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In which Penn falls in loveeeee...

Penn's nose was painfully smashed against the ground. *Again*. He was, at least, alive, and he was very thankful for that. His finger twitched and he regained consciousness, eyes opening up slowly to take in the dimly lit room.

From his vantage point on the floor, he observed the small room. It was concrete-walled and smelled vaguely of dirt. It was a concrete chamber with a wooden barn-like door that looked misplaced at its entrance. The walls were painted a stark white, and a few lamps were stationed around the room. One or two pictures adorned the wall and a bed sat neatly in the corner, its blue comforter a pop of color in the otherwise colorless room. Moving his head and looking to his other side, the beige carpet scraping against his nose, Penn spotted a burnished bronze panel of buttons and switches which was nestled behind an antique-looking rocking chair, where Lethia sat, scribbling something in a notebook.

Seeming to notice his gaze on her, Lethia finally looked up, giving a smile when she saw Penn. "Finally! You're awake! That took you long enough. It's been, like, twenty-three minutes. And this is one of my *favorite* worlds."

Penn sat up, a wave of dizziness flooding over him. Rubbing his temples, he looked around the room, trying to orient himself again. He noticed Lethia was in her ninja suit again. "Where exactly... are we?"

Lethia beamed. “A holding cell! So much nicer than Arthurian prisons, by the way, and there’s a change of ninja clothes on the bed,” she said, talking at a mile a minute.

What... time period is this? Penn wondered to himself, unsteadily getting onto his feet and heading over to the bed, picking up the ninja outfit experimentally. The fabric was dark and Penn almost expected to see a black belt with it, although he saw none.

Immediately, the Narrator’s voice piped up in Penn’s brain. He had to stifle a groan at her voice. He had recently found that it had grown feminine, to the point where it sounded like a twelve-year-old girl’s. **Relax! Take some time to chill out here— nothing to worry about!**

Penn bit back a snarky comeback. *Who even are you!?* he asked the Narrator. A laugh ran through his mind.

Don’t worry about that, I have valuable information about this time-period-slash-genre. The upbeat sound of the Narrator’s voice filled his mind. He waited a minute expectantly, before the Narrator spoke again, **Well? Do you want to hear it or not?**

He hadn’t realized he was expected to answer. *Um, yes. If it would quite possibly keep me alive and away from danger, then yes, info would be appreciated.*

Penn could imagine a grin spreading across the Narrator’s face, if she had one, which he doubted, since, as far as he knew, she was part of his imagination. **So! There’s no details in the book about what time period this is— there’s a book!?** —duh, **what do you think you were dumped into? Let me finish talking, please. It’s steam-punk, and there’s sci-fi and weirdos involved.**

Penn gave a grunt at the information. At least it was helpful. Sort of. *Anything I need to be worried about? For now, at least?*

There was a pause as the Narrator seemed to be thinking. **Nothing I can... wait, actually, be careful of that lady who’s about to come through the door, I don’t remember her being in the plot anywhere—**

What lady coming through the— the barn-like door opened, and a woman walked through. She looked to be in her younger twenties with her hair piled on top of her head in a ballerina-type bun, a fierce look on her face. Her gaze was commanding, sharp as an eagle's. The only thing that broke the image of an army drill sergeant was the rose gold glasses that rested on her dark face, with their slight pink tint to the lens.

"Well," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm glad to see you're awake. We can't have *another* person dying on the Ninjas' hands, can we?" She had a defiant air about her as if she had broken all rules and everything about society, completely trashing norms that were expected of her and throwing away any and all guidelines she had been given in the past.

"I suppose introductions are called for." She strode over to Penn, petite frame making her much shorter than him, so she had to look up. Her dark brown eyes met his and she stuck out her hand in greeting. "Agent Gabrielle," she asserted with confidence, clearly expecting Penn to speak.

Taking her hand and giving it a firm shake, Penn said— with much less confidence— that he was Penn Leape. She nodded thoughtfully. "Is Penn a nickname for something?" she asked, slight curiosity in her voice.

Penn let her hand go, thinking. "I don't *think* so," he responded after a moment, "but I may be wrong." A slight blush crept onto his cheeks although he tried to hide it and he felt his heart quicken, a bashful feeling washing over him. Lethia was looking at the two from her chair, ninja hood pulled down, the notebook open on her lap. A knowing look was on her face, a small smirk gracing it, a look that Penn hated, because it meant she knew things. Dangerous things.

Gabrielle nodded once again. "Well, Penn Leape, welcome to—" she gestured with her hand "—the main base for the Ninjas. I assume you've heard of us? Or perhaps you've been on a ship your whole life."

Penn shook his head no, to which Gabrielle looked slightly surprised— and a little bit happy— before she started to talk once again. "The Ninjas are a group of *peaceful* revolutionaries, who, for the

most part, disrupt cultural norms...” she trailed off before picking up the ninja suit off the bed “like women wearing pants and hope to one day cause a change in society.” Under her breath, she muttered something more, but Penn couldn’t hear her, and wasn’t, quite frankly, sure if he had wanted to.

“You may either decide to put on the suit and stay here,” she paused, as if allowing Penn to think for a moment, “or you may head back up to the real world. Although I will warn you, if you decide to stay here, you’ll be put to work. But it’s all up to you.” She shrugged, eyes flitting to Lethia quickly.

“It seems your friend has already decided to stay here. But, as I’m sure you’re aware, you may choose to go a different route.” The Narrator’s voice immediately filled Penn’s mind, jabbering excitedly.

Oh my GOODNESS, you HAVE to head out, I just saw the CUTEST bird, and the CUTEST GUY TOO— Penn firmly shut the Narrator’s voice out of his mind; he didn’t care much for her gushing about a cute guy. Gabrielle’s eyes were locked on him as she clearly awaited his decision.

To stay, or not to stay... that is the question. Penn thought deeply about it, before resorting to the oldest trick of the book: using the duck song to choose.

... And he waddled away, until the very next day. His brain landed on leaving. It was a quickly-made decision, but with Gabrielle’s gaze burning into him, he would risk it. It was awkward anyways.

“I’ll head up to the surface,” he said nonchalantly.

“WHAT!?” Lethia burst out, slamming her notebook and the pen which was sandwiched between the pages shut. “You’re LEAVING!? That’s so UNLIKE you, you’re HEADING UP!?”

It took a moment for Penn to register Lethia’s outburst. “... Yes?” he said tentatively, rethinking his life choices.

Lethia sat down. “I’m all for it, let’s go,” she said, a grin crossing onto her face. “You’re finally learning to chill! Took you long enough!” She stood up again, turning to Gabrielle, who stood facing Penn still, an unreadable gaze on her face. “Gabby, want me to swap out the ninja suit for something else?”

“*Gabrielle*, and we don’t usually issue out used suits, so it’s yours to keep. There’s a bin on the first floor if you want to use some of the things in it.”

“Great!” Lethia shouted enthusiastically, leaping up, and, her excitement contagious, a small smile beginning to form on Penn’s face.

“Well then,” said Gabrielle giving a nod. “I’ll have to escort you out; we can’t have people who aren’t part of the Ninjas knowing exactly where we’re based.”

“Can’t the government— or whoever you guys are against— just like, scan the ground or something...?” Penn trailed off, confused once again. The Narrator’s voice started to speak up again, but Lethia’s finger was against his face, in a shushing motion, the Narrator immediately becoming silent.

“Shhhh,” she said before she started off. “It’s steampunk, remember?” And with that, she followed Gabrielle out the door. Penn did likewise, stepping out into the hallway, the ninja suit in his arms, still dressed in his safari-like uniform from the previous story.

He looked around him at the corridor, which was painted a dark blue, footsteps echoing off the walls. After about a minute of walking and passing minimal ninja-cloaked people, the trio reached the end of the hallway, going across a concrete room. There wasn’t anything in there, except for stairs that led up to a gear-encrusted latch that Penn assumed opened up into the outside world, a chest of a bunch of dress-up clothes, and a lever that was probably meant to open the latch.

Lethia was already excitedly rummaging through the chest, pushing neatly-stacked clothes out of the way, to the fury of Gabrielle, who wore a barely masked expression of deep anger. Penn walked forward at a normal pace, having regained his basic walking capabilities, and arrived at the chest.

It wasn't a very remarkable chest; it held quite a few clothes, but only that. Its outside was dark wood with golden brown metal on the corners that framed it, giving it a rather steampunk vibe... not that Penn knew what to expect from the word "steampunk".

Lethia shoved some clothes in Penn's arms. They smelled vaguely of lavender, with a pinch of cinnamon mixed in. It made Penn feel like he was a candle at Bed, Bath, and Body Works, but it reminded him of home, so he was alright with it.

Having been directed to a changing room by the ever-helpful Gabrielle, he examined the clothes for the first time. Instead of the khaki-colored safari clothes he had been wearing up until then, the clothes were old-fashioned, with all the buttons and suspenders attached.

A blue button-down shirt was the centerpiece of it all. Over that Penn assumed he was to wear the dark gray vest, paired with some dark gray pants... that had bright green suspenders attached. All it meant was that Penn was to wear his vest buttoned up or something at all times, so nobody caught sight of the pear-green atrocities that went over his shoulders. On top of the whole pile was a gray hat, which, if Penn remembered his history lessons correctly (and he did), was reminiscent of a newsboy's hat from the 1900s.

He stepped out of the changing room, opening the latched door with slight difficulty (the gears looked to be stuck), the dressy shoes on his feet slightly scuffed and a little big. Across from him, on the other side of the room, Lethia stepped out of her booth, an ecstatic grin on her face.

A skirt went down, just below her knees, dark red socks reaching up to meet it. She wore a shirt similar to Penn's, although its mint green was a good change from the warmer shade of blue to keep from clashing with the dark blue of her skirt. On her watch was a small, yet fully operational and very fancy-looking watch with gears galore. She looked like she was from the 1900s. Sort of.

Gabrielle stepped forward, two black blindfolds in her hand. "Put these on if you will, please," she said, handing them out to the two.

Tying it securely, Penn felt Gabrielle's hand on his back, pushing him forward, then it left for a moment and the screech of a lever being pulled down and the clanking of large gears was heard. Gabrielle pushed the two forward, and out into the remarkably smoke-free air. It was fresh and clean and Penn's lungs heaved with happiness at being out of the stuffy basement that was the Ninjas' base.

Penn untied his blindfold and felt it snatched out of his hand as his arm hung limp. His eyes were on the city and everything in it. The sky was a cloudy gray, but the air was clean. The roads were cobbled and a little dirty, not unlike what he imagined nineteenth-century New York to look like. Large, gleaming, ships hovered high above the spiraling metal towers of the city, plaster buildings in his sight line every now and then. He couldn't take his eyes off it for minutes. When he turned around finally to thank Gabrielle, she was nowhere to be seen. He felt a twinge of sadness in his chest before he was nudged by Lethia's elbow.

"Welcome," she said with some extravagance, stepping out into the crowded streets, "to the grand city of Dawnward!"

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