

Steven, an unassuming teenage boy, is sitting in a chair, hunched forward with his elbows resting on his knees, donning a concentrated, wide-eyed look. A couple inches away from his face, mirroring a similar expression is six year-old Donovan.

The two of them remain motionless in the same position for what feels like hours until Donovan finally blinks.

“I win againnnn,” Steven chirps in a singsongy voice, holding out his hand.

“That’s not fair. You’re too good at this game,” Donovan whines and crosses his arms in protest, kicking his legs that are too short to touch the ground.

“Hey, don’t be a sore loser,” Steven teases him, motioning with his still outstretched hand.

After a few more moments of pouting, Donovan gives up and places his tiny arm into Steven’s grip. On the inside of his forearm, just below his elbow, a V has been neatly drawn with a black Sharpie. Steven carefully drags the tip of the marker across his skin, connecting the two lines to form a triangle. Donovan closely examines his new unwilling temporary tattoo, rotating his arm around as if to get a better angle.

“Okay. 10-minute break...” Steven pauses briefly. “... AND THEN PREPARE FOR YOUR DOOM.” He dramatically announces in a deep voice and strikes an embarrassing pose, probably copying what he’s seen while spending too many weekends in playing Street Fighter.

“YOU prepare for YOUR doom!” Donovan shouts back as threateningly as he possibly can, and then, turns to run off, nearly tripping over the leg of the chair, while making what he believes to be airplane sounds.

Steven makes his way to the bathroom, with his eyes fixated on his phone as he quickly types out a text message to Deonn: “Starting in 10.” He closes the door behind him and clicks the lock for a moment of privacy. His earlier playful demeanor has shifted to a stoic seriousness.

He lets out an uneven breath as he reaches into his shirt to pull out a quarter-sized, golden medallion hanging from his neck. He traces his thumb over the triangle design intricately engraved into it, then following the circle encompassing the triangle. With his eyes closed, Steven brings the medallion to his forehead.

Suddenly, a series of irregular knocks on the door is followed by Donovan’s slightly muffled voice behind it: “STEVEN, ARE YOU READY YETTTTT?”

Steven, now with his eyes wide open having been interrupted by an unexpected guest, responds in a soft, reassuring voice, “Yeah, go wait for me by the chairs. I’ll be out in a minute.” He takes another breath before returning to his previous position.

“Present sacrifices. Eventual victories,” he whispers before tucking the medallion back under his plain black t-shirt.

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As he exits the bathroom, his phone lets out a *ding*. He reaches into his pocket, when he hears a shrill, primal screech coming from behind him, quickly growing in volume. Before he could turn around to look, a charging pantsless Donovan leaps at him, hoping to tackle him to the ground but only manages to cling onto him like a koala, knocking his phone out of his hand.

Immediately distracted by the sound of the phone hitting the ground, Donovan pushes off of Steven and dives to retrieve it.

“OOooOoOooh who’s Deonn??!?” his eyebrows raise as he prances around in his underwear.

Steven, though mortified, refuses to lose composure and attempts to take hold of the situation. “Do I have to call your parents, Donovan?” he says, trying to stand as tall and sound as confident as possible.

Either unfazed or just completely distracted, or maybe both, Donovan run-stomps to the living room and perches on the chair, the phone inches away from his face with the blue tint illuminating his skin.

Steven darts after him as the child repeatedly yells taunts of “STEVEN HAS A BOYFRIEND.”

“THEY are not my boyfriend. They’re not my anything friend,” he explains, swiping to grab the phone as Donovan jerks it out of his reach.

“They’re... Augh... just give me the phone, Donovan,” Steven firmly says, trying to hide the defeat burning inside him.

Realizing his sudden position of power, Donovan decides to capitalize on the opportunity. “Okay, but what are you going to give me?”

Unwillingly surrendering, Steven takes a moment to think of a bribe. He takes out a black Sharpie, dangling it in front of Donovan.

“I grant you the power of infinity wins. You can draw on my arm.”

Donovan has now lost interest in the phone, staring at the permanent marker in awe. “INFINITY??”

“Infinity.”

The six year-old grabs the Sharpie with both hands and pops the cap open after too many tries.

“Close your eyes,” Donovan demands, looking up at Steven and waiting for him to do so before beginning his masterpiece. “And NO PEEKING.”

The teenager complies in hopes of appeasing him and making him forget all about the phone and whatever he might’ve seen on it. He tries to decipher what Donovan might be scrawling on his arm, but through the child’s clammy palm and shaky penmanship, it proved to be rather difficult.

“OKAY I’M DONE,” Donovan finally shouts too loudly from excitement and pride.

Steven opens his eyes and looks down. The anxiety he felt before creeps back, tenfold. What he hoped to find was a crude scribble of a dog. What he thought would be the worst-case scenario was an army of a first-grader’s interpretation of phallic shapes. What he absolutely did not expect was the exact symbol he started on Donovan, matching the one on his medallion.

“Wh-What did you do?!” Steven stands up and backs away in horror.

“Do you like it? I saw it on your phone. It looked cool. DO YOU LIKE IT?” Donovan is beaming.

A melodic arrangement of marimbas plays. Steven reaches for his phone before Donovan can pounce on it and walks a few strides away from him before answering Deonn’s call. “Hey.”

“Is everything okay? We didn’t hear back from you...”

“Oh. Yeah, yeah. Everything’s fine. It’s just... taking a little longer than expected.”

“Oh okay. The first time’s always the hardest. It’ll get easier. I promise.”

“Right, right. Uhh. Just out of curiosity. What happens if the trigraph is drawn twice?”

“On one person or two?”

“Two.”

“Wow. You got two kids your first time? Even some of our almost 30s haven’t gotten two kids in one sitting before. I guess they waived your age requirement for a reason.”

Steven lets out a nervous chuckle.

“But it doesn’t make a difference. Only the first kid the trigraph is completely drawn on will be affected. Guaranteed. The older the first kid is, the less likely the second will be taken,

depending on the power of the gem. We gave you a starter Seraphinite, so I wouldn't bank on two Takings."

Steven can feel his fingers losing sensation, as if all the blood from his body is bleeding out, as he croaks, "Oh... okay."

"Hey. It'll be fine. The hard part's over. Just give the first kid the gem and let the Taker do His work."

"Yeah. Okay..."

"We'll celebrate your 6 months of dedication and your first Taker Summoning at the next meeting. Present sacrifices, my friend."

"Eventual victories." Steven hangs up the call, his eyes dead with terror.

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"Two years. I couldn't wait two more years." Steven's knees thump the floor as his legs give out.

Donovan, now a few inches taller than Steven's kneeling body, tugs on the sleeve of his t-shirt.

"Steven?"

"They said I had more potential than any candidate they've seen in years. I couldn't even complete one summoning." Steven's glazed over eyes suddenly burn with a darkness entirely foreign to Donovan. "But you. This is why we do what we do. I gave my life to them and you disgusting little brat destroyed everything in a matter of minutes."

Fear has taken over Donovan's initial feelings of concern and confusion. He begins to back away, his small strides putting minimal distance between their bodies.

Steven stretches out his arm as if they were having their staring contest again, but this time with a morbid and twisted smile. "I'll take my chances and pray the Taker understands the exceptional circumstances. Come here, Donovan. Don't you want to meet the Taker?"

In a moment of panic, the little boy pulls a greenish marbled rock out from behind and places it in Steven's open palm. "Here! I'm sorry I looked through your stuff, okay? I took the rock cause I thought it was pretty. You can have it back. I'm sorry, Steven!"

"WAIT, N--"

Before Steven could finish uttering his words of protest, black particles, growing in density, start to emit from the rock, making their way around his body. Although he is still breathing and

conscious, it seems as though he has been tranquilized, his blinking eyes staring straight ahead, out of focus, and his muscles relaxed.

There is now almost a small tornado spiraling around Steven. The gentle wind it creates forms a layer of unintelligible whispers. Then, starting from his white sneakers, Steven's body gradually dissipates into identical black specks as if he is being consumed by the swirl. After the last of his blonde hair has disappeared, gravity pulls the rock to the floor.

The thud causes Donovan to jump and look at the ground.

"Oooh cool rock!" He bends over to pick it up.

"Hey, where are my pants?" He runs off in search of his missing pants, while playing happily with his newfound treasure, as if Steven had never taken even a breath of existence.