

D-I-E Act 1 - E.T.

By Bartan Tirix

[See Prologue for beginning]

Chapter 1

The redwoods were nearly pitch black at night, especially with the clouded sky. Blocking all the precious light from the moon that the beige fox could use right now; constantly stumbling across roots and low branches as she scampered. Occasionally hearing the cackle of something in the darkness, be it in the skies or in the trees, she couldn't quite locate. Taunting her with words that were deafened by her rapid heartbeat as the small canine attempted to escape with a limp in her step.

The Vixy attempted to stray from the path, hoping that the thicker trees and large rocks would help hide her from the demon. Taking shelter in the shadows behind a large stone as soon as she heard the echoing voice begin to distance. Trying to slow down her breaths and heart rate, to the point of holding her breath when the branches above began to move and something landed on the other side. A little bit of a dark purple light flickered around the large rock, keeping her in shadow as the larger creature attempted to keep its chuckles under control.

"Come on oooout, little lovely." The demon called, brushing some of the leaves off the 'cloak' that fell from his arms. Like that of wings; far different from its more humanoid body covered in an oil-black fur. "I ain't gonna hurt ya. I just need... A pillow of sorts to help this kink in my neck, you see." The creature stalked, using the purple flame at the end of his long tail as a lantern for his search. Scanning the area with these cat-like ears and faint whiskers. "It's been a problem for a while, keepin' me up night after night..."

The canine's jaw stiffened, bracing her body from giving into its urge to scamper away and retreat. Still holding in that breath as her heart thumped in her ears, unable to quite tell where the demon was without peeking around; possibly revealing herself. Just trying to keep

still, but her chest began to jerk from holding her breath in for too long. Requiring the fresh air, especially after burning through so much energy. Trying to release it in a very slow and silent manner. Not hearing any response from the demon as it began to walk away from the Vixy's hiding spot.

"Come on now, you can't hide from me." The Tombat chuckled deviously. "Many have tried, but all have failed... But I always like to give them a chance before I search them out, to treat them better, y'know?" Another few breaths from her as the light came closer. "No? Not gonna surrender for me, fluffball?" A desperate attempt to hold in that whimper. "Alright, but I'm doing more to you than just making you a pillow, love. You had your chance..." Some silence, and suddenly she could feel it. Like an invisible eye focusing on her, regardless of line-of-sight. "There you are-"

The demon cat suddenly choked on his word, standing completely still and almost... Cowering? Soon taking a step back and calling in a very low, frightful tone. "Vixy... I need you to come with me. Very. Quietly." The sudden change puzzled her, instantly expecting a ruse. "Girl... I'm serious... That's... That's not a rock...!"

What? A very faint whimper in question left her white muzzle until the shelter near her began to move! A large shadow of a beast a dozen times her size, unfolding from its crouched self, unable to tell what end was facing the small fox. Until a tail nearly batted against her, a pair of wings folding out and reaching high up, then some sort of beak staring down the Tombat. "Screw this! You're on your own!"

The demon fled directly away, but now the small fox was faced with a new one. Covered in a dark shadow, illuminating those sharp cyan eyes that very quickly spotted her out. Making the small one whimper as her fluffy coat depressed against her form, making her look significantly smaller while her tail curled. Legs shaking as the beast's body turned towards her, those glowing circles staring her down. Disappearing for a moment as they closed and the shadow half grunted. "You're... A Vixy?"

A sharp whine from her shaking form as she barely detected those large feathered appendages fold back in gently. Significantly reducing the creature's size as it looked back where the Tombat was, his purple lights now completely withdrawn from any view. "He was searching for you. Did you know him?" The small one was shaking so much that the gryphon couldn't quite get an answer. Taking a breath for himself before laying back down in front of the fox. "Please, relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Y-you're...?" She eventually whimpered after a long pause. "You're not going to... Eat me?" It was hard to see the beak move left to right within the darkness, almost needing to follow those cyan eyes when they opened again. Hearing some signs of discomfort from the

large bird that he powered through.

"I'm... Famished. Very famished, but Vixy's are all fluff. No offense." The large one sighed. "Good for comfort, but not good for actually hunting. I'm not sure why..." Another look back towards where the Tombat fled. "What are you doing wandering out in the dark? I thought Vixy's borrowed for the evenings."

"W-we do, yes." The fox whimpered, trying to overlook the large one. "My burrow collapsed several nights ago, I didn't have anywhere to hide. But I..." A noise in question from the gryphon. "I was told to wait in place earlier for a friend to find us food."

"A friend?"

"A-a... They're another dark one, I was skeptical at first, because of..." A gesture to the Tombat's previous location. "Some do have a terrible reputation."

"So I've heard... But this friend of yours?"

"Is... Surprisingly protective. Small, like me, but they are kind." The Vixy was getting a little more comfortable around the larger one, even if the occasional sounds of grumbles were howling from the bird's middle. "Maybe I can help you, since you helped me."

"Hmm?" Those cyan eyes watched the small one closely as she got up and started searching the ground.

"We're good at... Finding things in the ground. Sometimes it's just old objects that have been buried, but there is the occasional forage." Several sniffs as she paced around in large circles, stopping on occasion and studying the area with her nose before moving on.

"I've heard about this." The gryphon patiently watched her work, even if a part of him wasn't so patient. "This friend of yours... You said he was small? And like you?"

"Yes. He's a sweetheart. A bit too serious sometimes, but-" The fox's scent caught something, causing her to begin burrowing.

"So they're dark, small, like you..." The gryphon half grunted at his memory. "A Nox?" It actually made the small canine stop in place and look at the large shadow.

"That was... A surprisingly good guess." The Vixy nervously chuckled. "You must... Really know your Pals." The bird didn't answer, just silently grunted from the pain in his head. Closing his eyes for a few moments to the point where he didn't notice her approach and dropped something at his front; what looked to be a round misshapen rock.

"What... Is that?"

"It's a truffle." The small fox giggled, having her tail flutter and puffed out as normal. "I know it's not meat, but they are safe to eat. Just a little dirty if anything." Those cyan eyes focused on it with curiosity as the large bird picked up the surprisingly light 'rock'. Airy like bread, shaking some of the more loose dirt off of it. It wasn't the most appealing thing to him, but the gryphon's body didn't really care. Taking a small breath and putting it in his maw, requiring to bite down on it surprisingly hard to get through it. Still making the bird question the fox again if she tricked him into eating a rock, but it was more spongy. And it... Kinda had a slight profile of meat? "They're a bit strange, aren't they?"

"I'd describe it as a soft rock, yes." That made her chuckle as the Vixy moved back to the hole she dug and filled it back in. "But satisfying for now, thank you."

"Thank you for being kind enough not to attack me." Those large green discs looked over the shadow, still unable to really make out anything besides a large beak and blue eyes. "Where... Did you come from? I've never seen anything like you before."

"O-oh, me? I..." He shifted up to look over in the distance, spotting the snowy mountains from afar, one much closer but smaller. "I came from up there. It's... A long story, not very interesting. I just decided to try to fly instead of climbing down and well."

"You can fly?"

"Well, yes, but..." A head tilt from fox as the gryphon let out a shy whimper. "I'm... Not so good at the 'landing' part, I'm afraid." Another giggle from her as the Vixy came close. Placing her small paw onto his large, almost dangerous looking one. Making him suck in a breath quietly.

"I'm Rooth."

"Rooth?"

"Yes. It's not uncommon for Vixys to have names." Another small pain was spotted within those cyan eyes. "What's yours?"

"My...?"

"Your name, silly." Another giggle.

"O-oh, right. Of course..." The large black beast looked around shyly, but exhaled, coming clean. "4-9-5."

"495?"

"Y-yes... I've been searching for another one, but I just... Don't know of one yet." A breath as that large head shook slowly. "I've been too hungry to really think, survival came first."

"That makes sense." The small canine shivered and laid down, using her tail to help keep herself warm. "Where did your name come from then? The... 4?"

"4-9-5?" She nodded, only realizing her mistake when there was a heavy crack in those blue eyes, requiring them to hide away as he collected himself. "It's... A long story. But I really shouldn't be keeping it."

"Did you leave your family?" A slow nod in response that Rooth could barely make out. "I left mine too. The burrow was getting a little crowded, as one does. I wanted to leave and go somewhere safe. Too many humans around with their... Strange weapons, hunting for pals." Another shiver, though not temperature related. "I almost got caught last night too, by one of them. That's when Harater aided me."

"Harater? The Nox?" A sad smile but a nod from the Vixy.

"He's never said why, but he is kind as well. Though hardened it seems." No real response, just the large one scouting the area a little as he laid back down too. "4? What are you planning to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have somewhere you need to go? A plan of sorts?" The gryphon took a pause, not really knowing how to answer that. Before something could come to mind, his ears caught something again. Making those large beige ears perk too, catching her name being called. "Harater? Over here!" A faint purple light was seen as a small canine in a purple shaw followed the path to her. Sighing in relief once the Vixy was spotted.

"Goodness, girl. What part of 'Don't move, I'll be right back' don't you understand-?" Only to finally detect the gryphon and nearly jump backwards, hissing loudly with fur standing out. The reaction causing Rooth to giggle loudly, unable to help herself.

"Relax darling, he is peaceful. Big, but a gentle giant." The small fox looked up to those cyan discs. "This is 4, I got chased down earlier by a Tombat that found me hiding. 4 scared it off, and gave me quite the scare too, I'll admit."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Harater." The gryphon spoke softly, still not getting the trust of the canine; the body language stating so as it nearly circled around the large bird. Standing in

between 4-9-5 and the Vixy.

"He's just very protective of me, dear. Don't mind him." She spoke to the large one before nudging the canine, barely getting the attention of the fox before magenta eyes snapped back on the feathered beast. "Did you find anything?"

"Just some berries. I hope that's okay."

"It's something to eat at least." It took a moment for the Nox to drop a pawful of berries that were stashed under the clothing. Letting the canine eat away.

"I also found a human settlement. Contemplated trying to steal a dish there, but I didn't want to risk getting caught." That stare didn't let up, even though the gryphon kept awkwardly breaking eye contact. "What are you."

"Please Harater, be friendly. He really is a kind soul." That stare didn't lift as she attempted to see in the darkness. "He's a Nitewing, is he not?"

"No. Not any Nitewing I've ever seen." A near whimper left the large bird as he was being studied, analyzed like he was back on that stage.

"Ragnahawk? I've never seen one myself, but-"

"No." The Nox almost coldly stated, motioning the gryphon to answer.

"I... I don't know."

"Where did you come from." Again, another blunt question with defensive intent. Making the bird's gaze just look down with sorrow.

"4 said he came from the mountain up there, the smaller one." That time, the Nox actually looked. "He flew down during the daylight, and that's the extent that he remembers." The magenta gaze was easing up as the canine took a breath. Finally breaking when Rooth's paw touched his lavender one. "I was just telling him about the sanctuary."

"Sanctuary?" The large one repeated in a whisper, getting a grumble from the canine in response. Making the Nox exhale but nod.

"There's rumors of a Sanctuary for Pals to the east. No humans, and walls to keep them out." A nod from the Vixy as Hara continued. "They say it's a safe place, where there's shelter, plenty of food, and plenty of space too. Everyone's invited, so long as we don't cause trouble."

"I see..."

"Have you heard anything, 4?" A slow head shake from the bird. "Would you like to come with us?"

"Rooth!" The Nox hissed at her.

"Harater! Don't be so rude, he's a friend and without direction." A near growl in response while the gryphon was just taken aback. "You said so yourself: the more we have, the easier the journey will become."

"Nobody knows what he is. He doesn't know what he is." A bit of a hard press on that canine paw grabbed the Nox's attention, making him focus on the scolding look on the Vixy. Finally making Harater close his eyes and take a long breath, looking at her large green ones again. "Do you trust him?"

"Yes." She answered, surprisingly quickly to the canine. Still clearly having his doubts as he looked over the giant bird. "I was attacked because I was detected. He really knows his Pals, 4 can protect me when you can't be there. I'm certain he'll be useful-"

"Or he can be trouble for us." That time the fox growled at him and Hara backed down. "Fine. But I want to know more about you." He said to the bird, however, moving back to the Vixy for now. "It's late. Get some sleep. I'll keep watch over you."

Chapter 2

Ease your grip.

You, I don't know.

So it was out of its cage.

I don't know what you are.

I'm dying.

That is a good way to get caught.

We're developing weapons here-

What are you?

Not Emotional Support Pals.

What even is it?

It's deteriorating.

It is not Pal.

I was meant to be...

It will not last.

Maybe I'm not Pal. I'm afraid.

It will burn out quickly-

My body is falling apart.

-and die before it becomes useful.

And I just can't abandon someone in need.

Life Starts Now.

A sharp gasp as the gryphon jerked awake. His body overheated and shaky as it scanned the darkness underneath the reddening sky. Not detecting any threats, but... Something warm near his chest? Looking down to spot the Vixy snuggled up in his black chest fluff, staring at it

for a few moments while his mind calmed down. "She insisted." The Nox nearly spooked 495 as that gaze immediately found him underneath the black wing and his side. "Said something about being too cold... And trusting you." A half grumble from Harater saddened the bird's expression.

"... And you don't-"

"Would you?" That only lowered the black one's ears but he didn't argue. "She's naive, sees the world covered in light and beauty. She doesn't see the dark side of things, never been caught by them, sold, or..." A heavy sigh from the canine. "Only ever hunted, in which: who hasn't been?"

Some silence from the gryphon before he exhaled and looked down at the sleeping fox. "...They did something to you." The tension around the small lavender one increased. "The humans?"

"I remember it more than most, yes." A pause. "Some just naturally do. Others... We're haunted by the past lives. About being caught, skinned, tortured to see how much we can endure. Harvested, sold to the highest bidder as slaves for whatever they want some of us to build... There's no end to the horrors they do to us. And for what? Entertainment? Survival-?"

"To understand us." 495 interrupted, getting another pain in his head and silencing the canine. "They're... Frightened. Worried about what Pals are capable of." ("*We're developing weapons here-*") The memory of Victor's voice struck fear in the large one's chest.

"...So, Survival. Or so they claim such a thing." No response. "...You've been near them then." A slow nod from the large beak. "Killed them?"

"...No."

"But there's blood on your hands. I can smell it." A couple of sniffs from the Nox, leading it towards the gryphon's back. However he didn't climb on the large one. "It's... Not human. Almost Pal, but... Not quite?"

"They shot at me. With their... Guns. I haven't been able to get the bullets out."

"Bullets?"

"The small shards of metal that they throw. I... Know how they work for some reason, but I... Don't know how to explain it."

"And you never fought back?" A slow head shake as the bird stared into space. "Why?" But the large one couldn't think of an answer. Maybe because of Allen? It was a subject he had yet to ponder. "You're going to have to at some point. You can scare off a few of them, but eventually they will come after you." A heavy breath nearly deflated the gryphon, just thinking

about it. "That's just the way the world is."

The small fox murmured and stretched her limbs in the cold morning air. Instantly wanting to return to the thick warmth of fluff she buried her snout in during the rest, and feeling a large set of arms gently embrace her back. Taking a few moments for her to yelp, not recognizing such a thing and startling the large bird at the same time. The two scampered back a few steps as all three were alerted, looking over each other.

The gryphon looked completely strange to the Vixy, but those cyan eyes she did recognize after a few seconds of study. Overlooking the large black one, still startled himself, before finally calming down. "Is everything okay?" The Nox asked her, taking a moment to look at him with a faint nod.

"Y-yes... Sorry, I didn't recognize you." The fox mumbled, getting a sad look from the bird as he sat down.

"I often forget how poor your eyesight is in the dark." Harater bluntly stated, getting a little closer to the Vixy as if almost shielding her from the beast. "Still think he's some Gentle Giant?" Those green discs stared at 495's for a bit, eventually causing the blue eyes to break contact and look over himself a bit sadly.

"...Yes." She quietly told the canine, getting half an eyeroll at her but didn't argue. Let alone get in the fox's way when she took a few steps forwards. "Sorry about that, 4. It's been a scary few days." A slow nod in response as she took a breath. "Come, let's head to that sanctuary together!"

"Rooth." The Nox scolded her, not expecting a sudden turn around from the fluffy fox and having her in Hara's personal space.

"He's lost and needs a friend. I will not abandon him." ("*Can't abandon someone in need.*") Another faint pain in the bird's skull. "He could be very useful to them!" Another long grumble from the canine before tossing his snout.

"Fiiiine." Hara growled, staring directly at the gryphon. "But don't cause us any trouble,

understand? I'm giving you one chance, 4-9-5." It worried the large one but he nodded. Watching the violet canid attempt to snort in intimidation, but it only came off as kinda cute. Making the Vixy smile, which only became brighter when she looked at the large bird. Gesturing to come with as she walked after Hara, easing the gryphon's heart a little as he walked behind them.

The morning was quiet overall as the group followed an old road. Taking in the gorgeous red in the trees and view of the distant islands. Spotting several different kinds of pals: Fuacks, Sparkits, the occasional sounds of Rushoars digging into the dirt. Digging up truffles themselves, much like Rooth did last night.

The warthogs soon detecting the two smaller ones and snorted at them. Looking like they were about to charge, but the shadow behind them got their attention later. Causing the two wild pigs to scatter from the gryphon's size, relieving the smaller ones as they looked up at the bird. The Vixy smiled, while the Nox still showed distrust. Causing the large one's head to lower in shyness as they continued to walk.

"This Sanctuary..." 4 started, as the group continued walking. "Where did you hear of it?" A small look from those magenta eyes, but the canine didn't pause his movement.

"There's been rumors going around for a while. Far far too long, honestly, and too many locations scattered around." Hara half grumbled. "I've checked out a few possible ones in my travels, gotten to see them from afar. Many of which seemed to be in ruins for decades, some were overtaken by humans and used as a base camp of sorts." A vocal pause from the Nox. "To the point where I'm convinced they were traps. How they got around in conversation is beyond me."

"But how did you hear of it?" The Vixy pondered, not spotting the rather confused look from the gryphon behind her.

"Darks are often lonely, and lonely Pals talk. The humans worship the fire, always keep one somewhere-"

"They don't worship it, they need the warmth to survive." 495 bluntly stated, actually getting a puzzled look from the other two. Stopping them in place, and in turn halting the large bird mid-step. Slightly embarrassed at the attention.

"What do you mean?"

"T-the humans? They need the fire. For warmth and for food."

"They don't eat fire, 4." Harater grumbled.

"N-no no, I mean they use it to cook with." A blank stare from the other two. "Or... Else they'll get sick." More silence. "If they eat it raw..." The feathered one whimpered at their gazes.

"Anyway. I met a Leezpunk who did a lot of traveling, came from the desert and was visiting distant family." They continued walking. "They're good at finding places. Stashes, human camps, hideouts. You name it. Helps them survive, being able to avoid being caught by detecting the camps far before wandering into sight range. However..." The two pals following the Nox were focused on him. "She said one of them didn't have humans in it. But instead were filled with Pals."

"So, just a gathering of sorts?"

"No. I brushed it off as that as well, but this Leez studied it for quite some time. Too curious to let it slide, I suppose." A breath from the violet one. "She had to get up on one of the large spikes of earth to see inside the walls, but there were Pals and no human in sight. Even got to talk to one of them that was either patrolling or foraging outside, said the same thing. Sanctuary, no humans, any Pal is welcome."

"So long as they don't cause trouble..." 495 mumbled.

"Or so I'm told. But... It's something. Hope for a better life." The canine looked over at the Vixy, who only smiled back. "For those who are willing to search for it."

"I'm surprised you didn't get more people to come with you, Hara." The fox smiled at him. Watching the small violet one take a faint breath.

"I wasn't really expecting to gather people for the journey. Most are content with what they know, the areas around them. They know where food is, they know that it's safe."

"And you were not?" Rooth lightly teased.

"...I was... Kinda. I never paid it any mind, honestly. But... I was a target for humans, and it didn't take long for me to fall into one of their traps." The Nox admitted in a grumble. "During transport between areas though, stacking cages upon cages in one of their steel beasts, It was... Stressful to say the least." Hara looked at both the Vixy and 495 for a moment, still walking. "And one of the things you really shouldn't stress out is a Tocatoco."

"A what?"

"One of those green explosive birds?" The gryphon tilted his head, getting a nod as it took a moment for the fox to pin things together. Those green eyes widening as the canine nodded slowly.

"It got too nervous, exploded, and sent all of our cages off the loud creature-"

"You mean a truck?" 495 asked, getting a strange look from the two smaller ones. "Large thing, has wheels, seems to spit out exhaust? The humans control it by getting-"

"Inside its head, yes." A moment of study over the large black bird. "How do you know what it's called?"

"I... I'm not sure." Those magenta eyes gazed at the large one a bit harshly, a distrust clearly shown as 495 lowered his head. "It just... Appears in my mind. Sometimes it hurts."

"...I imagine." Another stare-off was interrupted by the Vixy's nudge.

"Go on. You survived being exploded." A grumble in response to how she put it, making Rooth giggle.

"Yeah, most of the cargo was sent off, and it warped my cage enough for me to squeeze out. Problem is... That wasn't the first trip I took. So I had no idea where I was. I spent a few moons wandering, talking to Pals and eventually hearing of this Sanctuary. Assuming, like everyone else, it was rumors."

"But that Leezpunk..." The gryphon mumbled.

"Was the only one who ever stated they witnessed proof. And it's not too far from here either, but it is outside of the redwoods." He gestured to the red leaves on the trees above, as well as the red grass around. "Somewhere east. The paths will take us there if we stay on them-" Only for all three of their stomachs to growl nearly at the same time. "...Though we might require some sort of energy first if we're going to make it."

"Y-yeah, I'm still famished." 495 lightly panted. "What should we try? I haven't done any hunting before..." A puzzled look from the Nox as he gazed over the gryphon's size.

"...Really?" Those black ears fell as the bird shyly looked away. "Just... Stay here. Me and Rooth will look around to see what we can find."

"We will?" The fox asked Hara.

"It should be easier in the daylight." The Vixy couldn't disagree, however, moving up to the large one and bunting one of those black legs.

"We'll be back soon, 4. Keep an eye out on the path, just in case." That made the bird smile sadly and nod. Laying down after giving her a gentle nuzzle with that dark beak. Watching the two disappear into the woods soon after while releasing a sigh.

"Nothing this way." Rooth spoke quietly, looking through the bushes and trees for any forageables. "Hopefully we can find our way back."

"Don't worry about it." The Nox stated bluntly, causing the fox to release a noise in question but no response.

"What do you mean?" A low exhale was heard from the canine, but the Vixy persisted. "Hara-?" Those large ears perked and scanned the area for a moment, but didn't detect anything of danger. "Hara, what is it?"

"Rooth..." The violet Nox exhaled quietly, looking at those green eyes. "We shouldn't go back."

"What?" Hara's expression stoned itself against the fox's saddened one turned angry. "You do not trust him, do you?"

"We don't know what that bird is. For all we know, it could be some other trap from the humans." That angry stare didn't let up. "Not to mention, do you know how much something that size eats? Easily six or seven times what we need comfortably." Still no relief. "Even if we did find the Sanctuary, it's possible that bird might eat all the food there. They may not let us in because of it-"

"I trust 4, and so should you."

"Why? Because he 'accidentally' scared off something that was chasing you? Then decided not to eat you?" The canine growled. "I'm trying to protect you from-"

"And 4 isn't trying to protect us?" A grumble from the Nox as he looked away. "I trust him, Hara- like I trust you. He needs our help."

"But we don't need him. We can get to the Sanctuary on our own, and get in by ourselves." Those green discs glared at him. "Once we're there, we can tell them about 495, but they're better off without-"

"-With him, and so are we." A head shake from the canine, making the fox do the same

thing. "Where did this distrust come from, Harater? Why...?" Those magenta eyes closed as the Nox took a breath.

"I don't trust Darks. Especially ones with unusual knowledge about the humans- and neither should you. That's a good way of getting caught."

"He just seems to know stuff, that doesn't mean-"

"He's hiding something, Rooth. Something important and damning, I can feel it." Hara looked back in the direction of the gryphon. "I sensed it in his dreams, voices- many voices of the same language that the humans used, but some Pal as well." A deep breath from the canine. "A scattered mess of memories, I can't make sense of it but nobody knows what... IT is. The unknown cannot be trusted." Another staring match.

"...I'm going to continue looking for food. You should too, Hara." The Vixy replied coldly, taking a few steps forwards before the Nox moved in front of her. Causing her to stop and nearly growl before watching him gaze at the path Rooth was taking. Hissing at it sharply and loudly, creating a wave of air that fired against the ground- immediately springing up a large net that was covered in leaves and the grass. A trap capturing nothing, but startled the fox back a few steps.

The Nox turned to face her again, having another stonewalled expression and took a deep inhale as those green eyes shifted between the now 'disarmed' trap and the canine. "I've been caught by them too many times. Every time you put trust into something... Remotely close to the Humans, you're putting yourself- and possibly others in danger." Hara snorted and started walking the same path. "Just think about it. We'll have another chance to get away from the bird if we need to."

It sent a shiver down the fox's spine, causing her to look back and wonder if the Nox was really right. Starting her search again through the bushes and ground, really putting that snout to work while her mind wandered. The gryphon was kind to Rooth, almost innocently so. But why was that? And could it have been a trap? She recalled the bird saying when they met 'but Vixy's are all fluff. No offense.' Is that the reason why the black beast let her live? Had she been more plump, like say a Lamball...?

The shouting of humans and some pals in the distance got the attention of those ears. One of that close to a monkey of sorts, and then the scent of burning wood began to reach her snout. Staying low to the ground and using the veil of flora around her, the Vixy crept forwards. Soon finding a clearing with a large wooden fence, reinforced crudely as humanoids in black outfits were dragging cages within the guarded area. One of which was a Tanzee, continuously shouting and making a ruckus. Even after its cage was beaten with clubs and shouted at, it still

cried out. "It's warning the others." Hara's voice caused the fox's fluff to puff out in a spook, nearly making her yelp in the process. "All others in the area. I didn't expect there to be one of these human gatherings here."

"The Leez...?"

"Said nothing about it. And by the looks of it... It's new." The two could do nothing but watch as cage after cage: Sparkits, other Vixys, and even a few Rushors were wheeled in. "There's nothing we can do for them, we should leave." Hara turned around.

"What are they doing with them...?" That caused the violet one to stop in place and ponder his words carefully.

"...Contraband." It was a word Rooth didn't quite recognize, but could piece together what it meant: selling. How he knew of it was worrisome as well, and as much as it hurt to... She was just one Vixy. She couldn't help. Turning about and following Hara back into the woods to continue to forage.

The area held a lot of beauty. From the deep red in the trees, the lighter shade in the dancing grass, to the many shades of gray on the rocks and ground. The coolness to the morning air still struck deep into the gryphon's chest, as if it were an opened wound, but at least he could still move and breathe. Leaving him resting in silence, attempting to keep an ear out for the other two's return.

But instead his attention just focused on one other thing: his own breathing. Taken one after the other, an indication that 495 was just shaving his life away. That heartbeat within his breast getting louder and more frequent as the thoughts returned as distance echos. (*"It's deteriorating."*) The large one heard, as if coming from the mountain. The man's voice said it with so much confidence, as if sentencing 495 to a demise. (*"It Will Not Last."*) Those cyan eyes just saddened and closed, once again feeling that weight over him. That his time was cut short, his life sub-finite. Lost in those constant drums and exhales that he didn't notice anyone approach-

Those eyes shot open as soon as footsteps were heard, looking towards the direction only to get struck by a club across the beak! Hitting a somewhat sensitive area and staggering the gryphon away from a humanoid in black clothing, cowl, and mask. Barely able to focus before that club struck again just under the eye, moving quickly to keep up with the bird's retreat.

The third strike in the throat caused it to growl as those survival instincts took over, choosing Fight over Flight. Guarding himself against the overhead strike and taking it in the neck, that wing pulled the humanoid in closer to the feathered body, making it difficult for the wielder to gain power for the swings. A supernatural noise gathered within the beast's center as a shimmer of purple energy suddenly erupted from around the gryphon! Extending those wings and limbs out as the burning blast threw the humanoid several feet back and prone, dropping the weapon.

They scampered to pick it up, but that large black beast pounced on the thin body! Pinning it down with both paws on the chest and shoulder as that beak opened, gathering more of that unsettling energy while those cyan eyes focused- now realizing that the cowl and mask had blown off and it was-

Human. It was a younger man, lightly bruised that was pinned underneath by 495. Shocking the bird out of those instincts as a flood of Allen's vocals douse the flames of anger. (*"Don't trust anymore people like us. **Humans.**"*) Yet, the cyan eyes focused on the younger man's blue ones; absolutely painted with fear. (*"The ones out there are not **friends.** They are not **family.**"*)

Yet, the gryphon couldn't do it. Trying to take back the energy of his attack, but it felt off.

Instead, just spitting out an unsettling purple ball to the side and watch it splash against the grounds several feet away. Catching eye contact with the man, and the large one carefully eased one paw off his chest. Caught in a stalemate of indecision, to follow Allen's advice and not trust any human on the outside? Or follow the bird's own instincts and let him go?

A choice that was interrupted by a gunshot, the bullet hitting just under the gryphon's eye as it growled loudly! Sheltering himself with a wing as several other shots were felt pelting him. That anger returned, and so did that energy within his maw, waiting for a small pause as the weapon emptied and opening that wing to release the attack. Only to find another human in the same mask- but he knew it! 495 knew that there was still another life behind it!

He purposely missed the shot, painting the ground with what seemed to be a thin dark-pink laser straight across where the other human was standing. Yet, it left a strange glow on the ground before exploding upwards in a wall of energy! Throwing the bandit backwards against a rock somewhat hard, leaving it unmoving through the quickly dying flames. Panting as the large one slowly looked at the other human underneath his paw, fear painted in each other's eyes but the man's significantly more so.

("You're not a tool for them to use.") The mare's words echoed within 495's mind, causing him to suck in a faint breath. *("Or... Whatever they were trying to make from you. If this... Allen of yours set you free, he has given you the gift of another life.")* Carefully the gryphon took a step back and slowly released his pin on the young man. Waiting a moment to see how the smaller humanoid would respond but he remained prone. Another step back led to a third, then a fourth, and finally the man started to shuffle himself back away from the beast. Shifting eyes between it and the melee weapon, but instead kept distance from both of them.

He did slowly get up and start moving towards the still not-moving partner, constantly keeping an eye on the black feathered beast as 495 did him. Unmasking the other human and spotting a slight head wound, but still breathing. Upon checking on the bird's movements again, he spotted the firearm. As did the gryphon, the two locked into a stalemate once more as the young man slowly crawled towards it. Watching as the beast's wings and stance went into offense, letting the human know 4 recognized exactly what it was.

However, with the same slow speed the man picked it up- wrongly: not holding the handle, not holding the trigger. Taking it by the barrel and showing it as a sign of surrender before backing to his partner. Putting their arm over his neck and started backing away from the bird. Keeping the firearm as a method of defense as they disappeared into the dense forest once again.

It was a few moments of scanning their movements before the gryphon collapsed. His heart racing heavily, breaths trying to keep up. The new bullet wounds were soon echoing pain

and increased sensitivity, but he wouldn't be able to get them out. Not even the one just below his eye, and already feeling the area start to swell up a little. Putting pressure on it and making it slightly harder for the bird to see out of that eye.

With nothing to use as a reflection nearby, the only thing 495 could do was rest and wait for the others to return. As the adrenaline subsided, that stomach growled heavily again. Unable to quite feel the pain of hunger underneath the crying wounds, still bleeding out slightly onto those black feathers. With a heavy few pants, the gryphon rested his head on the ground and just focused on breathing again.

"4...?" The familiar voice sounded like it was caught in an echo chamber, making him think that it was that young woman calling to him. Allen's assistant... Steph? "4? Come on, wake up." A few small paws against his arm, then neck, so light that they were barely felt but getting a reaction out of the large one. A sigh of relief was heard as a gaze was felt over that tender wound under the bird's eye. "What is that?"

"A fragment of metal. From one of the human attacks." A worried look from the Vixy, as the Nox looked around. "Are you alright, 4?" A slow nod in response, but there was a lack of sympathy from the violet one.

"I'm... Fine. Just hungry." The large one mumbled, trying to see out of that eye, but it was difficult to get it opened enough to see below where the foxes were. Some movement was detected as Hara came into view, digging into his cloak and setting down some berries, a large truffle, and some nuts.

"This was all we could find." The Nox stated, his face a bit crossed as he looked over the area and spotted the wooden club from afar. "For all of us."

"You should have the truffle, 4." Rooth spoke softly, almost running into that moving beak as the bird attempted to face her. "Me and Hara can split the rest. Hopefully we can find something else along the way."

"Are you... Sure?" The large one asked, getting a nod from the fluffy fox.

"We also spotted one of the... Human hideouts nearby."

"A camp?" The gryphon quickly corrected out of instinct, getting another pain in his head, but one very faint. Once again, feeling the gaze of distrust from those magenta eyes. "That... Would explain the attack."

"I don't see any bodies. Just some of their head-furs." The word did come to the bird's mind, but he didn't respond. "Regardless, we should eat and begin moving quickly. They're going to continue to search and hunt this area clean." The Nox returned, getting the two canids to share a look in near argument. Silently debating if returning was the best course of action.

However, they remained silent when some more cries from pals and faint pistol shots were heard from the distance. Grabbing all of their attentions just for a moment. "There's nothing we can do for them." Hara spoke coldly, spotting the sad look from the other two. "Eat. The longer we stay here, the more we'll encounter." The others shared a look, but nodded that he was right. Splitting and eating their rations as the gunfire and howls came from different directions.

After the Vixy was finished, she observed the bird's face-wound again. "I don't think I can get that out, 4. Sorry." A gaze over at the violet one, and those longer ears went back. "Do you think you can...?"

"It's probably for the better to leave it in." The Nox said bluntly.

"He's right..." The gryphon confirmed, getting up and gently giving that fluffy fox a nuzzle with that beak. "I appreciate the concern, Rooth... But trying to pry it out could lead to an infection. If I'm lucky, the Sanctuary could have some medicine of sorts to help with this." Those large green eyes looked at his cyan ones, almost asking 'Are You Sure?' The bird nodded in response, saddening her gaze a little but nodded regardless.

"Ready to move out?" Harater asked, getting a nod from both of them. "I would prefer to go through the forests for easier concealment, but..." A gesture to the feathered one's size. "We'd also possibly get lost if we stray from the path." The violet one looked over the bird for a moment. "...I don't suppose those wings work?" It actually got 495 to look at one with his good eye.

"They... Do yes. I'm able to fly but landing is... I still need to work on that part." Some more gunshots in the distance. "Besides, attempting to fly right now is just begging for their attention. And with those guns..."

"They can hit you from the ground. Possibly sending us straight to it..." Hara exhaled in a ponder. "I never thought of that..."

"Flight comes at a cost." The gryphon mumbled, getting up and stretching his sore body a little. "If you don't have access to it, I don't blame you for not being able to identify its issues." The small fluffy canid bunted in front of his large black legs.

"We made it this far on foot." Rooth smiled at the two. "We can make it further. If things

clear up, we'll consider that option." Those green eyes overlooked 495. "I... Think it would be fun to experience flight, in safer conditions, of course." It made the bird shyly smile and nod, sharing one more with Hara as the small male led the way forwards.

Though the area still echoed the violence and capture of Pals, the three didn't encounter anyone else. A few shots were getting close, a stray one actually hitting a nearby branch ahead of them, but no actual human was spotted along the path. Before they knew it the noise was behind the gryphon, giving them some relief as they kept moving and kept their guard up.

The sun was already starting to warm up the cool air and continued to light up their path. Some sightings of Pals in the distance or up trees, recognizing the familiar Vixy, but taking cautions about the Nox and unfamiliar black beast. Avoiding crossing any of their paths as the three moved along, until Hara slowed to a stop and took a sighing breath of relief. "What is it?" Rooth asked, looking forwards and noticing it as well:

The path led down to a large brook, but beyond it the red forests started to change. The trees, grass and leaves all adapting a green color, even the bark seemed different. The bird and fluffy fox both stared at Harater for a few moments in silence, eventually noticing them and double taking. "What?"

"Is that... Normal?" The Vixy asked, taking a step forwards and looking at the trees in the distance; all adapting the same vibrant green. "Are we going the right way?"

"We are." A bit of relief was felt over them. "According to that Leezpunk, it is somewhere within this green. But it's big... Very big."

"The Sanctuary?"

"The green forest, girl." The Nox snorted at her, causing the fox to chuckle as she moved forwards to the running brook. "Be cautious. I heard it's both stronger and deeper than it looks."

"The waters?" A noise in confirmation from the smaller violet one as he moved beside her. "And that was coming from something three times our size or weight. We'll get washed away if we fall in."

"How did she get across then?" The other fox pondered.

"She used the stones, but... They're unreliable. Slippery." Those magenta eyes moved from stone to stone. "I don't like those chances, but..." He then looked over the gryphon, causing the large one to double take his head at the night fox. "For someone like you, it should be no issue."

"Me?" 495 asked, getting a nod. "I can't say I've ever balanced on rocks before."

"No no, you can probably just walk through the water without being carried away by it." A shrug from the smaller male. "You might fall, but it wouldn't be enough to put you in danger like us."

"You... Think so?" The bird nervously asked, seeing the Vixy turn towards him with a bright smile and take a few steps closer.

"You can be very useful to us, 4." That warmed his large chest a little, even as she looked over at Hara. "As I thought he would be." An eye roll but a grumble in admission from the violet one as he approached as well.

"I'd rather admit I'm wrong than risk her life. Are you willing to try, 4?" That made the bird smile, though it hurt his wound to do so.

"Just tell me what to do."

"Lay down so we can get on your back." The gryphon did so, trying to keep an eye on the two foxes encircling him. Hara motioned the Vixy to get on first and feel the light paws jump onto the black haunches. Crawling up to his shoulders as the beast grunted in a few spots.

"Does it hurt?"

"Just... Wounds. Old wounds." She immediately looked at her paw and spotted the dark red crust from hardened blood along her white furs. "I'll be fine-" Another bit of a growl when the Nox got up and accidentally stepped on a tender one. Immediately lifting that paw and slipping off attempting to rebalance, trying again a moment later. This time making it halfway and past the hindquarters, but the Nox's balance was incredibly shaky. Opting to just lay down there. "You don't want to get further up?"

"Will I really need to?" The smaller male grumbled. "You're not flying, right?"

"W-well, no, but..." Slowly the bird raised to his standing position, still feeling the small paws dig into his back trying to keep still. Slowly starting to walk and feel the two foxes adjust nervously as the gryphon approached the waters. Taking a look at it for a moment before looking back with his good eye, getting a couple of nervous nods from the two passengers before 495 took a breath.

He stepped forwards onto the first rock; talons gripping around it but the stone wouldn't give much in terms of traction. The second one in the path was larger, easier to place his weight onto and balance. The third was a wider step, needing to fully commit from leaving the solid earth as the waters moved underneath. Still only a small stream to the gryphon, but the clear waters did go surprisingly deep.

The next step and the large black one was officially over the brook with no footing on ground. Only that tail being able to touch it, which was no help. Those black limbs, a bit weak from the lack of substance and harmed by the landing the night prior, making them a bit shaky while the other two became increasingly nervous. Just trying to stay on the large one's back as 4 attempted to move from stone to stone, awkwardly. Wide steps, several of them quite small and getting those talons wet with the cold waters. A pain he remembered quite well in the snowy mountain, causing him to rush a step-

And slip one full forearm into the waters, his chest hitting the rock the bird was aiming for and at least keeping him up. But the two on his back were forced to shift from the jerky movement, remained up by the help of those wings. With a grunt the black one got back up and moved past the halfway mark of the river.

The rocks were getting slippier and deeper into the waters, ones that were likely used as stepping stones washed away long ago. Giving the bird less and less options than to walk into the waters, and doing so to reach another set, they could feel the current begin to take him. Gently enough for the bird to swim as his feathers became heavily soaked with the cold, not made to repel the liquid like that of some water fowl.

One final push with no stones good enough to keep balance on, so the gryphon took a risk. Leaping from his position to the other side in one large jump and almost making it- but feeling a sudden slip of the weight he was carrying! The Nox hit the water with a heavy splash and the gryphon's sudden turn-about threw the Vixy onto the dry land. Immediately, 4 dove into the waters to grab Hara as the violet one was being carried away- barely missing that tail! The second lunge got closer, chaining it with a third to finally grab the small body with his black arm.

A sudden patch of ground was felt underneath the gryphon's feet allowing him to walk out of the current with the male fox. Both entirely soaked as Hara coughed and spat out the water, shivering from the sudden drop in temperature. Feeling the bird almost collapse onto the ground after knowing they were safe, just taking a breather after he double checked that Rooth was still where he landed. Spotting the Vixy looking concerned, but relieved that the Nox was with him. "Are you okay?"

"Just... Cold."

"-Absolutely freezing...!" Hara grumbled, still taking sharp breaths. "I should've suggested flying... Now we might freeze to death before we get there." No response from the bird, besides panting. "Rooth... Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, just had a little fall, is all." The purple fox nodded, then looked up at the bird, taking a few moments for the large one to lock eyes and notice a lot of mixed signals within the magenta ones. Like the Nox wanted to say something, but just... Couldn't.

"We should..." 495 mumbled. "Get moving. Maybe we can find something... Or someone to help dry us off." The black one got up, almost staggering his steps until he got onto the path. Making sure that Hara returned to it before relaxing, the poor night fox looking so frail when wet. The two shaking their coats the best they could, but only able to get so much water out of them.

"How much further, do you think...?" Rooth asked, unsure of how to help as the Nox took a breath in thought.

"It shouldn't be too far. So long that the sun doesn't hide behind the clouds we should be okay." The three looked at the path forwards, still formed into the ground and leading up a hill. Nodding together, they continued up until a large opened area. A couple of Foxsparks were spotted across the way, as well as a set of purple deer- both of which were easily spooked by the sightings of the wet group and took off. "Wait!" Hara tried to call at them and chase the firefoxes down, but it was too late. Making him sigh and shiver a little bit. "We just... Need some help."

Rooth and 4 shared a sad look before moving up to the Nox and resting beside him in flank. Trying to warm him up a little as the small male gathered himself, being encased in soft fluff and wet feathers, but also sheltered with a wing as some wind blew over them. "...I'm... Alright." A nudge from the vixen, getting his attention.

"We can make it." She smiled. "We made it this far, yes? I'm sure we can-"

"That is, if they will accept us..." Hara admitted, putting a little fear in the hearts of the others as he still looked at Rooth. "You, they will. No doubt... I'm honestly counting on it."

"What do you mean?" The Vixy asked.

"...Nevermind. It's just low morale talking." A concerned look from both the dry fox and the bird. "We shouldn't be far off now, but..." Hara began looking around at the wide open area, causing 495 to get up and do the same. Finding three other paths to take and no sign of a sanctuary in the distance. What little even the gryphon could see around.

"Which way do we go...?" The large one asked, both him and the beige fox looking at the Nox for an answer. Watching those magenta eyes ponder while looking in the paths one by one.

"...Not straight forwards, I remember that." The two looked straight regardless. "I remember her saying it looked like an obvious pick, but it wasn't the correct one." Then Hara got up and looked at the left path; the one leading northeast. "...I think this." The other two moving to his side and nodded.

"Alright." Rooth nearly chirped. "We trust you, don't we 4?" The large bird nodded, getting the Night Fox to smile and take a breath as they went down the path. One somewhat narrow with walls on both sides, sheltering them from the winds. A few twists and turns that took several minutes until one area opened up, revealing...

Another brook of water. Smaller, but a stream of water nonetheless. However, beyond it were walls! Thick towers of old ruins with recently constructed stone walls attached, repairs made and being worked on by a Lifmonk and Pengullet. Spotting the group from afar and calling out to the front gate where the doors opened and a much larger blue Penguin came out to see. Motioning something and the gate closed behind him.

The group started to move forwards, cautious about any ambushes around. Approaching the waters as the bird moved up a bit more before laying down, offering for the foxes to get onto his back again. The waters much less treacherous this time around, but not taking the chance regardless. Crossing the waters with the canids on his back, the bird took a deep breath and began walking towards the fort, nervous about the eyes on him once again. However, before thoughts started flooding the gryphon's head, a few taps were felt on his back, signaling to let them off.

The large bird did so, watching as the two foxes moved up after their thanks. "Let me do the talking." Nox said, getting a nod from the other two as they took a moment before approaching the Penking.

"We should really put a bridge there." The rather stylish bird stated, adjusting his large hat. "With how often people cross that stream."

"Good morning." Hara greeted the large penguin.

"Good day. Travelers, are you? Or are you seeking sanctum?"

"We are. Is this the Sanctuary we've heard about?"

"Heard from whom?" That struck the group with uneasy looks.

"A Leezpunk several nights ago, maybe more." A questionable look from the Penking.

"She even talked to a Caprity that was out foraging, said you were taking in Pals who were..." Nox trailed off, noticing the blue bird was crossing his arms. "Searching, for a better life."

"I see." Some silence, making the three a little anxious from the 'guard' studying them.

"I brought a Vixy with me-"

"A Vixy!?" A shout from beyond the large doors, almost that of a cheer as a few hisses shushed them out. Getting the slight attention of the Penking's eyes, but not the full attention.

"Well, I'll assure you this: you did find the Sanctuary."

"But?" Hara asked, knowing there was some catch.

"...The process for acceptance takes time. Our leader needs to approve, and he's not in right now."

"Your leader?" The Nox asked. "Who would that be?" No response, but the blue bird's eyes moved down towards the end of the walls; another path leading out, currently being taken by a humanoid in a ragged cloak and a very large beast of a Pal. Dark navy fur, an entire mane of cyan and purples. Larger than even the gryphon, which only intimidated them further as it approached, overlooking the two. "...You?"

"No." The humanoid figure stated, pulling off the hood of his cloak to reveal an anthro Jackal, large ears flicking up. "I am." Another set of blue eyes, not nearly as bright as 495's, gazed upon the three. "A Vixy?" He questioned rather positively.

"Y-yes, sir. My name is Rooth." She looked back at the Nox and gryphon, more for confirmation and Hara nodded. "These two are my friends: Harater and 4. We've been traveling together for days to find this place."

"From where?"

"A-across the red forest." The Jackal glanced at the black gryphon for a moment, a solid stare that only made 4's head lower. Especially in the presence of the flaming beast, who's expression was that of a stone wall.

"That's a long ways." The anthro stated. "And you must have encountered the renegades." A gesture to the black feathered one.

"Yes... 4 here got attacked while we were foraging for food." Rooth lightly whined. "We can't... Get the bits out of his wounds, and we were hoping that you could."

"Anty is very good with his hands." The Penking chuckled, getting a signal to stop from

the leader. That raised paw moving to the group, pointing at one after another.

"Vixy... Nox..." Stopping at the gryphon, and 4 could feel it coming. "I don't know you..."

"Nobody seems to." Hara stated. "He's just a new Pal-"

"There are no new Pals." Anty stated thickly, creating a tension over the area before the Jackal took a faint breath. Addressing the Penking. "Let's get him medical attention, and get them something to eat." A solid nod from the guard as he called for the doors to be opened. "We will keep you here for one night so you can rest, but this is not a luxury stay. Our Mantra is: Be Useful If You Want To Be Safe." The anthro commanded. "If you want to remain here, you will find some way to help the community out. If you do not agree or you cannot carry your own burden, you will leave. Either willingly or by Force. Understood?"

"Y-yes sir." Rooth whimpered, getting those blue eyes to look sharply at the Nox.

"Understood, sir." Harater nodded, then for Anty to look at 495.

"Y-yes. Sir."

"Good. Get rested up." That anthro's paw pointed at the gryphon. "Penking will show you our Medical Bay. Afterwards, I want to talk to you."

Chapter 4

A sharp whine from the bird as the bullet was pulled out of his cheek, manipulated by some invisible force as the anthro cat led it through some somatic movements with her paws.

Placing the used ammunition in a nearby bowl while the creature easily three or four times her size whimpered and flinched. "(If you touch that, I swear...!)" The Katress' voice seemed to sound more telepathic rather than verbal, leaving the gryphon to just deal with the pain of a now opened wound while she prepared something on said wounded side. Soon bringing over a cloth with something on it and pressing it against that vulnerable cheek.

495 hissed harshly into a cry as those talons gripped the dirt grounds of the medic tent, trying to stay perfectly still as the substance burned his cheek heavily. "(Hold that.)" She commanded, making the large one whimper a little bit but did so. Despite how bad it felt as she prepared something else. "(How long have you had this?)"

"O-only a couple of hours. A pair of... Humans snuck up on me in the woods, and..." He trailed off, whimpering when the cat turned around with a white cotton ball on some tape. Motioning to remove the cloth and he did so. Preparing for another sting, but not quite enough as he whined into a growl. Panting at the soreness as the bird made sure the tape stayed on there, despite his body's displeasure about it.

"(The ones from this morning? Or two days ago?)" The gryphon motioned 'now' with his other paw and the witch-dressed feline nodded. "(The swelling should go down then by tonight, but I want you to leave that on there.)" Another nod in response as he could feel those curious eyes look over his body. Actually taking the time to look through his plumage along that large back. "(You have more?)"

"T-those are... Older."

"(How much older?)"

"...Multiple nights." That didn't stop the Katress from looking the large one over more, counting all the damaged feathered areas and recognizing them as bullet wounds.

"(...You have 25 more.)" A heavy exhale from 4 as he looked away. "(Let me take a small break to gather a few things. I'll send someone in to bring you something to eat.)" A moment later, Hara walked in holding a basket- immediately getting a sharp stare from the feline. "(I'm with a patient.)" She stated thickly.

"And I was sent to bring him some food- something you just recently mentioned." The Nox growled back, looking at 495 for a moment. "We know each other anyway." An eye roll in response from the Katress as she made a little note before making her way out of the tent.

"(I keep telling Anty that we need some actual walls for this place...)" The two males watched her leave and took a moment to pause. Hara setting the basket of cooked berries down in front of the gryphon and sitting off to the side, being quiet for a few moments.

"...Thank you." Those cyan eyes stared at the fox; looking away from 4. "I don't-" Hara interrupted himself, taking a breath. "...I don't trust Darks. Not well, anyway... Most of them are in it for themselves, and don't really care about the others."

"Hara...?"

"Eat." The Nox commanded. "It gives me time to gather my thoughts."

"But why-?"

"Eat." The smaller one growled thicker, making the gryphon sigh and took some of the berries, having a surprisingly good flavor to them. "...Before I met Rooth... Long before honestly, I was just trying to survive. And well, nights are for the Darks, and..."

"Darks get lonely..." The Nox almost looked at the large one.

"...Yeah. I got into a... Relationship with a Daedream. Falling for her charm for what felt like a year, but I was plagued with nightmares. It took me too long to realize she was feeding off my dreams, leaving them twisted and anxiety driven." Some silence as those cyan eyes looked at the small fox sadly. "Even after a horrible breakup, she stalked me... Until eventually she was caught by humans. The one time I was thankful for them."

"Hara, why are you...?"

"After that, I stopped trusting Darks. I seen them in a negative light as I did you... Seeing you that first morning, protecting Rooth, I feared for the worst. I have fought off a Tombat, a Daedream or two..." Another almost look, revealing those wet magenta eyes only for a split second. "Something as big as you though? No... No chance, unless you let me..." The gryphon remained quiet. "I didn't know what you were after, even after searching your dreams, they were just a scattered mess I couldn't make sense of."

"Searching my dreams...?"

"But I just... Knew you were doing this for yourself. That when the time came, you would take Rooth away from me, and I would be left with nothing." The large one scooted closer, giving the fox a soft nudge with his beak.

"You really love her, don't you?" The canine's head shake surprised him.

"I did not. I placed that wall around myself a long time ago. I just... Knew how valuable she was."

"Valuable...?"

"People don't like Darks, 4. They wouldn't have accepted us in otherwise if it wasn't for Rooth." A heavy breath from Hara. "I fought too hard to find this place, I wanted to make sure I got in."

"So Rooth was...?"

"She was my trade-in. My Bargaining Chip, as I've heard people call it." The Nox took a breath. "Don't let that sound cold, I still cared for her well being, but she seemed to care more for you than me... Someone large who could protect her from any predators. A Dark that could watch over her in the night. Someone who could swim, fly, scare any Pal or Human in their path- Where The Hell Does That Leave Me!?" He hissed quietly, knowing how thin the walls were. "I knew you were going to be trouble for me, I led you basically to the Sanctuary's gate, I knew you were going to steal my pass into this place...!"

The black one kept quiet. "And the perfect spot for you to do so was that river..." Another obvious scoot closer but the fox didn't move. "You could've left me there to die, be carried downstream to disappear. Like any Dark would've done." Gently the gryphon pulled Hara into his feathered chest, hugging the fox close. "...But you didn't. You fought to keep..." A near sobbing breath from the small one, even causing the gryphon to tear up. "...Now that we're here, I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what... Aunti?"

"I think it's Anty."

"Whatever, I don't know what he wants to... Talk to you about... But just in case it comes to 'You Cannot Stay Here'..." That possibility struck fear into the bird's heart. "I needed to get this off my chest. Maybe it's selfish of me, I wouldn't put it past myself. But... Thank you. For saving me, and for... Being that Exception to Darks."

Another growl as a heavy sting was felt somewhere along the gryphon's back. Feeling something being pulled out and leaving a vacant soreness as the Katress added another cotton ball with that burning substance to the wound. "(That's number sixteen.)" She stated, hearing the large bird whimper and gave him a break to recover. "(I don't know if I can even get the others, they might be in too deep at this point.)" Only a few pants in response. "(But I can try if you like. Are they bothering you?)"

"I... Can't really feel them." 495 mumbled, shaking his head. "But right now, all I feel is

pain back there."

"(Maybe it's best to leave them then. Let you rest for a day, since they've already nearly healed over.)" She started to tidy up, using some strange magical powers to lift and move objects from afar. "(If I had better equipment, I likely could do more to help.)"

"You've done enough, thank you." The gryphon said sincerely, even though he was still grunting from the pain. Hearing a growl from his middle that even got those purple ears to flick.

"(You should get something to eat.)"

"No no, I just had something to eat. I'll be okay-"

"(And you still need more. We'll see what we can do.)" A sad look from those cyan eyes. "(We have enough here, and we know some Pals eat more than others. If you don't eat enough, you'll be too weak to help.)"

"But... How are you getting enough food? There isn't enough to forage out there."

"(We do not Forage for anything but seeds. From there, we grow things.)" The bird's head slowly tilted in confusion, staring at the anthro cat for a few moments until she gestured for him to follow outside. Keeping the cloth 'door' opened for him to exit the tent-like building within the stone fortress. Wide open sky, thick walls both on the bottom court where they were, as well as an upper one that a set of large stairs led to. One large building made of stone was seen from afar, while the roof of another made of wood was nearby.

A gesture to follow the Katress as she led the gryphon around, motioning to watch his step for some of the smaller Pals transporting goods. A line of them carrying berries to a nearby few campfires, being operated by a Foxsparks keeping the heat on a large pot. Pausing to let the series of small Pals to add more to the pot while the fox stirred it up.

As for where the line came from; several makeshift garden plots were set together neatly, cleaned out while a Dinossom and Caprity were spraying the seeded plots with... Something green. Allowing the plants to begin sprouting and regrow quite quickly, actually stunning the large bird before his head hurt. "I... Remember this about them, yes."

"(Remember?)"

"I-it's... Hard to explain." 4 grunted. "But it's... Them. Pals with this ability, that's why the foragables have always been around and abundant, or lacking in areas without them." A puzzled look at the gryphon but she didn't pry.

"(My point is, we get plenty here. Just lacking a variety. Meat is hard to come by, for

obvious reasons, and on occasion we do send out a hunting party.)" Her attention was pulled elsewhere, as a Floppie waved for her. "(So if you want something else, you'll have to search for it yourself.)" She motioned for another Pal to come forth, a Lifmunk who looked at the large black one a bit nervously. "(Heffer, this is Fore. Give him another bowl and give him the rundown, will you? I gotta help Kassii.)"

"Y-you sure?" The small green squirrel whined.

"(He doesn't bite. And if I couldn't get him to with all the bullet holes he's had, then there's no way he's going to hurt you. Right?)" She asked the gryphon, who looked back and forth between the two, nodding at the Katress.

"O-okay, Alle." The two watched the teal cat leave, having a bit of an awkward silence before they looked at each other. "You... Were attacked by humans?" The small green one asked.

"Yes... Multiple times." 4 mumbled, then watching the squirrel begin to turn around. Moving their tail out of the way and lifting the fur somewhere just above the hip, spotting a strange scar on their back.

"I was too when Pertheer found me." Heffer gestured the Caprity working nearby. "I was up in a tree when they tried to shoot me down, then a Rushoar attacked them..." The green one sighed as the gryphon listened. "...The Rushoar didn't make it, but they saved my life. I held on until I couldn't anymore, and fell off the tree..."

"Onto her back- erm... Bush?" A nod as the bird leaned down. "Then she brought you here."

"H-he, yes." The gryphon slightly whimpered at the correction, making the squirrel sadly smile. "Unexpected, isn't it?"

"Yes, especially when I swear I seen eyelashes." The bird studied the green goat from afar. "I can kinda see it now though. Anyway, I'm... Sorry to hear that happened to you." That made the small squirrel sadly smile.

"Thank you... There's no shortage of stories like mine here, many of us have been hurt out there, that's why this place is so... Attractive?"

"Appealing?" A nod from the Lifmunk.

"It's scary at first, especially with so many things larger than us being around, but..." Another sad smile as the two looked around the courtyard, spotting several areas: one for farming and cooking, but one also containing a couple of furnaces and ore. Wood being piled up

in another area, another for stone being shaped together. Then many containing different types of tables. "Let's get to it, shall we? You've already seen the plantations and cooking pots. That over there is where we create metals, there is our resource storage. We try to keep it well stalked, but many of us can only carry so much at a time."

"Wait... How did you build all this? I thought only humans could...?" 495 half trailed off looking over the areas. "The fortress walls-" A pain in his head caused him to grunt, half worrying the small squirrel for a moment. "I-I'm fine. But... The Fortress walls... Those were built by them, long long ago. But those walls..." A gesture to the forge and storage areas. "Those look... Those are newer. How?"

"Anty." A puzzled look from the large bird as the green one led the way closer. "I-it's true that humans can think of how to build things, and some Pals can be taught how to..."

"Construct."

"Yes! But Anty is special: he's a Pal that can make those same blueprints like Humans can. He can visualize and show us how to make things, often just getting us to make the basics, then showing us how to put them together. That's how we made the farming plots:" 4 looked back at them. "We just take multiple boards of wood, some nails at the corners. Fill it up with good soil, and then we just need the seeds."

"And then it's just a matter of copying that for more. Same with these stone foundations... Walls, and roofs." The gryphon looked around, now seeing it for every object: just a series of parts put together. "Strange how I... Never seen it before-" Another pain in his head, causing the large black one to at least hold back the growl, but not a grunt. Hearing the small Lif whimper. "I-I'm fine. Just... Pressure."

"A-are you sure? Do you want me to get Alle?"

"No... No, I'll be okay. Just need to..." The bird suddenly staggered to the side and fell to a haunch, but kept his upper half up. Panting the pain as it eventually subsided, slowly shaking that large head. "I'm... Alright, the migraines have just become more frequent lately when I think about..." A worried look from those small red eyes before they moved to the large stone building on the upper plaza.

"Maybe... Maybe we should get you to rest first. Hopefully the new beds have been made by now." A motion to come with, waiting patiently for the gryphon to get back up and start walking with Heffer. Coming up to the stairs and releasing a bit of a whimper. "Everyone stumbles on them at first, but you get used to it. The hill here before I heard was much worse."

"Anty again?" The squirrel nodded in response. "I'm... Surprised he knew so much about

building things."

"We all are, but..." A noise in question from the bird as the small one whispered. "T-try not to ask him about it. He gets a bit defensive and sometimes angry." Those cyan eyes gave a worried look, but silently agreed. Just trying to focus on getting up stair by stair until the upper plaza opened. Only really big enough for two large buildings: the stone one being significantly larger than the wooden one. Full of small boxed-in piles of hay and a couple of feeding baskets. "These three over here look new."

They were cheaply made, as were all the others. Fine for most of the smaller Pals the area was mostly filled with, but it was almost comical how small it was for the gryphon. Being painfully obvious when the black one moved up to it, staring at a small pile of hay that was just barely big enough to support his chest. "I-it's the best we can do on such short notice."

"I-I understand." 495 half whined in shyness with the Lifmunk, never realizing just how good he had it back in the lab. Regardless, his body requested rest, so the gryphon attempted to lie down on the small pile. Moving around it while he could almost feel his body argue which part should have the comfy side first, opting with his right haunch while the rest of his body took the floor.

"Y-you..." The small green one moved in front of him, overlooking the area. "Almost require three..."

"I-I'll be okay, thank you." That large head rested on the stone floor, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, but feeling the presence of the squirrel still about. Nervous: that slight amount of fear of trying something new as those cyan eyes slowly opened to the approaching Lifmunk, getting Heffer to freeze in place.

But reach out a hand towards that beak, an anxiously shaking one accompanied by a loud swallow of risk. Those bright blue eyes looking back and forth between the red ones and the hand, soon realizing what he was trying to do. Taking the extra step to gently move that beak towards the hand for a small pet; a sign of peace and acquaintance. Burning out that anxiety- even though 4 pushed the beak in a little further than he meant to. "Thank you, Heffer."

"I... Still have to give you the tour, let me know when you've gotten enough rest." A noise in confirmation as that large feathered head rested down again, and the small squirrel left. For the first time in what felt like years, the gryphon took a deep breath within the comfort of a shelter. Then a second before completely falling asleep.

Chapter 5

Some movement was detected in small spurts, trying to urge the gryphon awake and nearly succeeding. But the fatigue was too strong, forcing the gryphon back to sleep again even after detecting the presence of several Pals. The faint morning light was starting to peer into the shelter, waking a few of them up who communicated in whispers. Many of which were light on their feet and getting around many of the heavier sleepers. But after several minutes...

A series of slow knocks on hollow wood by a wooden stick was heard, echoing through the stone building as many Pals began to get up and stretch. The gryphon's form felt incredibly sore, but 4 still forced himself up. "Rise and shine, everyone." A half grumpy voice stated in the most lackadaisical way possible. "Today is a logging day. Attend to your morning duties before heading to the north gates. King will lead you from there." The other pals started to leave and chat among themselves, as the bird fought to get up.

"Are you going to be okay?" A familiar voice asked the bird, immediately getting his ears to perk up and look at Rooth, that smile warming his cold chest. "I heard you had a fall yesterday."

"J-just a dizzy spell, that's all. Thank you Rooth." 4 smiled at her, leaning that beak forwards and feeling her bump it with that soft body. Also soon feeling the presence of another familiar one.

"How about you, Hara?" The beige fox asked. "Are you doing okay?"

"I am... Thanks to you." A noise in question as the Nox felt a little awkward, even more when the bird locked eyes on him just for a moment. Quickly turning away as they felt uncomfortable about yesterday's conversation. Immediately causing the female to look at the two and snort, trying to be assertive but it only came off as cute.

"Don't you two be holding a grudge about something. We made it here together, we're gonna stick together."

"W-what?"

"No-no, Rooth." Harater tried to explain, still a bit awkward. "It's not about anything of the sort. Just..." Another noise in question from her pried further, making the Nox sigh. "I... Walked in on him in the medical tent, and... S-seen something I probably shouldn't have. That's all." It was a bit of a fib, but it made her giggle.

"Oh my~ Is that so?"

"Y-yes. That's all, miss." The large bird shyly nodded at the Nox, getting even more bashful when the Depresso came over slowly.

"You three are the new guys." He spoke a bit slowly, looking like he hasn't slept for days. "I take it you've gotten the tour?"

"Yep!"

"Yes."

"Mostly, yes." 495 mumbled, getting the attention of the navy Pal. "I know where things are."

"Alright. You've probably heard our motto: no freeloaders." The other three tilted their heads in sync. "Or whatever the others say, something about being useful."

"Be Useful If You Want To Be Safe." Hara stated, getting a nod from the Depresso.

"That's it. I'm Balzar, and today we're going to see how you can be useful." He gave a motion to follow him, and the others did while the gryphon got up. Though his walking speed was once again a bit slow. "Most Pals here have multiple jobs that they go back and forth on, as well as some jobs that bring us outside the walls."

"Logging being one of them." Hara added, getting a nod.

"But it's not as simple as chopping wood. Someone's gotta move it inside the gates as well, that's why you get some of the smaller Pals to help." They started walking down the steps, getting a view of the morning light and forest around the area. As well as a beach further down. "The areas are often scouted ahead beforehand, making sure they're clear and safe of any hostiles. We usually don't need someone to fight either, not many are willing to go up against a group of pals-"

"Pack Tactics." 495 bluntly stated, getting a strange look from the other three. "Like... Direhowls: you fight in groups, and your numbers will allow you to surround the enemy. Cutting off any escape." Some stares made the bird uncomfortable. "A-and most, like the Humans, are able to see that ahead of time, so they leave you alone during these..." 4 trailed off in a whimper, lowering his head as if to hide.

"...Sure." The Depresso nearly yawned, continuing to move ahead. "Where was I?"

"Multiple jobs, sir." Rooth nearly chirped.

"Right, so if you see something that needs to be done, and you're able to do it, get to it. Of course, not every Pal can stoke a fire or water the fields, so that's what we're going to find out today. Will be a bit easier with the fort not so crowded."

"Fort?" Hara asked, seeing Balzar shrug.

"Anty called it that once, it got passed around and sometimes we refer to it as that. No idea past that-"

"Fortress." The bird randomly blurted out, once again getting the other three to look at him and whimper. A small bit of pain in his head was felt, but nothing more than a flinch. "F-fort is short for Fortress."

"Then what's a Fortress?" The navy one asked.

"It's... A city with walls. Much like these kind." He gestured to the very large stone walls; thick and made to be walked on. The small others looked at it from afar and around the perimeter of the Sanctuary, fitting the definition. But the Depresso still couldn't help but look at the gryphon in question again, almost knowing what he was thinking. "I... Don't know. I don't know how or why I know these things."

"It's alright 4." The Vixy tried to calm the large one down. "Isn't it?" She looked at the small navy humanoid who honestly just looked too tired for this jazz.

"...I mean, if Anty said it was okay, then you're fine. Just full of random surprises." Balzar shrugged. "Alright, let's try some things. Starting with..." He gestured to the near empty

courtyard, focusing on one area at a time.

Mining a simple rock that was around was difficult for all three, unable to properly hold the pickaxe or swing it with enough force to even shave stone somehow off of it. Making the Depresso shake his head and take a mental note.

Logging wasn't much different. The smaller two had no idea how to get through the tree's base, and offered an ax that was very identical to the pickaxe from before. 495 could at least reach up higher in the tree by pressing his forepaws against it, but unless they needed twigs, it was a wasted effort.

Transporting some practice logs was a little hard on all as well. Hara could do it, but only very slowly to the point it was a waste of time. Rooth's actual body was too thin to properly keep something balance on her, and the gryphon had the exact same issue. Trying to balance something on his head didn't work, putting it on his back gave him no control as he awkwardly shifted and stepped sideways to keep the log on his back. Feeling it sliding down his back got the bird to panic and stumble backwards to keep up with it, accidentally running into a large warm body that grunted and making the feathered one yelp. "S-sorry-" 495 instinctively spoke and double taked at the Dark Blazehowl.

Those bright golden suns looking down at the gryphon, interrupted from his furnace work without a word to say. Nearly making 495 cower as he recalled seeing this beast before: escorting or guarding Anty from yesterday. A large black muscled body, fur and some stripes barely hiding such a form. A big fiery mane of bright cyans and violets intensely dancing around his neck. Intimidating horns and large tail, all decorated in the same fires as it just stared at the bird. Causing 495 to just abandon the log and take another failure.

Crafting: carving a wooden shaft or handle, shaping a stone into the head of an ax or pickaxe, and then assembling premade tools when all the test attempts were basically destroyed beyond use or just unfinished. Leaving Balzar's expression... Less than impressed so far.

"Okay, last one. A job so easy almost anyone can do it: Harvesting. I left a plantation of berries ungathered for this test. Work together to do it as fast as you can." The demoralized 3 half nodded as they got ready, given the signal and they all took a different side. Trying to pick the berries without damaging the plant, but without the use of proper hands or appendages and attempting to do it quickly lead to unsatisfactory results. Leaving the Depresso to stare at the mostly empty buckets of the three with unimpressed results. "...Well, it's something you can do..." Balzar half grumbled, looking over the disappointed three. "We'll put it on the list. A little bit of help is better than no help."

The group were not in high spirits, a little worse when the logging crew returned and the Katress approached them. Looking at Balzar for the results. "Only harvesting, really." He stated, seeing her nod.

"(There's more to do around here than labor, but it is something to keep in mind.)" Alle stated, seeing the Depresso shrug in response.

"I'm just doing what I'm told."

"(I know.)" The anthro feline looked at the three. "(Vixys are great diggers, we now have the wood for a Ranch, she can be placed there. And Darks are always useful because, like us, they can work through the night.)" A slow blink from Balzar's eyes. "(We'll find them something. It may just take another day.)" The Katress then looked at 495. "(How are your wounds?)"

"B-better, but still sore. The swelling has gone down at least and I can see better from this eye." The gryphon answered, getting a nod from her.

"(Have another day of rest for now. We'll find some use out of you two, but for now we have a ranch to build.)" Alle gestured the Depresso to follow her.

"Finally. I wonder if we can somehow convince a Chikipi to come in, I haven't had eggs in ages..." Balzar shuffled away with the Katress, leaving the three to look over each other in a bit of silence. All of them worried, but didn't want to admit it.

"...It'll be alright." Rooth eventually said, trying to keep their spirits up. "Like she said, they... We will all find you something." The two males nodded as the gryphon took a heavy breath.

"I'm... Going to lie down again for a little bit." Another series of nods as the bird climbed up the stairs. Now realizing just how hungry he was, and checking the food basket up there for several baked berries. Only taking a few before returning to his nearly flattened bedding, resting on it with a heavy sigh.

Sleep was impossible when it came to the night. The small box was about half his size, the hay itself barely provided any comfort at all. Causing the black gryphon to shift over and over again, trying to calm his panicking mind as the jackal's phrase echoed behind those cyan eyes. Be Useful If You Want To Be Safe. Throwing the bird's mind into a whirlwind of questions

that deflected rest.

His ribs ached, once again pressing up against the boxframe of the small bed; clearly not made for something 495's size. Suggesting to try a different position and then perhaps he would be granted the gift of slumber, but only half taking it. Instead getting up and leaving the flattened bed, thankful that the gryphon could see in the darkness well as to not disturb any of the other Pals within the sanctuary. All of them earned their rest from a hard day's work, making the black one's lack of such feel deserved.

Quietly, the gryphon left the stone room and made his way outside to the courtyard. Climbing up a ramp along the large outside walls, giving those within a look on the outside of what kept them safe. The faint lights of wild Pals attempting to lure in those who travel during the nights, ambushing under the clouded sky. The quiet of the evening echoing nearly every sound, including some very far away gunshots. Making 495 wonder if it was actually real, or just memories of his own escape replaying once again. Those small wounds along his body, both treated and not, still aching while his own wings attempted to shelter them. Giving the old holes some form of comfort.

-Only to get suddenly spooked by something approaching nearby! Causing the black plumage to puff out at the sight of a double taking beast. The same one as before: dark like the gryphon, mixed with that of a large male lion. A fiery mane, but one of bright cyan and purples. A pair of golden discs, nearly as frightened as the gryphon was at the sudden appearance of the other. Awkwardly and slowly sitting down a little ways beside 495, trying to keep his gaze on the forests and waters in front of them.

"...Couldn't sleep?" The beast asked after clearing his deep throat. The heavy weight of anxiety within his voice carried through as the gryphon looked him over for a moment.

"...No." 495 softly spoke, realizing just how quiet it was. "N-no, I've been... Having a hard time to sleep peacefully ever since I left home."

"I felt the same way." The Blazehowl responded, trying to be as soft. "I just found it was easier to get up and keep working, taking breaks once in a while. Like..." He gestured the location under his feet, not quite noticing the bird's study of the beast's spot of rest. "I find the night does calm me. It's peaceful, the waters are nice... Nicer when the stars and the moon are out." The gryphon nodded in response, but wasn't sure what else to say. "...You just arrived the day before, yes? With the Vixy?"

"Y-yeah, along with the Nox. I... Met them a night earlier, they wanted to get to a place that was really safe, and heard about..." A large nod from that colorful mane, flowing slowly like a strange fire.

"I've been here for a month or so, and it feels quite safe." 495 couldn't hide the worry in his face, as he attempted to look away. "Noct." Only to double take sharply.

"I-it isn't?"

"No-no, Noct. My name." A look in confusion from the bird. "I-it's what I call myself, and what others call me."

"O-oh, right. Of course, of course..." The beast nervously smiled at the black gryphon. "I'm... 495."

"4...9...5?"

"I-it's a work in progress." The bird admitted. "It's what I was called back home, but I... Haven't found another name I liked yet." A large nod from the lion as some silence fell over them. "I'm... Sorry about today." A noise in question. "About running into you."

"O-oh, that's fine. Happens all the time." Noct stated a bit shyly. "I think they just placed the furnace in a bad spot, honestly. Hard to work when your tail end keeps getting in the way of others."

"At least you can work..." 495 mumbled, getting another questionable noise and a curious gaze from those golden suns. Making the gryphon sigh heavily before coming clean. "I... I don't think I'm going to be able to stay here."

"Why not?"

"I'm not useful. I'm not good at anything..." A look at his own talons. "I don't have the dexterity to build things like others do. I can't make fire or water to smelt or help the crops... Can't help re-seed the plots, can't do any logging or mining..." Another heavy sigh. "Anything I try to transport just falls off me or is so pointless compared to others..."

"And you're worried about what Anty said?" A slow nod from the bird as the Blazeowl looked off into the distance. "I wouldn't be. He's yet to exile anyone for not doing enough. But..."

"But what?"

"Defense is a form of help..." A worried look from those cyan eyes. "I... Never liked fighting myself, to the point where I worried about the very same thing. Anty told me he was disappointed to hear that, but he found uses. He's a smart Pal."

"You don't like...?" 495 thought out loud, hearing the beast sigh through his muzzle.

"I know... Big intimidating creature like me, doesn't like to fight. Weird combo to have, but I..." Another breath. "He said sometimes my presence is enough, which is one reason why he likes having me around. And maybe it might be the same for you too, 495."

"What?"

"I'm not familiar with these areas, but I've never seen or heard of something like you before. You're just about as big as me, that's gotta account for something, yes?" A worried look from those cyan eyes. "Pals and humans alike... They're afraid of the unknown. An enemy that flees before the fight even starts is a flawless fight won, that's what an old friend of mine used to say." A slight smile from the lion as the bird stared into space for a moment. "That's why you're afraid of me, yes?" That got the attention of those cyan eyes. "I'm large, fierce looking, not from these parts. And those who have seen BlazeHOWLS never see the dark versions. Humans and Pal alike often associated Dark with Evil or Bad, and naturally they're afraid of me."

"Afraid of... Us." The two shared a look. "But... You're less intimidating when you talk, even if your voice has a bit of a rumble to it." That made Noct smile a little, which in turn made the bird do the same.

"I'm glad you think so, 4-9-5." A soft chuckle as the slightly larger lion shook his head. "Such a name sounds... Objectified, if you know what I mean. Like, you were seen more as an object to whoever gave it to you. In a way, that is intimidating to others here due to the many rumors going around."

"About Humans using Pals as experiments, yes..." The gryphon mumbled sadly. "I've... Heard them before."

"...Maybe I shouldn't have said anything-"

"N-no no, it's okay, Noct. I've just... Been so focused on surviving that trying to find a comfortable name has been a low priority." A slow nod in understanding. "And right now... I need to figure out my place here. How can I make myself useful..."

"I see." A moment of silence. "I suppose if that won't work, I can work twice as hard until you find a spot in our community."

"Y-you'll what...?" It left the gryphon stunned for a few moments. "Noct...?"

"Don't worry about it, okay?" The beast got up, gently approaching the bird and giving that feathered neck a little nuzzle before heading back down the ramp. "I won't let Anty kick you out, so long as you don't disrupt what we have here." Again, the bird had a hard time to respond, just trying to keep an eye on the lion with his beak half open. Eventually getting up to

call for him again.

"H-hey." Noct stopped, looking up at the bird patiently. "I... Thank you." A nod from the slightly larger beast, turning into a solid nod after a few attempts. Allowing the gryphon to sit down and breathe, as if a large weight was lifted off his shoulders.

Chapter 6

Discomfort pushed him awake again, this time before sunrise or any movement was sensed within the shelter. At least the gryphon got some rest after talking to Noct, but... It still made him feel too guilty. The Blazeowl was going to work twice as hard or twice as much for him to stay? No, 4 couldn't allow that, could he? As much as it seemed like a safe place... It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to Noct.

His mind constantly wandered in circles, coming to the same conclusion, the same guilt again and again. Even though it did allow the bird to get some rest, 495 just could not accept it. He had to figure things out, even if that meant...

A strike of fear sank the gryphon's cold chest. Making him almost forget the discomfort of laying on the stone floor. His large feathered body ached, really showing when the gryphon got up and started moving. Making his way outside where the light was just starting to shine under the clouds, meaning the sun was just over the horizon.

And it was dark enough to easily spot that cyan mane, glowing in the darkness within the light of the furnace. His back turned towards the gryphon as the bird approached, still trying to get things straight in his head, but he... He knew that talking to Noct would help. Somehow.

The heat ranged from nice to comfortable, to almost too much to handle as 4 kept his

distance. Watching the steady torrent of flame get focused heavily on the makeshift stone furnace. Heating up the metal ores so they would fit perfectly into a bar mold, then taking them out without any fear of the intense heat. Placing them to the side and having a breath before facing the bird's direction and nearly yelping! The fiery aura that made the beast's mane ignited greatly as even the bird jumped back. "Sorry-sorry-sorry!" 4 apologized as the Blazeowl held his own chest, chuckling nervously. "I-I didn't want to... Disturb your work."

"T-that's okay. I just didn't expect you to be there." Another breath from the beast. "The little ones don't spook me like that." A nervous look from 495 as he looked around, wondering if he should just leave. "What's wrong? Still couldn't sleep?"

"I..." The gryphon started, his thoughts still scattered as he fought to keep them still. "Can't, still, you..." A grumble turned into a whimper as those feathered wings lowered and he began to turn back to the shelter.

"Hey, hey." Noct moved closer to him. "Talk to me, what's wrong?" Another embarrassed whine from the bird and the beast sighed. "Hey... 4, right? Can you come to the wall again?" Some silence as those cyan eyes looked at his golden ones. "I need a break anyway, and I'd like the company." It was heavy for the gryphon to agree, but he did so. Following that large fluffy body up to the wall and sit down. Getting an instruction to rest beside him in the form of a couple paw taps. "What's on your mind? Take all the time you need."

"I..." 495 started, taking a deep breath and long exhale. Closing those eyes and opening them up. Never feeling so... Vulnerable. "I can't let you." A noise in question. "Work, not for my own stay and safety. It's not fair to you and..." The gryphon trailed off, making sure the feathered one was done before speaking up.

"I see." Noct started, giving a bit of a pause but still no additions from the bird. "Maybe some context would've helped, now that I think about it."

"Context...?"

"I'm... A bit of a workaholic, 4." A nervous chuckle from the Blazeowl. "Anty keeps telling me that I need to stop and rest more, that I'm doing too much around here, even though I only have three jobs: Cook, Smelt, and occasionally go on the Logging team." The two overlooked the colorful sky in the distance. "Smelting is the thing I'm best at, I don't have to worry about temperature or about burning the ores. Cooking... Well, if you've tasted any overcooked berries, that was me. Sorry." The beast chuckled. "Venara is a lot better at cooking than I am."

"Venara?"

"The Foxsparks. We work together in the heat quite often."

"R-right." 4 mumbled. "I... Suppose that isn't so bad." A noise in question from Noct. "O-oh, working in the heat."

"A lot of people say it's too intense. I grew up in a volcano, so it never bothered me." The Blazehowl's head gestured to a dark mountain in the distance. "Seems only fire Pals only really find it comforting."

"I do too." A questionable look from those golden suns. "I... I've been cold ever since I left home. Unable to properly get warmed up..." A nod from the beast as he shuffled a little closer to the gryphon, making 4 double take a bit nervously at him.

"I-if you want to, I mean. I don't mind." It was the feathered one's turn to look puzzled, causing Noct to move closer until the bird could feel it... A radiating warmth from those strange flames around the beast's neck. Comforting, really, almost alluring as 495 moved a little closer. "That's it, I don't bite." The two got their shoulders to touch, which was enough for the gryphon's breaths to change. To relax a bit more, like a vice had been loosened up around his chest. "Where did you come from?"

"I..." An exhale from 4 as he once again came clean, pointing up to the nearest snowy mountain that they could see. "That one. The top of that, I believe."

"Oh, no wonder you were freezing." The beast almost quipped. "You spent your entire life up there? You'd think you would've adapted to the cold."

"I was... Inside all the time."

"In a cave?" The gryphon's ears and head lowered, taking another breath.

"I'm sorry, Noct, I just... Don't know how much I should really say."

"That's alright. I'm just making conversation."

"Especially when Anty..." A noise in question from the beast.

"Did he say something to you?" That startled the bird as his head shot up.

"W-what? No-no-no, I just haven't..." Noct tilted his head a little, then pieced it together.

"He hasn't talk to you yet, is that it?" A defeated exhale and nod from the gryphon. "He's... Very busy, yes. I don't think it's that he forgot, just never quite got the time. Organizing this place is a lot of work, which is why we all do our part."

"And if people need to forward something...?"

"They usually talk to one of the higher ups: Alle, Darvis, sometimes people come to me too when they can't find anyone, but."

"Darvis?"

"The Penking. Usually on Guard duty, but he does a lot of things around here." A nod from the gryphon. "No wonder you seem so stressed, he hasn't gotten around to you in almost two days." A whimper from 4. "But I know what it's like... When I first came here, Anty was on some trip... A 'Pilgrimage' he called it. And didn't get around to me for a day or so either. I spent so many hours just worried that he wanted me to do something violent. Take out a nearby Human camp, burn out a pack of Direhowls at the gate..." The beast exhaled, then looked at the gryphon's eyes. "My point is, talk to him. Anty is a good listener, he'll understand."

"...Maybe." A nudge against his feathered neck. "I just don't know how I'm going to pay you back."

"You don't need to." The bird frowned at that answer. "Okay, okay. If you really want to, you'll have time."

"Not if I'm not around..."

"What do you mean?" A sense of discomfort from 495 as he exhaled. "4?"

"Noct, I..." A heavy breath from the gryphon. "I'm dy-"

"Black Bird." The jackal's voice spooked the two, interrupting the feathered one as the anthro motioned him to follow down the stairs and into the courtyard. Causing the gryphon to take a deep breath and nervously exhale.

"Hey." The beast got his attention after a moment. "Everything. Will be. Okay." The two stared at each other as Noct pulled the bandage on his face off, and 4 nodded. Stepping out of the comforting warmth for a moment and felt the cold of the morning air, but that warmth still followed him from afar. More specifically the Blazeowl was; down the stairs and catching up before reaching the forge. "I'll see you later, right 4?" He spoke a little louder than expected, catching the bird off guard.

"Y-yes. Later..." And they parted ways, feeling a strong set of blue eyes stare at the gryphon; Anty's rather stoic expression. Waiting by the gate as he draped on a ragged cloak, leaving the hood down and motioning the gryphon to come with. "You... Wanted to speak with me?"

"You were talking to Noct?" It was barely a question, more of a stern statement that sounded a lot like when Frostallion talked to him.

"Y-yes. He's been... Helping me a little bit with... Settling in." No response. "I-is that a problem?"

"No. Nobody ever talks to him, besides me and Venara." It stunned the black bird for a moment, causing those cyan eyes to stare at... Well, the back half of the Blazehowl's body as he operated the furnace again. "I suppose Alle if she needs something as well."

"He doesn't...?" 4 half repeated, mostly to himself.

"We're going out. I want you with me." The jackal explained. Barely. Making the gryphon more anxious, but... He trusted Noct's words. Taking a deep breath as the Penking opened the gate doors for them, watching Anty pick up a box and exit, motioning Darvis to close up when they left. "We need to talk."

"Y-yes, Sir."

Daylight came surprisingly fast, brightening up the red forest as the two walked in almost silence. Though it was nice to follow someone who was more the gryphon's walking speed, he was still incredibly nervous about the whole thing. Reminding 495 of encountering Victor while on that stage, or when he first met up with the guard. An anxiety around authority, but this had to start eventually. "You..." The bird spoke up. "You wanted to... Talk to me-?" A raised paw from the answer silenced him, but the jackal kept walking.

A little more down the pathway and Anty finally spoke up. "We should be safe now. Away from prying eyes and curious ears." He slowed to a stop, making the gryphon to as well, staring at the large bird for a moment. "What are you." The 'question' made the feathered one's heart sink as he exhaled heavily. "You are not Pal-"

"I know..." 4 admitted. "Hara was... Just trying to help me because I..." No response, but the look from those blue eyes was less intense. "You're not the first to detect that, or... Call me 'Not-Pal'. But I..." The gryphon's head fell. "I don't know."

A bit of silence as Anty took a breath, placing a paw on that black feathered shoulder but not getting the attention of those cyan eyes. "...Maybe I was too harsh, but you need to realize

that I'm responsible for their safety." A nod from the bird. "Where did you come from?" It was actually an honest question, and with a heavy breath...

"That mountain. The top of it." 4 pointed to it. "There was some... Building that I was in. Full of humans, and... Not-Pals like me." The jackal stared at it from afar. "I don't know what they were trying to do, but my human caretaker set me free."

"Why?"

"...Because I'm dying." That time the anthro looked at the gryphon, not trying to hide the tears rolling down his beak. "I'm... Deteriorating at a super small level. A-and..." The large one couldn't stop himself from looking away, barely noticing the stronger grip on his shoulder from that paw. "I'm sorry, I just... I'm still struggling with it. And I'm trying to be useful in your Sanctuary because I don't want to die alone out here-"

"Stop."

"But I'm terrible at everything, and then Noct tells me that he's going to work twice as hard to keep me in-"

"**Stop.**" Anty spoke sternly, waiting for the gryphon to stop his whimper. "I already talked to Noct. He didn't tell me about your... Condition though-"

"I haven't told anyone else besides that other Pal who could detect..."

"What other Pal?" A pause from the large bird as he thought.

"Fros... Frostallion?"

"Frostallion!? She's alive!?" Those cyan eyes met Anty's blue ones, then looking back up at the mountain top. "...No. Nevermind that. But... That's good news."

"You know her?"

"It's... Complicated." The anthro looked back at the snowy area in the distance. "It doesn't matter now. And so long as you do not make trouble... Bird?"

"495." 4 nervously informed.

"Right. Then you can stay with us. Especially if..." A moment in silence as the jackal exhaled. "I've dealt with my fair share of losses. There's a little comfort to realizing that Pals do not quite die off, but are reformed by the energies and nature of these islands." A motion to start walking again. "On occasion, we do come across Pals who do remember their past lives, usually only in glimpses, but it does happen rarely."

"I think Hara mentioned that before."

"Humans..." A heavy expression was spotted over the anthro, as he let out a breath. "Humans on the other hand, they are expended after that single life. They are not connected to the same lifestream Pals are."

"And that's... The same for me too." Anty stared at the bird for a moment.

"...Some stronger Pals gain a sense of who or what is connected to that lifestream. That's how I and-"

"Frostallion could tell..." A nod from the anthro as he placed that paw on 4's shoulder again.

"I do not want to give you false hope, 495. But... There might be some way to help you fight off this fate of yours." A sad look from those cyan discs. "The humans... Made you, I assume. Maybe..." The bird's head fell and shook slowly.

"...It was easier to just recycle and start over."

"Start over...?" The large one didn't elaborate. "Nevermind. We're almost there."

"Almost where?" But Anty didn't answer, only pulling over the hood of that shaggy cloak and continued moving forwards to a small clearing. Slowly looking through the forests and spotting some humans: few of which seemed to be in armor and armed with rifles, while another seemed to be setting up some boxes and a portable stand.

A motion from the Jackal to come closer, then to follow as he moved in plain sight, instantly making the bird almost panic. "A-Anty...!" 4 whispered loudly, only to get the motion again to follow. Hearing the humans call out at the cloaked anthro to halt, but the 'disguised' jackal only kept one gloved hand raised while the other held a large box under the free arm. Stopping before getting too far and motioning the gryphon to step out as well. "B-but..."

"Come. Reveal yourself. You will be okay if you don't try anything." A heavy whine from the bird but he did so. Coming out of hiding and hearing many of the guards panic.

"New target!"

"Christ!"

"What the hell is that!?"

It made the large feathered one stop a few times as he constantly shifted his gaze between the guards and Anty. The two slowly approaching the stand as the men began to calm

down a little more, now knowing that the gryphon didn't appear to be hostile. Carefully watching the cloaked anthro set the box on the stand and open it up slowly, revealing several rather pristine feathers, pelts, and a couple of gemstones.

Valuables... Anty was Trading with the Humans? Watching this transaction occur without any verbal language, just body movements, pointing, and gestures. A little difficult to make out the communication as his cyan eyes wandered around at the other boxed goods from afar. Spotting... Words. What at first looked like jumbles of letters soon shifting as the gryphon's head hurt again. A lot. Enough for him to whine in pain and make the guards nervous again.

"4?" Anty asked from the stand, but soon moved to the bird's side. "4, are you okay?" The pain lingered as those cyan eyes opened, vision a little blurry, but able to read the boxes. The words were still an absolute mess, but he recognized them as... Medicine? "Hey, are you alright."

A few pants and 4 nodded, lifting his head up and looking at the anthro through the wrapped mask. "Medicine...?" The gryphon asked him, getting a hint of surprise from those blue eyes but nodding. "That's what this is..."

"Yes. What did you think I was bartering?" The large one didn't want to answer that as Anty returned to the crate and took their supplies.

"Thank you." The merchant called, putting the goods away while another guard moved to talk to him. Meanwhile, the anthro motioned 4 to leave with him.

"You're dealing with Castaways now?"

"Yeah, my favorite customers." The gryphon slowed to a stop. "Mostly because they don't know what these things are worth, and I always come out on top." That immediately got the feathered beast's attention as he growled towards the merchant. Once more getting the guards on edge.

"4." Anty growled back. "Stop."

"But they're-"

"I don't care." The jackal thickened his voice. "They're trading with us when no others will. It's fine."

"They're cheating you!" 495 hissed at Anty, getting him to stop in place. "They've been cheating you! This entire time!" A long moment of study from those blue eyes.

"...How do you know that." The bird curled his neck.

"What do you mean? He just said it!" Another long look as Anty took a step closer.

"...You can understand them?"

"You can't?" 4 asked, almost unsure of himself. "I-I mean, I couldn't before, but I..." The tension between the two factions got more and more thick, more so when those cyan eyes locked onto the merchant's. Immediately connecting what the 'Pals' were talking about.

"...Can anybody speak bird?" One guard quipped, getting a glance from the gryphon before he slowly approached the stand.

"4...!" Anty called, almost certain he was going to witness the feathered one get gunned down. But just watched the large one overlook the boxes again, grunt from the pain in his head, then gently point at one box. Slowly the man did, bringing it up on the stand. Opening to see a series of small bags, the bird moving a couple around before taking two sets.

"Wheat seeds." 495 said in a little bit of a low growl, knowing the man didn't understand the vocal. "Puts us closer to even, but you still come out '*on top*'." With a loud swallow the merchant nodded, getting a little nervous when the gryphon's large paw moved up towards him; empty, palm down. Hovering there until the man carefully placed his hand on top of it, feeling the bird move them both up and down. Not quite a 'handshake' but the merchant recognized it as such. A seal of agreement, and with the bags in his beak the gryphon began to retreat slowly. Catching up to Anty who only looked at him for a moment, then the humans- still pointing their guns, and leaving the area.

"You can understand them." The Jackal had to repeat, now without the hood over his head and overlooking the seeds the bear purchased. "How?"

"Benefits to being a Not-Pal, I guess." The gryphon sat down, trying to stop his heart from racing. "...I don't know. I never could before, then one day in that building I got a massive pain in my head and passed out. After that..." A breath, one half of worry. "I could. I could understand everything they said, but they can't understand me."

"But that gesture..."

"...A guard asked me to 'shake' before. I'm not sure if it's a greeting or just a form of conveying an agreement, but... It's something along those lines." A few pants from the large one. "I can't stop shaking... I-I don't know why I did that, why I confronted a human- especially one surrounded by those wielding weapons..." 4 held his head for a moment.

"First time?"

"N-no, but I've never... Confronted authority before." The Jackal's head tilted at that. "I-I've always been good- always been obedient. Did what I was told. I-I-"

"Stop." The bird exhaled into a whimper. More so when that grip was felt on his feathered shoulder again, hearing the crinkle of the packaging to get the attention of the Cyan eyes. "You know what these are?"

"They're wheat seeds."

"And you could tell that." It was barely a question, making the gryphon more worried than anything else. "I take it you were talking to Mo'thura?"

"W-who?"

"The Dinossom back home." A whine in response with a faint headshake. "Then how did you know we needed them?"

"I-I didn't... I just... Felt like they could be useful, since you already have a..." 4 half glanced back at where the Merchant was in the distance; now completely out of sight. "You've been trading with them?"

"I have." Anty put the seeds into another pocket before bringing up his crate, now occupied with strange packs that made 495's head hurt looking at them. The letters shifting in his eyes until...

"Sterile Bandages... Burn ointments... Rubbing alcohol... Dis-... Disinfectant?" The pain shot up his brain as the anthro studied him. "The Medical Supplies..."

"We can't easily find clean things out in the wild, and most wounds... Become permanent if not treated." That paw on 4's shoulder moved up and brushed along that previously wounded feathered cheek, making him feel a little guilty about using up so much for his wounds. "I can't offer too much, but I do recall the old settlements trading fine pelts and feathers for goods." Another look at the supplies. "It was only guesswork on my side, but it does make me relieved."

"What?"

"I cannot read their more modern languages." The jackal closed the crate and carried it under his arm again. "But you really are able to... I think." The bird half grunted at the pain. "...That concerns me though." Those cyan eyes shot back to the anthro, lowering those feathered ears and head. "I mean, the pains you've been feeling. If it keeps occurring, we might

have to find the cause of it."

"Y-you mean...?"

"Your insight and your ability to understand their modern language is invaluable, I'd like you to stay with us 469." Despite the error in the name, the gryphon just stared at him for a moment before grabbing the anthro and pulling him in for a hug. Though immediately feeling a strike to the chest by an open paw, knocking the breath out of the large one and making him cough. But not breaking the embrace. "...Reflex. I apologize."

The gates closed behind them as the Lifmunk approached the anthro, not seeming to mind the bird's size as much anymore. Kneeling down and taking the seeds out, handing the small green squirrel the box, Anty spoke softly. "Please take these to Alle or the medical bay."

"You got them?"

"I got some, yes. But we'll need to make it last." Though it was a little heavy for the small one, the pengullet came over to help out. Standing back up and taking the cloak off, 4 finally got a good look at a strange dark and gold... Almost regal outfit the jackal wore. As well as what appeared to be a surprisingly long mane. "I have more work to do and some plans to make up. If you see Mo'thura around, send her my way." He gestured a nearby workshop of sorts.

"O-okay." The gryphon nodded, getting one back as if to say the bird was Dismissed. And with that a huge weight was lifted off of 495... Even though his breast still kinda hurt a little. The entire trip made him pretty tired, and though it wasn't comfortable, he longed for that small bed. Making his way through the courtyard, a little bit on the crowded side and needing to watch his step, that blue flame caught his eyes again. Staring at the Blazehowl who just finished another ingot and looked a bit displeased with its size. Shrugging it off and turning about to take a break, instantly spotting the gryphon where those golden discs lit up.

"Oh, you're back?" The bird tried to hold it back, feeling some sort of glow and wanting to just get near that warmth again. Worrying the beast as Noct's expression saddened. "What's wrong?" With no Pals finally in between them, the gryphon moved surprisingly quickly to the larger creature, wrapping those black arms around that fiery mane and pressing that feathered chest deep into the warmth. "F-four?"

"Thank you...!" 495 whispered loudly, hearing a purr of relief from the Blazehowl as he lightly pulled the large bird closer and sat down. Almost chuckling softly.

"So everything is okay?" A nod was felt against Noct's broad neck, as well as a little bit of... Wetness? Those large paws held him back with a tender strength. "In that case..." The beast started, almost wrapping his head around that feathered neck.

"Welcome home."