

Anthem Of The Lonely Act 3 - End Of All Days

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

The guests were still arriving by carriage at the High Commander's celebration that evening, before the sun had even set. Most were dressed up in their most fancy of clothing they could possibly find, perhaps spending hours getting ready, if not the entire day. Regardless, it was extremely easy for the mammoth to tell who was invited, and who was just working here to earn some extra coin.

The thought of the medium class serving would've concerned him, if he wasn't so already sick of listening to people talk or complain about others. For a celebration of one's rank, this party definitely had a different feel to it, more of a gossip one. Still, his ears and eyes kept watch on the staff, getting a foreboding feeling about them. "Cautious as ever, General Nobufasa." A well-groomed flacon in uniform greeted the brown mammoth.

"High Commander, congratulations on your promotion. I never got a chance to say it earlier."

"You and everyone else here, apparently. But thank you. I'd like to introduce you to someone." The avian gestured someone behind him, a rather tall red fox that looked strangely perfect. Standing nearly seven feet tall, and housing the physique of a body builder. Almost intimidating the General. "Nobufasa, this is General Ricon. He was the Trinity strategist of the southern operation you were commanding." The two shook paws in a peaceful greeting.

"It's a pleasure, fellow General." His voice carried a thick essence to it. Not of one holding rage or anger, but almost... Inspiration.

"Ricon, was it? I don't believe I've ever heard of that name."

"Ricon has only recently been promoted as well. He's been the brains behind many operations, but has hardly taken credit for such things in the face of the public." A strange look from the mammoth.

"The people should believe that the entire army is contributing, not just one person. It gives off a sense of unity, you see." The crimson fox explained, turning slightly and taking a drink served by a nearby

waiter without looking. Letting Nobufasa take notice to a rather thick cape he wore as well. One that seemed rather heavy to carry around, let alone in such a place. "But I did hear of some troubles you had with the city by the river."

"...Yes. Many of the townspeople got infected by some strange plague, one that started before we even arrived. We were thinking it was from the water, whereas I ordered my soldiers to only drink from the supply we brought." The two males nodded. "Of course, that didn't stop a few fools from being careless."

"Young soldiers are often green, after all." The Commander chuckled very lightly.

"Forgive me if this is out of line, General, but..." The mammoth started. "How many battles have you fought in yourself?"

"Several. I started as a private in Harigrasha, then was promoted to a Sargent. Participated in Kurrihra Valley, Narvagijannm, and even Nagashino."

"Nagashino...?" Nobufasa repeated. "That was nearly thirty years ago."

"I'll take that as a compliment." The fox smirked, rising his glass to be excused while someone else called for him. Almost giving the wooly one an uncomfortable airspace.

"You should listen to his war stories sometime. You don't find prodigies like him very often, General." A concerned look at the falcon for a moment, and he lightly chuckled again. "I didn't mean it like that, but you could learn a few things from him. Even if it's just tactics." A faint nod and the bird excused himself. Leaving the mammoth to just study the red male from afar.

"Something wrong?" A female gazelle asked, rather dressed up for the party. Breaking his train of thought and shake his head.

"Nothing. Just getting a strange feeling about all this. It's all too calm." He started heading out to the balcony for some air, and she followed him.

"You say that about every gathering. I think the stress has gotten to you." She smirked, to show she was joking.

"Maybe you're right." The larger male mumbled, double taking at what almost seemed to be a red star quickly flying through the sky in the distance. "...What is that?"

Chapter 1

The green energy concentrated in the small area, surrounded by dense bushes that blocked out the hunter's moon. As curious as some of the animals were, the high pitched noise scared them off. Creating a dome of slight green before dissipating and leaving behind three creatures. A blue dragon, a limping black badger, and a grey fox holding her up.

Cautiously looking over the area, and letting their eyes get used to the dark, the fox noticed the larger one moving a bit funny. Swaying his head back and forth like a dancing snake. "I think we're clear-"

"I stay up to lateee!" The blue one called into the night, getting a very odd look from the other two. "I got the Mark of Cainnn!" The others blinked a couple of times. "That's what Sam would sayyy... Yeahhh..." Bigger all, he can hear my music- "That's what Cass would sayyy... Yeahhh..."

"Maybe you shouldn't-"

"-I've had way too many driiiiinks!" A groan from the badger. "I can't even singgg!" The two stared at him for a moment before attempting to speak again. "-Least that's what people sayyy! Yeahhh... That's what-I!" A backhand on his muzzle made him yelp and hold it.

"Be quiet you! You never know what the hell is out here!" Zeltra hissed at him. "What has gotten into you?"

"I'm just trying to coconut the mood. Everything tastes so dark green right now." Thea snorted.

"That's because it's night." She grumbled.

"Actually, it's 5:33am. Says so on the in-story clock." Another pair of odd looks and the dragon double-taked at them. "I couldn't tackle the bear, the eggs were fricken real!"

"Our blue friend has officially lost it." Roe sighed, studying the badger for a moment. "Can you walk?"

"I'm a North, of course I can walk-" He let her go, and the black one fell to the grass. "...When my right leg starts working again."

"Any pains?"

"Not really. Just numb like it's asleep."

"Perhaps you should give it a nice rubbing." The larger one said, getting one clearly odd look, and another with castration levels of hate. Getting him to curl his neck and mutter. "Why did the elephant order a ham sandwich...?"

"Ham... Sandwich?" The fox repeated, getting another double take from the dragon and another neck curl, along with a bit of tilting.

"That's not a violin. I wonder where the mother bear is." A groan from the female.

"Can I just hit him again? Maybe it'll knock some sense into him." A slight whimper from Thea, as he started to look around for something. "Just give me a minute, I'll be okay."

"Can I trust you long enough to stay with him while I scout where we are?" A displeased look from her. "We certainly can't trust Thea to do it."

"Even if he wasn't saying gibberish." She got a slight hiss from him, as he started carving on a sheet of bark. "Just come back soon. And don't be surprised if he's knocked out."

"Alright." Roe carefully went through the thick plant life, getting the badger to sigh and drag herself against a tree. Doing what she could to return feeling to that appendage, as well as catch her breath. Even tending to the area where the bolt made contact, getting that strange tingling to echo through her body. As if altering it, cell by cell. It got under her hide, literally.

Regardless, worrying about it now was a waste. At the moment, the group had bigger problems. One of them being lost, unarmed, and if one could call this injured. Let alone, the dragon was still mumbling nonsense while carving on a sheet of wood. Looking over his dark blue body, Zeltra seen a strange green shimmer that appeared before.

~~~~~

The tavern was growing quiet finally, allowing the tired and wounded people upstairs to get their rest. Granted, it was unlike the Northe group to really think of them, let alone they were eager to celebrate Zeltra's return. Along with finding the legendary dragon within the mountains, getting the group to start drinking early, then very well into the night. That is, until the last one drinking finally fell over hard off her chair, getting the badger to chuckle. "There she goes." A glance at Thea, who has been oddly quiet ever since he started his ten pints. "Looks like you outlasted a group of Northe on your first night out drinking."

Only a faint noise in response, but those maroon eyes were just staring into space. "I can't say you outdrank them, but you did stay awake." She said, getting up and off her chair. Giving the large one a few taps on the shoulder and mutter in response, as well as a strange look. Surprised that he still wasn't very sluggish, but due to his size, he really shouldn't be. "Come on, let's find you a place to sleep for the night."

Without question he started following the badger outside. Walking down the streets beside her as the female studied him. Getting a slight stare from the blue one, but barely a curious look. "I'm surprised you're even walking straight-" A strange green shimmer seemed to lightly trickle his scales, getting the Northe to stop for a moment, then him as well. Carefully placing a paw on his side where she seen it, and attempting to feel anything.

"...What?" He half grumbled, like he was irritated.

"Just thought I saw something." She even looked back and around, thinking it might've been another light source. Then a loud splash over his wings got the dragon to growl very loudly, almost roar at an opened window with a faint glow. Getting the badger to attempt to calm him down, as well as spot a liquid with a bunch of bubbles drip off his wings.

"Insolent Wench!!" He growled again. "You ever think of looking before you throw your toilet water-!?"

"Hey, relax. It's just soap." She tried to calm him down.

"So, dirty bath water. That makes it *sooo* much better." Thea grumbled harshly, getting a heavy swat on the shoulder for his rude response. Another growl, then a snort as he looked back up at the window. Almost seeing the creature hiding behind the wall, then another shimmer on his scales. "Whatever. Enjoy your Cancer." His tail thumped on the cobblestone below, getting the badger's fur to raise up until she identified what it was.

They then continued towards the barn, using a key given to her to open it and scan inside. Moving a few objects out of the way and leading the large creature on some of the golden straw. Only to see him pull one of the bales out and flop on that instead of the dirt floor. Another strangely rude gesture, but what was done was done. She would figure out a way to punish him for it later. Actually, given his laying spot right underneath some extra staging, Karma would probably do that for her.

Regardless, she found her own spot on another bale. Not flattening it nearly as much with her frame, and still making it useable after she was done. Though it was almost morning, she would only need a few more hours of rest. Then they would see if this dragon could perform miracles like the legends said.

The echoes of morning animals woke her, along with the dragon's constant moaning in his sleep. Getting Zeltra to shake her head after getting awake, wondering how he could possibly be hungover from such a small amount of alcohol. Regardless, she had just the thing to cure it. Getting the badger rather awake and almost excited to show off one of her family recipes.

Within the town, many people were already up and about. Some she even recognized as bedridden when she first examined the illness from afar. Walking around perfectly healthy like nothing happened. Approaching a large kitchen from behind, she spotted the grey fox eating his own small breakfast. "I take it his cure worked?" She asked him, seeing him nod while waiting to swallow his food.

"Quite well, apparently. Many of them were up and about before the sun was." He chuckled. "And not a sign of side effects. Even the darkness on their skin has been removed, he's definitely a miracle worker."

"At the cost of how many years though." She muttered, looking over a few villagers returning to their families in full health. Though her statement was slightly cold, she couldn't help but feel uneasy about the dragon's decision.

"How did last night go?" Zeltra wasn't sure how to answer that, and it must've shown. Whereas the fox gave her a slightly puzzling look.

"He outlasted every Northe, besides me. But only because I didn't hardly drink." Another slight chuckle from him. Eventually, the badger sighed through her muzzle. Not really knowing what she should tell about the night. However, something came to mind. "Do you know what a Cancer is?"

"Cancer?" He repeated, almost worried. Once again, that morbid feeling returned. "...It's a Disease, causing the cells in your body to go haywire and keep splitting. Often resulting in many things to go wrong within the body." Though most of that was over her head, his expression didn't change. "Why?" She looked back at the barn for a moment, leading his green eyes to do the same and guess who she was looking at.

"...He mentioned it last night. You know how he gets with his words."

"Vocabulary." He corrected her, making her black ears go back in a bit of frustration. Still getting the fox to smirk a bit and take another bite. The female passed him, walking inside and getting a large pot, as well as picking a few things that she needed within. Turning to the head chef and asking.

"Do you know where I can get a dead man's toe?" And the entire kitchen fell in awkward silence and disgust.

~~~~~

"What are you doing?" Zeltra asked the blue one, still scribbling on that piece of bark. Only hearing him grumble a bit and keep working. Then eventually passing it to her for the badger to read. "Can You Understand This." She read aloud. "Yes. Yes I can, but everything you say is madness." The dragon tossed his snout. "Seriously, say something and I'll repeat it."

"There's boogers on my pizza." He grumbled.

"There's boogers on my pizza." The badger repeated, getting him to curl his neck.

"Squids will one day conquer Saturn's third moon." His ears went back.

"Squids will someday conquer... Something about a moon."

"That's **not** a violin!!" Thea hissed, breaking her almost into chuckles at his frustration. He groaned loudly, holding a paw over his eyes and muttered something she couldn't quite get.

"That's not a violin." She finally repeated, getting a whimper of anger from him.

Chapter 2

The grey fox cautiously moved forward through the forest, catching the echoes of voices at a distance after several minutes of walking. Though the morning light was starting to appear, only faintly. Still, it meant that soon enough the fox couldn't use the darkness as cover, getting him to move a bit faster until the voices became louder. "Whatever hit them, we're far enough away that it ain't going to get to us. Besides, it sounds like some campfire story to me."

"I don't know. I've heard stories of the dead coming back to life and attacking people. Especially ancient spirits within tombs and whatnot. They say it's the work of the Black Hand."

"The dead, maybe. But doofus over there said it was the sick attacking people."

"Annd as far as we know, nobody's sick here. We're in the clear, considering that-"

"I'm not a doofus."

"-That every one of them have said to be dealt with. But what killed them? The thing that made the bridge? And what's going to stop that Lhosaka or whatever from turning?"

"We would've heard it by now, and unlikely they'll attack the garrison. Odds are, they'll go after the wildlife or something next. And what the hell are you doing looking around those bushes?"

"I know I heard something earlier." One of them very nearby grumbled, getting Roe to hold his breath. "Strange calls that really didn't sound like any animal."

"Which was far away, and didn't sound like some howler or whatever they were calling them."

"How would you know anyways? You didn't hear them."

"Neither did you!"

"Captain said to keep an ear out for anything, and that's what I'm doing. At least one of us

should start working instead of yapping our jaws all night." A loud swipe from a nearby bush was heard, as small twigs fell down. "You never know where you're going to find spies anyway." another one that was ridiculously close to the fox. "I always get the feeling like I'm being watched."

"By what?"

"...Ears."

"Ears don't see anything."

"I didn't mean it like that! I mean, like someone is listening in." Another cut that could barely be felt by his fur.

"Well, taking it out on the bushes aren't going to help."

"I'm just restless. I joined the Trinity to fight someone, not for guard duty." The nearby one started to head back.

"You and everyone else here. But with that illness on the east side spreading, we might not have an enemy left." A heavy whoosh flew over them, startling the trees and putting the guards on edge.

"What the hell was that!?" (Flyare?)

"No idea, couldn't have been an Avian."

"Just something else to report on this crazy night." A loud snap of a tree nearby. "Oh?"

"Is Old Timber finally going to fall?" Another snap of wood as it started to grind. (Uh Oh.)

"I think so." A third close snap and the fox didn't risk it. Trying to turn around, all he got were bushes in all directions, except for one. As the tree came down, Roe jumped out towards the clearing, getting him and the three guards to stare at each other for a moment before yelping and drawing their weapons.

"A-a Spy!"

"You were right!"

"No-no-no-no-no! Just a traveler!" The grey fox whispered loudly, holding his paws up to surrender. "I just seen the lights and wanted to make sure I wasn't running blindly into the enemy." They looked at him for a few moments.

"...Think he's telling the truth?"

"Nope, definitely a spy." Roe's ears went back at that.

"How can you tell?"

"Well, he is wearing the jacket of the enemy." (...Crapbaskets.)

"Is that what this is?" The fox asked, trying to sound innocent. "I just seen it on the side of the road. The nights are getting colder lately, I was only trying to keep warm."

"...He's lying." A faint grumble from him.

"How can you tell?"

"I just can."

"But, what spy would be behind enemy lines be doing wearing something like that?"

"Jugs does have a point." The fox perked one ear and slowly tilted his head. "That would be like wearing a target on your back."

"...Jugs?" He asked, getting a chuckle from two of the guards while the third one groaned.

"Just a nickname we came up with. Started I think last month when-"

"He does need to know about that!" One of them hissed. "No one needs to know about that, especially the enemy!"

"I don't know about that. I mean, if you ever make High Commander, I'm pretty sure they could use it for something."

"J-just get back to the interrogations!"

"*Fine*, Private Jugs." A groan from one of them. "You, what about that... Belt thing?" The fox made a noise in question, then half tugged on the bandolier across his chest. Containing a long trail of rifle clips. "Yeah, that."

"What are those?"

"It's ammo, for them firesticks the southernns use."

"-What? No it's not!" Another guard interrupted before Roe could speak.

"Yes it is!"

"No, I've seen those things. They're like these little back marbles. Kinda like Sling bullets."

"Then what else would they be for, if not to shoot out of a long metal tube?" The other guard shrugged, then the three looked at the fox for an explanation.

"The zipper and straps of the jacket don't work. Probably another reason why they ditched it. The belt is just to hold it together." They grumbled at that answer. "I only kept the metal bits to see if maybe I could barter them."

"Yet some of them are missing?"

"To be honest..." Roe rubbed the back of his neck. "Whatever's inside them makes a great firestarter. But it doesn't last long." The three studied him. "If you want to, look at them yourself. Might be useful to your superiors for studying enemy weaponry, I just want some food for my group, and a bit of local information."

"So, there's more of you?"

"Yeah, but they're currently not well to travel. One has a bad leg, and the other has very poor endurance." A few more moments of study made the fox's ears fold back. "I'm serious, you can take it if you want. I just need to find something for them. Even if it's a small weapon to hunt with."

"It really wouldn't be a good idea to arm the enemy." One of the whispered, making the grey one place a paw over his eyes. "Let alone, release him back into the wild."

"We'll take you to the captain at least, then see what she wants to do with him." A faint grumble from the fox. "But first, we want that belt." A sigh from him, and he unbuckled it. Holding it by the ends of the straps, he started handing it towards the center one. Watching him still grip his machete rather cautiously, while reaching out to grab it.

Roe suddenly wound the belt up from the side while taking a step back. Whipping one end out towards the wrist of the nearest guard, the one holding the machete, and letting it wrap around and get snared by some strange force. Pulling on the belt harshly sent the guard staggering forward, and hitting the pommel of the blade with his knee. Forcing the guard to let go of it and letting the grey off-hand catch it in midair.

With the belt still tied to the guard's wrist, the fox spun around the armored male. Binding the snared arm behind his back and the rest of the belt around the guard's neck quickly, half choking him. Then clashing machetes with the other two guards before forcing the unarmed one to shield his back. Nearly making the choking one yelp when one of his comrades nearly swung at him. "N-No-No! Don't-!" He tried to call, while hearing the fox deflect slashes from the other guard.

Another few shrieks of metal colliding, and the grey one did an upward slash. Making the guard he was fighting take a step back. Then see the canine flip the bound one over his shoulder when the guard was going in for another attack, nearly stabbing his comrade.

Finally letting go of the belt, the fox assaulted the one in front of him with a series of heavy, yet quick, slashes. Aiming for the opposing machete than the wielder, until hitting the weapon on its backside and hurting the wrist attempting to keep hold of it. With one very quick swing, the canine's blade aimed straight for the guard's neck. Almost feeling the intense heat coming from it via the constant clashing it's had, yet stopping just before a fatal wound.

For a few seconds, he just looked into the fox's green eyes, not breathing. Seeing a strange trance and battle between instinct and reason behind them. Knowing this attack was a deathblow that

was barely pulled back in time, and just waiting to see which side would win.

The belt behind him was suddenly cut, culling the argument short. Withdrawing the blade, but kicking the guard's hurt wrist to send his weapon into the air, Roe then kicked that same guard in the face. Knocking him out while turning around, and grabbing his blade out of the air. Halting the blade aimed for his back, and retaliating with mid-section swing that purposely scratched the armor. Making the guard yelp at the new weapon, and stumble backwards on top of the bound one.

The armed guard scampered back into the darkness a bit, breathing heavily in fear as he barely made out the canine's two weapons. "...W-what... Are you...?" He whimpered, holding his side where the machete scraped him. Then something heavy landed behind him. Before he could see what it was, it grabbed him by the neck and squeezed his airway.

"Freayha...!" Roe growled, trying not to be too loud and alert the rest of the garrison. But the crystal dragon just looked calmly at the guard, watching him struggle to breathe until he stopped moving. Then dropping him on the ground, receiving a harsh look from those green eyes.

"...He's alive." She bluntly said, walking around the bound guard and tapping the back of his head harshly with the dull end of her spear. "He is too." At least now getting a breath of relief from the fox. "What happened." The dragon nearly demanded.

"We found some sort of teleporter to a lab. By accident, I might add." He grumbled, dropping the two blades, and observing the cut strap of his old belt. Granted, ditching that after an annoyed sigh into the forest. "There's something dark about it, and I think it has something to do with the Unborn." He said, taking his jacket off as well and throwing it into the woods.

"So, they're here."

"I don't know for sure. But whoever was in charge of that lab... They made a synthetic one." A heavy growl from her. "But they're not perfect, it ended up having a heart attack and dying."

"Unable to release its pent up energy?"

"I think so."

"And the illnesses? The mutated wildlife?"

"All from there." The red one exhaled. "It's not our job to trash it just yet, but... There's something else going on here. There was this large, black... Rock." A noise in question. "It smelled just like the Unborn. Odds are it uses the same..."

"So, we need to find a way to destroy the rock." She bluntly stated, following him to the near entrance of the garrison.

"I'm not sure, but first thing's first. I want Thea and Zeltra somewhere safe. For now, head back that way a bit, and you'll find them." She looked where he was pointing. "I'm going to get us some

equipment-"

"You realize you can just make it at will." Roe's ears went back. "There's no need to put yourself in dangerous situations if you can-"

"I also want to see where I am." A blank look from her. "-I know. I know you have, but seeing where everything is plotted out would be nice as well. Maybe get some more information about this Trinity."

"Because they are a threat." She grumbled, almost sarcastically.

"To him, they are. Especially if this is going where I think it's going." The fox sighed. "For now, just protect them until I get back. Hopefully with food."

"At least this time you will get something you are proficient with." A double take from him.

"I-I'm proficient with rifles!" He hissed quietly.

"You are proficient with staves, among many others. So why not just use those?" The canine just grumbled, and she turned around. "There is no reason for you to hide who you are, Exile. You could get more accomplished than by doing this." When there was no response, she took off.

Chapter 3

"Your windows are oozing pastrami! The dragon hissed, snorting after he finished this current sentence!" ...Yeah, what he said. "Remember to hit F12 to save your work." Thea grumbled, and F12 does nothing here.

"Just... Stop talking before something else hears you." Zeltra grumbled back. "We'll figure out what's wrong with you afterword."

"Unlike mistakes when people sneeze." He snorted, flopping his head down into the grass and sighing. "Even public bathrooms get to play with a Skip-It every now and then. I personally would *love* to lick the eyeball on an octopus." Another grumble, though those were more whispers, the badger could

make them out.

Something large quickly flew by overhead, getting the two's attention and remaining silent for a few moments. Hearing it circle back and forcefully land in a nearby clearing. As the plant life aggressively moved and snapped loudly, the creature came towards the two. Barely making out the gemmed dragon's head through the bushes and study them for a moment. "Oh, thank the Northern Spirits, somebody sane!" The black one let out a sigh of relief. Granted, not without getting a hiss from the blue dragon.

"You two are safe then?" The red one asked, cutting away the plant life with a few shards.

"My leg is a bit better, but I still can't quite stand." She grumbled. "And he can't speak clearly anymore." Flyare studied him for a moment, until he snorted.

"I couldn't tackle the bear! I'm Table as Table could be!"

"Told you."

"And he doesn't seem to recognize he's speaking this lang-" She started to closer, then almost growled. Taking a few steps away and a few breaths. "You two... Reek!" She grunted.

"What?"

"Carseats?"

"You... Smell. Terrible." The red one grumbled again, almost studying the area around them like lining out an invisible wall. "Exile didn't smell like this."

"Exile?"

"Upside-down Disney's Robbin Hood Hairdryer." Thea said, like it was painfully obvious. Double taking at the badger looking at him, then yelping when she swat his muzzle. "I Wonder Where The Mother Bear Is!!" He hissed.

"Keep it down." Flyare growled at him. "There's a Trinity Garrison nearby."

"So, we're in Trinity Territory?"

"Light Escapes Act One?"

"Yes. And right now, Exile is getting you re-armed. He commanded me to guard you until then." She overlooked the two more organic beings for a moment. "I can do that from over here, at least."

A few moments of silence and Zeltra spoke up. "Why do you keep calling him that?" Those red gemmed eyes scanned her again. "I'm just curious."

"Because that's who he is."

"He told us his name was Roe."

"It's not my fault Camels don't have eyelashes." The two females looked at him, and Thea tossed his snout.

"Roe is an Alias he used a long way back."

"Why?" Flyare studied her again.

"Why pry?"

"Apple Pie in the Sky." A snort from the male, but the other two ignored him.

"I'm just curious." Those red eyes didn't lift off her.

"...You wish to challenge him, is that it?" The dragon's tone was a bit harsh, sending the badger's ears back. "I can already tell you the outcome-"

"You sound so sure of that-"

"Because I am." The gemmed one almost growled. "I've heard you from afar, you wish to add his 'Defeat' to your legend, but you cannot win against him."

"If I just get a rematch-"

"It will make no difference. You may challenge him a million times, and I can tell you the outcome of each." The black one growled. "You speak so highly and respectfully of Legends. Do you know what he has accomplished? Do you have any idea what goes on outside your world?" The dragoon adjusted herself, almost gripping her weapon tightly as if in anger. "Exile is a living weapon, created by two forbidden forms of technologies from separate universes. He's made to be the perfect soldier, one that was able to overpower Gods and Dire beings. **Unborns** don't stand a chance against him."

Another growl from the badger, but she remained quiet. "But keep telling yourself that you're strong enough to deflect his blows. Swift enough to counter his attacks, and Smart enough to get through his defenses. Those stronger, faster, and more intelligent than you have only *Tried*." The two stared at each other, their tension almost seen like jolts of lightning in the air. It wasn't until a few rustles in the bushes a bit farther away broke that stare, letting the angering energy blanket the entire area when the fox returned.

"...Did..." He started, looking over the three. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"Eggos stole my buttermilk." Thea grumbled, half gesturing the females.

"Of course they did." Roe said awkwardly. "How's your leg?"

"Getting better, but it almost feels like it's spreading." He gave a worried look. "But I think I can walk."

"Well, I'll get Thea to carry these for now." He pulled up a smaller shield and a longsword, getting

Zeltra to grumble. "I know they're not your usual weapons, but... They might make it easier on you-"

"**Easier!?**" She growled loudly at him, getting the crystal one to arm herself at the disrespect. But stop when he put up a grey paw. Letting the badger calm down after a few moments, and then handing her a drink.

"Be more respectful." Flyare growled. "Considering what he's done for you so far." The tension returned, and she started to walk out. "I'll cut you a path out of here for now."

"Alright, start in that direction. There should be a road that heads towards a city nearby." The dragoon nodded at him, and did so.

"Say 'Trees' for us." The fox requested, getting a loud grumble from the dragon. It was bad enough they were back to walking, being studied while doing it only made it worse. But he sighed nonetheless.

"Wood Burgers." The other two lightly chuckled as he groaned again.

"Again." The black one got a glare this time, then those maroon eyes rolled.

"Leaf Factories that close for the winter." He grumbled, still not understanding what was so funny about his current speech impediment.

"Well, that was kinda close. Maybe he is just crossing words without realizing it?" Roe shrugged.

"Someone keeps moving my chair!" The blue one hissed at him.

"Okay, but let's try just a few more. Say..." The grey one looked around. "Zeltra."

"Black Bitch." Even the badger laughed a bit at that one, and the larger one snorted loudly.

"Okay, again."

"Ratel with an Ego problem?"

"I don't have an Ego problem."

"-That's not a violin!"

"Which is pretty much the only consistent thing that seems to be sticking, the Violin thing." The badger said, getting the blue one to groan in frustration. "I think it means, 'That's not what I'm saying' But..."

"The Howler Leeches are coming." Thea snorted.

"I'm not sure where Violin is coming from though." A snout toss from the dragon as the fox

shrugged.

"Okay, now say Roe."

"Shifty Weasel." The two chuckled.

"Again." Zeltra encouraged him.

"Prosthetic Forehead you wear on your real head."

"A... *What* Forehead?"

"Prosthetic." The fox chuckled. "Think, fake or substitute."

"Well, you don't really look like you have a forehead." A noise in question from him that almost made the canine insecure. Feeling around his head, above the eyes a bit. Seeing that made her snicker as they approached a large city gate. One that didn't seem to be used too often.

"Regardless, maybe I should do the talking-"

"Open The Gates!" The badger yelled proudly. "It Is I, Zeltragraciae of the Northe! I Was Told The Trinity Needed Our Help In This War!" A few grunts came from behind the wall, as a bat came to the opposite side of the gate. Rubbing his ears and holding a full helmet that he just took off.

"Do you have to yell so loud?" He grumbled. "Usually guests come in from the other side. More security over there."

"It's also very busy, by the looks of it. We've been out of refreshments all night." The fox explained.

"The newest of treadmills can now double up as a waffle maker." The dragon grumbled, getting an odd look from the guard.

"See, he's gone so long without water, he can't even talk straight." Zeltra said, getting a glare from those maroon eyes.

"I donno... I'm not supposed to let people in this way who aren't delivering to the castle." The bat muttered, studying the three. "Are you all Northe? We weren't expecting anybody-"

"Are you joking-!?"

"-Yes, we're all from the Northe." A stare as hot as the sun was felt burning into his grey fur, wondering if the badger was actually going to snap and attack Roe. Making him swallow a bit loudly.

"It's alright. Let them through." A rather thick voice called from afar, getting everyone but the fox to double take. Instead, nearly freezing in place and slowly looking through the gate as another red canine began to approach the bat.

"M-my Lord?" The guard went a bit speechless.

"Do not worry Krieg, I've been expecting these travelers for a while now. Just not so soon, let alone at the East gate." The taller fox's red eyes lightly studied over the three outside, as the gate opened. "You are welcomed here until my command. All I ask is that you remain respectful towards the people here, I know how rowdy Northe tend to get. Do I make myself clear?"

"And you are?" The badger half grumbled.

"Ricon." The grey one almost snarled.

"Roe, it's been too long since our last visit." A strange wind pasted over them, sending his rather thick cape lightly flapping in the wind. "I'm sure we have plenty to talk about, but first..." He studied the other two. "Who are your comrades?" The smaller canine didn't reply, nor take his eyes off of the larger one.

"I am Zeltragraciae!" The black badger said proudly, getting a rather pleasant and surprised look from the Lord.

"Daughter of Garthdarrick the Mountain?" A double take from her. "You're the one who took down that great Wurm."

"Yes! You've heard of me?"

"I've heard of the events that befell your father as well. He died as proudly as he lived." She looked at Roe a bit smugly.

"About time a Northe got some respect around here. Thank you, Lord..."

"Ricon. No need for titles, Ricon will do fine." His red eyes met with the dragon's next. "And who might this be?"

"That can of peas stole the doorknob to my bathroom." Thea grumbled, getting puzzled looks from everyone but the grey one. Getting the blue one to sigh and toss his muzzle a bit. "The fields of Ohio are delicious, and that's not a violin."

"S-sir, I think he needs a glass of water." The bat whispered. "...Maybe a river."

"There's definitely something... Scrambled in that noggin of his, isn't there?" The red fox pondered, looking at Roe once again. "How long has he been like this?"

"Do not say you can fix him." The grey one growled, nearly standing inbetween the dragon and him, almost to shield the largest one.

"Are you really going to force him to refuse treatment, Roe?"

"Treatment...?" Zeltra asked, looking between the two canines. "You can cure this?"

"Very likely-"

"-No." The grey one growled. "It'll wear off after a while-"

"So you know what this is?" The female half growled at the smaller fox, getting him to finally look at another person.

"I don't, but it won't last-"

"Or it will get worse!" She hissed in a whisper.

"You don't know that-"

"Neither do you! And he-!"

"Shouldn't be trusted." Roe growled at her, a bit loudly at that. Making Krieg feel a little awkward about the group of people, but his superior looked very calm about it.

"And you should be?" The black one growled back, getting him to exhale heat.

"Perhaps you might want to discuss this among yourselves then." Ricon suggested, motioning over a nearby servant.

"There's nothing to discuss, Ricon." Roe said coldly.

"He's right, we require your assistance." A harsh grip on her shoulder, and the badger grabbed his wrist. Getting into another staring match that really made the dragon uncomfortable.

"By all means, take your time. At least come in and take a seat in the garden. If you wish to leave, Krieg will open the gates back up without question." The servant arrived beside the Lord. "Can you bring these guests some water and a few plates? There should be some leftovers from lunch that are both still warm, and untouched." A quick nod and the servant went off, when his red eyes returned to the other fox's, they were still glaring at him. "I mean you no ruse, Roe. If that's what you worry about. But please at least rest for an hour before heading out again."

"We could also use a map-"

"-We have a map." The grey one snapped back, getting another growl.

"One without garrisons marked would be nice." She whispered. "If anybody sees that..."

"My radishes are into 80's disco music." Thea snorted, walking through the gate, and being careful of his wings. Facing the red Lord, and attempting to bow his head as a sign of respect.

"Make yourselves at home, but no boorish behavior." He gave the larger one's body a few taps before looking at the other canine again. "*Any*more boorish behavior, I mean. I'm afraid I have a meeting to tend to, but I will be back when I can. If you are nowhere in sight, I'll assume you've already left." A quiet moment between the two foxes. "If that is the case, then safe travels." Ricon turned around and started to leave, greeting a few servants along the way.

After a long few minutes of staring, the bat cleared his throat. "I shouldn't leave this gate opened too much longer." The two outside looked at him for a moment, then back at each other. Forcing his paw off her shoulder, Zeltra walked in through the gate. Roe eventually followed after a heated exhale.

Chapter 4

"What the hell was with that pissing contest?" The badger growled at him.

"It wasn't..." Roe trailed off, grumbling. "You don't know him like I do-"

"Well, Enlighten us then. I've never heard from him-"

"Because he's not from *here*." The other two tossed their snouts. "Yeah, Veritas. He was a Warlord that commanded in a lot of wars." The dragon went back to eating.

"Let me guess, ones you were against. Or on the opposing lines." He grumbled in response. "I guess things haven't changed then, have they?"

"That doesn't mean he's not dangerous." The grey one grumbled, taking a drink. "Ricon... Manipulates people. Toys with their minds, and makes others think they want his rule. If he's doing this, he's out for himself-"

"I get it. He's a threat to you. But right now, we need help. Thea needs help-"

"Thea can get better on his own. He just needs some rest-"

"You don't know that!"

"We're not having his conversation again!" Roe growled in a whisper.

"You're right, we're not! Because the cure is right in front of us!"

"Which will come at a cost!"

"So, what? We might have to fight a battle for him? You're a Mercenary! That's literally your

job!"

"It's doubtful he'll want us to fight for him-"

"Then what!?" The fox didn't answer. "Look. We're *stuck*. We don't know what's wrong with Thea, let alone if he will get... 'Unscrambled' in time or with some rest."

"So you want us to get caught in this whirlwind? Owe Ricon a favor for saving our friend-"

"If it's a solid shot, then yes!" The fox tossed his muzzle. "What happens if we find Muugyn? Thea's not going to be in any shape to talk to him! This might even be permanent after a while!" Roe stroked the space between his eyes, attempting to relieve stress. "I'm staying. And I'm sure if Thea could talk sensible, he would say the same thing." The two looked at the large blue one, and he nodded.

"I'm warning you..." The grey one sighed. "He can't be trusted."

"He seemed like a trustworthy person to me-"

"Only because he's 'Heard' of you, is that it?" Her ears went back. "That's what he does, Zeltra. He's a Telepath, he reads your mind, puts thoughts inside your head to make you trust him. How else do you think he has access to all of this?"

"Yet, not more?" A bit of a growl from him. "We have legends too about mind control and the Djinn's bewitching others. If he's able to do this, why not take more?"

"Because..." An exhale from the fox. "It's not having it that matters to him. It's the process of getting it all." A strange look from her. "Ricon wants the world, but he wants it through actions. He wants everyone to know that he's earned it, to the point where no one can stand against him."

About an hour of resting in the shade, the three heard several voices incoming. Casually walking along the gravel walkways through the plant filled gardens. Only picking up talk about supplies and future plans for some of the newer buildings within the city, nothing to be concerned about. Granted, Roe still didn't take the vocals of the taller fox easily. Especially after he sent the others away and approached the group alone. "I see that you're still here." Ricon pleasantly greeted them.

"Yes, we decided as a group to accept your help in this treatment." The badger said, trying to be a bit more respectful around him.

"As A Group?" He quoted her, looking at the grey one for a moment. "Still distrustful of me, are you Roe?"

"People may change, Ricon. But their overall motives don't."

"And you think mine are...?" He calmly questioned the other fox, getting a glare from those green eyes. "Fair enough. I understand you wish to keep some secrets of past wars from their ears. We can talk a bit later, then maybe I will convince you of my good-"

"Let alone, your disappearance?" Roe asked thickly, getting a bit of cross look before a nod.

"But first, let's not let your friend here suffer any longer. Thea'daisis, was it?" The dragon double taked at him. "Come with me. I'll see what I can do with you-"

"I'm coming too." Zeltra said, getting up with the grey one.

"It's better if you didn't, Zeltragrae. Don't want any distractions or thoughts wandering about, it will be a delicate procedure." The other two didn't like that answer. "Besides, once he's able to speak more clearly, I wouldn't mind having a small chat with your large friend." Uncomfortable exhales from the group. "As well with you as well, Northe. But until then make yourselves comfortable. Feel free to even browse our market."

With no one else breaking the silence, Ricon motioned the dragon to follow him. As Thea got up, he got a grey paw on his collar. Looking at Roe's harsh glare made him uncomfortable as he whispered to him. "Do not let him put any thoughts into that head of yours, understand?" It made the blue creature uncomfortable, but nodding regardless.

"Really, Roe. You have nothing to worry about." The red one informed him. "Oh, and feel free to call off your... Scout. I know she's been lurking around, and it makes people suspicious. Do let her relax a bit as well." Ricon turned about, barely seeing the gemmed dragon teleport in front of him, mid swing. Stopping when the tip of her spear reached his neck, but not getting a reaction from the taller fox. Though, making Thea yelp a bit.

"Flyare." The red canine half greeted her, meeting the dragoon's rather hateful stare. "You look well." The statement only made her growl.

"...Stand down, Flyare." Roe finally exhaled. "Here's not the place anyway." Several moments passed before she followed the orders, though still not releasing her gaze. Meeting it with his own smirk, and nearly making her growl again.

"Enjoy yourself, Flyare. Nowhere is off limits." He informed them again, even looking back at the other two before meeting the crystal one's gaze again.

"You should be more afraid." She nearly threatened him.

"Darling... You are no threat to me." Ricon whispered, finally walking passed her and motioning the other dragon to follow. Thea did so, lowering his head and ears when those black slits locked onto him again. Increasing his speed in hoping her gaze would lift.

When they were far enough away, Flyare walked towards the others. "I'll keep an eye on them-"

"Don't." She gave him a light look of question. "Ricon will be expecting that. Besides, you might get triggered by watching the two of them together for too long." A faint grumble through her exhale, but the gemmed one didn't argue. Eventually, Roe sighed. "I need a shower." He lightly gazed over at Zeltra, and her ears went back.

"What are you looking at me for!?"

"It would save water." Flyare bluntly stated, getting a hiss from the black one. Storming off shortly after, and leaving the two comrades together. "Was that not what you meant?"

"Nope." The grey fox said a bit awkwardly. "I was just wondering where she was going to be." Another heavy sigh. "Come on, let's take a look around."

"Ow!" The dragon hissed at the shock in his brain, pulling away from the fox's rather dark gloves he always seemed to be wearing. "That really hurt chairlegs!"

"I know it does, but I need you to try to remain still. We're almost done." A grumbling whine from the large one as he shook his head a bit, resting it on the pillow once again. Hearing the table below creek at his head's weight. "Whatever that rock was did a real job tangling up your thoughts. But it mostly effected the speech part of your brain."

"Whatever. I'm perfectly table other than that." The red one chuckled at that.

"You even think you're saying what you mean to say, but that's how these things work." Another shock and a hiss from Thea. Pulling back once again and holding onto his skull. "That should be it though. How do you feel?"

"Like my head was set on fire!" He snorted, seeing Ricon gather a towel and dip it into a nearby fountain.

"Possibly the most logical thing you've said all day. Though this won't physically help, it should comfort you a bit." He placed the towel over the dragon, and the blue paws held it there for a few moments. "But let's test a few things. What can you tell me about that rock?"

"It was black and dark green." The dragon grumbled, but by the look of those red eyes, he seemed to be speaking clearly once again.

"And those voices you heard?" Thea went quiet, looking at the fox with a bit of worry. "I had to look into your memories to find out what caused it. But it will be a secret between us."

"They... Half know about it anyway." He mumbled, looking down towards where he last saw Roe and Zeltra. "...I couldn't understand them, but I heard them before."

"The voices." The dragon nodded.

"I... Must've suppressed them, but I remember having nightmares when I was very young, inside that castle. I remember hiding from... Dark creatures. And those voices were calling to me, helping me escape."

"So, they brought you comfort?"

"But they were the same. I thought I was imagining it at first, but that rock was..." The blue one exhaled, his scales clicking together with a shiver. "I was scared, but... Comfortable around it. Like an old friend that I thought went missing, finally seeing them again." He went quiet after that, until a couple of large bells startled him.

"It's just the church." Ricon informed him, watching as those maroon eyes tracked where the sounds came from. "From the tower over there." The dragon then studied the streets from afar. "They ring it every hour, to help people tell time."

"Is that what...?" The fox nodded, and Thea watched over the building again. "I heard them from afar... Way, way far. But..."

"So, you've never been in a church?" The blue one shyly shook his head.

"But I know... Half know what they're for." A moment of study, and the canine rose to his feet. Motioning the larger one to walk with him for a bit.

"Religions differ from region to region. Often enough, countries will all follow a single one." Those red eyes studied the darker ones. "What religion have you heard, Thea?"

"I..." The dragon didn't know how to answer that. "Maybe only half of one...?"

"I see." A moment of silence made the blue beast uncomfortable. "Here, the people believe in mostly a single god. One that foretells an upcoming darkness that will cover the land. Poison the crops and forests, spoil any rivers and oceans left over, and leaving no area untouched." A slight whimper from him as Ricon continued. "For decades, people have been searching for that darkness in hopes they can find a way to stop it before such disasters."

"...Have they...?"

"It's difficult to tell. Many of the more loyal followers of such tales believe that only the Black Hand can destroy such darkness. And for such a thing to start, the Hand needs to be seen. Others accuse many things to be this darkness. Be it foreign lands, illnesses, monstrosities hibernating underground or..." The fox took a breath. "A corrupted empire." That last one worried Thea, and it was seen in his eyes. "You understand where this is going, do you not?"

"The... War." A large nod from him.

"The Trinity; an alliance with the North, West, and Southwest countries, believe that the Eastern

ones are corrupted by some sort of black plague. Not just these rabid attacks from both civil people and animals, but that it's been darkening their hearts as well. Due to the recent revolutions, civil wars, and riots coming from those cities..."

"You believe them then...?"

"It does not matter what I believe, Thea'daisis. One man cannot stop a war, they can only play a part in it. Perhaps find a way to save as many lives as they can, even through sacrifice." Those frilled ears fell. "Not necessarily Sacrifice of one's own life, but you understand." A faint nod. "And I know Roe does not trust me, nor my actions. There's just too much history between us; too many disagreements when it comes to morals and choices. But we do want the same thing."

"And you want me...?"

"Everyone will play a part in this War, Thea. I just do not want you to play the wrong part. I have heard many things going around: some say a dragon that can heal wounds has joined with the Trinity, but others say he was hatched on the East. And perhaps will defect." A heavy paw on the dragon's shoulders, and his heart began to race. "Some people within the Trinity will not take any chances. Let alone, traveling along with a hired gun that was working with the East. But I will warn you, whatever you are searching for in the west, do it with extreme caution if you value your life." A slight glance back where the two left the others. "As well as the lives of them."

"I-I'm just-"

"There's no need to explain yourself. As long as you're in these walls and you follow my rule, then you are friend. One that will be protected." Another shaky nod.

"Thank you, Lord Ricon-" A thunderous blast came from nearby, grabbing the concerned attention of both of them. Then several others following it. "A-are we under attack!?"

"It came from over there. Follow me!" The fox shouted at a few guards, getting everyone to quickly move.

Chapter 5

Several Minutes Earlier...

"It seems so peaceful here." Roe mumbled, walking through the path exiting out of the garden. Following the black one while overlooking the city.

"Does this surprise you?" The gemmed dragon asked, viewing the same thing.

"Considering who is in control, a little."

"Perhaps he is just filling in for now. It's impossible to tell without investigation." Flyare added, getting a little bit of a concerned look from those green eyes.

"If anyone sees you spying around..." A faint grumble from the red one. "We're a little stuck at the moment."

"Hypothetically asking:" The dragoon started, even getting the badger's attention for a moment. "What if Ricon's rule is well for this land-?" A sharp exhale from the fox. "Perhaps maybe we are holding a distrustful grudge against him-"

"Did he make you think that?" Roe grumbled, seeing her crystal ears go back.

"He is a being capable of Change, you know." All the male did was mutter a low growl. "I realize that I do not know him as well as you do, however-"

"**However?**" He repeated her harshly.

"Perhaps a fresh pair of eyes and a neutral opinion may help."

"Or it might throw us into a trap where someone could get hurt." An exhale from his grey muzzle. "Or worse."

A bit of silence, and Zeltra spotted an opened courtyard. "This place looks perfect." The statement made the fox mutter a noise in question as she walked in, taking hold of that sword and shield. He then groaned, putting a paw over his eyes.

"Not this again, Zeltra."

"I want a rematch-"

"You were unable to even walk this morning. Who knows what will happen if you strain

yourself-" A growl from the black one.

"A Northe never stays ill for long." She pointed the sword across from her, motioning him to stand there. "Don't even think of going easy on me." A heavy exhale from him.

"What do you hope to prove from this?" Flyare almost growled.

"That a Northe can accomplish anything deemed impossible!" The two didn't like that answer. "This is how my culture does things. We won't give up."

"You will have to eventually-" Roe held up a paw, stopping the red one.

"If I do this; a total of three rounds, will you stop?" The badger didn't answer directly, just pointed over again. The unarmed fox sighed, looking around at the training weapons on a nearby rack.

"No." Zeltra almost demanded, getting him to look at her for a moment. "Rifle and all." His gaze didn't lift. "You made that bridge entirely out of swords, correct?" Another exhale, and the grey one walked forward. In the corner of her eye, she seen a rifle flip out of nowhere and watch him catch it with ease. A firearm that was completely identical to his previous.

A quick inspection of the weapon, from the folding out bayonet to the chamber. Taking out the clip of bullets and setting them inside his pocket, then meeting her glare. "I don't miss, Northe." He thickly said. "But that's no reason for you to be shot. Or even waste some of Thea's power on..." He half raised a paw. Pulling the trigger and hearing the hammer click just in case.

The two stood in silence for a few moments, while the dragoon tensely gripped her weapon. Trying to hold back her anger for the black one's disrespect, but stayed out of it regardless. With the Northe keeping her guard up, and taking a few practice swings with the unfamiliar weapon, it was rather identical than the hammer. Much lighter, and a bit easier to control. Perhaps removing her defect for the previous duel they had.

Another breath, and Zeltra leapt at the fox, cutting with a downward slash. Seeing him easily step aside and lean towards her opened defense behind her. Swinging the small shield backwards with the momentum of the leap, it connected with the canine's rifle. Deflecting his swing at the opportunity.

Expecting him to stay in her blind spot, the badger swung widely sword-side. Seeing Roe step just out of reach and warm up an overhead slam down. Barely getting her wooden shield up to block it, the bayonet cut barely into the splitting wood. However, pushing the shield down to about chest level, and hearing the hammer of the rifle click. Indicating she would've been shot in the throat. "One." He said, quite seriously. Putting a foot on the shield and pulling out his weapon before returning to his starting point.

Zeltra growled, but at least she was being treated as an opponent this time. Getting up and taking a much more defensive stance this time. Tapping the shield to give the fox the first move. He half shrugged, then passing the rifle to his off-hand, almost confusing the black one. Seeing him take a

rushing few steps before jumping and rotating a full off-spin.

The strange tactic surprised her, causing the badger to swing at him midair in hopes to move the sword fast enough. But the blade connected with metal barrel, while his weight was taken by her shield. The force was enough to send her falling backwards, and feel the fox's shin against her collar. A slight tilt of the rifle, and the blade at the end nearly scratched her eye before hearing the click again. "Two." He muttered, getting off her and offering a hand.

Too proud to take it, Zeltra got up herself. Hearing the grey one take a breath and walk back to his post. "I can train you, if you want-"

"Shut up!" She almost roared, taking stance again and tapping her shield. "Again!" Roe gave off a crossed expression, almost denying the request. "Again!" She barked, hearing him exhale and take his stance. Taking a step after a moment, the badger noticed a strange shadow pass over her in a split second. Then the crystal dragon dove in to attack the fox with a wide swing, surprising him, but deflecting the blow with the rifle.

The dragoon continued with several more lateral swings with the crystal reach weapon, sending electrical sparks flying everytime it connected with the metal barrel. "Flyare-!?" He shouted at her, still surprised at the intrusion while side stepping an overhead attack. Hearing the spearhead crack the stone ground loudly, then follow up with a dozen quick stabs. Barely getting the gemmed blade out of harm's way, but with sacrifice of the rifle's durability.

After the last thrust attempt, the red one spun for a heavy side strike. Cracking the rifle with the impact, and sending the fox staggering a step while Flyare teleported for a moment. Reappearing for a second side strike, then three others. Each gathering in power and speed until his weapon split in two. Seeing the grey one shake his paw at the raw power of the dragoon before relying on evading her attacks. Several irrational swings that seemed to jump from stance to stance, each barely missing or cutting off a few patches of fur until Roe got to one of the weapon racks.

A powerful thrust attack from the gemmed one broke the rack, entrapping several of the weapons it held while he dove to avoid getting stabbed. Seeing her teleport to the side and kick her own stuck spear towards the grey one as he attempted to pry out a weapon. Leaving it behind to duck under the weapon, and sense her teleport to the other side to catch the midair lance, then strike the ground where he was with it. Barely catching a bit of his tail in the spark the impact created, leaving behind a black char and a small hole.

A few quick cross cuts, and Flyare attempted another stab while he was near the rack once again. Seeing him finally parry it with his own paws, getting the spear to dig under several sword handguards. Then Roe struck the bottom of the spear, sending the weapons up in the air and nearly going after them. But the dragon teleported once again to the side, sweeping the upper air before going for the middle again.

The mid attack was his chance. Pressing off against the wall to jump over it, the fox reached a

nearby falling sword and finally got rearmed. Though it was a training, one bladed dull longsword, it was a weapon he could defend with. Getting it gripped just in time to do just that, shielding against the upward swing, then a second one as another sword fell close to him.

Roe managed to grab it midair, but the dragoon's constant upward assault was keeping him from touching the ground. Only getting barely enough footing from the wall and moving against the reach weapon's blows. Pushing him upwards, and struggling against such an aggressive tactic: one where Flyare had both the ground, and the air advantage.

But the wall ended about ten feet up. Letting the fox land a foot of it, but only for a moment. Another teleport behind him while balancing on the thin wall, the only thing he could do was block the lateral slam. Absorbing most of the spear's shaft with the two blades, the knockback sent him sliding against the stone. Close to the badger who was retreating a bit more from the berserk dragon.

The crystal one hovered there for a moment, as the two outsiders shared a thick stare. Then Flyare threw her spear like a javelin directly at his heart, nearly igniting at the sheer power of the launch. But only for its tip to meet the very center of the sword's edge. The upward swing halting the makeshift projectile, sending it into flips as its loud song echoed in the courtyard.

A quick step forward to catch up to the spear, the fox hit it a few times with the swords to slow its rotations. Balancing it to a complete stillness between the two blades as if he were holding it with his own hands. With one blade on the bottom; just under the arrowhead-like spear point, and the other on the top side of the shaft, he quickly slid them to opposite ends. Letting the blade on the top side catch under the spear point and launch the weapon forward. Not with perfect accuracy, but close enough.

Regardless, the Lancer caught it. Spinning it around for a moment then throwing it on the ground quite a ways in front of the grey one. Giving off a heavy spark on impact to lightly blind those who were looking, she quickly teleported and grabbed the upper end mid leap. Rotating barbarically while slamming the sharp tip of the spear onto the fox's head, she expected the parry. Teleporting behind, she attempted a second massive overhead strike. One that left her prone, but nothing that a teleport couldn't fix.

A constant barrage of these heavy swings were getting the two nowhere. Even with the dragon's phasing tactics and faints, Roe could sense where the attack was coming from. It wasn't until the ground started to sink a little bit from the cracks that Flyare withdrew away for a moment. Stressing the crystal spear in her grip and stance, it nearly roared with raw plasma with her own vocals. Once again slamming the head of it into the ground, this time from afar.

A large fissure of red lightning shot towards the grey one, temporarily creating a wall of electrical bolts for a few moments as she disappeared again. The fox may have evaded the wall, but the energy attempted to arc towards his weapons with a loud crackle. Taking another step back, that sense alerted him once again, coming from above.

Jumping back with a twist just barely got him out of dodge as the dragoon slammed into the

ground from the air. The stab into the stone wrecked it, sending debris like a thick cloud of dust as the impact thundered through the city. Along with the several plasma bolts that erupted from the attack, barely missing the fox, but setting a few patches of fur on fire.

Landing from the close call, the dragon disappeared again. Attempting the same sky strike, he dived forward. Feeling the impact sear his pantlegs and nearly taking off a foot as it thundered once again. Nearly making the two organic beings deaf and unable to rely on their hearing from the numerous thunderclaps after those two.

With several more dives from the air, the courtyard was completely wrecked. The area covered in a thick static that mixed with the thin cloud of debris. Making it difficult for Thea, Ricon, and his guards to see through when they arrived. Let alone approach safely, whereas the red fox held up a warning not to tread inside yet.

After those several dives, Roe nearly got a sword slash on the crystal one, getting Flyare to step back for half a moment, then slam into the ground once again with several fissures. Creating the walls of plasma once again to box the fox inside. A cage to finally end this duel. The dragon teleported inside, once again mid-swing and dipping the spear point into the electrical wall. Sending a loud spark when their weapons collided to deflect the attack.

It was then Zeltra could see it. Even while deaf, the grey one deflected strike after strike. Even while half blinded, he could tell where the attacks were coming from. Regardless of the dragoon's teleports inbetween swings and stances. Let alone the progressively faster strikes, the sparks strobing near constantly as if to mimic the very sun.

It wasn't until the fox's roar was felt that the sparks stopped. The cloud slowly dissipating with the two completely still in the middle. Once the ringing in their ears stopped, they could hear Roe panting heavily. The crystal spear resting on his upper bicep, the shaft pinned between both blades. One end pointed upward, while the other deep into the red dragon's crystal form.

As a single scratch, just deep enough to draw blood, was the only real wound on the grey fox. The two still staring deeply into each other's eyes, not shaken in the slightest. "...You cannot win." Flyare calmly said aloud, almost puzzling him but soon realizing those words were not for him. "You can replay this fight a million-" She suddenly teleported behind him for another overhead strike, one that was 7/8th's complete. And within that instant, Roe still managed to turn around, parry the blow with one sword, and cut through the gemmed throat with the second. Nearly igniting the very air with the strike.

However, this time the dragon's gaze was looking into the badger's eyes. "It Will Make No Difference." There was a long silence before Flyare took a step back. Finally signaling the end of the fight with a kneel, and he dropped the two swords.

Chapter 6

"That was quite the display of power." Ricon calmly said, overlooking the dozen paid servants as they made repairs to the courtyard. All the while the shorter fox rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Let alone, unexpected."

"Believe me when I say it was an unexpected surprise for both of us." A slight nod from the lord. "She's... Not well like this-"

"I know." He stated with understanding.

"And she won't do it again-"

"That is not something you can assure." The red one said quite thickly, turning around and motioning Roe to follow him. With a heavy exhale, he did so. "We've both seen that whirlwind of chaos within her mind, yes?"

"In more ways than one." A breath. "But that's not what happened there. Zeltra wanted-"

"I know what the Northe wanted, and I understand what happened. Let alone Flyare's interference. That's why she trusts you. And *only* you." The Lord gestured the damaged area behind them. "Even with a lesser form, without the use of any outbreaks, you can stand up against her."

"Granted, that still wasn't Freayha, but-"

"That does not make it a smaller feat, Exile." The grey one didn't respond. "Yet she was close, wasn't she?"

"Maybe if I attacked more, she would've..."

"And how far would you go to stop her?" Their eyes met for a few moments. "What exactly are you hiding from, Kurrastian [*Think: Devil or Archdemon*]?"

"...Maybe being caught by the Forces."

"You and I both know you could easily take care of one-"

"I don't mean like that." The shorter one exhaled. "I mean... I know what it's like."

"You were the last Fate in Veritas, I remember."

"And when that Counterforce invaded our home, I felt... Responsible."

"You did not lead them there-"

"But I couldn't stop them alone. And when I tried..."

"Many of us got arrested by them." Ricon said rather composed. "So, you do not want to overpower these Forces, and put them through the same conflict. The idea of being almost helpless or powerless against a threat to something you've created."

"And if we show our real strength, there's a very good chance that we'll be detected. I don't want to take that risk."

"Yet, you carry the world's maddest dog without a leash."

"She will listen to me, and I can stop her if I can control her-"

"You cannot control Chaos, Exile." His grey ears went back. "You can lead it away from those it may harm, but you cannot control it." There was a long silence between them.

"...What happened to you." It was barely a question, more of a thick demand that got Ricon's attention. "You never returned to Veritas. You and Destiny went MIA-"

"We did not wish to return." A noise in question. "I knew what Veritas had become, and I respectfully declined it. A Peaceful Paradise does not appeal to me, especially when I've been viewed as Evil for as long as I can remember." A very little bit of guilt was shown in those green eyes. "What I want... What I desire: is this." He gestured around them.

"War?" Roe asked thickly.

"Something to Fight for. Something to Earn. I will not find that in Veritas." The two males looked at each other for several moments. "What do you desire?"

The badger was sitting in the shade on a bench, sipping some hard cider that was gifted by the Lord. Still wondering why he requested an audience with her after that event in the courtyard. She first thought maybe it was a trial against her for starting such a conflict that erupted in property damage, but Ricon assured her it was not about that.

Still, the cider was setting in. Finally getting her to relax and recover her senses from the constant barrage. Though still slightly diminished, Zeltra could still pick up the blue dragon almost sneaking up on her. Studying him as his wings drooped and grumbled. "And you wondered why I never

hunted."

"You scare off everything in a thirty foot radius by walking around." She muttered, indicating that the black one was still in a bad mood. "I heard that dragons normally fly to catch their prey."

"Yeah, well..." He snorted. "The trees were too thick half the time in my forest. I couldn't tell what was a brown animal hide, and what was just bark." Thea laid down beside her bench. Slightly sniffing at her drink. "What is that?"

"Apple Cider. Alcohol." He tossed his muzzle at that. "Not sure if you would like it."

"If it was anything like those ten drinks you forced into me a few nights ago, I'll pass." He snorted, getting a light smirk from her.

"That's probably for the best."

"Tastes that bad, huh?"

"Nothing compared to Shakarr's Red Cider." Zeltra started sounding a bit more like herself again. "He wasn't called the Tree Hugger for nothing."

"...Because he loved trees-?"

"Because he could rip them out of the ground, you twat." They chuckled, and the badger sighed. Getting a few nudges from that muzzle. "You want another swat, don't you?"

"Maybe. Now that I can speak clearly again, I just... Want to listen for some reason." She didn't respond to that. But only grumbled at another few nudges. "I swear you've gotten firmer." A glare from those yellow eyes only met with a sly smile. "I'm just pressing your Twinkies." She tilted her head.

"...Twinkies?" He curled his neck and tilted his head as well. "Still not completely cured yet?"

"Not entirely." The large one grumbled. "He said it might take a few days, but I'll stop... 'Mixing Up Words' I guess."

"It just makes you more unique." She took a drink. "As well as sound like an idiot."

"**Thank you.**" He grumbled sarcastically, getting her to chuckle a few times. "What was all that about anyway?" The black one didn't answer, but he figured it out from her expression. "They did warn you, time and time again-"

"Since when should a Northe listen to them?" She asked thickly. "We set our own standards, our own experiences vs trusting the word of mouth."

"Well then. Experience gained. Now we can finally put that tension behind us." He snorted. But once again, the badger stayed quiet. "*Riiiiight?*" Another sip. "*Riiiiiiight?*"

"A Northe doesn't give up, no matter how impossible the challenge."

"Mother of Bahamut- Are you fishing kidding me right now?" He hissed. Getting a scolding glare from the female. "Why bash your head against a rock in order to get through it? You can easily just walk around it and ignore the damn thing!"

"You wouldn't understand-"

"*I* wouldn't understand!?" She growled at him. "Understand what exactly? That you're so insignificant in this grand master plan of the world!? That there are beings out there who have ridiculous powers beyond even our own legends!?" He hissed in harsh whispers. "Yes, I think I do understand. More than you do, and I went through the same damn bologna!" A confused look for a moment and the dragon tossed his muzzle, trying the word again. "**Thoughts**. Did that one make sense?" Zeltra nodded as Thea took a breath.

"Look. Yes. It sucks being less powerful than everything around you. It sucks that you found a damn rock that you couldn't break. But for the love of oatmeal kevlar, just walk around it! Some things are just not meant to be done, Zelly." He exhaled, laying his head down in the grass and giving her time to adjust. After a bit, she pet his neck.

"...Zelly?" She questioned him, only seeing those wings shrug a bit.

"Call it a pet name-"

"Pet?" She asked, a bit insulted but almost chuckling at the same time. Getting the dragon to slightly whimper and cautiously look towards her.

"Master-name then?"

"Better." He grumbled a bit then exhaled through his muzzle.

"All I'm trying to say is... If you don't have wings, you're not going to fly. It's truism, and well... All Northe's can't have been able to ignore that."

"Some have attempted, actually." The badger smirked.

"But didn't survive, I imagine." She shrugged, not really answering. "Those two... The shifty fox and Crystal McBadAdditude, they're just some of those truisms. Life Lessons, ones you were able to walk away from. Y'know, **Alive**." Another sip. "Isn't that the important thing?"

When the black one didn't answer, he sighed. "Tub bubbles, you haven't even heard the worst of what's out there yet. When I found out, I went through the same thing you are. I just had someone kicking my balls until I accepted it."

"Is that why they're blue?" She half asked, getting a toss of his muzzle.

"Har har. Forget being a huntress, you should totally be a traveling jester." Thea snorted again. "Regardless." He swatted her cup of apple cider, watching it drop into the grass, but nothing came out of it. Looking back at her than it a few times, meeting her displeased gaze.

"You're lucky I finished." He just snorted at her.

"Yeah, well. It's the gesture that counts." He grumbled, taking a step away from her. "Come on, Zelly. You're stronger than this." Her gaze didn't lift, let alone change. Not even when a servant came around.

"Lady Zeltragrae? Lord Ricon is seeking you." The blue creature took a large breath of relief.

"Saved by the Servant." Thea muttered, double taking at the yellow gaze and whimpering. "...I'm going to go hide for a while. You probably don't want to keep him waiting." No response. "...Right?" More silence, and he whimpered again. Slowly walking away while keeping an eye on the badger.

Chapter 7

"*Whyyyyy?*" The dragon whined loudly, once again complaining about walking with the afternoon sun beating down on the three. "People should invent some sort of... Traveling machine so we no longer have to walk anymore!"

"Actually, they do have those on some planets." Roe informed him, clearly not as frustrated with the blue one's attitude as the badger was.

"I knowwww! I want one." Thea grumbled.

"I'm not sure if you could fit, to be honest. Well, I suppose if you had a long flatbed, maybe. But it would still be quite strenuous on the vehicle-"

"Or, he could fly to the next town." Zeltra grumbled, getting a glare from those maroon eyes. "It would save all of us the headache."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" The dragon snorted. "To finally have some alone time together away from me." The black one growled at him, almost glaring at the fox as if he said it.

"D-don't look at me! I didn't say anything!"

"But he was thinking it." A groan from the grey one as he covered his eyes with a paw.

"Are you done trying to make me mad?" Zeltra swatted the blue creature in the shoulder.

"It's entertaining, and gets my mind off of walking. And yes. I'll stop if we finally take a breaaaaaak!"

"We've only been walking for three hours!" She growled. "And you've been complaining since ten minutes into it!"

"That's because walking sucks. Seriously, how do you guys do it!?" The other two just rolled their eyes.

"Fine. It is getting close to dusk anyway." The fox said. "Let's find a spot to make camp, then see if we can hunt something." A desperate sigh of relief from Thea as he flopped down on the closest grassy area. Groaning at his sore limbs, and trying to get comfortable. "I was thinking a bit more... Closed in?"

"In a minute." The blue one grumbled.

"I don't suppose you could make us a shelter then." Zeltra half asked the smaller male, getting a look of concern from those green eyes. "You made a bridge, I don't know what the limit is."

"Finally admitted to the bridge thing, did he?" Thea groaned.

"I mean... I could, but the more I use it, the more people are going to notice."

"Not if you disassemble it later, let alone in the middle of the woods."

"That's not exactly what I meant, Zeltra." She barely lifted an ear and an eyebrow. "There are... Others that may be watching."

"Think Gods and stuff, and they don't like people messing with their plans." The dragon mumbled, getting a rather surprised look from Roe.

"How...?"

"I'm a dragon?" It was barely a question, let alone an answer.

"Regardless, I could only make it out of weaponry, which would hardly be comfortable or warm." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I could go back and find our equipment in that cave, return by the time you hunted something."

"Just give me a knife. Hunting with this thing is just difficult." The badger tapped her sword, and the grey one nodded. Once again barely seeing a knife fly just out of her sight and be caught by him. Handing the hilt to her, sheath and all.

"Feel free to keep it. Should last you a while." She half nodded, looking over the thing while the crystal dragon teleported near the fox. Only that he was replaced with a tall black dragon with spots of

shiny metal in many places, mostly on the underside. "You remember where we accidentally left you?" He asked the red one, and got a solid nod. "We'll be back soon, you two. Try to find somewhere safe." And the two took off very quickly, almost a single leap and they were out of sight in moments.

Finally seeing the form he hid for so long made Zeltra exhale almost sadly. "Hey." Thea mumbled, still not moving or even opening his eyes. "I've been there. They are around, you just gotta accept it." He grumbled, almost as annoyed as she was about the whole ordeal of being a bit powerless against them. "Just be thankful you're not the weakest person in this group." He snorted, at least making the female smirk.

"By a long shot, apparently." A grumble from him and she tapped his side a few times with the protected knife. "Come on, get up you. You don't want to be seen out here." A loud whine, but he obeyed. Following her out into the forest and laid down in the first decent clearing they found.

"I'm entrusting you with food while I guard this area."

"Don't strain yourself." She lightly chuckled, getting a snort from him as she started heading out. Taking off the small shield and longsword and leaving it in the clearing, the badger moved quietly. Finding some tracks of a caribou and carefully following them. However, something still distracted her mind a bit.

~~~~~

"You wanted to see me, Ricon?" Zeltra asked, walking through the palace hall and half glancing at the many displays that the fox was overlooking. Much of them being weapons and armor from retired soldiers, or just relics.

"Yes. I thought this would be a good spot to have our conversation." He studied the female for a few moments. "You seem off. Shaken perhaps?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" She almost growled.

"Not your will, but... Your pride?" The black one didn't respond. "I know it can be overwhelming to realize the power some people have-"

"Just... Stop." She exhaled. "Is this what you called me for? To check up on how I was doing?" Zeltra asked, almost insulted and staring into his crossed expression. Then see the tall male look over at a few heavy weapons that were on display.

"Tell me, Zeltragraciae, why did you choose to use this longhammer and towershield style of yours?" A bit of a heated exhale mixed with a bit of puzzlement on how he knew such a thing. "Every other Northe that were in tales used much more... Aggressive weaponry, so to speak. Two handed axes, hammers and mauls. Even traditional ranged weaponry, such as archery and throwing axes." Those red eyes scanned her. "Why choose those pair?"

"Forgive me for being out of line, but why would *you* want to know?"

"It is not important for me to know, it's important for you to remember." He calmly stated, not releasing his gaze until she took a breath.

"...It was my third hunt alone. I was tracing what I thought was a large Wolverine that has been getting into the livestock, but it turned out to be a Mandragor." A motion to go on. "They're a cross between insects and plants. Might not sound dangerous, but this one ended up taking out several beasts on its own."

"I know them to be rather intelligent, entrapping hunters of their own. Often even outsmarting those who are inexperienced with the species, let alone the land."

"Yeah... I don't tell this story truthfully very often for a reason, because it got the better of me. It ended up cutting the ligaments in my primary wrists, making it very hard to wield my hammer properly."

"Which was your weapon of choice from the beginning." A look from those yellow eyes. "I often wondered why the Northes let their children use weapons sized for adults, but it's not my place to question it."

"It's how we do things." The badger almost grumbled, but Ricon seemed to be more respectful of her culture than the others were.

"Go on."

"...At the time, I was only using that hammer. I was too slow with it, and everytime I took a swing, it only gave the Mandragor an opportunity to attack. I can withstand alot of pain and blood loss, but..."

"It was too much for a young hunter." Zeltra almost looked away. "But you survived."

"...I attempted to retreat cautiously, but it was still stalking me. I managed to find an old, rundown hut that belonged to another ages ago, and managed to close the near-broken door in the Mandragor's snout. Trapping it outside, but they can burrow very well. I knew that place wasn't safe from it. But looking at that door, I wondered if I could somehow keep that barrier between us. Use it as a portable wall to protect myself from the creature that was too agile for my swings."

"So you learned shield tactics."

"But not the way everyone else uses them. I held the old door handle with my wounded arm, and kept the hammer in my off-hand for the time being. I purposely broke the remaining hinge off the door, and started pushing the Mandragor away. Having a small eyehole so I could see its movements. We still struggled with each other, but at least that door was holding. But..."

"You were playing too defensively." A faint nod from the black one.

"When the wood started to give into the scrapes, I started using it more aggressively. Even going

so far as to attack the beast with the shield itself, ramming into it and forcing it into a corner. I got in a bit of a lucky shot, slamming its head into a frozen rock, then pinned the thing to the ground. I finished it soon after, splitting its head open, and doing my best to carve out a piece of it as proof."

"Quite the close encounter for a young hunter then." She nodded.

"But that was the first time I was afraid for my life. I despised it, feeling weak and helpless against something I was unprepared for."

"Which is why you didn't boast about this story much, I'm guessing."

"I left out a few pieces, but they didn't seem to care so much for my new tactics. I even had to forge the towershield myself because the blacksmith refused to make such a defensive piece of equipment that wasn't considered Armor. I was nearly made fun of from every tribe until I dueled every challenge willing to accept."

"So you changed the way Northe's viewed such a weapon-choice." She gave a solid nod. "You are definitely smart enough to understand what you need in order to win a fair fight, but that pride has gotten to your head a bit." A bit of a grumble from her, as the fox lead her towards a set of full plate armor. "Back in my first life, this used to be the ultimate of tactical weaponry. Warriors wearing such a thing to battle were nearly unstoppable. A bit slow and clumsy, but even when knocked prone, they were unharmed. If trampled, they could still get back up."

He gestured the female's longsword around her belt. "May I?" Ricon asked, getting the badger to cautiously nod and hand him the weapon, then take a step back. "Trinity weapons are not much different from those times, and when I was going up against the wealthiest army, our morale was already low. They had rows of men marching in these metal suits." He demonstrated a few practice slashes against the relic. "Longswords are perhaps one of the greatest weapons of that era. Easy enough for anyone to pick up and use, but potential to master is very high. Their blades are good against flesh, yet only dull against such a shield, let alone leave you open." He studied the tip of the sword for a moment. "The very ends can be used as a makeshift spear, and if you can manage to hit the armor in the joints..." Another careful demo.

"But things are much easier against a target that does not move." Zeltra said, getting a gesture of approval from him.

"Yes. So such things are rendered near useless, or are very risky. The plates could even stop the strongest drawn arrows, barely even slowing them down. But we still won in the end."

"What did you end up doing?"

"There are many forms of damage when it comes to war, besides weaponry: Morale is one, Supplies, Environmental such as the rain and terrain. Even Fire can be helpful, but you risk not being able to control it. However the three main ones for weapons are: Piercing, Slashing and Blundering."

"Two of which the longsword has."

"Only two?" He questioned, smiling at her confused expression. "Full Plate does defend against Slashing and Piercing quite well, but are rather vulnerable towards blunt weapons." Ricon then gripped the blade of the longsword like it was a maul's shaft, then struck with the crossguard of the weapon. Seeing the suit of armor shake and rattle loudly against the practice blow. "I told my soldiers to wield their blades like hammers, and strike with blunt force. A technique we called Half-swording. Though other blunt weapons would definitely do the job, we didn't have nearly enough of them."

"And you won that battle with this strange tactic?" She said, almost in disbelief. Handing the weapon back for even her to attempt it, surprised on how little gripping the blade harmed her palms.

"I won because they were not expecting our numbers to be Equipped for such a strategy, and they were somewhat correct. However, tactics and technique won that war, not sheer numbers or wealth." She studied the strange form of attack for a few moments before looking at him.

"Why tell me this?"

"Because you are Northe. Young still, but not naive nor inexperienced. Though I do not like to stereotype people or cultures, it is a true fact that the Northe do not like forms of Change. This is true from your introduction towards your style of choice, hmm?" She faintly nodded. "Zeltragraciae, I cannot count how many times I've said this to people, or overall countries: Those Who Do Not Change Are Doomed To Be Forgotten. Including Ourselves." He let the words sink in for a few moments.

"...This is about Roe, isn't it?"

"Let me tell you something about Exile, Northe. You are not the only one who cannot match him, I cannot as well. Though as impervious as I may seem, my shell does have a limit. The most we can do is perhaps agree on a stalemate between us." The black one studied him for a few moments. "He never told you what I am?"

"Other than an Outsider, the same as him and Flyare."

"Interesting." The red male took a breath and motioned her to follow. "Our home went by the name of Veritas; a unique universe that was divided into three separate universes themselves. A Multiverse, if you will." A bit of a disgruntled look on the badger's face got him to faintly chuckle. "I won't go much further than that, it's difficult to understand as it is. But the way life there cycled was through those three. In the Neutral universe, if something died, it would be judged by their past actions by a series of arbiters. Depending on their own decision, they were then sent to one of the other two universes."

"So, like the religion of Heaven and Hell?"

"More like Law and Chaos, but often enough the souls were labeled either good or evil. And whenever something within the lands of Law or Chaos deceased, they would be sent back and reborn

within the Neutral universe." She nodded in understanding. "There was a very specific being who went by the name of Xion who defended the Neutral universe along with Exile, and one of the very few who were a match for him." A faint grumble left her muzzle.

"Xion later invented this specific weapon known as an Exalt; by taking the destructive natures of an Evil soul and giving it a shell made of Space and Time, he created a sentient weapon that had an ethereal link towards its wielder. Developed enough, the Exalt was able to change shape at will, becoming more and more complex with more compatibility. Even able to 'Dance' on its own."

"Dance?" She questioned in disbelief.

"Think: able to float and fend without being held." The badger nodded. "People sought out these weapons, and it wasn't uncommon for Heroes to wield them."

"So, you're one of them." She stated, almost feeling the fur rise on the back of her neck when those red eyes gazed at her.

"I'm almost there, but you're on the correct track. These Exalts were considered indestructible, but rarely independent without a wielder. It's sheer purpose was to support someone that was compatible with it, not to pursue its own goals. Perhaps they could nudge a suggestion or a warning, but when it came to the logics outside of conflict, it was no help." A bit of a puzzled look from her. "It was crafted that way on purpose, you see. There was no conflicts between its own desires and the wielders, it's only function was to aid them. Read their instincts and energy flow, and follow orders." Ricon took a breath as they entered outside. "I can hardly remember those days."

"So you were...?"

"But Exalts were conductive, that was a bit of a defect of them. They could gather energy and unleash it in many forms, but gather too much and the shell could break like a thick glass." He took a breath. "That limit varied upon many different things, and some of it was due to the Exalts own experience with such attacks. But one Hero specifically, who went by the name of Downe, overcharged his weapon during a battle. This marked the very first time one was ever broken, and when the shell shattered; the soul inside seemed to take on a more liquid substance. Making contact with another being, it would absorb the many things it would need in order to form a body of its own."

"So... I'm assuming the only being left was...?" The fox nodded.

"I became a different version of Downe after that, a creature known as a Volratter. Finally freed from the shackles of primal willpower I was limited to. It took a long time for me to regain many things, such as emotions and distant memories of my past life. But those goals returned."

"...You're a living Exalt then." A slight shrug, but a nod regardless. "A creature made of space and time, able to shift..." He held up that black gloved hand, and she witnessed it peel back. Revealing the red furred paw underneath, then see it morph into a long blade. Back to his original paw, then slowly change into a copy of the badger's very own. "Unreal..."

"I am a creature that is near indestructible, and that's why Exile distrusts my actions. He believes with such abilities, I would get carried away. Attempt to play God and control the minds of others like puppets."

"Can you?" Zeltra asked a bit thickly.

"Downe was an extraordinary Psionic. I inherited such abilities, but they are not as strong as his will ever be." Her gaze didn't release. "Short answer: yes. I could. But to do so would put everyone into a state of primal willpower, would it not?" No response. "There is nothing fascinating about controlling a horde of hollow bodies. I do not want to receive Control, I want to Earn it." After a few moments, the Northe exhaled. Dropping her gaze and looking over the city from afar.

"...Yet, you cannot defeat him."

"We can fight, yes. Stand up against one another, but neither have the ability to put the other down for good. If anything, I would probably run out of endurance before he would." An odd look from her. "You are attempting to fight a being who has fought for literal Centuries. Straight. I'm not saying Give Up, Zeltra. But think about starting a little smaller." A faint grumble. "There is nothing wrong with finding your limits, Northe. Just do not let them consume you."

~~~~~

That last grumbled escaped from memory to reality, as she spooked the caribou the badger was closing in on. Getting her to exhale, but those instincts picked up something nearby. The feeling of being watched by something nearby.

The grass in the shade was much more comfortable on the dragon's burning muscles, as he took another deep breath. Contemplating once again why the hell he decided to travel to begin with, never imagining it would be so taxing on his body. But it would be worth it if he could find his friend-

Some distant movement flickered his ears, pinning out something wide coming towards him, and almost smelling the taste of cooked food. "That took you long enough." He snorted playfully. "Here I thought Northe's were extraordinary hunters-" Several shimmers reflected against his closed eyes, as something more metallic was walking through the forest instead. Then a few more, as several soldiers walked into the clearing. Wearing Trinity's emblem. "...You're not the Black Bitch." Thea muttered.

Several small jabs with the spearpoint in his haunches made him hiss at the soldiers, as they escorted the dragon through the large camp. "Quit it! I'm moving!" The blue one grumbled, only getting another jab and a growl. The group leading him towards another row of guards lead by a commander, nearby Zeltra was tied and kneeling. "Well, so much for a daring rescue." He mumbled at her. Feeling the focus of anger in her eyes, but not really towards him.

"Sir! We have caught and secured the darkness!" The soldier's report made the two captives double take.

"-Darkness!?"

"We're not the darkness!" Zeltra hissed. "I was only hunting in the fore-!" A heavy crack in the back of her head interrupted her, but it was too dark to see the wound.

"Hey!" The dragon growled, getting his own whack but shrugging most of it off.

"Silence. Both of you." The High Commander said thickly. "There was reports of someone attacking a nearby garrison recently, making off with a map and a few weapons." He motioned one of the guards, and they handed him Zeltra's longsword and shield. "Care to explain these?"

"We just came from that city near here, currently under Ricon's watch-" Another swat got her to growl loudly.

"That's Lord Ricon to you, thief!" A guard near her shouted. "Address Generals with respect!"

"She's telling the truth." Thea grumbled. "Ask him yourself if you wish."

"A several hour march to prove your innocence isn't worth it-" A feathered hand silenced a soldier, as the Commander studied the large blue one.

"I've heard of the events in Lhosaka from General Nobufasa, a sickness that suddenly appears around the same time where a dragon comes to cure it. A blue creature of legends in that area." He looked deep into those maroon eyes. "Are you that creature?" Thea didn't answer. "It's a cunning strategy, really. You infect the river of two towns, destroy the enemy one to convince us that you are on our side. Then heal the other, allowing you to walk freely right under our snouts-"

"What!?" The large one hissed, getting a few close spearpoints under his neck.

"Willing to cure any illness seems too much of a long shot, and one I am not willing to take. Be it you are ally or not, you hold too much power. Enough to turn the tide of this war if you decide to defect." Another moment of study as the dragon struggled to hold in his growl. "Tell me, creature. Are you actually capable of such things?"

"...Why would I answer that." Thea growled deeply. "You've already made up your mind, haven't you?"

"Perhaps I have, but I would like to witness it myself before you are executed." He snapped his fingers to bring the badger forward, throwing her before the dragon. "She is your friend, is she not?" No answer, but the look of worry in his eyes when the Commander unsheathed his sword. Placing the tip on her neck and almost leaning on it. "If you heal her, I will let you live another day for me to reconsider your alliance-"

"And if it doesn't work on the same person twice?" The blue one growled, getting a look from

both the bird and Zeltra. "She's already received my aid once before, it might not work again!"

"Then that is a risk I'm willing to take-"

"But I'm not!!" He roared at them, getting a few more soldiers to arm themselves. "Don't. Do This." They locked eyes again. "She is a Northe that has been on your side from the start. If you execute her without any evidence, you might lose them as an ally."

"And if they don't question it-?"

"They will." Thea confidently said. "People remember Zeltragraciae. She has a reputation in the Northlands." It got the Commander to stop for a few moments in silence. "Please. This is a bigger mistake than you let on to be."

"And if you are the Darkness?"

"Then it can wait another day." No response. "You don't want to be remembered as the Commander who broke the Trinity due to some half-baked theory. Northe's are too proud of themselves to steal *anything*. Do you really think that is going to slide?" Another long silence.

"Sir?" A consultant in light clothing came from the back. "It would not hurt to interrogate them, just to be sure."

"...He does seem to know a lot."

"Did you really expect someone of legend to not come equipped with magnificence?" The dragon snorted. "Please, High Commander. We are on your side." Thea said slowly, looking him in the eyes the entire time. After a bit, the bird took a breath.

"...Fair enough. You have until we either find someone injured, or until my men deem you enemy." He pointed to a few of them. "You three, grab some lanterns and secure a post to keep them guarded. You four will take four hour shifts through the night, guarding them in pairs. The rest, return to your posts. We move out at dawn."

A couple of them got the badger up and escorted the two a bit out of the camp. "Over here. We'll tie them to this tree in the meantime." One of them said, leading the way while the other got some rope. Hearing a loud *whoosh!* nearby got them both cautious, then taken down quickly in the darkness. Soon after, Zeltra's restraints were cut.

"You two okay?" Roe asked them, barely making out those green eyes and shiny plates.

"Barely, no thanks to you." Thea snorted, but a bit playfully.

"We didn't find you anywhere near our stopping point, then seen you from afar a few minutes-" Some shouting further back got his attention, making him curse silently. "I told her not to attack anyone." He grumbled, then turned to the Northe. "You okay to walk?"

"I'm fine." She half snarled, getting a solid nod and seeing two pieces of gear glisten in the faint light. Being caught by a single draconic paw and handing it to the badger. A longhammer and a towershield, about the same as what she had before.

"We don't have alot of time, let's move." They followed the lining of the thick trees along their way back. "I left the gear nearby-" He double-taked from afar, making the others scan behind them as well. Barely seeing the crystal dragon, holding the High Commander by the throat in a circle of soldiers, all trying to attack her. "...Run."

"What?" The blue one grumbled.

"You can't be serious!" Flyare suddenly disappeared with the bird.

"-*FUCKING RUN!!*"

Chapter 8

Vindictus OST - Ancient Glas Ghaibhleann

A thin red weapon speared from the clouds, splitting the entire sky in two with a massive impact when it hit the earth. Colossal bolts of lightning arced from one person or object to the next, nearly exploding them into a mess of blood and burning debris from sheer contact alone. All the while, sound barrier shattering bomb blast nearly pushed the two off their feet, as the black dragon tried to protect them against the harsh winds.

Hearing any leftover soldiers get slaughtered moments after the impact was almost too much for Thea and Zeltra to comprehend, getting half stunned by the fallout of such a blast that whiped out an entire camp. "Come on!!" Roe's voice suddenly returned them to the realm of reason. "Whatever you do, don't stop running and stay low!!" He commanded, constantly guarding their back and almost feeling those gemmed eyes target them.

Retreat kicked in her primal senses to pursuit, teleporting just in front of the blue dragon in mid swing nearly hit him, but the clash of a large blade crashing into the ground halted Freayha's attack.

Feeling the black dragon flip over the blue one and swing his tail at her while gripping the large blade, Exile came down with an overhead slash. One that connected with the spear once again, sending out a few red electrical sparks, and get a gruesome sight in the deadlock.

The High commander's body was still skewered and connected to it. Impaled from the right side of the neck through to the lower waist, the bird was beyond burned. Barely recognizable, even from the special armor he wore. Still missing a few limbs, his eye peeled opened to see the black dragon, and sink Exile's heart a little.

Knowing he was still in pain, the black dragon added pressure to the deadlock. Forcing the crystal one back a bit and teleport further away. From here, he aimed a quick shot from the revolver attached to his hilt, releasing two parallel bullets beside the long blade and putting an end to the Commander's misery. Though it was a bit messy, the red one didn't seem to care, and just threw the body off with a strong flick.

"Whatever you two do..." Roe started, keeping a thick eye contact with the gemmed one. "Do not stop." Thea and Zeltra gave each other a few quick nods to say they were ready. "Go." And they took off, instantly getting the attention of Freayha once again and attempting another teleport attack. This time near the badger, barely scraping the blow off her shield while ducking under it a bit.

Another teleport towards the blue dragon's side was intercepted by Exile's own clash, summoning another weapon on the other side and expecting the red one to attack there once again. Getting her to growl loudly and focus mostly on the black male. Hearing the weapons clash from behind, the sparks violently lighting the ground before them was almost too much. Fear overcame their willpower, shaving away at it with each blow that sounded closer than the last. Until all at once it stopped after the slight gasp of the black one, and the sound of teleporting.

Soon after, the clouds above were occupied by those same blows. Thunderous noises and massive sparks that were trailing away from them, and slowing the two to a stop. Allowing them to catch their breaths, and watch as such a storm was being pushed away, yet getting more and more violent as time went on. "There's nothing we can do for them now." The badger half whispered, getting a bit of a whimper from Thea. "Just do as he said, keep going." A faint nod, and some rustling in the bushes got their attention for a moment, then they took off once again.

Every blow he deflected was occupied with her own roar. Nearly feeling the entire voltage her anger created through the large blade, and noticed the glow it was starting to omit. The constant teleports were difficult to follow her, forcing him to rely on instinct and intuition. Not that sight mattered much in such fog anyhow.

"Come on, Freayha..." He half called, deflecting a few more blows and not attempting to fight back. "Calm down. Take it easy." A few more, making the sparks fly violently through the clouds. "You can regain control before anyone else gets hurt-" A massive overhead impact was barely guarded in time, but

sending the black one down out of the cloud. Landing about halfway up a large mountain heavily, cracking the shell on impact.

Rebalancing himself, Exile seen the dragoon dive at an angle. Shielding himself from the heavy blow sent him through the entire mountain, while the energy unleashed inside split the entire thing into pieces. Forcing the black dragon to skid out the other side along the flat plains. Recovering just in time before another teleport and rage fueled swing, knocking him flying once again.

Impacting a large city wall made of stone, he pried himself out of it, only to get slammed once again by her and sent through the wall. Crashing into several homes, and knocked into the streets, people started fleeing. But the black one was still Freayha's main focus, coming from the side this time and sending him down the streets. The heated weapon he defended with nearly liquefied from all the conducted energy, spraying into a few bystanders.

Skidding to a stop, Exile summoned another weapon, but was forced to blade grasp the spear aimed at his neck. The strength of her full body thrust pushed the two through another kiosk and damaging a nearby home a bit, putting the dragons into a deadlock for several moments. "Come on, Girl! You can fight this!"

A cannonball was fired from the top of the wall, landing on the dragons, but passing through the gemmed female. Getting caught by the platinum plates of the black dragon, and instantly getting her attention. "No!" Exile roared at her. "Focus on me!!" But it was too late, Freayha teleported towards the shot without her spear, knocking the operator prone.

Grabbing a piece of the cannon itself and throwing it into the air, she stood over the guard attempting to make a name for himself. Sensing the fear in his chest as she caught cannon by the barrel with one hand, making him flinch. But the crystal one disappeared for a moment, making him scan the area before she teleported behind him and slam his body into paste with a single blow of the cannon.

Another shot from afar missed, but got the red one's eyelock. Instantly reappearing next to that one and crushing his body, then the next several guards until she flew above a storeroom tower. Throwing the bashed cannon into the top roof and hear it crash through several floors, even collapsing a few.

Exile finally got a lock on her, firing one of the missile launchers from his previously made weapon and detonate it close to the crystal dragon. The explosion was enough to scatter her shards, but they quickly teleported in unity. Attacking the black one a few times when reunited with her spear, but his constant defense didn't keep her focused. Teleporting once again and leaving him guarded before spotting her above the tower a second time.

Cursing loudly, he summoned several massive blades to form as a wall. Coming down around the tower to shield the residents from the incoming blast, they got pushed down from the skysplitter. Mixed with the large amounts of blackpowder stored within, it created a large fireball in the middle of the city. However, with the swords acting as a flu, most of it was sent upwards.

The swords fell, but landed along the outer walls. Only slightly damaging a few houses in the process, vs another catastrophe like before. Giving the black dragon a win for the moment, and get the attention of a sore loser. Expecting the dragoon's teleport attack style, and putting a bit more offense to keep her aggro this time, as the two fought through the city.

"What is going on!?" Ricon barked, heading outside the palace and seeing a few of the servants stunned at the destruction.

"The Darkness..." One of them whispered. "It must be the Darkness...!"

"Everyone, listen to me." The red fox got their attention. "Take shelter underground, in the cellars. Head towards the escape route, Emmis knows the path. Stay there until things remain silent for a least twenty minutes here, or until dawn. Understood?"

"What about you, my Lord?"

"Do not worry about me. I need to gather all the soldiers I can." He said thickly, getting them to nod. "Lead the way, Emmis."

"Yes, my Lord!" And they left, leaving the Volratter to search for the two dragons in the fight, beginning to take it to the air once again. "You're not so powerful, Freayha..." He almost called, finally getting a good focus on the crystal dragon when she knocked the black one to the earth, and grab her with a form of Telekinesis. Getting that outer to halt movement while attempting to throw the spear at Exile.

Roaring loudly with a closed muzzle, those black slits quickly scanned the area. Recognizing the red fox as a threat, and teleporting the inner crystals that were not being grasped beside him. Getting Ricon to regret not holding onto the spear itself, as it cracked him hard in the face. The impact alone, he could shrug off easily, but the violent red spark that omitted broke his concentration.

Attempting to grab her again, Freayha teleported on the other side of the Volratter; outer crystals and all. Landing a hit on the back of the ribs, front throat, crown of the head, then the thigh just above the knee. The electrical arcs growing drastically with every accumulating strike, and turning his frame into a darker red.

Another gunshot from afar as the black dragon tried to get the attention of the red dragoon, but a simple teleport to the canine's opposite side evaded it. Freayha continued her assault against Ricon, striking the back of the knee, center of the chest, lower back, then aimed at the direct snout. Only for the spear to finally be caught by him physically, holding onto it desperately as his body started to chip away.

But the gemmed one grabbed his head with a single sharp paw. Something that didn't seem too threatening until she roared loudly and sent that raging tempest directly through her limb. Spraying the

red lightning into his face with a deafening blast, holding him up and forcing the being to conduct it. Then a second one, a third, fourth before Exile made it to them. Attempting to slash at her to grab the aggro. Though the blade connected, it did nothing but separate the crystals slightly.

A quick teleport away, and the fox went limp. Being caught by the black dragon with his off hand and body. "You okay?" There wasn't any response, but the energy omitting from him was nearly stinging his chestplates. Another distant roar came from the clouds as they once again split in two. Seeing that crystal needle dart straight towards them, the black one fully shielded the Volratter. Wings and all.

The palace hill was instantly replaced by a pillar of light, pure white with a faint hint of lavender along the edges. The quake, creating fissures to split through the land as it screamed underneath a deafening blast. Causing all buildings to be thrown against the castle walls before becoming volcanic glass from the intense heat, where the winds then shattered it within fractions of a second.

The city walls couldn't contain such power, breaking down and allowing the blast to escape and spread out. Trees within several miles of the impact burst into flames, grass superheated and becoming a firewalk. Rocks becoming glass, flesh of animals being seared off as the heated air spread out to the lakes and rivers, boiling them into a wall of steam where they were soon vaporized until there was nothing left. From afar, the neon light that could be seen at the horizon of every city within the country. The strange heat. Then the bomb blast and quake following.

The two beings finally hit the ground. Exile doing his best so that he would get the impact before the fragile fox, as they barreled through a few dozen trees. Eventually coming to a stop and growling against the pain. Taking a few breaths to overlook the Volratter for anything fatally cracked, but so far so good. "You just had to provoke her-" The black wyrm started to say, only to hear Freayha teleport behind him and whack the dragon violently. Sending them downhill through the forest.

Within a small clearing, the black tix was half snoozing. Picking up the large vibrations of the battle at the distant, but was just too lazy to care at the moment. Hearing dozens of trees get knocked around, Krow grumbled and rolled his eyes. Expecting another mutated animal on a rampage that he had to stop.

Getting up, he turned around in an irkful gesture. Only to get trampled and added to the snowball of males for a bit before getting launched into the air when he lost grip on the black dragon. "The hell-!?" He shouted, only to catch a glimpse of Freayha before she threw the red spear into the tix's body. Impaling him with ease, then kicking him down towards the others in a voltage burst.

As the ground finally leveled, the black dragon skidded to a stop. Summoning another large blade to defend himself with, he eased Ricon up on his feet. "You need to stop attacking her!" He ordered the other two, not very concerned about the now human's wound.

"I'm fine, by the way." Krow grumbled, getting up with the spear still in his middle. Pulling it out, only for it to be grabbed on the other side by her and the ripped out from behind. Cracking the man in the side of his head and forcing him to tumble towards the other males. "Well, she would explain your current troubles." A glance at the dragon and fox. "Which one of you pissed her off?"

"Long story." The black one answered. Creating several large shields and a large sword for the canine. One that had more of an axe's blade at the end rather than a point.

"It always is."

"Just don't attack her. The more you do, the longer she'll be in this state-!" A sudden teleport of her got everyone in defensive stances, as she attacked the other dragon first. Giving Ricon the time to grab the equipment with telekinesis, and surround himself with the shields. A few long minutes passed, as Freayha teleported rapidly between the three males. Attacking them at random and gradually coming more and more frequent.

"This isn't working!" Krow grumbled, barely healing from one wound before another was made.

"It will! Just keep at it!" Exile ordered. "If you can get her in a deadlock, then attempt that!"

"Or, plan B-!" The human almost yelled, dodging an overhead slam that cracked the ground loudly. Sending chunks of debris and rocks around, and he focused a black Spark in his kick. Hitting a rock with it, and sending it over towards Ricon; where the crystal one was attacking next. Though the rock missed, it gave Krow the aggro.

With the 'enchanted' rock still airborne, the fox grabbed it quickly with his psionic and send it back. Hearing the man get impaled once again on purpose, but barely evade the stone in time. Striking the gemmed dragon finally and taking the blow in the shoulder.

A faint snarl came from her as she teleported back, then Freayha was nearly drained of her energy. Forcing her to almost fall apart as she collapsed on the ground. "No...!" Exile quickly went to her, ditching his weapon and attempted to hold her together. "Why did you do that!?" He shouted at the younger looking male.

"It worked, didn't it?" He grumbled, not caring that there was still a spear in his liver.

"It works on organic beings, not...!" He held the red one close, as she acted like she was struggling to breathe. Still almost clawing at the black dragon, attempting to continue the murderous rage. "She doesn't gain energy the way others do...!"

"And letting her rampage her way through the world is a much better solution, I'm sure." Krow said harshly, hearing the Volratter stagger up beside him and place a paw on the man's shoulder. Giving him the entire energy supply gathered from those strikes to conduct into the human's body instead. Allowing Ricon to finally speak.

"Krow made the right choice." He said, getting a glare from those purple eyes.

"...**OW**." The man grumbled sarcastically, smoke coming from his body before taking the time to pull out the spear.

"The right choice for who-?"

"The right choice for the world." The canine growled at him, letting those green eyes glare harshly into the red ones. "You're too loyal towards the past, Exile. You should rethink, and reconsider your priorities. At the very least, consider putting that malefactor on a leash." The Volratter walked away. Heading back towards his recent palace, as the gemmed one growled in struggle.

"...It's okay, Flyare. Just relax, stay focused. I'll get you back home, I promise..."

Chapter 9

The two sprinted through the dark forest, directly away from the earth shattering impacts that echoed through the night. The harsh winds of heated air catching up to them and striking both their backs, even though the thick trees as the two fell forwards. Scrambling to move to protect one another; Thea grasping the badger's body and trying to shelter it with his own and a wing, while Zeltra used her form to completely cover his head. Gripping a little tightly at his spines as a near blistering gale passed over them.

Taking cover saved them from the intense light, as a sun was created nearby. Turning the very night into day and then some as the very planet screamed, sending tremors throughout the lands and tossing debris like ragdolls. Feeling the very hill underneath them shift and tilt slightly as the two armored themselves against the fiery natural shrapnel scattering across.

Their hearing eventually returned and the two started to look around when the light of the new sun began to fade. Replacing the once momentary bleached sky with a stained version of the night, becoming more black than blue as if the light seared that as well. The only quakes felt after were their own hearts as their bodies began to move.

The blue wyrm grunted painfully and with a bit of disgust as his exposed scales gave off a

thin crack. As if slightly melted and stinging as he got up. Overlooking Zeltra before himself, noticing her clothing in very small embers and pawing it out. Getting a look from her, but not one of offense, just in shock as the two looked over at the devastation such a thing brought. How little they could see, in any case.

"...I think we're safe." Zeltra said, cautiously listening into the darkness.

"I don't think anyone is safe in a world where she exists." Thea grumbled, half looking at the dent in the towershield. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I'm fine." She said, actually not stern or insulted for once.

"Just a bit shaken." Well, it was nice while it lasted, as she gave him a bit of a glare. "It's okay to admit it, everyone is." The badger just half grumbled at him. "...Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure. I honestly want to say back to Ricon's fort. That's about the only place I feel safe." A slight whine from him, and she gave the blue one a thick tap. "You'll live."

"Yeah, yeah." He snorted, as they cautiously headed back the way they came. Ready to turn tail and run if there was any loud noises or bright lights. But all was mostly good, until they made it to the clearing.

Far off into the distance, they could see some of the city still on fire. Along with a nearby mountain, still surrounded by a thick cloud. Leaving the two to just sigh heavily. "...They're going to need all the supplies and storage they can get."

"In other words; not as welcoming to visitors at the moment." The two looked at each other, until a large rumble came from the mountain. Being prepared to dash back into the forest, they just seen the top half slide down the mountain. Almost in one solid piece and create another dust cloud as it crashed into the plains. "Seriously... How does something do that...?"

"It just goes to show you how dangerous Outsiders can be." Zeltra muttered. "Roe said he found our equipment and stashed it nearby, let's see if we can track it down."

"*Fiiiine*." He tossed his muzzle, getting a sudden sharp pain in the neck, just under the jaw. "Ow!" He hissed, as the badger looked at him, making out an arrow caught in the scales. Her ear flicked with a bowstring snap, pulling up her shield just in time. Hearing the thing shatter on the other side, then move to defend him.

"You! With the shield! Drop it!" Someone in the woods barked.

"Like hell, I will!" Another arrow shot from the trees, getting into the dragon's midsection, making him yelp in pain.

"I've got plenty of these things, and you can't cover all of that beast! If you cooperate, you'll live!" She growled loudly at the shadowed area, trying to pinpoint where they were coming from. Seeing

the arrowhead flicker a bit before shooting out and hitting the dragon's side again. Even if she could see him, it wouldn't matter much.

"Okay. Just stop hurting him." She said.

"Drop the shield, and any other weapon you have." Another grumble, and she untied the straps. Dropping it to the ground and doing the same with the hammer.

"Happy?" A bit of movement from within, and three guards from the Trinity camp came out. None wielding the bow, meaning there was at least a forth in there. Two of them ordered the Northe to one side with their weapons, away from the blue creature, while the other tossed aside her equipment. "So you were a part of that camp?"

"The High Commander's division, yes. We went out to get firewood, and perhaps hunt something when we heard that they caught the darkness." One of them grumbled, overlooking the dragon up close and getting Thea to growl. "It was a bad omen to bring such a thing inside, and of course, when we returned..."

"That wasn't us." Zeltra growled. "It was... Something else."

"Sure it was." The guard grumbled sarcastically. "One of my dying comrades warned us of a dragon-"

"A dragon, yes. But not me!"

"He also made me promise to kill it if I ever found it again!" He unsheathed his weapon, getting the badger to make a dash towards him. But she was held back by the other two guards, seeing one of them struggle to hold her aside, while the other stabbed her midsection. As the blue one called to her, he got a slash across the muzzle. "I will avenge every one of their deaths, beast!"

The red ooze leaked out his warmth as everything moved a bit in slow motion to him. Still recovering from the sting of the cold blade, he seen the metal sword shine into the darkness, reflecting his own self through it. His scales shimmer a dark green for a moment when he got angry, and feel almost something to grab onto within this soldier.

Thea took it. Staring at him viciously caused the guard to completely stop, grunting a few times like he was in pain. His eyes widen as his muscles tensed up, getting called by the others before arcing back and screaming into the night in pain. Loud cracks and snaps were heard, as something in his chainmail started moving around. Pulling at whatever it was with his mind, the dragon took a step back, not releasing his gaze.

Another scream as a bone creature ripped through the metal armor, screeching its own song of birth as it struggled to escape the soldier's body. Every violent motion and pull of its armored bone limbs seemed to subtract to the guard's own mass, as the tiger sized hexeped ripped out of the sack of flesh.

It was skinless, lizard-like. Covered in sawblade teeth made from bone, trailing down its visible

spine and own larger limbs. Several other long appendages erupted from its back into its own natural spears, nearly hidden by its mane that seemed to flare out when it noticed the other two guards around Zeltra. Two large horns came out of the sides of its head, but one seemed more broken off.

The thing pounced at the closest guard, attacking it like a bird of prey as the badger turned around and beat the other guard to the ground. Hearing the bow snap once again and hit her square in the chest, the arrow burst into splinters. Almost getting in her face, but doing nothing else besides sticking in her fur.

A loud whimper came from the forest as the archer within started to run, instantly getting the bone creature's attention and dash after it. Passing Zeltra like she wasn't even there, though not complaining in the slightest. Running to Thea, she grabbed her gear once again and tugged on his neck. "Come on! Let's go!" Though still shocked at what happened, he shook his head quickly and followed her for several minutes.

"W... What...?" He started to asked, catching his breath.

"How the hell would I know!?" She grumbled at his whimpers as she started pulling out the arrows. Wishing she had the spare cloth to dress those wounds, but the worst of it was on the snout. "Are you okay?" He seemed a little stunned at the answer, and she tapped his muzzle a bit. "Hey! Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah..." A hiss when she inspected the wound further, never realizing how tender it was until now. "...You! Are you...!?" He made the mistake of nudging her with his muzzle, hissing at another sting as he gestured where she was stabbed. Seeing the clothing rip, but she put a paw underneath the shirt.

"Nothing..." The black one almost whispered. "I remember feeling it hit me, but it didn't go through."

"Well... Badgers are tough, right?" She cleared her throat. "I-I mean, Northe's are tough...?"

"Yeah, but not sword stoppingly so. We're not sheets of steel." Those dark red eyes gave her a worried look. "We need to find somewhere safe to spend the night. And somewhere to dress this." They half looked behind where they came. "I don't think it's a good idea to go back and find our gear. Not with that..." A look in question from her yellow eyes, and he half shrugged.

"I... I don't know what it was..." He mumbled, almost terrified by it. But she didn't mock him, just nodded and lead the way. For a few hours, they walked in the darkness. Passing a river and a few fruit trees in the process, getting what refreshments they could.

Thirty Seconds To Mars - End Of All Days

Eventually, they came to a war-torn town. Many of their homes were either ransacked or unsafe to stay in, and very little people seemed to remain. Though, there was a comforting warmth within its

church, along with some hymns. Cautiously, they looked through. Spying no soldiers or guards, only travelers with very little to spare. Along with a serpent priest, hosting the area of sanctuary.

Though the doors were a little small, Thea managed to get through. Only getting a few looks, but a bit of a peaceful approach when he laid down in the back. A traveler came up to them with some medical supplies, and Zeltra thanked her for them. Tending to the dragon's wound as the priest said a prayer.

"Even a well-lit place can hide Salvation. A map to a one-being maze that never sees the sun. Where the Lost are the Heroes, and the thieves are left to drown. But everyone knows by now that Fairytales are not found; they're written in the walls, as we walk in a straight line. Down in the dirt with a landslide approaching, yet nothing can ever stop us from claiming our place in the sun. We will face the odds against us, and Brave into the Fear we run from. For it has begun." The others responded with a faint few words in whispers, as the two remained quiet.

Almost enjoying their moment of peace, and content with the dragon's patched wound, Zeltra looked around. Making out many of the images within the stained glass, and seeing a figure that looked somewhat familiar. "Did you need anything?" The serpent asked them. "We do not have much to offer, but feel free to take what you need. We only ask that you give what you can for the others."

"We're... Fine. Someone already gave him something for his wounds. But..." He made a noise in question, as she overlooked the stained glass from before. One of a black panther-quadruped. "Who is that?" In the corner of her eye, she seen Thea look away.

"That would be the Black Hand. The one who is said to drive back the darkness in order to protect the people. It's been said that if he is seen, the darkness will rise soon after. Though the times will be tough, the Hand will protect us." The two studied each other for a moment. "You are not from around here, are you?"

"No. I'm from the Northe."

"And you have never heard of him?" She shook her head. "Perhaps he is called something else in your culture, as he tends to take on many forms."

"Forgive me for questioning your beliefs, but..." He gestured to go on. "How do you know that the Black Hand is not the darkness? Or even the source?"

"Faith." He said calmly, getting a strange look from the badger. "All we need is faith." With nothing more to respond to, the priest left it at that. Walking back up to the alter to accompany the others, and leaving Zeltra to look at the dragon slowly. Seeing his ears drop down.

"...It's him." The blue one was almost paralyzed as he could feel the female's anger almost building. "Isn't it? You had me chasing some religious symbol this entire time?" She hissed in a whisper.

"...He's real-"

"To who!?" Those red eyes looked sadly at the floor. "Why?" She asked thickly.

"...Because I needed to see him again-"

"For what!?" Another harsh whisper, and Thea didn't answer. Only hearing her exhale heat and lay down on the bench. Trying to get some sleep. Eventually, the dragon got up and went outside. Looking around the torn town and sighing sadly before leaving it. Walking out for maybe an hour, he looked to the stars for navigation. Eventually hearing some rustling in the bushes, getting the blue one to whimper a bit.

Morning came, and the badger woke up with a stiff back. Looking around for the sack of blue scales, but no sign of him in the church. A quick look outside, and still nothing, but she found his pawprints. Leading out of town and down the road a ways. "Dumbass, where have you wandered off to?" Zeltra grumbled, following the trail for a few hours. To the point where things started to look very familiar.

"...He realizes he's heading back to Lhosaka, right?" She half asked herself, still following the trail until it wandered off into the forest. Through an area that was already cut, by the crystal dragon no less. "...No... You son-of-a-!" She bolted through the trail, coming up to the cave they were supposed to camp in. Leading down to the small area with the glow worms, and the device that leads to the lab.

A quick touch of it, and it teleported her back inside. Arming herself, Zeltra cautiously walked down the halls. Looking to see if anything else was out of place. The tubes with animals were still inside. A few drones were still gathering data, but everything seemed dimmer than before.

Heading down towards the large catwalk, the badger looked down in search of the glowing rock. No longer getting the eerie shimmers from before, as if it was suddenly drained of all its power. Racing down the stairs and onto the ground level, she barely made out the dragon's hindquarters. "Thea?" She asked cautiously.

"Zelly...?" He whimpered, almost looking at her, but avoiding eye contact. "What are you doing here?"

Hold On, Holy Ghost

"Following you. What are **you** doing here...?" His blue head lowered. "Thea, look at me."

"I'm..." He took a breath. "I'm doing what I have to."

Go On, Hold Me Close

"Which is?"

"Zeltra..." He looked away when she tried to see his face. "You're not supposed to be here."

Better Run, Here We Come

"Why?" She almost demanded. "Thea'daisis. Look at me." No response. "Look at me."

It's The...