

“You sure this is everything you need, me hearties?”

“Nya! It better be! Some of this is heavy!”

You smirked as you adjusted the box of electronic equipment in your arms. You checked on your companions, who were carrying similar boxes. To your right strolled Grim, the fire-eared, trident-tailed, cat-like imp. He was carrying a very small box - fitting for his size - while yours was more medium sized. A box matching the size of yours was in the arms of your more human comrade: a tall, slender young man with long, fuschia-colored dreadlocks, dressed all in brown.

“Thanks for the help, Cael,” you said to him gratefully.

Caelyum De Macabre shrugged cheerily.

“Don’t mention it!” he chuckled. “For one thing, helping you get this stuff was part of my job at the Mystery Shop. Sam prides himself on having everything; if I couldn’t find something like all this, he might dock my pay.”

“Would he?” you blinked.

“Probably not, but he MIGHT,” huffed Cael. “And as for carrying some of this...”

His smile became more bashful.

“...I owe you both. If it weren’t for you all...I might not have been able to reconcile with Mia.”

“How is she, by the way?” you asked, tilting your head, then smirked teasingly. “Have you proposed yet?”

“Well...um...yes and no?” chuckled Cael, pausing to flick a stray dreadlock out of his face before continuing. “We had a talk about that, actually, and...we decided it would be best to wait to get married till after I finished school.”

“Well, as soon as you have your wedding, make sure you guys send me and Grim an invite!”

Cael nodded to say he would, then both of you paused as you heard a sort of growly groan come from Grim.

“Having trouble, Little Monster?” Cael asked, tilting his own head this time.

“I wish people would stop calling me that,” grumbled the imp, and continued to march onward, tail flicking angrily behind him as the blue flames in his ears crackled faintly. “I’ve got it. The Great Grim won’t be defeated by a box!”

He paused, blinked, then mumbled: “That’s something I didn’t think I’d say today…”

Both yourself and Caelyum snickered.

“Why’d the otaku guy ask for all this, anyway?” Cael asked as the three of you continued on.

“It’s for the science expo!” Grim said.

“Science expo?” frowned Caelyum.

“Idia’s final exam,” you nodded, and explained: “Crowley is holding a science expo here in a couple of weeks, and Idia has to create something for it for one of his classes.”

“Well...cool, but why are YOU guys getting it?”

“Because the thought of leaving his room multiple times to take multiple trips nearly made Idia have a heart attack,” you answered, dryly.

Cael blinked...then sighed.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “From what little I’ve seen of Shroud, that sounds about right.”

“I hope he appreciates the help,” huffed Grim, and bounced the box of equipment in his little arms as he continued to march forward, moving ahead of you both. “It’s not easy hauling all this from the Mystery Shop all the way Igni-YIPE!”

Grim let out a shrill yelp, and fell back onto his bunce; he’d bumped into something, which hit the floor with a crash. The box full of equipment fell to the ground. Yourself and Cael quickly but carefully put down your own boxes and hurried to gather the fallen items and inspect them swiftly, while Grim growled and rubbed his sore haunches.

“Nothing’s damaged,” Cael sighed with relief.

“Are you alright, Grim?” you asked.

“No,” pouted Grim. “My dignity is wounded, and it’s hard keeping it intact as it is.”

You smirked affectionately.

“Oh my gosh!” exclaimed a new voice. “Are you okay?!”

The three of you looked up to see a new figure rushing towards you all. The figure was a young man, dressed in the black-and-blue, informal, leather-jacket-clad dorm costume of Ignihyde. His skin was pale, and he had moppish hair, which had been dyed mint green with blue tips. His eyes were heterochromatic, and similarly colored: one was emerald, the other cobalt. He was somewhat gangly in build, yet handsome in features.

“Nya...I’m not hurt, if that’s what you mean,” Grim muttered out, stumbling back onto his hindpaws and dusting off his fur.

“I wasn’t talking to you!” the young man snapped, catching Grim off-guard...then knelt down to what Grim had bumped into. “Abe! Abe, are you okay?”

The figured Grim had bumped into, you soon realized, was a robot. It was dressed like a porter, and - in contrast to the synthetic skin and almost fully human appearance of Ortho Shroud - had a decidedly mechanical, industrial look: all metal plates and gear-twisting joints. Its face was mask-like, with two yellow lamps for eyes. The robot shook its head with a whirring noise, as if to clear it, then the mute bot - it had no mouth - nodded to the young Ignihyde student.

The mint-eyed boy sighed with relief, and smiled at the bot as if it were an old friend, patting its shoulder. Then, he glared at Grim almost childishly.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?!” the lad snapped.

“Me?!” snapped Grim, stomping one foot angrily, ear-fire flaring up. “Your stupid robot was the one who bumped into me!”

The green-and-blue-haired youth gasped, looking deeply offended, and hugged Abe close.

“Don’t listen to the mean little raccoon, Abe,” he crooned to the bot, stroking the back of its head like it was his child. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

“I AM NOT A RACCOON!” screamed Grim. “I don’t even LOOK like one; why does everyone keep calling me that?!”

The student from Ignihyde was too busy fawning over his robot like it was a spoiled child to

answer. The robot squirmed, its yellow eyes flickering; you got the feeling that if a machine had the power to blush, Abe would have been doing so from all the attention.

Grim pouted and grumbled while yourself and Caelyum stepped closer to address the newcomer, who helped the robot to its feet. The machine called Abe clattered and clanked a bit as the young man pulled a screwdriver out of his pocket and began to check over the mechanical wonder's form.

"Buddy, I keep telling you, you have to make sure to look both ways," whispered the young scientist. "Maybe some of your circuits need rewiring; it's like your memory bank has a hole or two in it somewhere. Tch. My fault for using-"

"Excuse me," you spoke up. "Who are you?"

The Ignihyde student looked to you...then smiled.

"Oh, hey there!" he said, waving with the hand that held the screwdriver. "Name's Xavier. Xavier Madoc, if you, ah, wanna get all formal and stuff, heh. I'm a, uh, first year here in the dorm. I was just taking my buddy Abe here for a tour around the campus!"

He patted his robot's back; Abe stumbled forward, and rubbed his arm, looking a little nervous as he nodded to you in greeting. Sensing the AI's anxiety, you gave a disarming smile of your own and bowed your head in return. This seemed to make Abe perk up a bit.

"Nice to meet you both," you said.

"Speak for yourself," mumbled Grim.

"Hey, not Abe's fault you're an imperfect specimen of biology," frowned Xavier. Before either yourself or Grim could point out Abe was clearly not a perfect machine, either, Xavier's eyes lit up with recognition as he noticed the other member of the party. "Oh, it's you again! Kale, yeah?"

"Cael," De Macabre corrected, with a mild smile. "Is this your presentation for the science expo?"

"Pffft! Oh-ho, yeah, like...c'mon. Making artificial life? That's, like, SO twenty years ago," Xavier snorted. "Nope! I've got somethin' a whole lot bigger in mind! It's gonna REALLY put me on the map!"

“After how much all those parts cost you, I should hope so,” mumbled Caelyum.

“Hold on, back up,” you said, giving a “time out” gesture. “The two of you know each other?”

“Only peripherally,” admitted the shopkeeper’s aid. “Just like you guys, I helped Xavier pick out some items for his project.”

“Cool,” you commented.

“They work perfectly, by the way!” Xavier butted in, and then giddily clapped his hands.

“Ohhhh, this is gonna Rock. The. World. Like, if there was a world, and my new invention could hold it, it would just...”

He made explosive noises as he mimed shaking something in his hands, then puffed them out with a long, whining “Aaaaaah!” noise.

“...That would be it,” he declared, grinning from ear to ear. “Nothing is gonna top this one, nothing!”

“Well, you seem pretty confident,” you chuckled.

“Trust me, if there’s one thing I know...well, actually, I know, like, a lot of things, I guess?”

Xavier frowned, turning his eyes heavenward as he counted on his fingers. “I mean, there’s, like mechanical engineering, alchemy, anatomy, welding, potion making, computer science...basically, yeah, if there’s one thing I can do, it’s how to make something awesome. With SCIENCE!”

The last word was spoken with great melodrama, complete with Xavier lifting one hand theatrically, throwing his head back with pride and puffing out his chest arrogantly. Abe seemed to roll his eyes at his creator’s hammy attitude.

“I wouldn’t get too cocky,” Cael said warningly, as he stepped back to lift his box up off the floor.

“Yeah! Especially with all this to contend with,” Grim grinned a little smugly, picking his own box back up as well.

Xavier frowned as he saw you lift the third and final box, now looking both curious and perhaps borderline suspicious.

“Yeah, about that...what’s with all the toys?” he said, pointing to the box with a slight frown, as if the items within were beneath him. “Is there, like, a kid entering the expo, or are you cleaning out trash...?”

You blinked, and the three in your party shared looks. The strange part about that comment was it didn’t sound like it was meant to be an insult. Xavier seriously seemed to see the tools in the boxes as inferior.

“These are for Idia. Your dorm head,” you said, slowly.

Xavier’s eyes widened, and so did his smile.

“Oh! Oh, COOL! So, wait, holdupholdupholdup...you’re saying Idia Shroud - THE Idia Shroud - is gonna come outta his hideout and tussle with the muscle at the contest?”

“That’s...one way of putting it, yep,” you answered unsteadily.

“That’s TERRIFIC!” Xavier exclaimed, clapping his hands and bouncing on his heels with giddy delight.

Abe tilted his head with curiosity, and Xavier, noticing the robot’s reaction, decided to explain.

“When I beat Idia, that’ll be, like, the best thing ever!” Madoc told Abe. “I can finally show just how perfect and brilliant my machines are! Abe, it’s gonna be DA BOMB! HA HA HA!”

Xavier cackled with almost unhinged delight, pumping his fists. Abe turned his lamplike eyes towards your group.

You see what I have to put up with? he seemed to be saying.

“Be wary,” Caelyum warned. “You shouldn’t underestimate Shroud: he’s dorm head for a reason. He literally made his own brother, you know; have you made anything that impressive before?”

Xavier looked to Cael...and his smile fell. A sudden coldness came over his expression, and his eyes narrowed.

“Are you saying my machines aren’t impressive?” he whispered, his voice lowering an octave.

“No, I don’t think he’s saying that at all!” you interrupted, sensing the tension and wanting to cut it short. “Just...um...Idia’s not half bad either, you know.”

Xavier smirked, but his eyes were still glittering like emerald daggers.

“Hmph. He may be dorm head, but he’s got nothing on The Madoc,” Xavier boasted, jabbing a thumb at himself...then, his eyes brightened, and his whole being became exuberant once more. “Hey! Hey, you should totally come see the expo! All of you! That’d be great!”

“Then we could see you win, huh?” you smirked right back, already sensing his thoughts.

“Well...or see the others lose,” he said with a sinister laugh. “Your choice of how you wanna word it.”

“Nya...that seems a jerky way to put it,” grumbled Grim, but no one paid attention to him.

“Well, Crowley is probably gonna ask us to do something there anyways, with his track record,” you muttered. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw you there.”

“Perfect,” smiled Xavier, then cocked his head innocently. “Uh...right, I, ah...yeah, just realized I never got who YOU were?”

You gave your name quickly.

“I’m Prefect of the Ramshackle Dorm,” you explained, and pointed to Grim. “This is Grim.”

“Aww...nice that your dorm allows pets.”

Grim looked like he was pondering the many ways he could make life excruciatingly painful for Xavier Madoc.

“Why do you say that?” Cael spoke up. “Does yours not?”

“Honestly, I dunno,” shrugged Xavier. “I’ve never had a pet. Never wanted one, really.”

He tapped Abe on the chest; the robot - who had been staring off at something on a wall - jumped at the clanking on his abdomen.

“I just deal with machines,” he said. “Pets are so...fussy. And unpredictable. You have to feed them and clean up their mess...my machines are clean and easy to handle. A machine can’t leave you or get sick; if there’s a malfunction, just a touch of oil or a twist of a wrench, and it’s all fixed, usually! And, hey, if something breaks, I can just rebuild it!”

Abe looked hurt.

“Oh, not you, buddy,” Xavier chuckled, patting his metal shoulder. “You’re irreplaceable.”

Abe seemed to smile, but since he had no visible lips, you couldn’t tell.

“I think it’s a good thing to have pets,” Caelyum argued, then gave a joking smile. “Maybe you should buy a lab rat or something?”

Xavier shuddered.

“Right, and be around animals AND people? Thanks, I think I’ll pass.”

“And you were teasing Idia about leaving HIS hideout?” Grim taunted.

Xavier glared at him.

“I’m not scared of people,” he protested. “I just...don’t like crowds. I don’t like most people, either.”

“You seem to be chatting easily with us,” you observed.

“Well...yeah, but...no offense, I’m not gonna be inviting you to my lab anytime soon,” Xavier smiled weakly. “I like my privacy, that’s all.”

You weren’t quite sure how to respond to that.

“Speaking of,” Xavier went on, without waiting to see if you WOULD respond, “I gotta get back to work: I’ve gotta work out some calibrations for my new invention, then maybe see about modifying Abe’s storage banks, not to mention figuring out a few blueprints for future projects...”

“Jeeze, don’t you do anything fun?!” Grim exclaimed.

“Science IS fun,” huffed Xavier, sticking his nose up snootily. “And I don’t see a reason to stand here and be insulted by a furball.”

While Grim sputtered, offended, Xavier looked to Abe.



“Come, my friend!” he called out, theatrically. “Back to the laboratory!”

Abe saluted, and he and his creator turned on their heels before marching away. The metallic footsteps of the robot echoed down the hall for several seconds after they vanished from sight.

“I don’t like him,” grumbled Grim.

“We gathered that,” Caelyum smirked.

“He seems...eccentric,” you murmured, then shook your head. “Then again, I guess it’d be hard to find anybody at this school who ISN’T at least a little bit odd.”

“He seemed like a good sort to me,” Cael nodded, then frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps a bit too sure of himself for his own good...not to mention a little too antisocial...”

“Hey, I’ve dealt with Idia; trust me, that was nothing on the antisocial level,” you scoffed, as the three of you went down a side passage and headed off to find Idia’s room.

“That’s not quite what I mean,” mumbled Caelyum, and then went on, aloud. “You know the donation jar at the Mystery Shop?”

“You mean for the Medical Center?”

“Yeah,” Cael said. “He didn’t donate anything. That’s not surprising, I guess, and it wouldn’t have really bothered me at all - donations from customers are hit and miss, always - but when I asked him if he’d like to make a donation, his response was...unsettling.”

“Nya?” Grim meowed, one ear flicking with curiosity. “And what did he say?”

“He said, ‘Sorry, but there are too many people out there to worry about the sick ones.’”

You blinked...then scowled.

“Okay...that’s...not very nice...and a little confusing,” you murmured.

“Yeah,” Caelyum said. “The weirdest part was he then started rambling about the machines in the Medical Center. He seemed more interested in how the machines worked than what they actually did to help people.”

You glanced back over your shoulder. Now, you were starting to feel worried. A person that

strange, that obsessed, and that sure of his own superiority...

...Suddenly, Xavier's eccentricities were starting to take a more sinister undercurrent.

"Let's just forget about him," snorted Grim. "Come on, the scaredy-cat's waiting!"

"Right," you muttered, then shook your head to clear it, and picked up the pace, this time taking the lead yourself. "Come on, you two...if Idia's going to have any shot at that science expo - Madoc or no Madoc - he'll need these parts."

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Several weeks later, the science expo at Night Raven College commenced. Various students from across the campus were readying their inventions and projects. You had been right, of course: the Headmaster had, indeed, demanded that you attend the expo. As custodians, your job was to help those preparing their experiments, and to clean up any messes that might come up. By some miracle, not a drop of an acid, nor a bit of any base, had yet to stain the floor, and nothing solid had broken.

Of course, that could change at any time, so yourself and Grim wandered around the expo, peeking at different experiments on display. A lot of what was being shown you didn't fully understand - science had never been your strongest point - and, truth be told, the majority of the students involved were not ones you knew personally.

There were, however, two familiar faces you were hoping to see.

"Nya...where are the Shrouds?" meowed Grim, flicking his tail from side to side and blinking his big blue-green eyes up at you. "Shouldn't Idia and Ortho have set up their panel already?"

"Yeah, they should have," you nodded. "Maybe they just didn't get things ready in time?"

"Not the way I heard it."

The voice caught your attention, and both yourself and Grim smiled as you saw who it belonged to.

"Oh, Cael! So you came here after all, huh?" you grinned.

"Yup. I actually invited Mia, but she couldn't make it; some kind of royal business," the shopkeeper's assistant shrugged. "I wanted to see how the items Sam and I sold were being used, so I asked him if I could get out of my job at the Mystery Shop a few hours early to check things out."

“I see. I’m sorry to hear Mia couldn’t make it,” you said, sympathetically.

Caelyum smiled gently.

“For years I lived without her,” he said, faintly. “Even if we’re not together, my heart will always be with her...and hers with mine...”

“Ugh...gag me,” sneered Grim. “You don’t have to make it sound so dramatic, you know; you’re a bigger ham than the guys at Pomefiore!”

Cael blushed and you giggled.

“Anyway...Ortho told me he and Idia had finished their work,” Caelyum informed you and the imp. “They actually have it stored here at the hall, since they felt that would make it easier for transport and setup.”

“That’s strange, then. Even Idia usually isn’t late for these things,” you murmured, looking a little concerned.

“He’s not?” Cael asked, curiously. “I would have thought, with his reputation, he would try his hardest to avoid them.”

“Well, Idia usually has Ortho attend the Dorm Leader Meetings - and other events - and then uses his computer to do a voice stream from his room,” you explained. “That way he can make his presentations without having to face the crowds directly. There should be no reason for at least one of them to not be-”

“Excuse me! Pardon me! Coming through! Thank you!”

“Idon’twannagoIdon’twannagoIdon’twannagohelphelp...!”

Grim turned around fast at the sound of the familiar voices, and tugged on your leg, pointing in the direction they were coming from. Both you and Cael quickly looked in the direction he had indicated, and saw the crowd of students and helpful staff members parting...

...Revealing the form of Ortho Shroud, who all but skipped merrily along through the campus convention hall where the expo was being held, dragging along what looked like an enormous black-and-blue bag. You quickly realized the “enormous bag” was really Idia Shroud, who was lying belly down on the floor. His dead-white hands were holding up his hoodie in a

steel-knuckled grip, while his glowing blue, ethereal hair spilled across the floor from under it.

Ortho noticed your group soon enough; his cybernetic eyes widened, and he waved, trotting over to three of you. You looked to Caelyum, who was staring bug-eyed, stunned by the bizarre tableaux.

You had to admit, it said something that, somehow, you were a lot less weirded out.

“Hi ya, Prefect!” Ortho chirped in his electronic way, as he stopped a few feet away from your trio. You could see that, now at a standstill, Idia was shaking like a leaf.

“Uhhhh...hi,” you greeted awkwardly.

“Nya! Why are you two so late?” Grim grimaced.

“And what exactly is going on?” Cael asked, sounding like he was trying not to shout that out in confusion.

“Oh! Well, um, Big Brother’s thingamajig that he uses for remote conference? It, uh...kinda had a malfunction,” Ortho said, an embarrassed smile flickering behind the mask-like apparatus on his android face.

“Malfunction?” the three of you repeated, looking at each other, and then back at Ortho.

“Yeah,” Ortho said, and scratched the back of his head. “My brother convinced a stray cat into our room so he could give it some food...but when he tried to snuggle it, it bolted back out the window, and knocked the device off a table and onto the floor. We...didn’t have time to fix it.”

A keening whine from Idia made it hard from you to determine if you should laugh or just feel sorry for the poor, anxious noble son.

“Yeesh...and that’s what all this is about, huh?”

“Yep!” Ortho said, cheerily. “Big Brother still has to attend his final for the class, after all! So I made sure to get him here with enough time to set up shop!”

Ortho’s chest was puffed out with pride; you swore, if he had a tail, it would have been wagging like a puppy’s. You couldn’t help but smile, even as Grim and Cael both rolled their eyes, crossing their arms over their chests.

“Well, good job, Ortho; that’s being responsible!” you said, and playfully patted the boy-like droid’s head; you would never understand how that fire-like hair DIDN’T burn your fingers, but no matter. “I’m sure once he’s done having a panic attack, he’ll be proud of you.”

Ortho giggled happily and his eyes crinkled with another sweet “smile.”

You now turned your attention to Idia, as Ortho released his leg. The instant, Idia felt his leg being let go, he stopped shaking and froze. Slowly, he rolled onto his back...and huge amber yellow eyes, glowing like warning lights, peered out from behind the hoodie.

Idia took one look at the crowd in the hall, and the faces looking at him...and squeaked like a mouse before hiding his face. He clumsily tried to get to his feet and run away...only to let out a shrill, strangled sound as he tripped on his own feet and fell over. Ortho let out an “eep!” and rushed to catch hold of his brother before the computer genius could eat tile.

“Nervous, Idia?” Grim drawled with a smirk. Cael couldn’t help but chuckle as Idia whimpered with terror, quivering once again.

“P-People,” came Idia’s voice behind his hood. “Too...t-too many people...please...t-take me back to my room...I-I’d rather watch the English dubbing of Ghost Stories than do this...heck, I’d rather play Iron Gear: Survive than be here...!”

“Not till you finish your presentation,” Ortho said. “Come on, Big Brother! Show everybody how cool you are!”

“I don’t wanna be cool!” Idia nearly sobbed. “Please, not this! Not...”

He gulped and nearly choked on the next words.

“...T-Talking to people...having them judge me...no, no, not that...”

Idia shook his head behind his hood stubbornly. Ortho looked at you helplessly. You sighed and knelt down to Idia’s level. You cautiously reached out to the trembling socially anxious scientist, who whimpered as he felt your hands brush against him, and curled up tightly, as if afraid of being struck. With a sympathetic smile, you carefully parted his hands and pulled down his hood.

His face now fully exposed to the outside world, Idia blinked his giant yellow eyes at you with real fear. His dark lips were trembling, and you swore those golden irises were getting a little misty as he looked on the verge of crying with fear. You could hear his shark-like teeth chattering as if winter had come early that year.

“Idia,” you said softly, “It’s got to be done, and you’re the only one who can do it.”

“Why is that?” peeped Idia, childishly.

“Because it’s YOUR creation, Idia,” you said, with an encouraging smile. “No one knows it better than you do.”

“Yeah! It’s not like we can talk about all this science-y junk!” Grim broke in...then subsided when Idia reacted by looking hurt, while Ortho gave him an almost murderous glare.

“The presentation only has to be a few minutes long,” Cael thought to put in helpfully.

“A few SECONDS is too much!” Idia said, and hurried to try and hide his face again...but you prevented it with your hands as you carefully held his wrists. His black-nailed fingers twitched with mortal dread as he looked into your earnest, honest eyes.

“Idia, does Ortho know anything about the project?”

“Well...n-no, not enough to tell them everything,” Idia admitted, squirming uncomfortably and almost guiltily, like a child admitting he’d stolen five cookies from the cookie jar.

“Is there anybody else who could give the presentation on your behalf, with the knowledge you have?”

Idia blinked. Those last few words seemed to have stirred something in his breast, and he looked at you anew, blinking a few times, as realization dawned on his pale face.

“...No...I guess not,” he said, softly.

“Well then?” you urged, tenderly, raising one eyebrow.

Idia bit his lip; his sharp teeth almost drew blood. (Almost.)

“...But...b-but I’m scared,” he cheeped out, like a wounded baby bird.

It took all your willpower not to kiss his forehead. How could a denizen of the Underworld be so friggin’ cute?!

“It’s okay to be scared,” you assured him. “Being brave means doing things even though you are

scared.”

“No, being brave means enduring unpleasant situations without showing fear,” Idia droned.

“That’s literally in the dictionary.”

“And how brave do you think the Lord of the Underworld was when he fought the Mighty Hercules?”

“A lot braver than I am!” Idia replied, without missing a beat, and promptly hid his face again, rolling onto his side, like a child refusing to get out of bed. “I’m not doing it!”

You bit your own lip, and looked around awkwardly. A LOT of people were staring, and that was only going to make Idia feel worse. You had to pacify this quickly.

“Mr. Shroud.”

You blinked up at Caelyum, who knelt down beside you with a reassuring smile of his own. Idia peeked out of his hoodie timidly.

“Wh-What?”

“Once this is over, I’d be happy to give you a free Jumbo Jar of Jelly Babies from the Mystery Shop as a reward for your efforts,” Cael offered.

Idia’s eyes went wide at the mention of so much candy.

“...F-Free?”

“Yes,” Cael nodded. “I’ll just put my own money back into the shop to make up the expense. BUT,” he said, in a stern, almost parental tone, holding up one finger, “You have to at least try to make your presentation first.”

Idia licked his lips, but he still looked uncertain.

“...What if they don’t like my creation, though?” he whispered, shivering a little.

“They’ll love it, Big Brother!” Ortho declared. “It’s the best thing ever! You’re so smart, it has to be!”

“And all three of us,” you thought to add, “Will be there. Myself, Cael, and Grim: we’ll be

watching and cheering you on.”

Idia squirmed again.

“...The watching part I could live without, but...”

Finally, at long last...he gave a scared, small, hesitant smile.

“...The cheering part...I-I’d appreciate it,” he chuckled, and seemed to perk up a bit. “And, h-hey...I get lots of candy out of it, yeah?”

“Sugary gummies galore,” winked Caelyum.

Idia paused once more, and took a deep breath, before finally relenting: “F-Fine...I’ll...I’ll try not to screw up...”

“That’s the spirit, Brother!” cheered Ortho joyously, and helped Idia to his feet. Idia gave a nervous nod to his brother, then gave you a shy wave and a smile that showed just a hint of his pointed teeth, as the young android led him away to another part of the hall.

Both yourself and Caelyum stood to your full heights and sighed with relief.

“Sam’s gonna kill me,” he mumbled. “He gets pretty strict with inventory; I think it’s the con-man in him...”

“Just don’t make a deal with him, and you’ll be fine,” Grim giggled.

“You know, maybe another incentive we could have used was a chance for ‘snuggle time’ with a certain ‘Little Monster,’” you said, airily, giving Grim a teasing smile. The cat-like little beast blushed bright red, and his ears flared up.

“Th-That’s not funny, Minion!” he snapped, huffishly, while Cael chortled merrily at the thought.

Just then, another laugh was heard from the far end of the hall; you recognized it instantly.

“Xavier?” you murmured, remembering the strange scientist from a few weeks ago.

“Sounds like the judging has begun,” Caelyum remarked, as he noticed a group of official-looking gentlemen, along with some students, gathered in the area.



“Nya! Let’s go see what’s up!” Grim suggested, and loped off on all fours to do exactly that.

You and Caelyum shrugged to each other, and followed at a casual pace.

You soon came to the panel hosted by Xavier. To one side stood Abe, who had traded out his porter’s costume for a buttoned-up labcoat...although, amusing, he still wore his porter’s cap upon his head. The mechanical man’s mask-like, expressionless, featureless face somehow still managed to look rather bashful as he waved shyly at the mob that now surrounded the corner spot.

It was Xavier Madoc himself, however, who most arrested your attention. He stood in front of a table, over which was draped a light gray table cloth...and on top of that was a large, oddly-shaped...something. No one could tell what, exactly, for a second tablecloth - also colored gray - was covering it. Xavier was dressed in a long labcoat, which stretched past his knees and halfway down his shins. Underneath this, the eccentric inventor wore blue jeans and white tennis shoes; the former was held up by a peculiar teal-colored belt. A light gray midriff shirt, with black pinstripes, was perhaps the weirdest part of his ensemble; emblazoned on his chest, upon this shirt, was an unusual design: a black-stenciled image that, on one side, resembled a skull, while the other side resembled a clockwork gear, the two parts meshed together unsettlingly. With his wild, wide grin and the way he bowed to the crowd - more like a circus ringmaster than a distinguished scholar - one couldn’t help but find him a most uncommon figure.

“Ladies and gentlemen...and undecided!” he greeted, and laughed at his own joke (no one else did, but he didn’t seem to care) before continuing: “Allow me to introduce myself: I am Xavier Madoc! Also, allow me to introduce my trusty counterpart, Abe! His name stands for Assistant Bot Extraordinaire. Yeah, ha, not the most, uh...SCIENTIFIC name I could’ve come up with, but what can I say? I liked the acronym.”

Abe rolled his electronic eyes and nodded to the judges, who nodded back before refocusing on Xavier, who rubbed his eyes as he moved to the opposite side of the table from Abe.

“Friends and colleagues of science, let us talk about emotions, shall we?” he began, still speaking in an almost carnival-esque tone of voice, which made Cael roll his eyes and scoff.

“He sounds almost like Sam at times,” the Swamplands native mumbled.

You and Grim smiled at him, then looked back at Xavier as he began his spiel.

“Emotions are a fickle thing,” Madoc said, lifting a finger in emphasis. “Emotions can be our strength, but they can also be our weakness. What a beautiful world it would be if we could all

be logical, without those...pesky things like jealousy or greed to spur us in the wrong direction. Even here, in a school of black magic, love is just as revered as vengeance. There is a reason, of course...two, really. One, I would argue, is human frailty. We cannot help ourselves; we are, very tragically, made to be feeling creatures more often than thinkers. But another is perhaps more practical, in this particular world...and that, my friends, is that we need it as fuel. Magic is a powerful entity in our world, arguably more than science, and while it is not uncommon for the two to mesh together, no one has found a way to properly harness the power of the human spirit that allows our magic to work. Well, my friends...I, Xavier Madoc, have found the solution to that quandary!”

So saying, Xavier through out both arms in a grand gesture and sang out: “TA-DA!”

Silence. Nothing happened. The judges and the crowd just stared at Xavier awkwardly.

Xavier blinked, then looked to Abe, who was looking around the room blithely. He frowned and whistled, getting the droid’s attention.

“Abe,” he said, and pointed to the table. “You’ll want to take off the tablecloth on that cue, ‘kay, buddy?”

Abe nodded, and scooted closer to the table.

“Thank you,” whispered Xavier, and tried again, louder: “*TA-DA!*”

A horrible grinding sound was heard as Abe grabbed the tablecloth on the table, nearly knocking over the item under the second veil as he gave it a tug. Xavier yelled for him to stop, and swooped in just in time to right the object before it could crash to the floor.

You forced yourself not to laugh; Grim and Caelyum were not inclined to do the same.

“So much for ‘the perfection of machines,’ huh?” the fluffy little imp whispered.

“Hush!” you scolded...but internally, you conceded he had a point.

Abe shuffled sheepishly as Xavier brushed his mint-and-cerulean bangs from his face and gave him an impatient, toothy smile. The dark doctor-in-training could hear some of the crowd snickering, and he hated it.

“Not THAT tablecloth,” he said through clenched teeth, and pointed to the device under the covering. “THIS tablecloth. Got it?”

Abe nodded, looking like a scared child.

*“Thank you,”* Xavier sighed in frustration, and took a deep breath before trying one more time:  
***“TA-DA!”***

Finally, Abe swirled off the right tablecloth with great panache. Underneath it was unveiled a strange machine, about the size and shape of the average backpack. Most of it was covered in white leather, but several mechanical apparatuses were jutting from it. Among these were two large copper tanks on either side, several steel cylinders, and two long tubes of tough, transparent rubber, which led from one of the sets of caps into the copper tanks. Two beige-colored leather straps were attached, and it was into these straps that Xavier slipped his long, lanky arms, putting the strange pack on his back.

“Introducing my newest invention!” Xavier declared with a beaming, proud smile. “The Emotion Reservoir Power Converter - or ERPC, if you want to shorten it. We can’t all have cool acronyms like Abe, heh...ANYWAY! I would argue that negative emotions have more importance here than positive ones: Blot is the result of an overabundance of black magic use, and much of dark wizardry involves the channeling of negative power. The ERPC can drain small doses of negative emotional energy directly from the subject, and then convert them into magical energy, without the user suffering a state of Overblot!”

“Can you give us a demonstration?” one of the judges spoke up. He was a portly man, with spectacles perched upon a crooked nose.

“I hoped you would ask that, Dr. Alcott,” Xavier answered with a Devil-May-Care wink, then looked to his robotic companion. “Abe? The book, please!”

The robot nodded, and reached into the folds of his labcoat, before handing his creator a small book with a bright pink cover. On it was the title “Princess Pony and the Island of Fluffy Squirrels,” by Lorina Faustus.

Xavier blushed bright red and swatted at Abe, who hurriedly put the book away while giggles and chuckles once again came from the audience.

“I told you not to...! THE OTHER BOOK, ABE!”

Abe quickly fished a second book out: this was a black leatherbound volume with the image of a galaxy festooning its front. Xavier took it and sighed, shaking his head before flipping to a bookmarked page.

“Here,” he declared, pointing at the page in question and tapping it with a finger, “Is an excellent example. Keep in mind, gentlemen and ladies, I am but a first year here. The spell I’m about to perform is typically a fourth-year level spell, and I have taken no classes on the subject. Should you wish for confirmation of this later, simply consult the members of the staff on standby today.”

Xavier thus cleared his throat, and lifted one hand, extending his thin fingers towards the ceiling before mumbling the incantation in the book. He closed his eyes, furrowing his brow and gritting his teeth, trying to concentrate...his fingers clawed as he flexed them, arm trembling as he forced all the power he could muster into his spellcasting...

A dim, murky cloud of purple - shapeless and formless - hovered over the heads of the judges. Specks and blotches of many hues, like splatters of watercolor on a half-burned piece of parchment, appeared and disappeared...before, finally, Xavier gasped and relinquished the attempt, and the colors all faded, the cloud dissipating in an instant.

“Haaaaah...a-as you can...ahem...as you can s-see,” Xavier gasped out, wiping some sweat from his brow. “That was hardly an easy task, gentleman...and hardly a good demonstration of that spell. Thankfully, my new invention can allow me to ‘upgrade’ my abilities, through use of my Unique Magic...”

He lifted his left hand, the one that he had first used to try and enact the spell, and flexed his fingers as he recited his magic words.

“...Paint & Thinner.”

There was a flash of turquoise-toned light...and suddenly, Xavier’s left arm had undergone a startling and somewhat disquieting transformation. The fingers and thumb of his left hand had turned into a set of what looked like syringes, the needles resembling claws, his whole hand now seemingly mechanical and metallic.

“My power,” Xavier smirked, flexing his taloned hand, “Allows me to extract emotion from a person. This is the ‘Thinner’ part of the equation. The emotional energy is converted to a liquid state. I can, of course, also return the emotions to their original owners, in a gaseous state: this is the ‘Paint’ aspect. Now, I know this is, uh...you know...a little freaky, but...I’m going to need a volunteer.”

He handed the spellbook to Abe and added: “My assistant doesn’t exactly have veins to target.”

Naturally, at first, nobody stepped forward. Xavier's expression shifted, and he started to seem crestfallen, perhaps even a little scared...

You sighed, shook your head, and stepped closer, raising one arm.

"I volunteer," you said.

Xavier grinned, and nodded gratefully.

"Thank you, Prefect," he said, and addressed the audience as - with the clinical care of a master surgeon - he pulled you closer by one arm. "Everyone watch closely, please."

He then looked back at you; his voice was the professional, bland calm of a medical expert as he said the timeless refrain: "This won't hurt a bit."

The syringes were inserted into your arm. You closed your eyes, trying to relax, remembering all the injections you had gotten. You did not feel the slightest prick as they did their work, and soon, bright green fluid - the color of some toxic acid - was drawn from your very body into the syringe fingers.

"Sit down," whispered Xavier, in the same clinical, almost cold tone, easing you into a nearby chair which Abe had prepared. His actions seemed more dismissive than in the vein of proper bedside manners. You sank into it gratefully. You felt...lightheaded. Cold. Almost ill. You didn't know it at the time, but before the congregation of onlookers, your skin had suddenly turned very, very pale, and your hair and eyes had lost all color. Even your clothes seemed to have become more faded, causing you to look like a monochrome character from a black-and-white movie.

You hoped the sickening, hollow sensation inside you wouldn't last long as Xavier turned to the audience again.

"Generally speaking, draining the emotion from the victim will leave them feeling weakened; enough power drawn can lead to them being rendered unconscious. My machine allows me to withdraw more than I would usually be able to manage in a single dose without even touching the subject, should I wish...but for safety purposes, I think we had better focus on the OUTPUT demonstration. Observe..."

He closed his eyes...and suddenly, the syringes emptied, as if the power was being drawn through his arm and into his core...then, the same green fluid bubbled through the pipes, and a slosh came from the copper tanks as your emotions filled them with liquid energy.

“Now,” said Xavier, and waved a hand for Abe to open the book and show him the page, as his syringe hand lifted to the ceiling. “Let’s see if the emotional energy I’ve drained from my volunteer can be converted to enough magical power, via the ERPC, for the spell I attempted earlier. Remember, everybody: first year here...”

Once again, Xavier lifted his hand to the ceiling...and this time, as he spoke the incantation, the purple cloud became a beautiful circle of deep indigo, revealing the boundless reaches of outer space. Splashes of color became perfect images of planets and stars, so real in appearance one swore they could touch them. In fact, one student DID try to touch one...and yelped, as the sun actually burnt their finger slightly.

“Careful,” chuckled Xavier, and then flexed his fingers...and the beautiful image disappeared. He then turned to the judges and, without a word, bowed. He had rested his case.

The judges seemed most impressed. Dr. Alcott and the others applauded and smiled, looking quite pleased. However, they had other presentations to attend to, and after a few more perfunctory questions, they moved on.

As the judges moved on, and the crowd went with them, Xavier looked two, kneeling down to look at your face. You felt dizzy and queasy, and the look on his face indicated he could tell. He extended his fingers.

“Breathe normally,” he instructed, and a faint blue mist poured from the needle like fingers...and you sighed as you felt the ill feeling go away. Steadily, the color flooded back into your being at the same time.

“Oh, dear Gods...wh-what was that?”

“That was what it was like to be drained of emotional energy,” Xavier said, and gave an anxious sort of smile. “Pretty icky, huh?”

“You said it,” you grumbled.

“That was a bold decision, Prefect,” Cael observed, as Grim nodded in agreement. Both he and the imp looked rather concerned; they had lingered behind to check on you.

Abe placed a mute hand upon your shoulder. You glanced up briefly at the featureless mechanical man, then smiled weakly back at your friends.

“Well, he needed someone...who else would have done it?” you reasoned, then shuddered. “I really don’t like needles though...”

“Not my fault it’s how my power works,” chuckled Xavier, but obligingly lifted his hand and spoke the counter-curse: “Thinner & Paint.”

Another flash of blue-green light, and his hand returned to normal. He gave it a shake, then extended it to you.

“Thank you for the help,” he said, sincerely. “Gotta admit, I didn’t expect anybody to put their best foot forward for me like that...”

“I’m glad I could start a new custom,” you said, and shook his hand before shakily standing up. “I still don’t feel quite ready for work though...”

“Give it a couple short minutes, and it’ll wear off on its own,” Xavier said sweetly.

Just then, more applause came...louder than before. The four of you looked; Xavier frowned and the rest of you perked up as you realized who the next contender was...

“The Shrouds!” exclaimed Grim.

“Let’s see what they are up to,” suggested Cael.

“Right,” you nodded, then smiled at Xavier. “Really cool invention. I hope you win!”

Xavier’s eyes widened as he looked back at you, seemingly taken aback by the compliment and well-wishes...then smiled awkwardly.

“Heh...uh...th-thanks, um...enjoy the rest of the expo. I mean, no one else is gonna be as awesome, but...you know...”

You just laughed, and joined your friends, giving Xavier a wave as you strolled towards the Shrouds’ panel.

You never noticed how Xavier’s smile faded into a cold, almost lifeless expression behind you while your back turned away.

“No one else is gonna be as awesome,” he whispered to himself, forebodingly.

Unaware of the ominous moment that had passed, your gaggle descended with the rest of the onlookers to see what the Head of Ignihyde and his “Baby Brother” had in store. Said “Baby Brother” was brushing humming in a vocoded-sounding way (he WAS an android, after all) as he brushed down a machine on the table. The device was not hidden by anything, the way Xavier’s power pack had been, which meant you and all and sundry could take a peek at it. It was...difficult to describe. The shape of the thing vaguely resembled a small ice maker, colored black and gray, but with three glass tubes on the top, each filled with strange fluids in primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. While Ortho dusted it off, Idia, was standing off to one side; his knees were almost knocking together, and his fingers fiddled endlessly with the dangling pullstrings of his hoodie as he stared at the judges, brow bathed in cold sweat.

“Okay, Brother-o’-mine!” cheered Ortho, and looked to Idia happily. “It’s all set.”

Idia said nothing. He didn’t move. He stared straight ahead, like a statue, still focused unblinkingly on the judges.

“Uh...brother?”

Idia whimpered, still frozen and shaking.

“BROTHER!” shouted Ortho, fire-hair flaring up and turning orange for a second as he stomped his foot in frustration.

Idia yelped and jumped about a foot in the air.

“I WASN’T THINKING ABOUT HIDING!” he exclaimed in a jabbering sort of way...then blinked when he saw Ortho’s pouty expression. (How the android could pout with no visible lips was anyone’s guess.) He flushed; Idia never blushed red or pink, but his cheeks turned a sort of bluish-purple color.

“C’mon!” Ortho urged, and gestured towards the group. “They’re waiting.”

This did not seem to encourage Idia, who flinched and looked nervously at the impatient judges.

“I...um...uh...w-well, uh...aha...er...”

You frowned, glancing with concern at Grim and Caelyum; the former matched your expression, while the other mostly looked bored. This was not going well. A thought came to you, and you stepped forward slightly.



Idia must have heard your approach, because his eyes quickly darted to see you, and the encouraging smile you gave. Suddenly, he seemed to relax...but only VERY slightly. Idia was the sort to fear he was BREATHING too loudly and that would get on people's nerves, he could only be so calm. Still, it helped enough for him to clear his throat and begin talking.

"Ahem...s-sorry, ladies and gentlemen," he said, with a nervous smile, tapping his fingers together childishly. "I'm, ah...not used to this sort of...front and center kinda thing, heh...honestly, I wish I were hiding under my blankets right now...BUT! But, ah...I think the device I've made will at least be of interest..."

So saying, Idia seemed to pluck up some courage. Your own smile widened as he placed a hand on the machine, and his stance straightened. If there was one thing that Shroud could talk about with SOME pride, it was his work.

"I don't need to tell all you that, uh...th-that the source of magic for m-many wizards and witches is their magic crystals, right? Right. So, ah...I, well...I got to thinking: the problem with the crystals is they can...well...run out. We have to mine for them, we have to dig for them, and there's always a chance that someday...y'know...th-there might not be any left. Which would...kinda suck, ha. SO! I decided to try and create SYNTHETIC crystals..."

He tapped the tubes on the top of the machine.

"With these three simple potion compounds, mixed together in the right order, I can...well...do that. Using this machine."

"Would you say there are other advantages to this idea?" Dr. Alcott spoke up.

"Oh, y-yes!" Idia said, starting to smile as he realized he had someone's interest, though he seemed a bit nervous when he noticed the way the other judges scribbled some quick notes down. "Ahem...yes, sir. See, with synthetic crystals, not only do you not need to dig them up, but...well...if you have these compounds, and this machine, you can make as many as you like."

"Well, yes," Dr. Alcott nodded, "But are they any more advantageous than natural crystals?"

Idia paused, as if to think on his answer, then nodded slowly.

"There is one other thing," he said, almost shyly. (Well...there was no "almost" about it, this was Idia Shroud, but you gave him the benefit of the wiggle room anyway.) He paused before steadily elaborating: "Synthetic crystals do have a couple of weaknesses. They are not as physically strong as natural ones, for a start, the same way synthetic gems are not as strong as

real jewels. You also can't make them as large as natural crystals, because with the compounds being used, they can become unstable. But, at the average size of the average magic crystal..."

He pointed to the one he wore himself, on his arm, before continuing.

"...It can actually last longer than a natural crystal. It...well...um...I don't know how to explain it, actually, but my experiments have shown that...well...you can use them for a longer period of time before worrying about Overblotting."

"Well, that's definitely an advantage," smiled Dr. Alcott, seemingly impressed, then turned serious as he scratched a few notes down before speaking again: "Can we see how this machine works?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, of course!" nodded Idia...then tapped Ortho on the shoulder. "Little brother? Um...w-would you do the honors?"

He then added in a whisper, "I'll probably mess up..."

Your smile became slightly less proud: Idia was still Idia.

Ortho just giggled.

"You can't mess up turning the machine on, Big Brother!" he teased quietly, but still obeyed, pressing a button on the contraption. A loud whirring sound was heard, and the potions in the tubes bubbled and then began to lessen in volume; you could hear the sound of fluid being stirred and mixed, followed by the low humming buzz of another item either cooling or heating the stuff inside the machine...

...It only took about two minutes - during which the judges' attention was raptly focused on the device, and several in the crowd mumbled to one another with interest - and then, with a rattle and a clatter, a teardrop-shaped, transparent, pale blue crystal dropped into a tray inside the machine. Idia opened the lid and pulled the crystal out of the tray, holding it up for everyone to see, then offered it to the judges, who inspected it closely.

Finally, Dr. Alcott handed the artificial crystal back to Idia with a smile.

"Fine work, young Master Shroud," he nodded in approval. "Fine work indeed."

The other judges and the audience applauded. Idia smiled bashfully, tucking his head down and mouthing a quiet word of thanks as he hugged the crystal to his chest. Ortho, noticing the way

his brother was shaking, gave him an encouraging hug as the mob and the judges - still chatting betwixt themselves - moved away.

Once again, yourself and your friends stepped forward, all of you wearing matching grins.

“I’m so proud of you!” you cheered, and gave Idia a hug. You felt the eldest Shroud freeze up in your embrace, and couldn’t help but smile still wider; Idia, bless his heart, still wasn’t used to much physical interaction, and you could feel him starting to twitch. You gave him a very gentle, comforting squeeze, and rubbed his back reassuringly. Only then did his arms steadily move upwards to gingerly return the hug.

“Nya!” Grim called out happily, trotting over with a wide grin, purring up at the fire-haired Ignihyde head. “You did a lot better than I expected!”

“An interesting invention, too,” Cael complimented. “I’m sure you’ll end up with first place!”

“Oh, I-I dunno,” mumbled Idia, rubbing one arm and squirming slightly with embarrassment. “I thought Madoc had a pretty cool creation, too...”

“His was neat,” nodded Grim, “But I think yours is better.”

“His energy converter DID have one noticeable issue,” Cael thought to add, glancing back towards Xavier’s panel - by now, the odd scientist and his assistant had turned their attention away, and were seemingly polishing the power pack. “It depends on HIM in order to work. No one else would be able to use it: it’s not something you can mass produce, because no one else has his Unique Magic.”

“That’s true,” Ortho spoke up. “But hey! The basic idea isn’t bad; with a little adjusting, he could make it something really special for everyone to use!”

“If he cares enough to try,” mumbled Grim; he subsided at the look you gave him.

“It’s up to the judges, and the contest has just started,” you said, crisply, then smiled at Idia once more. “Whatever happens, you did good. Don’t doubt that.”

Idia smiled sweetly.

“Th-thank you,” he whispered, then glanced at the crystal in his hand and back up at you...before offering it cautiously. “Would you...like a souvenir? Heh...”

You chuckled, and took the crystal, placing it in your pocket.

“Sure,” you said. “Thanks, Idia.”

“Y-You’re w-w-welcome,” stuttered Idia, looking like he was scared of feeling too happy. He paused and cleared his throat with a cough before reaching into his hoodie’s pocket, pulling out his cell phone. “Well, um...I wanna catch up with a new show I’m watching, so...I’m, uh...y’know...gonna go find a nice, safe corner till the judgment call comes, and...well...ju st, uh...exist, heh...”

“Can I watch with you, Big Brother?” Ortho peeped hopefully.

“Sure,” Idia said with a smile and a nod, then gave you the same gestures before scurrying away, looking like he couldn’t wait to get away from everything that had the power to breathe.

Yourself and your two companions chuckled and gave a collective mock salute to the Shroud brothers, as Ortho followed Idia quickly. Then, still chattering amongst yourselves, you hurried to rejoin the group and see what else was at the exposition...

None of you were aware of Xavier Madoc’s eyes following the mob’s movements, before glancing back at Idia’s device.

One could have sworn his one green eye flashed.

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The exposition had come to an end, and after two hours of deliberation, the judges were ready to deliver their verdict. The contestants had lined up on either side of the room, while the audience sat in chairs before a podium. Yourself, Caelyum, and Grim all took seats in the second row (the front row had filled up too quickly) and watched as Dr. Alcott approached the podium, adjusting his spectacles and shuffling some papers in his hands.

You glanced to the right. Along with the other contenders at the expo, Idia and Xavier were naturally lined up, both on the same side of the hall. Xavier stood with a cocksure smile, arms crossed, while Idia was nervously twiddling his fingers, biting his lip with his dagger-like teeth. He looked towards Xavier and smiled nervously.

“S-So, uh...may the best man win, huh?” he said, awkwardly.

Xavier didn’t even look at the dorm head as he narrowed his eyes and simply said, “Don’t worry. I will.”

Idia looked a bit befuddled. Abe and Ortho - who stood beside their corresponding creators - looked at each other and shrugged.

The sound of Dr. Alcott brought your attention back to the podium.

“It’s time,” Cael and Grim murmured at the same time, as the lead judge addressed the audience, crooked nose pointed high.

“Friends of science,” the doctor began, “I am not one for grand speeches or over-sentimentalizing the talents we’ve seen on display here today. Virtually every experiment we viewed today, every invention created or formula concocted, was of interest. As far as those doing this for an assignment go, my supposition is you will all pass with flying colors. However, there can only be one winner: one person to leave this exposition a proper champion.”

He snapped his fingers and one of the other judges stepped up beside him, and handed him a trophy, with a golden ornament resembling a ringed planet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Dr. Alcott intoned, “The winner of the Annual Science Expo is...”

Xavier smirked, and straightened up his labcoat, taking a deep breath, as if ready to thank everyone...

“...Mr. Idia Shroud!”

Xavier froze, the smile seemingly slapped from his face as his eyes widened.

Idia’s eyes widened too, and he gasped in surprise as the crowd applauded. One could almost see tears in his eyes as he realized what had happened. Yourself and your party cheered as Ortho nudged Idia up to the podium to accept his trophy, which he did with trembling fingers.

You were grinning from ear to ear, and so was Idia; his shark-toothed smile had never been wider, you felt, nor more genuine in nature. His amber eyes sparkled like a pair of glittering gold coins. As Dr. Alcott began to congratulate Shroud - who was hugging the trophy to his chest almost like a teddy bear - you turned to see the other contenders.

Most of them - including Abe - were clapping politely. The only exceptions were Ortho, who was literally dancing with joy...

...And Xavier Madoc. He looked absolutely livid. His face was almost as red as Riddle Rosehearts’ could get, his fists clenched, one eye twitching as he gritted his teeth angrily. His

mismatched eyes were burning...

You felt your blood run cold as the blue eye was surrounded by a matching aura.

“Grim!” you hissed, tapping the feline-like creature on the side. Grim turned fast...and his ears flattened back and he mewed as he saw droplets of ink dripping from the magic crystal Xavier wore...

“Oh, no,” he gulped nervously.

“What’s wrong?” Caelyum whispered...then frozen when he saw the same. “Oh, barnacles...is that...?”

“Overblot,” you replied, gravely. “Here we go again...”

Just as Dr. Alcott shook Idia’s hand, and was about to dismiss him, Xavier suddenly let out a screeching cry of apoplectic rage, which startled everyone present. All eyes watched as the white labcoat of the first-year science master flapped behind him like the wings of a huge war bird, as he flew back towards his panel, and hurriedly strapped the ERPC to his back.

“Unacceptable!” he shouted. “I will not allow it! I WILL NOT ALLOW IT! No one outsmarts me! NOBODY! My machines are perfect! My work is superior in every way! And if you doubt that - if ANYONE *STILL* doubts that...!”

A feral grin came to his face as he extended one arm.

**“...Then I’ll just have to prove otherwise, won’t I? Paint & Thinner.”**

A flash of turquoise light was immediately followed by an explosive sound.

***KA-ZAM!***

A gale wind ripped through the hall, as a swirl of black mist surrounded Xavier Madoc; you cursed violently under your breath as blue and green light burst through pockets in the spiraling cloud of inky darkness. No doubt Xavier’s strong emotions and the level of magic he had put out earlier had blended together, and with the power pack on, he could burn through magic and cause damage with greater force and strength than you could guess.

“Brace yourselves!” you called to Caelyum and Grim, as everyone else in the hall dove or ducked for cover. “This isn’t gonna be easy!”

“Is it ever?!” Grim yowled, while Cael simply squinted, watching with you as the mist began to clear...

...And soon, you could see the change that had come over Xavier Madoc. The right side of his body had seemingly not changed at all...but the left was another story. Not only was there now a blue aura surrounding his left eye, not to mention the metallic, syringe-tipped left hand...but his whole left side seemed to have become a cyborganic nightmare. The left side of his face was covered in metal plates, and his entire left arm and leg had become robotic in nature; the clothes on the left side of his body were seemingly frayed and shredded, exposing portions of a metal chest and clockwork-esque innards. In-between the joints of his limbs and face, black ink oozed like oil.

Xavier’s one green eye was feral looking; bloodshot with a pinprick pupil. He grinned in a manic way, and let out a cackling laugh that rebounded off the hall walls.

“HA HA HA HA HA! You dared to overlook my creations?! You spurned my talents, eh?! Then let me show just how powerful I can REALLY become!” he roared, and the ERPC roared to life as he thrust out his syringe hand. “I told you, I can extend my unique abilities without proximity! So now...NOW, ALL OF YOU, GIVE ME YOUR POWER!”

In horrific fashion, the needles extended...and five members in the crowd collapsed as they were pricked, turning gray and pallid. Their entire being became monochrome as, in a split second, all emotion was drained from them and into Xavier’s being. Xavier shot out his claws again, the protracting talons jabbing into another five people and rendering them the same.

Now, panic set in, and people screamed as they raced for the door.

“Don’t leave in such a rush!” laughed Madoc, and snapped the fingers of his one human hand. The doors suddenly shifted, becoming solid walls, and all the windows clicked as they were locked into place. “The party’s just beginning!”

Xavier’s claws lunged at you now, but yourself, Grim, and Cael all quickly dropped, ducking the attack. Three other people who had been standing behind you, along with two more, were drained in your stead. Xavier shuddered, a toxic aura surrounding him as the tanks were filled with more and more emotional energy.

“More...MORE!” he bellowed. “If I can’t have your respect, I will have your rage...your despair...your panice...fuel me! FUEL ME!”

Idia and Dr. Alcott ducked behind the podium with twin yelps. Ortho hurried to check on his brother, and barely avoided the needles as they shot out. The other judges weren't so lucky, and crumpled in an unconscious, grayscale-colored heap as their emotions were drained.

Abe rushed forward to try and stop his creator, desperately grabbing hold of Xavier's one human arm. Xavier snarled, gnashing his teeth.

"Imbecile and traitor!" he roared into the droid's pleading face. "I have no further use for YOU!"

Xavier jerked away his human hand, then, with a sneer, thrust it out again...and - THOOM! - a magical shockwave slammed into Abe's chest, sending the robot flying. He crashed down beside your trio, the three of you still lying on the ground as Xavier continued to stick his needles into everyone who moved. The room was in a panic, the other contestants' creations smashing on the floor as people dove for cover. Slowly, Xavier began to make his way through the hall, laughing dementedly.

"All this over a freaking trophy?!" hissed Grim.

"I think there's got to be more to it," mumbled Caelyum.

Abe nodded, as if to confirm this, and then gave you a look as if to ask, *Now what?*

This was the burning question; you had to figure out a way to keep Xavier from hurting more people, as well as remove the power pack. As long as he still had the converter on, his power wouldn't drop. He could potentially stay in Overblot for a much longer period of time, burning the power almost as quickly as he got it...growing just strong enough to overwhelm...

"Okay, I've got a plan," you said at last, and whispered to your compatriots. "Listen closely..."

Xavier, meanwhile, grinned as he approached a group of people, huddled together.

"Let's try an experiment," he hissed, a mad grin on the young doctor's face as he lifted his syringe hand. "I now know how swiftly I can drain an organism...now, can I make it more *slow and painful?*"

He cackled, his victims babbling pleas for him to stop as he lifted his hand, preparing to shoot out the razor-sharp needles and drain them dry.

"Every emotion in your body...slowly siphoning into mine...let's see how long it can really-"



FWOOSH!

“Nya! Back off, crazy-coat!”

Xavier jumped back with an almost animalistic sneer, and swirled his ragged cape around as he looked towards the source of the fire that had distracted him. Grim was standing in a ready pose, balls of blue flame held in each forepaw as he smirked challengingly.

“Insufferable hairball!” shouted Xavier. “I WILL NOT BE DENIED! I WILL HAVE MORE POWER!”

He lunged at Grim, swiping with his robotic talons, but Grim moved aside quickly. As Xavier plunged towards him, a loud smashing sound was heard from behind. The mad doctor turned quickly, and his one good eye widened in surprise as he saw that Abe had kicked a hole clear through the wall, and was ushering people through the hole and out of the area, Idia and Dr. Alcott leading those still conscious to safety.

“NO!” shouted Xavier, and shot out his needles...but he was just too late as Abe blocked him, giving him a determined glare as they scratched helplessly against his armored plating. Then, giving Xavier an almost pitying expression, the robot leapt through the hole himself.

Xavier moved to try and give pursuit, but Grim thrust out his arms, and formed a wide ring of fire that blocked the scientist’s path.

“You think this will stop me?!” Xavier bellowed. “You can’t defeat me! My invention gives me power beyond yours!”

“Good to know. I’d hate to have to refund anything.”

Xavier stopped short and glanced about, trying to find the source of Caelyum’s voice...before, suddenly, he felt a strange sensation brushing up against his legs. He looked down...and screamed in a mixture of panic and rage as a horde of marble white Locker Crabs began to swarm over him, their pincers latching onto parts of his clothing and the edges of his inkstained metal carapace, trying to drag him to the floor.

“GET OFF ME, YOU CRETINOUS CRUSTACEANS!” yelled Xavier, trying to kick and swat away the crabs, unaware of the shadow that stepped through a gap that formed in the flames, and approached from behind.

The crabs snipped their claws at the leather straps holding the ERPC in place. Xavier slapped

them away...then jerked as, suddenly, the weight of his invention was pulled away.

“WHAT?!” he spat, and turned around fast, pupils pinpricks as he saw you jump backwards, holding the device in your hands. “NO! NO, YOU-GACK!”

He hit the floors as the crabs tripped him up. You scampered back through the gap in the flames, which Grim soon closed up. The little monster was jumping up and down, pumping his forepaws/fists and cheering.

“NYA! Get ‘im, Cael! Pin ‘im down!” the cat called. “We’ve won now!”

A low laugh from under the swarm of Locker Crabs knocked the smile from Grim’s face.

“Won? Hardly. I’m still getting warmed up!”

ZAM!

Xavier sent out another shockwave with a loud shout. You toppled onto your back, the ERPC falling from your hands and thumping onto the floor. The crabs scattered, and the flames were extinguished as Grim was sent rolling across the hall.

You quickly sat back up...and shuddered. Xavier loomed over you, the acid-colored aura around him showing his fury as trails of spilling ink traced his steps.

You snatched up the ERPC and scrambled to your feet, making a dash for the hole in the wall.

“NOT SO FAST!” roared Madoc, and lifted his human hand. He screamed some foreign incantation, and the shattered section was suddenly patched up, the debris flying back into place, stitching together like a jigsaw puzzle’s corners.

You swerved and made a dash for a window; you could break it, after all, even if it was locked. Xavier snarled out another incantation, however...and teleported directly in front of you.

You skidded to a halt, but not fast enough as he grabbed hold of your arm with one hand, and lifted his syringe claws, a wild grin on his cyborganic face.

“HA HA HA!” he cackled. “What a foolish attempt that was! You truly thought you could defeat me?! I will drain you till your very soul is rendered inert! Nothing can resist my power! With the ERPC, I can remain like this for eternity! And when the world grovels at my feet, I will build more machines! BRILLIANT machines! My mechanical creations will-!”

FWOOMPH!

A burst of flame slammed into Xavier, bowling him over and singeing his labcoat. You fell back down and scrambled away as you held tightly to the power pack.

Xavier snarled as he stood back up, his mechanical pieces clicking and sparking...as the two of you saw who had re-entered the room. It was Idia Shroud; Ortho had evidently picked the lock on one of the windows, and the pair had climbed through. Idia was visibly trembling, but tried his hardest to look brave, twists of orange curling through his ethereal blue hairdo.

“Leave. Them. Alone,” Idia intoned.

Madoc sneered.

“First you steal my prize, now you RUIN MY MONOLOGUE?!” he yelled. “Alright! Just for that, I WILL OBLITERATE YOU!”

Xavier charged at Idia, but the head of Ignihyde narrowed his eyes, gritting his sharp, jagged teeth. His hand shook as he held it, as if showing doubt...

...Then, his stance and expression hardened, and the shaking stopped. Just as Xavier Madoc leapt through the air, swiping his syringe claws through the air...he snapped his fingers.

KRAK-KOOM!

An explosive blast of fire and noise, like a grenade had gone off, erupted directly before Madoc. The explosion sent the mad scientist flying backwards, his labcoat tattered and scorched, black marks on his skull plates. Xavier cried out as he slammed headfirst into a wall...then crumpled to the floor, and fell still. He was out like a light.

The mad doctor was done.

You sighed with relief and stood up as Ortho cheered.

“WOO-HOO! Way to go, Big Brother!” he exclaimed, and gave Idia a smack on the back. The hunched head of Ignihyde flinched and smiled shyly at his artificial sibling.

“It was nothing,” he whispered faintly, visibly blushing.

“Are you okay, Prefect?” Ortho asked.

“I’m fine,” you nodded as you approached them, and glanced around. “Where are the others?”

Right on cue, a low growl was heard. The three of you looked to see Grim was just sitting up, massaging his skull after evidently banging his head during his tumble.

“Me-owwww...! That creep hits way too hard!” he moaned out. “Did anybody get the number on that-MREOWR?!”

He was cut off as Idia scooped the imp up and began to snuggle him, crooning and planting chaste, loving kisses on his head.

“Awww, the poor wittle kitty!” he cooed sympathetically. “Did you get an ouchie? Did the mean cyborg hurt you, huh?”

“HISSSSS! I’M FINE!” Grim spat, kicking and squirming. “L-Lemme go! For the last time, I DON’T LIKE SNUGGLES, STOP!”

Idia just let out a happy hum, squeezing Grim, repeatedly crooning, “Awww, poor thing, you poor little dear...!” over and over again. Ortho giggled sweetly, while you just rolled your eyes and smiled.

A skittering sound heralded the reappearance of Caelyum, who reformed out of a pillar of white sand crabs. He stumbled on his feet as he returned to his normal state, and you placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

“You okay?” you whispered.

“No,” mumbled Cael, and smiled wearily. “When I use the power that way, a fraction of my will - my mind - is in every single crab. I feel like I just got thrown through the loop-the-loop of a roller coaster seventeen times.”

You gently patted his shoulder and smiled back, gratefully.

“Walk it off, matey,” you said softly with a wink.

Cael chuckled.

“Aye,” he nodded, as your group moved to look down at the defeated Xavier Madoc. “I will.”

For several seconds, the ink-leaking cyborg lay on the ground, unmoving. But that was alright: none of you were expecting him to move. By now, you knew the drill of how things worked after Overblot...and sure enough, after a few seconds, wisps of silvery-white mist began to drift up from the defeated scientist, as his whole body began to glow a blinding white. All of you shielded your eyes from the light, watching as the mist began to spiral, and soon enough, images formed in the center of the floating cloud. Pictures from the past...

*“Dad! Dad, look at this!”*

*A tall, thin man in white, with a pointed goatee, looked down from the workbench he was stationed at. He smiled as a small boy - with mismatched eyes of blue and green - came waddling into the room, holding a piece of paper.*

*“What is it, Xavier?”*

*“I made a blueprint, dad! I wanna make a robot! Like one of yours!” squeaked the young Xavier, and held out the paper to his father. “Do you think it’s any good, Dad? Do ya? Huh?”*

*The older man lifted the paper and looked; he chuckled at the untidy crayon scrawl drawn on the page, the acronym “A.B.E.” accompanying a childish drawing of a metal man in a porter’s outfit.*

*“Not a bad idea, Xavier,” he complimented his son, and handed the “blueprint” back to its creator before ruffling his son’s hair. “You’ll make a fine inventor, at this rate.”*

*Xavier giggled, playfully swatting at his father’s hand, then gave him a wide but shy smile.*

*“You promise?” he peeped. “Could I...could I be as good as you, Dad?”*

*“No,” the man answered, and leaned down, kissing his son’s forehead. “You’ll be even better.”*

*The child’s happy hum was interrupted by the shifting of time, as a new image spun into view: Xavier was a little older now, and working in a laboratory. He whistled as he fitted a screw into place on a device he was building...only to freeze as he heard voices coming from outside the shop. Curious, he trotted over to the door, and peeked outside. He could see the shadows of two men, arguing not so far away, and heard what they were saying. One of them he recognized as his father’s voice...*

*“Oscar, you can’t be serious!”*

*“I’m sorry, Xander,” the other voice said. “All I know is that Charles got to me first. What would that tell you?”*

*“That Charles is a faster runner,” droned Xander.*

*Xavier giggled softly, but clapped a hand over his mouth to avoid being heard.*

*“Very funny,” Oscar’s voice drawled.*

*“I’m serious, Oscar. You KNOW me, we’ve worked together for years! Are you going to take his word over mine?”*

*“Right now, I haven’t got a choice. His patent has been in development at my company for a while; all that’s left are i’s to dot and t’s to cross. Even if what you say is true, Xander, he finished his work more quickly; I’m not seeing a lot of incentive here.”*

*A pause.*

*“...So that’s it then?” came the terse voice of Xavier’s father. “What about my family, Oscar? What about my son?”*

*“Relax, Xander. You’ll come up with more inventions, you always do, and I’ll be just as willing to buy!”*

*“Forget it. I’ll find another person to sell to.”*

*Another pause.*

*“...Okay. Okay. If that’s how you feel about it,” came Oscar’s weak reply. “Goodbye, Xander.”*

*“Goodbye, Oscar. Tell Charlie he knows where to stuff it.”*

*Oscar’s shadow disappeared, and a few moments later, the sound of a door was heard opening and closing. Xander was heard sighing, and Xavier saw his father’s silhouette slump into a nearby chair. Curious, the boy trundled out of the room to his father’s side; the older inventor was sitting with his head in his hands, massaging his brow.*

*“Dad?” peeped Xavier. “What was all that?”*

*Xander blinked at his son.*

*“Oh. You...heard that, huh?”*

*Xavier nodded slowly.*

*Xander blinked...then sighed and picked his child up, placing him in his lap.*

*“Listen to this, Xavier, because it’s very important,” said the doctor to his son. “Not all inventors are good. You must guard your inventions well, and you must always do your best to make sure no one can top you. People will try to steal what you make, people will look for weaknesses in it. Never let them find any way to stop you.”*

*He placed a hand under his son’s chin and gave a sad smile.*

*“You’ll be brilliant someday...but with brilliance comes danger. You can’t trust anyone, understand?”*

*“I can trust you.”*

*“Of course,” chuckled Xander.*

*“And I can trust my machines,” added Xavier.*

*“Well, yes, but a machine isn’t a person,” Xander said. “Machines only exist to follow their programming. Machines will always do what they’re supposed to. Machines will only let you down if people making them make mistakes. People aren’t like that: people are flawed, and people are foolish. They will pass you over and cheat you if they find a way or reason. Never let that happen. Okay?”*

*“Okay, Dad. I’ll do my best.”*

*The scene shifted again. Xavier was now much older, nearly the same age as he was now. Abe now stood at his side as he worked on a project in his laboratory, building a new machine.*

*“This is going to be the greatest thing ever!” he cheered, grinning to his mechanical companion, who nodded in happy agreement. “Just think of how much fun the science fair will be with this completed! Ha Ha! Man, Abe, we have this in the bag!”*

*“Hi, Xavier!”*

*The pair looked towards a new face that had entered the lab: a fellow youngster in red.*

*“Oh, hey, Gus! What’s up? Shouldn’t you be getting ready for the science fair?”*

*“I haven’t figured out what to do yet,” sighed the boy sadly, then smiled weakly. “So, uh...I thought, well...maybe you could help me come up with an idea. I mean...you’re like a billion times better at this stuff, heh...”*

*“Sure, I can help!” smiled Xavier, helpfully, and clapped his hands together, dusting them off, waving for Abe to go fetch a few books. As the robot marched off, the teen in red noticed the item on the workbench.*

*“Hey, what’s that?”*

*“Huh? Oh! It’s my project for the science fair. Looks pretty cool, right?”*

*“Yeah! What’s it do?”*

*Xavier explained quickly. The lad looked envious of his science-savvy friend.*

*“Wow...I’ll never figure out how you can do all that stuff...you’ve gotta be the best inventor ever!”*

*“Awww,” blushed Xavier. “It’s just a knack.”*

*“Can you show me how you make it?” the teen asked, hesitantly.*

*“Sure, if you want,” Xavier said, blithely shrugging and smiling. “Then I’ll help you figure out what you’ll do yourself. Sound fair?”*

*The boy smirked; Xavier didn’t notice the cunning in his eyes.*

*“Yeah. That sounds fair,” the classmate answered.*

*The scenario changed once more. Xavier now glared with absolute hatred at the boy in red...who was smiling, chest puffed out with pride, as he showed off his machine to the judges, who cheered and applauded.*

*It was a machine identical to the one Xavier had made...and the boy had made it first. Xavier had*



*been forced to change his plans, and the experiment he'd come up with at the last minute had been sub-par.*

*The cheat got first place. Xavier got nothing.*

*Xavier snarled, fists clenching as the boy in red smirked in a sidelong way at him, and mouthed the word, "Sucker," before continuing to bask in adulation.*

*Xavier Madoc scowled as he packed up his items. He was shaking a little.*

*"You can't trust anyone," he whispered to himself. "Well, you'll see...you'll ALL see...I'll come up with something no one else can top. I will PROVE to you how good my science is. Just wait and see..."*

*His mismatched eyes burned as he turned his back on the laughing classmates and applauding teachers...and stalked back to his lab. Alone. With his machines.*

*"...I don't need anybody. Just my machines."*

The mist cleared and evaporated, and the white light faded...revealing Xavier Madoc had changed back to normal on the floor. He was still unconscious, but the glow was gone from his blue eye, and the machinery parts had vanished.

Silence reigned for a few seconds. This was not unheard of. By now, you had accepted there was always a "digestion period" where everyone was taking in what they'd just learned.

This time, however...the silence stayed unbroken. No one spoke a word, looking like they were trying to properly form thoughts, even as Xavier began to stir again.

As he did, he reached out with a hand, fumblingly, mumbling incoherently...

...And froze as someone knelt down and took that hand.

Xavier looked up...and seemed stunned when he stared into the wide yellow eyes of Idia Shroud.

For a moment, the two looked at each other...then Xavier pulled away with a sneer.

"Cheat," he hissed.

"I never cheated," whispered Idia, sounding surprisingly confident for once...confident, but

Careful. "It's not that no one recognized you, Xavier; no one was trying to neglect you. It's just...there could only be one winner. And I happened to be it."

"It wasn't an easy decision, either," added Ortho.

"Oh, no?" Xavier grimaced, looking skeptical.

"No," Idia answered. "Dr. Alcott spoke to me before I returned: you would have been second place. Your invention really impressed him and the other judges, they just...felt mine was more easy to use widespread. Yours needed a few tweaks for them to give it the topmost prize."

"They said they couldn't have asked for a better start to the expo than you," added Ortho, in a quiet, helpful voice.

The bitterness in Xavier's face had faded slightly, leaving his expression blank and cold. He turned away quietly, and hugged himself, curling up against the wall.

"You can't shut yourself out because of one bad incident," whispered Caelyum. "Trust me: I know what it's like when you seal off your heart. It doesn't get pretty."

"No one is invincible," added Grim. "Well...except for me, but...that's because I'm awesome."

You rolled your eyes at the hubris of "The Great Grim," and knelt down beside Idia, looking into the heterochromatic eyes of the mad scientist.

"Just because you're brilliant doesn't mean everything is going to be perfect. Similarly," you said, "Just because one person did something terrible, it doesn't mean you can shun all people. Everyone and everything has flaws. The important thing is to learn from them."

Xavier furrowed his brow and looked down at the floor for several seconds...then looked back up at both of you.

"...I'm sorry," he whispered. "I...I shouldn't have lost control. That was...that was childish of me. And...I'm sorry for what I did."

He looked to Idia and smiled shyly.

"Your invention was...not too bad."

"Thank you," Idia said, with a slight blush, and helped the scientist to his feet.

Just then, the sound of metallic footsteps echoed out. The group of you turned...and Xavier's heart seemed to sink as he saw Abe re-enter the hall, yellow eyes fixed on his creator.

"Abe, I'm so, SO sorry," Xavier said, seriously. "I shouldn't have-EEP!"

He was cut off as the metal man crushed him in a solid bear hug, nuzzling his steel cheek against his creator's hair. Ortho and Grim both giggled, while yourself and Caelyum smirked. Idia, for his part, didn't seem to know what to make of the scene.

"I think he already forgives you," you said teasingly.

Abe nodded to show this was the case. It was obvious he was just happy his maker was back to normal.

Xavier smiled bashfully and gestured for the metal man to put him down, then looked to Idia.

"So, uh...y-you're the head of the dorm," he said, and rubbed his arm. "Do you, uh...like...have any ideas on how to make the ERPC better? More...accessible?"

"I can think of something. You know...maybe," Idia said with a timid smile. "I mean...I'm r-really not the best choice, I...I got the whole idea for MY thing from an anime-"

"Anime?" Xavier asked, and perked up visibly. "What anime?"

"Oh! Uh...Magica Marocca. It's...um...a Magic Girl series? You, ah, probably don't know what that is-"

"YOU WATCH MAGICA MAROCCA?!"

Idia blinked, stunned, at the sudden look of exuberant excitement on Xavier's face.

"You...you've seen it?" the otaku nearly squeaked out.

"I love that series!" exclaimed Xavier. "I mean...okay, it's not, like, the GREATEST thing, in terms of story? Kinda rushed...but I really love the art style, a-and the way it plays with the themes and ideas of a typical Magic Girl series! It's like Watchmen, but for...that!"

Idia looked like he'd just found his soulmate.

“I feel the same way! A-And have you seen Glitter Cure?”

“Rascal is one of THE best villains ever.”

“I AGREE!” squealed Idia, clapping giddily, that wide, almost manic smile you saw so rarely stretching across his face, matching Xavier’s instantly. “Oh, my gosh, no one EVER knows about that one! This is great!”

“It is!” nodded Xavier eagerly...then took his turn to blush. “Um...d’ya think we can...oh...I-I dunno...maybe watch some together?”

“I mean...only if you want to,” peeped Idia, ducking his head anxiously. “I’m...n-not used to people who...WANT to watch it with me, heh...normally I-I can only talk about it online...”

“I’d like to watch it with you,” Xavier promised. “And...and we can talk about our inventions in the meantime. Does...does that sound fair?”

Idia nodded slowly, and began to smile wider once more.

“Yeah...yeah, it sounds like a plan,” he said, then looked to Ortho. “Is...is it okay with you, Little Brother?”

Ortho gaped.

“...You’re asking me if YOU can have a VISITOR in the apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Like...you WANT to HANG OUT WITH SOMEONE?”

“Yuh-huh.”

“...Okay, who are you, and what have you done with my Big Brother?”

You snickered. So did Xavier, as Idia smiled awkwardly.

“You wanna come with, Abe?” the mad scientist asked his robotic companion, who saluted in response.

“Great!” Idia laughed. “Let’s go then!”

And with unusual, uncharacteristic joy, the otaku and the eccentric sauntered off together, their androids following them as the exit door reformed and they left the convention hall. You smiled.

“Well,” you sighed happily. “All’s well that end’s well. Looks like Idia’s found a new friend at last.”

“I’m happy for them,” smiled Caelyum. “Finding a person who you can connect with is important.”

“Uh-huh,” nodded Grim. “Now, there’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?” both you and Cael asked.

Grim wordlessly pointed to the mess of chairs, scorch marks, busted machines, and dented walls that the hall had become. You went pale.

“...Ohhhhh...right...I forgot...*we’re the janitors.*”

“Uh-huh,” Grim said again, drably.

“Well, good luck with that!” Caelyum chirped, and began to saunter off towards the door.

“Hey! HEY! Where are you going?!” snapped Grim.

“Back to the Mystery Shop,” Cael called over his shoulders. “I have a job of my own to do, me hearties! Take care!”

“But-!”

Your call was unanswered. Cael disappeared, leaving you and Grim standing alone in the mess. You both looked around, then at each other.

“...Grim?”

“Yeah, Minion?”

“It’s moments like these where I wonder if helping people is worth it.”

“I never wonder, Minion,” sighed Grim. “Moments like these, I know it isn’t.”

Your feet shuffled as you went to find the broom and dust pan.

From saving the day to cleaning up the wreckage, a Prefect's work was never done.

**The End**