the two pets he had created likely still in the custody of police and no one else knowing his address he assumed the worst. He continued to remain frozen there where he had been standing and pacing previously, unsure of what to do until he heard the knock on the door once more. Even though he knew that it probably wouldn’t end well for him he went over and opened it, then immediately brought his hands up to his mouth in sheer terror as he felt the blood drain from his serpentine face.

“It’s… it’s you…” Julian stammered as he began to step back into his apartment, watching as the black rubber dragon began to walk into his apartment. “You… you’re Renzyl.”

“My reputation precedes me,” Renzyl replied as he gave Julian a smirk while walking inside and closing the door behind him. “It’s a rare occasion that something happens of that nature, normally I tend to take people by surprise. Speaking of surprises I have to say that seeing you with all the mods you managed to steal from the game is quite impressive.”

Julian swallowed hard as he could feel the power radiating from the creature that stood before him, not just from the ripped physique of the male but also from the sheer confidence that he exuded. This was not a creature to be trifled with and he had stolen eight things from his kin. “Look… I’ll give them back,” Julian bargained. “I just wanted to be really good at the game.”

“Through cheating,” Renzyl quickly replied, putting Julian in his place once more. “Instead of going through the proper channels and getting through the game to get better you thought to try and circumvent the rules and forge your own path. While I admire the effort I’m afraid that your attempt fell short and now it’s time to pay the devil his due… so to speak.”

“So what are you going to do?” Julian replied, trying to bolster what little resilience he had left to attempt a bit of puffery. “Strip me down, put me in the game as some sort of sex toy or something like that? Make me an example of the other players?”

While he wasn’t sure what the response was going to be Julian was surprised when the rubber dragon laughed, causing some of his fear to convert into confusion as he waited for the reason why what he said was so hilarious to the nexus creature. “And waste the opportunity that we’ve been given here?” Renzyl replied once he had finished. “Oh no, no no no, I’m here to give you exactly what you wanted… only question is would you prefer a rubber dragon head or rubber dragon wings?”

The question completely ambushed Julian and for a while he didn’t know what to say. He could feel his jaw moving but no sounds were coming out as Renzyl waited patiently on him to get over his shock and give him an answer. He had caused so much chaos and destruction… and Renzyl wanted to reward him for it with the very thing that he had been after? Even though it seemed like a trap he felt like he had little choice in the matter, something he was used to feeling at this point before he gasped and looked at the cuffs on his wrists.

“I can’t…” Julian said as he held up the restraints for Renzyl to see. “The one who gave me this power, the ability to steal from you guys, the second he finds out that I double-crossed him he’s going to turn me into some feral monster.”

“Let me guess…” Renzyl mused as he began to walk around Julian. “He wanted you to go to Haleon’s realm and take the mod from my mechanically-inclined brother before stopping into mine to claim your last piece?” Julian just nodded, which caused the rubber dragon to do the same. “Well then I hate to break it to you but becoming a beast was your fate all along.”

“Wait, what?” Julian asked in confusion.

“The one whom you serve was probably going to pull his protections on you after you had taken Haleon’s mod,” Renzyl explained. “If I had to take an educated guess the second you equipped it they were going to set you lose on the game and rain all sorts of destruction on the game realms, which in turn would damage the realms of the ones that were connected to them. A rather ingenious plot I must say, but one that I’m going to have to intervene in.”

Julian felt his heart slump down to his feet as he fell back onto his loveseat, once more hearing the wood frame break under his weight as he put his head into his clawed hands. “He was never going to let me succeed,” he muttered as he looked down at the floor. “I was being used, just like I was using the others in order to get what I want. Why did I ever get involved in all of this…”

“I think you know exactly why wanted this,” Renzyl replied, causing Julian to look up and see the rubber dragon standing right in front of him. “Just like the other games you’ve done this too you wanted the power and prestige that came with being on top, and while I don’t exactly condone your methods I understand the desire. As such I’m willing to offer you what you’ve always wanted, but in return I’m going to need to take something from you…”

“I knew it,” Julian scoffed. “What is it, my soul?”

Renzyl just shook his head, his grin faltering slightly. “Why does everyone think that when I make a bargain that I want their soul?” he said with a huff. “No, I’m going to want the corruption of the one that’s allowing you to be linked to all those mods in the first place. Now considering the situation that you’re in with your current benefactor I’m going to assume that you realize how good of a deal this is and simply ask you once more, do you want a rubber dragon head or rubber dragon wings?”

Julian sat there in mild shock as the question was once more posted to him, unsure of how to answer or even if he should. While the nexus creature was powerful what’s to say that he could beat whatever alien thing he had been harboring inside of him? What if he couldn’t even get it out, or in his attempt he just managed to turn him into a mindless beast anyway? Of course at this point, he thought to himself as his gaze met the glowing red eyes of the nexus creature, he was going to turn into one anyway if he refused…

“I guess… I’ll take the head.” Julian said, jumping when Renzyl clapped his hands together.

“An excellent choice,” Renzyl replied before holding out his hand. “Now in order to make sure things go smoothly we’re going to have to go into the game world that the mod comes from. While normally you’d have to log in and get your VR on and such I think we’re going to go ahead and take a more direct route.”

Julian felt his hand shake slightly as he grabbed Renzyl’s, feeling the smooth rubber press against his shadow wolf digits, shivering slightly from the touch as he was pulled onto his feet. As he was jerked up the scene around him shifted so suddenly it was like it had happened in the blink of an eye. By the time he was standing upright he was no longer in his apartment, instead he was in a grassy field surrounded by rubber creatures of all kinds in what seemed to be a more medieval theme. The rubber dragon continued to hold his hand and lead him towards the large castle that seemed to dominate the lobby and as they walked Julian immediately began to feel the eyes of the other players on him.

At first Julian thought that it was because he hadn’t bothered to hide his mods, though when he looked down at himself he found that he was in his drow form that was likely put there by Renyzl as a disguise. When he understood that he gathered that they were staring at him for a completely different reason. From the looks of both jealousy and lust on their faces he quickly comprehended that they were envious of the company that he was keeping. It was clear that the other players in the game wanted Renzyl, though Julian wondered just how many knew the real reason why as he was escorted to the castle.

Once he was brought inside Julian was led through the twisting hallways until he was brought in front of a massive stone door. With a wave of Renzyl’s hand the door opened and what he saw on the other side was a large portal, though unlike the ones that were created during the game this one had no markings or any other indicators of where it went. “That’s your final stop,” Renzyl instructed as he pointed to the shimmering surface of the portal. “But before you go through there we have to fulfill our bargain, especially since the one that sent you here in the first place knows that you’ve deviated from the path.”

It wasn’t until Renzyl had pointed it out that Julian realized that the strange blue substance around his neck had begun to heat up and his body had begun to shift. The rubber dragon informed him that the only reason he hadn’t gone into full beast mode was his powerful essence protecting him, but even that wouldn’t last forever. Though Julian nodded and expected to have to get on his knees in order to perform some sort of sexual act to get the mod he wanted he was surprised to have those heavy latex hands press against his head. The effect was immediate and Julian’s hands bolted up and grabbed onto Renzyl’s wrists as he felt something get pulled out of him.

Though it was hard for him to see with those shiny digits in the way he could sense that the corruption he had been spreading to so many others was going into one last person, but unlike all the other times it was leaving his body as he began to squirm under the powerful grasp. Lines of bright blue raced over Renzyl’s forearms and biceps as Julian felt his skull begin to reform. The disguise that Renzyl had used in order to bring him to this place without suspicion had already dropped and Julian hissed loudly from his goo serpent muzzle as the rubber began to spread over him. Despite merely being held by the rubber dragon the pleasure that Julian felt from his transformation was more intense than anything he had experienced, up to the point where he was panting as he began to feel two lumps push their way out of his head.

When the black rubber cascaded down Julian’s neck it blended in seamlessly with the goo of his face and the spandex of his chest where it almost looked natural, though the shiny skin he had gotten was anything but as he felt his hair shift into that of a synthetic mane. When the pair of twisted rubber horns had grown completely out of his head he suddenly felt it get let go, Julian gasping in surprise and stumbling back. He realized that he had been rubbing his groin the entire time as Renzyl also took a few steps back, though his were more measured as the bright blue lines of corruption continued to spread over the rubber dragon’s body. When he looked down at his own form Julian saw that the bindings around his wrists and ankles were gone as well as the collar when he reached up to feel his rubbery neck.

Renzyl continued to grunt and groan as blue flickered on the edges of his eyes, making Julian wonder for a second if the entity was about to corrupt one of the nexus creatures. If the rubber dragon did fall it would likely be the end of not only Nexus Wars but potentially the brothers themselves… a thought that suddenly seemed to terrify him as he watched him continue to fight. Just as it began to spread down past his abs and up his neck towards his head the light that came from the cracks in his skin flickered, then the ends turned from blue to red before racing back down to the source. It appeared as though the second Renzyl had thrown his own corruption into the mix that it spread rapidly through his system until the only traces of blue light left were in his palms. When the energy had been isolated there the nexus creature put his palms together and blew into them, then when he pulled them apart the blue corruption had crystallized into a gemstone rod slightly bigger than two of his fingers.

“Well there we have it,” Renzyl mused as he took the crystal and held it up to the light for second. “I was hoping that would work… but let’s just keep this little episode between you and me, shall we?”

Julian found his head nodding furiously as he agreed and the smirk returned to Renzyl’s face as he gestured for him to go through the portal. Even though he was still nervous it was with anticipation, not anxiety anymore as he took his newly freed form and began to walk towards the light. Without the bindings on him it felt like the first free choice he had made since he had made the deal in the first place, closing his eyes and walking through to the other side. He felt his entire body tingle with energy as he went through the portal and when he opened his eyes on the other side he found himself on a completely flat stretch of plateau with the ocean in the background on one side and a huge field in the other. Standing there waiting for him were the other nine brothers, standing there with their arms crossed while Renzyl appeared behind him and ushered him forward.

As the creature Julian had become moved forward he could feel a deep connection with all of them, even Haleon despite not having a mod as he was led to the middle of the circle of nexus creatures. “So this is the one that’s been causing me so much trouble as of late,” the robotic eagle said as he looked over the modded body of the male. “I see that you’ve already taken Renzyl’s deal to free yourself from your former master and serve us, but now before you complete the set that you had desired for so long you have one last choice that you need to make.”

“The first choice is that you choose to go no further in this,” Kirdos spoke up. “Not only will you be denied the last mod but we will be stripping you of all the others that you had collected and returning you to your realm as you are. Due to the unstable nature of your avatar here we also couldn’t allow you to come back into Nexus Wars as a player either, the corruption that you had experienced is beyond anything that we have the ability to revert.”

“The second choice is that you join us completely,” this time it was neoprene shark that spoke up. “The same reason that you can no longer make you a player also is what allows you to have this rather unique opportunity. Not only will you get Haleon’s mod but we’re also going to throw in a few additional goodies as well in exchange for serving all of us. There are very few out there that have such a distinction and you’ll be an important fixture in the game.”

“I would be?” Julian asked when he finally found his ability to speak words. “How?”

“We’ve been looking to expand the game to a new area for quite some time,” Haleon said, taking charge of the conversation once more. “While we won’t go too much into the details of such I can say that this whole little realm here would be yours to do with what you see fit. Not only would you have the power that you so desperately desired from this little adventure of yours but it would also be your way of paying back the players for your antics that had disrupted their game.”

Julian immediately felt a pang of guilt when what he had done up until this point had been mentioned. Still he had to carefully consider what they were offering, from what his previous benefactor had explained to him a deal like this meant that he was going to be wiped from the world that he had been in before. Either there would be no mention of him anywhere or he would end up as one of the many mysterious disappearances that happen every day. That idea was weighed against the body he possessed, flexing his muscles as he looked at the amalgamation of parts that he had worked very hard to earn. He stood there for who knew how long before he finally looked up at the ten sets of eyes staring at him and announced his choice loud enough to echo throughout the area…

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A few hours later Renzyl reappeared back in his actual realm in his teleportation room, surprising the silver rubber raptor that was looking at schematics on his console. “Master Renzyl!” the latex creature said once he had regained his composure. “I didn’t expect for you to be back so soon. Did the problem with the collaboration that you were working on with your brothers finish up already?”

“We have reached a conclusion in that matter,” Renzyl replied as he tossed a bright blue crystal to the synthetic saurian. “I need you to trace the power signature of that and use it to lock onto the realm that it came from. It’s not going to be in the nexus so use whatever power you need to punch through Chrono.”

Chrono nodded and plugged the crystal into a hole on the obsidian console, power immediately flowing from it into the twisted obelisks that surrounded the platform the rubber dragon walked onto. As swirling red, purple, and blue clouds formed around the device Renzyl could feel the power humming beneath his feet. The rubber raptor mentioned something about the crystal leeching a large amount of energy but Renzyl shouted at him to keep ramping up the power until it opened the portal. One of the crystals in the console cracked loudly as the essence of the Nexus continued to swirl faster and faster around him until it was a literal tornado that had formed around him.

Just as Chrono was thinking of pulling the plug the gemstone he had just inserted into the pedestal shattered, evaporating into millions of pieces as all the energy that had been gathered into it released with enough force to knock him over. The shiny silver creature immediately scrambled to his feet and looked around with mirrored eyes at the damage, but other than a few chips and cracks it appeared that the room had survived the influx. When he glanced over at the platform he found that the multi-hued clouds were still present, but the black dragon was not. Chrono just sighed to himself and set himself to clean up the mess for his master’s eventual return.

Meanwhile in an unknown location Renzyl opened his eyes and immediately his entire body shuddered slightly. The familiar sensation of being surrounded by the Nexus was gone, replaced with an alien feeling as he looked around the rather large room he had summoned himself too. Though the architecture was familiar to him in style it was a building he had never seen before and he had a fleeting suspicion that he had wandered into yet another pocket dimension. That suspicion was confirmed when he saw no doors that led in or out, the only way to get through was to either be a powerful trans-dimensional creature like himself… or the creator of the plane as he looked at a shadowed figure drinking tea at a nearby table.

“So you came,” the midnight-blue furred dragon said as he sipped his tea, looking up at Renzyl with reptilian blue eyes that glowed slightly. “I was wondering if you were going to show up after you had thwarted my plans, but here you are in the synthetic flesh.”

“Well after figuring out what was really going on here I thought that it would be best to make an appearance,” Renzyl replied while he walked over to the table, looking around as he did. “This is a nice place you have here, your realm manipulation abilities are growing quite well.”

“I learned from the best,” the dragon replied, his feathery black wings fluffing out slightly from the compliment despite his best efforts to contain it. “Now… are we just going to exchange pleasantries the whole while or are you going to tell me why you came here? To scold me no doubt…”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it scolding,” Renzyl said with a sigh as he leaned back in his chair. “But while I appreciate what you were trying to do I’ve told you before that sabotaging my brothers like that are not going to accomplish what you want. Not only does it put you in danger but it doesn’t help me the way you think it might.”

Renzyl didn’t even blink when the other dragon smashed his hands down on the table and caused everything to rattle, the fur glistening unnaturally in the light as he leaned forward. “I was only trying to help you!” he shouted before standing up and turning away. “You said that the only way would be if you controlled the Nexus realm entirely, had you just stood aside and let me finish what I had started they would be completely in chaos and you could have taken advantage of it! Then I wouldn’t have to stay here, you could finally take into the Nexus…”

“It doesn’t work that way and you know it,” Renzyl replied calmly, looking down at the liquid dripping off of the table. “Look, ever since I found out about you I’ve had numerous minions trying to find a way to bring you in without the others noticing, but if they knew… well, let’s just say letting around a rogue corruptor in a video game would be the least of the things they would despise you for. I told you what would happen if they knew of your existence, the only reason they don’t is because you live on a plane that isn’t inside the Nexus realm… and that’s where you’re going to have to stay I’m afraid.”

There was a moment of silence as the words sank into the younger dragon, and though anger was still clearly written on his face it appeared that Renzyl’s reasoning had made an impact. With a wave of the furry dragon’s hand the tea that had been spilt disappeared as well as the broken cups. By the time he sat back down again an entirely new set had formed in front of them as Renzyl poured them both a cup. “I was only trying to help…” the dragon said forlornly, Renzyl nodding.

“I know Seth,” Renzyl replied as a frown crossed his rubber muzzle, sighing slightly as he leaned back in the chair. “And I have to say that you gave the others quite the run for your money and still covered your tracks, had I not found out you tipped off one of my minions to drive Julian to you I don’t know if I would have figured it out. I suppose that’s your mother manifesting in you, she was quite powerful in her own right to the point where she pulled the wool over my eyes.”

Seth nodded and stirred the tea with his finger, letting the silence linger slightly before speaking up once more. “Do you ever think of her?” he asked. “Besides the obvious.”

“Quite a bit,” Renzyl replied. “A strong part of me wishes that she hadn’t been so dead set against my converting her, she would have made a brilliant general. Of course there was also the whole idea she thought that I was going to take over her entire kingdom… in a way it’s a bit ironic, that intense desire to have a means to protect her people and something to love was the thing that summoned me to her and she ended up pushing me away because she thought I would take all that away. It’s also the reason I didn’t know about you sooner and why our first meeting happened the way it did…”

“I’m still sorry for that,” Seth apologized. “I can only imagine what she would think with you coming here and teaching me things when you can to help me do what she groomed me for. I know it’s hard, especially with having to keep everyone in the dark.”

“Speaking of such things,” Renzyl said as he stood up. “I should probably get back and explain to Chrono what I found here when I investigated the source of the corruption so that I could see if it was you, which of course was an empty realm devoid of any troublemakers.” Even though the rubber dragon smiled at his own joke he saw Seth look down in sadness which caused him to do the same. “We’ll find a way, I’m not going to be beaten by some dusty old superstition that’s been around my brethren and I since our inception into the Nexus.”

The furred dragon just nodded and continued to look down, prompting Renzyl to turn around and begin to form a channel back into his own realm. “Wait!” Seth suddenly shouted as he jumped to his feet, the rubber turning around to look. “I know you can’t, but try to tell the others that I’m sorry, alright? Even though we’re trying to conquer them they’re still family.”

“I’ll try and pass along the message as best I can,” Renzyl replied with a chuckle, waving as a swirling mass of energy appeared in front of him and raising his voice over the swirling wind. “And don’t worry that you lost this one too, you’re still only a couple hundred years old! I didn’t convert my first area until I was a millennia!”

“Thanks!” Seth replied right before the portal activated, watching the rubber dragon disappear before sitting down once more on the chair and staring at the spot that Renzyl had been in with a look of forlorn. “Dad…”