

Ben's feet ached, the trek through a hallway of boxes and containers feeling eternal. Sweat dripped from his head onto his already suffocating ninja outfit—the thin, tight fabrics turning soaking wet from how much he had walked. He was far more used to the quick bursts of movements that Ryoma's reckless fighting style brought; jumping from vantage point to vantage point, throwing shurikens to protect his lord. Hours of just *walking* made those dangerous missions look like child's play in comparison. The fact that the boxes all looked *the same*—brightly colored to the point that sometimes it hurt to look at—didn't help with the feeling of endlessness the path brought.

“Are you sure that you're going the right way, Kaden?”

"Ben," Ryoma said firmly. "Let Kaden do his work. His sense of smell is the only thing that we could rely on."

"I know, I know, but..." The ninja whined. "Apologies, Lord Ryoma. This place is just so..." He looked at the large, towering machines—gears hastily attached on the outside and steam bursting through the seams, whatever process that they did overclocked to the point Ben couldn't help but worry about them blowing up at any second. "...Worrying."

"Come on, Benny! Have my senses ever failed me again?" Kaden asked proudly, his fingers against his chest—stopping dead in his tracks. "We wouldn't have found this giant hangar without them! Have a little faith, will ya? Can you do me that favor?" He flashed his eyes at the ninja, already aware of the effect his puppy dog eyes had on him. "Pleeese?"

"O-of course! Sorry for doubting you, Kaden! I should've known that uh... you're the best." Ben stammered, bumbling his apology out. "I just never went to a place like this. There's so much... metal everywhere."

Three days; that's how many days have passed since Keaton disappeared during the expedition to Eitri's forest. The wolfskin got lost while they were fighting the sage and her army of puppet heroes, and by the time Alfonse and the summoner found them, it was too late. Keaton disappeared under a trapdoor and the Askr army was quickly surrounded yet another horde of Eitri's mindless, zombie-esque puppets. It was only by a miracle that they managed to survive and request a search party for the missing Keaton.

Kaden—once assisted by Keaton during the invasion of Hel's forces to Askr—was bound by honor to go and repay the favor. By the time everyone else in the castle found out that he was packing to go, the only thing that stopped him from making a run straight for the forest was Ben and Ryoma stopping him at the last second. While clearly not happy with spending even a second more waiting, he allowed the Hoshidan prince and his newly hired retainer to pack their things up if it meant that the search for Keaton would be more efficient.

"No worries! Even with all the nasty rust all over their machines, I can still track Keaton without trouble!" He sniffed the air, his tail wagging nonstop. "We're getting so much closer! He's nearby, I can tell! This entire area of the warehouse has his wolfskin smell all over it!"

Ryoma shuddered, his usually stern face contorting into a grimace. "I'm sure that you could've found a better way of phrasing that, Kaden."

Ben pushed his hand against his mouth, failing to suppress a snort at Ryoma's face. "I'm sure that Keaton wouldn't, uh, mark territory while trying to escape his pursuers, Lord Ryoma." He could barely keep his words straight, every single one changing pitch and quivering. "What do you think they do here, anyway? There are so many machines, but none of them seem to be churning out anything"

"Maybe they're making whatever magic materials Eitri uses to make her heroes. The ones she commanded had a strange look to them, so they're probably not flesh and blood...." Kaden shuddered, memories of the puppets they had to fight on their way to the hangar flooding back in. Everything—from their clothes to their skin—had a washed-out, ashy texture to it. Their faces were like masks hastily glued onto mannequins that moved robotically, expression never changing. "They were so cree—"

"Halt!" Ryoma suddenly commanded, brandishing Raijinto as he put himself in front of Kaden. Electricity crackled through the air as he held the sword up, feet planted firmly into the ground. "Over there. Seventeenth box from us on the left row."

The large orange gift wrapper-covered container shuffled and thrashed, coming to life. The anxious, erratic rustling from within sounded like an animal trying to escape its cage. Ben pushed Kaden behind him, shuriken in hand while Ryoma held his stance.

A rippling, ear-shattering *rip* came from the box as a large, bulky creature burst through the wrapping. The lumbering creature stood still for a moment, looking down as if it was only barely conscious. Its head was crooked, constantly tilting either to the right or the left. Its shape was inhuman, a vague outline of a bipedal frame the only hint that they had of whatever was in front of them being human.

"What even is that?!" Kaden squealed, clutching to Ben, claws digging fiercely into the ninja's armor. "Ryoma, do something about it!"

"State your purpose or die by the blade." The Hoshidan prince threatened, slowly inching towards the strange, bulbous creature. "Now."

The creature turned around—a shiny, large mockery of what a person would look like. Its skin was shiny, every inch of its body rounded out and soft. Every step that it took caused it to let out ear-bursting squeaks, crawling towards the trio like a zombie. A smile was painted on top of its overinflated face, the features pushing outwards and making him look cross-eyed. A strange-shaped balloon was attached to its head, a poor attempt at making it look like the creature had hair. He seemed to be wearing an axe fighter's armor, yet the shoulder spikes looked more like pathetic nubs than sharp stalactites. The only thing that clued them with what it could be was the cartoonish stamp with the name 'BOUCHERON' plastered on its chest. It looked like a nightmarish pool toy taken from a strangely themed haunted house.

“Last chance.” The grip around his sword burnt his hand from how hard he clutched the blade. “Now.”

Boucheron *bolting* towards Ryoma, its cartoonish-looking shoes making unnatural, shrieking squeaks as he ran. He looked as if he was about to fall at any second.

“STAND BACK!” Ryoma screamed as he swung his blade.

The metal cut through the rubber-esque texture of Boucheron’s skin, a splurge of metallic-looking liquid suddenly bursting from the tear of the pool toy’s face. The sound was like a balloon being burst, Boucheron reeling back in pain while the strange substance oozed out of his body. For a few seconds, he desperately pressed his bulgy, circular hands—completely lacking in fingers, thin lines drawn across the rubber as a poor, sick joke of a replacement.

Ryoma jerked his arm in front of his face, his shoulder pad engulfed by the thick, slimy goo—the crimson, shiny armor now smeared by cold, greasy coating. Smoke rose up from the inflicted area, the foul, chemical aroma making Ryoma gag. “What in the world is this thing?!” He wrenched away from his shoulder, the stench infesting his nostrils and traveling up to his head. He couldn’t think—his eyes were bloodshot—a single whiff was all that it took for the Hoshidan prince’s stance to devolve into a bumbling tumble. “N-ngh, what in the world...”

More and more metallic sludge poured from the ‘wound’ on Boucheron’s face, yet the pool toy didn’t look any less full. Its pained, jerky movement abruptly stopped—panicked, agonizing ceasing abruptly and robotically. It stood still for a few seconds, creaking its head at Ryoma and the unstained pair behind him. It resumed its relentless, wild chase.

“LORD RYOMA!” Ben screamed, pushing Kaden behind him. He hurled the shuriken at the pool toy, another cut causing more sludge to gush out and sending Boucheron tumbling

The shuriken stuck from its poofy skin, dripping from the wound. He bounced on one of his feet, waving his thick arms around as he struggled to regain balance.

“Lord Ryoma!” Ben wailed again, scooting near his lord. “My lord, are you okay? What was that thing?”

Ryoma moaned out in pain, his body rigid and still. The strange metal sludge had spread through the entirety of his armor. In mere seconds, it had gained the same cartoonish, soft, rounded edges of Boucheron’s armor. The edges of his shoulder blades—once sharp and jagged seemed to have dissipated and morphed into a rounder figure with a glossy finish. It was almost as if the metal had melted away into the sludge and then a cartoonish representation was drawn over by the bizarre force puppeteering Boucheron.

“W-what do we do, Benny?!” Kaden’s tail had frazzled up into a stiff, bristled clump of hair.

“We need to take you back to Askr. Whatever’s happening here, it’s too dangerous for just the three of us!” Ben tried to pick Ryoma up, the Hoshidan prince weighing practically nothing. His body weight was bizarrely distributed, the bottom of his body still heavy with the armor and toned musculature, yet the afflicted area felt like it was composed of nothing

but rubber and air. The lopsided weight caused him to stumble, shuffling awkwardly. “What the hell is going on...? Lord Ryoma?”

“BENNY!”

Kaden’s shrill, ear-piercing scream burst Ben’s daydream. Without thinking twice, the both of them broke into a sprint, Boucheron’s heavy steps squeaking loudly behind them. The rubber axe fighter charged at them like an animal, rushing down with nothing in mind but hunting its prey.

“What do we do?!” Kaden screamed.

“We run back! You lead the way in case we get ambushed while I carry Ryoma!” Looking down at Ryoma, the prince’s condition had worsened. His armor had become lighter and more buoyant, his body resembling a pool toy with each passing second. The metal sludge spread rapidly through the entire suit, adorning his frame with rounded edges. His hands and feet became simplified nubs. Even the prized regalia from King Sumeragi had turned from the finest blade in the entire land to a noodle-like toy that seemed no different from a pool noodle. “Oh, oh gods, no!”

“We’ll fix this later, Benny!” The kitsune screamed. “We have to get back to the castle first, otherwise, we’re just gonna end up like Ryoma!”

Ben wanted nothing more than to pop Boucheron—leaving the strange creature as tatters and sludge—yet he had no choice—they needed to get back as soon as possible before Boucheron got any closer.

He and Kaden sprinted down the street, their breaths loud and heavy. The loud crinkling of boxes behind them filled the air as they ran faster, sweat dripping from their faces. Ben glanced over his shoulder for a split second and saw several boxes shifting and shaking with each step. They could hear more pool toys breaking from their confines, the ripping of the wrapping paper growing so fierce that it overtook the sound of the machinery around them. They pushed themselves to their limits, feet aching—not daring to look back.

Turning to the left, Ben finally looked down, shocked at what he saw. Ryoma’s face had become nearly unrecognizable, his head armor consumed by the mysterious sludge. It carried that same flat, joy-filled grin and bulging eyes that Boucheron had. The ninja couldn’t believe that his liege had been reduced to a barely moving pool toy. “LORD RYOMA!” He screamed, voice breaking into a horrified, creaking crescendo.

“Benny! Calm d—“

Kaden’s voice became muffled as the world suddenly went white for the pair. The two of them ran inside a void, wandering inside the ethereal plane for what felt like an eternity. It almost felt like they were floating, their bodies involved in a strange ebb and flow. Ben felt Ryoma slowly drifting away from him, escaping his grasp—his lifeless, plastic eyes staring back at him.

“Lord Ryoma...” Ben whispered. He reached out his hand, overstretching his fingers to touch his prince again... Then everything suddenly *stopped*.

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Ben slowly opened his eyes, finding himself back in the real world. Kaden was still unconscious, shifting in his sleep. "What... the..." Slowly standing up, Ben saw that they in a completely new area of the hangar; a large transparent glass cylinder that seemed to have no exit. It seemed to stretch up so far that it was impossible to see the ceiling.

"What is this place?" He asked, barely above a whisper as he peered around for something that could help them escape from their current predicament.

Kaden's whine turned louder, the kitsune slowly standing up. "W-where are..." yet before he could even finish, all his senses fired off. He jerked his head behind him. "Benny." He muttered, faintly whispering as if he was deathly afraid of being heard. "T-there's..."

Ben froze. "Another box."

The gray wrapping paper was torn as a figure burst through it. Just as they feared, the familiar yet warped outline of wolf ears, black and white hair, and claws—all malformed to remove any sharp points and turning them harmless and cartoonish—met them out of the box. Keaton squeaked loudly as he stumbled into its cylinder, the goofy yet *vacant* expression meeting Ben and Kaden's horrified grimaces.

Ben was about to draw another shuriken until Kaden pounced at him, gripping his arm.

"Don't! Ryoma cut it open and that's what turned him into that... *thing!*"

Glaring at the wolfskin pool toy—waddling towards them as they continued to walk away in tow—Ben reluctantly put the shuriken back into the holster around his waist. "Fine... but what do we do? You can't use your beastone either, since it'd cut him too!"

"Um, um, maybe we can—"

Kaden was silenced as suddenly, Keaton raised his arm—a strange cannon-like contraption strapped to his arm. The two men raised themselves as the wolfskin pool toy aimed at them, expecting to be torn to shreds by Niðavellir lead.

Instead, they heard the sound of plastic getting unstuck from something. Ben opened his eyes, lowering his arms from his face. Looking down at his body in confusion, he didn't see anything. He was about to sigh in relief when his respite was dashed away by the sight of a strange plastic-like valve that had gotten itself stuck to Kaden's exposed chest.

"What the... What is this?!" Kaden squealed, immediately trying to pull it away from his chest. "Ngh, ngh! Why... won't... it... budge!" He desperately tried to pull it away, yet the inflation valve had embedded itself as a part of his body. "M-mgh... I'm beginning to feel... weird..."

Before Ben could even attempt to cut off the valve from Kaden's body, the metallic goop suddenly started to crawl from the valve onto Kaden's body.

The strange, sulfuric scent from the sludge that paralyzed Ryoma quickly did its work, freezing him in place while Ben immediately retreated to the other end of the room with his hand over his mouth to prevent the scent from infecting him.

"Mgh... so... hot..."

It slowly spread itself through Kaden's chest and up to his neck—forming a thick layer of metallic slime that began to completely cover him. His eyes widened in terror as he realized that he was to suffer the same fate as Ryoma had when he was changed into a pool toy.

“W-wait, no! No!”

His flesh and blood turned into plastic and the metallic slime, hands forcing themselves into fists to be completely transformed into giant mitten-like spheres. He desperately tried patting himself with his newly acquired bulky hands, hoping that it would somehow stop the spread. His face lengthened, forming a snout that his smile stretched across—painful, muffled whines as he tried to scream through his permanently closed mouth. However, the sound didn't last long as he felt his lips and mouth turn into nothing but the two-dimensional imprint of a goofy smile. After his skin and body started to turn plastic, the golden sheen around his head, back, and tail started to turn into cheap plastic that bulged atop the base of his frame.

Ben could only watch from a distance, hopelessness settling in as he saw Kaden slowly regaining his movement by the time it was too late. The kitsune pool toy was wandering aimlessly, slamming its poofy hands against the glass while Keaton was slowly approaching him like a predator about to pounce on its business.

Kaden's pounding on the wall got more intense, only to feel Keaton's hand perched atop his shoulder. Cornered, he slowly began to turn around, and before he could even attempt to fight back in his new form, Keaton's plastic eyes flashed a bright yellow light that completely paralyzed Kaden. The pause was so abrupt that it was like a still frame from a movie, not even the slight movements that could come from simply standing. The light kept pouring in from Keaton's eyes to Kaden's, the kitsune completely still as the drive to escape was practically purged out of him.

The two beastmen pool toys remained in that exact position for what felt like forever. Ben felt like he was watching an incomprehensible horror movie, pushing his back against the glass as he dreaded the inevitable.

The two pool toys suddenly turned at him, their movements suddenly jerky as they walked towards him—hands outstretched towards him.

The two of them lunged towards Ben, their hands shooting out a glistening stream of metallic goo. It cascaded over his body like a liquid wave, slowly coating every inch of him in the bright silver slime. His clothes began to dissolve beneath it as he frantically tried to escape, but it was too late. In mere moments, he was completely consumed. He felt himself froze up, mind fogging up as waves of relaxation immediately polluted his mind. His fierce determination to save his beloveds clashed against the soothing, lullaby-esque whispers traveling through his mind.

It was as if the goo was massaging his body, numbing him to whatever danger was there. He couldn't see clearly through the thick cocoon of sludge, but he could feel Keaton and Kaden snuggling up next to him, covering him in even more sludge while cuddling him. He felt his bones stretch and bend, turning into plastic until he was nothing more than an object—a toy with any sense of being alive. His arms shifted and moved independently from one another, long fingers covered in orange fur forming rounded nubs. Ben

instinctively tried to reach for his shurikens but quickly found himself unable to grab them with his lack of fingers.

N-no... Gotta... resist...

He pressed the shurikens between his two puffy hands, slowly trying to lift it up. He used his equally thickened rubber arm to wipe away the sludge from his face. He could barely form a hole in the cocoon, but as soon as he did, his spirit shattered. His daggers had been transformed into sharp, diamond-shaped blades into toys that wouldn't look out of place in a child's bedroom. The rubber, inflatable shuriken fell on top of his eyes, every single hope of escape dashed in an instant.

A fatal mistake.

The strange will of the goop began to take hold as he was transformed further. He felt his mouth be stretched and then turn into an imprint. His complex ninja suit was turned into an amorphous, bulbous frame with the pattern of his suit spray-painted on top. Patting desperately to his sides, he felt the spikes protruding from his master ninja armor turn into soft-edged triangles that squeaked when he hit them with his rubber skin.

His needs and wants were corroded by a simple-minded, almost animalistic desire to *spread*. Something nestled in his brain kept forcing the idea of sharing this accursed affliction onto others, and worst of all, was that the thought alone was enough to get Ben *quaking*. His thick, goofy-looking legs shivered at the thought of hugging someone and spreading the virus just as Keaton and Kaden did to him. The horrifying visage of Ryoma's cartoonish smile had now twisted itself into a joyful, parasitically addicting image.

So soft... so warm...

He could feel his eyes roll to the back of his head as he pictured himself happily floating in a pool, surrounded by his new brethren. There was something about the idea that made Ben desperate to experience it. His arm began to move on their own, propelling him to embrace Keaton and Kaden who were now both staring at him with the same wide, glossy eyes. He felt himself wrap his arms around their thick, poofy heads—longing to be pulled into the comforting embrace of two friendly pool toys. His mind went blank as they rubbed their nulled, completely smooth crotches against his. The pleasure kept intensifying, Ben thrusting his hips upwards as the goo finally solidified around him, completely transforming into a plastic-covered, animated shell of his former self.

“Ah, there they are. My automated security system caught them. These fools just keep walking into my traps... Not that I can complain.”

The childish yet mocking tone somehow felt familiar. Ben felt no reason to object to the words coming from above, continuing to sit idly as he felt himself lulled into a wonderful sense of complacency. He was being embraced so lovingly, why should he complain?

“I need to store them, though. Otr, could you help me out here? I'm quite busy with keeping Alfonse's forces at bay.”

A masculine voice sighed through the intercom. *“Fine. You owe me for this, though.”*

At that moment, Ben heard a beeping noise from above. Metal claws descended from the ceiling and a hatch opened on the ground, a large gift box emerging from the hatch. The three of them were far too busy hugging each other, refusing to fight as they were slowly picked up and then placed into the container. The walls of the box were surrounded by cotton, soft enough to make him feel as if he was drifting in an ocean of clouds. From the thick and excited squeaking from the other two beastmen pool toys, Ben could see that they shared his sentiment.

And as if it couldn't get better, Ben's heart fluttered as his gaze fell on Ryoma, lying inside the pooltoy storage container alongside them. Unable to contain his happiness, he leaned forward, pressing his face against the semi-transparent plastic, as if he was giving Ryoma a kiss.

Ben felt the box close shut with gentle arms of metal encasing him and his friends forever in darkness and softness. He heard a click and then nothing but silence as he drifted off into a wonderful bliss of stasis and rubber.