## Portal Peril 4: Introductions

The night shimmered with decadence, each breath of air thick with the perfumed scent of opulence. The tiger's mansion sprawled, a bejeweled beast in repose, its grandeur as brazen and unapologetic as its master's desires. Inside, the holiday party was a dreamscape fashioned by feverish imagination—walls adorned with velvet draperies that whispered secrets to the touch, rich carpets that muffled the pad of partygoers secreting away together to hidden alcoves, and towering chandeliers dripping with crystals that scattered light into a thousand illicit promises.

"Simply divine," murmured a slender fennec, as they entered through the front door. Surreal, gentle trance music pulsed overhead, pumped into the air to mingle with the scents of fresh meat being grilled at the food bar. The room was massive, and in the center of it was a table bedecked with gifts, each a different hue, all shiny and metallic and wrapped up with bright red bows. Guests were milling about, buzzing pleasantly as they enjoyed glasses of bubbly, gathering around the food bar as fresh fish and other meats sizzled and steamed under the care of a large black bear.

At the epicenter of the party stood Charn, the burly tiger surveying over his orchestrated paradise. A dark satin purple vest and black silk trousers were all he wore, each with a playful tiger stripe package inlaid in glittering stitches across both. At times, the tiger could be called goofy, off beat or downright scurrilous, but tonight he was the epitome of distinction, a male tiger who moved through life with a predator's grace and a connoisseur's taste.

"Welcome to my little soirée," he purred, voice smooth as aged brandy as he took River's jacket. The fennec's fur bristled in excitement, stroking their arms to fluff out their fur as their jacket was handed to a white folf in a cute little bellhop uniform. The tiger's palm was warm and friendly against his back as he strolled with his guest through the crowd. "I hope you will enjoy yourself tonight."

"What are the rules?" River asked, nodding to a wolf and hyena couple who were whispering to each other near the fire. "I didn't see anything in the invitation, and as you know, I've never been to one of your events."

Charn chuckled indulgently as he slipped a finger into the crook of a passing server's elbow, pausing them to allow them to offer the fennec a tall, sleek flute of champagne. "Well, as CharnCo's newest, and largest investor, I would be absolutely remiss not to invite you." He let River sip some fizz, as they slipped over the soft floor towards the gift table. "Your 'gift' is wrapped, of course."

"It was quite interesting acquiring that gift. Your technology is quite advanced, and I appreciate that you have provided various styles and sizes to account for the wide range of... configurations that your customers may be interested in."

"Oh, well, that's very kind of you to notice," Charn said, as he strolled fingers over the various packages. He winked to a siamese cat who was staring at the two of them from afar, as he tapped a light pink package with one finger tip. River gasped, slightly, at the sensation of pressure poking against a tender spot of him. "When it comes time to the swap, this one is yours... as I'm sure you've already deduced."

River nodded, their large fennec ears flicking forward, a reddish tinge pinkening their insides. "Ah, yes, so it is. I admit, this is all quite, what is the term? Surreal? Nouveau?"

"Nouveau is a great way to describe it," Charn agreed, as he traced his finger in a slow circle around the package. "And it's just the beginning. Of course, you know one of the secrets I'm going to be revealing tonight, but there are others. Surprises, you could say."

River sipped their champagne, stimulated and curious. "What are they?"

"They're *surprises,*" Charn said, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Surprises that will amaze you. Surprises that are possible because of your investment into CharnCo. Surprises that you helped make possible. I do hope you will enjoy them."

Charn stepped away from his business partner, his smile a weaponized curve of soft, fuzzy lips.

"Charn, you outdo yourself,'' Percy laughed, the gryphon enjoying a sausage on a stick. The roasted horse penis was still steaming as the gryphon's beak tore thick chunks from it, savoring the roasted tissue in ragged gulped hunks.

"Ah, but to outdo oneself is to chase perfection," Charn mused aloud, his gaze roving over the accumulated guests. "And what is a chase without a little mischief to spice the pursuit?"

His voice caressed the words, infusing them with innuendo. They hung in the air, heavy with implication. Around him, the hum of conversations dipped and swelled, a symphony of intrigue that played counterpoint to the subtle rustle of fabric against bodies too close together, the clink of crystal, and the murmur of anticipation.

"Well, I don't know about all of that," Percy said, as he tore off a large beakful of horse flesh. The gelding, one of the dozen or so Clydesdales who were working the crowds with plates of amuse bouche and cocktails, shivered, watching from nearby. "But I'm looking forward to the gift swap. I'm hoping for something exotic. Is it true, you've branched out into more than just cocks and balls?"

Charn reached over, taking Percy's snack in his own hand and stealing a bite. "My dear friend, when have I ever lied?" He asked, chewing through the hot succulent flesh. He returned the wooden skewer, as Percy snickered under his breath.

"Uh huh, sure Charn. Those honeyed words might work with some rut-horny bull, but not with me. Tell me the truth, what's in those boxes? Is it all empty sacks and half-gnaws cocks, or what?"

"I look forward to seeing which package you open, my friend," Charn said, tickling under the large gryphon's beak, his feet strolling him past the mythical creature and over to the meat bar. The bear that was working the bar was not much older than the tiger himself, the thick black fur showing whorls of gray. Shirtless and powerful, he deftly flipped the sizzling slabs of meat using only his (silicone capped) claws, rolling the horse shafts and rut-swollen testes about on the grill. These were the hors d'oeuvres, and while they would be unheard of in other parties, at the CharnCo holiday party, they were not even staples. What would a Charn party be without an exuberant abundance of freshly plucked masculinity, cooked and served with the casualness of hotdogs and hamburgers?

"You're probably going to get some requests," Charn said, as he slipped behind the bear, rubbing his fingers against the firm shoulders, kneading into the powerful back. "Use your discretion, of course. If they want something you aren't familiar with, or can't cook here, then send them to the kitchen in the back."

"Sure thing, boss," The bear said, as he pushed down on a ram's testicle, the long ovoid rupturing and bursting with steam as it hissed its guts out onto the griddle.

"And if they just want to suck your dick, there should be room under the table," Charn said, hands kneading bread into the bear's middle back, working out the tension.

"Already got one," the bear replied in deadpan. Charn paused, noticing the subtle thrusts that the bear was making towards the underside of the grill.

"Looks like you're in good hands, then. I'll be there in half an hour to do the meat from the fishing episode. The trout, especially, I will need to do, however, the catfish has been gutted and cleaned and is ready for cooking. I don't imagine that it will be as popular as the horse cocks, but there are those here who would prefer not to devour the flesh of their fellow guests, and we respect their diets, regardless of how distasteful they are." The bear nodded, and Charn stole a steaming egg from the grill, biting into the tip of it and enjoying the steaming, still bubbling 'yolk' that filled it as he made his way back into the crowd, and towards the small stage that was set up between the fireplace and the the gift table.

The guests were glancing at him as he took the microphone in his hand, some staring, some only peeking when they thought they could do so without getting caught. In those gazes, he read their secrets, their yearnings. Charn had always been a collector of such treasures—desires whispered in the dark, fantasies barely dared to be dreamt. And tonight, he would add to his collection, one portalled package at a time.

"Tonight, my friends," Charn announced, raising the cooked egg to the glittering room, "we shall unwrap more than mere presents. Tonight, we unwrap possibilities both sumptuous and macabre. Tonight, we reveal ourselves, indulging in the experience of the flesh in a way that has never been done before. Tonight, we *feast.*"

The crowd drank in his words, intoxicated by the heady mix of allure and suggestiveness. The air itself seemed to pulse with the beat of their quickened hearts, the collective breath of those poised on the brink of revelation. And as Charn's gaze swept over his domain, it was clear: he was not just the host of a mere holiday gathering. He was the ringmaster of a carnival of the senses, where every guest was both spectator and show, and every moment was ripe with the potential for ecstasy or chaos.

"Let the festivities begin," he declared, his voice a velvet caress that wrapped around each guest, gesturing to the gift table. All of the guests were intrigued, but only a dozen or so carried tickets that would allow them access to these gifts, each of them personally curated by the tiger for this special night. An array of packages, bound by ribbons and false promises, let off an otherworldly hum, a cosmic purr that belied the precious, unnatural cargo bundled inside.

"The rules of course, are simple," He continued, as he strolled around the inner periphery of the gathered crowd. He held out his hand to a ram hybrid named Kolby, the chubby ungulate holding a gray token between his fingers. Kolby handed the token to the tiger, who held it up for others to see. "For those of you with a token, you will be able to exchange it for one of the packages stacked here before you. When the coin glows, it is your time, and you may choose one of only two options. You may take any gift from the stack," And he gestured to the hidden treasures laying on the table, "And claim it as your own, or, you may purloin the already claimed gift of another. It is up to you." Charn handed the coin back to Kolby, smacking his chops at the hybrid, who's pants hung much looser from the groin then they had when he arrived. Some of the guests had traded the packages they had arrived with for a chance at someone else's, and Kolby had been one of them.

"But if I choose a gift, and then someone steals it from me, that doesn't seem fair," a small blue female feline said. "I mean, that means I'm left with nothing."

"Ahh, not true. If someone takes your already claimed package, they will give you their coin, and that allows you to take something else for yourself, either from the stack, or from someone back," Charn explained.

"So I can just steal it back!" Kraft continued, her blue ears flicking forward. "Won't we just be swapping back and forth forever then?!"

"Of course not. When you go to take someone else's package, your coin will either glow, or go inert. If it glows, you can trade. If it goes inert, it means that package is no longer available for you to have. I won't bore you with the details of the coding that goes in to determine whether it glows or not, just know that it will prevent 'take backsies' from happening."

Kraft nodded, glancing excitedly up at the large table. "Okay, thank you mister Charn." She sized up the packages, clearly studying the larger ones that were in the back of the table.

"Choose wisely," Max whispered from behind her, his white fur brushed to a sheen, his presence almost ethereal among the sea of exotic creatures. The folf moved through the crowd with a grace that belied his anxious thoughts, fingers brushing lightly against a satin-draped shoulder here, a quick, reassuring smile there.

Kraft glanced at the folf, sizing him up, then rolled her eyes and went back to studying the larger tables, "Thanks for the head's up, shrimp, but I think I'll be fine."

Max's heart thumped against his chest, the rhythm erratic as he meandered closer to the side of the table less frequented by the guests. His keen intellect knew the precise location of his own contribution to the collection, sitting nonchalantly at the top of the stack, resting on top of large packages that promised more promise per pound than his own might. He had agreed to allow his package to be added to the stack in exchange for the tiger pulling it, soggy and digestion-scalded, from the large catfish that the tiger had accidentally caught with it the day before. He didn't have a coin to redeem, so his only hope was in making sure that whoever got it would be nice with it. Well, at least, nice *enough.* Not everyone here, after all, was as prurient and devious as the tiger was. The large taur fellow, Achaius, for example, seemed to be absolutely vanilla. Certainly he smelled like vanilla, and how could a sadistic bastard smell like sweet vanilla?

Max reached over and nudged his package away from the edge of the hatbox shaped package that it rested on top of. He could feel it against his balls, which had been crushed down into the box that was just barely big enough around for the portal ring itself.

"May I suggest exploring the choices along this end?" Max said to Achaius gesturing subtly towards 'his' stack. His eyes gleamed with a mix of mischief and anticipation, his tail swishing in barely contained excitement.

"Are you guiding us to fortune or folly, dear Max?" A velvety voice queried, belonging to Amara, the dragoness crouching subtly to examine the stack he was gesturing to. The dragoness was one of the VI-VI-VIPs, and Max's chest pushed out against his bellhop vest as he moved to rigid attention.

"Perhaps a bit of both," Max replied, the corner of his mouth quirking upwards. He made eye contact with the taur, meaningfully gesturing again. "After all, isn't that the essence of adventure?"

His internal monologue was a cadence of hope and trepidation, an intimate waltz of thoughts that twisted around the core of his desire to connect, to be chosen, to be understood beyond the layers of his assistant's facade. Tonight, the veil between roles would thin, and he yearned for the courage to step beyond it.

Jax, perched with predatory elegance atop the grand staircase, observed Max's delicate dance among the guests. His keen gaze cut through the flurry of activity as he listened intently to the hushed tones and cryptic gestures that Max so skillfully employed. From beneath his sharply tailored tuxedo, Jax's feathers ruffled slightly—a physical manifestation of the amusement bubbling within him. Jax knew Max, after all. He had known him since before the folf had joined Charn's employ, and his beak ached with amusement as the folf so openly pointed to the package that *his* precious equipment laid inside of. Equipment that Jax had no particular need or desire for, but which Max would desperately want to get back. And that made it all the more enticing to the devious fowl.

"Ah, young Max," Jax thought, his sly smile unveiling a row of pearly teeth, "you're playing a dangerous game, and I might just tip the scales for my own entertainment." The glint in his eyes sharpened, reflecting an inner fire fueled by the prospect of mischief.

Let the games begin.