

Anthem Of The Lonely Act 4 - Day Of The Dead

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

The winds were getting stronger on the grassy hilltop as the black Tirix sat in silence. Unable to tell if it was either warm or cold. Not like it really mattered to him, they never felt much different. Granted, the sun occasionally beating down was enough to get some small warning signs through his body, but dangerous would hardly be a word he would use to describe such a thing.

His ear flickered, catching familiar heavy pawsteps nearly a mile away. That's not including the many snaps of branches and twigs that he was sure the entire world could hear. Getting the black male to sigh heavily and look over his shoulder. "You're terrible at that sneaking thing, you know that?" A whimper of disappointment was caught within the trees, and the creature didn't even try anymore. "What are you gonna do when you don't have me to hunt for you?"

"What do you mean?" A dark blue dragon came out of clearing, shouting as he came closer. Only to get an irritated stare from those purple eyes until he sat down beside the canine. Now being able to resist that intimidation, knowing that Krow would never harm the younger, yet bigger creature. "I thought you said you were immortal."

"Basically yes, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stay here forever." The black one snorted. Going back to his meditation for a bit. But couldn't shake off that curious stare. "Don't ask-"

"Why do you do this?" A groan of frustration was his only answer at the time. "I mean, nearly every day you find a spot like this and just... Sleep standing up?"

"It's called meditation. It's part of that whole Enlightenment I was telling you about, remember?"

"Not in the slightest." The dragon teased, getting a growl from the black one. "Does this have something to do with that bird guy?"

"Thogth, yes. I feel like I've explained this ten times already." Krow grumbled, getting a smile from Thea. "So I'm not explaining it again. For all I know, the next void could be any day now."

"So, meaning what? The world turns night for a few days?"

"It means; no one will remember anything and will have to start over as a species." A heavy, slightly annoyed and tired sigh. "Meaning, you won't remember me either. Let alone yourself."

"But you will?"

"That's how it goes. Benefits to being an Outsider."

"Then just come find me again. Can't be that hard."

"You do have the bluest balls I've ever seen."

"That's only because you keep beating on me." The dragon snorted.

"Besides, you say that like we enjoy each other's company." A snout toss that time and a playful shove.

"You love my scaly ass and you know it."

"Hardly a word I would use. More like it's convenient when we have no other forms of shelter. So, you're about as useful as a tree, not the greatest of bars that you need to clear." Another compliment tucked away as an insult, yet it still made the blue one smile. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

The large one double took. "W-what?"

"I need to check up on Thogth, see if they've made any progress on the grid since. It's been a long while-"

"Why tomorrow though?"

"Would it really matter to you if it was three days from now?" Those maroon eyes looked at the tirix sadly. "You'll be fine on your own. I've taught you enough to do so. I guess we could've worked on your hunting skills a bit more."

"How long are you going to be?" A shrug.

"Who knows. Could be three days, could be thirty years." A whimper from him.

"Then let me come with you." A very unimpressed look from Krow. "What?"

"You get winded walking downhill. You really think you're fit for travel?" A snort from the dragon.

"It can't be that far. It's like just over those mountains, isn't it?" That look didn't let up. "...A bit further?" Not even a blink. "Two sets of mountains?"

"You have absolutely no clue how big this world is, do you?" Another whimper. "It's better this way, trust me. I think you've become a bit too dependent on me anyways."

"But..." He didn't really know what to say, letting his ears and wings droop in sadness for a few minutes. "I'll wait for you then."

"What?"

"I'll wait for you to come back. Even if it's just for a visit. And you'll see what I've built, what I've done with my life." A look of lackadaisical puzzlement from those purple eyes. "I'll find a way to make our lives better, to make up for what you've done for me." That look didn't let up. "But you have to promise me you'll come back."

"Thea-"

"Promise me. Please." A heavy, almost irritated sigh.

"Fine. I'll come back when I can, or when I'm in the area. Deal?"

"Deal."

Chapter 1

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The sudden massive crash woke the mammoth up in a tense fear. Many of the paintings and ornaments he's collected over the many travels rattled loudly or fell off the places they were perched. Hearing several loud footsteps within the many hallways above and below his sleeping quarters, rushing to either get to safety or armed. Expecting any one of them to burst down his door and alert the General. "Nobufasa, Sir!"

"Are we under attack?"

"I-I don't know yet, Sir! No one has reported any damages of yet!" Half a growl left the elephant's throat as he got out of bed. Quickly getting dressed while speaking to the squire.

"Well, get me an answer! I need to know who's attacking us with what, and where they're coming from!" A whimper from the young female as she withdrew from his door in a scamper. Quickly following behind her and ordering many others around to get to safety as quickly as possible.

Upon leaving his building, a massive explosion was heard almost nearby, seeing a bright light in the distance that caught everyone in a frightful awe. "S-Sir!" That squire from before. "It's not in our perimeter, but-"

"Where Lord Ricon is stationed!? Who would plan an assault on that city?" He half grumbled to himself. Getting another worried look from the female soldier. "This war is making less and less sense the longer it goes on. For now, gather the troops. I want this entire side fortified and put on sever watch!"

"Yes Sir!" She started to move, then a massive quake was felt. Nearly downing a few buildings as the sky lit up. A huge pillar of neon light cleaving through the darkness harshly, brighter than the sun and as wide as two cities. Forcing everyone to stop what they were doing to gaze as such a sight as long as possible before the hot winds came.

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The dark forest was nearly void of all life. Judging from the past commotion, it wasn't surprising that everything within several thousand miles abandoned everything just to sprint for safety. All in all, it made it easier for the two dragons. The black one with silver-ish plates carrying one made out of shards, just trying to hold herself together. There was no reason for hiding, no reason for disguises. For now, they were just looking for a place for her to recover.

But with every heavy pawstep, a few more shards fell out of sync. Getting it harder for the black one to keep a grip on the crystal golem. "Come on, girl..." He mumbled, readjusting her exhausted body once again. "All you need to do is hold still. Keep yourself in one piece." No response, but she was awake. Just staring at the ground, those black pupils half studying the ground they traveled. "If I have to, I'll put you in a box and carry you that way." He half teased, hoping to get a reaction out of the female, but nothing. "Actually, that wouldn't be a bad idea."

Still, no response. Even after he slowed to a stop. Taking a free paw and forging a large bladed crate made out of several different weapons. Dragging it over and almost expecting a fight from Flyare, but nothing. "I won't think any less of you." He said as she studied the metal cube, her eyes rotating to mimic a slow blink before stepping inside it herself. Getting assistance regardless from the black one before collapsing her figure inside. Spilling out a few shards outside, but they were easy enough to find.

As Exile gathered them, he lifted the box and carried it on his shoulder. Letting his armored scales worry about the dangers. Though it was more weight, it was much easier to carry in the end. "He's right, you know." Her voice came from the box after a bit of shifting.

"I don't want to hear you to say that Ricon was right about anything." The black dragon almost growled. "He isn't. You're not an animal, and a literal leash isn't going to do much."

"I am unstable, Exile. That cannot be ignored."

"Who says I'm ignoring it?" He grumbled, taking a breath. "It's not so simple as whether or not you deserve to be free. Since killing you is out of the question."

"Exile-"

"Out. Of The. Question. Understood?" He stopped in silence, almost waiting for the soldier to argue. "That's even if I knew how. But you don't deserve to be locked away for something *they* did to you."

"Exile."

"What?" Another half growl.

"...We're backtracking, Sir." He looked around in the dark forest for a few moments. "We came from over there."

"I knew that." The black one said, half smiling and changing direction.

"A little more to the left."

"Such impatience. It's almost as if you don't want to be carried like a wyrmling." The male teased, bouncing his shoulders a little with every step to force the crate to bob. But his efforts to cheer her up wasn't working. Possibly due to the fact that he actually didn't know if she could sense movement in this state. Getting the black dragon to sigh a bit. "It'll be alright, Flyare. I'll find a way to make it alright."

"There is only one cure that I know of. And several treatments that you do not approve of."

"But you do?" He asked, almost harshly.

"...I am a danger to too many in this state, Sir." Another growl commanded the red one to stop. "Be upset with that statement as much as you like, but you are not the one attempting to slay your allies without control. It's better for everyone if I-"

"Do not finish that sentence, soldier." The black one grumbled. "That's an order. For now, focus on getting your energy back."

"Only to then be a danger-" Exile shoved the metal crate behind him, letting it hit the ground with a hard thud and spill out quite a bit of those shards. Glaring at it harshly with those green eyes, knowing that hers could see him in that position. "...Message understood, Sir."

"Good." He said, almost in a bad mood. But started putting the crystal dragon back in the crate and carrying her once again. Traveling the dark forest uphill until they found a cave to hide in. "I want you to stay here and recover. I'm going to see if I can find Thea and Zeltra." With no response, the black one turned around and took to the air. Leaving the crystal golem to slowly rebuild herself while trying to keep calm.

Her movements felt stiff from whatever the Tirix ended up doing to her. The cross between absolutely exhausted and stunned. Getting several phantom pains as if her limbs literally fell off her real self. Granted, pains she was somewhat familiar with when her anger was low. Otherwise the rage would blind such senses or concerns.

The golem's mind kept reflecting on what hit her. Very rarely has she ever fought by Krow, let alone ever against him. She recalled seeing the black spark before, and swear she dodged the attack. But

everything happened so quickly, and was nothing more than reactions. Instinctive rage against those who were actually allies. Against those who she was supposed to protect, now possibly...

The dragon couldn't stay here. Now that the whirlwind has calmed down, all that was seen through the translucent red was regret. Before Exile was to return, she left as soon as she could stand. Let alone fly or vanish into the clouded night.

Chapter 2

The loud slap echoed through the underground lab, followed by the dragon's yelp. Holding onto that muzzle and powering through the rather harsh sting the badger delivered. "Ow!" He hissed, almost several times over the next few moments. "Why-!?"

"**What The Hell!?**" Zeltra roared at the blue beast, making him lower his head and droop his ears at her anger. "What The Hell Is Wrong With You!? You don't know enough to stay away from something like this!?"

"It was calling me-!"

"Which is a **Clear Indication to Stay Away From It!!**" She roared at him, making Thea whimper and attempt to take a step away from her, only to be backed up against a wall. "Why the Hell...!?"

"I..." Another whimper as he took a breath. Looking away to hide his now monstrous eyes, who's vision he was still getting used to. "I needed to do it." Regardless, he couldn't shield himself from the Northe's intense glare. Wondering if it was going to set him ablaze at any moment. "This needs to hap-" Another backhand slap made him yelp and now hold his shoulder, causing something within the darkness to land and get between them with a loud, unnatural hiss.

Though difficult to really make out in the darkness and faint red emergency light, but it was about panther size. Feral, covered in muscle and boney spines that flared up while it hissed at the black female. Protecting the dragon from her. "Is that...!?"

"It's okay." Thea said to the strange creature. "She's Zeltra. She's a... Friend? Kinda?" He mumbled, placing a paw on it, and the feral beast started to calm down. "This is Biscuit." A long, almost awkward silence. "He's-"

"Biscuit...?" She grumbled, glaring at the two with both curiosity and thick irritation.

"Y-yeah. It's the first thing that came to mind." Another awkward silence made the large one whimper at her never blinking stare. Eventually getting Zeltra to sigh loudly and cover her eyes with a paw.

"We're just going to ignore the fact you named it. Let alone... 'Biscuit' of all things. But what the hell, Thea!? Is that the thing-!?"

"I... Made from that guard, y-yeah." A very angry, Less-Than-Pleased stare from those yellow eyes. "He's been following me through the forests, a-and not like he was hunting me. But more like a little lost puppy." That stare didn't let up and he whimpered again. "Please blink. Just blink for me, it's driving me nuts."

"And so you decided to keep it around? Let it lead you to this...!"

"I lead him here. He was only protecting me-"

"From what!?" Another hiss from the creature as the dragon tried to keep a firm paw on it. Making the badger quiet for a few moments. "Fine, then answer me why... This? Why after everything did you come back here and...!" Those eyes fell to the floor and looked away from Zeltra.

"...Things are not... This is something I need to do, Zelly."

"Like hell it is. Explain."

"Would you even understand if I told you?" A growl from her, and he took a breath. Sitting down on the floor. "A long, long, long, long-long-long, long-long-" A growl from the badger and even the creature. "Time ago, something crashed here." Thea looked over at the pitch black rock, now void of any life or energy it once had. "*That* crashed here. Doing so, it messed up the entire Spiritual Grid."

"The what?"

"It's like... A web around the world. Something that I still don't quite understand myself because of how damn complex it is, but it's important. Very important for everyone. For everything that lives on our planet." A breath. "Because of how it's messed up, species can't evolve or survive the way they are supposed to. They can't excel in stages of Enlightenment-"

"What the hell did that church tell you while I was out?"

"They didn't tell me anything!" He almost snapped, then looked off to the side again. "Muugyn did..."

"And by Muugyn, you mean that Blackpaw-"

"Black Hand. His real name is Krow." Her eyes shifted, recognizing it from legends dated way back. "He's real. Was like a big brother to me, saved my life when I was finally freed out in the wild."

"...What happened to him?" She asked, almost angry still, getting a sad look from those unnatural eyes. "I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, now what happened to him?"

"...He was alive and around when that rock fell. He was the only one on the planet that remembered, that the Sixes trusted." A puzzling look. "W-we kinda know them as Gods, but they're... Still over my head. But Stage Six of Enlightenment. Hence: Sixes."

"On With It."

"-Yes ma'am." Another whimper. "Point is, they trusted him to help protect the world while they restored the Grid. And part of that was to seek out this rock."

"So you knew where the hell this thing was before we ended up here?"

"N-no. I just..." A heavy sigh. "I just wanted to see him again. It's been so long since he left that I..." Another breath, and he could feel her question coming along. "He went to visit the Temples again. To talk to Thogh-A Six." Another sorrow filled look. "My only plan when I met you was to give us a better life, even at the cost of mine. Something he wouldn't approve of much either."

"Then why the hell...?" She gestured the rock.

"...Plans change. When we found this place, when I got close to that energy..." A heavy sigh. "The world is waiting for this Darkness to cover the land-"

"You've got to be joking!" She growled at him.

"If I don't bring it, who will?"

"What the hell convinced you of this!? That damn voice? Muugyn?" The dragon didn't look at her. "Who?"

"...You seen what it did to others. This... Green energy. It drives other creatures mad." That unnatural gaze, several pupils almost studying the Northe like Thea's eyes were windows. "Why not me?"

"Seriously? You were speaking gibberish a day ago-"

"Well, yeah." He tossed his snout. "But... I feel literally no different from yesterday. Aside from the fact my eyes feel like they're twitching a bit." A few blinks and a shake of his head. Looking at Biscuit for a moment. "Even he was frightful of me when I touched it. Kinda like you were, but he didn't hit me." A snort.

"He should've." The large one whimpered again. "So, what? You're going to sacrifice yourself for the damn world? What have they done to deserve it!?"

"Zelly..."

"You told us that **Your Life** is not worth **Theirs!** **You** Said That! Do not go back against-"

"**Theirs** being a few! This is the **World** we're talking about!"

"**The World Can Go To Hell!!**" She roared, getting another hiss from the creature, but nearly paralyzing the blue dragon. "They're not worth you, Thea! No matter who they are, no matter what they've done! They're not worth-"

"You?" She stopped for a moment. "Is this worth your life? Is Mine worth yours? For you to live a life without darkness?" Silence as he wasn't afraid to show a few tears. "All my life I've been forcefully destined, designed just to prolong someone's life. For the cost of my own, as if I didn't really have one. Only living on borrowed time that was to be returned to those who decided to suck it out of me through begging. That's who I am, Zeltra. That's all I am to everyone else but Krow."

"Like Hell. For all you know-"

"**He Is Immortal!!**" Thea roared, shaking the entire underground lab.

"**He Heals Wounds Faster Than I Can!! Without A Damn Cost!! He Is The Only Person I've Ever Known Who I Am Worthless To!**" Silence. "He's been dealing with this shit far longer than I have! Given far more than I could have...! Who am I to delay this?"

"...And you really think he's going to approve of this?" The dragon closed his eyes and let his muzzle fall.

"No. He would probably beat me more than you ever could. But that still wouldn't stop me." She took a step forward, and Biscuit hissed at her. However, a blue paw held it back. Letting his head lean closer to the badger, as if to give Zeltra a free shot. Yet, she only placed a paw on his wounded snout. "I'm immune to this for a reason. I'm able to keep... *Myself*, because of my dragon heritage or biology or some jazz I don't understand enough of... I'm not really Bad, but I'm made up of Bad Things. And we all need to make a choice in our lives. We all need to play a role in this war."

"What?"

"You chose to join the fight before we met, Zelly. I'm fighting too. Just expecting defeat." He got up, giving that paw a lick. "Once this Darkness is out of the Grid, then you can have a better life. Everyone can. But someone must pay the price, it might as well be someone who is literally walking currency." All at once, she felt tired of fighting the dragon as he left up the stairway. Along with the strange creature pet that followed him. Leaving the Northe alone in the darkness.

The behemoth-like pants and pawsteps were getting closer to him. Stalking him. Hunting, like it could sense his fear. Hear the soldier's very own heartbeats and whimpers that were only released in his throat. Roaring from time to time, as if to provoke him to run. But though his instincts demanded it, he understood the tactic well. One he used to use while hunting rabbits when he was younger. For the moment he took off, he would be spotted by the beast.

Another roar was so close to him that he nearly soiled himself. Though it was Ursidae, it had this strange dark and supernatural echo to it. Too monstrous to be considered something of nature, it had to be something else. One more deep inhale from the creature that was climbing over the rock he was hiding behind and-!

Machinae Supremacy - Versus

The grotesque sound of something impaling it's throat, then a heavy landing on top of it. The rock splitting almost overpowered the near-song of a thousand gems tapping each other before the behemoth was gutted down its spine. Nearly making the soldier sick and couldn't hold back his gag. Bringing up something before getting a faint growl from another creature that was unnatural. Black slits in a background of red madness glared at the Civet for a moment. "**Withdraw.**" The golem demanded, like struggling to hold something back. But she didn't have to tell him twice.

With the soldier gone, the dragon disposed of the body and it's foul stench. Throwing it into the dark forest in a near rage of what those who had the same scent did to her, and giving her a little more energy to work with. But also sending her mind deeper into the sea of red. Forcing herself to just take that anger and grip her weapon harshly, as if the golem was trying to strangle it while kneeling down.

Flyare sat there in the silent open field, attempting to calm those harsh winds in her mind and reclaim her true self. "...A Knight Is Sworn To Valor..." She prayed in thick whispers. "Her Heart Knows Only Virtue. Her Weapon Defends The Helpless-"

"I'd hardly say that's accurate." She growled at the familiar male voice, but didn't feel a presence. Barely glancing over enough to see the black tirix with green highlights. "Let's face it, that weapon of yours isn't red by choice. It hungers to inflict pain, just like you do."

"I don't." Another growl, this time much louder. "That's not who I am."

"Maybe not who you where, but people *change*. Don't they?" He asked rhetorically. Getting that black muzzle near her and taking a deep breath. "There it is. Not exactly fresh, but it's there." The dragon turned away in anger, taking a few steps and leaving the creature with a cold shoulder. "I swear we've had this conversation before."

"This isn't a conversation."

"Oh? You're just talking to the shadows again? Last time I checked, you even came to the same conclusion as me-"

"Not you!" Flyare roared, finally staring into the Tirix' red eyes, much like her very own. "That was Rixxix. Not you."

"Perhaps maybe it wasn't me Per Say, yet you imagine me as such." He took a moment to look over his form. "Rather suiting, to be honest. Especially if it finally got you to cave into those-" A loud roar interrupted him, but didn't intimidate. Instead, he only chuckled. Walking up to her back and nearly stroking her gemstone form. "Say it for me, won't you?" No response. "Come on, I *must* hear you say it again. It's been so long."

With a simple exhale, she lowered her head and shoulders. "...I'm a Monster." Another deep breath from the black panther. "I accept that, but I am not-"

"A what? Malefactor? Atrocity? Savage? I think we both know the true answer to those, considering just your recent history." A bit of that anger returned, gripping that gemmed spear again. "Oh yes, you remember every blow. Every execution you performed, don't you? I specifically thought the use of that cannon to make that young soldier into a stain was rather artistic." A hiss in anger, and she took off to the air.

Soring quickly over the forests and the clouds of smoke and debris that were still being carried, the golem sprinted away. Only to soon hear the colossal wingbeats behind her, and an even more massive dragon tear through the dirty clouds. One almost mechanical and black. **"You really think you can escape me?"** It nearly laughed. **"Or did you forget he had this?"**

"I'm not what you think I am!"

"You are Exactly what you think you are! You are what you admit! Your actions, your Desires make you that Monster!"

"Silence!!"

"To the point where you crave the violence! The pain! To make the world around you suffer and hurt!" A frustrated hiss from her. **"You Feed On It, Just Like He Does! For Once, You Found Someone Like You! Yet, you constantly reject it!? Force it down until it leaks out of your body in a form of plasmic pain and rage!"** Another loud hiss as she dove purposely into the ground. Another field that seemed to be burning from a fire that started in that Trinity Camp. The one that she found Zeltra and Thea in.

"I am nothing like you-!"

"You Are Me! I Am You! We Always Have Been Each Other!" The massive dragon landed, towering over the gemmed one. **"Look around you. The World Around Us Cast In Flames. Gods Will Rise And Then Fall Again. In A Light That Fades And Dies Away. This is your life as a Knight. This is what you chose to escape from!"**

"I didn't choose that-!"

"You Cannot Lie To Me! I am your Desire for violence! I am your thirst for the living's liquid! Entropy is your very Breath! Such as the way as the Monster!"

"I'm not-!"

"You Admitted To It!! You Admitted To Them!! You Know What You Are! Why Hide Away From It!? Why Preserve The Lives Of The Innocent When They Taste So Delicious!?"

"-I'm Not Evil!"

"-I'M NOT *EVIL*!!"

"By who's definition!? Your Faith's!? Your Code's!? Evil Is Nothing But Opinion! Observation Of One's Actions, Judged By Pointless Morals! Evil Is Illusionary! Even The Innocent Are Evil To Someone In Existence! Why Resist That!?"

"Because That's Not Who I Am!"

"Because That's Not Who You *Where*, Child!" The two roared at each other within the thick flames. **"You Are No Longer That Knight! The Unborn Changed You! Made You This Way! You Are No Longer That Same Person! Even Your Instincts Have Been Redefined! How Can You Possibly Cling To Old Codes And Folly Morals!? Who Defines Those For You Now!?"**

"Exile Does!!"

"A Literal Living Weapon!? An Outsider!? A Chimera!? A Frankenstein's Monster Is Your Definition Of Morals And Aspirations!? He Is Designed To Be The Very Thing Your Knighthood Stood Against! Alien! Mutation! Yet You Cling To His Waist As If He Were The Very Father That Left You!" Another loud roar from her. **"Tell Me, Child: Why Follow Such A Stain On Existence!?"**

"Because He's Right!"

"By Who's Definition!? Yours!? You Only Know One Thing: Vindictus! You Said So Yourself That Your Judgement Cannot Be Trusted! What Makes That Heartless, Soulless, Abomination Of A Weapon Morally Right!?" A frustrated, almost shaken breath from Flyare as she turned around.

"I am the only thing you know for certain, Child." The voice said, this time female and somewhat familiar. "I am the only Reason you have left, the only road to lead you to desire." But the gemmed one only knelt down within the burning field. Clinging onto that spear tightly as somewhat heavy pawsteps trailed around her.

"Look at me, Flyare." No response. "Say it for me again... I can lead you to this." That time she opened her eyes, recognizing her own lower half before the incident. But dared not to look herself in the eyes. "This is what you want, is it not? Exile cannot bring this back to you."

"He has before."

"But was that him?" Silence. "You forge your own path. You can return to what you truly desire, what you wish to become. It just must be through the sacrifice of others." A tight grip on that gemmed

spear. "I am your only ally left. The only one that you cannot disappoint. But I need you to say it for me, Flyare. Please?"

"...I'm A Monster."

Chapter 4

The sun crept through the scattered clouds, unusually bright and heated as if it were unfiltered. The echoes of distant thunder and flashes in the sky brought warning without the comfort of rain. Bringing a bad omen with it as it signaled to the badger to wake up off the dry grass, regardless of how stunned she was from the night before. Zeltra lost comrades before, but none due to one going berserk like that. She wanted to track and find Thea, but had no way to persuade him off his path.

The black one was just lost at the moment, emotionally null and without direction. Adjusting the pack she gathered from an abandoned cart, using it as a makeshift pillow for a bit longer before giving up on sleep entirely. It was like... Her body didn't require it right now. Or maybe it did and Zeltra just couldn't tell anymore.

But the badger needed to occupy herself with action, and there were people in need of help. Getting up and donning the pack once more, hearing the sloshing of water within as the skins shifted and the rations she could find gathered. Zeltra began her hike up the mountain once more. Nearly the same exact path the two took to get to that church, even coming up to where they were ambushed by soldiers... Marked by the same bloodstains, but no signs of the creature still.

'Biscuit' must still be following the wyrm. Thinking about it worried and ached the female's heart as she tried not to think about it. Tried not to think about what was going on; with Thea and what he did to himself. With her own body, and how it seemed to be getting tougher than steel. Making her wonder what was happening to her. Was she going to become like that bear or those animals? Could Thea... Control her too?

Zeltra shook the thoughts from her head, climbing up the area to look down over where Ricon's city was... Where it used to be. Now replaced with a crater and several scars of the

earth. Fissures that spread out from the impact while everything around it turned black with charr and ash. The air was heavy and unnatural. The heat was unusually intense for storm clouds to be overhead...

There was an electricity in the air. She didn't notice it at first but her fur lightly tickled at the very tip, and a moment later a bolt of lightning did strike within a mile of the badger. Causing her to lightly flinch at its thunderclap, feeling the soundwave rush past her but unharmed the female otherwise. Was anyone even alive after such a disaster? Did Roe and Flyare survive? Did Lord Ricon? The outlook was incredibly bleak...

Zeltra sterned herself, knowing that there were still people in there, ones in need of help and rescue. Even if her instincts told her something wasn't right, such a report was interrupted when she spotted movement along the path. A simple small wagon being pulled by a single person, attempting to escape.

The badger began her descent down the rocky hill she was on, able to slide down against the rocky steeps and makeshift pass in order to reach the bottom quicker. Slipping a few times but landing heavily on the ground without any injury... Once again questioning her durability increase worryingly, but there was no time to focus on that now.

The black one came down to the pathway, vacant of anything but light ash and dirt. Running towards the wagon, deeper into the devastated land and her body increasingly gave off warning signs. Fur standing up on end, the air heavy and dense, like it was made of metal. But she didn't stop until the badger found the survivor, not seeing it through the path for a little ways in and meeting up with the thin gopher in travel clothing. Spotting it collapse before the badger caught up with it. "Hey!" Zeltra shouted at it, picking up the heaving rodent and carrying them with ease to the side of the road. Leaning up against a large rock before taking off her pack and giving it a waterskin. "Drink up. Catch your breath, I'm here to help-"

"Father...!" It panted heavily. "In... The...!"

"Drink." The black one growled, getting another waterskin from her pack and moving to the wagon to find a body being carried. Not moving, and when the badger checked its vitals... Then rechecked in a few different areas... She heard the younger one almost sob. "Drink." She demanded it.

"It's my fault...!" The brown one whimpered. "It's all my fault... I was tired and didn't-"

"Stop it! Drink up and rest!"

"I-I didn't want to... So he did it instead, and then-" A growl from the badger in warning, but the rodent continued its confession. "A scream... The scream of a God, the shelter caved

in... Trapping me inside while he was out..." A heavy breath from Zeltra, realizing that being stern wasn't getting through to them. Moving back and placing a hand on their shoulder, finally getting their eyes to lock.

"You need to rest." She calmly stated, hearing it whimper but eventually nod. Still heaving, getting slower and slower between breaths. "Hey... Hey!" Until it stopped. And a heavy blanket of being alone once again covered the area. A strike of lightning nearby didn't phase her as Zeltra closed her eyes and shook her black head, laying the body sideways in rest before getting the other one. Moving the wagon off of the path for now as she looked for a shovel within but no luck. Checking even underneath but still nothing, only to feel a presence.

"Do not bother with burying the dead." The red fox's voice nearly fluttered her heart, recognizing an ally as he climbed up to the path she was on. Clothing covered in soot from the dead wasteland. "As horrible as it sounds, we must-"

"Lord Ricon...!?" She whispered in disbelief, unable to stop herself from actually hugging the large canine. Surprising both of them for a slight moment before she stopped and looked him over. "You're alive!"

"Barely. I'm glad to see you are well too, but what are you doing here Zeltra?" His voice thick but carrying a concern. "We must leave this area at once."

"No." A noise of disapproval from the warlord, but he heard the black badger out. "There's still people that need help. There's still survivors that need supplies." A heavy hand on her shoulder stopped Zeltra from continuing. Watching those red eyes of the Lord's drift away in remorse for a moment.

"There is... A poison in the air, Zeltra. Anyone who is still alive is already dead... They just do not know it yet." That sank her chest as Ricon gestured her towards the path out. Taking it as well. "There is a reason why I was always against such weaponry. It's... Dirty, for lack of a better term."

"Like dirty fighting?" She nearly growled at the concept, hearing it before. However, getting a head shake from the warlord.

"More like harming civilians and the very land in order to take out the enemy. Poisoning the wells and rivers of those who are not soldiers, ruining their crops and torching the fields." The badger watched his stern expression as they walked. "Sometimes such tactics are required, especially if you're fighting an enemy with speed. If you set fire to a crop, you can still use it next year. But this..." A gesture behind them as a bolt of lightning struck nearby, not phasing the two but allowing a heavy silence. "This will plague this land for decades to come."

"Because of the lightning?"

"No." The fox took a remorseful breath. "It's something you cannot detect without being exposed to it for a time. It may even be too late for a Northe such as you, only because it kills from within."

"Like a poison..." Zeltra looked over the area. "And there's no antidote."

"Not one this world has prepared, no. And even then..." Ricon watched as she shook her head in defeat, turning around with him to leave once again. "Is Thea'daisis safe?"

"...I don't know." A concerned look from those red eyes. "I don't even know where to begin, I can't even understand what is happening anymore-" A heavy hand on her black shoulder stopped the thoughts from scattering in her head. Almost demanding her attention but seeing a caring concern in the canine's eyes.

"May I?" He asked, opening that same hand to gesture her head. Puzzled about what he was talking about. "I'll only view your recent memories, but it is your decision." Right. Roe did call him... Something. A warning of sorts, as the grey one always seemed to distrust the warlord. But Zeltra... She didn't distrust him, regardless of how naked it made her feel. Taking a deep breath and nodding. Giving him permission to hold the gloved hand next to her black head and feel something... Lightly invasive. Close to the feeling of being watched or overheard from an unknown presence.

But it only lasted for a moment before Ricon gently pulled away. "I see... And I think I understand." The male took a moment to ponder. "I've seen that pattern before; the one you saw in Thea's eyes. Or at least something similar."

"What is it?"

"It's... Zeltragrae. I do know a fair amount of how things work and function, but by all means I am no scholar on the matter. However, in the universe where I came from; Veritas, it was invaded by creatures close to what you faced within that lab."

"Veritas..." The badger whispered. "Roe mentioned that place before."

"Yes, they are from there too. And that creature you faced within those depths was called an Unborn... Or at least it was corrupted into such a thing."

"Does that mean Thea-?" Ricon's paw raised to interrupt her.

"I made the mistake of reading one of their minds when we fought them in Veritas, and one of the things I did witness were those eyes. Different, but similar." He took a breath as they

walked, pausing for another thunderclap that was semi-close. "That Rock, it is... A fraction; a tiny spec of a single scale- again: oversimplifying it, of that creature. They had a certain vocal call for it that I could not replicate. But a translation I've heard from a far superior being than I: calling it a Terrasque."

"Terrasque?"

"It is a living battery. A renewable fuel source to keep universes lit and warm like a bonfire. But the Terrasque itself also needs to be fed something in return."

"Darkness." The fox paused for a moment.

"You are very close. A little bit more definitive: negativity. Be it physical, emotional, social, or mental. It feeds off this, but when it is not getting enough, it sheds."

"Which is how it got here..."

"And why so little people understand it. Even the ones in command here do not, hence why they were trying to identify and understand it." Ricon explained, letting the badger take a moment to piece it together herself.

"Only to get corrupted by it. That's why the lab was there..."

"It seems like he was forced to attempt to harness the 'Rock's power, using the same energy that allows the very stars to function." A slightly worried look from her. "The right amount of fuel can do amazing things, sometimes very unique things if adapted correctly."

"What do you mean?"

"You've seen what it does to creatures of all kinds that's been offered it. Thea'daisis... He isn't special. Dragons here are just extraordinarily resilient-"

"Wait, that's what he was fed!?" Zeltra stopped in her tracks, fitting the pieces together and looking at her own self. "...It was calling him. It was attracted to him, because it... Recognized its own kind? Then that energy jumped to me when we first seen it." She looked at the surprisingly calm warlord. "That's why it barely affects him."

"Because he was introduced to it at a very young age, but even then it nearly killed him. It's been in the dragon's system ever since, how it hasn't affected his personality- outside of the obvious complaints and sarcastic remarks."

"-Of course." She missed them terribly at that moment. "How do I stop it? How do I convince him not to take this path?" She watched the red fox sigh through his muzzle, almost a

hint of guilt in his eyes as he sterned himself.

"This... Is a war far beyond the Trinity and the East. The truth is, it will require a lot of casualties to realign this world's future to its intended road."

"What are you talking about?" The badger watched the warlord take a breath, lightly shaking his head. "Lord Ricon... What do you mean?"

"You must not worry about it further, Zeltra. It does not concern you-"

"Like hell it doesn't." She growls. "This is my world- not Roe's, not Flyare's, not yours! If anything-"

"-And they are trying to fix it." The fox raised his voice, as if to establish command. Still getting her to almost snarl. "Not specifically Exile or Flyare. They are not involved in the plan, I barely am." A slight look in question from the black female. "I am merely a piece of it with little say, as you are. But I understand what they are doing, and... The only thing I can really do is agree and hope it does work."

"...And in order for it to work, people must..." He took a step forward to rest both of his hands on the badger's shoulders.

"It is a difficult thing to process, I know. It was the reason why your father left my command." It made Zeltra stare at him in surprise, as one of Ricon's hands moved gently to the side of her head. Within her mind pulsed several images of a strong mountain-of-a-Badger with a similar fur pattern to hers. Some of which were in battle, some were drinking with other soldiers, some were him showing off his strength and endurance... And some where in Ricon's POV; sharing moments with the Northe, while others were in argument.

"It... Really is him." She nearly whispered, recalling Roe assuming the warlord just read her mind when they first met Ricon. "You actually knew my father?"

"I never seen a Northe with more conviction than Garth, to the point of being ignorantly stubborn." She got a chuckle out of that. "He boasted about all things, but one of my most precious moments with him were when he was talking about his future child. He recently got word that... Siffarah, was it? Your mother?" Zeltra nodded. "She was pregnant with you. Nothing excited him more than to look forwards to a life raising his 'Son'." She still smiled at that. "No battle, no war, no foe. He wanted to spend his life raising you..." A quiet breath as Ricon returned his hand on her shoulder, looking off to the side. "Perhaps that's why I pushed him too far."

"...You understood us."

"The Northe are not the first proud kind I've come across. Druids, Berserkers, Barbarians, Savages- forgive the terms, but I've encountered them all. None of which were bad people, they just viewed the world, themselves, and what they value differently." A short breath from the canine. "Maybe it was manipulative of me to push a command he didn't agree with- specifically a more passive one like to stand-by or guard areas. But I did want to see him return to Gunnar's Hold." That nearly brought a tear to Zeltra's eyes as she sighed heavily and looked away.

"...What should I do, Ricon?" A moment of silence, knowing that she wasn't done. "You... Don't want me to go after Thea, I can feel that."

"If you do, you will force him to make a very difficult choice." That statement did it, causing a few tears to run down her snout. But the badger still stood strong.

"And there's no convincing him of this... So what do I do?" She heard the warlord take a deep breath, thinking. "Just going back home feels like I'm abandoning these lands." Ricon shook his head at that suggestion before looking her in the eyes again.

"Help others." A growing doubt was seen in the badger's eyes, causing the large male to raise his voice. "You are a Northe. Garthdarrick's finest child. Capable of doing extraordinary things for folks who need it. Seek them out, aid them however they need. Protect them if they request." A gentle hand at her chin. "But most importantly; stay out of this war. I've grown rather fond of you, Zeltragrae. You can do so much more for this world than slay enemies or monsters... Let alone friends." It hurt to hear that, taking a pause before she nodded and the two looked back at the now devastated lands. "But know that not everyone can be helped..."

Chapter 5

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"Krow made the right choice." Ricon said, finally able to concentrate after getting rid of that pent up energy Freayha conducted into his body. Receiving 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 from his own liver.

"The right choice for who-?" Exile snapped at him.

"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..." Krow looked at the two in silence before heading after Ricon, making his way back into the forest.

"Mind telling me what the fuck that was all about?" The man almost growled at the red fox upon catching up, getting a glare from him.

"I was defending my city-"

"Oh, how I would *love* to believe that. It just happened to be that you three: the best of friends, I might add, got into a disagreement and she ended up nuking a city. Wonderful." A grunt of disapproval from the canine. "The deal was that you kept your nose and powers out of the world's business, *Warlord*. And in return, I wouldn't sack you."

"You are no threat to me-"

"You know what the hell a Red Spark does to a Volratter? Because I'm ***Dying*** to find out." The two had an intense staring match.

"Then why don't you...?" Ricon seriously asked, almost curious. "In all honesty, why are you letting me live among these people, *Celestial*?"

"You don't have time to ask questions, Roxy. You've got a mess to clean up." A step closer for intimidation, even though the fox was at least a foot taller than Krow. "***Do it***. Or I'll Clean *You* Off This World." The two didn't back down until the man walked away. Letting the Volratter release a heated breath before heading back to his city. The tirix almost stalking him from afar for a bit to see what he was up to, but it was clear soon enough.

Still, Krow left it until morning. Making his way back to his small camp and resting the night away before heading to see the damage for himself. The smell of heated debris was enough to give him an idea however. Not very familiar with the crystal dragon's aftermath, but he knew well the power she held when taken off that leash.

The city was completely decimated. Almost leveled without a single building standing. Fractions of the wall managed to stay up, but leaned over like they could crumble at any moment. And of course, no signs of life. Even if there was, the fallout would likely end them soon. Yet, no signs of the Warlord anywhere. Nor his talents attempting to reconstruct such a thing. Perhaps he understood how little people could survive when the lands were in this state.

Granted, even without considering the nuclear blast that was detonated on the palace doorstep, the dust from the severed mountain would be enough to cause very poor growth among the lands.

Mimicking a yearly winter in a land that barely had a month of cold weather. Causing the black tix to exhale the terrible and harmful air. "Well... You guys wanted the Darkness..."

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The streets were rather calm, but the air was cool. Borderline cold, really. Not that the badger minded too much. It all reminded her of the homelands, which in turn made her homesick. Wondering if she should just abandon searching for him and just head back home.

Some part of Zeltra worried about the homestead. How it was doing, if it was attacked. Fended off or even overcome like many of the forts to the East and West Borders. Making it difficult for them to really track down the source of this darkness, but the Northe knew...

It weighed on her heart heavily too. Even starting off pursuing down the dragon at first, but was unable to trust any resources found in the corrupted lands. Thick with black, like they were burned and stained with soot, yet acting healthy. Still, it wasn't worth the risk, considering what happened to the wildlife too.

Wildlife... Those creatures that were found in the lab and set free roamed the lands for a while. But she's rarely come across any of their corpses anymore. Wondering if they've all died off by now, culled by those same outcomes: massive muscle growth to the point where it collapsed their chest.

What makes it worse is that scavengers feast on those decaying bodies, attracting that oily substance and only spreading it out from there. Even the pelts she's been trading to keep her earnings up have been covered in that black. The animals at least seemed healthy, but it still worried her.

Luckily, no one has seen any harmful effects from such things. Though some traders do strictly refuse bartering from these furs, there are others who don't seem to mind. Getting better business in the process. Such traders as... "Another set of pelts already? You Northes are really something." The Marten greeted her, almost knowing how to bring the badger out of worry.

"Of course! Northes are the greatest hunters in the land!" Zeltra proudly said, let alone nearby several other ones who were just looking at her. "I've gotten your requests, and a few more since then."

"Keep this up, you'll be putting these guys out of business. But..." He started to joke, then leaned to almost whisper. "You haven't been clearing the forests of life or anything, have you? I know money's tight lately, but-" She held up a paw to interrupt him before placing the furs on the counter.

"I only hunt what I track while scouting for the Trinity. From Lhosaka following the river north to Fort Belmont." A surprised look from the trader.

"Is... Isn't that nearly 400 miles of ground...?" She nodded like it was no big deal, hearing him exhale and shake his head in disbelief. "I can tell you're not Joshing as well, these pelts are from different regions."

"Will you take them?"

"Sure, but I only have enough for seven at the moment. The other half you'll have to bring back tomorrow."

"Just take them for now and write a note for your employer."

"Better idea." The marten took out two slips of parchment and wrote an identical number on each of them before signing it. Writing a bit more on the larger one, and giving her the smaller. "Return this to us by at least tomorrow, and we'll give you what we owe. I'll be sure to tell the squirt about it." She nodded and placed the paper in her bag. Her ear catching something from afar, as well as the trader's. "Another scrap? I swear people have gotten more aggressive lately."

The tavern was busy as always. Taking orders for the noon rush was finally starting to die down, and people were finishing up eating before being pulled back to work. The loud and rowdy atmosphere, like it was near evening, never appealed to the man with white hair. Walking in with a ragged cloak like that of a refugee caught the bartender's attention. "We don't give out leftovers to those who can't afford it." Getting a thick glare from those unfamiliar purple eyes as the man sat down at a stool.

"You say that like I'm some kind of dog."

"Depends, are you?"

"Some have called me that." The Cougar started gesturing a bodyguard at the other end until the white one slammed his palm down on the bar's surface. Nearly shaking the area and getting the bartender to freeze. Releasing that hand and showing several gold coins, a currency that one dressed like him wouldn't have. "It's legit, and the extra strictly yours if you follow my specific instructions to the T." The feline leaned in close. "I want Potatoes, sliced into small columns and fried-**write this down.**" He growled, getting the Cougar to gather some parchment. "Fried stovetop: in three parts olive oil, one part vinegar. I want bacon, cooked on a separate pan. **Separate.** Understand?"

"Y-yes."

"When it's done, sprinkle a pinch of salt on the potatoes, and half a pinch of sugar on the bacon strips. Screw this up, not only do you lose the gold, but I'm going to shove my foot so far up your ass and use your sorry excuse of existence as my slipper for the next month. Understand?" An intimidated nod. "Go!" The man whispered, and the feline took off. Exhaling some heat as he started playing the waiting game. Catching the bodyguard get off his seat from the corner of his vision and approach him.

"Did you threaten my client?"

"Nope. Just told him that his mate left him and that his dog got ran over. What do you think?"
The two got into a harsh staring match.

"Are we going to have a problem, human?"

"Buddy, you name a time, place, and what hospital you want to be taken to afterward then we've got a date. One I wouldn't miss for the world." The larger peccary growled at him, but caught the gesture of the bartender.

"Not in here." The cougar said thickly, getting the man to smirk as the guard was forced to back down. "He's paying well too, so."

"At least he's dressed for his part." The pig snorted.

"I'd be careful with that mouth of yours, buddy." He nearly got another snarl, but another gesture from the bartender to let it go. Several minutes later, his food arrived. Getting a rather surprised look from feline when the white one instantly picked up a very hot fry off of the heated plate and tasted it. Taking half a moment to study it and sigh. "This is four parts oil and one vinegar." A whimper from the cougar, but the man only took a single gold piece back. "It's still good, just not perfect. Take it." He motioned to take the extra pay regardless.

He attempted to enjoy his meal while several other customers came. One specific group lead by a rhino was rather loud. Him and several other members sitting next to the white haired one and even going as far as to attempt to steal a few fries. Getting that grey paw smacked away rather forcefully and a thick stare from those purple eyes. "You want some so badly, you get your own damn food." The man growled, getting a shove from the bigger male and making him stand up to stare him in the eyes. "Touch me again." He threatened, only for that paw to slide the rest of his meal off the bar and take a thick breath.

"Hey!" The bartender said, eventually getting the attention of the two. "Take it outside!"

An outside view of the tavern door, and the rhino was thrown through the doorframe. Sending chunks of wood scattering in the dirt streets, along with a few more of his crew. Eventually Krow left the building, tossing the cloak off and leaving him shirtless. Waiting for the few people to recover to either continue engaging against him, or take off running.

However a few plans changed when some soldiers came around to see what was the noise about. Participating in guard duty, even with a couple of guards coming through the streets. "You want to go in his place?" The white haired one taunted the soldiers, still unarmed. Safe to say it angered the Gnu (Wildebeest) Trinity soldier, getting him to charge with a heavy baton.

But he didn't even move to avoid it. Letting the large blackjack hit the side of his skull and snap off, going as far as to hurt the soldier's wrist and step back in pain. "Satisfied?" Krow asked, not even flinching from it and barely looking at the other guards that were making a circle around him. "Anyone else want to take a shot?"

It was then they all heard charging footsteps from afar, coming from the street to the white one's back. Hearing his sigh loudly in almost boredom and half toss his head slowly as he turned about, only to get a longhammer in the face. A loud, unexpected impact sent the outside through at least two buildings and a ways down the adjacent street. Nearly getting whimpers from the guards around that area from looking at the badger that hit him. Of course, not stopping at a single strike and running after the man through the holes he's created.

Krow skidded into a blacksmith shop, prying himself out of a weapon rack with an irritated grunt and standing up like it was an inconvenience. Starting to walk out of the hole he entered without even realizing that several weapons were in his back. "H-hey! You need to pay for those." An irked look from those purple eyes and the man reached back to rip them out. Throwing them on the ground before re-entering the streets.

Walking at a rather quick pace as the badger came out the other end. Typical longhammer and tower shield standard for her while Krow just stretched out his shoulders a bit. "That better not be all you've got, lady."

"Far from it." She almost growled, swinging the weapon around for a slight warmup. "I am Zeltragraciae of the Northe!"

"You say that as if I should know you."

"And you?"

"A waste of breath, because you've dug yourself so deep that you'll either A: be dead by the end of this, or B: knocked out in a coma for the next twenty years."

"Never treat a Northe like a normal opponent." She tapped her shield and got into a defensive stance. "Give me everything you've got!"

"Famous last words, if I've ever heard 'em." Krow charged, slamming his knee against the shield and even putting a dent into it while pushing the black one back a bit. Parrying her counter swing with one arm and hitting the portable wall again with a body blow. Then a second one that was causing her to slide back along the dirt road.

A midsection roundhouse finally pushed the shield out of the way long enough to connect his foot directly to her chin. Even pushing the Northe airborne enough for the man to grab her ankle, force her to fall on the back of her head. Then swing the badger over his own and slam down on the road on his flank. "Don't say I didn't warn-"

A sudden hammer swing to his face interrupted the white haired man. Once again sending him into another building, but this time not through it. Once again, prying himself out of the wall and pulling the thick splinters of wood out of his skin. Looking out at Zeltra who was already up and ready to go, tapping her shield again. "I'd say that trick is getting old..." He half grumbled. "But I've been waiting so long to blow off some steam."

"Then bring it!" A sudden kick to her shield nearly made it warp at the impact. Sliding her back again then rolling out of the way of his leap attack follow-up. Striking the ground heavily as she regained her stance. Blocking one hook and evading the second one by bending back again. Using that dodge to rotate backwards and strike the back of his leg with the hammerhead, forcing Krow to kneel down.

Turning the opposite direction for a warmup, she swung the weapon at his face. Nearly getting a hit but see the man barely duck under it, placing a hand on the ground and countering with a spin kick. One that connected with the black snout and almost making her neck crack loudly, her body rotating with the momentum until it hit the ground.

The hit dazed, but she was still fine. Getting up quickly to remain in the fight and on her guard as she blocked another kick. "That shield looks a little heavy for you." The man taunted, getting her to growl a bit before she heard a strange noise. Like a few metal rings quickly grinding against each other and a slightly red flash on his ankle as she tried to block it.

But his foot seemed to pass through it like the portable wall was made out of liquid. Cutting it in half, just below where her arm strapped and sending shards of metal all over the place. Actually stunning Zeltra by trying to make sense of what just happened. "Much better." Another quip. "More your size anyway." That made her angry, seeing another kick being used against her and instinctively attempting to block it. Of course, not used to the shield's new size and taking it directly to the stomach.

She skidded and rolled back several meters, once again growling at Krow. "Seriously though, why bother carrying that thing around anyway? You seem pretty durable without it." He said, almost crouching like he was no longer taking the fight seriously. Getting her to take the strap off so the badger would no longer attempt to rely on it. "I mean it, I'm not really holding back and you're still in one piece. Well..." A glance at the shrapnel and he shrugged. "Mostly."

"You like to talk alot, don't you?" She snorted.

"Only when I'm bored." That one made Zeltra hiss loudly, this time taking charge and winding up a faint head level swing and getting him to duck it. Then taking a bit of the man's own style and adding a rotating back kick that his hands caught, but left him opened for the heavy overhead swing of the hammer. Slamming onto his shoulder heavily and getting him to kneel down. Even cracking the dirt road and sending dust to cloud the area a bit.

The area was quiet for a moment, almost wondering if she actually knocked the man out. But he remained still for a bit and sighed. "Yeah, this is getting a little ridiculous." He half mumbled, getting the Northe to make a noise in question before that metal sound was heard again. Stepping away from him

and keeping guard, a sudden upward kick nearly got her in the snout. Barely tapping her free paw before falling backwards.

All of her energy was suddenly drained, doing everything she could to just keep breathing and attempt to stand up. Her first thought was that of a poison, but nothing got into her bloodstream. Not even a remote wound as she struggled to get up off her stomach, only to hear Krow come around as she coughed. "Yeah, yeah." He sat his now feral self down on her back, eventually getting her to collapse from his rather surprising weight. "You'll get over it. They all do."

Chapter 6

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The stinging rain was pouring down outside, letting a heavy fog of steam cover the forests and mountains. Bringing some hope for the garrison and nearby towns that the fires would finally be put out. Even at the cost of such pollution. Catching the sounds of people still covering up their old water barrels and containers in hopes that they wouldn't be mixed too badly to remain safe.

Though his hearing was always good, he picked those sounds up from nearly across the garrison within a heavy tent. Barely even four days since that neon light affected his eyes and half blinded him. His other senses; from those wooly ears to that long trunk, increased dramatically. Here Nobufasa was thinking that the Darkness would be the one to wound him into retirement. Turns out it was the light.

He could still make decisions based on information, but he couldn't read anything himself. But now news of the late High Commander, there wasn't many to take his place. Perhaps the mammoth could if he just knew enough to protect his eyes, but alas...

Still, reports were still speculating of what actually happened. All they really knew was this: Something attacked the High Commander's camp, raided it, tortured and then executed the bird. Something struck a nearby mountain, cleaving it in half which caused a large distraction, then went for the city that Lord Ricon was stationed in.

The only other word was from the eyes of a traumatized soldier, who claimed that an unnatural dragon did it. One made out of gemstone, but that was the only witness to such a thing. No other signs or sightings, so for the moment, they claimed that he was seeing things. Projecting some form of supernatural beast in the blame in order to cope with such tragedy.

Dragon... Thoughts wandered back to that blue one the Northe found that could heal wounds. Disappearing the next day to 'Travel' with the two that found him, outside of the General's permission.

And now the one thing that could possibly heal the mammoth's mistake was missing once again. Questioning if it actually even existed in the first place, or was it just his imagination. Perhaps a mirage that everyone seen along with him. Some sort of trick played by someone sinister... Perhaps that southerner, the grey fox that was with him...?

A bit of commotion was at the front gate, barely picking up soldiers demanding them to open it over the heavy rain. Almost being able to picture word being carried like a physical letter or message. Passed from one person to another, moving towards his tent and eventually enter uninvited. "Sir!" A female half got the General's attention.

"Yes, who's at the gate?"

"Sir... It's Lord Ricon! He's alive...!"

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He was soaring through the air, barely seen thanks to the night sky. Though he somewhat stood out when swooping under the clouds, the black dragon wasn't really hiding. He was scouting the grounds and fields. Doing what he could to pick out something reflective, red, or anything crystal. Like he's done for the past weeks.

Has it really been that long? His comrade vanishing without a trace. No signs of destruction, no massive beams of light or soundwaves. Next to no path of corpses that were screaming vendetta against anything with black blood. It all worried him more and more than if he could see the signs. At least he could trace her down so he could stop such madness. But like this...?

But he kept at it, growing more and more careless about hiding and even scouting in the day light. Trying his best to telepathically connect with her, if she left such a communication open in the first place. It's possible she wasn't even on this planet anymore, and that theory was growing more and more believable as the days went on.

His frilled ears picked up a lot of commotion below where a decent amount of light could be picked out in a clearing. As much as he wanted to find the red golem, he couldn't ignore their cries for help. Getting closer, the black dragon could see a poorly fortified small town attempting to guard two adjacent exits. Ones that were illuminated quite well, and were attracting a lot of wild animals. A quick zoom with those green eyes, and those creatures were far from normal.

Many gunshots filled the air and the mustang cursed at his weapon. The rifle jamming at the worst possible time as he took a step back to attempt to fix it. The many rabid animals across the makeshift barricade were scampering the walls while something rather big was ramming against them harshly. Along with the many howls and cries of his fellow townsfolk were the unnatural roars of them, one of them extremely close to the horse as he took another few steps back to gain some distance.

But a bulky wolverine snagged at one of his pantlegs, tripping him and almost dragging him back before something much larger landed behind it. Instantly getting the possessed animal to become paralyzed and stop moving entirely. Revealing something altogether more terrifying to the mustang, now disarmed and prone. At the mercy of such a creature as it aimed a bigger rifle at him, until it flipped the rifle around and pointed the stock at the male laying on the ground.

One of his allies, a female crocodile, took aim at the giant black creature to save the horse. But was attacked from behind by a feral jaguar. Only grabbing hold of some of her clothing before getting uppercut heavily by a black tail. Sending the mutated creature to the air before flipping that firearm around again and executing it in the sky. Letting it faintly rain down chunks from the heavy shotgun blast before spinning it around and handing it to the mustang once again. "You don't have time for questions." The creature said, finally giving him the courage to take the heavy weapon before turning around with the rest of his allies.

Another rifle of sorts flew out from almost nowhere as the dragon caught it. Firing into the darkness across the town barricade and once through it where the steer was ramming it. Getting the attention of most of the people there after helping up the amphibian. "How long have they been attacking you?" Exile asked.

"F-for maybe about twenty minutes?"

"There can't be too much more then." He informed them, pointing across where the other defense point was. "Head over there and defend that! I'll take care of this side! Remember to shoot while the person next to you reloads, understood!?" A few shaky nods, and he could tell these people were not soldiers. Granted, they weren't doing half bad considering such. "Move out!"

They started to head out while the dragon jumped the barricade. A couple of massive swords fell from the sky to help support the gap that was left opened within the barricade so nothing could easily get through. Using up the remaining ammo from his rifle on several of the smaller creatures before tossing it to the side. Another shotgun came out, along with a longsword around the Outsider's size. Catching both of them before a pack of rabid dingoes came after him.

They spread out to surround the dragon as he advanced in, cutting one down that was straight forward and using his left wing as a shield against the other two in front. Turning with the blade's attack and wing parry, he bashed another with the opposite wing to knock it back. Thrusting the shotgun barrel into the next one that attacked with the pack, and firing it when it got to a full extension. A tail sweep got another one as two canine's jumped over it, trying to go after the black one's throat but were cleaved in half while midair by the that was following his spin. One final aim with the firearm, and the dingoes were down after a loud gunshot.

The ground started to shake a bit as the dragon picked up the many trees getting knocked down before him on the other side of the forest. Those frilled ears also picking up the panicked cries from the other defense point, and nearly getting Exile to curse. Unable to be at both places at once, but he could provide some support from here.

Several mortars appeared above the grass and angled themselves towards the town, being summoned by the draconic one along with his signature two handed blade. Triple checking the measurements of each one before firing them, letting the projectiles arc over the town and fall on the opposite fields with several harsh explosions. Thinning out the many rabid animals that were attacking there.

But behind the dragon, a massive beast burst through the trees. Sending several of them towards the black one as horizontal ammunition, barely dodging the first few before using his wings to shield against the others. Taking a large jump back when the near thirty foot behemoth attempted to gore him with several horns and tusks that were strangely attached to its skull.

It was difficult to make out in the darkness, but it hardly looked like one single animal. The body of a bear, one already taken down and almost rotting. The head of a bull that took inspiration from many different other animals with tusks. Almost like mounting their spines and ribs across its muzzle and using them as defensive weaponry. Due to its undead nature, such a creature almost looked like some kind of Flesh Golem.

With a loud roar, the abomination reared up and stomped on the ground. Something similar to what the dragon has seen before, and taking to the skies to evade the black fissures. Abyss spikes looking like they were made from volcanic glass erupted through the ground in several rows, piercing through the town's defense like nothing and wrecking those barricades.

As the dragon started to summon more of those large swords to make up for the defense, his eyes caught those spikes moving a bit. Aiming at him before launching to the air, once again causing him to move in evasion. Blocking and parrying when such things got too close, until he realized they were arcing as well. Falling towards the town homes in a large spread.

Thinking quickly, Exile created dozens of large swords and darted them into the Spike's paths. Deflecting them to fall outside for the most part, but a few decimated parts of the makeshift barricade. Soon enough, more rapid creatures would pour in those weakspots, something they were not prepared for. Getting the dragon to growl a bit before landing into the city square.

Another roar from the golem from afar as it reared up once again and the draconic one half roared at it. Lifting a paw as if to grasp it from afar, causing the abomination to almost stiffen before a large blade speared out of its chest, preventing its front paws from touching the ground as it almost wheezed in pain. Another blade stuck out of its side before several others started doing the same. Twisting a bit before slicing through the dense muscle and cutting such a creature into chunks in a single moment.

As much as he hated doing that, Exile didn't have much of a choice. It's either fight cheaply and save lives, or attempt to be fair and risk some. Not to mention how difficult it is without an Outbreak. Taking a few breaths before sensing many of the animals approaching the broken barricades. Quickly summoning several large swords to make up for it and dropping them in place to shield the town.

But a few creatures got through. Attacking a few people as well as the dragon. Taking aim at one rabid puma that dragged down a rabbit before nearly getting his arm bitten by vengeful jackal. Taking a step to the side to slice at the canine and fire the revolver attached to the two-handed sword. Hearing the bullet go through the bulky creature and snipe at the mad feline, hopefully before the townspeople was hurt.

The gunshots stopped as their barricade was reinforced by a few massive swords. The shaken people gazing at it with awe while taking a few steps back to regroup with the black dragon. Still unsure what to take upon such supernatural power, that is until many of the growls and hisses started to surround the town walls. Getting Exile to take a few breaths before placing his weapon into the ground.

The town's people thought he was giving up at first, barely being able to make out the reflective blades that were hovering above the walls. The same ones that took down the abomination before, then joined by several others before starting to spin horizontally very quickly. Almost becoming a blurring disc before hearing the dragon's voice again. "You might want to cover your ears." Most of them did so, but were unable to take their eyes off the strange magical weapons. That is until they lowered outside of the barricades.

Even with their ears being shielded by their paws, they could still make out the grotesque sounds and howls of pain as those weapons grinded anything that got close to the town's walls. Making a few of them sick on the ground, then a few others concerned when some trees started to fall down farther outside the town's limits. Also paying witness to their draconic savior, who was nearly beginning to glow white from time to time, still concentrating until a few deep breaths.

Then silence. An eerie, disturbing silence as they quickly did a headcount of who was still alive. A few people who took shelter in their homes were cautiously looking out, wondering what happened. Worried about such a devilish creature that was standing in the middle of many survivors. Even Exile himself looking over each of them before speaking. "It's probably not safe here any longer." It took a moment for them to be trusting enough towards the outsider, but they agreed nonetheless.

"Y-yes. We didn't think they were that much of a threat." An old badger said. "Many villages, including Liera's were getting attacks from time to time, but..." A gesture towards the rabbit from earlier.

"Thank you kindly, stranger... I apologize when we assumed the worst from seeing you earlier." The crocodile said. "You saved my husband's life."

"It saved all our lives." The horse from before stated. "We just thought-"

"That I was the darkness." The dragon softly said, getting a few uncomfortable looks. "You are not the first to judge me by my appearance, and you won't be the last." He tried to make it sound like a joke, but it was clear that they just didn't know what to think. "Is there somewhere safe where you can travel to? There was a garrison a bit far from here."

"That would be a Trinity garrison. They probably wouldn't like any easterners there." The old ratel again.

"You are people before you are Enemy." Exile stated. "And you don't look like soldiers. If I have to, I'll convince them of such." They gave him a bit of an odd look.

"Y-you mean...?"

"I'll escort you all in the morning. But I need to ask you something first." Worrisome looks all around. "Have any of you seen a red gemstone dragon these past few weeks?"

Chapter 7

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The sirens and constant wails of creatures were constantly heard even from the air, traveling the dusk sky alongside the many hybrid dragons that were withdrawing. All following the black one's lead. "Over there! We'll set the wounded camp and wait for a response!" They dived into a flat plateau, landing carefully before tending to the many injured, but not dead.

Those who were able to still fight were forced to overlook their home from afar. The many smoke trails and broken domes were once filled with life just a single day ago, now a painful ruin to those who survived such a strange and sudden attack. Along with the black dragon, there was a white that came very close to him. Looking into her blue eyes, they were filled with worry. "Don't worry. He'll get her to safety." A faint nod. "I trust him."

"I know, but he was once your enemy. Are you sure-?"

"She is safe." A rather thick voice said behind her, seeing a rather tall white wolf walk beside her. Nearly putting several of them on edge of where he came from, but Exile gave the order to stand down. Looking over the destruction from afar with his cold silver eyes, those ears barely flicked at the noises within. "Those are Krymerias."

"That's what Exile called them." A red female dragon said, carrying a rather elegant spear. "You've faced them before?"

"A few times. Their origins are still elusive, but they've been traveling through Time Storms."

"Which would explain how they got through the Academy's defenses." The white female said. Then the group picked up several objects in the air.

"Are those-!?"

"Weapons from the United Nations!? Why would they strike the Academy so soon!?" The black one growled, finishing Flyare's statement. "...I can stop them."

"What?" A worried look from Rynoa's blue eyes again.

"If I Outbreak, I can make it!"

"You could make it to one. Not all forty-eight." The wolf almost growled. "It's better this way."

"You cannot be serious!"

"How do you think the rest of the world would react towards an army that could appear at any moment? Who do you think they would blame for such a thing?" The canine growled at the red one. "There's nothing left to your home. Accept it."

With a sorrow filled breath, they did. Watching as such weapons fell upon their home and exploded loudly with a heated wave. Sending debris in all directions and showering the lands, even as far as they were. Seeing several large ones incoming, the black dragon shielded his mate with a wing, but still heard that awful sound...

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The fields were quiet and almost dark. The clouds above still getting over the sickness from inhaling dust, but was finally able to start showing their white healthy fluff from time to time. Though, it definitely reminded those around of the winter seasons. Even the animals brave enough to return to such lands were donning their winter coats in the early autumn.

Yet, they still did not sense the dangers that remained within the field. None of the life did, including the plants and vines that spent most of their renewed life twisting around that gemmed golem. Using it to get just to climb a bit higher to reach that golden orb that fed them. It never moving, never breathing. Just forcing itself to remain still for the sake of all living objects, knowing her instincts would desire to take their very lives.

"Beautiful." A voice beside her said, though did not shift the crystal dragon out of her trance. "Within every sense of the word. I suppose that could be said for all of this as well." That eventually opened her eyes towards the strange, yet familiar presence. Though still not moving, her eyes themselves did rotate to look towards the male voice. A strange, rather large and intimidating wolf looking over the horizon. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Flyare only observed him for a few moments, nearly stunned by those golden yellow eyes with copper rings in them. Unnatural, yet soothing. Then a bird landed on her head, tweeting in response. "Precisely. It is rather breathtaking when you look at it as a whole. It even took nearly your entire

existence to become this way, did it not?" Another short song from the avian. "That description does match with history. Wouldn't you say so, Flyare?"

That time it got the dragon to move a bit more to face him. Sensing the bird getting startled and move to the dark navy furred shoulder of the wolf. Studying him with red eyes like she hasn't seen him in ages, making him smile a bit. Yet, she still didn't respond. "How do you fair? I know it isn't easy with your body reacting this way. I'm still rather puzzled why it does this, but within Veritas it returns to normal now, yes?"

"...Yes." She finally spoke, getting a full smile and a gleam of happiness in his eyes. "...How did...?"

"I find you?" A little bit of that joy faded as he took a deep breath. As if to enjoy every little scent he inhaled. "They are terrified of you, Flyare. Of you, Exile, of Ricon after I explained what he was capable of." Her gaze fell as he sat down beside her, the bird moving to his other shoulder. "They don't know what to do, how to respond. Granted, they were frightful ever since that blackstar fell into their regions, so you were not the cause. However, they called for help after..."

"And you answered that call..."

"Because I recognized you over everyone else here." One of those four arms touched her gemmed paw, one that was almost aching from the mental restraints she's put onto it. "This isn't your fault. You and Exile just know how to deal with such an energy. You are warriors. You are experienced enough to know how to conflict against it."

"But in the process..." Her muzzle fell as she didn't finish.

"In the process... You...?" No response. "We sadly did not get enough time to spend together while in Veritas, it's honestly one of the very few things I regret during my time there. So I cannot end your sentences." Another paw pet her shoulder, trying it's best not to harm the plants that were growing over her body. "I know you are not fond of it, but your form... I have always found it astonishing. The sheer willpower you must have had to, not only survive when that worldstone shattered, but to keep yourself together. To keep everything morally stable..."

"That... Was not my doing." She looked away.

"Yes. Yes it was." Silence. "You may use the excuse that Exile makes you strong, and you are not incorrect. But you still make the choice. That is something that is probably so obvious to you that you don't realize how big of a deal that really means. Especially to a Counterweight." That red gaze started to return to him, as that purple stripped paw lightly took a few shards to study them. "Every little piece is a part of you. It's like a very large cell, not only holding your basic deoxyribonucleic strands, but even your experiences. Each little crystal withholds your memories, feelings, morals and yourself. That is... Incredibly beautiful."

"But at a cost..."

"Yes... It does preserve your state within time, but not as much as you think." That time she looked into those warm golden eyes, almost reminding her of a sun. "You still make new memories. You still keep new experiences, make new instincts. Emotions are not even so preserved as you think." A paw under her chin. "You have much more control over such things than you are lead to believe. Is it more difficult for you? Yes. But not impossible. You just need to know you can, and now you do know that."

"So, that just makes me responsible for this. Instead of just blaming it on..."

"On what? Your instincts? Temper?" No response as those eyes rotated to a close. "This shame that you're feeling... That's something I've never understood. I see this in many creatures that are capable of opened thought. What did you call it again... Evil?" A heavy drop from that sharded muzzle. "I do not understand this concept you're struggling with. Can you explain this to me?"

"Vyitr..."

"C. Weight will do fine, Flyare. You know that." Another smile, but the dragon didn't look at it. "I remember having this discussion with Deago before, though during that time he called himself Leonarto." A bit of a bit of a chuckle from the canine. "He got so angry with me to the point he was almost shaken by my lack of understanding. To this moment, I still have not quite understood these morals or feelings I see in others. I understand their experiences with pain and the want to avoid such things. But this strange concept of Good versus Evil, the labels that your people use... It's very elusive."

"An Evil person destroys life."

"Yes, but not everyone who destroys life is Evil?" No response. "Is it those who take enjoyment to the art destruction? Those who do not have a reason for such things? Yet, what happens when you apply that concept to the art of building or creation instead? Those who enjoy creating are considered better than those who destroy? Those who do not have a reason to build-"

"Because it's harder to do." She almost growled.

"...Is it?" A bit of a stressed noise left that gemmed chest, and the wolf looked at his own paws. "Perhaps it is for you. That's not something I was cursed with. But if I were to follow the rules here and not rely on such abilities... I still don't understand it. If something is destroyed, you cannot just rebuild it?"

"You cannot rebuild life..."

"Maybe not rebuild, but you can create life." An actual growl this time as those red eyes glared at him. "I understand the idea of loss is something you've always either frowned upon or even attempt to prevent as a whole, but... Why?" That glare didn't let up. "Flyare, Destruction is a natural part of life. You cannot stop that, and attempt to do so is a bit... Childish."

"You can't mean that." She hissed at him. "What good comes out of destruction!?"

A puzzled look from him, as he lifted up a paw. Lightly waving it and seeing those black pupils shift a bit in angry confusion. "Your eyes are opened." A bit of a neck curl until he gestured the surrounding area. What was once a completely ash stained land, covered in a blanket of smoke and flames were now fertile. Almost even more so than before. "Perhaps not all destruction is called for, but it can do good. Like it did in Veritas."

"It only worked there because you were-"

"I did *nothing*." He said, again almost smiling at her puzzled yet angry look. "Veritas itself fixed everything wrong within it. I just reinforced the outside a little bit to make sure the CounterForce could no longer enter it. That is all." Another furred paw on her own. "And you seen the result. Regardless of how long it may take, destruction is not always a bad thing. It's natural, it comes in many forms. Some better than others, but you can see why I can't understand this concept of Good and Evil, yes?"

"...What are you saying?"

"Are you Evil?" Her heart almost fluttered in anger, yet denial. But the dragon couldn't answer. "Are you Good?" That time her chest sank, invaded by guilt and remorse. "Why convince yourself of any of these alignments, when their standards are so vague to begin with?"

"...Because that's who I want to be."

"Then be it." C. Weight said, getting a bit closer. "The Good Destroy. The Evil Build. Their Instincts Matter Not." A sad look from those red shards. "You cannot stop destroying, Flyare, no matter what you do. It is something that needs to be done for universes to function."

"Even Veritas." She said, almost sadly.

"Yes." A movement closer as he half hugged the crystal dragon, not fearing her in the slightest, and even making that small bird brave enough to land on her snout. "Though I know you cannot procreate, even before this happened you chose to give it up, that does not mean that you cannot belong or live alongside those in existence." Another sad look. "We all have our roles to play, Beautiful. It even took a mortal, one who created for the sake of destruction, for me to discover mine." A small brush on the side of her gemmed face with his paw, looking at it intensely as it nearly took his breath away. "Don't give up. Time won't wait for you."

A small glance to the side, and the wolf was gone. Getting the red one to question if he was ever there to begin with, but the bird remained on her. Picking at the small plants that wove between her shards. Getting her to stare at it calmly... Calm. For the first time in many decades this way, she felt calm.

Eventually, the bird flew off, getting the gemmed one to stare at it until it was lost in the forest. Taking a moment before teleporting a few steps away to preserve the plants that comforted her during such a breakdown. Almost wanting to do something for them, as they desperate attempted to see the sun. Getting her to look at the clouds above for a moment before disappearing once again. The sky's barricade being suddenly split in two shortly after and letting the rays of light shine down.

Chapter 8

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The mammoth felt tired, almost exhausted in a way. Yet completely restless and unable to continually lay in the bed provided for him. Due to his handicap, it's very difficult to walk without guidance. Though he was getting better at it. Those large ears were able to pick up how close and big things were, especially when he started making sounds. Though he couldn't explain why.

Different footsteps often got him somewhat excited, able to tell who it was by those alone. "You may enter, Lord Ricon." He almost grumbled.

"General." The red fox greeted him. "You sound happy to see me." A bit of a sigh from that trunk.

"I apologize. I guess I'm still antsy about calling you Lord instead of High Commander." A noise in confirmation as the Volratter took a seat. "He made a mistake, I know it."

"You shouldn't be saying such things, Nobufasa. Especially against the crowns."

"I don't care if I'm charged for treason at this point, Lord. My life and its value is far too diminished to be considered even worth their time." The red one didn't respond, as the mammoth took another breath. "That civet's too young to be leading such a large portion of an army."

"They are just out of time to decide. The scout reports are saying that the Eastern army is mobilizing, and they needed someone to lead them-"

"A soldier that survived a single attack is not qualified enough to lead an entire army." The wooly one nearly hissed, taking a breath to calm down a bit. "You survived as well. You have the experience to lead."

"I was also presumed dead at the time. Word arrived too late of my survival, and by that time he was already promoted." Another heated breath from the blind one. "The Trinity has suffered many casualties these past few months. Our offense is too spread out to be doing anything but countering a constantly respawning enemy. They need someone to lead against the East, and they're leaving soon, General."

"I know. I know..." A sigh as the fox got up.

"I will be leading a portion of that army regardless. I will keep an eye on them for you."

"Be careful, Lord. Something about this doesn't feel right..."

"Your intuition has always been a boon to you, Nobufasa." They shook paws before the Volratter left. Leaving the mammoth with an almost uncomfortable silence and foreboding.

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The campfire's warmth was a bit too much for her, getting the badger to roll a bit away in a more comfortable position. Well, comfortable, if it wasn't for a stick she was laying on. Trying to keep this strange balance of staying asleep and being awake enough to fight with the stick, only to find out it was a root in the ground. Getting Zeltra to grumble awake, and suddenly feel a presence nearby.

She quickly rolled away from it before getting up, only to see a black tiger half staring at her in boredom. The two locked eyes, taking her a moment to recognize them and let her memories come back to her. "It's over there." He motioned, getting her to glance at the ground and see her longhammer. Resting on the rest of her bags that she left in the streets. "Some people were trying to get into it, but I donno if they took anything." Krow said, now staring into the flames again.

"And you are?" She almost growled, not getting his attention. Even after arming herself, the black one didn't seem threatened. "...Muugyn." That time she got a look for a moment, then back to the fire.

"Fuck. It's been a while since I heard that." He half sighed, resting his head on his folded paws. "How is he?" No response, but she did let her guard lower a bit. "Is he dead?"

"...I don't know." No response, but it was clear that the tixir wasn't going to attack her. "But..."

"Out with it."

"...He did something stupid."

"That's to be expected. He's not the brightest pickle in the barrel." A very strange look from her almost made him sigh in irritation. "He's always been a little dimwitted, y'know. Having a hard time to go against his damn instincts and be completely kind to people. No matter what they were taking from him." Another moment of silence, and she dropped the weapon where it was. Moving the sleeping bag a bit and sitting down again. "What did he do?"

"You want a list?"

"Just the highlights. It's been about thirty years since."

"Well, for starters, he still doesn't know how to hunt."

"That's not surprising." He mumbled.

"He's been scavenging to survive. Barely moving from the same area. Least he could do was find a cave much higher up but-"

"He doesn't know how to fly." An almost questionable look from her yellow eyes, as Zeltra studied him. "He's a big blue bundle of boring that's been raised by an old rat and the oldest person on this planet. And does it *look* like I have wings?" He actually looked at her for that last part, almost feeling her gaze. But it made sense to her now. The dragon not worried about giving up his Freedom of Flight, his constant excuses for his complaints and not knowing how to hunt for himself. All because he was never taught how. "Oh, how the gears turn. How long have you been with him?" A look back, and the tirix was no longer studying her.

"...About a week."

"And you never put this together?" His tone nearly made her angry.

"He had a hurt wing when I met him. Never thought anything of it."

"He's a dragon walking in a thick forest. Of course those things are going to be constantly snagged by trees. Hell, he's actually asked me before if I could cut them off for him." An almost hurt look from her. "Because they were being a pain. I just told him learn to use them already, but nope. Like a little lost-"

"Puppy..." That time another look. "He clings to you, because you were his only friend." A slow blink that showed almost no emotion. "And then you left him." Zeltra's tone thickened, getting those purple eyes to roll and close again.

"I wanted to check up on what Thogh was doing. Last I checked, the temples were rather far away from that area." He grumbled. "And before you start, you seen how the guy travels, right?" Her own grumble said it all, as she placed a paw over her eyes. "Enough said."

"But he..." A noise in question. "He was searching for you. He sent us to search for you, because he wanted you back." Barely a mutter in response. "He ended up curing an entire town of an illness, demanding hospitality for you and him both for the rest of his life-"

"Which I can only imagine took a chunk out of it." Krow grumbled. "Dumbass." Another look in anger at the feral one.

"He was trying to do something nice for you! What the hell are you doing out here?" No response but a deep bored breath. "Why take so long to come back to him?"

"Other than the fact that he's a bit annoying?" That made her more angry. "What can I say, I'm tired of babysitting people. And he's better off-"

"With you."

"No, he's better off taking some time to learn things for himself-"

"Like sacrificing his life to save the damn world!?" She hissed.

"As if." He muttered like he didn't care. Eventually the silence opened his eyes and meet her glare. "You're mistaken. I've beaten that shit out of him. He's not doing that."

"So says the person who hasn't seen him in thirty years." She grumbled. "I know what he said, he's convinced of it." Those purple discs still displayed disbelief, and the badger sighed. "Look, we ended up finding some lab by accident. Within it... Someone was doing... Things with animals. Something about a strange energy and a black rock." That time his stare got a bit more serious. "Thea knew what it was, it called to him."

"And he touched it?"

"He was going to, but I stopped him. Getting hit by something in the process. Since then..."

"You've been more durable." She faintly nodded. "Well, that explains that. Here I was almost thinking you were a Force."

"A force to be reckoned with, yes. A Northe-"

"Annd you clearly do not know what a Force is." He took an irritated breath. "What did it do to him?"

"...Nothing much. He got his brain scrambled, but someone helped him-"

"Was it Ricon?" An unexpected look from those yellow eyes, and the Tirix rolled his again. "I told that asshat not to use any powers."

"But it helped Thea recover." A shrug. "...How did he ever call you friend?"

"I wonder the same thing sometimes. But by the sounds of it, he befriended a rock." She stressed her jaw a bit. "What else did it do to him?"

"...I don't know. He ended up making this... Bone creature when he was attacked by a soldier. But..."

"Go on."

"I think he had this ability beforehand." An actual noise in question. "You know what Cancer is, right?"

"I'm surprised you do."

"I didn't at the time. But the only other time I seen him angry, he said 'Whatever, Enjoy Your Cancer.' Which I'm assuming..."

"That he gave someone the disease." She was quiet for a few moments. "He's never done anything like that around me. Fuck, he was such a damn Goodie Goodie that I had to beat it out of him."

"...He does kinda talk like you."

"I can't imagine why." Krow sarcastically yawned. "So, where is he then? He run off without you?"

"...He went back to that rock and..." No response from the tirix. "Thea's still himself, I think. But he hell bent on some stupid conquest. Something about being the Darkness-" Him cursing under his breath caught her attention, but otherwise nothing. "You told him about this-"

"So what? You're trying to blame this on me?" They locked glares. "I've already dealt with the whole Big Brother role dozens of times. Not to mention, the world itself is counting on me to fix this shithole. So, my question is, if he wanted to do this so badly, why didn't you go with him? Why didn't you become his friend?" The badger's eyes eased up a bit as she remained silent. "Not so easy, is it? You had something else to do, someone else to look after. And before you know it, he's gone. Maybe even gone too far off. So why the hell are you trying to get me to fix him?"

"I didn't say that I was-"

"Oh, *forgive* me for mistaking your preaching for standard Northe conversation about how I should've been a better friend to a whiny dragon." Almost a snarl from her. "...That's interesting."

"What?" Zeltra grumbled.

"I just remember how much of a god damn pest that blue wall was-" A hiss from her and those purple eyes just stared at her. Eventually tilting his nose down while lifting up his eyebrows when she didn't catch on. "Never knew Northes to be so slow."

"The hell are you talking ab-"

"You like him." She stopped, almost stunned. "Everytime I've insulted that portable barricade, you've wanted to hit me. Well, more than usual, let alone more than most people." Silence from her, as if just realizing it. "And yet, you can't figure out why you A: didn't see it sooner. Or B: why you let him go off on his own. Come back to me when you're done sorting through your feelings." He rested his head down again as she almost snorted.

"I don't like him."

"Then you're in denial. Wonderful."

"Not in the way you think-"

"Why not?"

"Because he's so damn weak! He's a near burden to take anywhere, keep fed, protect, and he complains constantly!"

"Well, I'm not arguing there-"

"He barely listens-"

"Seriously, not arguing-"

"Can't take his alcohol-"

"I get it already! He's pathetic!" Though she didn't like it when the tirix said it, she remained quiet. "Which is why you like him." Another snarl from her.

"I don't...!" A heated breath from her muzzle. "He misses you! He sent me to find you, so-!"

"Yet you complain about taking him anywhere. You even admitted to it earlier, you know what he's like." A bit of a growl from being outwitted. "So, replay that scene for me again: after however hell you two met, he asked you to find me. Keeping you near him, but insists on coming with. Even after enduring the one thing he detests more than raw meat at this point. All because...?" He left it as uptalk, trying to get the Northe to finish him, but still no response. "He didn't want to leave your side."

"He sent me to find you-"

"Which was a near impossible task to begin with. Probably one he wasn't even expecting to work in the first place. But if it did, he would be around two friends instead of one. Probably having some foolish fantasy of us all getting along as well." It was almost painful to her not being able to see it sooner. To the point where she almost did long for the dragon. "Finally admitting to it yet?"

"But... Northes do not like weakness-"

"Something frowned upon within your society. AKA: **Forbidden**." An irritated sigh from the male. "Typical really, to be attracted to something you were told to avoid at all costs."

"Are you saying we shouldn't strive for strength and abandon weakness?" Another growl.

"Well, this is a conversation I haven't had in a while." Krow grumbled a bit, taking a breath and looking at her again. "Tell me, what's wrong with Weakness?"

"Are you joking?"

"Nope." She looked at him strangely while keeping her anger a bit. "Granted, I'm in nearly the same boat as you: Haven't felt weak for **Blah** amount of years. But if everything in the world was strong, how do you think things would be?"

"They would be like the Northern Settlements!"

"I didn't say every person. I said Every**thing**." Another strange look. "Animals would be too strong to hunt. Trees would be too strong to cut down. People would be too strong to take on one another for survival. What would you end up doing if everything was on equal plains?" Silence. "Every move you make wouldn't even matter. Everything might as well stand perfectly still."

The tirix continued. "The world needs weakness, Zeltra. Not everything can be strong, not everything can be smart. That's the way things work, you need to sacrifice something for power. You need to have a weakness, and sometimes you're just attracted to weakness."

"What about you then?" She almost grumbled, but at least hearing him out a little. "What's yours?"

"Mine? We've already established how shitty of a friend I am. I tend to have the ability to get a lot of negative attention on myself. I'm prideful, which is why we will never be friends, and I'm asexual." That last one she didn't understand. "In other words, you don't attract me. Nothing does. In case you haven't noticed, I'm the only male who isn't:" A deep breath. "Mated, Married, Or any form of Taken, Attracted to the opposite Sex, Interested in something Weird or Abnormal, Doesn't have a Fetish for anything, and overall just doesn't give a damn about passing on my Genes." A few moments of silence as he rested his head on his paws again. "Even strip naked in front of me, I wouldn't care. Do what you please, but if you press on, I will hurt you."

"And Thea?" A shrug from him.

"Found out the hard way. But I swear he's a bit of a masochist." Another puzzling look and he sighed after feeling it. "Meaning, he likes being inflicted with pain." Another moment of silence as the badger went through all the times she's actually hit the dragon, yet he still liked her enough to feel protected. "So, again: why are you here and not out there protecting him?" No response. "And what are you going to do about all this?"

Chapter 9

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The blue one casually strolled through the cluttered field, one that was gated and next to a large building. Dozens upon dozens of heavy stones rested within the grass, all spaced out as if they were planned or claimed before their time was up. Glancing over the many names that held no meaning in his memory, as the cries of terror echoed through the air.

He didn't enjoy doing this. That's probably what half kept him sane and not fall into the void of darkness within his instincts. When really, he was acting on his instincts. Ones he thought were beaten out of him time and time again. Over and over, he kept hearing the same arguments made by that black tiger, reminding him that the dragon's life was more valuable than everyone else's. At least in Thea's perspective.

But was that really the case? He wasn't castigated to think as such by any of his attendants while still in youth. He wasn't even told that it was the wrong thing to do until he was rescued. Freed from that large cage of preservation, keeping his borrowed time refrigerated for those who wish to reclaim it. He half wondered if his scaly self would still be in that room if it wasn't for...

Through some bushes, he found a poorly crafted headstone that was barely marked. Probably almost illegally, but instead out of respect. Taking a heavy breath before sitting down and just staring at it while a tear filled those strange eyes. Green and plastered with the several iris' of another being. But he recognized it as the same person, holding a strange scent that he could detect outside of those nostrils. A few breaths as he desperately attempted to ignore the screams of pain behind him.

"...Are you ashamed?" Thea asked in a low voice, as if he was trying to hide from the very creatures that were terrorizing the city. "Of many things...? Things I have done and haven't? Of the life I attempted? The path I've chosen? I keep telling myself that you would be proud of me, for even just still being alive for this long. For following your and Krow's advice of just not giving into those..."

"...I've tried. I'm sorry, but I've tried for so long. It just felt like I couldn't get anywhere without giving up something of mine. I felt stuck, surviving as a scavenger. All I wanted was an easier life. A friend or two I could trust. A family that was there for me, but not for... Me. My Worth. Instead, I bring trouble time and time again. I feel like I'm the cause of everything wrong going on, like it was just lashing out until it got a hold of me." A few breaths to remain brave.

"So, I gave up. I'm sorry, but I feel this is the only way. Be ashamed of me, please. I know I deserve it. But you'll see what I'm trying to do for the world. I just need to cause enough pain to end it forever. Even if I go down in history as Malevolent, and remembered only as a Darkness that no one seen grow up. One that they were expecting... I'll at least bring something good in this world out of it. Be ashamed, but please don't forsake me. You didn't abandon me before, even when you knew what I was. Please keep that trust in me. Please keep your faith that I'm doing the right thing..."

Several nearby cries came from the castle. One of an elder, as it was dragged along the ground by Biscuit. Getting Thea to wipe away his many tears and take a few breaths to put on a mask. Turning around and meeting up with his loyal companion, pulling a mandrill by his injured leg. "Did you find one of them?" A happy-ish growl in confirmation as the dragon took a step over the elder one. Seeing him attempt to crawl away as soon as the bone fiend let go, but got nearly crushed by a blue paw.

"P-please! I didn't do anything-!"

"You don't remember me?" Thea growled in intimidation. "Has all those years made that mind of yours senile?" A whimper from the monkey, as the larger one forced him to look over the dragon in the darkness. Seeing that shimmer of both blue and dark green through the moonlight. Picking up that shocked look. "Yes... Now it's coming back to you, isn't it?"

"You...! You should be-"

"Dead? Perhaps expired or gone mad by now?" Another whimper, and the bone creature chittered a bit. "Was there...?" Those frightening eyes gazed over the elder one. "Yes, there are traces of such things in his body. I can see it..."

"Please! I was only trying to-"

"Prolong your life!? By repeating the same experiments that your kind did to me!?" Thea almost roared. Taking a breath and looking back at the grave he was talking to earlier. "...What happened to him?"

"W-what? Who?"

"You. Know. Who." The dragon still stared at the stone. "What. Happened."

"I-I don't know-" A hiss from Biscuit.

"I know he's lying." The blue one said, sighing. Muttering apologies before turning to look at the mandrill. That stare causing him great pain as something under those robes started to shift and move. Cracking his bones and sinew loudly as they altered before bursting out of his chest as an entirely new creature, all while the monkey witnessed it before such transformation consumed his head. Creating another bone fiend that was more ape like, looking at Thea as if a pledge a new alliance. "What happened to him." The dragon demanded.

Several wheezing gasps as the newly formed fiend adjusted its vocal cords. Sending out noises that were harsh rasps. "They hanged him...?" His red and green eyes turned sorrowful as the creature explained further. "Taken me for himself...? But..." A heavy sigh as he looked over the grave for several moments. The screams and cries eventually dying down as Biscuit came up to the dragon. Purring in concern as Thea gave it a few pets. "I'll be..." A heavy breath. Then the bone fiend made a few noises. "You're right. I just..."

One last heavy sigh as the dragon got up. Once again apologizing to the makeshift tombstone that read *Nalgrasha* on it, as if quickly made than hidden before anyone could spot them. There were still some good people that paid him some respect at least, but the blue one needed to do this. Spreading his wings high in a display of power, while taking a deep breath. Several moments later, the calls of a newly born army shouted into the darkness.

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The sun was slowly rising on one of the longest nights the town's probably ever had. Many of them not really expecting to see the glowing orb of comfort, one they still symbolized with hope. The dragon could see it in their eyes, even those who were naturally nocturnal still praised such a thing.

He didn't blame them for feeling so tired. Even suggested to them several times through the remaining dark night for them to get some rest. That he could keep watch for them easily, but perhaps

they were just being cautious. Even after they knew that they would be helpless against such power that the black one was capable of, they still did not feel safe around him.

Regardless, many would have an even harder day of travel. Spending most of the night packing everything they needed to survive, outside of a few mementos. Even then, Exile could almost state that such things were still needed. Knowing from personal experience how important morale really was.

Looking over the townspeople gathering their things made him almost anxious about his own mementos. Taking a moment to lift on one of the many plates over his chest and pull it up, reaching inside for a small object that gave him a bit of relief from simply touching it. Carefully pulling out the metal scrap, stained with a faint red, even after all these years.

It was still sharp, untarnished and almost preserved after all this time. Letting the object bathe in the morning sunlight from the center of his paw, spreading it's light around. Enthralling the dragon to the point where he didn't even notice the Mustang watching him nearby. Or did he, and just simply not react? "Are you okay...?"

"Yes." The black one answered the horse in an almost remorseful tone. Taking another breath before looking the equine in the eyes. "How are things coming?"

"We'll be ready in about an hour. Though it might take the entire day of travel to get there..."

"That's to be expected."

"You sure you're alright?" A solid nod from the tall one. "I could've sworn that I seen a hole in your chest."

"I assure you I'm fine." Exile gave him a small smile, but studied him for a moment. "How's your shoulder?" He gestured the one carrying the shotgun, the same weapon the mustang was gifted last night. Hearing him half chuckle in response and stretch the sore joint a bit.

"Thing packs a punch..."

"You're not used to firearms."

"None of us are. We barely sell the things." A heavy sigh from the brown horse. "I wasn't even planning to take them, but the mistress insisted..." A look over at the crocodile, still helping those load the wagons. "Funny how one decision could save so many lives... Granted, I don't think we would've made it without you." The two locked eyes again. "Thank you... Erm..."

"Exile." The black one finally greeted himself, expecting the puzzled look from him. "Speaking of which, how are you doing in ammo?"

"We're almost out of rounds and blackpowder. But it should be enough to make it past the garrison." A few silent nods. "Aside from that, we're running out of room. Mostly because of the

shortage of wagons." The smaller one gestured the outer walls, often built around disassembled forms of transport. "It was a good idea, and I honestly think it saved us at the time. But now..."

"Try to gather what you can without overloading them terribly. If I have to, I'll carry a few myself." A worried look. "I'll still be able to defend you if something comes after us, so make sure whatever I'm carrying is either light or disposable. Speaking of which, be sure to tell everyone to stay together if something comes after you. I won't be able to protect all of you if you scatter." A faint nod from the horse as he answered a call soon after. "Go help them, I'll keep watch until you're ready."

Another whisper of thanks as he left the dragon's company. Leaving the black one to take a breath and look over that piece of metal once again. Taking a small breath before lifting up those chest scales a bit again to slide it inside. Turning about to catch the stare of the rabbit from earlier, now resting an injured shin.

The two shared looks for quite a while at a distance, not trying to intimidate the other. Until another town's person got her attention, finally being forced to break the gaze and let the black one look over the town once again. Perhaps when this is all over, these people could return to this place if desired. That is, if such corruption did eventually decay. But what would that do or say about the rest of the wilderness...?

So many questions revolved around what was making these animals rabid. Though it was dark, Exile didn't notice any abnormal wounds on anything's skull like that first bear him and Zeltra took down. No devices on any of them either, even that abomination that seemed to be waiting for someone to step in.

Looking over the two main defense points and tracking the animal's movements, it was clear all this was planned. Tactically thought out before they even assaulted such a place. Let alone, an innocent town that would not be worth the resources. "Something wrong?" The crocodile from earlier asked. "You look worried."

"It's nothing." The taller one mumbled, looking back and forth at their defense points again as if to gesture them. "This was planned."

"Planned?"

"These creatures didn't think of this themselves. They were either controlled or positioned here. As if trying to lure someone out..."

"You maybe?"

"I don't know..." His tone was even making her worry a bit. "For now, we're safe. I can't sense another one of those creatures outside of the walls, or in the forests. So if we're going to move out, we should do it soon."

"Alright."

"You comfortable back there?" The black dragon asked, ferally walking and attempting to keep the strapped bags over his haunches. Hearing the rabbit almost whimper in confirmation, still getting used to his walk. "I can't say I was designed for being ridden. You're my first in a long time."

"J-just how long...?"

"Very long." Exile teased, giving the female a smirk and trying to shuffle his folded wings. Ones that would bend the top branches under and be tucked away into his back rather compactly. Feeling her almost shift a few times to get a comfortable spot. "Feels like metal plates, doesn't it?"

"Or a series of metal sheets, yes." She mumbled, taking a close look at the small metal spikes and occasional platinum shine of the plates and scales. All of which actually looked new and undamaged. "It actually looks like it would be metal. Are they...?"

"No. Or at least not that I know of." A worried look was felt from those red eyes. "They've never been affected by magnets in any case. Same with the front." Another look back at the brown rabbit. "Exile, by the way."

"O-oh, Liera." A nod from the black one. Feeling her adjust again to get closer to his head. "Can I... Ask you something?" She almost whispered.

"Of course."

"Are you... The Holy Ghost?" He made a noise in question as he almost stopped to look at her. "From our stories? While you were protecting us last night... After you saved me, you were turning white." A faint breath was detected from his muzzle. "My people used to claim that there was a Holy Ghost in a veil of Darkness. One that would save us if we were worthy of being spared." He felt the rabbit almost hug his neck. "Thank you for that."

"You're... Welcome. But I'm not exactly..." A bit of an awkward breath from the black one. "I'm not from around here, Liera. So odds are, I'm not what your legends say."

"But you are... Not alive." Not really a response from the dragon. "I can hear it. There's something missing, that's why your chest opens."

"That's from another reason..." One of those white paws slid down towards those series of silver plates.

"Can I see it? Please?" He knew what she was talking about. Slowing to a stop and taking a breath. Sliding those sheets opened carefully and pulling out the small piece of scrap metal. Handing it to the rabbit on his back.

"Be careful with it." A noise in confirmation as she looked it over. About half the size of her own paw, stained with what she guessed was dried blood and licks of flames. Warped a bit over the edges that were still sharp.

"It has remorseful energy..." She said, really studying it. "It reminds you of the passing of... Your mate?"

"...Yes." A few moments of silence as he felt the ears of many looking over the two.

"She was a good person. Very caring, even towards the heartless. That's why you liked her, isn't it?"

"I'm guessing you have a gift?"

"Y-yes. I can see some history of objects when I hold them." Another small study of the piece of scrap, and she almost whimpered in pain. "It was in her heart, wasn't it?" No response as another paw tried to feel through his back and into the dragon's chest. "That's why you keep it, in place of the one you're missing."

"Just... Not metaphorically." Another deep breath.

"Yes. That's why you are a Ghost. Only showing your true self when others are in danger." A few strokes against the back of his neck. Finding one specific spot that couldn't even be seen. "...They took something from you?"

"Almost."

"...I'm seeing a small... Very thin dagger with a thick, hollow hilt... Used to draw out your blood..." A slow nod from him. "And from it... They made you a daughter...? How?"

"...She was studying to become what was commonly known as a Gene Therapist. It's complicated but... The way their society worked; it was rare to conceive the old fashioned way. So they took samples of the two or three mates, and found a way to combine them into offspring." He mumbled, getting strange looks from the others. "I, uh... Can't really explain it well myself. She knew more about it than I did."

"But regardless, they made you a family." The white one smiled a bit, but realized how such a thing ended by looking at that memento. "...Then you..."

"It's not as heartbreaking as you think." He mumbled, getting a look in question he could not directly see. "I didn't know about her when I was sent away. I guess Rynoia wanted to save it for a surprise, but didn't know of it would work. When I... Didn't come back, she was forced to raise our daughter alone. She grew up before I even met her, and... I wanted that time back."

"But you could not obtain the lost time." He was unresponsive for a few moments as that white paw pet him. Noticing he was not feeling that remorse about that subject.

"You're wrong." A noise in question. "There were rules about such a thing, ones I knew well... And I wanted to make things right, no matter what the cost. My daughter would grow up with a father, with me. But the way the timelines cross... By the time I naturally returned, I needed to give them up to the original Exile." He slowed to a stop and looked away from the confusion. "And then I had to let her die." A heavy exhale. "That was my price to all this, to witness it all again and willingly do nothing to change it."

"I had to stay away. I couldn't be near myself, just in case something relapsed in the timeline... I knew my daughter was being cared for, and I..." Another breath. "I wandered off. Made myself a different identity, fought in war after war and drown myself in the company of others just to attempt to relieve the pain of it all." A few moments of silence as she overlooked the shard of metal again. "But I had my time with her. More than I should have. That's why I can still move on, why I can still accept it. Even if it's hard to... Just take it one pawstep at a time."

A quiet aura fell over the group as they began exchanging looks of both sorrow, yet acceptance. Doing their best to take the black one's advice and just keep one foot in front of the other. Eventually feeling the rabbit behind him give the dragon another hug while returning the memento. Taking a moment to look at it himself before placing it back in.

Chapter 10

The journey was hard on nearly everyone as they spent nearly the entire daylight traveling. Though there were signs from time to time of strange creatures either passing or far through the forest, the group of townsfolk didn't encounter any. Getting near dusk, they finally spotted the garrison downhill a ways, giving everyone a morale boost. Taking one final rest before the rest of the journey. "It'll take about an hour to get there." The black dragon said to them. "But I see torches and the smoke of a fireplace. There are people there."

Several of them nodded in relief. "It's a good thing too, we're almost running out of supplies."

"We didn't have enough room for more-" The croc started to add to the horse's sentence, but was interrupted by another.

"We would've if *someone* didn't decide to bring such bulky cabinets-"

"Stop." Exile almost growled, silencing the argument before it broke out. "There's a reason for every object's importance. Even if you do not understand them." He looked over the group as a few of

them lowered their heads. "You don't fight with yourselves, especially while being hunted by something. It will only lead to your end, sooner if anything. Understood?" A few nods and a bit of silence as they used up the rest of their food. "It's getting dark, but we can make it."

By the time the group was approaching the gate, it was dark. Nearly the longest and most unsettling several minutes they ever had. Even with the dragon constantly scanning their surroundings, many of the towns people felt vulnerable within such darkness. Every small noise that came out of the plantlife could've been another encounter with death, but they made it to the closed gates. Of course making the guards patrolling rather on edge to see two dozen people traveling. "Who goes there?"

"I am elder Signus from Forthwood, about a day's travel from here." The old badger said. "We were attacked last night by many wild animals, and it is no longer safe there. The only reason why we're still alive is because we were saved."

"Saved? By whom? The Eastern army?"

"No, by the Holy Ghost." Though they couldn't see it, the dragon looked away in silence. Expecting the confused look of the guard, Signus thought for a moment. "I believe in your religion you call him the Black Hand?"

"You cannot be serious." The ground hog grumbled.

"Exile." A heavy breath from the large black one as many of the towns people divided to give him a path. "Can you come here please?" Another breath and the dragon started forth. Looking at the small window in the gate at the guard's surprised expression and almost step back in a bit of fright. Allowing a few others to look as well and almost get the same reaction. "This dragon came from the heavens above to save us. He has protected us since, watching over our people until we could reach safety." No response from the inside. "Please, I know it's difficult for you to even consider such a thing, but our town is not safe anymore. We ask you to pardon us away from this war that has divided our lands, and reunite for the sake of everyone here."

Though many of them were still stunned, one of them eventually whispered to get the captain. Leading to a good sign that these people would be heard. The badger and Exile shared a hopeful look, as well as the rabbit that was riding him. Feeling others relieve his hindquarters of the saddle bags he was carrying for them as they waited for a response from the other side. "Thank you for everything, great one." The elder ratel whispered, getting a nod from the large surreal creature.

"Signus..." A lizard in a slightly different uniform half called. Looking over both the black creatures for a moment, but more on the elder one rather than the large.

"Kuhamu?" A few of the townsfolk asked.

"Open the gates." The captain demanded, and within a few moments they started to open. The dragon staying outside until the last person passed, still scanning the dark wilderness before entering. "What are you doing here? I heard that Forth was attacked-"

"It was, but we are safe." The badger gave the young lizard a hug. "What are you doing here? I feared the worst from you!"

"I... Got drafted, after they found out where I was hatched." Another look at the dragon, now standing in the light. "I was raised in Forthwood during my youth. I always considered it home... It's hard to believe it's gone."

"It's not gone, just... Empty for the time being. We can still return to it once this darkness has lifted." Signus said. "But for now..."

"It's not safe. I understand. You can stay here for now, but we don't have much left since the army passed through." A double take from Exile.

"Army?"

"The Trinity, y-yes. They were sent to march northeast of here a day or so ago." A worried look from the captain as he spoke. "They said that the Eastern Army is gathering up there, and they're bringing the main assault to put an end to it."

"The north...?" The ratel almost whispered, sharing a look with Exile. "That's where..."

"Those animals were heading... Following something and attacking from instinct." A nod in confirmation.

"Animals...?" One of the guards questioned, getting a motion from the large one to help the rabbit down off him. Then standing up to carefully spread his wings a bit.

"If the armies are heading north to fight, that would mean they are vulnerable to the real threat." Exile said, getting a worried nod from the badger.

"Save those who you can and stop this. We are safe and welcomed here, Holy Ghost." A nod at the elder as Liera gave him another hug. "We wish we could've helped you find that friend of yours, but..."

"It's for the best that none of you encountered her, I believe..." He replied a bit sadly, giving the rabbit a few pets. "Stay safe for me, okay?"

"You too, Exile." She let go, giving him room to take off into the night sky. Still leaving several dozen of the garrison people a bit shocked.

The winds were getting harder for the soldiers to travel against it, feeling the cold sting since that city was completely decimated. The clouds darkened with the tells of an upcoming storm, warning them that this was not the time to fight. Though the fox leading the march could understand why such things were happening, there wasn't much he could do without the use of his abilities. Not that the lord did mind so much to live a life without them, he's gotten rather used to it. Power makes things easy, and thus, boring. No, what he wanted was the challenge. To obtain such things and climb up the ranks by his own means.

Ricon was doing well for himself, even now with just a fraction of an army behind him. He could almost feel the warmth of respect from his fellow soldiers as he pushed through the same conditions. Usually, any captain or higher would demand a horse or something to lead his people. But these brave ones were still new to him, and almost vice versa. For their leader to be dismounted showed more than the will to experience their pain. It showed that the Volratter was not greater than them, be it not the real case.

Regardless, he only required their scouts to have greater means of transportation, for obvious reasons. At least his soldiers didn't gaze upon them with envy, whereas they still had hard work and a dangerous job. Especially in such dreadful weather, as the rain up ahead could be seen from miles away. The fox could see this coming a few days prior, and sent a scout to warn the new High Commander. A title that felt like it held a horrible curse, especially to those inexperienced.

But there was no word from the scout he sent nearly a week ago, which worried him. Sending another to seek the first one's disappearance, and possibly continue his mission if he had fallen. Things were getting dire quickly, and without communication between the two divisions, one could easily be taken out. At least the Civet's portion was the greater in numbers, but Ricon did not know how battle savvy those troops were. Even the ones behind him were a bit green, only being able to harness from a handful of skirmishes.

Favor was most definitely not in the Lord's favor at the moment. In some ways, he seen it as a challenge, but in others... Especially when dealing with the supernatural or superior beings like that gemmed golem, things can turn for the worst. So far, his ears or scent didn't pick up anything out of the ordinary, but that could change in a heartbeat.

That red dragon came to his mind once again. Nearly cursing himself for underestimating her so, a mistake that Ricon admitted from the start. And one he would not be making again if such a thing did replay. But during these long marches, he often attempted to come up with ways to get around such things for entertainment. Almost like a game of Chess, planning one's formations in advance. But that berserk knight was more difficult than many others the fox has come up against. Physically, she couldn't be harmed. And mentally, she was unstable, possibly even driving the Lord into madness if he attempted to disable or delve into that volatile mind.

But those thoughts were cut short when his hear flicked, picking up the sounds of feral hooves in the distance. Giving the signal to halt his army's advance and scan the landscape. "What is it, my lord?"

"A scout. Ours I hope." The group waited patiently as many whispers were passing between ears. Seeing a horse appear several moments later with their colors, and a wounded soldier on it. As several units followed Ricon towards it, the spooked horse reared up and dropped the limp raccoon. Her cloak stained with blood and weapon missing. "Jiha!? Speak to me!" A cough from her.

"Water! Bring me some water!" One of the captains called, getting a skin soon enough and doing their best to tend to the scout.

"What happened!?"

"Animals, my lord..." The raccoon replied between breaths. "They attacked Harvis... Nothing left to him. I c-couldn't even find his stamped message outside of small traces..."

"So the High Commander doesn't know to wait for us?" Another soldier almost whimpered. "He wouldn't be naive enough to attempt an assault in this weather, right?" A disappointed grumble from the fox only worried the soldier.

"What happened to you, Jiha?"

"They weren't... Wild."

"Wild? The animals?"

"They were being controlled...! Lead...! Darkness in their eyes...! Wounds...!" A heavy swallow and a few gasps. "They can't stand...!" Her grip faded as the raccoon fell to her own wounds. No longer sensing any life from her, Ricon carefully removed that cloak to look at the massive gashes that took her life. Ones that looked almost infected by something black, deep enough to steal a rib and nearly rip out two pawfulls of her side.

Silence fell over the fields as the group stared slightly frightened, and a few a little squeamish. "Your orders, Lord Ricon?"

A few moments of thought as he looked at the landscape. "Map." He politely demanded, getting one quickly and motioning the captains to gather around. "The East is gathering somewhere around this area, last we know. Odds are the Commander will end up trying to cut them off. He would most likely get the suggestion to fight in this valley..."

"That's still a few days around the mountain. We won't regroup with them in time before they likely engage."

"Not unless we path through the mountain pass." Another captain suggested.

"That path is very unsafe even for merchants to travel. It's doubtful that such roads would hold an army." They looked at the fox for a response or command, but he was just studying the map.

"...What if instead we went north around the mountain." Ricon suggested, getting a few puzzled looks.

"North?"

"Yes. This area here is higher ground, correct?" A few nods. "We can set up our archers there and get that advantage over the fields. Hopefully the winds would also be at our backs."

"But it leaves the High Commander's army vulnerable."

"We won't make it in time, let alone be any use exhausted." The red one traced the map with his words. "We can deploy our archers here to rain upon the enemy's rear while our front travels around to their flank. We'll support the High Commander from the other side and route the Eastern army."

"A pincer attack?" A captain almost whispered. "I suppose if there was ever a time for one... But we'd have to move soon."

"Indeed, the longer we wait, the longer we risk the new Commander's patience." Ricon said, handing the map back. "Converse the plans to your squad while we move. For now, we must march!"

The sun was nearly set when the troops finally passed through the storm. Though the terrain was still wet and a bit hard to travel through, they were almost to point. Only to hear the sounds of battle from afar. Cursing that they were tardy to such an event, Ricon ran a bit forward up the hill to witness the fight between two sides that had just begin.

But something was off, a strange sense within pure intuition that nearly stunned the Volratter. As many captains behind him ordered the archers to take positions, the red fox suddenly recognized such energy. "Halt!" He ordered as the archers were starting to reach him, getting them to stop in question. "Get back! Out of sight!"

"What is it, my Lord!?" One of them shouted from the back, only to barely meet up and see something blue across the valley. Spreading its wings and instantly hearing the horrid calls of two armies in tremendous pain. Slowly, more of Ricon's soldiers peered over the cliff to witness everything within the lower grounds have creatures rip out of their bodies. Creating a new army of creatures in a matter of a few dozen seconds, one commanded by an unknown leader. "By the Gods..." The same captain whimpered.

"Your orders, sir...?"

"...To fight them would to be suicide." The fox said, overlooking such a thing and nearly coming to the conclusion that this would be a war they could not win. Not without-

"Look!" A black being dove from the evening sky, directly into the center of the dark army.

"What is that...?"

"The Black Hand!?"

"...No. But a chance we could possibly take in winning this war!" The fox shouted towards his followers. "Archers! In position! Do not concern yourself about harming him! Frontlines! I want a wall of shields in case of counter-fire in front! A second row behind the archers to protect from above! You three!" He pointed at three captains. "Take your troops and guard our left flank in case they come around! You, you, and You! Take the Right! These grounds might be cursed! No matter what you do, do not advance! Understood!?"

"Yes Sir!"

"Archers! Take Aim...! Fire!"

Chapter 11

The thunderous landing nearly stunned the many fleshy constructs within as one of the taller creatures suddenly fell in two pieces. Barely seeing the perfect cut until it hit the uneven grounds and unfolded. Immediately calling out to warn their brethren, several of them got cleaved in half by a quick sideswipe from the two handed blade, while the others got shoved soon after. A sudden black and metal wing folding out into a portable wall before bashing them into others within the crowded valley.

As a bulky golem tried to hit the black dragon with a tree sized boney club, it's weapon and several fingers were suddenly split in two by an upward swing. One that was barely seen with the evening sun reflecting off the polished blade. The phantom pains of such a thing got the golem to step backwards enough for Exile to leap up to its chest and decapitate it in a fraction of a second. Rotating with that horizontal swing and aiming at the ground before firing one of those missile launchers into the crowd.

The explosion was unexpected to nearly everyone who could hear it, as pieces rained outwards of such a thing. Barely following the black blur as it landed in a different area, cutting off a limb of another creature before bashing it with his full body. Sending the larger creature off-balance and cutting through dozens of them in one straight slide. Then going back in a different direction, this time firing a bullet mid-swing. Tearing apart another dozen within a line of the bullet's path as arrows began to rain down into the valley.

Another circular swing around him to guard his flanks, one of the smaller critters managed to jump over it. Only losing a bit of its tail from the attack as it climb on top of the dragon and attempted to go for those green eyes to distract him. Nearly signaling all other adjacent ones to attack while the black one was vulnerable. However, the outsider didn't seem to focus on the small critter; going after every

creature that advanced towards him with a series of well-timed slashes, tail whips, wing blocks and counters while the smaller one struggled to hold on.

It managed to get a claw into those eyes a few times, but was unable to penetrate the usual vulnerable spot. Eventually getting impaled by a flying hook sword from the sky and nailed to the ground nearby before getting gutted open by the same weapon. Barely hearing the smaller sword parry a set of bladed claws before a heavy black paw stomped on the critter's head.

The hook from the smaller sword managed to snare into the abomination's hand while cutting into it a bit. Keeping those defenses opened for the two handed blade to separate its torso with one clean cut, ripping out the snared weapon while it was in mid-air, and slicing directly upwards at another close target. Then down nearly at the same exact path while firing another round from the hilted revolver.

"Why can I do this...?" His mind echoed the white rabbit's words from earlier that day, as he parried another bone abomination's swing with the smaller sword. Tripping it with the hook while sidwinding to its side to cleave it in mid-air with the much longer weapon. "I've never been able to read another person."

"I'm not a person." The black dragon from the past responded, as he struck a small leaping critter with the crescent blade on the hook sword's hilt. Turning with the attack to aim down at several more and launching a missile point blank. Sending a ripple of concussive force and heat in nearly a city block's area. "I am a sentient weapon."

"Weapon...?"

"I was designed for only one thing, the same for any other object of war." A massive golem came up from behind the dragon and slammed down on it with a large fleshy axe. Forcing the black one to defend with hook sword, but in return damaging it greatly and getting his shoulder and wing to take most of the resistance. "I was created without vitals that could be used against me, including a heart. That's why you can't hear it." Sundering the weapon with the two handed sword and then throwing the damaged smaller one into the golem's face.

"That's what you mean about not being alive...?" A heavy swing upwards lead the dragon to take to the air once again. Dividing the colossal creature in two with a force that seemed to extend far from the blade's edge.

"I am a Construct, one made with the sole intensions of winning wars." Keeping some of that ethereal energy while he landed within another group. Folding out a wing to parry and ram another creature his size before swinging horizontally backwards. Throwing that remaining force into a bladed projectile that severed hundreds of abominations in its path. "To fight battles is my reason for existence, it's all I was ever lead to be: Victorious. She just..."

"Taught you differently...?" Several smaller ones, able to duck under the dragon's previous swing, sprung up in a group. Grabbing hold of the black one as his wings covered his front and started clawing

at those scales. Trying their best to penetrate or even scratch such things, but only made their claws dull in those few seconds.

"Rynioia gave me a reason to fight. Before, I was just told to." That two handed sword pointed downwards from under the winged cloak. Launching its third missile point blank into the ground and standing up against its bomb blast. "Like a weapon, they just aimed me towards a direction and I followed their objectives." The heated winds launched every little critter into the air away from the dragon, as he pulled out an automatic shotgun from under those black wings. Taking aim towards the airborne smaller ones and emptying the entirety of the weapon's ammunition. Shells that seemed to be holding small metal spheres connected to thick wires. "When I was lost in a land without a metaphorical wielder... She suggested for me to just help those in need, like she often did."

"That's why I helped you and your people last night." A medium sized nimble creature scampered in close while Exile was firing the ranged weapon. Barely evading the long blade's quick slash, and even getting a few spiny bones cut off from its form before attempting to grapple the dragon. Attaching itself to the silver plates of his underside and try to pierce them with it's fleshy, dagger-like ribs. "For every person I save, I create an enemy." Even after taking a few beatings from the firearm's stock, the creature held on and just continued drilling against those plates. Eventually feeling the dragon ditch the ranged weapon and hold the abomination in place with a single arm. "I'm not your Holy Ghost, messiah, or savior from some prophecy. But I don't have any interior motives or selfish reasons to keep you all alive."

The faint ring of a long blade, nearly javelin sized, was heard before it pierced through the creature's neck and body. Nailing it down into the ground and forcing it's claws to give out. "I'm doing it because that's my Instinct." Going to pick up the new weapon, his ears warned him of a nearby danger, one passing behind the advancement of golems as a massive bone club trampled over them. Being thrown in the dragon's direction and forced to take the hit. Moving with the airborne bone as it bounced off the ground and rotated, giving Exile enough time and lift to take to the air himself. "My Reason." Spotting the bone colossus that threw the club and taking aim with his two handed blade. "My Purpose." Firing a bullet that went through its eye, causing the creature to shout in pain before the dragon threw his own weapon at it from across the valley. "My Existence." With the creature distracted, the blade stuck into its chest like a dart, sinking into it a bit before launching its final missile and raining chunks down below. "My Resolve."

The ground quaked when the bottom half of the colossus fell to its knees, then the blood stained grass. Taking a moment to look over the battlefield and seeing where the arrows were coming from. Nearly locking eyes with the red fox before resummoning the dragon's signature weapon and diving back in, only to see a thin glowing red spear of light fall from the darkness.

A loud, electrical burst with the heat of a small warhead carpeted the field before the black dragon reached the ground. Standing strong against the harsh winds before the gemmed golem teleported to her spear near him. "Freayha?"

She pulled out the gemstone weapon and looked at the black one calmly. "Flyare." A smirk from the male as the two shared a happy moment of reunity, of course getting half interrupted with the charging cries of the army. "Looks like we're surrounded, sir." The two took stances, guarding each other's back.

"That's nothing new." Exile jokingly grumbled. "Reminds me of old times, really."

"Sir." A noise in question. "Vyitr is here." A double take from him.

"Seriously?" She nodded in confirmation as he took a quick glance at the sky. "Can you guard me for a few moments?"

"Yes." She confidently said, stressing her paw as she dragged plasma over her weapon. Slamming the grounds around the black dragon to create a lightning wall around him as he took a concentrated stance. Hiding him within before advancing a bit at the charging abominations. Taking quick teleport strikes to anything that got near the lightning cage.

The space around it started to warp harshly, but held together as several ethereal weapons fell from the sky into the cage. Hearing the dragon inside roar loudly as a bright light exploded outwards, disabling the plasma walls and nearly burning anything that got too close to the light. A pure white dragon flew out at massive speeds, holding two of those ethereal weapons as they morphed into a Khopesh and a two handed Morningstar. The five other ghostly swords following close by while rotating around him.

Striking a near blinded abomination, the sheer touch of the sword-like sickle was like having the weight of five massive axes against a single tight thread. Cutting clear through it, and passing through the ground a ways before the spiked mace followed the attack. Crushing the creature's body before it could even recognize that it was even cut in the first place, and nearly sending a quake of pure vibration from the impact through the ground. Causing it to dome under them and almost collapse as the bone creature nearly liquefied.

Before the others could react, the Morningstar and khopesh were dropped and returned to their longsword-like forms. Having two others quickly move to his paws then change into a spiked chain and sawed-off shotgun. Swinging one end of the chain to wrap around the neck of one golem, while another attempted to attack the bright being. Moving at nearly sonic speeds, it's claw was snagged by the other end of the chain before one of the floating weapons quickly changed into a warhammer. Striking it's leg harshly and tripping it forward.

From the spike chain's center ring, the dragon pulled out a new separate end for the next few flesh creatures that attacked him. Dodging their attacks easily while dragging those already snared quickly acrossed the now red terrain. When Exile got the chance, he pulled the ethereal chain harshly to gather them all in one spot on the ground before leaping over it. Aiming the short firearm and releasing its overcharged shot right in the center of the pile. Causing another thick quake and a shower of giblets.

The ground underneath the soldier's feet shook violently, as they attempted to keep an eye on the red and now white blur. "That's enough, troops. It's best we leave now." Ricon ordered them, pointing at two nearby ones that had his attention. "You two, go tell our defenses to start moving out! We'll rendezvous west!"

"Sir!" The two saluted, doing what they were told.

"My Lord..." Another soldier started. "Is it really wise to leave these things...? What if they fall?"

"If they somehow do, there's nothing our army can do about it." The red fox stated, getting several worried looks from his followers.

"And if these creatures turn on us...?" Another worried.

"Then it's best we do withdraw, like Lord Ricon ordered. Right sir?" One of the archers half asked, catching the fox's gaze, clearly not looking at the battle. Instead, almost through it. "Sir?"

"Withdraw. Everyone, to the rendezvous point where we seen the circle of stones." Ricon ordered, stepping forward towards the fight.

"Sir?"

"If you're fighting, my Lord, I am too."

"I am not participating in this battle, soldier. Do not worry about that. However... I know when creatures are being manipulated."

"Manipulated...?"

The mace head barely scraped the skull of the abomination as it attempted to get close to the white dragon. Watching the seven-section staff closely as the bright one swing and wrap it around his body without fear, while advancing towards several other creatures. Seeing a slight opening when the chained staff flailed forward, the critter took its chances, only to get a spiked ball in the face. Piercing and cracking the bone upon it's 'softer' impact and nearly throwing it to the ground. A quick scamper up wasn't enough before the dragon slammed the advanced double-weapon on the back of its head. Crushing it with a heavy quake before cleaving it against several others.

Other than a few on the gemmed one's side of the valley, the dark army was finished. And those ones she could handle on her own. Feeling his current form finally start to take a heavy toll on him, Exile started to slow it down. Preparing to disengage the Outbreak until he sensed something else; movement around him.

A quick scan, but there was nothing getting up. However, many of the parts of downed golems were starting to vibrate. Making the white one think that maybe they were set to explode. Instead, they

all gathered in the center of the valley very quickly, getting the dragon to curse when he followed what was happening. "Exile!" His red comrade warned him.

"I see it!" He half grumbled at the situation, as gathered his signature two handed blade in a paw while the others morphed into the same. Moving to the mountain of grotesque body parts' flank, several of the ethereal weapons around him fired a missile each. Breaking apart large chunks as the forming creature wailed in pain. "Take it down before it can rally!" He ordered, and soon enough an aerial spear nuked it's adjacent side. Vaporizing many of the medium and smaller chunks on her side.

After most of the hot winds cleared, the white one swooped down and started severing limbs when they grew out. Feeling the massive vibrations of its cries in pain like he was right in front of it's still forming maw. Many sections of its shell were still broken and exposed from the explosions from before as it drastically attempted to repair it. Eventually attaching limbs and weapons from other creatures to fight back, connecting them to long boney tentacles that started lashing out at the two dragons.

They were hardly a threat towards the two, but a desperate distraction while the rest of the giant could form. Getting Exile to almost growl as those ghostly blades fought against such makeshift defenses while firing the rest of their ammunition when in position. Clearly, this thing wasn't going to let up, regardless of how painful it was for the mountain. But they couldn't just leave it. "Flyare! Stun It!" The white one roared from the other side.

The gemmed dragon was having the same difficulties as her commander, but those ears caught his orders. Quickly teleporting to its front and Painting her entire weapon with electrical rage, nearly setting the very sky around her on fire before throwing directly at the creature's slightly exposed brain. Sending a massively bright blast that exploded outward and within the shell. Nearly toasting it into ashes, but it's structure still somewhat remained.

Faster the creature started to reform. Recovering more swiftly everytime damage was done to the abomination. But this is where the white dragon came in; quickly moving to its front and landing in the blood soaked grass. Transferring the remaining energy from his Outbreak into the very blade he was wielding, while the six other ethereal ones grew ten-fold. Setting in position behind the now black dragon.

Exile roared loudly, activating another much weaker Outbreak and returning his white scales; though not nearly as bright. Charging to close the distance to the now almost reformed mountain of body parts and swinging upward in a heavy vertical divide, launching a massive projectile through the creature. Following that swing, he continued with a horizontal dash through the entire creature's length. Cutting through it before the six other ghostly blades did the same in a fraction of a second.

Coming out the other end as his normal black self as those ethereal blades vanished. The creature fell apart, no longer getting up nor regenerating. A thick silence as Flyare teleported towards her commander, witnessing the black one still in his stance. Glancing over him and it for a moment before speaking. "I actually expected something more... Climatic."

"Wait for it."

"Wait for what-?" A loud feedback got both dragons to growl against it before a sun was nearly created.

Chapter 12

The blue dragon stood over the adjacent side of the valley, witnessing his army and creation get demolished. Though stunned, yet optimistic about such a thing he and his boney friend were a bit dumbfounded. "I... Actually expected that to last a little longer, honestly." Biscuit replied with a noise of confirmation as Thea's mountain of an abomination fell silently. "Wait, what just happened?" Then the heavy feedback hit.

The two hissed at it before getting blinded by a massive light and pushed away by a huge blast. One that was attempting to be contained by some supernatural force. Even feeling the pain of his blue scales start to almost melt, but soon heal up as the heat went away. Granted, still taking a few minutes for his eyes to heal from the bruising.

A silhouette of an upright dragon could barely be seen through the now dark night, towering over the blue one with the shimmer of a weapon pointed at his form. Taking a few moments to just breathe as Thea's senses returned to him, and make out what it was. Just as it clicked, Biscuit dove forward to protect his master. "No-!" The blue one shouted, doing his best to protect his companion as that blade moved to take down the spinney critter.

Feeling the warm blade completely cut through the high branches of his wings, membranes, and even the back of his shoulders as if they were the air itself. Whimpering loudly once his body realized there was something wrong and feeling the pain of such a weapon begin leaking out his red warmth. Regardless, Thea only tightly held onto his feral companion, protecting it from the black one's genocide.

Even through all the pain of the large cut, those unsettling green and maroon eyes begged the black dragon to stop. Pleaded to spare his companion, and expecting nothing but coldness in those green eyes. Instead, there was sorrow. A conflict of Roe not wanting to be here, not wanting to be against one he attempted to protect for so long. One claimed to be a friend. "Please..." Thea tried not to whimper from the pain, still protecting the smaller creature over his own self. "Not him..."

"Thea..." The black one sighed, but still not lowering his weapon. "How did this happen? What drove you to...?" There was regret shown into those nightmared windows, almost as if it wasn't a choice for the blue one anymore. "Is this controlling you?" It was barely a question.

"...No." A faint whisper that nearly sank the black one's hope that this could end any other way. The only thing left for the blue one was mercy. Pulling the hammer built into the sword's revolver to load it, Exile aimed it at his previous ally. The loud gunfire making the blue dragon yelp loudly.

But there was no extra pain, no additional wounds. Though frighteningly still, Biscuit moved normally in question. Another study, and Thea could see the bullet stopping in mid-air before it hit him, aiming for his heart. Then, thrown off to the distance, along with the black one's weapon. Getting Exile to step back and quickly summon another one before Ricon slid between them. Guarding the blue dragon. "Ricon!?"

"This isn't your war, Kurrastian." The fox spoke loudly, motioning Thea to rise up. "Your interrupting the plans of others-"

"The plans of yours, you mean? You can't really be considering to protect him!"

"Consideration is beyond my choice, warrior." A quick glance at the blue one from those red canine eyes. "He needs to live."

"You cannot be serious." A growl, half gesturing the valley he fought in momentarily ago. "Have you seen what he is capable of!? The lives he's taken!?"

"Which is required." Ricon stoically growled, getting the black one to nearly roar at him. "It's something you have never been able to understand, Exile. Sometimes people need to die in order to accomplish a goal-"

"You don't have to-"

"Yes, you do! You claim the lives of others everytime you draw a blade-"

"Not by Choice!"

"Again, incorrect."

"I give them a chance to withdraw! To lay down arms and flee! That's **their** choice to make!!"

"Against you, it's not a choice for them. It's a consequence." A loud growl from the black one as the gemmed dragon teleported beside him. Aiming her weapon at the Volratter as well.

"Step aside, Ricon." She demanded.

"I cannot." A long thick silence fell over the area. "If you choose to engage, be aware that I will not be making under-estimations again." Another long silence.

"Your orders, sir?"

"It's two against one, Ricon." The black wyrm warned him, but neither budged from their stances.

"Actually, it's two against two." A nearly forgotten voice fluttered the blue one's heart as he barely seen the black tix walk past him. Standing next to the fox before taking a more hybrid form. "And you're on my turf, guys. Leave the pathetic, hopeless, ugly thing alone. Oh, and that bone thing he's so protective of as well."

"Are you insane, Krow?"

"Who's fucking world do you think this is, Exile?" Those puzzled green eyes shifted from the red fox to the Tirix a few times. "Nope."

"Seriously...? That's like... Ricon's thing to rule the world or something."

"*Ricon's Thing?*" The fox repeated the male dragon.

"I know, I know. But this one's mine. And last I checked, you don't have a beef with me. Y'know, unless you want to make one." A glance over at the gemmed dragon. "Same goes for you too, Ruby Tuesday."

"You're no threat to me, Krow."

"Oh, please." A gesture towards Ricon. "Me and him took you out on our own last time. How long did it take you to recover from that?" A bit of a growl from her. "And do you really think he's going to last that long too?" A half wave towards the black wyrm that time. "Besides, I'm curious about what a red spark would do to one of those shards."

"Please." The Navy wolf from before appeared behind the two dragons. "No more fighting. Especially amongst allies." Recognizing who it was, Flyare and Exile shared a glance and he nodded. Signaling to lower their weapons. "What conflict that was needed is complete, there doesn't need to be anymore."

"Conflict needed...?" The black wyrm repeated him. "What do you mean, Vyitr?" A bit of a sad smile from the four armed creature.

"I can explain, and take you home if desired. But Krow and Ricon know what they are doing." The black dragon's ears went back a bit as he took a breath to study them. "Come with me, I will explain what this world requires." Though he didn't like the idea of leaving them unattended, his trust of the Counterweight was greater than the dragon's current intuition. Nodding in agreement and getting Flyare to do the same while following the wolf. Looking back one last time at Thea with those green eyes, almost wanting to apologize to him, but the black dragon remained silent.

A few moments of silence and the pain of the blue one's wounds started coming with vocal sounds. Getting the two canines to look at him as Thea attempted to stand, having help from his smaller companion. Letting the tix come closer to study his near severed wing and cut neck. "How the hell do you get yourself into these messes...?" The black furred one muttered, getting a whimper of apology

from the dragon before looking over at the red fox. "You can repair wounds, right?" An odd look from Ricon.

"...It's a bit painful for the patient, but I can."

"Good."

"Why-?" Before the fox could really ask, Krow backhand slapped the dragon's snout. Shattering the entire muzzle and jaw and forcing it to droop down as Thea struggled with the sudden shock and pain he felt. Nearly crying as it overwhelmed his larger body and getting another confused look from the Lord.

"Fix him." The Tirix demanded, walking off in a grumble.

"Can I..." The red gemmed dragon started. "Interrupt you here for a moment?" Vyitr nodded eagerly. "What was that explosion back there?"

"Explosion?"

"That Exile did." A large nod of realization from the Counterweight. "I've seen him use that before, but not..." The idea of it made the black one rub the back of his neck awkwardly.

"I... Had a run into a Force Of Death before... As in, Literally."

"It was very interesting! Most of your damage, so to speak, effects the physical plane, correct? Exile's first Outbreak allowed him to harm the ethereal substances of his target and force them to become unstable-"

"Vyitr..." Another interruption from the female. "Remember before when I asked for you to talk normally?"

"In Veritas? Yes." A long stare from those red eyes. "Oh! Apologies. You want me to keep it... Simple?"

"Please." A moment of pondering from the wolf.

"While in the Outbreak, he harms the soul directly, using its energy to effect the opponent from within. Does that make sense?"

"A little, but..."

"Normally such side effects would often travel between planes, there's so much energy to be tapped into. A strong soul would barely effect much, however several hundred at once-"

"But they were dead." A strange look at the red one. "The soldiers were dead."

"Yes, granted that doesn't mean their essences were lost. They were a bit twisted due to Thea'daisis' manipulations, but they were still tied and forced together into one larger creature-

"Meaning: wounding them all at once would cause the Big Bang to happen, got it."

"The what?"

"N-nevermind her. Go back to that... Spiritual Grid, was it?" The black dragon asked, repeating the wolf's term then looking towards the sky. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Understandable. I never used the method in Veritas. Though it does have its uses, it also comes with its limitations. Let alone, things can go wrong quickly if the grid gets damaged or overloaded."

"Our home was far different from everything else, wasn't it?" The gemmed one asked, almost getting a sad look from Vyitr.

"Yes. Yes it is." The two dragons shared a look.

"What's wrong." The black one concerningly demanded, getting the two to lock eyes for a moment before a navy paw touched his shoulder.

"Do you know of Bartan?"

"Polar bear?" A nod. "He eventually found me when we got arrested, but we didn't get time to talk." A few strange moments of study from those golden yellow eyes nearly made the dragon uncomfortable.

"Oh, you met the Counterweight Bartan."

"There's... More than one?" A half whimper from Exile.

"Yes, and it's a very interesting story! When we-

"Please, Vyitr..." Flyare interrupted him, anxiously. "What's wrong with Veritas?"

"Wrong? Oh, it's perfectly fine and stable."

"But...?" The black one asked, getting a bit of a sigh.

"Bartan... Really looked up to your comrades, and didn't like the idea of you being... Trapped, so to speak."

"Trapped?"

"Sealed within Veritas, Flyare. And only within Veritas." The Counterweight stated. "So he created a way for you to leave."

"Through that Basilica, you mean?" A nod at Exile. "I remember it, yes."

"Well, that was attacked by something. Investigations are still under way, but we don't have much to go on."

"And the people within...?"

"Many have still remained within the universe unharmed. But..." A paw on the gemmed shoulder this time.

"Are they just missing? Like we were?" A nod.

"As far as I can tell, but you've all been spread out in many different places." Those yellow eyes looked towards the night sky. "You would not believe how far away this is from Veritas."

"Which is why you were passing by to answer the Forces..." The red one almost whispered, getting a look in question from the black dragon, but he soon followed through.

"How many are missing?" Those yellow eyes onto those green ones again.

"Exile, this isn't your responsibility-"

"They are my friends and comrades." That look didn't let up. "I will find them."

"I'm going too." A double take from both males.

"Flyare... You shouldn't-"

"I will be fine, Sir." She said confidently. Even after a few moments of observing her.

"...It will probably be a long time before we could go back." A solid nod from the red one. "Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely certain of your control?"

"Yes Sir."

"Positively, 100% certain-"

"I'm notifying you Sir, not asking your permission." A sad smile to show it was a small joke, and Exile sighed. "I have you with me. I will be fine." His muzzle nodded slightly before looking at Vyitr again.

"Are we needed here for anything else?"

"Not that I know of. But..." A noise in question. "I thought your name was Exile." A slight neck curl from both dragons.

"It... Is?"

"Then why...?" The wolf looked back and forth between the two dragons. "Oh, Sir is a Title of sorts! How interesting!" A few awkward chuckles.

The snaps of the campfire woke the dragon from his deep slumber, but barely. Faintly recalling himself being knocked out by a tremendous pain, but at the moment he felt nothing of the sort. Just the comfort of a warm fire... And that familiar scent of black fur.

Thea laid completely still for a long time, trying to pre-think his arguments and counterpoints. Let alone what he was going to really say to his old friend, when really, there was only one thing. "I'm sorry." The blue one mumbled into the darkness, not getting a response for a long time.

"Not yet, you aren't." Krow muttered back, getting the dragon's wings to droop further, and feel the long spines of his companion. Finally raising his head to see Biscuit's condition. "It's alive." A half puzzled look from those monstrous eyes, as the tirix stared into the fire. "You nearly jumped in front of a blade that could cut hairs in tenths for it. I'm not going to kill it out of spite or revenge. Or whatever you can think of." A breath of relief. "...And I think it knew that."

"What... Do you mean?"

"As in, it didn't hiss or whatever at me after I smacked that dumbass muzzle of yours into yesterday." Those frilled ears dropped. "Three weeks ago." The black one continued, lowering the dragon's head. "Last year."

"It... Did hurt a lot."

"Yeah, you deserved it alright." A sad chuckle from Thea. "And I think your dog thing agreed with me."

"You're supposed to be my dog thing."

"Then what the hell do you call that?"

"You on a good day." That one got a glare from those purple eyes as the blue one sadly smiled at him. Then looked over at his pet. "...His name is Biscuit."

"Of course it is." That black head rested on his paws. "I can only imagine that's just the beginning of all the stupid things you've done since we last met."

"Well... There's quite a list to it." A breath as they watched the fire for a moment. "I got us a home."

"One that you paid for using that special currency of yours." The dragon went quiet. "Well, you didn't pay for it using your brain cells. Last I checked, if you got another one you'd have a matching set." Another sad smile that those purple eyes eventually caught. Taking a sigh soon after.

"...I missed this."

"Masochist." A faint chuckle. "Go on. What's next on it."

"...I tried to make friends, but only found ones that seemed to beat on me or had strange ulterior motives. Ones I still don't quite understand-"

"That's Exile for you." A noise in question. "Finds someone so pathetic and makes it a full time job to just protect them the best he can." A faint nod from the blue one. "Sounds so tedious."

"Speaking of tedious... I traveled the land a little. Often the same damn roads." Thea grumbled. "And... To top it all off... You know..." No response. "So, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"...Not turning out better? Going against what you taught me? What-"

"Nalgrasha taught you?" His large heart both felt warm, yet sank when Krow said his name. "Why the hell are you looking for my approval over his anyway?"

"...You remembered his...?"

"Of course I did. What, did you think I wasn't listening?" The black one grumbled, but the dragon didn't respond. "So, what now? You found the darkness and suddenly decided that you were going to be the one to unleash it? Is that what the whispers said to you?"

"...They called me, yes. I just..." A deep breath. "This is just what you were looking for. That this was the one thing that could end this endless cycle that plagued your life..." A loud growl from the tirix. "I mean, I did it for other people, yes. But I also did it for you-"

"**I'm sorry.**" Thea double took at the black one, now noticing that he was looking away.

"...Sorry...?"

"I **knew**." A long silence as the blue one tried to figure out what he was talking about. "I fucking **knew** it when you told me your bullshit story. I fucking **knew** that it was going to be you from then on." Another long silence as those maroon eyes just stared at him in shock. "I just didn't want to believe it."

"...Why?"

"Because I seen myself in you...? Past self, of course. I seen some dumbass that finally understood the extent of his own abilities. I seen some idiot that realized what he could do for the world if he ended up attempting to sacrifice himself to save the god damn thing. And how stupidly worthless of a task it would be in the end." A faint breath from him. "So I tried to **change** you. **Force** you to think that they weren't **damn well** worth it. That the only thing important to you in this world was **yourself**, and **fuck** everyone else."

"Krow..."

"...That's why I left. I knew that the Sixes were watching me from time to time... If they took a long look at your blue ass and figure out how resistant you were to this damn thing..." Another long stare as a few tears rolled down that scaly muzzle. "So I left. Didn't come back because..." A breath from the black one. "Because I didn't want to be forced to..."

When he didn't continue, the dragon got up. Giving a few pets to his companion before stepping over to the tix. Laying down with him and giving the black one a tight hug. "...I forgive you."

"Of course you would." He grumbled at the larger one. "Too late to do anything about it now..."

"Then...?" Silence. "Where do we go from here?"

"In the morning... I take you to see Thogh."

Chapter 13

The blue dragon whined loudly as he staged over the path, getting the black tix and bone critter to almost grumble in sync. "You realize we've only been walking for ten minutes since our last break." Krow muttered, listening to the large one wheeze something about his blue ass. "And that 'last break' was the fifth one we've had." Another whine. "In two hours."

"I get it-!" Thea flopped down on the small path. "I suck at this!"

"Yet, you wanted to travel and see the world." The black one sat down, looking over at Biscuit for a moment. "Did he complain and mutter this much with you guys as well?" A grumbling nod from the critter. "Figures."

"How... Much...?"

"About another hour." A whimper. "With you, maybe three." A louder whimper. "See, the thing I don't get is, you absorbed this darkness junk, right? The stuff that's been increasing the physical shit of every animal that comes into contact with, causing them to get all 'roided out until they collapse. You, on the other hand, somehow get *weaker* taking it." A straining hiss from the blue one. "How the hell did you manage that?"

"*I don't know...!*"

"And not just physically weaker either, like a normal illness. But then again, you've always sucked at this stuff. Must come with the immunities, I suppose." Another whimper as the tirix walked over and leaned against the resting dragon for a while. Staying silent for a few minutes.

"...What's going to happen, Krow?"

"Do I really, **really** need to explain this?"

"I guess... I just want to know if it will hurt or not." He felt those purple eyes study him for a bit, but couldn't look in their direction.

"...It'll have to." That sank his heart. "If I just flat-out kill you, it won't get rid of the energy. We need to dissipate the energy first." The sound of that worried him. "...You'll feel like you're suffocating, struggling to breathe for even the simplest of breaths as your body is drained of all its power. Then... You'll just stop functioning." The black one mumbled, hearing the heavy breaths of the larger one trying to stay composed. "...You asked for this."

"...I know I did. I just wish..." Biscuit came over to comfort Thea. "I just wish I didn't have to suffer."

"I can't put you to sleep. You'll just end up waking up instead and possibly..."

"Doing something I regret." A heavy sigh from the blue one. "...What about Biscuit?"

"What about it?"

"What will happen to him?"

"Pffft, fuck. I donno. He probably won't be harmed by it." A noise in question. "You notice something about him that is different from every other creature you've made or taken control of?" That time those monstrous eyes looked towards the tirix. "He ain't stupid."

"...Stupid?"

"As in, he doesn't go out of his way to savagely attack anyone. He doesn't seem to be acting like an animal, does he?" Thea studied his companion for a long few moments, eventually earring the thing curiously purr at him. "Odds are, it's not being controlled by the darkness."

"Why...?" A thick stare from Krow to ask How The Fuck Would I Know? "M-maybe because... I made him before...?"

"Before you touched the rock? Maybe." A long, almost annoyed sigh from the tirix. "But I know what you're going to ask." A few heavy taps on the dragon's side as the black one got up. Starting to carry on walking again. "I'll take care of him while you're gone. Happy?" A sad look as those maroon eyes studied the bone critter for a bit, getting a lick of affection from it and returning one. Granted, half regretting it because of the horrid taste on his red tongue, but it was the thought that counted.

But they soon started following the black tiger along the path, as Thea attempted to push past the gloomy thoughts about his future. "So... You know Ricon?" An unimpressed stare in question from those purple eyes as he waited for the dragon to catch up. "I-I just... I don't really-"

"He cured you, I know." A double take from Thea, and the black one took a breath. "I had a scrap with your badger-"

"Zelly?" A nod. "...How is she?"

"She's fine. And took one hell of a beating, I might add. Yet somehow perfectly fine." A sad smile from the blue one. "Said your brain got scrambled, and the Warlord fixed it."

"Y-yeah... And in turn, she..."

"Got hit by the same thing, except she became more durable."

"*Somehow* more durable." Thea snorted. "Seriously, why couldn't I become a brick wall instead of replacing words with statements?"

"Story of your life." Though sarcasm, it made the dragon's head lower with dark thoughts again.

"...One only you will remember."

"Her too." A heavy sigh from the blue one, as he longed to see the black female again. "Don't ask. I don't know where she went."

"Is she going to be safe though...? What if the darkness...?"

"Does something to her as well?" A sad nod and the tirix sighed. "Then I might just have to beat it out of her too. But regardless, she'll probably survive, considering the portion difference." A few taps on his large blue body made the dragon sadly smile. "...I used to work for Ricon."

A double take from Thea. "Seriously?"

"Way back in Veritas. He had some of his goonies and whatnot, they were being assholes. So I beat the shit out of them. Then he sent more." A snout toss from Krow. "Then more, then more. Then eventually his elites."

"Elites?"

"His most trustworthy, and 'Best' soldiers. A falcon named Devotion, a Rhino named Devastation. A dove named Serenity, and some panther... Thing named Sinality." A confused look from the large one. "I couldn't tell what it was. It wasn't obvious, I'll tell you that. Regardless-"

"They couldn't take you down." A noise in confirmation. "And Ricon admired that...?"

"Guy does like power, and I guess I proved myself to him. I mean, it wasn't the easiest of fights, but I did it."

"And they...?"

"Lived, if that's what you mean." A deep breath. "At the time, he gave me work. Something to do, a goal to look forward to for a while. Even offered me my own team, but I declined. Most of them hated me anyway."

"Why?"

"Because I was the one keeping those shitheads in line. And like I *really* needed people to defend me." He grumbled, getting the blue one to smile a bit. "But that all changed when I spotted the guy murder his own daughter."

"T-the fuck...?"

"She was an unstable pyromaniac." A noise in question. "She liked to burn things. A lot. And often went out of her way just to torture others, mostly his enemies... At first." A bit of a horrified look at the tirix, and he eventually slowed to a stop. Getting the dragon to do the same. "It wasn't his real daughter, she was adopted. But that doesn't change the fact that Ricon executed her himself. Probably thinking nobody knew about it."

"Then you...?" Krow was quiet for a few moments before he sat down.

"...I'm going to tell you this, because you don't have much time left." Another sad look. "Remember who I said my real parents were?"

"Kind of...?"

"One of them being the Force of Death?" An unsettling nod. "...I kinda liked her, to be honest. She was bitter and unstable, but she half reminded me of..." Another breath. "So when I found her body, I stupidly attempted to revive her. Same way my father did through strict exceptions..."

"But you-?"

"Fucked it up. Horribly. Accidentally warping her soul and tearing it in two. Causing her so much pain that I had to put her down again and just hope for the best." A heavy sigh. "I was so damn naive sometimes... But too prideful to ask for help. Knowing what he would say..."

"Your father?" A nod.

"I was mad at him at the time too. We weren't really on speaking terms. Regardless, I resigned shortly after and..." A heavy breath as the dragon moved to comfort the black one. "She suffered a lot, y'know? More than she needed to, before I even did that to her. I learned my damn lesson and never attempted such a thing again... It's not as easy as just bringing them back, like fitting a puzzle piece into a slot."

"I..." Thea was half trying to make sense of it, but no words came out. Instead, he just held his old friend. Even knowing how awkward it might make them feel, and letting the bone critter join in on the brotherly affection.

Several minutes passed until the tiritax tapped the blue arm. "Alright, that's enough. You've spent way too much time holding onto me the past eight hours."

"It's only about an hour total."

"Exactly. Longer than anyone else has, which is saying something about your taste in friends." A chuckle from the dragon as he nuzzled the tiger. "No bunting, you."

"Bunting?"

"Like a cat." A noise in question, and Krow sighed. "You are hopeless."

After three hours, several other breaks, and the longest set of stairs the dragon has ever climbed in his life, Thea flopped up the final step. Panting loudly like he was nearly dying. Every muscle in his body burned, from his ears to the very tip of his tail. To the point the blue one was sure he was set on fire by the very sun.

"And you wanted to come with me when I left." The tiritax grumbled, not even the least bit winded. Getting a bit of a smirk as the dragon attempted to talk through his heaves, knowing the basic hisses, snorts, and Bite My Scaly Blue Ass' the large one was attempting to telegraph. In some ways, he succeeded in making the sack of scales bitter.

After seventeen heavy breaths and a long rest on the flat stone, Thea opened his eyes to the landscape. A massive view of the forests, valleys, mountains and even lakes that the temple had to offer. All glistening in the brightest day he could possibly imagine. Perfect with a warm set of winds, as if the threat of the darkness was finally abandoned.

Defeat. He never would've even guessed he could deliver such a thing, gift it to the world he was forced to leave behind. But at least he could see it now, see what his actions would result in. A long study of the beautiful lands, Thea could barely make out where his last home was. The distance he had traveled this past month, and all the pain he had seen. "Is it worth it?" The tiritax asked him, following the blue one's thought process.

"...Yes. Yes it is." A heavy breath as he just took it all in. Feeling Biscuit nudge at him, like it knew what was going on. Like it knew the dragon was leaving. "You sure you want to come in, Biscuit?" A high pitched chirp from it that was almost bark-like. One more gaze upon the world, and he dragon took a deep inhale. "...Alright. I'm ready."

A nod from the Tirix as he lead the way. Thea following, but took one last look back upon entering the doorway. Hearing many of the torches within light up and display a massive circle made of stone, written in a language the large one had never seen before. And on the adjacent side, a humanoid bird. "I am glad you could make it here." The avian greeted the tirix with a smile.

"Yeah, well..." A glance back at the dragon. "Would've made it sooner if someone was in better shape." A sad smile from the blue one as he nudged the tiger. "What did I just say about bunting."

"That you like it, and you wish others would do it more often." Thea teased, getting a snout toss from the feral black one.

"Can you see what I've had to put up with all these years?" He grumbled towards Thogh.

"The common factor to such outcomes would be you, Krow."

"That doesn't mean I'm the problem."

"I think it does, actually." Thea chuckled, taking a step forward. "You must be Thogh?"

"Yes."

"Thea'daisis." The two greeted, getting a rather interested look from the Six.

"How politely mannered, far from what I was expecting to encounter this day." A gesture to ask if it was okay to touch the blue one, and he agreed. Feeling those strange half-talon claws move across Thea's eyes and he felt them twitch again. "Astonishing. Yet, you were able to absorb such energies without being consumed by it?"

"I..."

"Not compared to any others. Apparently they found someone that was working with a Force in some underground lab. Even he wasn't immune to it." The tirix stated, looking over the calendar. Then the bone critter got the avian's attention. "It's tame."

"Fascinating." Another moment of study between the dragon and Biscuit. "You do not control this one?"

"N-not like the others, no." Thea awkwardly said, taking a breath of remorse. "I'm... Sorry for what I needed to do."

"That is fine, Thea'daisis. You only did it because you were required to. Me and all the other Sixes were expecting the damages to be far worse. Though the casualties are still regrettably high, I do

not think we could have desired a better outcome." A sad smile from the blue one as he exhaled the fear from his heart. "You understand the consequences of such a path, correct?"

"I... Do. Yes."

"As well as the reason why you cannot be saved."

"That was never... Explained. But I wasn't-" A soft touch on the dragon's chest got him to whimper a bit. Expecting a harsh pain, and really displaying the fear that the blue one was feeling towards such a meeting.

"Thea'daisis." Thogh started. "Your body and mind have been outstandingly resistant. However, your soul has been tainted due to this. Nearly dissolved like it was bathing in an acid." That strange paw moved around his chest. "This, sadly, cannot be repaired. And without it-"

"I would only suffer..." A glance at Krow who was just trying not to look at the two. "...Like she did." No response from him. "Death isn't a consequence to meet... It's a Mercy." A slow nod from the avian.

"Once that energy within your vessel has been diminished, we can work on repairing the grid without corruption. There, everyone alive and yet to be born, will have a much greater lifespan to look forward to."

"After they get rid of these dumbass currencies." The tix grumbled. "Let alone, rulers."

"That will be your job then." A sad smile from Thogh. "Are you ready to begin, Thea'daisis?" A deep breath, and a nod. "Thank you for your sacrifice, it will be recorded for the world to recall. May I hug you?"

It half broke the nearly crying dragon into chuckles, but nodded. Hugging the bird back tightly as he took several deep breaths. Letting go after a bit and hugging his pet Biscuit for a bit, hearing it whimper like knowing something was wrong. "You belong to Krow now, understand? He'll take good care of you while I'm gone-" Thea choked, releasing several sobs as he struggled to compose himself. Receiving the several licks of affection and farewells.

Then he turned to face the tix, getting them to lock eyes. The dragon's, though monstrous, were drenched in sorrow. While Krow's were barely changed. "Don't hug me." And the blue one hugged him. As tight as he could, regardless of how harsh his tired muscles were screaming at him to stop. Like it was the very last action of his life, he held onto that black tiger. "Christ, you never did listen."

"Thank you for everything, big brother!" The large one yelped his sorrow, not holding back. "For...!" Another choke.

"Just say everything. I get it. Now put me down." Something unintelligible came from that blue maw and the tix guessed it was a very poor attempt at saying Everything. "Done yet?"

A few heavy breaths, and the dragon's arms gave out. Taking a few breaths, but starting to get all sobby again looking into those purple eyes. "I..."

"You're thankful. You're sorry. You accidently drowned my pet rock." A tearful noise in question. "Oh, wait. That one was me, not you. Can I hit him now?" The avian nodded.

"I always looked up to you." Thea said, finally getting that weighted reaction out of the black one.

"I know you did, kid. And it's as awkward as it is flattering." Another deep breath from the two. "Thanks for this gift, Thea." A few shaky nods.

"Enjoy your world, Krow." And the blue one closed his eyes, lowering his head for the tix to take him. Finally putting a fulfillment to the many stories the lands had between the Black Hand and the Darkness. Placing a single furred paw on that snout, a set of black metal rings omitted from Krow's fingers, lightly tapping on the dragon's maw.

Within moments, Thea's energy was completely drained. Collapsing heavily on the ground and gasping for breath. Far worse than all the times he was traveling, as his large body struggled to make up for what was lost. That horrible sound of steel against steel again, and a light brush of a furred paw banished even more of that energy. Breathing itself was almost too much to bare. Taking everything the dragon had to get one single half wheeze. Barely making out the sound this time, as Thea started to fade.

The three just stared at the body of blue scales on the floor, half twitching as if it were still trying to recover. Lightly breathing, but not enough to survive. Making the bone critter whimper loudly and nudge Thea's body a few times. Only howling in sorrow when it didn't get a reaction.

"The energy has been lost now." Thogh said, looking towards the ceiling of the temple soon after. "And the Grid is looking much cleaner. It would be wise to do it now." A deep breath from Krow, turning around and heading for the doorway. Getting the attention of Biscuit as the black tix didn't look back.

"Say your goodbyes, I'll just be outside." Both the creature and Thogh watched the panther for a few moments, able to tell something was definitely off but didn't question it. Instead either going back to his scans or grieving for the time being as Krow walked into the sunlight. Taking a sharp turn to the outside of the doorway, almost hiding himself away from them and sitting down. Gazing along the view of the far distance for a moment, exhaling a deep breath... And covering his eyes with a paw.

It didn't take long for his jaw to stiffen and a few droplets to fall onto the stone floor. Dealing with another mix of emotions; that muzzle and paw hiding his eyes straining in anger, the heavy weight in his chest from losing another friend. Either by their own stupid choices or awful habits... Even after Krow tried to help them. Stuck as the survivor once more.

Thoughts occupied him to the point where he didn't even notice steps climbing up to the temple until they were just several away from him. The tix sharply looked at the black badger who glanced at

him, then inside the large doorway. "...Am I too late?"

"...Yeah. Just missed him." Krow responded, a mix between that sarcasm she grew to know from the dragon and... Remorse. Only to hear a growl from inside, getting the two to half glance towards the doorway at Biscuit; spines raised and blocking Zeltra's way to the blue wyrm's body. "Down boy. There's nothing she can do to harm him anymore." That didn't really stop it much, but the two black ones met their gazes again. "If you've got something to say to him, say it now. If he isn't gone, he won't last much longer."

A sad look from the Northe as she entered, dropping her equipment on the floor and walking towards the dead dragon. Rather surprised that there wasn't a single wound on him. Though, that didn't stop the bone creature from nearly guarding Thea's body from the badger. Stopping once he got another call from the tix to stand down and let Zeltra pay her respects. Resting beside Thea's head. Lifting it to see his face, then an eyelid. Now vacant of the monstrous look of what that rock did to him. However, it did not shift in the slightest. Not even twitch, as she rested it back down on the ground. "Did you need his body for anything?" She called back to Krow.

"Shouldn't... We're all done here." He answered from the gateway.

"Then I'll take him up to the Northe and bury him there, if that's alright-"

"You want to carry. A twelve ton dragon. All the way up north." The black one grumbled, not really asking a question, actually getting him to look inside and witness her give a solid nod. "Fuck it, do what you want." He got up to leave, calling Biscuit to follow. Hearing him whimper, like he was divided between leaving Thea, and following the dragon's best friend.

Getting up, Zeltra started lifting the blue body up, but dropped him when Thogh came very close. Placing a strange paw on her chest, and getting her to growl. Slapping him and causing that beak to turn for the moment, but getting no ill reaction. "You are... Damaged as well."

"What!?" She hissed, making the tix stop along the first set of stairs.

"Like he was... Yours is still functional. Slightly missing, like it was corroded, but..." A look at the dragon, and back to her. Even getting Krow's attention. "You are...?"

"Zeltragraciae. And you?"

"Thogh. I am a Category Six, and one of this planet's guardians." Another study of the dragon. "Zeltragraciae, what is your relationship with Thea'daisis?"

"R-relationship?"

"She's a recent friend to just discovered she loved him." A growl from her to the other black one. "Oh stop denying it already. What are you getting at, Thogh?"

"Zeltragrae. With your permission, I can bring Thea's back by forging both of your souls into a single whole one."

"Y-you can!?" She actually stuttered.

"Yes. However, if one of you dies, you both will be taken." Barely even a moment passed when she responded.

"Do it."

"It will be painful."

"I don't care. Bring him back to me. Even if he's just a head on a stick, I want that dragon back." A puzzling look from the bird, then to Krow.

"Don't look at me. She's the one in love. That's what it does to you."

"Alright. Zeltragrae, it would be best if you lay down beside him."

The day was still beautiful, as the three walked down the shady path. Providing a colder shade to the already cooling temperatures that were growing gradually. Slowly becoming winter as the days went past. Though it made his blue scales click loudly in shivers, he still enjoyed it. Taking breath after breath as to finally enjoy the scent of the colder season.

Though, it was still a bit difficult to keep up with the badger's pace, Thea somehow already survived worse pain. This was hardly nothing compared. However, the awkward silence was still making him a bit uncomfortable. Attempting to find something for the female to be proud about and talk for ages. It usually wasn't hard, but something was still off about it all. Like Zeltra was hiding something from him, or...

Eventually, they came to the fork in the road. A sign reading North, while the other reading Southeast. Stopping for a small break as the two looked at each other, the dragon still petting his

companion. "Here we are." The blue one said, nearly standing on the Southeast side of the road, while the badger on the North.

"Yeah." An awkward silence. "You sure you're feeling okay for traveling? I'm pretty sure you literally died yesterday." It made the blue one chuckle.

"Yeah... I think I'm fine." A rub on the back of his neck. "Krow didn't really beat me, just knocked the wind out of me."

"Still, that stuff about... Air in the brain he was talking about. I had a hard time following it."

"I have a hard time too." A sad smile from the dragon, as he got one back. "Thanks... Zelly. For..."

"You are welcome. You basically did the same thing for every single person in the world." Another moment of silence. "Even though you also ended up hurting a lot of people..." A whimper from him. "As well as basically kill off two armies..." His head sank, but she half smirked at him. "Most Northes would be proud of that, really. Let alone what good you've done."

"I'm just..." A deep sigh as time passed. "So, you're heading back home then?"

"Yeah. With no more talk of war, I should've been back at most a week ago."

"Then... Thanks for your help, Zelly." A nod from her. "Thanks for... Everything. I owe you."

"Yeah, I'll put it on your tab." A faint chuckle. "You ever see that fox guy again?"

"Roe? I think he went back home."

"As in...?" A gesture towards the sky from that blue snout. "And the...?"

"Flyare too, yes." A few faint nods. "What about Ricon?"

"Think he went back to the capital and was made High Commander. Maybe if Krow's right, it'll just be an empty title."

"Yeah... We don't need anymore wars." The dragon mumbled. "A-and if there is...?"

"I won't be joining it. Don't worry." A sigh of relief. "But that means you better watch your scaly behind too. No more using your breath powers on other people." A faint nod as more silence fell over them. "Alright, we're burning daylight." The badger said, walking the North road. "Take care of yourself Thea, and enjoy your new life."

"You too, Zelly."

"Watch over him, Biscuit. I'm counting on you." A chirp in response as they parted ways. Her heart cursing her prideful self for letting the dragon go without saying anything. Even the night before was filled with the same damn small talk and awkward silences, all because the badger just couldn't say anything.

Granted, last night was due to Krow being there as well. Was this because of Biscuit's presence? Why she couldn't just tell the blue one that she loved him? Everything is so clear, the fact that they would sacrifice themselves, even just fragments, for each other. And all Zeltra could do is just let him walk away, never knowing.

Her chest demanded that she ran back. Followed the road and just shout it out. To find that stupid blue muzzle and just hug it tightly until it cracked and whimpered like the spleeny wuss he was. Yet, her pride still remained in control. Regardless of the warnings of how she would regret this for the rest of her life. Regardless of the thoughts of him being cornered, possibly captured again and kept for someone's own vain mortality.

The images popped in her mind one by one. Of Thea being shackled and chained. Of being starved into submission. Caged and never to be set free again, just like those bastards at that castle. And by the time she heard something in the bushes, the badger was ready to beat the hell out of something with the very fire in her heart. Only to see-

"Biscuit? Where are you going?" The bone critter came out of the forestry, and the blue dragon soon following. Double taking at the badger's stance and curling his neck. "O-oh, hi Zelly. He was just-" The black one dropped her weapon and gear, then dove into Thea's chest. "Z-Zelly!?"

"Don't ever leave me again, you dumbass dragon!" She shouted.

"Leave you-!? I'm pretty sure you left first." He snorted, almost chuckling awkwardly at her tight squeeze. "It's been like ten minutes. Why the...?" The large one joked, but understood. Moving a bit to embrace the badger back and stay there for several minutes. Looking over at his companion to quietly say Thank You, and see it nod. "Zelly?" A noise in question from the female.

"What're the Northelands like in the winter?"