

Hollow Bodies Act 3 - Resonance

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

The weather was perfect. Nice and cool with the warm sun lighting up the waters to the ocean before her. A nice breeze that was gradually getting stronger, and a clear blue sky. Although there were signs of a storm coming, this moment itself was perfect. Then why was she so sad?

She was alone. Just her and that large rock that always seemed to support her weight. It towered over her, providing the shade she enjoyed. The soft grass provided comfort. The world itself was there for her, but she still felt like there was something missing. "I thought I'd find you here." And there it was.

The Grizzly's face almost lit up when she heard his voice. As the gray Gnoll sat down beside her, he looked happy at first, and then concerned when he looked into her green eyes. It was then she knew she couldn't hide it. "Is everything okay?" He asked.

She sighed, smiling sadly. "It's nothing." He held her paw and stroked the back of her neck. "...It's just the humans again. Giving me a hard time."

"They've always gave Furnanns a hard time. I can't say I blame them." She nodded in agreement, but it still didn't make it okay. It wasn't her fault what happened to their species. And she didn't agree to be their replacement. They were just made that way. A deep breath, and she could smell something rather strong. It almost smelled like herbal medicine, the stuff they used on the injured.

She looked at him with worry. "Are you alright?" The Gnoll looked at her puzzled for a moment, and smiled.

"I'm always alright. But I guess you can smell it, can't you?" He chuckled. "I never liked it myself, but after being in it for so long, I guess I just ignore it." Again she looked at him concerned. "Just a few scratches on the arm."

"Finally caught something did you?" She teased.

"Kinda. I ended up catching a large rabbit." The Bear couldn't hold back her laughter.

"That's not what hurt me! I'm not that pathetic of a hunter. That rabbit attracted a large bear, and well..." She just shook her head at him. Looking down at his paw over hers, then noticed something.

"Your ring?"

"I still have it. But..."

"That string idea didn't work out?" She chuckled.

"Not really. I ended up losing it in a brook. Grabbing it just in time for the bear to swat me." Another loud laughter, imagining the sound it made. "Don't laugh! Bears hurt! It's probably the reason why the humans don't like you. You're much stronger than they are." She smiled at that. Even though it made her a little sad, he always found a way to make her feel better.

"Where's that ring now?" She asked, the gray one giving her a little bit of worry. "I just like to look at it. I feel safe around it."

"I... Hid it. In a place where I can't retrieve it. Sorry."

"It's alright. As long as it's safe. I'm pretty sure one of them really want it for themselves." The Gnoll nodded.

"Why are you out here? What did they say to you?"

Another sigh. "They want me to be useful to them. I've tried several things, but..."

"They're picky, I know. They don't want us to cook, clean, or even make clothing for them. All they seem to want from us is labor or hunting. I'm not even sure if they want us farming."

"They don't want us to touch the food. Worried that they might catch something from us, I suppose."

"I always thought it was the idea of finding fur in their food." The Gnoll tilted his head.

"I overheard them... They still think of us as disease carrying animals." She said quietly. It honestly made his heart sink a little.

"Did they ever give you a job yet?"

"...They're planning to take me on a ship to help fish for them. I don't really want to go, but..."

"It's alright. You never know, you might enjoy it. The ocean is very calming, often clearing your mind." It made her feel a bit better about it.

"It's too bad you couldn't come with me."

"They want me to help raise another building. But tell you what, I'll see you off, and when you come back..." He gave her a little nuzzle. "I'll be right here. As soon as you see land, I'll be right here waiting for you. Okay?"

It made the bear smile brightly. "Okay. But for now, just stay with me..."

"I will." He smiled. "I will..."

Chapter 1

"...Kass...Kassel...Kass...Wake up, Kass... Please... Just open your eyes... **Kassel!**"

Kass...Kass...It's time to wake up...Kasse...

A series of coughs came out of the Gnoll, followed by someone's sob of relief. "Damnit, you... You've gotta stop doing this to me!" A sharp jab in his side omitted a squeak and a pain, but in return made him more awake.

"...Ow..." He groaned, feeling scales under his paws and holding him rather tightly. A few mumbles from someone else he couldn't quite understand.

"He'll be fine. He's survived worse, I think. Go to someone else... Yeah, sure. If I need you." The female's voice said. She then lifted him and began carrying him somewhere.

"...What...?"

"I don't even know. How much do you remember?" His brain was still foggy. It didn't help that I was still narrating in his head and everytime I speak he grumbles a bit. "That says alot." She stated sarcastically, setting him down leaning against something. "I'm going to help some of the others, stay alive until I get back. Okay?" She gave him a pet when he tried to say something. Soon after that, he went back to sleep.

The sounds of people eventually woke him up. That, and dehydration. His chest still hurt, and it felt like his veins were stiff. But he fought against it, getting himself up and staggering towards a nearby water well. A bucket was recently filled, and the Gnoll refreshed himself. After

that, he felt more awake, able to study his surroundings a bit.

The city of Lingerriff was completely devastated. Almost flattened except for the faint ruins of the outer buildings. A very small percentage of the city's population stayed quite far out of the city's limits in groups. Attending to the injured and harmed. As well as tending to some of those who didn't make it. It ached him when the Gray one seen the tarps and blankets over a long series of... Sorry.

"It's... A massacre..." He almost collapsed at the sheer sight of it. But over the moans of pain and cries, he heard something. Almost like people shouting in anger. Concerned he began to search of it.

A little ways away, he could see a gathering of angry people. Circling around what seemed to be a light brown being. "Hey-Hey!" Kassel shouted at them, pushing his way to the center. As the tied up Avian in the center got slugged by civilian, the Gnoll got between them and pushed the civilian away. "Stop!"

"What are you doing!?" The Pangolin shouted. "He's one of them! His country attacked our city!"

"That doesn't give you the right to execute him." Kassel growled, paying careful watch to the crowd surrounding him.

"You're really defending that bird? He murdered our people! He destroyed our city-!"

"He didn't murder your people, he was after me. As for your city... He didn't destroy it. I did." The Gnoll couldn't look them in the eye when he said that. "If you want to lash out on someone, lash out on me. But it'd be a wasted effort." A few moments later, someone took a swing at his snout. As the loud squeak echoed across the fields, the people jumped at the sudden sound and took a step back. Studying the Gnoll. "...Whether you hit me or him, it won't bring your city or your loved ones back." As Kass turned around and untied the Brown Avian, he supported him and made his way through the crowd.

"...What the hell are you doing?" The Knight asked him. Still cringing at his damaged beak. "I tried to kill you. I'm your enemy."

"I don't have enemies. I just have people who misunderstand me."

"I'm still one of those people..."

"And there's already been enough people lost today. There's no point in losing more." The bird was quiet after that, as Kass leaned him against some debris. "Let's look at this." The Gnoll studied his beak. It was a bit cracked, but overall still in good shape. However, it did hurt when he touched it. Hence the contained growl. "You should be fine. But it's going to ache for a while. Let me get you some water."

"You're a fool..." He just smiled sadly at the bird as he got him a drink. Although the bird still hesitated to take it at first, he eventually did. Getting a bit more concerned when he seen the Dragonite approach him.

"Really? Isn't this the guy who wanted to impale you?" Tobyas asked Kassel. It only made the gray one chuckle a bit. "Seriously, I know it's hard for you, but show a little hate once in a while. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine..." Another sad smile. "How are the others?"

"Managing. Many are still in shock and morning. Not to mention lost. They really don't know where to go or what to do. There isn't another city out around here for days."

"The only one I can think of is Hoelhara. And that's probably not a road they should travel. Not with the proper protection. That is, if the weather doesn't get them. It gets unusually cold during the nights the closer to the city."

"So we're stuck for now. Until we can make somesort of settlement for them. There's a few nearby villages around that might take some people." She noticed Kassel looking at the avian for a moment.

"What about the people from Elbarenluv? Cinna and the others." The look on Tobyas' face said it all. "...Are there any other soldiers found?" She shook her head. "...What about his spear?" He asked, looking at the crowd of people dispersed.

"Okay, how hard did you hit that head of yours? Are you seriously going to give him a weap-"

"He needs a way to defend himself. And... I..." He sighed, trying to keep himself together. Then untied the sheath attached to his belt. Kneeling down, he placed his falchion in the hands of Stigborg. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"You cannot be serious." They both asked him, but the Gnoll kept a straight face.

"Even if they just know you have it, odds are they won't bother you. They're not fighters."

"And you would trust me with this?" Kassel nodded at him. "I've had training in one handed blades, yes."

"Good. Tobyas, can you guard him for a few minutes?" Her ears went back, and a bit low, but she agreed. And Kassel walked off to be alone.

The fields farther outside were empty. There seemed to be a strange darkness that still tainted the sky, not letting the sun through the strange cloud of shadow. It was to the point where he couldn't tell what time of day it was. How long he was out, and how long until Night-
"Bartan..."

Hmm?

"...You said before... When I first heard you, that this was a story. One with readers and an audience of some sort."

Yes. Granted, not a big audience, but one none the less.

"What did you mean by that? That this is a story?" ... "Is... Any of this real? Do you even have control over it?" ... "Bartan..."

Sonic Syndicate - Denied

...Let me tell you a short story. Once, there was this kid. He was taken care of by his parents, but only in a sensible way. Aside from the basic needs; Food, Shelter, Warmth, Clothing, etc. he was neglected. Neglected by his parents. By his three siblings. By his peers and students. Neglected by the entire world itself. Not even the teachers even noticed him.

One day, he got so sick of it. Knowing there was something lacking in his life, though not knowing how to put it into words. One night, while listening to music with headphones blasting at max volume, he found out that he could create a different world. This world held those needs. A Father Figure, one that would actually discipline him. Get him to understand the true difference between Right and Wrong. A Hero-like Role Model, one that knew the full idea of the word GOOD, and what it actually meant to help others while being a decent humane being. A Conscience, who understood Humility and Empathy. The idea of thinking of others, and feeling for the pain that they carry with them. And many many others.

When he immersed himself into this world, he felt everything that happened to these series of characters. If they got shot in the arm, he would feel it. If they got rejected or hurt emotionally, it would ache his heart. If one of them died...

He got so used to this world, that he almost completely disregarded the one he was actually born in. He hated the real one he was never a part of. So for years, he just lived in his own. He Grew Up in his OWN world, while it seemed like the real world never did...

"Bartan..."

My point is, you ask if this story is real. You ask if you even exist. And you want my answer for it? Yes. You're damn right you exist. Maybe not to the readers. Maybe not to anyone in the world that I'm currently in. But you're damn real to me. Much more than anyone else here. And you're much more important to me than they are.

The Gnoll was quiet for a while. Eventually he sighed. "I just don't know what to do. I don't know if Ralkor's even a threat anymore."

And if they are?

"...Then we'll have to find a way to stop them. But I doubt I can do it alone. Especially if the Red..." He trailed off. "What happened to it? Why did it turn black like that?"

I actually have been thinking about that, but first you need to find Dr. Taute-

"Burdock? He's still alive!?"

Errm... Balls.

"But how? Wasn't he in the city?"

Kassel, what's the most important thing to that guy?

"I'd like to say me, but I have the feeling that I'm wrong."

Very wrong.

"Then what? He's never really shown any interest in people, except if they wanted to take a job..."

Mhmm, now you're onto it.

"His work? His experiments? They're all in that Tower of his."

The one that was only slightly damaged.

"Did he seriously go back there? There's nothing left."

Not to you or anyone else, maybe. But to him, that's his home.

"So go find him. Then you'll share that idea of yours?"

It will start to make sense, yes.

"Alright." And the Gnoll took off.

On his return, the Dragonite was seen a little farther out. Talking to some Frog guy in the background with a large carriage. Okay, not talking to, more like threatening. Kassel let out a chuckle at that, which got the Avian's attention. "...She went to talk to him." He said.

"It's alright. Let her work her magic."

"...You sound better. More at ease."

"Kinda... I more or less have a direction now." The statement puzzled the bird, but he didn't pry. "What are you planning to do now?"

"You're not going to hold me prisoner? Even after I did?"

"Of course not." The Gnoll chuckled a bit. Looking around the debris in the distance, he seen something that caught his eye. "Give me a minute." And he went to it. After a bit of digging, he found the brown bird's Spear and brought it back to him. "Trade you."

Again with the hesitation, Stigborg offered the Falchion back, and took his spear. "I still don't understand you..."

"I'm not asking you to. But I'm not going to deceive you. I have no reason to." Kassel sat beside him, keeping an eye on the blue Dragonite in the distance. "But I really can't tell you what to do. If your wings are still okay, you could fly back to Ralkor."

He let out a quiet sigh. "...I'm not sure. They fired on our own people, even on a battle that we were clearly winning. My faith in my country is a little... Shaken." The Gray one nodded in understanding. "What were you planning to do?"

"I... Need to go back to Elbarenluv for some answers. You're welcome to join us if you like."

"Us?" The bird asked. A little shocked by the request. Kass pointed at Tobias in the distance. "And you think she would...?"

"Probably not. But you're not a threat to us." Stigborg's ears went back. "No offense. I'm just invincible, and she's... Scary?" The Avian looked at him oddly. "She is! But... I'm eventually I'm going to get some answers out of your King."

"Are you asking me to defect?"

"N-no... I'm just... Warning you. You're free to go anytime, but..." There was a bit of silence between the two. "Opportunity should've never been re-opened. And I need to find out what he discovered in there. There's a lot of unanswered questions surrounding that." Stigborg gave a faint nod.

"...My spear is yours for now then. If you will have me." It put a smile on the Gnoll's face. The Gray one then placed out a paw.

"Kassel." The Avian looked at him strangely. But shook it anyway.

"Stigborg. Clayon Stigborg." Kass leaked through a strange look. Almost like an old wound being opened. But quickly tried to hide it.

"Nice to meet you. And not by spearpoint for once." A very very very light chuckle from the Bird. "You feel good enough to move out?" The Knight nodded surely, and the two got up. Heading towards the Dragonite to see what news she had. The closer the two got, the more of the conversation they could hear between her and the Frog.

"And I'm telling you that these people need a place to stay. I don't care how much money you spent on it!" The Dragonite growled.

"It is my property, and I'll be the only one using it! I'll help move the injured to a different location, but that safehouse is mine!" The Frog croaked.

"How go the negotiations?" The Gnoll asked, almost expected to get his head bit off.

"Volgain will help transport and supply people in several villages. He's got a bunker full of supplies that will last them months-"

"I most certainly will not! It's my supplies made for myself and a few of my close friends!" The tubby toad snapped, only to get a blue fist in the face and then grabbed by Tobyas.

"Although it may be hard to believe, this problem is bigger than you! Now's not the time to think of yourself!" The Dragonite hissed, lifting him off the ground a bit.

"J-just the opposite actually! It's every person for themselves! That's the only way we're going to survive these times!"

A loud growl came from the Blue one's throat. "...You know that Dragonites eat frogs, right?" A bit of a whimper came from the amphibian.

"You can threaten me all you want, you hooligan, but it's not going to change-" She shoved him back into his carriage.

"You want to say No to me, fine." She pointed at the survivors in the distance. "But you go to every one of them, look them in the eye and flat out tell them that you have supplies, places to sleep, and ways to help EVERYTHING that they've just lost. Then tell them that they can't have it. All because you want to save it for yourself!" She then stormed off.

A long silence came over the area as the Frog got up, and tended to his clothing. "I still don't see how this is my problem. I see no reason to help these people."

Kassel just smiled sadly at him. "You don't need a reason to help people." A simple paw on Volgain's shoulder as he passed him to follow Tobyas.

Catching up to her, the two could still hear her growling a bit. "I swear, I'm seriously considering that Angry Sex, Kassel."

"Angry what?" Stigborg asked the Gnoll, getting the gray one to lower his ears in embarrassment. Also getting an odd look from the Dragonite.

"Uh... Nevermind."

"Kass, what is he doing?"

"He's coming with us." He received a less-than-approved look from the already angry female. "I told you she's scary." The Gnoll whispered to the Brown Avian.

"You're joking right?" Kassel shyly shook his head. "You Taath-head..." Such Language!

"Language? What does it mean?" He asked out loud. Getting an odd look from both, but a slight smirk from the female. In all honesty, you don't want to know. "If you say so."

The Bird half raised his paw, wanting to ask, but the Dragonite motioned him to let it go. "He does that. Apparently there's a narrator in his head named Bartan."

"That sounds healthy." Stigborg grumbled. Still looking at the Gray one a bit oddly.

"Fine. Just to get this out of the way, he may trust you, but I don't."

"You don't have a reason to."

"Guys?" The Gnoll tried to stay in between the two. "No fighting. Okay? You don't have to get along, but no one is going to point weapons at each other."

Tobyas tossed her snout. "Alright. But if I hear you squeak, I'm beating him until we get to Hoelhara."

"We're not going to Hoelhara." Kassel said, receiving a sharp look from her, almost letting out the whimper in his throat. "Bartan said that Dr. Taute is still alive. And that he has a theory of what happened..."

"Wait, you're going to trust a random voice in his head with a direction on where to go?"

"If it was just a random voice, then no. But if it's Bartan then I'll give it a shot." The Dragonite teased.

"There's only the one voice, thank you. I don't think I could take more than one." The Gnoll scratched the back of his mane. "Are you ready Tobyas?"

"Yeah. There's no real reason for us to stay here. We did what we could for them." As the other two nodded in agreement, they set out towards the charred city of Elbarenluf.

Chapter 2

"It was dusty, so I ended up blowing on it to see if I could read it clearly. When I did, some of the dust got in my nose and I sneezed on it, causing it to break in like seven pieces." Kassel explained. "Ever since then, I've heard him. Constantly stating what I'm doing, what other people are doing. And even his own thoughts at times."

"So it was from a cursed object?" Stigborg asked. "Makes me feel uneasy to know those actually do exist."

"It's not the first one he's come acrossed. But the first one that seems to be permanent. Remember that ricochet bomb? What was that thing called?" The Gnoll instantly groaned at Tobyas' question. Getting both the Avian and me curious about it.

"You would be curious..." He replied, sighing. "They called it Murphy, based off an old law that they had in the old world: If Anything Can Go Wrong, It Will. That artifact caused me alot of pain."

"The thing would bounce randomly, usually towards the most valuable thing that it could do the most damage to. The fuse on the bomb would light at random, even when it was wet. And the shell was somehow very glossy and slippery. You couldn't hold onto it for the life of you." The Gnoll whimpered loudly, remembering the amount of trouble it gave him.

"Who would want such a thing?"

"Beats me. It was just an order from someone in Lingerriff. I barely made it to a nearby village, and even then I lost it a good eight times in a few hours. I don't think I've ever been so stressed in my life."

"Good times." The Dragonite patted him on the back.

"For you maybe. You were laughing the entire time." The Gray one grumbled.

"I can't help it. It was funny to see you suffer, after you stole my job."

"Stole her job?"

"I didn't steal it, I just grabbed it before you did. I even offered to split it with you." He whimpered, ears low.

"But at that time, I didn't want to share money."

"You still don't-"

"But I will at times. Besides, you didn't get paid for it. You sent it in a sack on a wagon heading towards Lingerriff, and the bomb exploded on the way there."

"Are you serious?" The Brown one looked at her.

"She is, sadly. I told them they had to keep an eye on it, but..."

"I still remember the large cloud. It almost spelled out OW in the air." She laughed loudly.

"The people were still somehow okay, but the commissioner was... Not satisfied."

Tobias took a breath, and heard her stomach starting to growl a bit. "Phew, I'm famished... Kass, get us something to eat."

"Why me?"

"Because she's been up all day carrying others out of the city, and I was tied up and beaten for an hour." Stigborg stated, sitting down and leaning against a log. "Besides, you know how to hunt, don't you?"

The Gnoll's ears went low. "Y-yes, but it might take me a while."

"It's fine, we'll just be here." Tobias sat down beside the bird, and Kassel got a bit cautious.

"...Alright. But no scrapping while I'm gone. Okay?" The two tossed their heads. After a few moments of studying them, he carried on. "Bartan, keep me updated."

Fair enough. Odds are you'll hear everything I'm saying anyway.

The other two were quiet for now. Both enjoying the oddly relaxing weather, and studying the sky. The Shadow was beginning to dissipate slowly, letting the neglected sunlight almost breaking through. "I still don't understand what that was." The Dragonite almost whispered. Stigborg studied it as well, not really knowing how to answer. "Was it some sort of new weapon you guys had? Maybe one that malfunctioned?" It was a bad area to go, and it irked the Bird a bit. But he let it slide.

"No. It wasn't from us. It was from Him. During our fight... Our airships were charging the Takisaga." She looked at him. "...What did Kass call it...? Na-something? The fire weapon we..." It was hard to carry on the conversation without it breaking out to something worse. The

Brown one could feel tension coming from Tobyas. And concluded that there was something lost when his country destroyed Elbarenluv. "He was trying to create a barrier to stop the attack and protect the city. But it changed from red to black after he kneeled down in pain."

"That idiot... He's holding too many secrets from us." The statement worried Stigborg, wondering what he was getting himself into. "I'm not really sure what that thing is, but he's been doing it ever since Elbarenluv. Though I haven't really gotten a good look at it."

"I'm pretty sure that's how he escaped from prison." Another look from the Dragonite. "We found the iron bars to the window cut clean off. I've never heard of anything that could do that, and he had nothing on him." She faintly smiled at that. "...Not to make you doubt him or anything, but why follow him? If he's holding so many secrets from you?" She remained silent, and he got the message. After a few moments, a large rumbling could almost be felt from the ground. "Tell me that was your stomach." The Dragonite Glared at him, ears back. Then another one that was much less settle. The two looked at each other in a bit of worry, and dove separate ways. Coming from the large forest behind the two, a series of large spikes erupted in a straight line, destroying the log the two were resting on.

Getting their weapons ready, the two couldn't help but stare at the large spikes that came from the ground. They almost looked like a glowing red and orange gemstone, standing over eight feet tall. The large gemstone spikes looked like they were breathing, as if life were inside them. Quickly, they retreated into the grounds with a nearby loud growl from the forest. Soon after a Roar as a large quadruped creature leapt out of the trees and between the two. Sending several trenches of the spikes outward, once again with the same types of spikes piercing through the ground. Once again forcing them to evade or be impaled. "Is this what I think it is!?" The Avian asked.

"It's no monster I've ever seen. Is it a Dire!?" The thing was charred, nearly twenty feet tall, and almost wolf-like. Several of the gemstone spikes were coming out of its seared fur, following down its long tail that was armed with several small ones at the end. Its eyes resembled the Red to Orange glow as well, as it turned towards the bird and slashed at it with its claws. While the tail flung towards the dragonite. Thankfully both missing, but it seemed to burn the grass with its touch. Stigborg took a leap backward to evade the claw attack, and then flew quickly into the sky. "Who needed you anyway." The Dragonite mumbled, as the creature turned towards her.

A slam from its right paw was an opportunity she could use to charge under its raised paw, and swing the Greatsword at its side. A large crack omitted from both its ribs and its skin as it roared at her. From the sky, the Avian dove down to stab it hard in the back while landing on it. Forcing the spear between some of the crystal spikes. Though a few of them did scratch the armor on his shins, the force of the landing staggered the creature on the ground.

Tobyas used this opportunity to get up in its face, slashing down on its snout, across, and then a hard thrust into the creature's eye. It almost felt like cracking thick glass, as it roared in

pain and rage. Though half blind, it managed to swat her away, and shake off the Avian off it's back. The bird landed hard, half in one of the holes the Gemstone Spikes made.

The creature spotted him and lunged at him, covering it's paw with a series of the sharp Gemstones. Just before the claw hit him, the Dragonite got in front of Stigborg, swinging heavily at the claw. They collided together with a very loud Clash, but the crystals on the creature's paw shattered into many fragments. Quite a few of the shards ended up spraying on the Bird, but it was a result he would gladly take. Trying not to delay, he got out of the hole with his spear quickly. "Flank it!" The Dragonite demanded, and he swiftly moved to the other side of it.

The beast roared loudly, and the two felt the ground shake again. Several large spikes came from the ground around the creature. Then another set outside of that, then a third. Going further and further outward, forcing the two to be pushed back. Soon a high pitched ringing could be almost heard from the Brown one. "Get in a hole!" He shouted, as he dove for one himself. Soon after, all the Gemstones exploded outward, sending a heavy storm of shards in every direction, even upward. Causing them to rain down on the two even in cover. The sharp needles seemed to almost pierce the plate mails the two were wearing from the weight of gravity alone.

They got up and shook the shards from their armor and bodies, keeping a close watch on the beast. As the creature tried to keep sights in both of them, it began to back up cautiously. It's heavy, vicious breaths began to slow down, but not out of fatigue. It seemed to be staring at the forest on the other side of the path. The creature was staring at Kassel, who was slowly walking towards it with a bit of a sad look on his face. "...Do you remember me?" The Gnoll asked. A bit relieved that the other two were okay. The beast seemed to study the Gray one with its remaining good eye. The longer it did, the more calm it seemed to be getting. "You do, don't you?"

As Kass took a step forward, the creature took one back. "...Abirrian." It held its breath for a moment. "That's where you wanted to live, remember? A small village to the southeast. Past the mountains. We used to travel there as a small group, not really knowing what was in the forests. It's where you feel in love with her..." Something seemed to click in the creature's eye, as if some faint realization.

The Gnoll looked away a bit sad. "...I'm sorry. I tried to stop her from going with us into that cave. I told her that I would get that small pup alone. That she didn't need to follow me. Even when the beams above snapped over her, I tried to get her out..." It started growling a bit, and Kassel fell to his knees. "I couldn't find her. Even after three days of digging, I couldn't save your mate... I'm sorry... And because of that... You..." The beast roared loudly at him in anger. Then charged at him.

While Tobyas called to the Gray one, he remained still until the thing was right in front of him. As it came down to bite at the Gnoll, Kass quickly drew his sword, and thrust it in the creature's mouth. Several squeaks could be heard, as the thing snapped it's jaws several times

before Kassel was in its maw deep enough to pierce through the roof of its mouth and into its brain. The sudden jerk made it lose its balance and soon it began to stop struggling. "...I'm sorry...!" He kept whispering, as the Dragonite pulled him out of the large jaws.

"Kass..." She looked him over. Other than his clothing, he wasn't damaged. "...You've gotta stop hiding these secrets of yours." He couldn't look at her. "I know you know something about these things... And I know it's dark. But you don't have to carry it alone."

He just faintly nodded. "...At Elbaren... I'll tell you everything."

The Avian came around cautiously, making sure the creature didn't move again. "What did you call this thing again? A Dire?" Tobyas nodded. "I've only heard stories of them. There was one in a mining cave about twenty years ago. I remember my father's unit attempted to hunt it, but it ended up killing several of his soldiers and injuring the rest. It even tore off one of his wings." The two were quiet, but there was a strange sad smile on the Gnoll's face which puzzled them.

"...She always hated birds." Kassel almost laughed. The other two looked at each other for a moment.

"Come on. We don't need to stay here." Tobyas said, getting the Gray one up on his feet. He faintly nodded taking another look at the creature's head. The Orange and Red embers in its eyes and gems were slowly fading away, as he apologized once again. Leaving behind another old friend.

The group was not bothered again for the rest of the trip. A little before dusk, Elbarenluf was in sight. Even from far away, they could barely see the old Bird's tower slightly glowing from the inside. Once again, a feeling of relief washed over them. It wasn't long before the sun set, but they arrived. The closer they got, the more they could hear two people arguing- "Two?" ...He asked again, out loud and getting yet another odd look from the two following him. Seriously, if you had a coin for everytime- "Bartan."

Grumbles Yes, two. Listen closely.

The Gnoll did. Even hushing Tobyas when she started to ask- ...Right.

...Hear them?

"Yeah, who is that?"

Who do you think it is? Get closer you.

The three carried on until they began to understand what they were saying. When it

clicked, Kassel's face lit up, and he started to race towards the building. "What do you mean it doesn't make any sense!? It makes perfect sense. There's two magnetic poles on the top of the world, and the bottom. And us Avians can sense where-"

"Nuh uh! You guys just guess and you know it!" The voice of a small female could be heard.

"Cinna? Burdock?"

"Oh great. Another idiot at my door." The bird grumbled, possibly not knowing who was actually outside of the door.

"Actually, three idiots at the door." The Gnoll replied, almost immediately getting shoved at the door by the Dragonite. Then a second time by the Knight.

"Is that Kassiey? KASSIEY!" The little Lion cub squealed as she started unlocking the door. It seemed like eons to the Gray one, almost tracing where her hands were on the other side of the door. "I can't get this one to move!" It caused the Gnoll to whimper in impatience.

"That's because it's fool proof." Dr. Taute grumbled, tending to the door and in a matter of seconds it bursted open. Kassel grabbing the little cub and holding her tightly.

"Someday I hope he holds me like that." Tobyas said sarcastically.

"Thank Oddin you're alright! I thought I killed you!" ...The Gnoll said out loud. Getting a very concerned and morbid look from the Doctor. Which then made his Gray ears low when they locked eyes.

"...I see. So that large sound was..." The bird adjusted his glasses, to the point it was hard to see his eyes through the reflection of the lantern.

"Yes. Regrettably, that city was taken."

"A Ralkor Knight? Tobyas, what are you doing with this Avian?" The Red Bird demanded. It almost frightened the Lioness.

"Ask him." The Dragonite snorted. Tossing her head towards Kassel. It made him whimper a bit.

"He's... Not our enemy."

"Nor is he a friend." Taute grumbled again.

"I'm not here to do any harm to anyone. I just want answers."

"Answers to what?"

"To why his king ordered an open fire on his soldiers." Kassel said. The old bird looked at

him for a few moments of silence, then he gave a nod as if to say 'he can stay then.'

"...How is the city?" He asked the Blue one.

"Gone. Barely any survivors, just like last time." It was a bit heavy on him. "You were right to leave it. Stupid to come back here, but right." An odd glare at her.

"He wanted to go alone, but I didn't want him to." The cub said, still purring in the arms of the Gnoll.

"You protected him, did you?" Kassel half joked. His smile faded quickly after. "...Did you see anything coming? Hear anything?" They shook their heads.

"A few hours ago, I heard something in the distance while getting some berries, but nothing on the way here." She seen a hint of pain in his brown eyes. "Kassie? what's wrong?"

"...Kassel has some explaining to do." Stigborg stated, taking a seat inside and closing the door. It made him faintly nod. As they all took a seat in a circle within the small building, Kassel took a breath.

Chapter 3

"What was that thing?" The brown one asked. "Tobias called it a Dire-" The Gnoll motioned for him to stop for a moment. Taking another heavy breath.

"...I..." He Swallowed. "I was a Firstborn. One of the few that were created from the other side of Opportunity. When that city was evacuated, I was not even three years of age. Going by the Human Calendar." Another hard swallow, and Taute brought over some kind of drink. Kass said his thanks, until he tasted it. Making a strange face, both at the glass and the Red bird.

"It will help you relax a bit. Make it last, that stuff is old." The Gnoll's ears lowered a bit, but he nodded and carried on.

"This was back in Oddin's rule." He got a look from Stigborg. "Yes, Oddin existed. He was their king until the very end. He didn't make it through Opportunity though."

"What is this Opportunity?"

"It's the tunnel the humans used to cross the ocean underground." The Dragonite informed the doctor. "They couldn't sail or fly across the seas, so to make it to the east world, they built a tunnel. It's where Ralkor got a lot of their technologies."

"Your king broke the Taboo?" The Knight nodded, a bit shamefully. "...I see. Carry on Kassel."

"...My mother actually ended up creating my father first. He was kind of a failed attempt in making a successor species. Very smart, but he was still too feral to do much. He could understand languages, but couldn't speak them. At times he could write, but..." A small smile came across his muzzle. "He was a hyena named Giggles." It made the cub laugh. "And I was made from a mix of his blood and my mother's; Dr. Kase. I was grown in a Lab, even before I was technically born, and raised in one. Though there were several species like myself made, she gave a lot of personal attention to me." Another drink.

"That's what you mean by Firstborn? The first set of species created from the humans?" Tobyas asked, getting a nod. "That means you are..."

"Over three thousand years old. I actually lost track."

"Because of that ring." She got a strange look from Taute, who then turned to Kassel for an explanation.

"...The Set of Oddin exists too. And Dr. Kase had an affair with one of the Knights there, Sir Clayon." The Knight slightly nodded in understanding. "He... Wanted to make sure that her hard work made it out alive. So he gave me his ring... The one that would make the wearer indestructible, but..." He lightly retrieved his very bushy tail and squeezed it. Sending out a loud squeak in the building while bubbling out. A few chuckles and strange looks of amazement came out, regardless of how hard they were trying to keep quiet.

"How in the world...?"

"I'll get to it." Another drink. "...It took almost eighteen days of walking to reach about halfway. And that's when we heard that the creatures that attacked the city got through. About three days later, they were on our heels. Soon after that they caught my mother. Her last words to me were: The Future Of The Living Depends On You To Protect It. It wasn't long before I was caught. But that ring... They couldn't bite into me. I still have nightmares about being in those hoards and being pulled apart by them. But somehow I got out. Crawling in a vent until they passed."

"It was a very long journey to the other side. But eventually I made it, only to find that they locked the door."

"How on earth did you survive this long without food? The Ring?" Another nod.

"For another few days, I just tried to get their attention. Anyone on the other side. Someone eventually heard me crying and interrogated me before letting me in. Making sure there was nothing else around. They let me through, hesitant about me carrying some kind of disease. I was contained for probably almost a year, until someone accidentally tended to me without protection. After about a month of tests on that person to indicate that they were perfectly fine, I was able to go out."

"There was several units and transfers before the city was attacked. Many of the other species and experiments were moved out while they were still being grown. I was the last one to arrive, and was sent to join them as we studied the human's ways of life. But never were we truly accepted as equals to them. For the longest time, we were almost held prisoner, confined into one building and not able to go out to any of the other settlements that were made. Eventually we broke out. Many of the species ended up going into the forests and away from the humans, they started their own villages and tribes."

"What about you?" Tobyas asked.

"I... Quite a few of us ended up going to different towns. We were not really prisoners, so they didn't chase after us. But the townspeople were... Timid of us. I ended up trying to learn how to hunt and just do labor for a while, that was my job growing up. But after a few close encounters of nearly dying, losing the ring a few times, and almost getting it stolen..." The Gnoll searched through the fur in his chest. "...I ended up cutting a bit of the skin inside my chest. And then I placed the Ring inside. After the wound healed..."

"You were unable to take it off. While it stayed in effect the entire time. Quite clever really." The Red one said, impressed.

"Yes. It made me immortal. At times my fur still grew out a bit, but I never got any older. For years, I did what I could to help other people out using this gift, but never knowing when it would just stop... I made a lot of friends, but..."

"They eventually died, while you stayed like this." He nodded at the Knight sadly. "And those creatures?"

"You said to me the day that you two left for Ralkor, that We Cremate Our Dead For A Reason."

"...When one of us dies, it's possible that they will change. Often into what we call Monsters. Many of the species of creatures that are not animals are the result of someone dying and..."

"And the Dires?"

"...They are the dead bodies of the Firstborn. That's why they're much stronger and more violent than your average monster."

"...They're people that you knew. People you grew up with." Tobyas whispered. Another drink.

"And people I tried to save. Often failing in one way or another. But the older the Firstborn is, the stronger the Dire that they... Become."

"That's why you're so afraid of dying...?"

"...You could consider me a walking apocalypse by now. And when this ring gives out... The only way I could find that would stop the change was destroying the body. And the easiest way to do it is..."

"To burn them." The Doctor concluded. "It makes sense now."

"What about that fire power thing you have?"

"Fire power?" She probably means the Red. "Oh... Bartan says that I'm a reincarnation of someone who had it. It's why I'm able to use it, but... Something went wrong with it in Lingerriff..." A deep breath from him. "But you had some sort of theory about it?"

"I did?" Taute asked.

"Not you, Well... Yes you, but not...you?" The Gnoll's head sank. Kassel, ask him if you know where the Set of Oddin came from. "Do you know where the Ring came from?"

The Doctor looked at him strangely, but then something clicked. "You might be right... Where was that?" He began searching through his books for a bit, and Kassel got a slight squeeze from his tail, followed by a young giggle.

"Sorry, it's just funny. I had no idea you were squeaky."

"Just don't do it too much. Nor too hard. I can still feel it."

"Here maybe. Tobyas, can you clear a table-" He tried to stop himself before the Dragonite picked up an end and let everything on the surface slide off and break. "Not like that!" He hissed. Thankful that it was just a series of replaceable books and scrolls. She just shrugged at him while the doctor placed the book on the table. "It says here that there was a black stone from which the jewelry was crafted from, but it said that the stone was evil. It fell from the sky during a period where something blocked the sun for several days. In order to preset them to Oddin and be used for a source of good, it was blessed and prayed upon for nearly a decade before covered in gold and gifted to the king of Humans. He then blessed it himself, and gave them to his most trusted knights."

"But what does that have to do with anything?" Stigborg asked.

"Hold on, let me ask him." Ask who what-? Oh come on. I am not going to explain anything to you and let you blenderize and regurgitate it to them to make them even more confused. "Regurgi-what?" For the love of... Okay, Taute still has that artifact, right? "What artifact? Oh... No! Bartan, no! Bad voice-in-my-head!" They don't have to break it, just touch it.

The Gnoll whimpered loudly. "Kassel?" The Dragonite nudged him. Caused him to lower his ears.

"...Burdock?" The red one's ears went back. "Do you still have that wall? Errm, template thing?" Tablet. "Tablet?"

"Yes. But you said it was cursed."

"Bartan says if you just touch it you won't get cursed, and you can hear him." I did? "Didn't you?" I said nothing about not getting cursed, but they won't. "Good." And now everybody's giving you a very worried look. "Well, for what I'm about to do to them, they should be worried." He said, rubbing the back of his mane.

"...Is it too late to go back to Ralkor?"

"Yes." Tobyas answered, rather quickly at that. Carefully the old bird got out the fragments of the Tablet.

"What does he want us to do? Just touch it?"

Touch the same one Kass will Touch.

"Touch mine? And this won't curse them, right?"

Nope. With a conformational nod they did. Shouldn't curse them anyway.

The Gnoll jumped backwards and yelped. "What do you mean Shouldn't!?"

When have I ever been sure about anything?

"...You've been sure about everything so far... Haven't you?"

I donno. Maybe? The Gnoll whimpered.

"I don't want to hurt my friends."

You won't be hurting them. If anyone will be, I will. And it's their fault to begin with for trusting you. So you're not to blame regardless.

"Well... When you put it like that..." He went to reach out, then pulled back. "Nope! Sounds too suspicious. And it won't stop them from being mad at me, so just tell me."

Just do it, you wussy.

He whimpered again and touched a piece of it.

"...Done arguing with him?"

"Yes. Touch it." And they did so. Also giving each other odd looks as if to say 'can you hear him as well?' Yes. He was telling the truth all along.

"On with it Bartan." Tobyas said, also raising an ear and tilting her head. "Wow... Even every little action. How did you deal with this?"

"Talent. And go on Bartan."

You're not the boss of me.

"Bartan."

Yes Ma'am. I have a bit of a theory of why that power of Kassel's turned black and well... Went haywire.

"Hay-what?"

Whacko. Screwy. Nutbunnies. Sixes and Sevens. Three fries short of a happy meal-

"Seriously, how do you live with this?" The Dragonite tossed her head.

"It... Malfunctioned?" The Doctor asked. And yes, I suppose that's a less interesting way to put it.

That rock that was mentioned in the story, it's a small bit from a much larger 'rock' known as a Blackstar. Without making this horribly complex, it's a very very evil thing filled with negative energy. Now, when Kassel used too much of the power, it began taking it out of another source of energy. That being the Ring.

"So it used the negative energy of the ring to fuel that power, which in turn made it black." Stigborg said. And yes. "Good grief, that is kinda annoying."

Why does everybody keep saying that?

"What does this mean for me? That it corrupted my Red?"

For the most part, yes. It's still useable, but it might be unstable. So use it with caution from now on. But that's not all. Because it went through your body, it might've done something to it.

"Like what?"

Well... That Blackstar, it tends to feed off the negative energy of those it's around. In turn, it feeds it's... Well, Master. The one that sheared the star in the first place. Because it went

through your bloodstream now, you actually might be... A Host for it. Much like how a parasite would attach itself to one.

"Meaning?"

That he's likely becoming a battery to feed the Blackstar or the Star's master; a Terrasque. And as long as he has the ring inside him, he will likely bring many bad omens with him. The statement caused his ears to lower.

"Don't worry Kassie, nothing else bad will happen if you don't let it."

"...So, if I...?"

If you become a Dire, anything negative that you bring with you will in turn feed a much more powerful being.

"How do we stop it?" Tobyas asked. Rather demanding at that- "Bartan."

...You don't. You either take off the ring, or you don't. This thing is much bigger than you.

"I don't care how big it is."

Let me put it this way; it's bigger than your ego.

"That's pretty big." The Brown bird said, getting a shove from her.

"So what do we do next?"

I'm not a Strategy Guide.

"Strategy Guide. We know."

It's up to you guys to figure out then. Class dismissed.

"Not really sure what that meant, but it still doesn't sound good." Dr. Taute said, retrieving his paw, as did everyone else.

"Just one more reason why I'm going to be the death of everyone here." Kass whimpered, lowering his head. "I'm not really sure what to do."

"Well, let's sleep on it for now. There's not enough room for everyone here, so you'll have to sleep outside somewhere." The Red one said. Sounds to me like he's kicking you out.

"We get the hint." Tobyas tossed her snout. "Come on Kass. We'll sleep outside."

"We will?" He whimpered, mostly out of embarrassment. She glared at him for a moment and he felt cold. "Errm... Coming." The other three just shook their heads.

"Exactly where are you planning to sleep? There's not much left of the buildings here, and the smell is kinda bad." The Gnoll complained.

"Just out in the grass. It should be warm enough if we stay near each other." She said that rather calmly, which surprised Kassel, but made his ears lower. As much as he wanted to decline and be left alone for a few hours, he didn't want to disappoint her again. And don't look at the sky on me, you know very well you don't want to.

His ears lowered again. "Ooooh, it's true." He moped, getting the Dragonite to shake her head. For a while, they walked in silence. The Sky was still quite dark, and they could still tell the darkness from the actual night sky. The Moon was still quite bright, and seemed to hold this glowing ring around it. "That's always been there."

She looked at him, then at the moon. "Mmm, it's always looked like that, hasn't it?"

It's because there's always a storm nearby. Just not always on land. "Yeah... Always seems to be a squall somewhere." A few clinks got his attention, while Tobyas was beginning to strip her armor off. "W-what are you doing?"

"You don't honestly think I'll sleep in this, do you? I'm exhausted." She said, carelessly tossing it on the grass. "Be thankful you never have to wear it." She teased.

"I used to. A light armor set. It was rather uncomfortable, and I found myself getting hit more with it." The old memories made him slightly smile. "But it covered up the visual part of the ring. Couldn't do much about the audio part, besides make excuses-" She suddenly pulled him down and rolled with him in the grass a bit. It was actually quite soft for being so long. Bit wet, but that was fine with the two.

She just smiled at him a bit, and he back at her nervously. "Oh please, don't look at me like that." She shoved him. "We won't be doing anything tonight besides sleeping. Happy now?" She tossed her head, and rested it on his chest.

"A bit." His ears lowered again.

"...I still can't believe it." It caught his attention. "You went three thousand years without sex. That's just impossible." It actually made him laugh. "You weren't lying to me, right?"

"No, I wasn't. I can't say that others didn't attempt, but..." Again, a bit nervous. Thinking that she might be jealous of them.

"You just needed the right person to give it to."

"Take. You took it after tying me up, if you don't recall." How serious he was made her laugh. He just sighed it off for now, unable to stay mad.

"...Can I ask you something?"

"Mhmm. Anything."

"Why didn't you do it sooner? I mean, you must've found many females that made you happy."

"I did, but..." Another heavy breath. "...No one should have to watch their pups die. Or their grandpups." It made sense to her then, but she remained quiet for a bit.

"...So you were planning on living forever?"

"I never plan anything. Did you see how much of a mess that mission in Ralkor was?" Again, it made Tobyas laugh.

"You need to tell me what happened to you after." She said, still resting her head on his chest. Stroking his belly lightly.

"Well..."

Chapter 4

A loud noise was filling the morning air, just before sunrise. The sky was beginning to light up, but it was still half dark out. As the noise began to grow louder, Kassel started to feel wind blowing quite hard. As his eyes adjusted to the light and darkness, he seen a large airship land in the meadow the two were sleeping in. On the side of it was the emblem of Ralkor.

"What in the world...?" The Dragonite moaned, getting awake. Seeing the airship and then going after her sword. Though her armor was off, she would have to defend herself very carefully. A few Avians could be seen on the ship, gliding off the deck, Stigborg being in the front. "What's the meaning of this, bird?"

He lifted his hands in surrender. "We're not here to do anything hostile. I seen the ship flying slowly in the distance during the night. I caught up to them and explained everything."

"We were from the flight team that was to assault Lingerriff." One of them said. "When we got the order to fire the Takisaga, our captain tried to follow through with it. But we didn't think it was right. We started a mutiny, and when he wouldn't stand down..."

"Where did that order come from? The King?" Kassel asked.

"Yeah, directly from him too."

"I want to return to Ralkor and ask him about it personally." The Knight said. "I thought I would inform you before I left, to prevent any misunderstandings." The Gnoll nodded.

"...Take me with you." Kassel said, getting an odd look from everyone there. "I want to ask for myself what he discovered in Opportunity. And what his motives are."

"You realize you're an enemy to all the guards there, right? You were a prisoner at one point." Tobyas stated.

"I know, but I'm sure Stigborg would probably have enough authority to at least let me speak with him. Even if I'm unarmed and stripped."

"You're not planning an Assassination are you?" One of the crew members asked. Getting an irked look from the Gnoll.

"I don't want to kill him. I just... Need to understand."

"Fair enough. I honestly would feel more comfortable with you beside me." The Brown one said, getting a rather surprised look from the other birds.

"If he's going, then I am too." The Dragonite said. "I always wanted to try flying in one of these things."

"Very well. Should we inform the Doctor then?"

"Alright." Kassel lead the way to the old bird's home.

"We'll prepare the ship for when you return."

As the three approached the old tower, still slightly damaged from the fires, the Gnoll called to him. Still rather surprised that the door was locked. "Dr. Toot?"

"It's Taute you idiot!" The Red one grumbled from inside. "I've told you it for years, and you still mess it up." The complaints put a smile on the Gnoll's face. "What do you want?" He asked, unlocking the door.

"We're heading out to Ralkor to get some answers. We got an airship to take us there quickly." Stigborg said, while everyone let themselves inside.

"You cannot be serious." The old bird snorted. "You realize you're asking for Treason, correct? If you confront him about this, you will never be trusted by him again. You will end up being Ronin."

"...I understand that." The answer still made the doctor grumbled. "It's something I'm willing to risk. This cannot be able to carry on any longer."

Taute studied him for a few minutes, then looked at the other two. "And you? Are you prepared to be branded as enemies of an entire country? One with the most dangerous of weapons?" Kassel and Tobyas looked at each other, then nodded at him. "You're a bunch of idiots." He grumbled again, turning to a shelf. "Moronic idiots." He ended up getting two small boxes, and a long rifle out and setting it on the table. The Lion cub came down the stairs, looking at everyone.

"What's going on?" She asked.

"We're going to Ralkor." The doctor said sternly, getting the other three to look at him. "When we leave, lock the door and make sure no one else comes through it. I don't care if it's a refugee. Understood?" The cub nodded sadly.

"Burdock..." Kassel started, only to get a red feathered paw to tell him to stop.

"He's an idiot too. Always has been short sighted, even has a chick. That crown must've gotten to his head."

"Our king doesn't wear a crown..."

"It's a Metaphorical Crown!" The Red one snapped, almost smiling as he loaded the rifle. He opened the other box, and placed a strange clip-on lens over his glasses that had a strange red tint to them. After looking at everyone once more, he nodded and said "Let's go."

As the others followed him outside the door, a small note inside the lens case caught Kassel's eye. As he opened it, he read a short message:

Calibrated for high focal alignment. Should allow for the precision you were asking for. But I must ask... For what reasons do you need such glasses? Surely the development team at Ralkor would still provide them for you. They owe you alot.

I can't think of a single... Scientific Reason why you would want this. Is this about the prince? The future of the kingdom? Or is it something else? If you're in trouble, you can always ask me for help. But... Taking this into your own hands is a mistake. And I fear that making these things was a mistake on my end. Just... Be careful.

"What does it say Kassie?" Cinna asked him.

"...It's an old letter to him. Probably an old friend of his, and the reason why he moved out here." The cub looked at him sadly. "We'll be back. Don't worry, Cinna. Are you going to be

okay out here on your own?"

"Mhmm. I'll be fine." It ached him to leave her behind like this. But to take her with him was a mistake. One last pat on her head, and he left the building. "Come back, Kassie! I'll be waiting."

As the Gray one caught up to the rest, they all boarded the Airship and set off to the City of Ralkor once again. The takeoff was smooth, but... Let's just say the Gnoll really didn't enjoy flight. While the Dragonite seemed to love it. "I don't see how she could." He grumbled. Holding onto the railing for dear life.

She just laughed at him. "It's not that bad. I love the speed of it. It's very exciting." Tobyas said, standing at the bow and letting the wind blow through her spines. "I wish I could fly at this speed. Even when I dive I can't reach this."

"And you're not afraid of crashing?"

"Of course not. The beauty of having my own pair of wings is that I can abandon ship anytime." Kassel grumbled again. "Oh please, you shouldn't be so worried either. You could dive into the ships propellers and be fine."

"That's not the point. It'll still hurt!" She just shook her snout at him.

"Come up here."

"Why?" The Dragonite tossed her head and just motioned him to come to her. A bit hesitant, he slowly did.

"Look down."

"I'd rather not."

"I don't remember you being so afraid of heights." The Dragonite chuckled.

"I'm not. But I'm afraid of flying."

"Oh please. It's nothing to be afraid of. Come on. I got you." She grabbed a hold of his wrist. "Now look over the ledge." A deep breath from the Gnoll and he slowly did. The trees and lands below were whipping by at a massive speed, and it felt so surreal to him. Within a few moments, they could even see the watchtowers in the forests. "It's breathtaking, isn't it?"

That it was. "...Yeah." Kassel felt his heart flutter with excitement and fear. "I can't imagine how someone could think of such a thing."

"I'm guessing some crazy bird that really wanted to fly faster."

"I donno. I think the humans had aircrafts before their end. They used to fight wars with them." His ears went low, and she lightly frowned at him. "Some Messiah I am... I was supposed to stop our species from fighting wars like this. From using forbidden technology, and keep them from becoming monsters." He sat down on the deck, still looking over the railing. "Seems like everything I tried, it still went out of control. Invincible or not, I can't save a single species..."

"Of course you can't. Not alone, you Taath-head." There's that word again. "Kass, how old were you when your mother told you that?"

"...About three I think."

"Regardless if you were told when you were an adult, no one can control an entire species without it being tyranny. You were trying to do it the same way Oddin did, when the humans were at war, right?" He looked at her for a moment. "And do you think Oddin did it alone?"

"I-"

"Of course he didn't!" She hissed at him. "You do what you can Kass. That's more than anyone else has for a while."

"Well... You've done more." His ears went low again.

"Yeah, well... I wouldn't have done any of it if it wasn't for you." She mumbled, her ears back and trying to face away from him. Although he somehow caught what she said. The Gnoll looked sadly at her, and tugged on her wrist. She tossed her head, but didn't argue, sitting down beside him. "You've done more than you think for this world. Even for just half of it. Regardless if you didn't actually do it yourself."

"...And you think that what I did...?"

"We're trying to help everyone get along. If it means I have to shove my foot into some bird-king's ass, I'll do it. It may not be the same way you'd approach the problem, but it's the only way I know how." He lightly smiled at her. "Follow your virtues, Kasse. Eventually they'll lead you to something worthy." He nodded at her, as he felt the ship slowing down. "There's no turning back now."

"Yeah... Let's get some answers."

As the large ship landed close to the city, the two on the bow kept themselves rather hidden. Letting the first face that the guards see be Stigborgs. After that, they rose up and made themselves known. The guards looked at their superior with caution for a few moments, letting him approach and wait until the loud engines turned off. "It's good to see at least someone came back alive." One of the guards said, giving a salute.

"Yes. But sadly, this is the only ship that made it out." The guards gave a shocked look, then looked at the other members that were not from the city. "They are with me for now. We're here to speak with the king."

"Sir..." The guard paused, giving a morbid look to the others. "No news has yet returned from the assault. After all communications went dead, the King..." The Knight motioned her to go on. "He hasn't been himself. He's been in his quarters with the lights off. A few people have been trying to check on him, but he ordered them out. They said he's been... Talking. Whispering to the shadows."

"The shadows?" Taute asked. "Perhaps in shock of what happened?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not suppose to let anyone in to see him, but..." she sighed. "He should hear from his only Knight left. Of course, I cannot let you go in armed..."

"Understood." As the guards confiscated all their weapons, they followed them through the city. To a rather tall door at the end of a great hall.

"Sir." She got his attention before he entered the door. "I don't want to believe that our king is lost to us. But if he is, please bring back what you can." The Brown avian gave a solid nod, then entered the dark room.

There was very little light, most of it coming from a large window being blocked by a thick curtain. Upon entering, they could feel a strange uneasiness within the room. Something they couldn't quite place.

Towards the back of the room stood a figure in royal clothing. Painting on the wall with what almost looked like Blood, but the shimmer it gave off was much more closer to ink. Drawn on the wall was two large sections that were faintly connected by one small line between them. "It seems no matter how many times I tell them, they just cannot take an order." The Black bird mumbled to himself. "...Ah. I suppose it is. Welcome back my Feather, how do you fair?"

"Your Highness..." Stigborg kneeled before him, watching him as he faintly turned his head.

"And you've brought guests? Friends of yours perhaps? Or are they now considered comrades?" The Knight hesitated for a moment, and stayed silent. "...Of course. Considering such events that happened of late. But who do we have?" As the King turned around he carefully studied the group. "My, it has been a while, Doctor. Where have you hidden since you've left my studies?"

"They were not your studies, they were your fathers." Taute snorted. "And you know very well why I left. Too many under your hand were far too interested in the demise of the

past."

"And so you've decided to just leave, thinking that it would not go anywhere?"

"I never thought you'd open that gate, Eyldrian. It was a big mistake to."

"Mistake? I now have the greatest power of all the land under my fingers. Even the greatest army-"

"Greatest army my ass. You have one ship left!" The Dragonite snorted.

The king took a deep breath. "...So it seems. And this is all that is left? Still, compared to the rest of the world, mine is far greater. Hoelhara has no such thing-"

"That's because it was never needed!" The Doctor snapped. "You were always narrow minded. Feeling like you needed a wall of people around you to protect you-"

"Tell me, teacher... What happened to my father? How many years did that counsel attempt to find a dagger for his back? The greater the number of people that you claim to have as walls, the greater the chance those walls will turn to you."

"And so you've lost your trust in your people?" The Brown one asked. "Is that why you gave that order?"

"The order? Oh, yes... That was for an entirely different purpose. But similar all the same; I was trying to be rid of you, if that's what you're wondering." The Knight growled loudly.

"How could you!?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you had your doubts against me before all of this. Am I right?" The Knight held his breath. "How long would it have gone until you were prepared to end me? To stop this 'insanity' of mine? Isn't that what they call it now?" They remained quiet. "A Machine will always do what it's told. It is a puppet. It will never betray you, plot against you, and obey your every command." He turned around and continued drawing on the wall. "I fell in love with such things after my wife leapt out of that window. I can see how the humans adored such objects. Praised them. Used them in everything. It was not due to their lust for machinery that drove them to their distasteful end. It in fact saved them. Isn't that right?"

"...They made us." Kassel said. "So that we wouldn't make the same mistakes-"

"We have already made those mistakes. It had nothing to do with the machines, the technology. They are what kept them alive... Oh? Is that so?" Once again, the black bird turned around and overlooked the Gnoll. "Perhaps your survival was meant to be then, Feather."

"What do you mean, Sire?"

"You wish to know why I attacked the city of Thieves? And the city of Trades? You wish to

know why I gave the order to fire the Takisaga over your fleet?" He gestured towards Kassel. "Edgar, you were correct. He did bloom into quite the weapon, didn't he?"

"I know that name..." Kassel whispered.

"Of course you must. It's hard to believe that such a thing could live for so long. How did he do it...?" As the King gazed to his right side, they could start to see it in the darkness. The outline of some specter with faint yellow eyes beside him. "Within his chest? Then how does Oddin plan to retrieve such a thing? ...Ah. And then it will be mine?"

"Oddin...?" The Knight whispered. "You cannot be serious."

"To open the gates to Opportunity. Then let the Hollow ones through. He will have no choice but to destroy them. And then it will come back to us." He took out something within his coat, something that looked like a small black ball. "As you wish Edgar. I do pledge allegiance to Oddin."

"Cover your eyes!" The Doctor shouted. As the ball detonated in a very bright flash and a very high pitched noise, it dazed everyone for a few moments. When Kassel got his senses back, the Black bird was gone, leaving behind an opened door.

"Where did he go!?" The Dragonite shouted. Seeing the door and immediately bolting for it.

"Stigborg, grab our weapons and start the ship outside! I fear he's going to blast open the gate to Opportunity!" The Knight nodded at the Doctor. "Kassel, follow her, we'll meet you on the other side."

"Alright!" And the Gnoll bolted down the hall. It seemed like a secret passage for an emergency escape. Probably fitted with an airship at the end. "That sounds like my luck." And that also sounds like the engines of one.

The hall lead to a large opening with a small deck. The Airship just barely taking off as the Gnoll got there, and before Tobyas could reach it. "Damnit!" She shouted. "What now?" She asked the Gray one as he caught up to her.

"Burdock said he would meet us here." In the distance they could hear another ship getting closer. As it came in view, it seemed more like a cargo ship than the warship that they were in.

"Well... That's a bit of a disappointment." She said, her ears going back and noticing the Red bird on board. "No time to dock! Just keep it steady!"

"What do you mean?" Kassel really shouldn't have asked, as the Dragonite picked him up. Yelping loudly, she threw him onto the deck of the ship, across a good twenty foot gap. Then quickly transformed and got on herself.

"What happened to the other ship?" She asked the Doctor, returning to her normal self.

"It was in the way of this one, so we just high-jacked this instead."

"So, you're planning to stop a ship armed with weapons with a ship that has none?" She grumbled.

"Just catch up to it. I know how these things were designed. Get to the bridge and help out Stigborg. He can't run both engines and pilot this thing at the same time." Taute readied his rifle and flicked down the Red Lens on his glasses. "Kass, with me."

"Alright." He followed the Bird to the bow of the ship.

T.M Revolution - Resonance

Way off into the distance, the two could see the Eyldrian's ship. It almost seemed impossible to the Gnoll that they would catch up to it. But a few moments later, he could hear the engines of the cargo ship grow much louder and almost high pitched. The airship began to climb excessively in speed, which honestly worried Kassel. "Should we be worried about that?" He asked Taute, trying to hang onto the railing.

"I stopped the acceleration limit to the engines for now. It's going to be much harder to steer the ship and harder to keep it steady, so I need you to support my back!" The Doctor took aim with his rifle for now, getting used to the information the lens was giving him.

"Information?" The Bird did his best to ignore him.

Yes. Those glasses let him see weaknesses.

"So he can destroy the weapons..." Yes, now you're catching on.

The cargo ship was gaining on the escaped one gradually, but they were also getting closer to the gates of Opportunity. It could actually been seen from Kassel's position, if he was looking over the railing and not supporting the Old bird. A few moments later, he shot the rifle, and it gave out an unexpected backblast. However, that shot missed. The two struggled to get back into place, fighting against the wind. Taking aim again, Taute exhaled. It felt like the entire world stood still for a brief moment while he took another shot. The strange bullet hit the other ship and loudly stripped it of one of its cannons.

The second cannon was on the opposite side of the Escape ship, and the doctor motioned the bridge to feint right. Doing so, the cargo ship lost a bit of speed and it was hard to keep it stable. A loud bang omitted from the other ship, and through some of the railing, Kassel could see what looked to be modified roundshot heading towards the gate. Quickly he covered the ammo with his Blackened Red, setting it to explode and destroy the shot, however the explosion was much bigger than he meant for it to be. Still it got the job done. "Did he just miss?" The Doctor looked at the Gnoll and noticed his drained expression. Once again, he just

quickly shook his head and aimed again. "I can't get a good shot of the other cannon like this, so I'm aiming at his engines. We're almost at the waters, so he shouldn't crash on land."

"...Okay." Kass said, still trying to support the Bird. Another few moments and the rifle fired again. Piercing through the metal shell of the engine and causing it to explode. The Escape ship began to glide down faintly, and lose a lot of speed, while quite a bit of flaming debris was falling onto the ocean.

The cargo airship soon passed over the other one, as the engines began to slow down. As the escaped ship took aim with its remaining cannon, several large spikes attached to anchor chains came from the waters, pierced through Eyldrian's hull, and pulled it down to the ocean's surface. As the large airship turned around, a massive brown maw came from below and dragged down the escaped airship. The water rippled into waves, making it impossible to see what was actually below it. "What in the name of...? Was that a Dire?!" The Bird asked, looking at Kassel's sad looking face. A few moments later, several more spines came out and pulled harshly on their ship.

The engines began to rev up again the sea monster's grasp, but it didn't do very much good. Quickly, the Gnoll went to the other side and used his Red to cut the chains safely halfway. A loud roar came from beneath, as if he severed a limb. And barely being able to see the large beast briefly surface.

It was indeed massive, almost the size of a village. Its fur was a dark brown, almost wearing what seemed to be the destroyed hulls of ships it must've sank over hundreds of years. Even armed with their harpoons used to fish with. One look into those green eyes, and he instantly knew who it was. As the doctor approached him, looking down at the creature just before it sank back into the waters. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

"I can talk to her! She'll listen to me!" Kassel said, as he tried to stand on the railing.

"What!? Kass, don't be an idiot!" But it was too late to stop him. The Gnoll dove into the waters, once again thankful that he was invincible. Because he squeaked loudly as he hit the waters. "Stupid pup!" He cursed at him, as Taute went to the bridge.

"What the hell is he thinking!?" The Dragonite piloting demanded. "What grabbed us? A new weapon?"

"There's a Dire in the water, we have to get back on land!" The two looked at him for a moment. Only to feel another grasp and one of the engines explode loudly. As the three struggled to stay afloat the falling airship, it crashed loudly against the waters. Sending it slightly under the waves for a few minutes before resurfacing.

Struggling to stay on top of the creature, Kassel made his way to its front from its neck. Although black and near limitless the bottom of the sea seemed to be, he could still half make out its front paws as it almost began to surface once again. Hitting the air, the Gnoll took a few

breaths, and used the opportunity well, making his way to the creature's eye before it took fire at his friends once again. "STOP!" He yelled at it, thankful for the many large spikes coming from its skull around its eye. "Stop! Please!" Standing directly in front of the green eye, it seemed to notice him, and adjusted to look at him clearly. "You remember me! I know you do! Please!"

A little bit of a low growl gradually turned into a soft murmur. "I know you're still in there! It's me, Kass! Kassel! You wanted me to wait for you! Don't you remember?" The creature seemed to somewhat respond to him, and he could see some sort of change in its eye. As if it remembered something. "You don't have to do this! Not anymore! They're gone now...! I know what they did, but they're gone now! Please!" Another series of growls, but it didn't seem to be angry. "Please... They're my friends."

A few moments later, a loud shot could be heard, and a strange bullet pierced the creature's eye beside Kassel. The Dire roared loudly in pain as it dove under, sending the Gnoll away from its face, but able to see where it was swimming under the black sea.

"Did you get it?" the Knight asked the Doctor on the ship.

"I know I hit it, but I don't think it's dead-" A large motion could be felt in the waters, and then a forceful one that sent out waves beneath it.

"I swear I seen a light down there." Tobyas said, after a few moments of silence. "...Look!" As the three looked over the railing, they could see the waters slowly turn a dark red and calm down.

"Maybe you did end up getting it." A few coughs from the other side of the ship could be heard. Bolting for it, they could see the Gnoll come out of the waters and swim towards the wrecked ship.

"Kass!" The Dragonite said, tossing him a rope. The three pulled him up quickly, and he rested on his knees.

"...They threw her overboard. They never admitted it, but I know they did..." He said, almost crying.

"Kassel..." The Dragonite held him. Transforming and covering him up with her wings.

"...I think we all know now why we never got any word back from the ships that tried to make it across the seas." The Doctor said, looking out to the water. Almost being able to hear the morning of others from the oceans. "It's best we leave now. There's no telling how much more of these things are in here."

"We might be able to make it with one engine. But I'll need your help to start it back up." The Doctor nodded at the Knight, and they went off to the stern.

As Kassel emptied himself into the winged one, he slowly felt the ship moving. "Kass..." He remained quiet, and eventually feel asleep in her arms.

Chapter 5

Though the ship was still slightly sinking, they managed to make it back to land. Docking up on a beach nearby a village. As the four took a slight rest, waiting for Kassel to wake up, they managed to open one of the crates and find some wines. But seriously Kass. You've been sleeping alot lately.

A few groans omitted from him. "Getting up, are you?" Tobyas asked him, still in her lesser form. Blinking his eyes opened, she gave him a lick between the eyes. He murred at it softly, causing her to chuckle at him. "How do you feel?"

"Overtired." He mumbled, slightly stretching in her embrace. Starting to focus, he could see her in her lesser form now, and everything that happened came rushing back at him. His heart sank, as he just held onto her a bit longer. "...Thank you."

"Don't mention it." She whispered to him. "...I know it must be hard on you, but you don't have to go through it alone." He nodded, and took it one breath at a time. After a bit he heard talons across the wooden frame of the ship.

"We didn't find much in the cargo bay, but we did find a few drinks. And the Doc seen a bit of smoke to the east, not far from here." She looked at the Knight for a moment. "Probably from chimneys. We could travel there by foot in maybe an hour." Tobyas nodded at him. "We'll leave when he's ready." And he glided off.

"...When I'm ready..." Kassel mumbled. "You guys could make it there in a quarter that if you flew..." She growled at him, then jabbed him in the side. A small whimper followed the squeak.

"If you insist on beating yourself, I'm going to beat you twice as hard!" Once again, she just held him. "There's no reason for it. And nothing will come out of it. If you need to morn, fine. But if you slam yourself for things that you can't help, then I'm going to drag you to that village. Slamming you into every tree and rock on the way there, do I make myself clear?" Yep, scary fits.

He just whimpered again, but remained quiet. After a few minutes, he spoke up.
"...Okay. I think I'm ready." She got up to look at him. Her dark Golden eyes studying his for a few moments.

"You sure?" He gave a faint nod. "...Alright." And the Dragonite let go of him. Changing back into her original form, she helped him up, and off the ship. It wasn't long until they found the other two in the cargo area.

"Want a drink before we leave?" Stigborg asked the two.

"Granted, I'm not sure if it's such a great idea. Drinks like this don't really quench your thirst. You're better off finding some water before you dehydrate yourself with this." The Doctor explained. "How much coin do you guys have on you?"

"Next to nothing." Tobyas shrugged. "I never got paid for that last job."

"I never thought to bring some." The Brown avian said.

"And you, Kassel?"

"About 12,50. What's left of what you gave me."

The Red bird pondered. "Tobyas, I hate to ask so much of you, but do you think you could carry this? Perhaps we can barter a bit with the villages."

"Not a problem." She picked up the crate with ease. "Let's head out before a storm gets to us." The rest followed her out.

For a while, the team was quiet. Keeping an ear out for anything that they might encounter through the fields and forestry. Eventually, the Knight exhaled. "So... It's finally over." He swallowed rather loudly. "I... I hope your cities will not think ill of our country because of all this."

"It's doubtful. Once we explain what happened. Although, our kind may not be the most respected species for a while." The Doctor replied. "Still, time will make things better." A bit more silence. "Stigborg. What do you plan on doing from now on? Keep the life of a Knight?"

"I'm not sure. Being the last one left, there really isn't a need for such things. And to have them..."

"Only provokes people to use them." Tobyas finished his sentence. "The Dragonites used to think the same way for a while. But we never actually went to war with anyone."

"You don't see too many of them here in the west."

"That might be the reason why we never did. We honestly didn't see you as a threat."

"Wow, listen to that ego." The Knight teased, getting a bit of a slap across the arm.

"Still, I think we all could use a break. We've got a lot of repairing to do." She said.

"What about you, Taute? Where are you going?"

"I'm staying in my tower for a while longer. Eventually, I might end up coming back to Ralkor for a few months, but..."

"Most of the people you've worked with have probably left in one way or another."

"And the one next in line to your throne?"

"Was supposed to be his son. But he never conceived."

"It might be for the better. A species doesn't need a single ruler fueled by their own desires." The old bird grumbled. "Too many of them made that mistake."

The entire time, Kass couldn't help but keep glancing back. Feeling like there was still something wrong. Something missing or overlooked. For now, he just sighed and left it alone.

They made it to the village within thirty minutes, got meals and rooms for a night with the large case of wines, and the team rested up for the day. Something they really needed. "Mhmm." The Gnoll mumbled, laying in his bed. Getting a light chuckle from the Dragonite.

"Special friend of yours?"

"Yep. As usual."

"We need to find you a cure for that."

"Why?"

Why?

"Because he's going to drive you insane. I barely tolerated him for four minutes." He smiled at that.

"It's not so bad after a while. Besides, I suppose I could always use him to my advantage."

"How?"

How?

"Well, I can hear what other people are thinking, if it's something important. He's got

good awareness, even when things are not in my line of sight. And he does have some good ideas." Thank you. "You're welcome."

Another chuckle. "Glad to see you being optimistic again." Giving him a last nuzzle. "Wish they weren't so picky about males and females staying in the same room."

"You'll live. They just want to get some sleep, and not hear me squeaking all night." It actually made her laugh.

"Never thought of that. But come to think of it now, you do make alot of noise." She got up and headed to the door. "Good night."

"Good night." He smiled. Watching her as she closed the door. When her footsteps were out of earshot, he let out a painful sigh. His heart still ached a bit, but this time for something a little different.

He ended up resting for quite a while, but when he awoke thanks to some random voice in his head, he jerked and grumbled a bit. I'm not even sure why I'm supporting this, but I am. "Not so loud." He whispered. As if anyone else beside you can hear me.

A few more groans, and the Gnoll shook his head awake. Going down the hall and through the front door was probably a mistake, so his next bet was through the window. At least this one wasn't barred. Although it was a bit higher than he expected, giving off a slight squeak and a grunt when Kassel landed. Quickly getting up and shaking it off, the Gnoll started to head west. Hiding in the shadows from everyone that could possibly be up in the night.

When he was quite far out, he gave a loud sigh of relief. Taking one last look at the village before turning around and leaving them behind. A few more steps, and he was out of the village's limits.

"You're an idiot!"

"You're an idiot!"

"You're an idiot!"

You're an idiot!

Kassel nearly jumped out of his fur coat at the three that had been sleeping under a tree... And me, I suppose. Giving out a loud yelp of surprise. "...What-?"

"What exactly do you think you're furry ass is doing?" The Dragonite hissed at him, while they approached the Gray one.

"But you were-"

"You really think you're that convincing?" His ears went low.

"What gave it away?"

"You made a joke about sex. You never make any noise about sex unless it's a whimper!" Tobyas shoved him.

"Seriously. You've got to be the biggest idiot I've ever seen to try to go back there." The old bird snorted.

"Alone, at that." The Knight joined in.

"...I really can't ask you to..." Kass lowered his head. "This isn't something that concerns you."

"It concerns all of us. Well, maybe not Burdock, but us two at least." The Red one grunted at the Dragonite.

"Until we get our answers, my spear is yours. If you're heading out, I'll be beside you."

"And you get into so much trouble alone, you need someone to bail you out."

"Not to mention you were never very smart. I honestly believe that Cinna is smarter than you."

"Guys..."

You're also clumsy, immature, have the worst luck, and don't have a lot of money.

"Bartan..." He whimpered. What? Those are all things you admitted to in the first installment. "Installment?"

"Nevermind him. What exactly are you planning to do?" Tobyas asked.

Kassel sighed heavily. "...Edgar. I can't quite place the name, but I know it was on the other side of Opportunity. If he either communicated, or even possessed your king, odds are he'll do it again." The Knight nodded at him. "My... Our enemy was never Eyldrian. He was just manipulated. Our foe is Oddin himself. And I have the feeling that he's not going to give up."

"What are you saying Kassel?" The Doctor snorted.

"...We need to go through Opportunity, and stop this at its source. Or else none of this is going to end."

The group nodded at each other and said: "Idiot." Making the Gnoll whimper again.

"Let's go then." Tobyas said. Getting a nod from the other two and making the Gray one look at her. "You're not doing this alone."

"But-"

"I can't believe we're actually doing this for him." The Knight grumbled.

"Guys--"

"He's given us enough, I suppose. We're bound to return the favor eventually." The Gnoll lightly smiled at that. Don't try to convince them otherwise. They know the risks.

Another deep sigh. "Alright. Let's head to the Gate of Opportunity."

Remind me if this ever makes it to the screen to put some sort of traveling montage to fill that space. "What's a Montage?" Nevermind. Kassel grumbled, then studied the large metal gate before him. Old, aged and worn, it still seemed to tower over him. "It's been a long time since I seen it."

"And it's only recently been opened." The Doctor said, looking at the panels that would most likely control it. "Are you absolutely sure you guys want to do this?" One by one they nodded at him. "Then arm yourselves. Who knows what awaits us on the other side." The three readied their weapons, while the Red one loaded his. "Let's hope we don't doom us all." A few key presses, and power to the doors seemed to return. Slowly opening just one side of the sliding doors.

It only seemed to open so much before jamming. After shutting the power to it off, the door stayed still, and everyone waited for a few moments to hear anything. The smell of slight decay seemed to come out of the door, but there was something odd about it. It was slightly... Fresh.

Kassel swallowed hard. "...I'll go first." And slowly the Gray one approached the door. Still not hearing anything, but the smell slightly growing. Inside was vastly dark, and he was only able to see so much due to the light of the morning sun. Until he immersed himself into darkness, he could start to make out strange crates and boxes. Along with many sorts of machines used for loading cargo. "Clear." He said to the others, and slowly they began to move in.

"Anyone have a light?" Taute whispered, finally finding the console. I know someone who does.

"Bartan..." The Gnoll grumbled. But your right. It's not worth blowing yourselves up over. Go to it. Feel on the top right for a small button. One above that. There you go, the console began to light up. "Saying something about spare power being low, and it's asking to find another source." Feel for a key to the right. There's a small one, and a rather tall one beside it. Hit the tall one.

A few moments passed, and some lights began to turn on within the large tunnel. As the Doctor began to look through the console, he found something. "Controls for the outside door..." He looked at everyone a bit sadly. "There's no going back now. If we fail, I don't want anything to get through." Another nod from the others, and he told the machine to close it.

As it creaked and slammed shut, it sounded like a few more locks took place inside the metal barrier. Confident that it could keep out the worst of nasties. As the bird gathered some information, the other three studied the large room while keeping guard. "Rations." The Knight said, looking at a crate. "But no doubt spoiled now."

"Many of the things here probably are not of any use. You notice how they're moved a bit recently?" The Knight nodded at her. "They probably looked inside a little bit, but not very much further. Enough to get designs and other things. Maybe even a few answers."

Meanwhile, the Gnoll felt uneasy. Almost retracing his steps he barely remembered as a pup. "Interesting..." The Doctor said. Getting everyone's attention. "According to this, there's some sort of large transport device that goes from one side of the tunnel to the other. But it quite far into it from here-" An odd howling came from deep within the tunnel, making everyone stop and be on their guard. "...If we can make it to that, odds are we can make it to the city."

"...Alright." Kassel said. "Be very careful everyone. I remember there being a lot of them." And slowly they advanced.

It was getting darker. Many of the lights down the tunnel were out or just trying to stay on. Creating a strobe light effect, and making it hard to see clearly what was in front of them. Once in a while, they could still hear a howl, and then start hearing replies to that howl further down the maze of wreckage and crates. A few of the walls and separate rooms have been torn apart, and the further they got down the tunnel, the colder it seemed to get. A slight scrape, and Kassel gave the motion for them to stop. Slowly, they could start to see a shadow move across, along with a Silhouette of a humanoid figure. As the lights flickered on and off, they could start to see fractions of details about the creature that didn't seem to notice them.

It was stiff. From the rags of clothing it seemed to wear, to its staggering walk. Making strange noises from deep within its throat. From the look of it, there was a strange depression in its chest, but not a complete hole. Much of its body seemed injured, including some chunks of its head being missing, as well as some of its arm. Another loud Howl from it, as the creature scanned the area. Once again making a strange whine as it inhaled. All of a sudden, it stopped and looked into the direction of the team, making the noise a few more times as to call for something.

Slowly, the Red bird lowered the red lens of his glasses, still giving off a bit of a loud snap that made everyone's mane rise up a bit. Hoping the creature didn't hear it. Tapping everyone

very quietly, the doctor motioned at the creature, then pointed at his own head. Showing more of a slicing motion around the top half of the forehead. As everyone nodded in understanding, they almost jerked when it howled loudly again. Getting a few more replies further down the tunnel. "We need to shut that thing up." Tobyas whispered at them. "It's attracting more of them."

"If I fire, then they're all probably going to come running. One of you better do it, preferably the one with the lighter weapon." Taute gave a bit of a tap on the Gnoll's back, and he whimpered a bit.

"Fine..." Kass whimpered. Slowly going around the large objects and crates. Staying out of the creature's vision. Once again giving out that odd noise, moving a bit more towards the others. With one swift motion, the Gray one rose and slashed at its head upwardly, splitting its skull opened.

Where is she...?

Kassel took a step back for a moment. Unable to tell if what he just heard was the creature actually speaking. As the body of it collapsed, it seemed to make a loud thud that echoed throughout the tunnel. For a moment everything stayed still. And then the howling started again from further down.

Blessthefall - Hollow Bodies

The Dragonite cursed out loud, climbing over the boxes. "I knew this wasn't going to be easy."

"Looks like we're going to have to fight our way to that machine." The Knight readied his spear. "I really hope this wasn't some sort of disease."

"Just in case that it is, try not to get wounded by them. There's no telling what actually caused them to change." The Doctor loaded his rifle and took aim at one of them in the far back where it was better lit. A loud shot exploded from the barrel of the gun as it took off one of their heads.

I just don't know what I did wrong...

Taute paused for a moment, feeling his heart slightly sink as the body fell. He hardened himself and snorted to shake it off. "Move up! Fight where you can see!"

The three began to advance. Getting a better look at the creature's pale skin that was only slight rotted, and near hairless bodies. Their clothing were covered in what seemed to be frost, and several wounds that almost looked like frostbite. Their lack of movement was a large advantage that they had, and Tobyas was going to use it well. Aiming with the most reach of her long sword, she swung downward on the hollow one's head-

I lost him... He was only three... And I lost him...

The statement even made her stop for a moment, now clicking in why the others had hesitated. The Dragonite knew then that this was going to be much harder on her than many of the other undead she had fought.

Stigborg's target was getting a bit close to two others. Quickly, he pulled a nearby long crate in front of him, and kicked it hard. Sliding it into the three creatures and causing them to lean over it. A heavy downward snap with the edge of the spear on the center one-

I don't know why I did it, but I had to...

A small pause from him. And then another swift cut on the left one-

I missed her after that... So much...

A heavy breath. And another one to the right.

It could've been me with him...

It nearly caused him to collapse. Exposing himself to a few more nearby. But Kassel covered him. Cutting jaw of one of them and getting it to dangle from a flap of skin, and then across the head.

Every breath after him was too hard to take...

It stunned the Gnoll, letting one of the creatures get close enough to attempt to bite him. Though it couldn't get through his fur due to the ring, it brought back painful memories and fears. He shoved it away, and decapitated it-

She deserved better... So much better...

Leaning against a large crate, he understood why it was so hard for the humans to deal with this threat. Another shot from the rifle at a distant target.

What was so wrong with him, father? Why couldn't you just...

"Hey!" The old bird shouted, nearly choking on his words. "Focus! Stop listening to them!"

Growling angrily, the Blue one swung at another Hollow. Slicing it from shoulder to lower ribs. A hard step on its head caused it to easily cave in.

He said it would be different...

A loud snort then another near-wild swing. Getting it at the neck, but damaging some of the crates behind it.

His last words to me were "Have a good stay in the city mom, and I'll see you on Monday." And I'll be waiting for Monday for the rest of my life...

It was just too much for her, and she fell on her knee. Dashing to cover her, the Knight rotated backwards and sliced the blade at neck height. Getting four more-

My life was too short to deal with it anymore...

I knew that boy was bad news... He took her away from me...

The last thing she said to me was "You Deserve This."

I couldn't let him control me anymore...

Kassel... "I know..." The Gnoll got off the crate he was against and pushed himself forward. A bit farther than the other two. As he heard the bird call to him to fallback, he ignored it for now. Slashing at a few Hollows, but only to stun them. You'll have to really concentrate on this one. If it's too big, it could break a hole in the tunnel.

The Gray one nodded. Still feeling a bit of that pain in his chest and veins as the contrasting Red started to cover his paws. He slashed backwards at the ones he passed.

She wouldn't stop using it. No matter how much I threatened to leave her...

I said I loved her, wasn't that enough?

The Absolute... Worst... Pain...

I'm sorry son... You're reaping what you sow...

Before he collapsed again, he threw everything he had into the last slash going down the tunnel. The black claws cutting through the large horde before-

*I could've saved him, **If** I just knew how...*

Shame it was four years too late...

He was always with me after that. Scratching at me...

*I couldn't live with what **You** did...*

I always feared dying alone...

I couldn't go on losing another one...

*I try to stop, but I just **Can't**...*

He died... Because of me...

No one understood my work... Regardless of how I tried to explain it...

*I could hear his voice, but I couldn't **Find** him...*

It ached so much...

It eats at your heart, no matter how strong you are...

***Love** was nothing more than a disaster...*

I welcomed death after that...

It wasn't worth her...

When I looked in her heart, all I seen was black...
*I did what I could for **You**...*
I see now, he was a good father...
I trusted you!
*I'll **Die** and wait here...*
There is no God... There is only Pain, and those willing to end it...

...

...He fell. No longer being able to stand from the sheer pain they brought to him. Though he was trying to keep quiet, as to not attract more of them, he couldn't help it. As the other three caught up with him, making sure the fallen were staying down, they said no words. They just helped the Gnoll to his feet and began carrying him. Only because it was not safe to stay there.

Chapter 6

They remained silent. Other than the sounds of their footsteps heading down the hall, and the occasional howls, they spoke no words to each other. Seeing a familiar number next to a door, the Doctor pointed at it. Running the console to open it, the Knight watched his back, while Tobias held up Kassel, keeping an opened eye and ear for them.

The sliding doors rushed opened, and the Red bird walked in armed. Slowly scanning everything: walls, floors, ceiling. "Sweep this room." He demanded from the other two, but they didn't argue. After going through all the covered areas, possible entrances, he shut the sliding door from the inside console, and they all stopped for a moment.

"...It..." Kass managed to say to break the silence. "It was never... A disease or a sickness... What made them this way..." The Dragonite just placed her paw on his, as if to say 'It's alright. You don't need to explain...' He just nodded at her, noticing the faint frightful expression on her face.

"Doc..." She whispered. "Can you turn off the lights here? In this room?" He managed to

find a switch and did so. The windows looking out to the tunnel revealed another horde of the Hollow ones migrating to the surface end. But they didn't pay much attention to the room they were in. A few of them looked into the window, but barely bothered with it. They all gave a quiet sigh in relief.

"I don't quite understand why they're so... preserved." The Knight whispered, studying them.

"They're all covered in frost. They were probably frozen for a long time." Taute replied. "If they've been under the ocean for so long, I can only imagine that it'd be deathly cold towards the bottom. And without any air really circulating, it would probably delay the decaying." The room was silent for a while. "For three thousand years, they've been tormented with Loss... I cannot imagine..."

"...None of us can. It's why we have to put an end to this." They all agreed with the Gnoll's statement. "How much further do you think?"

"It should be in those sets of doors." He pointed to the large set of doors that were on the opposite side of the ones they came in. "Hopefully we can go around all these hollow bodies." After a few more minutes of uneasy rest, they got up and headed to the next room.

Upon entering cautiously, many of the lights were still out. A few were blinking, revealing a lot of crates stacked on top of each other. Many of which were actually empty, as if the place was scavenged recently. No sounds were heard inside, besides the occasional hiss of the lights, trying to stay on.

The room felt cold. Very cold. An odd draft seemed to be flowing through the spaces between the stacked crates. After they made it out of what seemed to be a small maze of them, the room opened up to a very large tunnel with two platforms set on rails. The platforms did seem to have tilted glass shields on both ends, and were massive. Still partially loaded from a previous use, it seemed to be slightly covered in a sheet of frost. "I don't like this." The Dragonite said. Carefully watching the surroundings.

"Nobody likes this. But it's either attempt to get this thing working, or fight through that." The Knight replied. "I honestly don't think we could do it..."

"It's definitely harder than I expected. Almost like killing innocent people." She said quietly.

"The Console is over there." Kassel pointed. Being the better one to see in the dark. "But there is a control room up there. Probably to get them to run."

"Let's scout that first. I'd ask you two to stay out here and guard, but I'd rather not split

up." The Doctor grumbled. As they went up a small set of steel stairs, they opened the door to find a body in the corner. "That's..."

"An Avian!?" The Knight almost shouted. Cautiously approaching it, then checking to see if by some miracle that she was still alive. "...No pulse. And a symbol of Ralkor on her robe."

"Odds are she froze to death. I can only imagine that the power would shut itself off when it wasn't being used for so long. No power..."

"No heat." Tobyas finished him. Getting a slow nod. "Odds are she was probably from the first few groups that wandered in here."

The Gnoll and the Red bird each started going through a computer in the room. "I found the controls for the train." The Doctor said.

"Try something for me: Do you see the menu on the top left? Open it. Then go to Recent documents." He did so. "What did you find?"

"...A report of some sort." Everyone glanced at it for a moment.

"The hell? Look at that date."

"Over three thousand years ago." The Knight said quietly.

"What does it say?" Kassel asked, still not looking off of his screen.

"...It's a report on trying to recover the Hollow ones." It made the Gray one stop for a moment.

"...It's what Bartan calls them too."

"They've apparently captured quite a few of them and held them in a recent containment building for 'RPMs.' But the RPMs escaped-"

"What the hell is a RPM?" The Dragonite tilted her head.

"...Replacement." Kass said sadly. It ached his heart a bit.

"They tried to see if they could restore any part of them. Even attempted to dissect one of them, but the operators claimed that they kept hearing voices." The group was quiet for a moment. "After that, they had doubts about many of the experiments that they held. And eventually discontinued them. Leaving many of their... 'Stock' here." They all glanced out at the room full of crates, just now noticing that they could probably fit an entire body in one... "What does yours say, Kassel?"

"...Two things. The first is a large list of weaponry and how they were built. Let alone which pieces were placed where in Opportunity. The second... Is the formula and method of

controlling the Hollow ones. They actually end up cutting into a large section of their brains and eyes, then replacing it with some device. Something that runs on remote."

"Odds are the documents Eyldrian used..." Taute couldn't help but look at the frozen avian. "I wonder if she was trying to stop them. Perhaps locked in Opportunity at some point."

"...Lets not stay here any longer than we have to." Tobyas said. "Can you get the trains running?"

"Possibly." The Doctor went to work. A few minutes later, power to the large track could be heard. "That should do it. The rest should be on the consoles down there." They all left, Kassel taking another look at the fallen one, and sighed heavily.

A few more howls could be heard a few rooms across. The voices of them made their manes stand up a bit, and bring an unsettling shiver down their spines. "I think they're getting more frequent..." Kassel mumbled.

"I suppose it was a good idea to lock the door behind us." Stigborg mentioned quietly. "I'm guessing they're thawing out?"

"Probably due to the power being turned back on." The Dragonite said. "I wonder what it meant by other power source?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if it had something to do with the ocean. Currents or even the pressure at the bottom." The Doctor sighed as he approached the console on the Train platform. "To this day, I barely understand what information the humans carried with them. We were not able to study such things as they were."

"I still don't understand it." Tobyas tossed her head. Stopping Kassel from explaining. "Don't bother. I won't remember it anyways."

It put a slight smile on his muzzle, until another howl echoed through rooms. "Can you get it working?" He asked the Red one.

"I think so. It's like reading a different language, but one I can half understand." A few more key presses and the engine started to hum loudly throughout the room. "Alright, best hang on, I don't know how smooth this thing will be." A few more key presses, and the thing jerked forward. Sirens began to go off, sending many red lights on the ceiling to circle about. The Flatbed started gliding on the rails with loud grind, and fighting against the thin aged ice that has built in it over time. After a bit of struggling, it started to climb in speed.

As the team began to hang onto many of the pop-up hooked straps that could be pried out from the bed, the Car began to accelerate. Even with the clear shields on its front and back, the train created a massive force as it went through the barely lit tunnel. Often enough, there

was large patches of black along the ride, as it slightly kept getting faster and faster. It was almost hard for them to hold on.

What seemed like almost an hour of trying to stay stable on the speeding kart, it began to finally slow down. The lights on the other end of the tunnel have been out for the past twenty minutes, and everyone was exhausted by the time the Train came to a complete stop. However, many of the Hollow ones were making noise from this side. "...I don't think they know that we're here, but..."

"It's very unnerving." The Doctor replied to the Gray one. "We shouldn't stay here long." After a few minutes, another very close set of howling echoed that got everyone armed.

"...I vote on getting out of here. Think there's a way to sneak past them?" The Knight asked.

"I don't remember much about this side. I was kept hidden for quite a while." Kassel said quietly. "But let's try to sneak past them. I'll lead."

Through the first doorway, that hideous smell filled the air. Several hundred centuries of decay and dryness was enough to make them almost choke. The further that the team got, the more struggles the Gnoll felt he had to put them through. He detested it.

Upon going through the doorway, a few scurries could be heard within the cargo room. Everyone could feel that there was seriously something wrong here, but they knew no other way. A few steps into the dark room, and more scurries to the far end. Followed by another howl outside. "I can't see a thing..." The Dragonite complained in a whisper.

"None of us can-" Something dropped down onto Stigborg, interrupting him. Although he wasn't able to see the creature, it began clawing heavily at his chest plate. Actually doing some damage to it. Tobias managed to grab one of its arms, and the grip itself was almost enough to break it. As she pulled it off the Knight, she snapped its arms. A Leg, and finally its neck, expecting to hear its remorse. But it kept hissing at her, trying to gnaw at her armored breast.

Quickly, she just tossed it behind some crates, only to land on another one and get several of them to start fighting with each other. "Quick, grab each other's paws!" Kassel demanded, still trying to be quiet. As they made a bit of a line, holding onto each other, the Gnoll lead them through the maze of crates. Once again thankful for his dark vision. Although moving rather quickly made a lot of noise and attracted a lot of them, they seemed to be staying on top of the large stacks of crates.

Opening the door to the next room brought what almost felt like the setting sunlight. Along with a massive amount of them going into the tunnel. "There is no way we can do that..." The Doctor said, looking at them in disbelief.

As one of the Hollows took notice of the group, a loud screeching howl came from its dislocated jaw, grabbing the attention of the swarm. "Let's get out of here!" Tobyas roared, as they all raced to the opened gate of the tunnel.

The gate revealed the remains to a very large skeleton of an urban city. The many years of uninhabitable weather and decay seemed to deteriorate most of the tall buildings, sending them to fall over and forever rest on the dead looking streets filled with a sea of Hollow creatures. What seemed to be almost a storm of wind and rust covered the landscape. "This way!" Stigborg guided them, getting them to fly over a barricade made from a toppled building. This time, Kass expected Tobyas to launch him up, but it didn't stop him from yelping through the air.

Her aim was just slightly off, and he ran into some of the glass windows the large building seemed to be made out of. "Just keep going! I'll meet you on the other side!" He shouted outside. After seeing the lesser form of the Dragonite fly up safely, the Gnoll continued his way through the sideways building. Walking on the walls of it, and avoiding any doorways that lead down, while having to climb through them that provided a way forward.

The debris was a mess, often enough having personal possessions covering the walls that were now floors. Seeing many faces of the families that were now no longer living in a proper form ached his heart. A few of them even looked familiar to him.

Finally reaching the other glass window, he looked down to witness a near empty street. With a bit of a running start, he charged through the glass and yelped loudly, hitting the pavement with a loud squeak and making him bounce a few times. Several creatures landed behind him, being his team but covered in the rusty dust that was eating away at the city. "You're an idiot." Tobyas said, half laughing at him.

"If you could've suggested a better way of getting down, I'm no longer taking them." He grumbled. Only to hear another Howl down the street. Followed by several others. "We need to keep moving." The team nodded at him. Heading down the streets, and witnessing swarms coming from every direction of the intersection.

"What now!?" The Knight asked.

Trying to look through his surroundings, the only thing he could see was a large opening in another tall building. "You three get up there, I'll figure out something!" Kass said.

"No way in hell am I leaving you behind!" The Blue one readied her sword. "Even if I have to disable every one of these!"

"You don't have a choice! I'll figure out some-" Several rotted cloaks seemed to fly down and circle around the team. Though covered in rust as well, when they started to slow down, it appeared to be suits of armor with long capes.

"Sir Clayon, where have you been!?" One of them ask, as they took defensive positions for the team. The four all looked at each other in puzzlement.

"I don't think they're talking about me." The Brown bird said.

"Sir! Oddin has been waiting for your return! He's asked us to take you to him!"

"We will help clear the way for you, Sir! Please follow our lead!"

The Gnoll looked at them sadly, but accepted it regardless. "Thank you. Please lead the way!" And the Human Knights began to rotate in formation down the west street. Colliding with the Hollow creatures, they all seemed to take turns attacking and watching each other's backs. It wasn't long until they were flanked, but the rotations seemed to increase. Protecting the outsiders to the city and leading them down to a very large set of buildings. Almost looking like a Castle of some sort.

Within minutes, they were at the steps to the center building, and once again the Knights took a defensive formation. "He's waiting at the top for you, Sir! Please see to him!"

"...Thank you. I don't suppose I can relieve you of duty?" The Gnoll asked sadly.

"No Sir. We're here until Oddin himself Dismisses us!"

"Please do not worry about us, Clayon! We will stay strong, just like you taught us!" It brought a sad smile to his gray muzzle, and he nodded at them. Still unable to see their faces through their helmets. Up the large steps to the building, and through the opened doors. Finally getting some relief from the sandstorm.

"...They must've served him loyally for thousands of years..." Stigborg said, looking back at them. "I barely did it for fourteen..." The Red one placed a feathered paw on his shoulder.

"You didn't have a choice. Eyldrian... Lost himself. If you kept yourself loyal to him, you would've been dead like they are."

"It wasn't my doubt that saved me." He mumbled.

"...You're still Loyal, just to who you think deserves loyalty." Tobyas added in. "Keep a hold of that confidence, and others will do the same to you." He nodded, still looking in the direction of the door.

"...Kassel?" The Gnoll looked at the Brown one. "Why is it that you're doing this? That you've been doing this from the start?" A rather good question, I might add. "Are you doing it because you were told to?"

"...I do it because I want to. I don't need another reason." *Chuckles* "What, Bartan?"

You're just as vain as he is.

The Gnoll's ears went back and he grumbled. "Stigborg..."

"Because you want to..." He was quiet for a moment. "I've followed you this far to repay you." It made the Gray one's ears lower. "Let us continue." He turned around, confidently. "Lead the way, Kassel."

A small smile shown through. "Alright." And they continued up the stairs to the throne room.

The Castle seemed to age quite well for being thousands of years old. It was very much still intact. From the furniture to the paintings and artwork that lined the halls. It wasn't difficult to find the Throne, and when they did...

Sitting on the chair was an aged skeleton in full plate with its helm off. There was a large hole in the chestplate made from what looked to be many claw marks. Yet what seemed to be all of its jewelry and possessions remained untouched. "...What do you think?" Kass asked the Red bird.

"My guess? He passed away by other means... And then they came." He studied the marks on Stigborg's armor, done by the Hollow one in the dark room. "They seem to have some sort of attraction to the heart, and a little bit towards the brain as well."

"There doesn't seem to be any other wounds that are visible on him. So he wasn't betrayed, unless he was somehow poisoned." The Gnoll said, looking closer at the skeleton.

"It's hard to believe he actually existed. Many species thought of him as a God. Quite a few tribes of Dragonites do too." The Blue one took a closer look as well.

"But the question lies, what exactly does this all mean? Why were we told to come here?" The Knight asked.

"There must be something-" A faint movement came from the right side of the throne, opening a passage behind a wall. "...Please tell me that was... Whatshisface." The Doc said. Whatshisface. I feel special.

"Bartan?" At least someone remembers my name. "To be fair, he's only heard it a few times."

I suppose you're right. But Tobyas got it right off the bat.

"Tobyas pays more attention to people than Dr. Toot does."

"It's Taute!"

It's Taute.

"Close enough." The Gnoll tossed his head.

"Kass?" The Dragonite asked.

"Hmm?"

"Did he?"

"Did who what?" Everyone smacked their foreheads. Probably asking if I opened the secret door. "Did you?"

Nope.

"Then who did?"

You're asking me?

"Yeeeeesssssss?"

"Kass, stop arguing with him." The Blue one chuckled. Completely ruining the spooky moment.

"Odds are something is leading us." Stigborg said. "I suppose we didn't have any other ideas."

"You lead, squeaks." The Gnoll double taked at Tobyas, releasing a small whimper as he walked towards the door. It lead to a long set of stairs that seemed to be climbing the very outside walls of the center building. Quite dark and narrow, with heavy air at first. Eventually it started to get thinner and warmer, as they turned the last corner and see the sky in the eye of the storm.

Chapter 7

Exiting out of the narrow passage lead to the roof of the center building. The wind seemed to be blowing in circles, while the large rusty storm seemed to stay in place over the tower. The sky above was the only thing the team had seen that resembled anything close to

home, and even then it seemed a bit strange. Foreign.

Across the flat surface was another specter in armor with a long cape. It looked much like the one the Skeleton in the throne room was wearing, but this one had its helmet on.

"Oddin..." Kassel whispered, taking a few steps closer.

"Is that...? Sir Clayon?" The specter turned around. "Have my aged senses deceived me?" He studied the group that was before him. "You... Are not. But you carry him with you, do you?"

"A small piece of him, yes. A gift he gave me to assure my survival." The Gnoll said sadly.

"I see. So my Knight had then been lost for so long. But your people did survive I see. Please, tell me... Have mine as well?" Kassel lowered his head and his ears. "...I cannot hear them from where they reside. Nor over the cries of my current people in pain."

"...There are some, but not very many. It's been a very long time since I've seen one of them."

"And you've been alive all this time? As I have?" The group was quiet for a moment, trying not to give away any signs to the old king.

"...Yes."

"Then Sir Clayon's sacrifice was not in vain. I'm thankful for what he did, for at least a species that still exists remembers us." Again, they were quiet. "I was never against such a thing." Oddin said, turning around once again. "I actually gave the order to attempt it as to make a synthetic species. Instead of making something human, I choose the next best thing: Animals. They were the only thing that didn't seem to... Return." Again, they were silent. "Tell me, does your kind still turn... Hollow?"

"...Yes. In a way. They turn into something that only faintly remember who they once were..."

"Then... It did not cure it?"

The Doctor stepped forward. "They change into beasts. Violent creatures that tend to attack anything with a beating heart."

"Much like ours..." The King said quietly, lowering his head. "I fear that there is no real cure for such a thing. It is an enemy that I just cannot defeat."

"...I'm sorry." Kassel said.

"Young one... What is your name?"

"Kassel."

"Kase... I remember her now." The Gnoll let out a small whimper. "Kassel. Can I have my Knight's ring back?"

"...What for?"

"I was told in secret that they held a great and terrible power. Regardless of how much we tried to cleanse it of such taint, it was never a success. The Hollow ones came the same night as the first Black Day. On the Fourth Black Day, a large fragment of powerful evil fell upon my lands. Its power was so great, but its Entropy was much greater. Many of my people attempted to use such power to make our lives better. To stop consuming the land with fuels and making the wilds inhabitable. Their cause was only humble... But all they could do was make a small set of jewelry."

"The set named after you..." The Dragonite said.

"Yes, I was gifted with such a thing. But I didn't want it for myself. For years, we've fought against the Hollow threat. Trying to do something to turn the tables and perhaps cure them..." Silence. "Kassel, I'm tired of watching my people suffer. I'm tired of hearing their constant screams and wails of agony. Their remorse and torment. But I believe I can release them of such a thing with that ring. Along with the rest of the set."

"It's a negative power, there won't be much you can do with it besides destroy." Taute informed him.

"...That is correct. But look at them." He gestured towards the city. "They often spend days looking at the old world, and trying to figure out how to become human again. They still exist, I can feel it. Even your kind leaves small traces of who they once were behind, do they not?"

"Oddin..."

"...If I can find that corruption and destroy that, perhaps I can save my people." Silence. "Please, Kassel... Help me save them."

"...I'm sorry. I can't."

"What do you mean...?" A bit of sadness echoed in his voice as he turned around. "Have you not come all this way to deliver me that artifact?"

"...To be honest, I'm not really sure why we came. Edgar took possession of one of our leaders, and... I thought you were behind such a thing."

"Edgar... Is that where he's been?" The King sighed. "I sent him to find the ring when it was the last thing I needed." Once again, he studied the Gnoll. "Where is it? I can feel it on you, but my eyes are not what they used to be."

"...That's another reason why I can't... Give it to you. It's in my chest..."

"...I see." He was silent for a few moments. "Forgive me then, Kassel. But," A sharp pain came from the ring, as if it was being pulled outward. "I must have that ring." He set forward his armored hand and began walking towards the Gnoll, while the Gray one felt paralyzed from the pain.

Tobias charged forward, slashing across the specter. But she didn't see it draw a longsword until it began parrying her large one. Oddin then hit her in the back hard while she was off balance, but wasn't wounded. The King then deflected Stigborg's spear coming from his opposing side, and attempted slash upward at him. But the Knight was able to block it with the bo of his weapon. The old king's strength was massive, for being dead. And when the pressure of his attack was almost overpowering the Brown avian, a loud shot and a large bullet hit Oddin's eye.

It stunned the old King, enough for Tobias to swing heavily again at him and land a massive blow to his ribs. Cracking them loudly, but it didn't move the armored specter. Stigborg Managed to follow through the attack the Doctor made, and crack Oddin's helmet with the spear, then stabbing through the lower side. Once again, it didn't move the King, and he retaliated with a heavy hand to the Knight's chest. Causing him to be pushed back quite far and let go of his weapon.

He then tried a swing at the Dragonite, but she managed to duck and roll out of the way. Coming back with an upward slice, the Armored hand caught it and held it at bay. She growled loudly at him, trying to overpower his strength. As the King pulled out the spear in his lower body, he tossed it over the edge. He then went for another swing at Tobias, but she weaved it, being forced to let go of her weapon. The Blue one then took a wide swing with her fist at the helmet. Cracking it, but not staggering it.

Tossing the greatsword over the edge, Tobias dove after it. Knowing she didn't stand a chance without it. As the King turned around again, he was shot in the other eye. He was slightly stunned by the powerful shot, but he didn't struggle much against it. Once again, he began walking towards the Gnoll. "I don't understand why you are fighting against me." Oddin said. "Your kind was made to preserve our species. All I'm doing is taking back what was given to you." Once again, that pain of all the ring's power being pulled back into Kassel's chest returned. His veins hardened as his blood scraped against the walls. The ring itself began to feel very hot. "You've held onto this for so long, Kassel. You must understand, as one elder to another, that I must save my people. Just as you've saved yours-" Another shot gave a bit of relief to the Gnoll. But the King paid little attention to him.

As Oddin approached the kneeling Gray one, he took off his gauntlet, revealing a blackened boned spectral hand. He reached inside of Kassel's chest, passing through the fur and flesh, and drained the Ring of its power. The sheer pain from it knocked out the Gnoll, and the last thing he heard was Tobias scream at him.

...

("Kid, what are you doing?")

(...Who's there?)

("Who do you think it is? Are you really going to be beaten by a bag of bones? Come on, Kid. Get up.")

(...I can't. I feel tired.)

("So? That's never stopped you before.")

(...Stopped me before?)

("Yeah. All those times before. Now get up! And for once in your life, get angry!")

"I think he's still breathing."

(But I... Can't get angry. If I do... Then I might...)

"We need to get him out of here!"

("Yeah, do that. If he wants negativity, give him everything you've got. Show him the vanity of the last Firstborn. Go completely Dire on his ass!")

"...Dire..."

"What...? Kass! Wake up!" And just like that, he's back. Waking up to the face of the old bird wasn't the most pleasant of awakenings, and the constant clashing of metal nearby was almost giving him a headache. Looking around, he could see Tobias still fighting with the old King, and Kassel growled loudly. "Kassel?"

"Get underground!" He snarled at the Doctor. Though his chest was still sore, he pushed aside the red bird and got up. Gathering a fistful of Red, actually Red this time too, he threw it at Oddin's helmet when the two were in a deadlock. Causing it to explode only towards the old King, and leaving the Dragonite only surprised. "Get Everyone Underground!" He shouted again. Throwing both hands towards the specter's chestplate and making it explode outwardly once again. Pushing him off the roof. "You want to see a Dire!? I'll Show You A DIRE!!" The Gnoll shouted, as he jumped off the building after it. Ignoring the Dragonite's calling.

Falling down, Kass gathered Red and surrounded Oddin's remains with it. Exploding outward in all directions, only to come back and explode again. And again. And again. The force

of the explosions slowing the Gnoll down little by little. Gathering several more for when the King hit the ground, and unleashing them all at once. Sending the armor, still somehow intact, away from his throne.

But Kassel still fell too high. Landing hard on the already cracked ground snapped his left shin. Causing him to grunt in pain. Feeling the very first time he's ever broken a bone. But his anger overpowered his pain for the moment. He somehow, and very stupidly I might add, was able to still stand on the leg, but barely. With another loud roar, he surrounded the King with a large amount of Red and slammed it against him. Then another bigger than the last. Pushing Oddin farther and farther into his city. After a large chain of twelve explosions, Kass gathered one last one that covered nearly four city blocks and leveled a huge area of the city with it.

Breathless, and starting to feel something wrong with his body, he... accepted it. A few more breaths, and he began to cover the entire sky with Red. Spreading across the entire city in what almost felt like a rain of photonic energy. "I... Always knew I'd be the destruction of something. Be it a city, country, or even the entire world. I always knew I would be the end of it... But at least I won't be taking any more lives..." A deep breath from him...

Are you sure about this Kassel?

"Yes. I can't stay immortal anymore." He looked down at his shaky leg. "And when I die, I want to make sure I'm in a place where I can't hurt others."

...

"It's been a long time coming, fellow Firstborns." He lightly smiled at the sky, as the rain of Red came crashing down. Blinding him with a hot white.

"Kid? You awake? Well, if not, you are now." The Gnoll suddenly whimpered at a sudden light kick to the side. "Come on you. You've been like this for an hour."

He woke up, trying to adjust his eyes to the very bright white room he was in. It was almost a large dome. Rounded ceiling and all. "Where...?"

"Where do you think this is? It's your mind, Kid. Vast, empty, and somehow unusually bright." He was trying to make out the figure before him. Rather tall, wearing a long coat that almost looked dark orange. And carrying something a bit long.

"Where's Bartan?"

"Who?" The creature tilted his head, leaving an ear up and one sideways.

"Bartan. He's a... Friend." Awww. He can't hear me, but Awww.

"I donno. I only started to paying attention when you were, y'know, DYING." The creature leaned against a wall. "Honestly, it's about time. I'm tired of waiting."

"Tired of... Waiting?" His brown eyes were finally being able to focus on something rather blue. "You're... Flaytonn?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten about me already. Kids these days. It's like they just never remember Legends anymore." He tossed his head. Once again just toying with a long sword he had.

"What do you want?" The beast chuckled at that question.

"What do I want...? Wow, how many times have I been asked that question. And the answer, just too much to pick just one thing." He looked at the Gnoll with a smirk. "I want out of here for one. But that's not the real question, is it?"

"It isn't?"

"The real question is: what do *you* want?" The question seemed to echo through Kassel's head for a bit. And then his face lit up sadly. "And there it is." It got the Gray one's attention. "That look. I know it well."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we have a conflict." He got up, throwing the sword on his shoulder and playfully bouncing the dull end. "And there's only one way that it's going to get resolved." He shrugged. The Gnoll looked at him sadly. "Oh come on now. You said so yourself, you were basically done, right? Your time is up, and it's my time to step in. But you don't want to, do you?" The Gray one's head lowered. "Well, time to see who's vanity is stronger."

"What?"

"Who wants to go back more. Just your typical fight to the death, except for the one who wins is the one who gets to go back. The Looser? Eh, stays here for a long time." Kass' ears lowered. "You want to go back, right?"

OC Remix - Lunatic Moon
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZpUjY1nofQ>)

"...Yes."

"Alright then Kid, choose a weapon." The Gnoll looked at him, and the beast tossed his head. "Just think of one."

Kassel studied his hands for a bit. Being able to still feel the Red like a separate appendage. "...I'll be fine." And he got up.

Flaytonn looked at him strangely, tilting his head and then shrugged. "Whatever you say, kid. But I'm not going easy on you."

"It's alright." He half smiled at him. As he took a deep breath, he concentrated the Red around his fist and a bit over his outer forearm. Kinda like a tonfa. As he got into a fighter's stance, he took one more breath. "I'm ready."

The beast lightly chuckled. "No you're not." Very quickly dashing and slashing downward in one fluid motion nearly cut the Gnoll's eye. Followed by a very quick series of mid slashes that just seemed to push Kass back, barely being able to deflect them aside with his Red blades. As the Blue one rotated and slashed backwards, Kass barely seen a shine of Red behind his long coat. Rolling out of the way, just before Flaytonn thrust his empty hand and exploded the wall. Though the white walls were never really damaged, what almost seemed like char could almost be visible.

Again with that dashing slash towards the Gnoll, another few quick cuts and the occasional kick, Kass tried to get in very close in hopes he'd have a chance. He managed to land a fist to the side, but going for the other one, the beast Knead him. Following with an uppercut on the Gray one's jaw and a slash over the eye. Then a heavy backwards slash across the chest sent the Gnoll spinning a bit in the air before landing.

The pain felt real, but checking his eye for the wound, he felt no blood. He could even still see out of it. "It stings a bit, huh?" Kassel looked at him. "But you can't get any wounds here. And they won't even effect you on the field. So don't worry about defense so much." He tossed his head, the blue mane bouncing a bit. "You're not going to win at this rate."

"Yet you insist on coaching me?" The Gray one chuckled at him. Shaking his head to refocus while getting up.

"Might as well. You'll have alot of time to think about where you went wrong." He

smirked at the Gnoll. As Kass exhaled and readied himself again. As the beast shook his head once again, he opened with that same dash attack. This time Kassel was ready for it; placing an extra layer of Red over his right fist and weaving to the left to dodge it. Slugging Flaytonn and getting the small explosion off, focusing on knockback. It actually felt good to punch him in the face.

The Blue one quickly recovered, and painted his sword with Red as he did another heavy backslash. The long wave of energy spreaded to Kass' side of the room, and he just barely bent backward enough to escape it. Feeling the blade almost touch his throat. The Red then came back with a sweep, and tangled around the Gnoll's leg like a long whip. He yelped a bit in surprise, and the even more so when the beast pulled him across the room and into a wall.

But the Gray one landed on the wall with his feet. Still somehow staying on it, he grabbed the Red whip like it was solid, and pulled Flaytonn to him. Predicting the incoming slash from the sword and nailing him with a hook to the side. Carrying the beast to the Gnoll's flank, where he continued to assault him with a series of fists. Alot of them being deflected by the sword, but pushing the Blue one back a bit and having a hard time to counter. Eventually, Kass made an opening in which Flaytonn almost got him in the neck. But by taking the swing, it left the beast open, and the Gnoll kicked him down to the floor once again.

Covering his paw with Red again, the Gray one chased after him. Striking the ground with the charged paw, and sending an explosive wave outward from where the Gnoll landed. It was a bit bright, and Kass thought he got him, but a large horizontal wave of Red came at chest level and hit him in the chest. Throwing him back against the wall, and then exploding, sending the Gray one to the other side of the room.

Coughing a bit, he tried to get up again, but ended up collapsing. The pain of the explosions seemed to linger over his body, as if it was burning the energy out of him. "That was a little better." Flaytonn said, rubbing his cheek a bit. "But still not enough." Looking over on the downed Gnoll, he shook his head again. "Done?" Kassel just caught his breath, but started to get up slowly. "You've got guts, kid. I like that. So I'll let you go out with style." As the beast went into a stance where his sword was under his free arm, it began to glow very bright and hot with Red. Covering the blade several times over and making it longer. The charge itself took nearly a minute, and by that time Kassel was up. Still breathing heavily, but up. "It was nice meeting you, Kass!"

With one full rotation, the entire room painted with Red. Starting with a rather high pitched Whine, and shaking the area with a loud roar. When all the Red compacted straight to the center once again, Kass did a motion as if he caught it. "What the-!?" The beast yelped in surprise. Spinning with Flaytonn's rotation, Kassel released it. Remaining quiet for a few seconds before exploding the entire room.

"Thanks, For A Great Match."

Chapter ---

The slight pain with every movement woke him up. Trying to speak, but he only ended up coughing. He knew this feeling. The slow bobbing up and down. That discomfort of plated metal. He was being carried again. Just like he always was. Opening his eyes, he could half see the remains of the large city. Nearly completely leveled, aside from a few fragments of the grounds. But no sign of the Hollow ones.

He couldn't move though. It was the strangest thing. He could look with his eyes, but his muscles would not let him move. He whined slightly at the pain when she took a big step down. "You'll be alright." She grumbled. Not thinking he was actually awake. Slightly being able to look forward, he could see the two birds were safe. Exhausted like the rest were, but safe. Still dirty from the rust storm that used to be above them. But it was all gone now. The sun had set, and nothing remained of the once tainted city.

Sixx Am - The Girl With Golden Eyes

A slight groan from his throat leaked out, as he was trying to speak. He felt so weak that he wasn't able to even hold on around her neck. "...To..." She slowed down and looked at his direction. "...Toby..."

"...It's alright Kass. We're going home. It's over."

"...Toby... No... I can't..."

"You can't what? I know your leg hurts, but we don't have anything to help it right now. I think I remember seeing a few First Aid kits in the Tunnel."

"...No... I can't go back..."

"Why?" It was almost a demand really. And once again, he felt that fear of her.

"...Tobyas... I'm not going to survive it. You can't take me back there."

"I don't care, Kass."

"But I'm... A Dire..."

"I don't care, Kass."

"If you bring me back, people will die-"

"I Don't Care!" She roared at him, getting the attention of the other two. But quickly they continued. "...You Taath-head..." And she continued.

"Tobyas..."

"Kass, in my tribe, there was an old saying: When Two Rivers Run Together, They Can Never Be Distinct Again." He whimpered again. "You've changed my life far too much for me to just let you go. If you stay here and die, you will become a Dire. There's no stopping that."

"But..."

"Just shut up, and let me take care of you..." She whispered. He whimpered at it again, but remained quiet until his exhaustion kicked in. Once more, he fell into that veil of sleep, while she carried him to safety.

Day 1

...I finally got feeling back in my arms. Although I'm still a bit weak, Tobyas wanted me to

start getting used to moving once again. For now, she gave me some parchment and a pencil. Though it takes me hours to write a few sentences, it keeps me busy. We're currently staying in the nearest village from Opportunity, but... I'm worried. I can still feel the ring inside my chest, but I can't feel its power anymore. It makes me wonder what Oddin did to me.

Day2

I feel sick. Horribly horribly sick. I'm constantly in pain, and I'm just trying to stay alive. For the fate of everyone here, I need to live... It makes me wonder if that dream with Flaytonn was real. Am I really so Vain...? Is it so much to ask for to just live so I don't hurt people?

Day3

Taute says it's some kind of withdraw. It feels like all the damage I've ever taken with that ring on has come back to do it's harm against my body. My heart feels so faint. My body feels like it's cracking into pieces. Fragile doesn't even come close to describing how I feel. I wonder if I'll even survive this...

...Tobias is going to hit me for writing that.

Day 4

I can breathe easier today. Talk a bit more. Still in alot of pain, and it's not easy to move. But I think the worst is over. I have the feeling in my legs once again. But Tobias doesn't want me to walk just yet. She doesn't even want me to leave the bed... She doesn't deserve this. Taking care of a monster... Bartan just called me a Masochist. Maybe he's right.

Day 5

Feeling better, but my heart is still weak. My insides almost feel Hollow, and I don't mean I'm hungry... I think that's the first joke that I've made since we've come back... Heh...

Day 6

The doctor tried some new herbs on me today for pain relief. I've been so dazed on them, but they help. I accidentally told Tobias that I loved her... Maybe it wasn't an accident. But she said it back... She said it back.

Day 7

Still a bit sick, but I'm still managing. Heart still hurts, and it feels like it's sending ripples of pain throughout my body. Tobias says I've been whimpering in my sleep. She's also been joking with me, keeping my spirits up. Today she told me that if my heart stops, she'll hit it until it comes back on. I really hope it doesn't.

Day 8

I stood today. With four people trying to keep me balanced, I actually stood up and walked. Burdock was worried that I might not be able to after that. Though my leg still hurts, she made sure I didn't put too much pressure on it. Saying something about some water in a mountain. I never got the metaphor, but she said it was something like you only feel the greatest pain in your body, and ignore all the rest. I never noticed how smart she was.

Day 9

I woke up today, and it didn't hurt when I breathe. My chest still feels sore, but I feel better. I feel... Better. Alive. I can't believe I'm still alive. Even after all that's happened...

Day 10

Today will be my first day outside since we came here. But I almost feel like something is wrong. My chest hurts worse today. I feel like it's harder to breathe. Maybe it's just my-

The weather was warm. Though the autumn was just starting, pretty soon it was going to start getting colder. The Dragonite sitting on the veranda was thinking of the things she would need. More warm blankets to keep his wounds from aching. Perhaps more clothing too. Though in male clothing herself, because she refused to wear dresses, she was often mistaken for a male in the village. The thought of it made her chuckle.

As she got up and stretched, she headed to a small clothesline just outside of the small home. Taking down a few more bed sheets that needed to be washed once again, she folded it up only to see the two Avians come visit once again. "It's a nice day, isn't it?" The Red Doctor asked her.

"Yes. I was planning to get him out here for a bit for some fresh air."

"Should liven him up a bit more." The Brown one said. "How is he?"

She sighed, shaking her head, but she still had a smile over her blue muzzle. "Managing, I suppose."

"You're doing a nice thing for him. Loyal, I might say."

"And you are too, Clayon. It's your work that's keeping his worth here." The Brown one just lightly shrugged.

"We all owe him alot. Now that there's no more threat to the Hollow ones. I don't even know what happened to the ones in the tunnels."

"Regardless, I've talked to quite a few mining villages nearby." The Red bird adjusted his glasses. "We're going to see if we can seal it off for good. Perhaps build another wall over it, overlap it with dirt, and grow some grass over that. Make it so no one will ever have known that Opportunity ever existed."

"I still half wonder what was on the other side." She said, looking off to the tunnel's direction. "I wonder what the lands had. What fruits and plants existed. The unexplored history of it all..." Another shake of her head. "Still, I think my tomb raiding days are over. And I'm sure his are too."

"What do you plan on doing then? Bring him to the east with you?"

She tossed her head at Clayon's question. "Hell no. They'd rip him apart. I was thinking of maybe building our own house out here somewhere. After everything we've survived, a few monsters in the woods are nothing."

"Does make me wonder how many Dires are still around-" A loud crash came from the door, and Tobyas' heart stopped for a moment.

"Kass? Kass!!" She ran to the building. Whipping open the door, nearly tearing it off its hinges.

"I'm sorry. I just... Knocked over a vase." The Gnoll whimpered. Still getting used to his crutches. "And I ran out of parchment..." He lowered his head and his ears, as she smiled sadly at him. Embracing his very fuzzy self.

"Don't scare me like that." He had a hard time to tell if she was serious or not, but looking at her, he whispered his apologies again. "Come. Our old friends are here."

Slowly the two got him through the door and sitting on a large bench on the veranda. "Well, he's still kicking. Here I thought you'd be dead in three days." The Brown one teased.

"Barely living, thank you." Kass gave the two a sad smile. "I thought you were going to leave soon." He said to the Doctor.

"Yes. Tomorrow morning actually. But I thought I'd come by and see you one last time before I leave. I need to go back to my tower. Heaven only knows what that cub has gotten herself into."

"So she's still safe? Cinna?"

"Yes, I sent someone to check on her the second day we came back. I believe she's here actually, but I didn't think you were ready to see her just yet." The Gnoll looked at the village in the background, smiling. "Perhaps tomorrow. You really need your rest."

"Everyone says that."

"Well, everyone is right. Especially me." The Blue one lightly nudged him. "And until I can poke you in the chest without you flinching, you're going to stay in that bed."

"That'll be forever. You impale people with that finger." He whimpered at her.

"Best to listen to her though. After slaving after you for a week now." Stigborg said.

"Which reminds me, I've heard you've been helping the village for my sake..." The Brown bird nodded at him. "You... Don't have-"

"I know I don't."

"You don't owe me anything, Stigborg."

"I know I don't." It still made his Gray ears lower. "I'm doing this because I want to. Because a friend of mine is in need. Besides, I think it's a nice change from Guard duty and Protection."

"So, you're planning...?"

"To pay your way until you're able to walk again. I don't mind. Then I'll figure out what I'll do after. Do not worry yourself Kassel. Just focus on getting better. That will be enough." Although he still felt uncomfortable about the arrangement, he still nodded at him.

"Come now, let's leave them alone for a bit." Dr. Taute pulled the other avian away. "I have something I want you to move anyway."

The Gnoll sighed again, getting the Dragonite to look at him with a look that said 'If you slam yourself again, I'm going to hurt you.' He whimpered at my explanation, and shook his head. "N-no. I just... People seem to do so much for me lately."

"That's because you deserve it." She nuzzled him. Though a bit uneasy about the reply. "Kindness tends to make its way around, Kass. Just accept it. They want to help." He nodded at her, and just held her paw for a little while in silence.

"...I love you, Toby."

"I love you too, Kass."

"And... Thank you. For everything you've done for me."

"You're very welcome." She gave him a lick. "We're going to have to trim you someday though." He whimpered at that. "Don't give me that. Your coat is a complete mess."

"Can't it wait until after winter? When the spring hits?"

"I suppose we could. You make a nice bodypillow." She teased.

"You can snuggle up next to me anytime." He stroked her mane a bit.

Kass...

"What's wrong Bartan?"

It's about that time.

"What time?"

To end the story.

"End it?"

Yes, it's going past 78 pages as we speak. Quite literally.

"...What will happen to us?"

What do you think will happen? You'll carry on your lives without me stating it. You'll get better, build a home, marry her, and make a family of little Dragon-Gnolls. Kassel whimpered loudly.

"Dragon-what?"

Do you seriously think she'll let you live without riding your brains out seventeen times after your better? Seriously, look at her smile at you. The Gnoll did, with his ears really low. But to his surprise, she was just looking at him oddly.

"He... Wants us to make..."

"Well, we are. Aren't we?" Again, another whimper. "I mean, not right now. But eventually I am going to screw your knot off." The Gnoll covered his face with his paws.

Still. It's been fun, Kassel.

"Yes. It's been... Something. Go torment someone else for a while."

Will do.

"...And just like that, he's gone. Hard to believe."

"Yes, finally get peace and quiet now, do you?"

"Mmm. It's nice. But I have this strange song stuck in my head."

"Hmm?"

"Something Tells Me, We Could Be Here For A While. And All I Know Is..."

"If You Can't Find Love, You Die."

"...You ever get that feeling that you're still being watched?"