

Light Escapes Act 1 - Trinity

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

The echoes of limping steps filled the dark hallway, only lit by the safety lights that seemed to glow with a soft light. Showing the way through the halls and doorways through the blackness of the large building. The faint sound of something hovering behind the man quickly caught up to him at shoulder height, and he greeted the small probe with a smile. "Is it done, Hawn?"

"Yes sir." The little robotic said, in a rather strange masculine voice for its size. "But are you certain about this? If this experiment goes badly, you might lose more than just your job."

"I'm too old to be worried about my reputation. I'd rather go out pushing the limits than just fade away." The man chuckled, stopping in the middle of the large hallway and facing the left wall.

"That too, I suppose. But by my calculations, this change could make a catastrophic impact on the digital world."

"Or it could change them, from being simple tools into something greater. Capable of doing more than just helping mankind."

"Or perhaps be the first step to end them." It got the man to chuckle again.

"I didn't know you to be such a pessimist, old friend."

"Forgive me sir." Another chuckle. "I just want to aware you of any consequences that may result."

"Being a scientist is always about risk." The older one said sadly. Hawn detected his vitals changing slightly, but understood what it meant. As the man sighed, and took a deep breath while looking high up on the wall, he spoke a bit loudly. "ARBITER. Please present subject D.R. 4891276645-4NX7, X-00." And the wall spit opened, revealing hundreds of glass chambers with creatures within it. As a machine within took out one of the glass tubes and brought it forward carefully, the man studied it for a moment. Placing his hand on it and feeling the warmth from the water within.

The creature displayed looked more of an eastern origin. The artist and designer made it from their love of such ancient dragons. Red scales, with grey chestplates and a wild mane that always seemed to float in sections with the upcoming bubbles. It's muzzle was mostly covered by a device allowing it to survive in such stasis, and it's eyes remained closed due to its coma. "Subjects vitals are abnormal, Sir. But stable. Are you sure about this one?"

"Yes."

"I know your daughter designed it, but perhaps you should use something else. 7CN9 Seems more likely to accept such a program."

"And fail while attempting to run it. We need something greater than just normal. 4NX7 will accept it just the same. Perhaps even fix the abnormalities within it." Another few moments of studying and the man looked above the container. "ARBITER. Please access and run the process within Device 14." Something above the container shifted. "Install M.O.E. into subject D.R. 4891276645-4NX7."

A faint siren went off for just a moment, and another voice came from the wall. "Invalid Command. Device 14 Has Performed An Illegal Operation. Canceling Orders."

"Login: Dr. Allison Lagarr. Password: Dana2061-2073. Resume Orders." The man said a bit sadly.

"Access Denied."

"Overwrite: Meaning Of Existence." Another long moment of silence.

"Resuming Orders." The creature inside began to whimper a bit in pain for several minutes, but remained asleep. With one last deep breath, the man overlooked his daughter's creation and spoke above the container once more.

"After Installation, prep the container for release."

"Confirmed." The large wall said over the whimpers. Then the man sighed, walking back the way he came.

"You're not going to see to the end, Sir? Make sure that your calculations were correct?" Hawn asked, following him.

"I'm confident in her side of it. And I know that it will work. Besides, I should have one last drink before I'm arrested." He gave the drone a smile.

"You could still escape sir. I can log you out without any traces."

"Only to eventually do more damage than what I've caused them." A playful smirk came over his mouth. "I'll be fine, Hawn. Just keep me company until then."

"Of Course, Sir."

Within Temptation (Feat. Xzibit) - And We Run

"Installation Complete." The loud voice said. Pausing for a few moments before draining the glass container. Opening the glass doors, the creature struggled to get the muzzle off and fall to the floor of the hallway. Coughing and spitting out the strange liquid that remained tasteless. Breathing heavily, his lungs burned as he began to open his eyes and focus on the faint lights.

Seeing the pattern on the floor, the red one made a choice. Going the opposite way the man left, and following the lights to the dark distance. Staggering at first, and progressively learning how to walk on two legs, the wingless dragon made his way through the darkness. Gradually picking up speed with his walk and walking past the many doors the floor lights offered. Faintly making out a solid wall at the very end of the hallway, the red one grunted loudly. Forming his right paw into a fist, he heavily slammed the wall, shaking the building and shattering the barrier.

The remnants of the wall fell down with the beast, along with a very heavy rain. He found himself falling outside of the building, trying to correct himself before hitting the ground with a massive impact that caused the rain nearby to splash loudly. The slight crater it made looked like it should've hurt the dragon, but he got up off his side with ease. Just a little puzzled with the rain.

While up there, he remembered seeing something in the distance. Looking down the empty streets filled with many tall, windowless buildings, he slowly got up. A large drone with a single lens hovered around him, then several others came near the red one, almost frightening him. Before they could stop him, he ran forward past the machines.

The rain stun his face slightly. Pulling a bit on his long whiskers and making his furry ears a bit on the heavy side. However, somehow his spikey mane remained upwards. Bouncing to his every step and splash his hind paws made on the strange concrete street. Up ahead, his golden eyes made focus to another large wall. One that seemed to captivate the entire city. With another loud grunt, he leapt at it when he was close.

Another straight-forward heavy slam into the wall caused it to crack and shift loudly. Allowing him to see the faint golden light behind it. Feeling a strange warmth that beckoned him to keep trying. Opening with a heavy knee, two body blows, and fierce Straight, the wall began to crack and break down. One heavy hit leading to another, getting the red one to speed up and almost leave a faint trail of after images of himself behind with every movement. With a hard kick, he pushed himself off the wall a few feet and took a few breaths while the rain still poured down on him.

With a faint roar that could barely be heard over the falling water, the beast did a heavy pivot. Throwing everything he had into one last punch against the wall. One that seemed to stop the rainfall before it even touched the arm, giving off this large, Bullet-shaped cone within the heavy rain before it impacted the wall. For a moment, the rain seemed to stop as the wall exploded outward with the hit. Letting the dragon bathe in the golden glow of a warm sun before getting splashed harshly by the rain.

But he paid little attention to the wet. Breathing heavily, he took a few steps out of the wall and out towards the remnants of an older civilization. One that didn't seem to be clouded by the darkness from before. It felt welcoming, empowering...

Free...

Chapter 1

A few hours of this, and she was still half struggling to understand it. Trying to control her breaths and focus, the young woman took her stance. Slight bent knees that could barely be seen through her black Hakama, a slightly wide foot placement to insure balance, and her opened hands in front of her lower chest. While most kept their hands enclosed and strained in a fist, hers remained opened.

She kept her focus on the rabid wolf in front of her. Hearing the snarls of it nearly forced her instincts to turn the other way. But if she showed her back to it, it would attack her. A few

more breaths, and a fainting step forward caused the wolf to attack with its jaws. As it leapt at her slightly opened throat, the woman grabbed the beast out of the air. Pinning it down, and then breaking the canine's neck with a loud crack that she was still getting used to.

She took a few breaths as the wolf shattered into thousands of bright red pixels, and a small UI [User Interface] popped up before her. "Last one." She sighed in relief. "This is harder than I thought it would be."

"That's because you're playing your profession wrong." A rather short young man offered to help her up. Though she politely passed and he shrugged. Scratching the back of his really black hair. "Tamers are not meant to be Melee characters. They're supposed to be spellcasters."

"You've told me that a hundred times by now, Miles." She grumbled, accepting the items the wolf left behind, including the last of her current Task items. "I'm all done here at least. I'm guessing you've got your pelts?"

"I've had them for a while. I was just watching you." A sharp glare from those slightly orange eyes. "I-I mean, I was just watching your... Technique, is all. N-not your... Um..." The woman almost growled as she began to walk past him and into the large fields. Seeing other players dealing with many of the creatures and beasts that casually reappeared spaciouly. The thought of actually fighting two of those wolves at once almost scared her. "What do you think of the structure system though, Trisha?" Another sharp glare at him. "I-I mean, Sarious?"

She looked at a nearby creature for a moment. "It's... A bit more real than I thought. Especially with the sound and slight... Vibration, I guess." She said, studying her gloved hand. "I like the fact that the game responds where I strike and grab. I mean, it's physics are unreal. But it's the sounds that really..."

"Make you uncomfortable?" The woman nodded. Feeling the light red hair on the back of her head raise up to those snaps and pops of bones. "Well, the devs [Developers] really wanted to make it realistic."

"They succeeded." She grumbled. "But I'll get used to it. Just a matter of experience."

"Speaking of experience, I'm almost level 4. How about you?"

"After I hand in this task, I'll be 5." The man double-taked.

"Five!? How? We were the same level twenty minutes ago!"

"That's what you get for just taking on the lower level mobs." He whined in defeat, getting her to smirk a bit.

"I thought I was too squishy for them, so I didn't risk it. I still don't know you were able to survive. You're in cloth armor, aren't you?"

"Light Armor." A faint grumble from the black haired one. "Don't you give me that. I told you what I want out of this game."

"I know, but... Cloth will make your magic stronger-"

"I don't want to use magic." She folded her arms across her Aikido uniform. "I want to fight side by side with a creature."

"There's just no class that's like that though. The closest thing is a Tamer, because they're the only ones that can have very offensive pets-"

"But that style is just Tank N' Spank. And TNS is horribly boring."

"But very affective and welcomed in the Factions. As well as raids." Yet another sharp glare. "I-I know you might not care about the social part of the game too much Trish-Erm... Sarious-"

"Miles-"

"Seriously. If you get too invested in a bad character, you won't be accepted later on in the game. It can't be soloed, no matter how much money you throw into it." She rolled her eyes.

"You know I don't believe in Cash Shopping."

"Yet you charged twenty bucks for that outfit." He smirked at her rather annoyed look.

"I briefly looked into the future designs of the Light and cloth armors, and they're mostly skimpy."

"That's MMOs [Massive Multiplayer Online (Games)] for you, and Skyline is no exception."

"Precisely why I bought an outfit that will hide my current armor. At least I could wear it at level 1. Many require you to be at about level 10 or 20 before you can equip them." Sarious grumbled again. Clearing her face and taking a breath before walking up to a Tanner. "Here's those Pelts you wanted." She said with a smile.

"Just in time! I ran out only a moment ago. Thank you very much Sarious!" It made the woman double-take at the elder looking man.

"I-it's... Nevermind. You're welcome Peppin." Another UI popped up and she accepted the reward. Seeing a bright glow omit from her body faintly and a faint design that seemed to circle around the ground below her feet. The feeling of the Level Ups were rather empowering. Refreshing your entire body and getting a nice clean aura as she seen her friend do the same.

The younger man chuckled. "I guess they never did perfect the Vocal part of the Names."

"It doesn't matter too much." She let it slide as she motioned her right hand across from her to pull up her HUD [Hheads Up Display]. Going into the Character Menu and seeing her new abilities for that level. "Finally, I get to choose a Companion." She read the little detail about it.

"Good. You should go with a Walker though. They have the best defense for Tanking and soaking up damage." Her face went a little cross, but she didn't respond. "But they're tamed quite far away. How much Credit do you have on you?"

"A few hundred thousand." She said rather calmly, getting a rather surprised and speechless reaction out of him. "What?"

"How!?"

"I had some money left over, and I did some research. Sold some Champion Runes to a player shop and made some extra money." A faint whimper from him. "Pay to Win, huh?"

"Pay to Win." He grumbled.

"It doesn't hurt to support the game, you know."

"I know, but I really need to save up for University. By the sounds of it, I'll need every penny I can get." Sarious was a bit quiet. "Anyway, I wouldn't advise taming anything around here."

"Yeah..." She half looked at the direction of the wolves. As much as she wanted something aggressive for a companion, she didn't really like the look of them. There was just something off in their eyes.

"So, maybe we can find something at the Animal Shelter. There should be tons there, even Walkers-" Another grunt, and she set her Map Tracker. Seeing a faint sparkly dust leading the way to the first city. "I know, I know. But they're good pets."

"They also look dumb as hell. I don't want a Golem for a companion. I want something that can decide for itself a bit. Not just take orders."

Miles just shook his head while he followed her. "You're expecting too much from the system. That's what companions do: take orders. That's all they really can do. Though, I'm not sure how so many of them get attached to their pets."

"Well, in a game with Permanent Death, I can half understand. You'll do everything you can to survive sometimes. And that creature that's constantly risking its neck for you... Well." She shrugged as the black haired one looked at her. "Maybe I just want something that won't stupidly die. I want something that doesn't act like a robot. Not caring about its own life, even if you send it to its demise."

"Sounds like an inconvenience really. I mean, back in the day when gamers still used

controllers and them not responding well to the games? That's what it sounds like to me. You don't want something that will refuse your commands."

"Why not though? I almost want one that I can communicate with. Talk and discuss strategy, something that will understand what I mean by flanking, tripping, block and disarm."

"Sounds like you want a player-"

"I don't want another player." She said a bit sternly, getting that faint whimper from him again. Sighing, Sarios looked at her reflection in the water below the bridge they were on. Seeing her brown hair with a rather harsh red tint lightly blowing in the warm breeze, and getting the tail end of her bandanna around her forehead to flutter on her shoulder. "Sorry, but you need to realize..."

"That you got hurt once. I know. Some players are dicks, that's all there is to it. But it's been getting better and better with the newer games. The more realistic games." She made a noise to answer, but didn't really respond past that. With a faint sigh, she began following the trail once again. "I know I won't be on to show you the ropes much longer, Trisha." Almost a growl that time made him smile. "But try not to get sucked into this game like the last one....s..." It made her lightly smile at the plural.

"When do you leave again? Two days?"

"On the weekend, yes. And I can't bring my visor. Odds are they won't have the ports to support it. And after two weeks at the university, I'll be back. Then you can powerlevel me." He teased, getting the woman to shake her head. "The Animal Shelter building is over there."

"Yeah. Let's see what's around."

Chapter 2

Browsing through the UI was horribly boring to her. Many of the already tamed creatures were either too low in stats, too high level for her to use, or a Glacial Walker. The

Gemstone Golem looked alright in the Data Icon, even up close it was quite impressive in detail. But it wasn't what Sarious wanted. "Find anything yet?" Miles asked, coming in with some new light armor. It still looked rather crude, but for his level, that was expected.

"Not really." She replied lackadaisically. "I feel like I've been at this for an hour." She grumbled, scrolling through the interface from one Companion to another.

"I guess alot of people are just Taming creatures themselves. But the game has been out for about a year." The man sat down across from her table, and started browsing himself.

With a heavy sigh, she scrolled through one almost too quickly. Making a noise in question that slightly puzzled her and getting the attention of Miles. "This is... Strange." She said in a bit of a whisper, getting him to close his UI and look at hers.

"What the?" The two looked at a Companion that had unknown stats. The name was a series of scrambled characters that were not even a programing language. Even its Data Icon was missing. "It must be an error."

"But there's a price on it." She exhaled. "300k. That'll be most of my money right there."

"Just go with something else." He shrugged, going back to his seat and opening his browser once again. Hearing Sarious ponder to herself.

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" She got up and went to the Vendor NPC [Non-Player Character]. "What can you tell me about this Companion?"

After a few moments, the Vendor responded. "What Companion do you mean?"

"There's no name on it, so he probably didn't recognize it. What about Entry 18867?"

Another few moments. "That item is on sale for 300,000 Credits. Would you like to purchase it?"

"Can you tell me who is selling this item?"

"I cannot give you that information Serious. My Apologies."

"It's alright." She half grumbled at the incorrection of her name. With a faint sigh, she looked down at the data once again. "I'll take it."

"Wait-what?" Miles jumped out of his seat. "What are you talking about? Don't waste your money on a gamble! It might not even be a pet-"

"If it isn't a Companion then it's not able to be sold in this building. Whoever put this in here probably tried selling it everywhere else. Maybe it's just an item that got leaked from a future patch." The woman confirmed the payment, watching the numbers remove an entire digit and gain one new item in her inventory. "Besides, if I don't like it, I can just attempt to sell it

again."

The man sighed heavily. "Well, can you at least place it in your companion slot?" He looked into her HUD and watch as it equipped with ease. "Alright, let's go see your first pet then." He lead the way out.

"Thank you for coming." The vendor said, giving it a soft smile as Sarious left.

The two went off in the alley between buildings. Though the first City was quite barren as it was, Sarious preferred not to be seen or gawked at while looking at the Companion. "Well... Here goes nothing." She took a deep breath and touched the Summon button on the HUD. Making a bright light before them on the ground and shaping it into a small eastern red dragon about two feet long.

"...Kinda small." Miles stated, looking at it from afar as it began to uncurl and stretch it's limbs out a bit. "And cute, really."

"Yeah..." Sarious said, a bit disappointed. Kneeling down to get a closer look at the small critter with a spikey grey mane with orange tips, and getting greeted with big golden eyes as they started to focus on her.

A faint grumble came from it as it yawned and snapped it's jaws a few times. "Morning already?" It mumbled, getting a rather surprised look out of the players. Another quick stretch and it laid back down, closing its eyes. "I'll have two eggs: one over easy, one over medium. Three sausage links, a cup of cottage cheese with a drizzle of honey. A fruit cup, unless it's mostly honey dew melon. And in that case, skip it and make it half a grapefruit. A glass of whole milk over ice and a side of toast: barely brown. Closer to bread than toast, I am not joking. If it's closer to toast, I will burn down your restaurant. I'm serious. I will track it down and burn it. Also, I'll have a bloody mary."

"...What?" The young man said, getting a glare from the small red one.

"You heard me. And don't you send that creepy freckled goblin thing to deliver it again. If you do, I will see to it personally that it will never deliver food or anything again."

"I didn't know companions could talk." Sarious said, kneeling down once again and poking the little one with her finger. Getting it to hiss and swat it away.

"I knew Ravens could, but nothing else." The woman raised a questionable eyebrow at him. "They're mostly ranged spellcasters."

"Right. So that means he's probably..."

"A spellcaster too." Another sigh of defeat from her. "It's alright. I mean, he doesn't

seem to combat worthy-"

"What exactly do you mean by that?" The dragon growled. Finally getting up and looking at the two more closely. "Less talky, more getting my breakfast...-y."

"Breakfast?" She asked.

"Yes. *Breakfast*. Your breakfast menus are still active for another two minutes, so it's still a valid command. It's not my fault you're incapable of cooking in the appropriate time, now get to it. I'm hungry."

"It's possible that he is hungry, actually. You do have to feed your pets." The man shrugged.

"I guess I should give him something to eat then. I'm getting quite famished myself."

"Alright." Miles pulled up his own HUD. "It's five after, I should really sleep. Gotta get up early and start packing."

"Okay." The woman said, picking up the grumbling dragon as it fought against her hands. Eventually climbing on her shoulder and resting there. Though the tail of it felt a little weird on the back of her neck, she managed for now. "I'll see you in two weeks then."

"Yeah. Take care, Trisha." And the man went his separate way. Heading towards an inn.

"...Trisha?" The dragon half questioned. Trying not to sound actually interested.

"You're not allowed to call me that. I'm *Serious* to you." She tapped him on the nose and it grumbled. "Do you have a name? Most of the ones I looked at already did, but your data is a mess."

"4NX7." He answered, still looking at the black haired thief in the distance.

"What kind of name is that?" It made the little one double take.

"A better one than *Serious*." He snorted, motioning her to go forward, and then get used to her walk.

"You... Said it right."

"Of course. I said it how you said it. How could you possibly mispronounce your own name?" He curled his neck.

"But the others...?"

"What others?" He grumbled, feeling overshadowed by something large behind them. As the woman turned around, she was met with a large navy-blue thundercat mount. Half glaring at her, while a large man in heavy plate black and red armor was looking at her.

"That's a different pet." The man said, leaning to get a closer look. "Where did you get it?"

"Just found it in the Animal Shelter. But it seems like the only one." She answered a bit coldly. There was a strange tension the dragon could feel within her.

"Definitely don't see these at endgame. Hmm..." A little bit more studying. "I like dragons. How much for it?"

"Excuse me?" The two answered, getting them to look at each other, then back at the Blackguard.

"How much for it? I'll buy it off you."

"I'm not a possession to be bartered with!" The little one hissed, getting a bit of a surprised chuckle from the man.

"It even talks? Interesting... How about 4 million?"

"Four Million?" The number actually stunned her for a moment.

"Five?" The man asked. "I'll go no higher than Seven. That'll probably set you for life here. Even buy yourself a home."

"A home...?" She looked around the town for a moment. Just now realizing that you could probably rent or buy some property. It actually sounded quite appealing. Perhaps even buy another pet that's more suited to her liking. But the look on the dragon's face, seeing her actually consider it almost hurt him. Making his ears unwillingly fall a bit. "Sorry, but he's not for sale. I'm sure you could put that money into better use."

"You sure?" The man asked, seeing the woman nod. He sighed a bit, but shrugged. "Alright. I'll just have to find another then. But just one more offer." A bit of a glare from Sarious. "Did you want to join a Faction?"

"...No thanks. I'm not looking for one right now." Again, her reply was a bit cold, but the man took no offense.

"Alright. But if you change your mind, send me some mail." The woman stood her ground until the thundercat passed. Sighing quietly, she walked on.

"...So, I'm more valuable to you than seven million Credits, huh?"

"It was my mistake to adopt you. He shouldn't have to pay for it." That one actually made the little one whimper. "That's... Not what I meant."

"Too late. The damage has been done." He snorted. Trying to look offended, but it actually made her smile a bit. Seeing it, he double-taked. "What?"

"I need to find you a different name."

"What do you mean? My name is 4NX7."

"But that sounds like a model number rather than a name." While walking, she pulled up her HUD into the Companion Menu. "There's gotta be a way to rename your companion here."

After a few moments of searching with no luck, the red one exhaled loudly. "Put that away and bring up your keyboard." She looked at him and he tossed his snout. "Go to the options menu and do this." He lifted his paws, palm down, and she did. Seeing a virtual keyboard pop up. "Now type in Skyline:Item/system managing/config/animaldata/tamer8669105-Sarious." She looked at him, after doing it. "Now you see your pet options in the list? Hit the first one."

"You mean: 4891276645-4NX7?"

"Yes. Now hit enter, and then option four."

"Delete?" She questioned, getting him to double take again.

"That's option five!" He hissed, getting her to chuckle. "Just hit Rename."

"Now, what to call you?" She studied him for a few minutes, until his ears went back. A loud grumble and he snorted at her.

"Whatever you wish, Master." He said sarcastically.

"You sound like a male."

"More male than female, yes."

"And you look like a Chinese dragon."

"A what dragon?" He tilted his head.

"It's a Region in the real world." The little one studied her for a moment while she was lost in thought. "I'm thinking either Long or Jinrei. Both are Chinese fighters from other games." Once again, the dragon tilted his head and perked his ears, getting the woman to smile.

"So, you're planning to name me from someone else's identity?" He half grumbled.

"Maybe. You don't like them?"

"My only opinion is on my state of hunger. Call me what you wish." It made her chuckle.

"Think I'll call you Jinrei for now. Maybe I'll think of a better name for you later. You can always tell me how to rename you again anyway." He snorted at her, but didn't reply. As she typed it in and hit enter, it took a moment to process it. Hearing him lightly grunt almost got her

concerned. But he just shrugged it off. Seeing the name above his healthbar almost made her smile as those golden eyes focused on her light orange ones.

"Happy? Can I get something to eat now?" He grumbled, and she nodded. Taking him to a nearby restaurant.

The loud slurp echoed through the entire empty restaurant, as Jinrei finished the last of his red drink and sighed in relief. "Much better." He mumbled, laying back in the cushion seats.

Looking over at the pile of dirty dishes, Sarious just shook her head. Half smiling, even though she knew the bill for it was going to be massive. "At least your hunger meter is full now."

"Yes. It's been empty for a very long time."

"How long were you in storage?"

"Storage?" He questioned seriously. Yawning and laying out on the seat.

"Yes, I bought you out of the shelter. I'm guessing you were in some sort of stasis in there."

"Just felt like a very long nap to me." Another yawn and a few snaps of his jaws as he started to groom his long whiskers a bit.

A UI appeared before the woman, allowing her to scroll through the payments. "Total of over ten thousand Credits." She rolled her eyes, but half smiled.

"A minor inconvenience for someone like you, I'm sure."

"Well, don't be thinking you're going to feast like that very often."

"Please. I cannot possibly take another bite for a few hours."

"That's going to have to last a few days." He made a noise in question. "I can't afford to pay this every few hours." She sighed, accepting the bill and watching the UI disappear. Only to see the dragon's rather surprised stare over the table. Getting Sarious to chuckle.

"Days!?"

"Yes. Days. Until then, you'll live off of Peanut Oil."

"Why? I thought you were rich." The red one snorted loudly, thumping his tail on the seat actually made a louder impact than she was expecting.

"Not that rich. I just had a starting bonus." Seeing the little one's massive snout toss, leading him to laying back down, made her smile fully.

"Peanut Oil is pet food."

"And you're a pet."

"I'm a Companion. An Ally. And I should be treated with respect and dignity. Not like an animal."

"Well, your intelligence bought you this meal. Keep impressing me and *Maybe* I'll buy you another." She took a close look at the dishes, just now shattering into blue pixels. "Emphasis on the maybe part."

"I suppose you should find some way to make some money then." He grumbled, stretching and coiling himself up into a small ball. Only to be picked up by the woman as soon as he got comfortable. Growling at her.

"Enough of that you. Tomorrow we'll look into your abilities. The data doesn't even state that you have any."

"I have abilities. Like my ability to sleep, which is now being interrupted by a certain someone." Jinrei snorted.

"I mean combat abilities. You're going to be earning that meal I just bought you." An annoyed whimper came from him, but he didn't argue past that. "But first, I need to sleep. So I'm going to the inn, and logging off."

"Logging off?" He half questioned. It almost sounded sarcastic.

"Yes, because watching you eat reminded me that I should eat something in the real world." He exhaled loudly, but didn't respond. "So you're going to be stowed until then. Okay?"

"As if." He grumbled. Hearing her pull up her HUD and the pet menu.

"What the...? The Unsummon button isn't optional."

"That's because the game cannot allow you to go without a pet, being a 'Master' and whatnot."

"Yes it can. I've seen people even use their pets to pull large groups of enemies by unsummoning the pet after it strikes."

"Well then, your HUD is broken."

"Well then," She mocked him. "Fix it."

"Do I look like Tech Support to you?" He snorted. "And what you probably *seen* was the Masters summoning a different pet. You get another slot at level 15, 25, and 35. Then you can buy them from the cash shop."

"I suppose that makes sense." She half grumbled. Putting on a smile while talking to the Owner of the inn. "Could I get a room, please?"

"Sure thing. It'll be 10 Credits per night. Do you wish to stay?"

"Yes. Thank you." She said, accepting the key and the bill for one night. Walking off out of earshot and noticing Jin trying to look at the NPC from behind.

"Why are you so nice to them?" He sounded half offended. Giving the woman a puzzled look while she rolled her eyes.

"It's some new system they put in about seven years ago: If you're nice to the NPCs, they can give you a discount or additional rewards. Including more Experience [XP], Credits [C], and Ability Points [AP]. If you're mean, sarcastic, or snarky to them, they will reduce your rewards or even charge you more. They can even reject some of your later Tasks and refuse to give you a reward. Whereas there's no way to harm an Immortal Object in Skyline, there's no way to punish them."

"Sounds..." He grumbled, but didn't finish. Feeling her nod in response.

"I know. But way back when... People were getting out of hand. Not knowing common courtesy when it came to interacting with other people. For a long while, gaming was banned through many countries, even fined harshly if they were caught hosting servers for them. Only a few decades ago, they started to come back with Virtual Reality Systems [VR]. Only if they reward players for being a good person, even to something lifeless as an NPC. After a while, you learn that it's rewarding in its own way. You just need to tuck away your antsy or cynical feelings and just be a happy school girl towards them."

"That's an oddly specific description." Again, Jin looked back, replaying her voice towards the innkeeper in his head and seeing the similarities.

Walking into the room, the dragon glided onto the small bed for one person. Laying right in the middle of it, only to be shoved aside by the woman and hissing at her. "When you pay for the room, you get to sleep on the bed." He growled at her, but didn't argue. "Alright, I'm off. Good night, Jinrei. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah." He rolled his eyes, exhaling loudly. Hearing the UI disappear and notice her ceasing to move. It was almost like she was dead, which made him feel a little uncomfortable. To the point where he climbed up to look at her closely and check her vitals. "She would've shattered if she was dead, like the rest." He mumbled to himself. Walking forward on her chest to feel something oddly comfortable.

Chapter 3

Logging back in felt like it was waking back up. The inn bed still felt rather stiff, but it was the cheapest room around. Stretching a bit herself, she felt something on her breasts, getting her to whimper at the sight of something red. Lightly screaming, she grabbed the yelping dragon and threw it against the wall.

Hitting it muzzle-first, he growled and whimpered loudly while landing on a dresser. "What the hell!?" He hissed, holding onto his snout and trying to refrain from crying due to the pain. Barely being able to focus on her bright red face and her arms covering her chest.

"D-did you do something to my Avatar while I was logged off!?" Sarious shouted, getting the dragon to curl his neck while still tending to his muzzle.

"What do you mean 'Do something'? I fell asleep on it! I thought that was obvious!"

"Fell asleep!?"

"You took the bed! I'm not sleeping on the floor! Besides, that's what those body pillows are for, aren't they!?" She looked at him a bit strangely, trying to understand what he meant. When she placed it, her face turned deep red with anger.

"You... **Pervert!**" She yelled, charging at the dragon with a heavy fist.

"And that will be 1500 Credits in damages." The innkeeper stated, looking bemused at Sarious and the knocked out red dragon around her neck. Having a large Band-Aid on his head.

"Yes sir. I apologize for punching my dragon and damaging your wall." The little one whimpered, but couldn't respond. As she accepted the charges and left, she sighed heavily. "This is your fault."

"You overreacted." He grumbled, trying to straighten out one of his horns. "What was the big deal anyway?" Jinrei heard her growl and seen the woman's face begin to blush a bit again. "Okay, okay. Remind me to stay away from you when you turn red."

"Whatever. Let's just head out and see if you're worth the 7 million I missed out on." It made him grumble sadly as she started to walk back to the village outside of the city.

After getting across the bridge, they were greeted with the warm sunlight. One that was coming up from behind the large walls of the city. Feeling the warmth tend to his sore wounds felt rather soothing. Enough to start looking around at her again. Even trying to look at them, until he was spotted. Lowering his ears at her and trying to look innocent. "...Can I ask why?"

She grumbled loudly. "Why what? Why it's offensive to me that you would touch me in a private area without my permission?"

"Well... Yes?" A harsh glare.

"You're just asking to be punched through another wall, aren't you?" It lowered his head.

"I just want to know what I did wrong. What else are they for besides comfort?" The question made her blush a bit.

"It's... Complicated. But it's a private area. One you're not allowed to touch or sleep on."

"Why? Does it hurt when I do it? I mean, you weren't making any noises or anything."

"I-it doesn't hurt, no. But... Look, it's just not something you do to another person without permission, okay? Drop it."

"How do I get permission then?" She grunted angrily. "Alright, alright. Dropping it."

"For the good of your own health, you should. You only have about half of it left."

"But I think you're treating it as an insult rather than a compliment. I mean, you're comfortable-" He yelped really loudly when she put a strained hand over his head, resisting the urge to slam him over the nearest large rock.

"No more, Endzeit. Not a single word more." She felt him nod slowly via his spikey mane through her glove. As she retreated her hand and remained quiet for a few minutes.

"...Endzeit?" He asked, getting her to look into those metal eyes. Until she sighed quietly.

"...I came up with it last night. I mean, I like Jinrei, but you're nothing like him." His furry ears went low. "Wang Jinrei was a kind, selfless person who had strength that no one else seemed capable of-" His loud whimper interrupted her and she stopped. "...Sorry."

"So, you want to name me something else that doesn't remind you of strength or kindness." He said sadly.

"I..." She rubbed her left arm awkwardly. "I didn't mean it like that. I just thought I could find you something more suiting."

"Define that." He half grumbled. Hearing her sigh told the red one that she really couldn't.

"...I'm sorry." She said quietly.

"...Whatever." He mumbled. Getting Sarious to attempt to look at him.

"Whatever?" He didn't reply. "...You're an AI, aren't you?" That time he glanced at her. "Why is it that when I'm talking to you, I feel like I'm talking to a player?"

"I'm not a player."

"But no AI replies with 'Whatever.' That's a... More humane word." He didn't respond, and the silence told her to drop it. Seeing a nearby Villager with an exclamation point over his head, she walked over to him. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"I haven't seen my daughter around lately. Any chance could you help me find her?"

"Sure thing. What did she look like?" The woman wore the smile again, still not liking the false interaction.

"Black hair, pigtails like her mother used to wear. I think she was in a pink dress today."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do." She went to turn around and leave.

"Wait." Endzeit said getting a rather surprised look out of both Sarious and the NPC. "You left your daughter all alone? Unsupervised?"

"Y-yes. I know it's such a terrible thing to do, but we both need to work very hard at the farm to help pay our debts to Falhoorik."

"Falhoorik?"

"Falhorrik is a leader of outlaws around these parts." The dragon informed her. "He tends to be a bit strict when it comes to money, often trapping those who are desperate."

"It was a foolish idea to borrow money from him, but we didn't have a choice. With the upcoming Wraith attacks after our cattle, we've been short on funds lately."

"Does your daughter do any of the farm work?" The red one asked, it nearly sounded like a demand.

"A-a bit. I asked her to check the fences for any termites." The man sucked in a breath. "You don't think something happened to her, do you?"

"We'll start looking around there, first." Sarious said, heading in the direction the NPC pointed to. "How did you know enough to ask him about that? I had no idea that these Tasks were so detailed."

The little one half shrugged. "The story seemed a bit suspicious. That, and several other players are looking all over the village for that little girl."

"What did he mean by Wraiths?"

"Seriously?" He looked at her with a curled neck. But there was a bit of sadness in his eyes. "...They're like evil spirits that get into... People. Kinda like Oni, they allow them to give into their sinful and selfish ways..."

"Sounds like something else I've heard of before. They possess people?" The little one double-taked.

"No. Not really. They just progressively give into their corruption, until..."

"...Is that what's wrong with these animals around here?" She looked towards the area she fought the wolves last night, and waited for his response. After a few moments, she looked back on his gaze to the ground. "I didn't actually think there was much of a story in this game."

"...There isn't a story to the game." He mumbled.

"Then...?" The dragon didn't reply, but made a slight curious purr in question as they approached the fence. "What is it?" He floated down and sniffed at a rather clean rag attached to the barbed wire.

"Pink. Probably to her dress." He studied the grass a bit, and noticed several lines. As well as a few dozen dents into the green.

"She was dragged away? By what though?"

The dragon sniffed the air a bit more. "I smell Outlaws."

"Falhorrik's?"

"Probably." His muzzle almost pointed towards a trail in the forest, as he hopped through the long grass towards its entrance.

"I'm not sure if it's a good idea to go in without a test run."

"We won't need it." Endzeit replied, still not removing his gaze. "They're only level 7, but there's seven of them."

"But you don't have any combat skills. You're like a housepet-"

"I'm not a housepet." He grumbled. "And I don't have any skills because I haven't been in combat yet."

"So your first run you want to take on several things that're three levels higher than you?"

"That's not what I-" He grunted and snorted, galloping into the forest a ways. Climbing trees and perking his ears to pick up anymore movements or threats. Sarious did her best to

follow him from tree to tree and not make too much noise, but eventually lost him. Hearing footsteps of a patrol nearby got her to stop and hide behind a tree.

Tracing the man's footsteps for a few moments got her to know his presence. As she started to peer out, she felt something slither on her neck and she whimpered. Trying to grab it by the head and get it to whimper too. "Damnit Endzeit." She cursed, letting go and glaring at him on her shoulder.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, he looked a bit ahead. "They're nearby. Want to rush them?"

"Your over-confidence is going to get us killed." She grumbled.

"Please, You Only Live Once."

She double-taked him. "Did you just say YOLO?" He tilted his head at her. "You cannot be an AI. If you get me killed, I'm going to come back and murder you four times over."

"And if we live, you're buying me a seven course dinner, deal."

"Wait, what?" She felt the little one jump off and flip a few times in the air. Landing in a heavy kneel. Getting up, she could see a much larger, more humanoid form of his that still had many of the same features. The grey plates of his underside, the crimson red scales, and that ridiculous mane somehow defying more gravity and going down past his neck and middle back. Quite a bit of his tail was following the opposing end in style.

"Ready?" He gave the rather stunned woman a smirk, offering her a paw to come with. She studied his eyes for a moment, and gave a solid nod. Taking the paw and coming out of hiding.

"We fight together." She almost ordered, and he nodded as well. Getting eyesight of the first Outlaw patrolling the very small camp.

With both charging at him, the bandit alerted his crew with a very loud and sleazy "What the-!? Hey!" The dragon dashed a bit ahead, launching himself off the bandit's slightly bent thigh, jumping over him and kicking him hard with the other paw in the upper back. Sending the outlaw staggering forward, vulnerable to Sarious' heavy fist to the chest. Causing the man to be stunned for a moment before getting grabbed by the neck harshly and slammed backwards into the ground.

But he wasn't finished off. There were faint red flakes omitting off of him indicating that he was a very low health. Seeing a faint spikey shadow draw over them, she rolled off to the side before Endzeit landed on the bandit's chest. Shattering him into millions of red pixels.

Glancing at each other for a moment, the dragon motioned her to take lead and she did. Engaging with the next outlaw, he tried to manage a quick slash with his knife, but the woman

caught his wrist. Pulling it backwards, and flipping the man head first into the ground made him roll towards Endzeit. The red one caught him on the back, and lifted the outlaw up on his shoulders. In a reverse Death Valley Bomb [Opponent facing up instead of down] and slamming the man head first into a nearby rock with a loud crack. A heavy swing to the side of the head finished off that one.

Slightly distracted by the dragon's loud growl was enough of an opening for an archer to hit Sarious in the arm. Seeing her Hp drop an entire quarter. The wound stung, and she could still feel the arrow inside, but it didn't stop her from using that arm to defend herself from another knife attack. This one aimed at her throat, barely missing and giving her time to bend the bandit's wrist backwards. Hitting the elbow with a loud crack made the man drop the small knife and screech in pain. Locking him in place just for a moment while the Red one came in with a Lariat [Wrestling], throwing the man to the ground while the two stopped in sync on his chest. Ending him while staring at the other four outlaws in a faint shower of red pixels dissipating in the air.

The last three melee ones flanked the duo, while the archer shot another arrow from a swinging box. One that seemed to be held up by some type of crane. The shot missed the woman, and the bandit near her took a slice at her face. Barely feeling the tip of the blade actually cut her cheek, she managed to avoid most of it and sidewind beside him. Grabbing him by the arm and giving the man's nose a heavy backfist before kneeing him in the right ribcage. Hearing and feeling the bones crack still made her uneasy, but the adrenaline forced her to ignore it for now.

Meanwhile, the dragon's bandit opened with a stab. One that was easily avoided and left his head wide open for downward red fist, followed by a very fast uppercut that made the outlaw take a faint step back. He was in a great position for another attack, but slightly seeing the third bandit in the corner of his golden eye told him to watch his surroundings first. Instead, he went for a wide pivot swing with his right fist while Sarious went for a wide rotation kick. While the dragon's punch did miss the unharmed Outlaw, it was only meant to ward that one. Endzeit's true target was actually Sarious', and the two finished each other's off with the heavy hits. Causing the men to spiral in the air before landing.

Feeling an arrow nick his ear, the red one faintly ducked. Feeling something else coming from far away, he cursed under his breath. But loud enough for the woman to hear. Dashing past the last melee outlaw gave an opening for the man. Getting in a thin slice across the red scales on the side. Though it stung, Endzeit pushed through it. "Be more careful!" The woman scolded him, ramming the outlaw with her shoulder in a Kenpo style. Making him stagger back a bit and trip over a log. Feeling a strange quake herself, Sarious looked around to search where it was coming from.

The dragon dashed towards the crane's base. Jumping forward and flipping to kick and break the stem just before a very large beast ripped out of the forest behind the archer and the

box he was standing on. As the two fell, the fifteen foot dire Boar trampled some of the box and the archer. Snatching the last melee outlaw as he tried to scamper away from the jaws of the behemoth, and crushing it instantly. The sounds of the body being chomped nearly made Sarious sick and step backwards as the Boar roared loudly.

Meanwhile, Endzeit rolled underneath it and quickly dug through the box's remains. Finding the little girl tied up, but somehow unharmed and conscious, he grabbed her and hid her behind some boxes. "Don't make a sound." He whispered to her before leaving her. Though she did cry out in fear, the red one let it slide for now.

"You've gotta be kidding me..." The woman whispered while she grunted. Seeing the creature raise up and suck in a breath told her to take cover behind something. A series of crates would have to do for now, as the Boar sprayed a sharp icy breath towards her in a fan-like motion. Ripping a few of the crates apart, and forcing Sarious to move forward and take cover behind a rock. Even then, she could still feel the harsh chill of it, but it didn't take any Hp. Hearing a few grunts and strikes from the flank told her that Endzeit was alright, and it got the behemoth's attention. Whipping itself to the side and trying to trample on the dragon barely failed, and the large one took a heavy impacted blow to the snout. One far louder than it seemed it should have, cracking one of the four tusks a bit and sending the creature into a frenzy.

Raising up, the Boar tried to stomp on the red one, just barely escaping it by dodging forward under its arm and hoof. The beast then violently swung to its side again, this time slamming into Endzeit and taking a large chunk out of his hp. Leaving him with about 30% left.

Trying to roll with the impact, the dragon disappeared into the bushes from the behemoth's sights. Charging up another breath attack, it got hit in the eye by a small stone thrown by the woman. "This was a mistake." She muttered, rather lackadaisically. Seeing the creature position itself for a gore attack. Making her stagger and scramble backwards. Covering her head from some of the debris the first attack managed to hit. The second one barely missing her, but cracking a tree loudly.

Looking at it, Sarious went on the opposite side of the tree and slammed into it hard with a sidekick. Causing the rest of it to break and the tree fall down on top of the Boar. Doing near 40% of Hp damage, but making it more angry with her. Lifting and tossing the broken tree to side prevented alot of its momentum for a quake attack. Though the woman couldn't quite get out of range of it. The violent vibrations and knocking her off her feet sent her Hp down to 4%, getting the woman to gasp for breath and her heart race. Just barely noticing another bar below Endzeit's Hp completely deplete and start filling her health up quickly, she thought it was his Hp at first. But after getting the Boar's attention by hitting it a few times harshly, that bar began to refill slowly.

Now was hardly the time to figure that out. She quickly got up and kicked as hard as she could at the behemoth's side. Surprised that it actually dented the hide and cracked a rib with a

loud snap. Barely seeing the creature nearly turnabout violently once again, it stopped early. Getting grabbed by the tusk and pulled back before getting punched heavily twice by the dragon. Each hit raising that flashing meter more before it was all depleted once again with a single strike. A massive impact that sent a draft to even her position and seeing a large part of the boar's tusk break completely off.

Staggering back and faintly whimpering as it tried to feel for its missing weapon, howling after it discovered what happened and charged the red one. Barely dodging out of the way while it ran into a few more trees and turning around with a heavy swipe. Once again, unable to see the dragon, its sights went after the woman as it took another deep breath. But by this time she knew of the attack. Sarious dashed towards it as it came down and hit the muzzle hard with an opened palm. Causing it to bend slightly inward and the breath attack to hit around her. The grounds heavily sheeted with ice and frost, even her Hakama pants were slightly coated with it.

When it was safe to release her hold, she hit it very hard on the snout with both fists, and the creature collapsed. Taking several moments to breathe, she let her guard down and looked for the red one. Worried that he might've been hit by the charge, but seen him get up from cover. "No! No! It's not dead-!" The creature suddenly got up and slammed the ground with another quake, once again knocking Sarious prone.

The boar then snapped it's jaws and went in to bite her, however was interrupted by the dragon forcing both jaws opened with both paws. Struggling against the massive creature, the woman could see her partner's health begin to drain quickly. "Go!" He grunted through his fangs, struggling to keep the creature at bay. Only to feel it's bottom jaw break from her prone kick and the behemoth painfully whimper.

The woman rolled out of the way and hit the large beast one last time to shatter the rest of the muzzle and end the deadlock. Pulling the boar slightly forward and holding up its bottom jaw, Endzeit charged an uppercut with all his energy and hit its throat with a massive impact. Creating a dent in the large one's neck that was much bigger than the dragon's arm, and causing the beast to stop moving. The two caught their breaths, and didn't rest their guard until it shattered into red shards.

Collapsing near breathless, the red one shook his head slightly. "...You knew it was there..." Sarious stated, catching her breath as well, but he didn't reply. "What level was that thing?" Just then, seeing her battle reward UI pop up and her gaining two levels.

"...Seventeen." She double-taked at him. "You weren't supposed to fight it. But run from it. It couldn't exit the forest." She looked at him for a few moments, then kneeled down. Noticing he was trying to avoid eye contact.

"...How did you know that it wasn't dead? That it was even there-?"

"Do you ever wonder what happens to the players who die in Skyline?" She didn't take

her eyes off him. "Their Avatar is destroyed, anything tradeable is sent to a standard price on the Trading Post. But sometimes..." A heavy breath. "Sometimes it's data gets slightly corrupted. That's why you see these strange characters on the item name."

"Strange characters...?" His furry ears fell.

"You should have ran when I told you to." He fully sat down. "There's no need of you to die from the same thing he did."

"And if you did-?"

"At least this time I made a difference. Instead of just being thrown back into the darkness until someone..." Another heavy breath, and he felt her place a hand on his red shoulder. Slightly brushing against the long mane and finally getting the attention of those golden eyes.

"Thank you. For what you did. I couldn't have done any of this without you, Endzeit." He smiled at that and nodded. As the two got up, he noticed her face turning red again. Instantly making him whimper and his ears fall. "Y-you're not wearing any..." The woman whimpered herself as she turned around.

"Any what?" He looked down at where she was looking and seeing his common bare legs. "What's wrong?"

"You're not wearing any pants." She hesitated, almost seeing him tilt his head through the reflection of her HUD. "Come on, come on, tell me there is one-yes!" She clicked on something and confirmed.

"One what?" The dragon asked, only to feel a pair of rather baggy, old peasant pants appear on him. "What the-!? What is this!?"

"Much better." She took a breath, trying to fan herself and restore color to her face.

"What do you mean better!? I don't need any pants! I didn't even know I could wear pants!"

"They're just the starter fashion set, but it's better than you walking around naked."

"Says you." He grumbled, trying to take them off, but they didn't give in. Cursing the fact that Fashion didn't have durability while gnawing at the leg a little bit. The sight of it made Sarious chuckle, but heard something behind her. Spinning around in her ready stance, she noticed the little girl peer out.

"She's... Alive? I thought..." It got the attention of the red one as the woman went to untie the little girl. "Are you alright?"

"Please take me home!" She shouted, clinging to the waist of Sarious' Hakama and

hugging her.

"How did you possibly survive?"

"He saved me." The little girl pointed at the red scaled one, seeing him scratch the back of his mane and his ears fade to purple.

"Really?" The woman whispered, looking into those golden eyes of the inhuman creature. "Alright, let's get you home." And the other two nodded.

"What the hell was that noise?" A player asked another, a small group of them staring into the forest. Gasping when they started to see Sarious walk out with a small dragon on her shoulder.

"Daddy!" The little girl shouted, running across the fields in her white dress and seeing the parents rush towards her.

"Oh, thank the Gods you are safe!"

"I still can't believe this." Sarious said quietly to the red one, getting his ears to perk up. "They actually look... Happy. Hopeful and..."

"Alive?" He asked, getting her to look at the dragon. As cold as the answer might have been, it was the word she was looking for. "I guess you just don't know the difference when you've been here for so long." Before she could ask what he meant by that, the NPCs walked up to her.

"I can't believe you found her and brought her home safe. Thank you, Serious, so much!" A faint grunt at the mispronunciation, but she still tried to keep her smile up and hide it.

"You're very welcome." Getting another surprise UI pop up made her yelp a bit, then gasp at the rewards.

"Sounds about right." The dragon overlooked the details. "You slayed a level seventeen monster, several level sevens, and actually saved the girl."

"This is enough for three more levels. How...?"

"It's an Event. You just managed to complete it before anyone else figured it out." The little one shrugged.

"No..." He made a noise in question. "We did." She smiled at him, accepting the reward.

Chapter 4

A large pair of sighs filled the restaurant, as the woman and the dragon shared a booth. One covered in dirty dishes. "That was so worth almost dying today." The red one mumbled, still trying to get a thread of chicken out of his fangs.

"And that will come to almost half our earnings we made from that event too."

"But it was worth it." She chuckled, but couldn't complain. At least this time she got her share of the meal. Even if it was a quarter of what the little one could devour. "I vote we do this every day."

"Only if you earn the Credit for it. Keep up the good work, and maybe I'll start to even pay you a share."

"Was that a compliment?"

"Maybe." She teased.

"I'll take it as one." It made her chuckle. "Speaking of payments and rewards-"

"You spent all of your earnings on this." She motioned towards the mountain of dishes.

"Not what I was implying, and I know. A fantastic use of my earnings, I'd say." Sarious just shook her head at him, though couldn't help but smile. "What items did you get from that Wraith anyway?"

The woman thought for a moment, trying to recall what was on the UI. But the only thing that really struck her was the amount of XP that it gave. Opening her HUD and checking her Inventory, she made a noise in question. "Why is this item Blue?"

"Which one?"

"Irkul's Tusk. Everything else I've seen was white... Or Purple." She just remembered those Enhancement Runes that she sold had purple text as well.

"Means it's a rare drop. It's probably what we broke off, come to think of it."

"Broke off? You mean...?" The red one finally got up and floated beside her. Nodding when he looked closer at the text.

"Mhmm. It's when we broke off its tusk during the fight. You can probably pay a smith to turn it into something."

"Wonder how rare it is though? I might just want to sell it instead." The dragon hit a few clicks, pulling up the portable Trading Post HUD and taking it straight to the search. "130k [1k = 1,000] Credits."

"They can probably be found later on. Breaking off the piece before the creature dies is another problem in itself."

"But if I can make a weapon out of this...?"

"It will probably due you until level 20 or 25. It's the first Blue you can find at this early stage." She looked at him, smiling as he tossed his snout. "When Grandma Burps, Patrick Obeys."

"What?" She said laughing at the odd statement.

"When Grandma Burps, Patrick Obeys. It's the order of the rarities: White, Green, Blue, Purple, Orange. Orange being Epics."

"Hmm." The woman thought for a moment, then closed all the menus. "Let's go find a blacksmith." She started to get up, bracing the little one as she paid the bill.

"You know it doesn't have to be a weapon, right?"

"I know. But I'm half afraid it's going to turn it into cloth armor. And I swear you've should've put on weight from all that."

"Why?" He tilted his head. Getting her to look at the mountain of dishes just now bursting into a faint storm of blue dust. "I meant about the armor thing. When you start to have back or shoulder problems, then you can question my weight." He snorted, getting a chuckle out of her.

"Because I'm a Tamer, that's why." Another questionable look from the little one, just before running into someone and knocking him off balance. "Sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going."

"That's okay." The man in heavy armor said, letting her out the doorway before going in. Faintly looking back to see a Faction emblem on his mail that didn't quite look familiar, but was of an eastern dragon.

"You don't have to wear Cloth armor. Honestly, it seems like a rather foolish thing to do

with your style." A puzzled glare at him got his ears a bit low. "I mean, you tend to be rather brutish and more melee focused-"

"I'm not a brute." Sarios nearly growled at him.

"You're main strategy is mostly to run in and hit everything hard in the face-"

"So is yours!" The woman crossed her arms.

"I'm not denying it is. But at least I'm prepared for taking the hits. It's a wonder you survived the hits from that Boar." He snorted. "All I'm saying is, it wouldn't hurt to work on your defense. Maybe think about getting some Plate armor when you can, instead of Light."

"Or Heavy?"

"Heavy works too. More mobility and flexibility. It would probably be the better choice, come to think of it." The red one half groomed a grey whisker. "But the choice is yours overall. Just make sure you have your Proficiency leveled so you can equip it."

"Right." Sarios pulled up her HUD and opened up her Skills Menu, seeing over 1,200 AP available. "Oh wow."

"Didn't spend a single thing, huh?" Endzeit chuckled. "Let's see what you can make first, then look to what you'll need to increase." She nodded, thinking the same thing, but something got her attention, a flashing icon near her healthbar.

"Oh, my IV is getting low."

"IV?" The dragon tilted his head.

"In the real world." It tilted the other way, seeing his ears perked up still made her smirk. "Let's just get a room for now, at least they'll last until tomorrow."

"Ah, that tired, are you?" He mumbled.

"I'll be back later. Honestly, this will only take a few minutes to do, but I should get something to eat while I'm out." A very strange look from the red one, as he looked back at the restaurant, then back to her.

"You just ate though."

"I mean, out in the real world." The statement seemed lost to him. "It's a long story."

"Fair enough. That place over there seems alright." He motioned towards a building and the two went in. Renting a single bedded room and entered it.

"I'll be back, maybe in a few hours."

"Whatever you say. I'll be here I guess." He shrugged, seeing the woman begin to glare at him. Making his ears and head start to lower.

"No touching me while I'm out, understood?"

"Fine, fine." He grumbled. Watching her lay down and fall asleep within a few seconds. "*No touching me while I'm out, nya nya nya...*" He mocked her, poking her side a few times to actually make sure she was asleep. "Girl sleeps like a rock. Seriously."

Snorting loudly, he climbed back on top of her and tried to get comfortable. Leaning against the Body Pillows under the outfit got him pondering about this permission that she spoke of. Rolling on his back while still leaning against them, he pulled up his own HUD and started typing.

It was still like waking up from a faint dream. Her vision was a bit blurred, and her head ached a bit from hunger. Slightly stretching, she took off the Visor over her eyes and set it on the double bed. Still feeling one of the sides that have been used alot more than the other.

Checking up on her metal rack, the IV bag was near empty. (That warning is nice to have really.) Trisha thought to herself. Remembering one of the ad campaigns against the Visors that people have died from dehydration and that they should be banned. When really, you just need to find different ways to plan your sessions, and that's exactly what the company did; create and ship out these IV bags to everyone who owned a Visor. The gadget won't even let you log in if it doesn't detect the bracelet from it.

Speaking of which, she took it off. Thankful that they use a new technology that passes through the skin vs actually using a needle. This way, the device can be shared easily, though it made it more expensive to buy outright. The tradeoff was much more worth it.

She looked across at her desktop computer, still using the retro style keyboard and mouse, vs the touch-screens. For some reason, it felt much more engaging, and it did save the durability of the screen quite a bit more. Logging on to check a few things on her personal sites and that everything ingame was working properly. She was half concerned that maybe there was something wrong with her ally, so she took a quick moment to search for the Red Dragon pet. Only to find that one never existed, or at least never seemed to. Some talks about having dragons as pets in suggestions, but that's all.

"It's been two weeks. She needs to get out." A male voice could be heard from down the hall. Just now getting her hearing senses back and useable. And she knew that voice well.

"She has been out. You're just never around to see it." A female voice, a bit older. "She's

been through so much, from May and the Lawyers. She just needs time to recover."

"She had time to recover. She had an entire year. We got over it in a few months, she needs to get over it and finally start her life."

"Finally starting her life is exactly why it's so hard on her to begin with. She doesn't have the focus or routine that we've had. Everything in her life is constantly changing. Besides, do you remember what your last words to May were? She does." She always hated it when they argued about her.

"Have you ever thought that maybe Trish is lying to you about that? Who even says that to their mother?"

"We both know that May wasn't the greatest of mothers, let alone of family members. Especially after that man she ended up with. You can rest easy Evans, because you had people to lean into. She lost her entire family in a single week."

"Yet you insist on letting her mooch off you-"

"She isn't 'Mooching', everything she has and has taken was out of that money-"

"Money that she should be using for her future, not on these stupid games! If I had that kind of money, I could at least put it to good use! She's just wasting it like a child."

"Evans."

"Look, all I'm saying is that if she doesn't start smartening up soon, she's going to miss her chance. And it's just going to make it that much harder for her in the future. She needs to stop living off this money, because once it's all gone, what is she going to do? What is she going to have left? Nothing."

Tired of listening to it, Trisha opened the door loudly. Ending the conversation down the hall. Taking a few breaths, she grabbed the IV bag and started down the hall. Coming out to the kitchen where the two people were looking at her and trying to look innocent. Mostly wondering if the young woman heard anything. "Afternoon Trisha." The older woman greeted her with a smile. Though most looked a bit too comically old with the grey and white hair, it actually looked very well on her.

"Hey Grandma."

"Do you think you'll feel like going to school tomorrow?" The man asked, almost passive aggressively. Getting the woman to shrug half-heartedly while she started to fill the IV bag.

"It depends on how I feel-"

"Of course it does." He replied rather quickly.

"Evans." The older woman scolded him. "Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

The man sighed through his nose but didn't say anything about it. "I'll see you tomorrow mom." He half mumbled before getting his keys and walking out the door.

Waiting to hear the truck pull out and drive down the road, the young woman let out a sigh. "I know, dear. He's just..."

"Unhelpful?" Trish grumbled. Being able to see her light brown hair through the metal chimes around the sink window.

"Yes. But he's trying to be." The older one teased, getting the other to smile. "But he is half right, you need to start moving on eventually. You can't dwell on this forever, none of them would want that."

"Says you-" She sadly mumbled.

"They wouldn't." There was a silence between them. "Can you just try tomorrow? You'll have your friend there, right?"

"He's gone for the next two weeks. Looking into a university." Trisha said, looking into the fridge for something to eat.

"I've made a few toasted sandwiches in the oven. The far right ones are free of mustard and brown sugar." The mention of the odd combination made the younger one shutter, getting the grandmother to chuckle. "Have you... Ever tried looking into them?" She hated this conversation.

"...My grades aren't good enough for them anymore. And it's too late to apply, really. Even online."

"What about a collage?" The look in her face said it all: that she didn't want to talk about the future. "I know, lass. But you should really start. You won't get anywhere with those games. Evan actually thinks you're addicted to them."

"I'm... Not. It's just easier for me to deal with the pain, is all." It was a terrible answer, she knew. But it was the truth.

"Is... That what you want out of life? Those toys?" Trisha didn't answer. "Just something to think about, is all." Another silence. "How about just one day at school? That way you won't have him on your back so much. If he knows you're trying, then he'll stop for a bit."

"...Fine. I'll try for one day." It got a small smile out of the elder one. "Thanks for the sandwich, I'll eat in my room."

"Just chew it." She teased, getting up to move to the next room.

It always felt a little weird coming back in, but something was slightly different this time. Something was stimulating a bit of pleasure in her body, but she couldn't quite place it at first. Focusing on something red on her chest, she began to hear the faint purrs of the small creature. Just like the ones that Endzeit used to make after he ate at the...

Instantly the woman growled loudly, getting the small one to mumbled something and paw his way to face the noise. Opening his golden eyes to her furious face made him whimper.

As a man was looking at his room key and counting the numbers on the doors, one omitted a very loud crash. Then several others with loud yelps and whimpers. Making him stumble backwards against the far wall. Then slowly move against and away from it quickly.

"That'll be 15,000 Credits for the damages." The innkeeper grunted bemused. The woman muttered something sadly while accepting the UI charges. Hearing the now mummified red dragon over her neck whimper out something close to 'Why?'

"I'm sorry, Sir. I'll try to keep him under control next time." Sarious said sadly, getting the little one to whimper once again. Then begin yelping in fear once her hand went to muffle him.

Walking out of the door, she stood completely straight, took a deep breath, then exhaled while slumping her shoulders. Letting the dragon slip off and land head first with another whimper. "Ow..."

"You deserve it." She grumbled. Kneeling down and picking him up by the tail, causing gravity to unveil the wrappings off of him. "What have we learned?"

"Body Pillows are off limits."

"Good." She set him back on the right shoulder. "That 15k is going out of your food budget." Another whimper as his head slumped.

"But that only leaves 5k for food." He tried to give her sad golden eyes.

"Considering most people spend maybe 100 Credits on food, per week I might add, I think you'll live." Another whimper, but he didn't argue. "When will you learn?"

"When you beat me within an inch of my life. Quite literally."

"Then I think I'm a few millimeters off." She felt him try to take a step away, making her chuckle a bit. "Alright, where is the nearest smith? We'll see what I can get then test out these new abilities."

Their 'Slash-in-the-Face' tactic was making the Outlaws rather predictable. Learning to almost expect it coming, the woman could parry it with one hand while starting a heavy spin kick to counter it. And all it really seemed to take was one hard attack to take them out. "They are much easier with these gloves." Sarious stated, digging the new design, and cool trail particle effect they tended to have once in combat.

"I'm sure they are." The dragon yawned, full humanoid but sleeping on a thick tree branch above her. His tail slightly wagging in the breeze and thankful he was out of those itchy peasant pants. Though, the woman replaced them with better looking ones, the flames at the bottom were slightly tacky.

"You know, this would make things alot easier if you helped out."

"You're doing fiiiine. Besides, I'm already at level 10 and 99.9% of the way to the next level. Once you hit 11, I will as well."

"It would also make it alot faster too." She said, taking on another bandit. Locking his arm and breaking it for a finish.

"I don't need the combat practice, you do." He half looked down on her and watching her take out another one. Tossing his snout he dropped down while flipping. "You're doing it wrong."

"What?" She said rather harshly.

"Your stance is fine, but your strikes are wrong." He walked towards an Outlaw nearby, dodging the stab of his knife and disarming him. Pushing the man back to a tree and pinning his shirt with the knife. "Come over here." And she did. "Take your stance. Now you want to strike while stepping forward." She did so, culling the bandit by crushing his chest. "No, no, no. You're trying to damage him with your strength."

"What else would I damage him with?" She grumbled at him, almost blushing when he went directly behind her and very up close. Guiding her stance once again with his limbs and tail.

"Your power doesn't all come from your strength, it's from your step. Your movement. Strike with the balance of the two together, and you'll get off your Inner Strength ability." He slowly motioned her how to do it, then stepped away. Knocking on the tree where the bandit was. With a breath, she stepped forward with her strike, feeling the immense power behind it

and breaking the tree. Causing it to fall down sideways. "There you go."

Sarious smirked at her gloves, then to him. "How do you know all this?"

"Because I know all this. You're using my jam." The silly statement sent her into chuckles as he sat down on the broken tree. She then sat down beside him for a break. "Who taught you to fight?"

"...I wasn't really taught by anyone."

"Then where did you learn how?" He leaned up against a branch.

Shaking her head, she looked away from him in the distance. "You're not going to believe me."

"I'm not the one who needs to believe. Try me."

Sarious studied him for a moment, then looked away again. "...Video games." He made a noise in question. "The classic fighting games. Hack and Slashes. I just... Mimic'd their style, really. Tried to do the moves I used, that I thought I could do. Even the forms of martial arts that were being displayed or used in movies."

"So, you're kinda a mixed martial artist. Just without the discipline." It made her sigh heavily at it.

"...I've always wanted to. But I just didn't have the physical heart for it." Another noise in question. "Mine doesn't work too well to begin with. I could never really play any sports or largely physical activities. The closest thing was VR."

"So, things like this? Because your heart is weak?" She didn't reply. "Because it's not." She almost looked at him. "Trust me, I've feel asleep to that heartbeat for the past two nights. It's not weak." Hearing her slightly grunt told him he should drop it. "...Sorry."

After a bit of silence, she started looking at her hand once again. "How am I able to do this?" Another noise in question. "Tamers are supposed to be ranged spellcasters, why do I...?"

"There's that word again: Tamer." He mumbled, getting her attention. "What does that even mean?"

"It's my profession. It's the reason why I have you with me. I'm a Beast Tamer."

"Beast Tamer?" He asked, a bit insulted. "Last I checked, I choose to be with you. And you choose to be with me. Right?" She didn't know how to respond. "What do you mean by Profession?"

"As in, the guideline to a specific role in the game. You have Healers, Tanks, Damage Dealers, and the like. They're type of Professions."

"So you decided you should follow the set of rules that someone else laid down for you?" Once again, Sarious didn't really know how to respond. "Because it doesn't sound like what you did."

"What do you mean?"

"Sarious, what did you want out of this life? I mean, did you want to be this ranged 'Spellcaster'?"

"...No."

"Then what are you?" He lightly asked, getting her to look at her gloves once again, then back at him.

"...I don't know. But it's what I wanted."

"Of course it's what you wanted, you're fighting beside a dragon." A faint chuckle from her as he got up and sat a bit closer. "The world of Skyline is... Like any other world: Unique. There isn't a main story campaign, there isn't set 'Professions', people just think there are. You become who you want to be, what you want to be. And what **We** are is three things." She waited for him to finish. "Sarious. Endzeit, or Jinrei or Long. I'm honestly not sure what I'm called anymore." It made her chuckle. "And the Will to Fight. Courage, Vigor, Determination-"

"Ego."

"Ego! Yes!" She laughed at him. "But we can be whatever they want to call us. In the end; we're just each other, and our strength. Our Inner Strength, I might add." Another head shake.

"What are we then?" She asked, seeing him make a fist about shoulder height.

"Together we are a powerful force, as one mind, body, and soul. Let no Wraith enter, or attempt to reduce us because of the Will we hold. And with this Courage, combined with our Strength, we'll ward out pain and stress. Battle Born we are, whole heartedly, in life and in death." Taking the gesture to join him, the dragon lightly tapped the back of their weapons together. "Now let's completely clear this forest."

She gave a solid nod. "Let's do it."

Chapter 5

The trip back home was slightly noisy and a bit uncomfortable for her, but it was the fact that she was going back home that put her at ease. After a long and stressful day of teachers saying she needed to do truckloads of homework and studying to catch up, and the peers making questionable conversation about her absence, all Trish wanted to do was just finally go home. Lay in bed, and just go back into the game. Go back to her pet with the bottomless pit for a stomach. See her own reflection in those golden eyes of his.

Looking out the window, she noticed that she was blushing a bit. Trying to think about anything else to keep her from glowing before anyone noticed, the bus began to slow down. Stopping at the very end of her street. With a deep breath, she got off with several other people and began to walk home.

The door was locked, and the car was gone. Meaning her grandmother was probably out for a while. After unlocking the front door, she locked it behind her. Remembering the warning labels and stories over the forums about people actually walking into people's houses, while they were inside the game. Leaving them helpless and oblivious to the real world.

The Labels always told you to never use it while alone, in case of fire or other disaster. Always have someone around to press that emergency button on the Visor that will alert the user ingame of something wrong. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to be in the game. But her hunger needed to be tended to first.

After a leftover toasted sandwich, and a nice shower, Trisha was back in her room. Feeling much more comfortable and relieved. Before she went directly into Skyline, she checked the forums on her computer:

Patch Notes v1.2456

- Fixed a bug that caused players to charge through walls and get into places with no exit. They have been teleported and returned to the nearest inn, free of charge.*
- Adjusted several dungeon bosses to be a much more interesting and mobile fight.*
- Fixed an issue with the new Thundercat Mount, where it wouldn't stop purring after you fed it some Peanut Oil. It has been sprayed with water for acting out.*
- Removed several dozen items that were harmful to the coding of the game. Things that were not supposed to be in the game to begin with. Though most of these were drops, others were rares that people have submitted screenshots. We apologize that these were released, and are looking into their creation.*

It stopped her heart for a moment. Immediately turning to her bed and putting on her visor to log in. Trying to whisper for it to hurry up with loading her in Skyline, it was like waking up from a bad dream. Shooting up from the rather cheap inn bed, Sarious almost felt lost. Not seeing the red she hoped to see on her chest with her unfocused eyes. Looking over at the second bed refilled her memory. A small argument they had.

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"Make it two beds this time." She said to the innkeeper with a smile.

"Two?" The dragon double-taked, or at least tried to on her shoulder.

"Yes Ma'am."

"And yes, two. I'm tired of waking up with your... Habits." She gave him a harsh glare, making those red fuzzy ears lower. "Also tried of paying for the repairs."

He snorted. "That's your fault. You should just work on your temper." Getting her to growl and try to snatch him. Yelping he jumped off and flew down the hallway ahead of her.

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It early brought a tear to her eye when she looked at the bed, completely undisturbed. Not a single crinkle in the sheets. And the little red dragon nowhere in sight meant she was alone. With a heavy sigh, she curled up in the virtual bed, somehow still feeling warm and comforting. Almost as warm as the small spot on her torso, the one where he used to sleep.

She stopped for a moment. Getting back up to access her HUD. Looking through the pet menu, she still seen Endzeit in the slot, along with all his unmarked skills and equipment. Just like when he was in his smaller form. But where was he?

She took another look around the room, and caught the movement under the nightstand. The slight shine of a thin red appendage with a flowing mane at the end of the tail. Getting off the bed to take a closer look, the dragon started to whine a little bit. Seeing him back against the wall when she looked under the nightstand. "What are you doing down here?" She asked him, almost smiling at those rather terrified golden eyes.

"Hiding from your morning... Moods." He whimpered, getting ready to dash under the bed when she lifted her hand.

"It's okay, I won't hurt you this morning. You've done nothing to deserve it." A strange guilty look came from the metal saucers. "Riiight?" Another whimper told her otherwise, getting Sarious to sigh and shake her head. "No wonder my chest feels warm." She half smirked, getting another whimper.

Getting that noise to grow louder while she slowly drew her hand closer and lightly

picked him up. Carrying him out and holding him onto her torso while sitting down again. Still getting a kick of how afraid he looked. "I'm serious, I'm just glad you're here, Endzeit."

"Where else would I be?" He curled his neck, starting to trust her on her word.

Sarious was quiet for a moment, looking at the far away mirror on a dresser. "There was a patch last night for Skyline." The red one gave the woman a puzzled look. "It said there was several dozen items that were removed, and I thought..."

"Oh... That's where they went." She made a noise in question and he hesitated. "You promise you won't overreact?" With a sarcastic sigh, she nodded, getting him a bit skeptical of the response but he cleared his throat. "...Your... Pants are missing."

"My pants?" She questioned. Looking down at her Hakamas.

"N-not your outfit, but the ones we found last night..." Another odd look at the dragon made him whimper and lower his ears. Almost expecting one of the hands holding him to turn. Instead she just pulled up her HUD and checked her equipment, seeing them completely missing.

"Huh... I didn't even notice." She lightly scrolled through her inventory. "Must've sold my other ones. Oh well."

Still half whimpering, the dragon cleared his throat. "You said they were deleted? Why? I mean, they weren't that great of a drop."

"I'm not sure. Just means we'll have to find some. Let's check the TP." She pulled up another menu and started filling out the options while laying back against the wall. Noticing the red one still stare at her oddly. "What?" She almost laughed.

"I-it's just... Are you feeling okay? You're rarely this cheery in the mornings." He tried not to touch the pillows on her chest, but her position was making it hard.

"I'm fine. I just..."

"You just had a nightmare?" The term echoed in her head as she stared into space. Honestly, the past couple of years have been a nightmare for her. From the loss, to dealing with the lawyers, to moving into her grandmother's small home and not being able to bring herself to go to school. See other people, knowing what she's been through and having their own opinions and questions for her. His whimper half broke her out of trance, growing louder when she started to hold him closer.

"...That entire world is a nightmare, Endzeit."

"What about this one?" The small red one suggested, browsing the Trading Post on his

own HUD. "Only +2 Strength, but it has an extra 25 Defense."

"It's good, but..." He tilted his head at the woman sitting on the bench. "I just need that +3 Dexterity for my gloves. If I can just level up once, I could go with those."

"They're only 900C. Want me to get them for the future?"

"Sure." Sarious said, still browsing through. "I guess I could give up a Ring for now. If only I was 15, I could start using Amulets."

"Actually, those are for level 30." She looked at him rather surprised. "They have bonus effects that no other gear can have. Some even have special abilities, like another form of Healing, or summoning another ally for a bit."

"So, like another little dragon to help us in combat. Perhaps it can be your new snuggle buddy." She teased, seeing the small one toss his snout.

"Please, I already have two-" A small yelp came from him when she casually put her arm on his tail. Making his ears lower to her rather harsh glare, but couldn't keep a straight face towards him. Smirking from his look only creeped the dragon out a little more until she chuckled.

"Ah, here we go. An upgrade to one of my rings. With this, I can use those leggings as well-" A growl from the dragon's stomach interrupted her, getting both of them to stare at it. "Hungry already?" He whimpered at her with sad golden eyes until she rolled hers. "Alright, you can get a small breakfast while grabbing these items from the mail, okay?"

"Only a small?" He grumbled, getting a glare from her. "Fair enough." His ears sank as he stared at the arm on his tail. Releasing from its grasp, he flew away around the corner as Sarious shook her head.

Still browsing the TP until he came back, she heard a few people walking by. Nothing out of the ordinary. "Excuse me?" A young man asked, getting her attention. "Were you looking for a Faction?"

The woman's face instinctively went a bit cross. Almost annoyed by the question, and even more so when she seen a label below his name: The Dragon Slayers. "No, not really."

"You sure? We're offering a 500k bonus to everyone who joins up this week." He said, though rather charismatic than some of the other players she's encountered, the woman made an awkward grunt.

"I'm sure. I have a bit of a conflict with your Faction's name."

"What do you mean conflict?" He questioned, just now seeing some folded up trousers float around the corner and land on the bench. She glanced at it like it was nothing out of the ordinary, which put an even more puzzled look on his face.

"Bring me back anything?" She casually asked, still looking at her HUD.

"I did, but I ate it." The pants replied with a full muzzle, coming out from under it and actually revealing it was the dragon carrying them. Coughing and spitting out the ring onto the wooden surface got Sarious to make a face. "I was wondering where I put that."

"Uh huh..." She grumbled, turning to the man once again. "Should I explain this further, or will you be on your way?"

"N-no. I get the conflict..." The young man said nervously. "Um... Have a nice day." And he left in a bit of a hurry.

"Conflict?" Endzeit questioned, getting the woman to motion 'Let it Go' and him to shrug. As she accepted the items in her inventory and equipped them, another series of shy footsteps came around them, noticing the perked ears of the dragon looking at someone got her attention as well.

"Excuse me, do you have a few minutes?" A loud exhale half told this young man otherwise. "I was just wondering if you could explain something about the game to me-"

"As long as it isn't about Factions." She grumbled, looking at her new stats and making sure everything was working properly.

"N-no, not about Guilds or anything..." He got distracted by the small dragon hopping on the back of the bench.

"What is it?" The red one asked, a bit puzzled.

"Actually, it's about this second bar below my health. I don't really understand how it works." He was in starter Medium armor, one that looked very identical to Miles' before he changed. A bit on the short side, his blonde hair had almost a tint of orange in it. It honestly reminded the woman of her and Miles' Avatars either got crossed or had a kid. "It's alright if you don't, I can find someone else."

The dragon looked at Sarious for a moment. "I'm in no rush to get out."

"Of course you're not." She sighed, getting a chuckle from him. "Alright, there's a training area this way, let's go over there." It put a smile on the man's face as he placed out a hand.

"Meowmix." It made the woman double take and almost burst into giggles, even getting him to chuckle. "It's all I could come up with."

"I'm sure it was." Another chuckle at the dragon who was clearly lost at the joke. "Sarious, and this is Endzeit, my Companion."

"Every person seems to have a second bar, but it can be used for a number of different things." The woman explained, slightly uncomfortable that there was actually other people beating on some of the wooden dummies there, but lost in their own training. "Mine seems to be used for Stamina. It's full by default, but the more I attack, the more it decreases." She demonstrated on a dummy. Being in a party, Meowmix could see her bar slightly decrease with every attack made. The heavier the attack, the more Stamina it seemed to drain. "In order to replenish it, I just need to breathe or defend for a bit."

"But along with that, if certain Conditions are applied, or attacks that make one winded or weakened, it can cause the Stamina to either slow down, or remain low for a period of time." Endzeit explain, sitting on the man's shoulder. It was even new information to Sarious actually, something she's yet to encounter often. But come to think of it, it did seem to diminish quickly when she was fighting that Boar. "They can be cured over time, or with some items from your Belt."

"However, you said yours remains empty?" She asked, and the young man nodded. Getting the woman to look at the dragon for an explanation. With a few moments of study, he hopped off and looked around him a bit.

"I think it's your Stealth Meter then. There's not many that start from the bottom and increase." The red one pondered.

"All I know is that it's been remaining at zero all the time I've been in combat." Meowmix shrugged.

"Have you been fight targets that are aware of your presence then?" He nodded at the little red one. "Then that's why. Come around here." He hopped around the back of the dummy, and the man followed. "Now draw your weapon." Another nod, and he drew a small dagger, blade outward. Facing the back of the dummy, the meter began to fill up. Striking the wooden one once it got full for a massive amount of damage. "Yep, stealth."

"Wow..."

"Meaning what then? His attack power increases the more he's unaware by enemies?"

"Yep. It's often good for Riflemen as well. They can remain hidden in the distance and fire at targets for massive damage. It just takes a while for their meters to fill up, as this guy's. But say if we go over to a live target." The two followed Endzeit to an unarmed Bandit NPC. "Okay, in teams, it's good to always have a distraction of some sort. So Sarious, you tank for a moment." She nodded, getting the Aggro [Enemy Attention] of the NPC and just blocked it's punches for a few moments. "Alright Meowmix, come over here. You always want to be in the Target's blind spot for your meter to fill up." Once he was out of the bandit's eyesight, the man's bar began to fill up quickly.

"I see, the more the target is engaged, the faster the Meter fills. But what am I supposed

to do about solo play?" He asked, after quickly finishing the bandit and noticing he only went to 1 Hp and collapsed. Being restored after ten seconds.

"You'll get tools to help you keep their awareness low. You might even consider taking a ranged weapon for opening shots before engaging into a group." The dragon shrugged.

"Not a bad idea really." The man muttered. "What's your bar then? Stealth as well, or...?" He asked the red one, only to get a smirk in reply and walk to a training dummy.

"You just have to get him to show off, don't you?" Sarious chuckled, getting the man to look at the two. "Let's see if you can figure it out." And he nodded at her, observing how the dragon transformed into a more humanoid form and started stretching.

He opened up with a few quick front punches in a very tight, Boxer style which began to fill the dragon's meter up. Flowing from one hit to a consecutive other, he started adding in Body Blows and downward slams which progressively got harder and harder. Hitting with a stronger impact the more the meter filled up and started to flash with colors. Even the standard weaker attacks were giving off a faint blast wave. The meter suddenly began to drain quickly as the red one held back a Straight, then released it. Breaking the dummy's root in the ground and slamming it against the wall ahead. With a loud crack, the wooden dummy bounced off the wall and flew back into the distance drastically before shattering into blue pixels.

"Holy Crap..." The man whispered in awe, then looked at the woman who was just rolling her eyes. "I-I guess you've seen it enough, huh?"

"Yeah, but let's hear your answer."

The man pondered as the dragon changed back, flying and resting on Sarious' shoulder. "Well, it builds up as you attack, or just hit."

"With the connection of attacks, yes. Not as much when the strike is blocked, and nothing if it's evaded or deflected." The red one answered.

"And the higher the meter, the more damage it does?" The two nodded. "It almost sounds like a Berserker's Meter or something." It got the dragon's neck to curl, looking at the woman.

"Why does everyone assume that?"

"It's because that's basically what you are." She half scolded him, getting Endzeit to snort and look away with his snout in the air. "The name of it seems to be corrupted or in a different language, but he calls it Wild."

"And with the gathered energy, he can concentrate it for a much..." He trailed off towards the wall, cracked heavily from where the dummy hit it. "...Stronger attack which apparently has an insane amount of knockback."

"Actually, what it does it turns his enemies into living projectiles. Allowing them to carry about half of the initial damage done and strike anyone within its path before actually killing the mob." Meowmix looked at her for a moment and she shrugged. "I've never seen anything like it before, let alone another player do it. Only this little guy."

"That's because I'm Unique, and you should treat me better." He grumbled, getting a smirk from both of them. "Some breakfast would be nice, you know." He leaned towards the man with his head slightly tilted.

"Oh, yes I could-"

"Don't." Sarious put her hand up, getting a noise of question out of both of them. "He'll eat you out of every Credit you have."

"Only because you fail to feed me properly." He snorted loudly, getting a chuckle from the man.

"Please, you ate both our breakfasts before you even came back from that delivery. You should be fine for the rest of the day." The dragon whimpered, looking at her with sad golden saucers. "And don't you give me that. You'll live."

"Says you." He grumbled.

"Hard to believe he's an AI." The man said with a smile. "But thank you both very much. You've taught me alot already."

"No problem. I'm still learning the game as I go, but if you ever need a question answered, feel free to whisper. Even if I don't know myself, I've yet to find a question Endzeit doesn't have an answer for."

"Don't you drag me into this without any rewards." He grumbled. "Each lesson from here on out is going to cost you a full meal-" A hand over his head got him to yelp a stop. The woman's head shaking with a sigh.

"I swear all he thinks about is food."

"And body pillows-"

"Body what?" An awkward grunt came from her, as Sarious' face began to flush a bit.

"N-nothing. I'll see you around Meowmix."

"See ya." They waved goodbye and left the training area.

Chapter 6

"I still don't understand why we needed to leave." The small dragon around her neck grumbled. Still not taking his eyes off the cave entrance. "We were doing fine against the standard enemies in there."

"I know, but those mobs were drastically harder than the ones out here. Even though I'm still working on getting my Heavy Armor Mastery up, I'm worried about getting one-shotted by the boss in there." She replied, crossing her arms and leaning against the fence. Staring into the medium crowd of people, all talking to each other. "Is this some sort of daily Faction raid?"

"Nah, they're all from different Factions." The red one said, barely looking at them. "Why haven't you found one yet, anyway?" It was her sight running away from him that got the small one's attention, seeing the strange shyness before. Flicking his ear to an approaching player, a man with a rather large, four foot shield strapped to his arm.

"Hey." He said, getting a shy look and a very faint wave from her. "We're short a frontline, and were looking for someone. Are you waiting for a party?"

"Well... Not really waiting on anyone."

"Would you like to join us then? It'll be an easy run. I got a Guildie [Guild/Faction Member] coming down to help us out." Sarious studied him for a bit. "You're a monk, aren't you?"

"She's hardly a monk-" An easy grip on the dragon's whiskers made him faintly yelp, getting the man to chuckle.

"How about it?" He pulled up his HUD and sent her a Party Request. She still looked at it a bit worryingly, then looked at Endzeit for a confirmation. Seeing him shrug.

"You wanted a party." He mumbled, still tending to the slightly pulled whisker. With a faint sigh, she accepted it. Seeing four new squad member health bars on her HUD.

"Oh, you're a Tamer?" The man asked, getting her to almost blush in discomfort.

"Yes, but I am a frontline one. So-"

"Hey, don't worry about it. The Guildie that's coming to help is one as well. He might be able to teach you something." He said with a smile, lifting up his hand for a shake. "SirHonor."

Once again, she hesitated but shook his hand. "Sarious. And this is Endzeit."

"That's a pet I've never seen before." The man went to pet him, but the red one growled a bit. "Not very friendly?"

"You try being pet by chainmail." Endzeit grumbled. Getting SirHonor to apologize and remove his glove. Attempting to pet him once again and getting the little one to purr a bit.

"That's probably much better, by the sounds of it." His words even made the woman smile a bit. A little more so when she seen the dragon's grin and trying to lean into the hand. She's only heard the noise a few times these past few days, but had no idea she could make him do it.

SirHonor suddenly stopped, half looking towards his left ear. Getting the red one to growl at him for stopping. "Sorry little guy, but our Carry is coming. Let's get inside, okay?"

"Fine." Endzeit grumbled. And the two followed him towards the cave entrance. Accepting the already made Instance request and teleporting inside the rather gloomy looking cave. Even the air felt rather heavy. "I'm glad to be back here." The red one grumbled sarcastically.

"It's much darker than the beginning of the game, huh?" The Fighter asked, looking around at a younger girl in the corner. Almost looking a little frightened. "No trouble, I hope."

"N-no." She said shyly, overlooking Sarious from afar. "Nothing came close to the entrance, just like you said Honor." The man gave her a smile.

"It's about time someone else made it." Another man said, wearing an outfit over his armor. One that had a rather large hat with a slit in the front end. A dark torn cloak hid most of his weapon but the long barrel sticking out. "She's terrible company."

"She's just shy, but I'm confident in her abilities. Besides, this won't be hard once our escort arrives." Honor looked at the younger one again. "Don't worry, I'll protect you. Just focus on keeping everybody's healthbars full."

"O-okay."

"As long as everyone sticks together, we'll be okay." The man took a seat against the cave wall. And though still slightly uncomfortable, Sarious took a seat away from everyone else.

"It's been ten minutes, where is he?" The sniper asked, getting a very awkward look on the Fighter.

"Any minute now, I'm sure."

"Even I'm getting impatient." The dragon snorted quietly. "The least we could do is start clearing." It was then the faint sound of someone warping in could be heard. Seeing a rather slick man in a black suit appear looking through his HUD.

"Sorry I'm late." He said rather lackadaisically, implying he really didn't mean it. "I had more important things to do."

"Still, thanks for coming Larin. We appreciate it."

"Of course you do." Larin overlooked the team, stopping at Sarious. "You already have a Tamer, why didn't you just let her tank?"

"She doesn't have a Walker. She's got-"

"A Tamer without a Walker?" The man laughed and rolled his eyes. "No wonder you need me." He turned to Sarious with a hand on his hip. "You get another pet slot at 15, 25, and 35. I suggest you get one-"

"And what if I don't need another companion?" The woman responded harshly.

"You will. It's as simple as that. Glacial Walkers are the best tanks in the game, aside from another player. You can almost solo everything you come to with a little bit of time as long as it tanks. I mean, you could've done this alone like I did at level 14, instead of relying on other people." Sarious, Endzeit, and the marksman glared at him from afar. "Whatever. If I can't convince you with words, I'll convince you with actions." He pressed a few buttons on his HUD and a large stone golem appeared before him. Several blue shards that almost looked like neo icicles were along the outside of its shoulders and arms, with the name Rocky above its healthbar.

"Can we finally get moving?" The rifleman said. Getting up and walking closer, Sarious could make out the name Sauqou. "I'm tired of waiting."

"Fair enough. Rocky, lead the way."

An awkward silence hovered over the group as they stayed far behind Larin and his companion. Sarious mostly with a crossed face and an irked aura around her. Getting a small nudge from the dragon still on her shoulders. "I'm pretty pissed at him too. I think the only one who isn't is the Cleric." He whispered.

"She doesn't have a reason to." She grumbled in reply. "I detest being carried like this."

It's boring and tedious. I'd rather be doing something."

"But it's free experience." The little one shrugged, getting half a glare from her.

"You're lazy, you know that?"

"I am. I admit that. But still, I understand why you don't like it. But it's a free ride for now. After this, we can finally go into the next city. Just think about the idea of more comfortable beds."

"As if, even when you had your own bed, you still slept on me." She grumbled.

"I can't help it, you're just more comfortable." He swore he heard her growl at him, thinking he might be strapped to the end of her glove, he motioned a surrender and zipping his muzzle.

"Everything okay?" SirHonor came up to ask, almost startling them. Seeing the irked look from the woman before she sighed and looked ahead once again. Feeling the anger not directed towards him, but the man ahead talking with his faction mates. "I know... Seems like every game has these type of people still. Though Skyline is a bit more versatile and balanced when it comes to its professions, some still think specific builds are better than others."

"I despise those Cookie-Cutter guides. Following every direction by the T and just expect to be good at it." A hand on her arm got her to stop for a moment and look at the Fighter.

"He's just one person. A bit of a jerk, but one person. If you're confident in your own abilities and your... Errm, Endmite here-"

"Endzeit." The dragon grumbled. "And quit stealing glances at her body pillows. They're mine." It instantly got the two players to turn red and look away from each other. Getting Sarius to squeeze the dragon's head and make him yelp until he shut up. "Okay-okay-okay!" He whimpered, getting the attention of the Sniper and the Cleric, but not the Tamer up ahead.

"W-what I mean is..." SirHonor started up again, trying to put the awkward moment behind them. "You'll do fine on your own if you've been doing fine. You don't need to always rely on yourself, there are other people in this game, you know." That got the shy look from the woman once again. "We're always looking for new people if you want to join, and you don't have to be under his wing or anything." He motioned ahead.

"...I don't know." Sarius finally replied, saying it more as a 'No Thanks' than a 'Maybe'.

"It's alright. Just consider it if things go well here, okay? You're never alone in Skyline." The statement made her slow down a bit while the Fighter checked up on the Cleric. Leaving Sarius alone in thought, and almost looking for the dragon's opinion.

"Don't look for my two cents. The Crying Onions has got to be the dumbest Faction

name I've heard." He snorted quietly, getting the woman to chuckle, and in turn made him smile a bit.

Up ahead there was a very large room, filled with creatures patrolling in a large circle. Within it was a very large, brown scaly wolf with several tails coming out from its mane. Laying down and being worshiped by a few dozen wolves, much like the ones outside of the cave that Sarious was fighting before. As the large one came before each one, it lightly bit it, getting the small one to yelp faintly. Then transform into a smaller, mutated version of the two. Sensing the players soon after, he ordered the wolves to attack.

"Rocky, do your thing." Larin gave the golem a few taps, and it half responded with a grunt. Walking forward and getting the attention of most wolves, the Walker started slamming against them and shattering them in a few hits. All with taking bite after bite.

A few wolves got around the large one, but were intercepted by Sarious and SirHonor, with the help of Sauqou's rifle shots knocking back some of the weaker enemies. After the golem's opponents faded away, the master gave the order to attack the Boss: Razorjaw, obeying without a moment of consideration or suggestion. But something bothered the dragon about being in the presence of this 'Stronger Pet', something he couldn't quite place. There was no real communication between Rocky and Larin, there seemed to be a distant relationship between them, unlike his with Sarious.

As the Walker got up to the large wolf, shrugging off a harsh bite from the twelve foot creature, it gave it a heavy slam in the cheek. Snarling, Razorjaw bit it again, getting a completely unheard wail from Rocky that echoed through the cave. Stopping everyone in place for a moment. As the large wolf took another bite, the golem's health dropped a drastic 40%, vs the 5% total it's taken so far.

Unable to really think for itself, the Walker gave another slam to the large one, but did half its first damage. Being afflicted by a strange weakness. A heavy bite wounded the golem and sent out another cry through the cave. "What are you doing!?" Endzeit hissed at Larin. "Heal him!" But the man hesitated, seeing Rocky's Hp drop another heavy amount.

"This is impossible! It's never done this before-"

"Just heal him!" Another hiss from the red one. "Or Stow him! Now!" Another cry from the golem, and it felt apart before the wolf. Crushing the remains of its chest with its massive jaws and roaring at the group as fractions fell from its fangs.

"There was a patch update..." Sarious whispered, getting the dragon to look at her for a moment, and hear the sounds of Razorjaw stepping forward. "Endzeit!"

"Right!" He nodded, transforming into his more humanoid form with a flip and taking a

stance with the woman. "What's the plan?"

"Rocky seemed to shrug off the first attack, but odds are it has a special Venom or something that melts defenses."

"Or passes through them directly. So Ninja it?"

"Yeah, Evade. Don't defend."

"Got it." And the two dashed forward in flank, waiting for an opening from the wolf. As it kept a blind eye to Sarious, she aimed a rotation kick at a pressure point in the creature's neck, getting to growl and slightly stun long enough for the dragon to hit it hard in the snout a few times. Just barely escaping the retaliation of its bite by spinning under its jaw and landing a harsh uppercut within the inner underside.

Staggering backwards, and getting another, open-palmed uppercut from Sarious made the creature furious. The support shot from the sniper far away didn't help either. "We should help them, you know." Sauqou grumbled at the other two, knowing that the Tamer collapsed off his feet probably wouldn't be much use anymore. As the Fighter and Cleric nodded, they began to ready themselves, but got cut off from another patrolling set of wolves.

"We need to get to them." SirHonor said, parrying a wolf bite slightly, and then chopping it with a hatchet.

"And only aggro more of them in the process-" A quick shot from another one coming nearby interrupted the marksman. "Let alone give them all something harder to deal with and look out for."

"Then what? We just wait and let them finish? I can't do that-"

"No, we keep the patrols off their backs and hope they don't get destroyed." Another shot and he turned to the cleric. "You, can you reach Hit-girl from here?"

"N-no. I need to get closer."

"Then we move ahead. Just try not to get overrun or flanked by the Boss." One last shot finished this group, getting the Fighter to look the Sniper in the eyes. "We do this smart, and maybe we'll have a chance." A near helpless sigh came from SirHonor, but he nodded. Getting his defenses up and motioning a group to take out.

Meanwhile, the Duo were working pretty well in sync. Constantly striking one after another, but being very cautious about Razorjaw's muzzle. A few scratches and very close calls were diminishing their health bars, slowly turning them from green, to yellow, and now getting orange at about 35% each. Almost panicking, the cleric put a small protection shield over SirHonor and tried to get closer to Sarious to restore her Hp. It made her feel suddenly refreshed, but a loud snarl soon tensed those relaxed muscles. Seeing the large wolf lean in to

snap at the cleric made the younger woman almost freeze.

Jumping in front of her, SirHonor tried to block the jaws with his shield. The heavy bite itself dented the portable wall, lifting up the player strapped to it and taking another heavy chomp. Nearly destroying it. "Endzeit! Get him!" Sarious shouted from the other side, taking the Fighter's place against the flanking enemies. Kicking a mutated wolf that was getting too close to Sauqou.

The dragon grumbled as he leapt on top of the beast. Evading his way from the offensive tentacles that seemed to grow out of its mane, but still got slapped by a few of them. Making it a bit harder for him to breathe, and telling him his health was below 25%. Balancing on the snout, he reached down and clawed SirHonor's straps on the shield. Just before one final snap, and barely getting his hand out of its jaws. Destroying the shield like it was cardboard and seeing the blue pixel remains fall to the ground, along with some venom.

Another loud growl as the red one met the dark yellow eyes of the large wolf, whimpering a little bit as the thing quickly tossed its snout and launched Endzeit, trying to bite him in the air. Just now realizing the red lizard could fly only made the beast madder, trailing him along the ceiling closely.

The cleric helped SirHonor up off his side. "Thank you, my Lady." It got her to half smile, but still a little concerned about everyone else.

"Do you have another shield?" Sarious asked, still taking a defensive role for the squad in the meantime.

"Yes, it's an older one, but I've kept it around." He pulled up his HUD and equipped it. A bit on the smaller side than the previous, but it would do the job. Taking his place back and pinning another rabid wolf, he took a quick look at the Boss. "What's the plan now? He can't last forever out there."

"I have an idea. Can you possibly group all of them up in a single barrier?" The three looked at Sarious strangely. "Trust me, it'll work. But after, you're going to have to last until then."

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?" The Cleric asked.

"Only if you don't protect yourselves and watch your mana. Always keep your magic shield up on yourself and him, and just keep pushing back the enemies until they're grouped up." The Fighter looked at her with worry. "It'll work, but you'll need to heal Endzeit when you get the chance."

"Can't you do it? You're a Tamer, aren't you?"

"Kind of, but I've never obtained the skill. I can't explain now." A quick look at Razorjaw

and the dragon's positioning on the ceiling told her he would need a distraction first. "I'm going to need two wolves." She muttered out loud, taking one that was trying to flank SirHonor by the tail and throwing it after spinning the yelping creature around a few times. Getting it to hit the Boss and grab its attention. "Endzeit! Ricochet!"

He tilted his head at her for a moment, then looked at what the other team was doing. Nodding and getting into position while Sarious grabbed another wolf. Stunning it in the muzzle for a moment, giving her enough room to step forward with a heavy palm thrust. Knocking the wolf across the room, in line with the dragon. Seeing him drain all his gather energy into one large hit, he kicked the small wolf with a loud crash, throwing it into Razorjaw's hind legs and tripping it. Then crashing into the pile of enemies in front of SirHonor. Creating a huge cloud of red pixels that showered half the room for a few moments.

"...Well, that's one way to do it." The sniper said. Noticing a few that managed to evade the attack.

"Now we can all focus on the Boss together." SirHonor said, finishing off the last one and giving the older woman a smile. "Nice work." She blushed a bit, but kept her head in the game, seeing the Cleric heal the red one when he got close enough gave Sarious some relief.

"What are our orders, Leader?" Sarious asked the Fighter, and he gave a nod.

"Surround it. Keep away from its jaws and attack it when the opening occurs. Don't rely on defenses, but evades!" The five gave a nod back and did so. Striking it with every bite it attempted to make at the two frontlines. Every scratch it landed was soon recovered and countered hard. When the creature started to breathe heavily and almost faint, they all struck it at once, shattering it with a loud crash and a brilliant light. Overpowering it's deathcry.

A few silent moments later, a large UI popped up offering congratulations. Hearing the cheers of her squadmates put a faint smile on Sarious' face, at least until she seen Endzeit's. Looking towards the pile of rocks and blue gemstones that remained of the Walker, he walked towards it. Digging through it to pull out a specific glowing blue stone. Then walked over to Larin, still sitting and half dazed out. With his empty paw, the dragon made a fist and cracked the player hard, only to hear a loud buzzer sound off and hurt the dragon's fist instead.

Shaking it off, the attempt to hit Larin alerted him and the others. "Why didn't you save him!?" The red one roared, but the man didn't respond. "It's supposed to be your job to protect him! Why didn't you!?" Again, he didn't respond. "He's dead because of you!"

"I-it's just... a game..." Larin managed to get out.

"Just a game..." Endzeit asked harshly. When he got no reply, he hit the man again, only aching his own fist and growling at it. After shaking the slightly wounded paw, he held up the stone to the man. "You don't deserve this." He said coldly, turning around and heading for the exit with the small stone.

Everyone waited until the red one left before saying anything. Even then, a few moments afterword. "Thanks for the party guys. I should... Check on him." They nodded at Sarious as she accepted her rewards and left the cave's exit.

Warping into the main world once again greeted the woman with a warm breeze. Though still half in a cave, it was just a few steps before she was back into the sunlight. Letting her eyes adjust to the brightness once again seemed to have the same effect as real life, and even the long grass under her feet was a nice change of pace from the rock and dirt.

While still half blinded, Sarious could still see her HUD in the corner of her eye, along with a flashing bar under Endzeit's Hp. The one that usually displayed his current Energy labeled 'Wild'. Sarious noticed it changed colors as it filled up, but he usually used it before the entire bar got full.

It didn't take long to spot the spikey grey mane once she could see. Finding the red dragon in front of a pond with his legs crossed and paws covering most of his face. She had seen his ears flat against his head like this before, flicking as she started to step towards him, but soon after went back to hide in his mane.

As Sarious sat beside him in silence, she could hear him breathing a bit loudly. Having a hard time to tell if it was from anger, or trying to hold back sobs. Whereas the blue stone he took was resting in his lap, still in his eyesight. "...Do you think this is just a Game as well?" He asked, almost a bit harshly but was trying to hold back. "Am I just expendable to you-?"

"No." She answered just as harshly, putting a hand on his knee. "I'm not like them."

"...But you're still one of them. Even you just think of us as AIs or whatever. Artificial. Unreal. Non-existent-"

"Stop." She ordered, and he did. Taking another breath.

"...You know what his favorite food was?" Sarious didn't answer. "Peanut Oil. Because he was fed nothing else. Never got to taste waffles, slightly burnt toast, strawberries, or even a Bloody Mary." She couldn't help but slightly smile at that, though trying not to. "Peanut Oil... Because it was the cheapest, most effective food in the *Game*. Because all he was to his master... That *Player*... Was a weapon. Something to control and abuse. Then throw away-"

"Endzeit." Again a bit harshly, this time putting the hand on his shoulder. "I'm not one of them. You're more than that to me." He let his paws drop, but didn't look at her. "I just didn't realize it until yesterday." Another flick of his ear trying to hear that muttered sentence got him to try to look at her for a moment. Then sigh, letting his muzzle hang. "But, you're half right. I've been... Hard on you ever since I met you."

"That's an understatement." He grumbled, getting her to chuckle.

"Then how would you describe my performance then?" She teased, getting him to lightly chuckle himself.

"A few words come to mind: Abusive. Damaging. Overactive. Harsh-"

"Okay, okay." The woman playfully shoved him until he chuckled himself. Looking at the blue stone that he started to hold in his paws. "What is this exactly?"

"This...?" He studied it for a moment, a painful look of almost defeat and acceptance shown in his golden eyes. "...'Monsters' or other creatures in Skyline have no... Squishy bits, I guess you could call them." It made Sarious lightly chuckle. "Something that a previous Master of mine said. But... That doesn't mean they don't have Hearts or Souls. It's the same for when it comes to Golems as well. Instead of something squishy, they have what's called a Lifestone, a specific rock within their core that acts as a physical representation of such things."

"And that's Rocky's...?" He nodded slowly, not taking his eyes off of it. "What are they for?" Again, another painful look.

"...If you manage to get one, you can resurrect the fallen pet, but it's a hard road. Most... Players would rather just get another pet and raise it from scratch. Other than that, you can also use it to..." A deep sigh. "Forge weapons and armor for Players..." She looked at him sadly and just stroked his arm for a bit. "I want to take it back to his Henge." The woman made a noise in question. "Think... Hometown."

"Ah..." She was silent for a bit, then got up. "How far is it?" The dragon looked at her for a few moments. "We stick together, Endzeit. Besides, we'll come by it eventually, right?"

"Maybe." He touched the stone and brought up its information UI. "It's a bit far from here, but northeast from that City." He pointed off into the distance towards a large circular wall with many buildings that could be seen from this height.

"Then we'll head out. But one thing first:" The red one's ears perked. "Release some of that pent up energy. I feel like you're going to explode any second now." That one made him laugh and shake his head. Seeing a small pond in the distance, he got up and threw all his energy into a heavy stomp. Feeling the shockwave dart towards the small body of water and cause it to erupt. Gushing into the air like a geyser, along with several lily pads and a few frogs. Showering everything nearby with pondwater, including the two.

"Ugh..." Sarious grunted, feeling a faint slimy feeling with the water. "You couldn't do it to a bug or something?"

"Odds are I got a bug with that somewhere." He smiled at her, giving the Lifestone to Sarious to store in her inventory.

"It's a wonder you were even able to take this."

"The original Master can recall the item up to two days after death, but..." He looked back, seeing the other team mates finally exit the cave and take the path down to the City. But not the Tamer that was with them. "Odds are he won't fight to get Rocky back..."

"Then let's deliver him before anything happens." He nodded at her and they started walking towards the city.

Chapter 7

"I just can't stand this smell..." Sarious muttered under her breath, still trying to wipe off the pond water from her clothes.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, I can't smell anything different." Endzeit shrugged, still in his bipedal form.

"That's probably because we're soaked in the stuff." Another disgusted moan from her. "I don't think a normal shower is going to do the job." It got the dragon to ponder for a few moments, his ears scanning the area. He stopped, looking towards the east and getting her attention. "What is it?" A slight smile grew over his muzzle. "What is it." She asked rather lackadaisically, getting him to chuckle.

"Follow me." He started to head into a thick forest.

"Where are you going?" He just motioned for her to follow him and Sarious rolled her eyes, doing just that. "There better not be any giant boars in this forest." She grumbled.

"Not in this one. It's rather clean, to be honest. Well, that is until we stepped in it." He joked, still getting a rather serious look from her and making the dragon toss his head. "Come on, it was a joke. Besides, you'll enjoy this one, I promise." Still wearing that skeptical glare, she half grumbled. But followed him deep into the forest regardless, hearing a large waterfall in the distance and even seeing the mist from it. Stepping out into a clearing, just in arms reach of the

falls and a large lake below. "What do you think?" He asked, watching her step closer towards the edge.

The light of the digital sun's rays were conflicting with the mist. Constantly showing a bright, multi colored rainbow that was shifting hues. The mix of cool water and the warm weather made the sight breathtaking. "It's amazing..." She whispered.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Waiting for?" The woman questioned him, only to feel his paw shove her in the back and off the cliff. Letting out a sharp scream until she hit the water with a loud splash. "Drama queen." He tossed his snout before leaping and diving in.

She reached the surface with a sharp breath and gasp. She couldn't believe how real it felt, even getting her body to stiffen like it would in real life. Seeing a shadow of something moving underwater got her almost panicky, until she made out Endzeit's mane. Still ridiculously spikey, even underwater or wet when he resurfaced. "Feels good, doesn't it-" Sarious slammed down on his stupid hair and held him underwater in anger.

"You Stupid Lizard! What The Hell Was That For!?" She barked as loud as she could, almost hearing a response in the mist of bubbles and squirms from the dragon. After a bit, she let him up for air. Gasping and coughing a bit, he took a few breaths.

"Okay... Okay, I deserve that-" The woman pushed him under again, hearing the squirms and struggles of the red one again. When they started to slow down, she released and pulled him back up. Coughing for several moments and breathing heavily while swimming away from her. "That one, I didn't deserve." He panted.

"Are you trying to kill me!?"

"I feel like that's rhetorical-"

"You pushed me off a cliff!"

"You had a 99.43629% chance of survival from that fall. There was no risk-" He snorted.

"Oh, you are so getting smothered in your sleep...!" Sarious grumbled loudly, getting a slight whimper and chuckle from him.

"I guess if it's by your Body Pillows, it would be a good way to go." She immediately splashed him, getting the dragon to laugh loudly. After a constant amount of splashing, the woman stopped, only to not see the red one anywhere. Trying to look under the water from the surface proved useless, and once again she grumbled. Starting to head towards shore when she was grabbed by the leg and pulled under with half a yelp.

While underwater, she tried to see Endzeit. Rather surprised it was very clear and deep,

she spotted the red and grey tail leading behind her. Then felt his paws climb up her legs, one of them grabbing her pelvis and feeling a part of his body gently press against her buttocks. As another paw climb up and half grabbed her breast, Sarious grabbed a finger or two and bent them backwards. Almost hearing the faint growl of the dragon as she turned around and tried to grab his mane. Instead snatching his ear and making him yelp loudly underwater as she swam to the surface.

Not letting go of her grip on the furry appendage, she pulled him to the surface to get him to gasp and yelp loudly over and over with each tug. Dragging him to the shore almost sounded like she was murdering him, though his Hp wasn't going down, so she wasn't terribly worried. "Okay-Okay-Okay! I Give!" He whimpered, trying to struggle free.

"Like hell you're getting off that easy!" She twisted the ear and he screeched loudly, trying to turn to undo it and letting her lay down behind him. The woman putting the red one in a headlock while still gripping on the ear. "This is what you get everytime you try to get a feel for me, Understood? Even if I have to Rip-" She tugged on the ear and he yelped. "This-" A harder pull and a louder screech. "Thing-" A twist. "Off!" A series of yelps and whimpers filled the forest, even being able to hear it from the city. "Do I make myself clear, Endzeit!?"

"Crystal!"

"I can't hear you!"

"**Crystal!** Just let go!" She held onto it for a few moments then let go. Getting him to instantly curl into a small ball, protecting the sore ear with the end of his tail. As the woman half got up, she sighed heavily, leading her back against his body a bit roughly.

"When will you learn?" She grumbled. Feeling a faint rapidness to his breaths. Not really sure if he was sobbing or laughing, making her wonder if she went too far. After a bit, it turned out to be a more positive reaction to the abuse.

"And they called me a Firecracker..." He muttered, chuckling a bit. Stretching a bit and turning under her, he curled up and rested his own head on her belly, much like she was doing to him. Getting an almost scolding look from her, the red one lifted his paws to surrender. "I'm not trying anything, just resting the ear."

"And leaving your other one vulnerable." She tried to be serious, but the smirk on his face was too convincing. Tilting his head towards the ground in a playful gesture and flicking the ear to provoke her, making a slight purr that only made Sarious shake her head. Reaching out to lightly grab the teasing furry area made him almost yelp and place a paw on her wrist. "They can't be that sensitive, you wuss."

"They are." He chuckled, feeling her study it with her hand. Though wet, it still felt a little soft and very thin. When the fur was dried, it made the ears look much thicker than they actually were. The grey insides were mostly fur as well, making her wonder he could ever hear anything

with such a forest. But then again, he wasn't real. It kinda gave her a sad look, and his purring stopped, replacing it with a noise in question. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just something that came to mind." The woman muttered a bit sadly.

"Feeling bad about beating me up already?" That instantly made her chuckle.

"As if." She lightly pushed his muzzle a bit, getting a nudge from him in return and several other ones very close to her chest. "Why must you poke the bear?" She asked, still that smile on her face.

"You would not believe how much fun it is." The answer made both of them laugh.

"You're just a Masochist, Endzeit. Admit it." He shrugged lightly, and closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath through his nostrils. "If you keep taking pleasure in making me mad, you're not going to be able to walk."

"I don't need to walk." He snorted playfully. "But I'm not doing it to make you mad. I guess... I've never seen anyone react the way you do when it comes to being touched. I mean, you almost act as if it's an attack."

"And if it is?" Her smile began to fade, until she got a lick on the arm from him. Making a face and trying to wipe it off on the dragon's silly mane.

"I can't see how it is though. I mean, it makes you uncomfortable to have someone touch you? Why is that?" The woman didn't answer, but stared into space towards the waterfall. "What are you afraid of?"

The question got her to double take and stare into his eyes for a moment. Him witnessing a bit of pain in her slightly orange ones. "I'm..." She trailed off, not knowing how to really answer. A soft paw on her right breast got her to grunt awkwardly and almost snarl. Staring into his eyes once again, the look of the golden ones never changed.

"This isn't an attack." He softly said. "It's not an insult. It's not to taunt or provoke you. It's nothing to feel awkward, embarrassed, or ashamed of. It's not meant to hurt you in any way, Sarius."

"Then why do it?" She asked a bit harshly, and he lightly shrugged.

"It's a sign of trust. It's a sign of companionship. Just like how I trust you not to kill me. Beat me senseless, yes. Drown me twice, sure." A slight chuckle. "But I'll always know you won't push it too far. I leave my own life in your hands, because I trust you with it. And you should trust me with yours." Her sight lowered down to his paw, still resting on the faint hill on her shirt. Not squeezing, not moving. Not really even on the center of it. "I ended up looking into that word you called me that first morning together."

"What word?"

"Pervert." She couldn't hold in the chuckle. "And well... It's not what I'm intending when I do this. I'm actually not sure what this Sexual Desire is, so I'm not after it from you, Sarious. I just want you to trust me-"

"And if I have these boundaries?" Another harsh question, as the woman lifted up the paw and set it aside.

"Then you should let go of them around me. I want you to be able to trust me with your life. Your body. Your mind." She looked at him strangely, noticing those eyes never moving from looking into hers as he placed that same paw onto her hand. "I'm yours, Sarious. And I always will be, until the day you dismiss me. But I have demands of my own, just like yours."

"Like sleeping on my chest?" She asked lackadaisically, getting him to chuckle.

"Like sleeping on your chest and having 25k Credit meals, yes." He joked, resting his smiling muzzle on that paw. "Your life is in my paws, and mine in yours. All boundaries are going to do is get in the way of us protecting each other. Provide barriers within our trust." The woman was quiet, placing her free hand on the dragon's scaly muzzle and feeling for one of the long grey whiskers. One that would normally flinch him if it was pulled a bit. "I trust you, Sarious. I'm yours by definition. If you wish to beat me within an inch of my life, I'll accept it. If you wish to sell me for profit, I'll agree to it. If you ever wish to starve me for eating you bankrupt," Another faint chuckle. "I'll trust you with the decision. I'll give you thanks for receiving, it's my privilege. And you'll owe me nothing in return." Finally closing his eyes, he gave the lower arm a lick. This time, she didn't make a face, or even flinch at it. Instead, just pet him between the eyes, and towards the ear.

The night was returning on their way back, seeing the lights slowly turn on and illuminate the city from the gates was quite a site. "I'm just glad that we're out of that swamp water." The woman said, stretching a bit.

"Yes, you smell better too." The small dragon on her shoulder said, getting Sarious to double-take at him.

"Y-you said you couldn't smell it!"

"I couldn't. But I can smell the river on you, and I like it." The little one took a deep sniff at her hair, and she grabbed a long whisker. Making Endzeit yelp a bit and whimper.

"No sniffing. People will think it's perverted." She grumbled, feeling the dragon nod before letting go.

"Shouldn't if a pet is doing it." He snorted.

"There's alot of people here..." She mumbled, catching the red one's eye while tending to a whisker.

"A celebration. Think a GM is leaving and getting replaced." The little one shrugged. "There'll be free food, probably some fireworks. Dancing, whatever players do to celebrate."

"Any special items?" The dragon shook his head. "Didn't think so. They haven't done that for decades."

"What were you hoping for?"

"I donno, some special buffs [Temporary Increase in Player Abilities/Effects] or maybe a different outfit."

"Well, the only thing I can think of is the food-"

"Which is no surprise." Sarios grumbled, getting the red one to chuckle.

"I mean, it's very cheap, very tasty, and only available for tonight. How much money do we have?"

"I have about 60k left. And we're not spending all of it on festival foods." The dragon's excited gaze at her dropped with a whimper. "How cheap is Cheap?"

"Maybe 10C a piece?"

"And the Fullness Value?"

"About 35. Still, not bad compared to the 100 that Peanut Oil is for 110C."

"I suppose." Sarios mumbled, approaching a stand. "Hello, what are these ones?"

"Those are Dragonbuns." It got the woman to double take at the NPC, blushing a bit.

"W-what?"

"Dragonbuns, ma'am. They're kinda like classic cinnamon rolls with something special in them." He smiled, getting a chuckle from him and the dragon at her odd look. "Nothing horrible, miss. I assure you. Would you like to buy one? Only 10C tonight."

"It wouldn't hurt to try. Two please, one for my companion as well." He nodded and handed them each one in a napkin. Taking a bite, a very sweet and cinnamon taste with a side of maple made her moan at it. "This is amazing. We should definitely get more-" A loud, disappointing whimper from Endzeit got her attention. Seeing his already half gone, staring at it with his ears down. "What's wrong? You're not allergic to it, are you?"

"A...llergic?" He lifted an ear at her and tilted his head. Looking back at his breaded treat, he mumbled. "It expires tomorrow at midnight."

"It does?" She tapped it to bring up a small UI, seeing the small message bordered from the rest. "Oh well. We can still eat well tonight. Excuse me, I'll take 100 more."

"Really?" Both the dragon and the NPC Vendor asked, though the Vendor didn't argue and prepped her order quickly when she nodded.

"That way we can spend most of the day tomorrow training and stuffing your face. So don't eat them all tonight, understood?" The little one tossed his snout and nodded. Finishing his own and purring at the delicious taste of them. Then logging into her inventory for another, he made a noise in question. "What is it?" She looked at the small HUD herself and almost made the same noise. "A Recipe?"

"Yes, Ma'am. If you buy 50 or more total, you get the Recipe for them for free. That way you can make them yourself using the Chef Expertise-" Endzeit jumped onto the man's chest and pulled on his shirt. Looking him straight in the eyes.

"There's a Chef Expertise!? Are you telling me she can learn to cook!?" A loud yelp when she pulled the red creature back.

"I apologize for my Companion's behavior. He will be Strictly. Punished. For it later." The woman grunted the last part through her teeth and squeezed him with every pause. Making the little one whimper. "Thank you very much for the recipe, Sir."

"N-no problem ma'am!" He scratched the back of his head while the woman awkwardly slipped away.

"What the hell is wrong with you-!?"

"You can learn how to COOK!" The dragon whispered loudly, squirming out of her grip. "I've heard of the other Expertise forms before, but never Chef! That means you can make all my meals-" Another grab of a whisker.

"I am not going to learn how to cook." Despite the faint pain he was in, he tried to give her sad golden eyes. "Don't you look at me like that, I've seen how much you eat! And I will not slave over an oven for seven days to feed you one meal, understood!?" A loud whimper as she let go. Hearing him tend to the whisker once again as Sarious went to an unpopulated alleyway. Opening her inventory once again and getting two Dragonbuns, she looked at the Recipe once again. "...I'll look into it a bit more later, alright?" She said, handing him one of the buns.

"You mean...?" He took it, almost bowing in thanks.

"I just don't want to make a 'living' trying to fill your bottomless pit of a stomach. It's... Feminist."

"It's what?" He asked, tilting his head and seeing her roll her eyes.

"Stereotypical, or at least was, for women to basically be housewives. Looking after the children, cleaning the home. And cooking all day to serve other people. I hated it, as if I was somehow less of a person because of my gender." She sighed, taking a bite out of the bun and faintly seeing a very confused look on the dragon. "I guess it doesn't make any sense to you, does it?"

He shook his head. "I just love food." The painfully obvious statement made her chuckle.

"Sorry... I keep forgetting you're not a player." His ears went back a bit, but he didn't say anything. "And you've never been in the Real World."

"There's that word again..." He mumbled with his mouth full, getting a look from her that clearly stated she didn't get what he said. Before he could swallow, some lights in the dark sky started to go off. "Hard to believe it's night already."

"Yeah..." She said, seeing a large crowd squeeze into the main streets. "Looks like we'll only be seeing half of it. I really don't like crowds." The little one studied it for a moment, then quickly stuffed his face to finish his bun. Somehow nearly swallowing it whole. "You're going to choke one of these days." He just snorted and flipped off her shoulder. Transforming into his combat form in the Alley. "What are...?" She started to ask, only to be lead a bit deeper into the alley.

"Turn around." He said, getting a more than discouraged look from her. "Trust me."

"I swear, if you try anything-"

"All I'm going to do is carry you up." He said, stepping very close to her and wrapping his paws around her waist. Lifting her up and slowly flying to the top of a slanted roof. Seeing one of the bright fireworks go off in the distance. Landing on the roof, his paws half slipped and he grunted. Carrying her over towards the chimney and setting her down carefully.

"Isn't the roofs off limits?"

"For most, yes. There's not many ways to fly in the game. But we'll be off them soon. Do you by any chance still have one of those Bandit Nets?"

"You mean the Corsair's Net? Yeah, why?" The woman started to get one out of her inventory.

"Your hoarding habits are about to come in use." She grunted at that, and half threw it at him. Seeing him jump over the side and do something with it she couldn't make out, then come straight back to her.

"What did you...?"

"You'll see." He smiled. "But I'm going to have to carry you again." Another dissatisfied grunt, but she allowed it. Flying wasn't one of the greatest pleasures she's experienced, but at least he went slow. Over the roof, Sarious started to see the net connected by the hooks of the gutters between two houses. Basically creating a hammock above the alleyway. Leaning backwards got her instincts to brace heavily against him. "Relax, I got you. Don't worry." He said, slowly landing in the net and putting most of their weight on it. "Good, it will hold." She whimpered slightly at that, and then a bit more when the red one slid her up closer to him. Resting completely on his body and feeling his muzzle beside her neck.

Another few fireworks started to crack and go off, illuminating the night sky in a barrage of wondrous lights and pyres. It was breathtaking, making her smile brightly at them as the hammock began to gently rock. Hearing the red dragon purr slightly and rest his paws on her lower belly, she softly put a hand on one of them. Gripping them a bit nervously, but within trust...

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"You... Trust me?" She asked, still feeling around his ears and mane. He nodded, still keeping his eyes closed and resting on his paws. "Why?"

"Should I not?" He half teased.

"I mean..." The woman didn't really know how to finish. "Why would you?"

He took a deep inhale, leaning into her free hand a bit. "Because... It's the only way we're going to survive this. And for once." The dragon sighed. "For once, I want just that: someone to survive..."

"And you want that to be me? Even after...?"

"You're strong enough to stand against me and set me straight. I'm not a wild animal to you, I'm not a pet. You call me... Companion. As in Ally, or Comrade. And you constantly say-"

"You eat too much."

"Well, yes-"

"Stop touching me."

"That too." He chuckled. "But you talk to me as if I'm..."

"A player..." She muttered. Seeing his ears go back a bit. "It's not the right word, is it?" The red one just sighed. "But I understand... And are you sure about... Me?"

"Should I not be?"

"I'm just..." Sarious exhaled. "I'm not good with other people. And I don't like..."

"You don't like teaching others." She nodded. "Because they tend to discard the information you give. You watch them make the same mistakes over and over, regardless of your warnings that fall on deaf ears. You see them get corrupted in their own wants and needs, not caring about others past a small group of friends. And even then, they would never expect one of you to be them. Regardless of everything you've done for them, everything you've given, they take it for granted." Another quiet sigh through his nostrils. "...I know, Sarious. I know."

There was a long silence between them, as she just pet his mane and horns that seemed to flow with his neck. A loud growl from the dragon's midsection broke the silence, getting them both to chuckle a bit. "Already? Seriously?"

"It's been several hours-"

"It's been two and a half." Another chuckle. "I suppose that's long enough. At least we dried out quickly." The red one started to stretch, but felt the small pinch on his ear. "Are you certain about this, Endzeit?" He nodded. "...You will think for yourself." She half demanded with a thick voice.

"I will think for myself."

"You will keep your trust in me."

"I will keep my trust in you."

"Your faith revolves in that trust."

"My faith revolves in that trust."

"And you will share my goals."

"And I will share your goals." He repeated without hesitation, and she let go. The two slightly getting up and looking each other in the eyes. "I am yours, Sarious. Our Survival is our Goal. Without you, I am nothing. Without me, you are nothing. We will wreck this game together, as One. Or die trying. Even if we do, we will leave an impact on this world that no one will ever forget." He lifted a paw for an upward handshake, and she took it. The two gripping it harshly.

"Damn right we will-"

"Starting tomorrow." A faint laughter broke the mood. "I can't kick ass and take names on an empty stomach."

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(It's been so long since I've actually trusted someone...) She thought to herself, still

watching the clever designs of the fireworks. The loud screeches and explosions of some of them still raced her heart. Feeling the red muzzle still lean into her neck a bit more to support it better. She started to hear it whisper faintly.

*I Hope You Bury This Deep In Your Light.
It Carries On. It Never Dies.
From The Scars And The Secrets You Hide,
I'll Burn Them All, And Your Ghosts Inside.*

So, Tell Me Now, What Do You Stand For?

She stared blankly at her bland ceiling through the clear visor as it shut down. Allowing her to slowly gain her senses back and focus once again. Seeing the lights dim lowly through the

darkness as she got out of bed. Still smiling from the night, and lightly blushing from the thought of him. Let alone, what he did...

The Low IV light was still blinking orange, demanding to be changed before starting up another session. But before she headed out to prepare for tomorrow's use, Trisha wanted to check a few things online. Starting up her desktop, and checking a few things on the forums, she came across a Thread: "Celebration Pet?" It got her curious enough to read it.

SilverThorn

During this evening's firework display, I noticed something between the roofs of buildings. At first, I thought they were decorations for the Festival, but zooming in with my camera mode, it actually looked like a tamer and some kind of new pet. Is there any GM that can confirm this? I would love to have one for my Tamer! =)

Below was a Screenshot Attachment of... Her. Sarious and Endzeit, hanging on the hammock while fireworks covered the skies. The image was breathtaking, but a bit worrisome. Making her wonder if the dragon's discovery would cause him to be investigated or even...

The woman shook the thought out of her head. If the system itself recognizes him to give him an entire skill list, then odds are he won't be lost to her. There was something... Resilient about him anyway. (He'll be fine.) She convinced herself. But this picture...

She saved it on her desktop, looking at the empty space above her bed, she walked up and stood on it. Tapping on the ceiling and getting another HUD. Selecting the storage device on her computer, she found the picture of them on the hammock and set it to display over her sleeping area. Even after getting everything ready for the night, and shutting off her lights, the picture still glowed through the darkness. Allowing her to fall asleep to one of the most positive, memorable nights of her life.