

Light Escapes - Sky

By Dexdor

Chapter 1

There was an eerie stillness within the office hallways. The man swore there was several people around and about half an hour ago, but they all seemed to have disappeared ominously. Checking his watch, it was past 7:30pm. Probably many of them went home to their families or second jobs.

It didn't make this trip to the head office any easier. By the sound of his boss' tone, something was definitely up for Nathan. He half worried that it was his job on the line. As he passed another window in the hall, he stopped to collect himself, and exhale his worries. Looking out in the busy streets of the city in the pouring rain, it seemed to not affect people as it used to. No more running for cover, no more worrying about getting wet or a cold. This species has come a long ways, really.

A heavy wind sprayed against the window, making him almost step back from it and carry on. Reaching The rather thick door in the middle of a long hallway, the man sighed and waited a moment before knocking. "Yes?" A deep voice asked a bit harshly, and Nathan swallowed, slowly opening the door and peeking through.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" The older man motioned him to come in, and he did. A few steps in while closing the door, a strange presence was felt behind him. Almost spooked by the third man in the room standing against the wall. Mostly dressed in dark clothing not part of the dress code.

"Mr. Lenson, this is Michael Owelns."

"Oh, hey." The younger man said nervously, but the black one barely looked at him.

"Nathan, have you made any progress within the Smaug issue lately?" The younger one studied his boss for a moment. Trying not to stare at the odd comb over that he was desperately trying to hide.

"Not much, no. He hides his traces rather well, but-"

"That's enough then. I want you to make copies of your information on the subject and give them to Owelns."

"Sir?" Nathan looked back and forth between the two. "Are you sure? I thought you didn't want me to tell anyone about this. It was only supposed to be between us-"

"And it will still be between us three." The rounder boss rose from his chair, hearing the old thing painfully creak with the sudden relief. "Mr. Owelns... He's a Bounty Hunter of sorts. I've hired him to put an end to this problem." Another glance at the black suited man. "I've asked him to come to you, this lizard's discoverer, and you will aid him in its capture, or deletion."

"Sir? It's a dragon-"

"It doesn't have any wings, so it's not a dragon."

"But eastern dragons-"

"Nathan." The younger one was quiet. "Smaug needs to be stopped. It's been spotted too often, and made quite a name for itself over the forums already. The players are starting to complain-"

"The Players always complain." The dark man finally spoke up. A rather raspy, dry voice that actually sounded like a villain from some comic-book movie. "Even if it's about the smallest things, they will always whine about everything. That's how they are, and how they will always be."

"Sir..." The younger one sighed. "He hasn't hurt anyone-"

"Yet." Another raspy reply.

"Owelns has a point, Nathan. And it has broken the Terms-"

"Terms that a Player accepts." Another breath. "He's not a player, Sir."

"It has to be a player-"

"He hasn't logged out even once, not even during server maintenance. His coding is identical to a Tamer's pet within Skyline, and he's even owned by a player-"

"Nathan-"

"Not to mention, Smaug is a rather terrible name for him. Smaug was a Wyvern, and this one is more of-"

"Mr. Lenson. Enough." The young one lowered his head. "I asked for your information, not your opinion. This thing, be it a player or some false coding error needs to be corrected, needs to be removed from the system. And that's what Owelns does. He's licensed with RX-Tech, and has permission to edit the code to his will until Smaug is dealt with. Understood?"

The young man swallowed and sighed through his nose. "...Yes Sir." He said, almost in defeat. But something was still off about this whole thing, like there was some type of information that was being hidden from him. Not to mention, something else to do with Smaug. The dragon was different, yes, but Nathan was searching for it more to study it, rather than remove it. There was this strange feeling that he was meant to protect it, not execute it.

With another sigh, he turned to leave the room. Taking another glance at the Bounty Hunter, he exhaled. "Come with me."

It was the slight breeze gliding through the entire house that lead it to her. The sun, half greeting her gently and telling the woman that it was morning. They did it right not to make it glare harshly and burn a player's eyeballs. Let alone become an inconvenience while fighting. Yet, it kept that glowing warmth that was always comforting, at least to her.

That warmth. It was seeping through the light sheets that went over their bed. What she thought was passing through the comforter, she began to realize that the comforter was missing when she started moving and stretching a bit. Finally opening her eyes to the beautiful landscape they often observed. The grassy meadows that seemed to stretch on, until finally transforming into a thick forest. This place was paradise.

Still covering herself with the sheets, she looked at the edge of the bed and seen a very little bit of the large blanket grasping to hold on. It was always her instinct while she was sleeping to kick them off, especially when she got too hot during the nights. Rarely happened during the winter seasons, but in the summer... At least lately, she was always holding on to someone.

A deep breath, and she could smell them again. Getting her stomach

to crave those waffles. And noticing the red one finally out of his bed, she knew where he was. It was no surprise really. Most males tend to want a large Wreck room to place all their hobbies and stuff inside. The dragon, on the other hand, wanted a kitchen. A huge kitchen. "Well, if you start helping me save for it, you might get it." She recalled the conversation she had when he was smaller.

"Save for it how?" Still amused how he curls his neck when he's half insulted. Putting a smile on her face as she got up.

"By not eating so much. Seriously-"

"Sariously-" He tossed his muzzle high, only to get playfully shoved off the table by her and land on the cushion seat with a yelp.

"Seriously, if you cut back to half of what you eat for one week, you'll have enough for your kitchen." She said, writing down on a small notepad in her HUD [Heads Up Display], a large smirk on her face when she heard him groan. "It's a short time pain for a lifelong pleasure, providing you don't burn down the house on your first day."

Though she was joking about it, he did actually light the stove on fire cooking something. It was supposed to be a surprise for her, but it was completely unidentifiable by the time it was finished. Nevertheless, the house still stood, the kitchen still survived, and he was getting much better at it.

Passing through the well, sun-lit rooms, the woman came to the kitchen. Still in her naked figure that she's grown to love over the past couple of weeks. Even if it was rather identical to her original body, she thought in the end... That someone needed to love it before she herself could learn to. And that someone... Was juggling several pancakes between two frying pans over the stove. "Awake are you?" He asked, completely concentrated in his work. "Quick, grab the maple syrup and squirt a bit in the pans."

She shook her head, but grabbed the bottle anyway. Carefully squirting a little bit in each one, and bracing herself when a pancake landed in the flat pan. Getting a little bit of the syrup to spray everywhere, and start making a bit of a mess. After a bit more flipping, the dragon landed each one in an even stack within each pan. Placing it over two already served plates across the table and finally turning off the stove. "Showoff."

He bowed to her anyways, throwing the pans in the sink. "You know you like it."

"The show is nice, but the mess you make isn't." He tossed his snout.

"Please, I'll just lick it clean afterword. Like I usually do." The red one

opened a chair for her on the table.

"And about the mess on me?" She smirked, seeing him double take and finally noticed the woman was bare. He purred a bit, coming closer to her.

"Then I'll just have to lick that off too." He touched noses with her in a feral-like kiss. Giving her a full one afterword, while holding her. "But first, you should eat. I don't want to have to lick you clean twice today."

She playfully shoved him, taking the seat while he took the one across on the table. Staring out the window for a moment before and seeing the incomplete deck outside. It's taking a while for the carpenters to complete it, but not that they minded. Overall, the only thing it's really missing is the railing right now, then the swing will be next on the list. "How did I do?"

"Hmm?" The woman broke out of thought. Seeing the golden eyed dragon smiling at her told her what he was thinking of. Chuckling a bit and once again shaking her head, Sarious sighed. "Better. But it has room for improvement." It made the red one chuckle. "You're the only person in the entire world that actually wants to learn Innuendo."

"Only because it brings out the better in you." A sweet thing to say. Though he was still getting used to the idea of love, Endzeit was doing it rather well. At least for not having a good role model for such a thing. "How are the Dragontails?"

"The what?" She seen him take a bite out of his pancake, then she looked down at hers. Seeing a rather large stripe circling around towards the center of the cake. Flaring at the end, kinda like his did with the mane. "Oh, I never noticed that." She took a bite and moaned at the thick mix of maple and caramel, with a hint of vanilla. "That is wonderful, and strangely still warm. You are getting much better at this though."

"Awwh, no blushing?" He half whimpered, taking another bite and looking down at his breakfast. "Perhaps Tail isn't a good of a pun." She looked at him a little strangely, then shook her head.

"I never really considered it to be one, but..."

"I just remember reading some players wanting some... Tail. Thought maybe it was innuendo." A slight whimper from her got the dragon to start chuckling. "Maybe it does work then."

"Well, if you put it that way..." She sighed, feeling her face turn a little red. It made Endzeit smile, but suddenly stick his ears up. Soon after, a knock on the door, and Sarious immediately covered herself with her arms.

"Go around the back." The red one whispered, half trying to cover her from the window, and she bolted to the back hall, around the bathing room. "Just a moment." He called to the front door, seeing if she made it out alright, then opened it.

"Morning Sir." An NPC tilted his hat at the dragon.

"Good morning. Sorry, I was just finishing up breakfast." He glanced towards the kitchen, trying to see if the woman found some spare clothes. Instead, heard the bathtub running. "Sarious is just taking a bath, you guys got here a little early."

"We wanted a head start on today, since we're almost done with your deck." The red one nodded. Seeing a few more NPCs unload a bit from a strange looking wagon.

"That's alright. Feel free to start anytime, and call for us if you have any questions."

"Will do." Another tilt of the man's hat, and Endzeit closed the door. Sighing in relief.

Sarious took a few tests of the water with her foot before fully stepping inside. Almost hissing at the heated water, but then let out a relaxing sigh. Hearing the dragon's claws hit the new hardwood floor while heading to the bathing room got her to chuckle a bit out loud. "That was kinda close." She said, hearing him respond the same way.

"Yes. I'm not sure what we would be in for if they actually spotted you... Altered, I guess?" He opened the door, her plate of pancakes in hand while she made a gesture of affection towards him. Handing her the plate and a fork. "But we should be okay for the most part. Might want to find you a robe to wear or something in the future."

"I just..." She took a bite. "For the first time in like ever, I'm just comfortable with walking around like this. Everywhere before was just so crowded and you'd be embarrassed with walking around in your undergarments."

"But here? In the middle of nowhere?"

"Quite literally." They chuckled, hearing the hammering and orders from the carpenters outside. "I guess it's just so... Relieving. I can see why you never liked wearing pants."

"Pants are foolish."

"Too bad, you're still wearing them outside." He grumbled playfully at her. "It's just finally nice not having to worry so much about what other people think of you." She took a few bites, half noticing a bit of a sad look on his muzzle from the large mirror.

"So... You don't miss it?" There was a bit of pain in her eyes.

"...I miss a few things. Microwaves for one." She gestured the slightly cold pancakes and he gave her a very puzzled look. Chuckling and loving the way his ears perked up when he was curious. "It's like a small stove that heats things up quickly. Without the use of fire."

"Hmm."

"And I miss some music, but..." Another sigh. "I don't miss the stress, the loneliness..." He nodded. Giving her another nuzzle and a lick. "I'm happy with this decision. More than I ever thought I could be."

"I suppose I'm content with that, then." He teased. "I'll go clean up the kitchen a bit. Shout if you need anything."

"Thank you." She gave him a little kiss on the muzzle, and then he went off. Another sigh of relaxation, and she took another bite.

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The loud crash echoed throughout the fields, sending the mantis far off into the distance and almost turning into a star in the night sky. The fields rained with the red pixels of those who got in the way of the massive attack. Raising herself from the tall grass, Sarios scouted for the small dragon in the storm. Finally spotting him flying around in circles and flips before coming to her. "Having fun?"

"It's so vigorating!" He purred, snuggling up to her in affection. "I wish you could feel the rush of it."

"I'm glad you like yours." She placed her hand over him, and he purred louder. Leaning into it and making the woman smile. She loved that sound he made, much better than the yelp and whimpers. However, there was still a bit of sadness in her voice, making him half whimper in question. "I just can't understand mine."

"It can't be that hard." He tossed his snout. "Pull it up."

"It's written in a riddle or something." She moved her hand across, bringing up the light blue menu, and went to her skills. "Right here. The Red."

Endzeit looked at it with perked ears and tilted his head. "Fight Or Be Hollow, Just Like Them? Sounds like a reference to something. Hmm..." I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about.

"Did you say something?" Sarious asked, getting the red one to look at her and faintly shake his head. Once again, she just sighed. "My level 60 ability just seems useless. Yours is gamebreaking, but..."

"Don't say that just yet. We just need to figure out how it works, is all." He nuzzled her. "I have a few ideas, let's just play around with them first."

"...Alright." She smiled at him. "But first, let's get some food. No burning down the kitchen on our second day in the house though." He overdramatically tossed his snout, and she chuckled.

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A notification noise woke her up in the tub, just now realizing that she fell asleep in it. At least in the digital world, it always seemed to stay warm. Half grunting awake, she tapped the notification, and seen a rewards screen. The x30 Mantis Blades told her what the dragon was doing while she was resting, making her smile and get up. Also noticing the plate had disappeared into pixels a long time ago.

The air still felt a little cool to her, which only made sense. Grabbing the towel to dry herself off, she stopped in front of the large mirror, almost examining her body. Still amazed at how the visor picked up every little detail that night. Every single spot, pattern, and texture on her nipples was just like before. It was hard to tell that this wasn't the real world any longer.

The Real World. It was a term that she was getting irritated at, just like Endzeit did. It made no sense to claim that one was real, and the rest were fake. The thought of it actually half made her angry and somewhat depressed. Still thinking of the unhappiness she went through for nearly twenty years before finally leaving that place. Honestly, it's a wonder that this transfer actually worked; to download her entire consciousness onto the server and let it remain there. As long as the server was up and running, she could live her life. When it went down for Maintenance or upkeep, it was like the entire world just paused. Or she fell asleep for a few hours.

Still, such a thing was illegal. It was even on the Terms of Use, that it was bannable if the act was caught. Or if eventually found, let alone accused. And if they ever caught her, odds are it would end her life. A deep sigh was broken by another UI [User Interface] pop up. Even when he wasn't meaning to, the red one still put a smile on her face.

Sarious put her gear and outfit back on, and went outside. Greeting the NPCs and commenting on the great job they were doing. Though she's gotten used to half faking it, this one was actually sincere. The railing was coming along just fine, the deck was making its finishing touches. The only thing left was the swing where a very large empty spot was between windows of the house. And even that was to be planned very soon. They had the funds, it was more or less taking a trip into the city inbetween their vacation.

Vacation. The word sounded funny to her, being a vacation within a vacation. But she told Dalton that the two wanted some time off, a few days to get everything ready for the house. As much as the knight offered a room within the Faction's Hall, the scary castle was a little too real looking for her tastes. Fun to visit for the sake of fun, but to live there would probably give her nightmares. Maybe getting her to punch a hole in the wall or two from getting spooked.

The thought of it made her chuckle a bit, walking around the house and heading towards one of the more empty fields. If it was mostly empty, that usually meant the dragon was playing around in it. The influence fell heavily on him when it came to foolish stunts like what Dalton taught the two, but in the end; he was right. It was a much more interesting way of playing the game, doing tasks, but it was also more dangerous. Especially on the later areas. It worried her a bit that something could go wrong, and it could so easily. As long as her group was cautious about the risks, they would be fine.

Finally spotting Endzeit in the fields, he was playing around with one of the Grand Mantis'. However, he was attacking it from several feet away. Still the same unarmed style of combat he usually did, but the distance was astounding. After the creature shattered, another UI gave her the rewards. "How are you doing that?" She called out to him, hearing the red one purr a bit out of curiosity and then float towards her.

"Enjoy your bath?" He asked as he came around her.

"It was nice. Convenient that the water doesn't get cold here." He snorted at the response.

"Why the H would it get cold?" She giggled at his expression, but it soon turned against her in the form of a few licks. "Your level 60 ability is amazing, by the way."

"The Red thing?" He nodded, pulling her back and letting the woman sit on his lap. "You figured it out?"

"Yeah, I found a way to kinda play around with your fighting skills and style."

"How do you like it?" A long snout toss made her chuckle. "I take it you loved it."

"You have to be waaaaaaay too patient with your skills. It's all about countering and manipulation. I'd rather just run in-"

"Oh, I know you would-"

"And hit something hard in the face." He exhaled, smiling at Sarious' laughter. "But I did learn a few things about it. Your 'Red' description still doesn't make alot of sense to me, but I kinda found out how to use it."

"Spill it out already."

"Really? No bribing? No 'Good job Endzeit! You deserve dinner this week-' Ow." He whimpered at the clamp on his ear. "Okay-okay-okay. Mercy, you." He gave her a lick. "It's like... The ability to shape your attacks a bit. Almost like extending a part of your energy out to create different forms of damage. You can cut enemies with very small cuts, like a rapier or a knife, or you can change it into heavy chops like that of an axe. You can even just make the attack heavier or more dense, like a hammer."

"So it's like making my body more of a weapon?"

"In a way, but it's more of making your body in a versatile weapon. You're like a jackknife. Being able to change on the fly with enough practice."

"Then how were you able to keep your distance? Can you actually extend it like that?"

"More than that, you can change the entire shape of it too. If you want to punch a giant in the face, you can shape the Red to be big enough to punch a giant in the face. Just, the bigger the shape-"

"The more stamina it's going to take. Meaning, I can keep my distance, but not forever." She muttered, feeling the dragon nudge her again.

"As long as we just work on your Stamina Mastery a bit, you should be fine. Perhaps even find a way to restore your Stamina bar quicker during combat." She nodded, still looking at her skills. "But the important thing is that we found out-"

"You found out." She half muttered a bit sadly, getting the red one to nudge and lick her a few times until she showed a smile.

"You would have eventually. You just take too long in the bathing room." A small embow shove from the woman. "Sariouly, what do you do in there that takes so long?"

"Stop talking." She laughed at him, trying to avoid the subject. "What did you mean earlier, about playing around with my abilities?"

"The same way I use your cooking skill, which is near maxed, by the way."

"I expected that." She chuckled.

"But I can play around with your skills as well, and you can try mine out for a while if you like."

"Is that even the game's rules?"

"It doesn't say you can't." He teased, pulling up an HUD and typing in front of her. "This will probably sting."

"As usual-" She grunted for a few moments. "You'd think I'd get used to that by now."

"Please, with all the editing I do with my data, you never get used to it."

"It's a wonder you haven't become a masochist."

"I don't take pleasure in the pain of the alteration, but I do like the outcomes... Sometimes."

"Name one time you didn't like it."

"When you wanted me to increase the capacity of my... Dragon balls." He whispered, after looking towards the carpenters quickly. The statement got the woman to laugh while trying to keep quiet. "Seriously, 24x was waaaay too much. Where did such an idea come from?"

"Shhh!" She tapped him on the nose. "I just... Wanted to feel it."

"Feel like you wanted to play with a hose?" He grumbled.

"More like a dragon." Sarious said a bit quietly, stroking his tail as it came closer to her and fluttered a bit. "But seriously, you can do this-Ow!" Another harsh sting.

"All done." The dragon smiled. "Go play, you know how I roll."

"I know how you roll?" She laughed at the old expression. "Sometimes, I swear you're so full of cheese."

"What are you talking about? We had pancakes his morning." He curled his neck, once again getting the woman to laugh and shake her head.

Chapter 2

A large sigh of relief filled the restaurant, as the red dragon relaxed in the booth's chair. "Is there anything better than brunch?" He purred, almost being able to see the woman's hair faintly move back and forth.

"Not having to pay for it." She muttered, seeing the Billing UI appear. Sighing, she accepted the charges.

"Incorrect. The answer is every meal of the day, including brunch." Endzeit said, rolling on his back and laying out on the cushion.

"Well, you're working that brunch off after we get a swing." The dragon grumbled a bit, but didn't argue past that. "Are you going to finish that Mary?"

He made a surprising noise in question, raising up to see one of his glasses still about a third full. "How did I not finish that?" He tilted his head. Getting up on the table to grab the straw out of the glass, it shattered into blue pixels. As did the rest of the dishes, and leaving the red one to flomp on the table. Whimpering at both the fall, and the lost drink.

"Too bad. Let's get going."

"I still can't believe that. I've never missed a crumb on any other meal." He climbed on her shoulder as she shrugged. "I blame you."

"Me?" She questioned, a bit harshly.

"Yes. You're spoiling me to the point where I'm losing my respect for food." He snorted, seeing the woman cross her arms and give him a glare. "You better pay attention to where you're going."

"You probably shouldn't be playing the blame game. Not if you ever want to eat again."

"That threat won't work anymore. We have a kitchen now."

"That can be demolished quite easily." She playfully threatened him, getting Endzeit to hiss at her.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wanna try me? I mean, it came out of your pay. I could always reduce your food bills for another few weeks before getting it all replaced-" Sarius bumped into a couple of players while exiting the door. "Sorry." She apologized.

"Told you to watch where you were going." The dragon snorted again.

"It's alright." Another woman said, then ended up studying Sarius. "Oh, you're in Draconica?"

The question almost shocked Sarius, getting her to look at the silver haired woman for a moment. "Y-yes." She managed to get out, now seeing the Faction Tag under the two other women's name read Draconica as well. "Oh, I didn't even notice you..." The Silver one raised a hand.

"It's alright. Me and my husband don't have time to play too much." She gestured the other woman, then covered her mouth while the Red headed one rolled her eyes, a bit oddly as well. "Oops."

"Great job, Silverthorn. It's bad enough that you got me to play as a female in this, the fun of it was to be undetected." She grumbled, crossing her arms and getting the Silver one to giggle.

"Sorry, Sire."

"Wait, you're a guy?" Sarius asked the Red woman. "How? I know I could alter a few things in the Character Creation of Skyline, but never seen a Gender option."

She almost whimpered at the question, trying to cover her eyes. "We had to get some special equipment from the Company itself. During the meeting with one of their devs, I asked if it was possible to play as a Female instead."

"I only thought you wanted to play one yourself, not drag me into it." Sire grumbled, still slightly embarrassed and getting the other three to chuckle.

"It's no fun like that. Though, it would be like old times." Silverthorn thought out loud a bit.

"And already this is getting a little weird." Endzeit muttered, getting a surprised look from the two.

"Oh, it does talk."

"I swear I heard it say something before." Sire said, looking closer at the dragon.

"Yes, this is my Companion: Endzeit. He tends to do the talking 'Trick' alot."

"I also have another trick to make food disappear. Want to see it?" He tried to lean closer to the other two, but got tapped on the nose. Making him whimper and hiss at the glove.

"You just ate, and you're fine for a few hours. Days even, with that bill." Another whimper.

"Too bad, we were just going in for some refreshments before heading out. You sure you don't want to join us?"

"It's fine, Silverthorn. I apparently spoil him enough as it is."

"I never said that to be a bad thing."

"Yes. Yes you did. You even blamed me for it like three minutes ago, remember?"

"I recall no such thing." He snorted, getting the couple to chuckle.

"We won't keep you, uh..."

"Sarious." She shook the two's hand.

"Silverthorn, and Sire. We tend to be away for nearly a year at a time, and only play for maybe a few weeks. It's a wonder Dalton hasn't kicked us out, but..."

"But what?"

"We used to play with him." Sire added in. "We started out just a bit before he did, and helped him on his feet here and there."

"It's too bad we couldn't watch him grow. He's doing alright now, I hope."

"Yes, he's been helping everyone out a bit. We recently just got to the raids a few weeks ago."

"That's nice. Are they hard?"

"Kinda. It really requires a lot of teamwork and effort. And some of them are Babysitting Missions [Tasks or Quests that have you protect an NPC or object from dangers. These can also be called Escort Missions.]. Those can be irritating and stressful. It's hard enough to keep your team alive, to keep them alive as well..."

"Yeah, I can imagine..." Silverthorn trailed off, looking a bit strangely at something behind Sarious. When turning around, she was almost stuttered at a rather large man. A mane of both long fabric and spikes seemed to circle out from his back and made him look much bigger than the black and dark gold armor seemed to already.

"...That's an interesting pet you have there." He said in a rather dark voice, the visor keeping most of his face hidden. He stared at the dragon for several moments, and the Red one didn't take his eye off him. A thick aura of caution came over the two, making both Sarious and Endzeit's expressions cross.

"...Yes." She finally answered. "I think he was an event pet from a long while back. I found him in the shelter."

"Is that so..." He muttered. Once again examining the two people before walking forward. Almost pushing the other women out of the way, and Sire tried to shield Silverthorn. The four kept quiet until the man turned a corner before relaxing a bit.

"What was that about?" Sire asked. Getting Sarious to look at Endzeit for an answer.

"...That wasn't a player." He muttered, a bit quietly.

"A mod? [Game Moderator. Think Supervisor]" Sarious asked him, but the dragon remained quiet.

"It's alright. We best be going soon though. But um..." Silverthorn started, getting the attention of the other two. "We're heading out to get some Tasks done. Are you doing anything today?"

"Just shopping for a Swing. Want some backup?"

"Yeah, we were looking at the MOTD [Message Of The Day: A small message board for the Guilds or Factions to have for announcements. Usually Mission times, Raid schedules, or other events], and we heard of some kind of player infection going on." The two sighed a bit, and nodded slowly. "So it is...?"

"We spotted it a few weeks ago. We call them Grudges, but everyone has different terms for them nowadays. Some even claiming they're Zombies."

"Which isn't terribly far off." The dragon muttered.

"Either way, it told us not to really explore alone. Since we haven't played for a while...?"

"We can come with, don't worry. I have a few things I want to play around with anyway."

"Sounds great, meet back here in an hour?" The Silver one asked.

"Should be enough time for our Swing. We'll see you then."

The final blow was massive. Echoing through the fields far into the distance and almost cracking the digital sky. She even swore it moved a few clouds, but it could've been the wolf as it acted like a projectile. The after effect was very different too. The feeling of almost a broken bone in the limb, but without the pain. Sarious was thankful for the lack of it, but was almost shocked at the adrenaline rush the attack gave. "Fun, isn't it?" Endzeit asked her, as she staggered to a nearby large rock in the fields.

"That felt... Amazing...!" She breathed heavily, and he chuckled at her. Then the two laughed at the expression of the Silver and Red women.

"That was..."

"Impressive." Silverthorn finished. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just... Give me about five minutes."

"It's a defect to Violent Rhythm, decommissions you for a few minutes after the attack." The red dragon informed them. "Making you unable to enter or act in combat. Even when trying to help others via items."

"But, oh... The numbers." They chuckled again. "I can see why you're exhausted after this though." He just snorted at her.

"That's also all of my Tasks complete too. How about you, Sire?"

"Yep. Much quicker when you don't really have to share the enemies. How did you even find this place?"

"Dalton, actually. He took me here when I was your level a few weeks ago."

"And he also taught us how to have fun with the enemies." The dragon almost chirped.

"He calls it fun." The silver one lowered her head.

"It was kinda fun." Sire said.

"Males..." Sarious and Silverthorn said, shaking their heads and getting their partners to half glare at them.

"Don't you start." The red woman nudged her. "It's bad enough you tattled on my secret, don't make me tattle on yours."

"Fiiiine." Another rather strange eyeroll, it half reminded Sarious of the way Endzeit does his. "But you owe me once we get out. New record."

"Oh course." Sire whimpered. Nudging her to lean against the rock with the others. "Your lands are beautiful."

"They remind me of ours back in our first home."

"They're not really our lands. But..." Sarious said a bit awkwardly. "We only brought the rights to put a house on it."

"I can see why though. To live out here every day? Must be nice."

"It's like living in a vacation." Endzeit added. Leaning against Sarious' neck and getting pet by the woman.

"...For a long time after we got this, I almost wanted to stop playing the game." It got the attention of the three. "I mean, like... Stop advancing forward."

"Is that why you asked for a vacation from the raids?" She nodded at the dragon.

"What do you mean exactly?" Sire asked, getting a comfortable embrace with the Silver one.

"I mean... Have you ever wanted to just stop because you're happy where you are?" The others were a bit quiet, but there was a look in the other couple's eyes that said Yes. "You don't really feel the need to advance, gain levels, or more abilities. You don't need more money-"

"You can never have enough food. Don't even go there." The dragon grumbled, getting a playful shove from her. "And food cost money."

"But I mean... Right now, the game gives me everything I ever wanted. I don't really see the point of searching for more. To go past this." Sarious was quiet for a bit.

"I know where you're coming from, but..." The Silver woman started, looking at the red haired one.

"Nothing stays the same, Sarious. Clinging onto a moment will only make you miss more. It's nice to appreciate what you have, and not be greedy past that, but... Right now you might not want anything. However, it's better to prepare for when you do. You never know when you might have to defend your possessions... Your home... Or even your loved ones from those who want more."

"That makes sense..." She muttered in return, almost a bit sadly.

"Trust me, you'll be thankful later on that you've done everything you've possibly could to protect others. Eventually you'll get a test that will take everything you have to complete."

"Sire..." Silverthorn playfully scolded her, getting a strange look from Sarious. As the silver one motioned to let it go, she spotted Endzeit looking off into the woods.

"...Get into the house." He whispered at them, getting a concerned look from all of them. "Quickly, but very quietly." And he flew towards it. Almost scouting from the roof. The women looked at each other, but followed his advice. Climbing over the new railing of the deck and making their way into the door. Closing it once the small one flew in, and hearing the gibberish begin howling from the forest.

As they all stayed low, they tried looking out the windows carefully. "I really wish we got those curtains now." Sarious whimpered, starting to see a few Grudges come out of the woods.

"Away from the windows." Endzeit demanded. "Into the Bathing room, they can't sense you in there."

"What are those things?"

"They're the Grudges. Players that were infected by something that we're unsure of."

"It's a Wraith, I know that. But which one, I'm not sure." The dragon stated, closing the door and keeping the lights off. "They shouldn't bother the house if they didn't detect anyone inside."

"What's a Herd doing all the way out here though?" The dragon shrugged at Sarious.

"I thought they were like level 65 enemies." Sire once again held the silver one, almost protecting her.

"That's where we first seen them, but..."

"...They're level 75." The dragon said a bit grimly, staring through the wall as they followed the mad voices of the herd. "...And a hundred and thirty-seven of them."

"That's more than most raids."

"Where are they going?" Silverthorn questioned, seeing the dragon look towards a direction.

"...They're heading for the city."

Chapter 3

The stress was elevating around the office. Or perhaps it was just in his head. Nathan heard of these Bounty Hunters before, they tend to do alot more damage than good for the systems. Often making rash decisions to complete their goal, things that would often create ripples of bugs throughout the entire server. The was an event about a year ago, a rival company having

some issues with hackers and viruses getting out of hand to the point where they called in a few of these guys to deal with them. The job was done, yes, but at a horrible cost. The damage done to the system kept the servers for the game down for nearly four months, losing nearly all of their playerbase and crippling the company.

It would make sense why he was so stressed right now. There was something just wrong with giving this "Owlens" every bit of information Nathan has discovered about Smaug. Perhaps it was the idea of the death of the dragon that got him to think this way. Handing over the data was like Nathan putting a spear into the creature's heart himself.

It's no wonder he felt this way. Ever since he started to observe and collect data on him was more like a fun scavenger hunt, or bird watching. He was never commanded to "Remove On Sight", but just to find traces of everything the creature interacted with. A clear description of Smaug. And though Nathan was able to find traces of contacted items and NPCs, it was actually the playerbase that gave them all a clear photo over a month ago. When their first boss left the company, and was replaced.

That night changed everything. There was traces of faint alterations within Skyline, but nothing like recently. And while Nathan did keep good track of what this dragon did within the system, these alterations... They did not really harm the game. A faint few changes to the areas around him, or even to Smaug himself. But it seemed to be more making a habitat rather than to control or manipulate the system to its own will, or its programmers... At least for now.

And that last part is why Nathan's boss probably hired this Bounty Hunter. For all they knew, Smaug could be the very end of the system, and just taking his time. To them, the dragon was a pest. Something living within a work of art that everyone slaved to get up and running, while to Nathan...

The man sighed. Leaning back into his chair and covering his eyes. Putting a bit of pressure and feeling for his ethmoid. The faint ding of a new message made him half grumble, waiting a few moments before checking it. Odds are it was just something foolish one of his work buddies sent him. With a heavy sigh, he checked it and started reading. "...They're doing what!?" He whispered, getting up from his desk and bolting for the door.

A heavy kick to the head made the creature squeal, still expelling it's

madness while jerking and flailing its arms and legs at Sarious. It honestly reminded her of fighting someone that was drunk, managing to get in a few scrapes and kicks in places she wouldn't expect. And typical of lazy design, they just increased the damage drastically. Feeling her health drop down to about 40%, but soon restored the current amount. "Thanks, Silverthorn." She grunted.

"I got you." She responded, keeping her distance from the creature. Seeing Endzeit come up from behind it, he slipped in and grabbed it's waist. Throwing it backward in a suplex and keeping it pinned for Sarious to stomp on its head heavily. Shattering the creature into red pixels and giving everyone a bit of relief.

These things were getting harder and more aggressive to the point where she felt like this was going nowhere. Only picking off a few strays from the back of the herd, and hearing the battle go on within the city's walls was almost demoralizing. "I wonder how they're doing." Sire muttered, getting Sarious to see the same look on everyone else's faces. One of almost defeat.

"I can't imagine well. The players were completely unprepared for this attack." Silverthorn said.

"The NPC guards are holding up rather well though. They're half designed for situations like this." The dragon stated, getting the team to look at him. "PKers [Player Killers], mostly. They'll go after anyone with a red name, even in safe zones."

"So they can probably survive this."

"But can only engage one enemy at a time. Insane health regen and attack power though. They're designed specifically to defend the city walls against all odds. But..."

"The numbers of these Grudges are overwhelming. Though I have gone up like six levels." Sire shrugged. "I just don't know if what we're doing is helping any." She grumbled, getting rather close to a growl like the dragon would normally do.

Sarious sighed, pondering a bit. Then got a faint idea. "Hold on." She went through her HUD and into her Contacts. "...Dalton? Can you hear me?"

"A little in the middle of something." He grunted over a 'Speaker-like Phone'. Several slashing noises and creatures hissing on his side told everyone that he was in combat. "But talk to me, what's up Sarious?"

"I'm here with Endzeit, Sire, and Silverthorn."

"Hey guys, it's been a while."

"Hi Dalton." The silver one greeted rather cheerfully.

"Dalton, we have a bit of a situation down at La."

"La?"

"I think it's pronounced as L A, Sire." Another strange eye roll from the red woman, grumbling something about humans and their stupid names. Getting Silverthorn to chuckle and lick her.

"Dalton, the Grudges are attacking the city. A herd of about a hundred and twenty seven now. We got behind them, and have been trying to pick off a few strays."

"LA? That's only a level thirty five zone, Sarious. You should be able to take on more than a few-"

"They're level 75." The dragon said a bit thickly, hearing the man on the other side stop.

"Are you serious, Endzeit?"

"Sariouly Serious." A glare from the woman.

"That's pretty serious." He half joked. "I can launch an order to the guild to get everyone's butts down there, but..."

"Do you have any Server Megaphones? [An item that allows you to send a message to everyone currently on the server]"

"I have a spare, yes. I'll use it when I get down to Lost Arch."

"I don't know how much longer the city is going to last. The guards are holding up, but-" Sarious stopped at Endzeit's curse. "What's wrong?"

"...There's another herd coming, from the other gates. And I think a third on their way from the north." He said, looking at his HUD. "...This was planned."

"By the devs? Without any event announcement? Why?" Sarious asked, just getting a concerned look on Endzeit's face.

"Sarious? The teleporter to LA is busted, I'm going to have to ride from the east city. I'll try to confirm Endzeit's data. I'll have to fight my way through the city in order to catch up to you guys."

"Just be careful, Dalton. What do you want us to do?"

"Just keep Pulling* and take out what you can. I know Silver and Sire are not high enough level for these things yet-"

**Pulling - A strategy used to take a specific target, or a small group, away from a much larger group to get an advantage. Usually this advantage is environmental (as in terrain, or even an ambush), or just to get a flank on the enemy.*

"They've been more than helpful." Sarious' words put a smile on the other two women's faces. "But okay, I'll do what I can to protect them."

"I'm counting on you. Dalton out." He ended the call, and everyone felt a bit of an uplift in spirit. Though one thing still worried Sire a bit.

"...They took out the teleporter." She said, looking at the dragon.

"...It is definitely organized." The group faintly nodded.

"Perhaps then the mastermind behind this corruption will show themselves today." Silverthorn said, moving forward. "I'll see if I can pull another one."

"We're right behind you."

"Everyone. LA is under attack by Grudges, apparently getting two more waves of at least a hundred coming from the east and north. We need every player that can get there and help out. This was an unannounced event, and these things are at level 75. Engage with caution, and Draconica: I better see your asses in the fray."

The announcement made the group chuckle as they approached the rear lines. With Silverthorn in the lead, she swung the small mace at a distance, releasing a small orb-like projectile that hit a stray Grudge. Irking the creature with the pathetic amount of damage, but alerting another one with its hiss. As the two came forth with their strange movements and jerks, they leaned forward and shot a torrent of flame at the silver one. Though she crouched a bit, Sire came in front of her and protected them both with a large tower shield.

As the flames divided around the two and faded away, the red haired one dashed between the Grudges. Sliding to a stop, then bashing the left one with the shield while kicking the other. Though the damage was very low due

to the level difference, the force remained. Separating them to make the fight easier, Sire tripped the left one with her foot while blocking a scrape from the right Grudge. Quickly bashing it as a counter attack, then a full rotation for a heavier slam to shove it down.

This is where Sarius and Endzeit had openings, each taking one as Silverthorn casted a protection spell on them. Restoring any wounds they received quickly, and always keeping her own small shield ready. When this small pull was done, they did another.

Several minutes went on, and the sounds of other players joining the battles within the city began to raise. "There's no doubt that Dalton and the others are inside that." Sire said. Overlooking the fight at a distance, but not really able to see past the large walls of the city. "And there's not many strays left." She and Silverthorn looked at each other, then to the other couple.

"You should join them. We'll head back to the Faction Hall and wait for your victory against this."

"As much as I would like that..." Sarius started, but didn't finish. "I almost want to call Dalton for his orders again, but..." She pulled up her HUD and then her friends list, seeing a strange mark on it. "What is this?"

The dragon took a look at it, then sighed. "...They shut down communications. Whoever's in charge of this even specifically wants something to happen to this city. And they don't want players to be able to control it." A low growl came from his throat. "There's something wrong with all of this-" He made a grunt in question, looking behind the group and towards the forest a ways.

Getting the attention of the women, they started to make it out. Some large wireframe of a creature that looked familiar to Sarius. Something colossal forming within the forest. As its textures loaded, a massive eight legged woolly mammoth-like behemoth nearly stopped their heart. "...A Hive...?"

"A what?" The silver one asked Sarius.

"It's a... level 85 Raid boss. It's not supposed to be out in the real world."

"Taath. Then what the hell is it doing here?" Sire grumbled at the dragon.

"It's-" The creature groaned at a distance, slightly swaying its bird-skull shaped head a bit, and seeing the beast's long tongue unravel from its mouth. Half rotted, a large chunk of the fanged appendage fell off, and the

Hive didn't seem to notice. "...Infected?"

"What?" Sarious looked at him. "How is that even possible? I thought the Wraiths were the ones infecting others."

"They normally are, but..." Endzeit floated up a bit to get a better view, then came back down to them. "There's no doubt about it. They're in the same category as the Grudges."

"So what does this mean? Can that thing infect other players, like the others can?"

"Probably, but if that thing reaches the city, it's done for. The players can't fight against that and the Grudges at the same time." The red male half growled.

"So what? We engage it outside the walls? Before it reaches the city?"

"We can't 4-man something like this. Even in the raid, we need to use Siege weapons to take it down."

"It has to have some kind of weakness then. Maybe we can still damage it from the ground." The silver one thought.

"Maybe..." She looked at the dragon again. "Endzeit, go find Dalton. Let him know what's coming, and try to invite us all into his squad. This thing is top priority." The red one gave Sarious a sad look. "I know... It's unlikely we'll win, but we have to try!"

"...Let me do something then." He pulled up an HUD and started typing. "This is gonna sting."

"What are you doing-?" She grunted heavily, and so did he for a moment, concerning the other two women.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah..." She replied, still looking at the dragon for an explanation.

"I gave us both each other's skills. You should see a third bar now." With close examination, Sarious did see it. "You'll need to use both of them to stand a chance, though I know you didn't have much for practice with your Red."

"Yeah. What are you going to do?"

Endzeit sighed through his muzzle. "You've always been better at a single target. I've always been better at groups." He looked towards the city.

"Endzeit..."

"Don't worry about me. I'll alert Dalton and the others." He looked at Sire for a moment. "Do you have extra Shields?"

"About five of these." She knocked on the portable wall.

"And about five of every rank below." The silver one giggled.

"After the first one broke, I panic'd. Okay?" She grumbled at Silverthorn.

"Fair enough though. Silver, do you have enough Magic Consumables? Foods? Potions?"

"I have a little in stock. Maybe thirteen."

"She can have mine. I still have all the ones I gathered from day one."

"You still have pots [Potions] that you couldn't use from half your level ago?" Sire tried to curl her neck.

"I like to keep things on hand."

"It's true, she hordes everything." A sharp glare from Sarious. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing!" The dragon hissed at her. "Just hold out until they arrive."

"Alright. But you be careful, you hear me?" He raised his paws. "And no Violent Rhythm!"

"Believe me, being disabled for five minutes is not worth it. Even against that thing, so the same goes to you." She nodded at him. "If anything, I'll just distract them. They can't reach me in the sky." He floated up, and they all nodded at each other before he took off.

"We don't stand a chance, do we?" Sire grumbled.

"Don't think like that, Zh-iiire." A glare from the red woman. "Force of habit." Silverthorn whimpered.

Flying at this speed was almost like sprinting. Not really hard on stamina, but difficult to control and handle. To the point where the dragon noticed himself almost rotating slightly in barrels until he got to the main gates.

Behind the walls was absolute chaos. So many of these creatures still

stood and were setting everything they could on fire. For drones or hive-mind minions, they were being controlled a little too well. The more he looked at this event, the more staged it became.

Quite possibly the strangest thing was the bodies were not disappearing. Outside the gates, they were shattering like normal, but inside the bodies were covering the roads. It only took half a glance to see that the East wings were already being assaulted, which only added to the carnage. Making Endzeit's morale lower once again.

Shaking his head violently, he growled at himself. Find Dalton, then deal with the biggest threat. He can worry about the future when this is all over. With a loud snort, he zipped through the streets overhead. Looking around the crowds of NPCs scampering for a safe way out. Observing the players to see if they were part of the Guild, and eventually found one. "Scharlot!" The red one called, landing behind the archer and protecting her flank.

"Endzeit!?" She shot one of them at a distance, hearing some heavy cracks that were alot closer than she expected. "Is Sarious around here?"

"Outside the west gate. We have a problem, have you seen Dalton?"

"Last I seen, he took the Square. Alot more room for him to deal with." Another shot at the fleshy dome on a Grudge's head. "These things never quit!"

"And there's going to be alot more of them. The East already arrived." She cursed, and the red one swatted a creature trying to spray flames. The slight stun interrupted it, allowing the dragon to charge up a Chainshot. Getting the electrical damage to bounce off of one target and hit several others, giving him an idea. "I want you to make your way to the West Gate and assist Sarious. I'll get Dalton to help out there as well!"

"You serious?" A low wail came from the west, but the walls and buildings blocked the view. "What was that?"

"...An Infected Hive." The woman looked at him for a moment, taking a shot at another Grudge without looking. "If that thing reaches the gate..."

"Then we're flanked, let alone done for." She almost grumbled. "I'll get whoever I can along the way."

"It's probably for the best." They nodded and went off. Endzeit bolted right for the Square, Picking up a random player that was surrounded and carrying him towards a more opened space. "Get To The West Gate!" He roared at him, hoping everyone else who heard would do the same thing.

The Square was almost full of bodies. Both dead and assaulting. The gibberish was giving the dragon a headache on top of the stress, but he growled through it. Spotting the black knight taking on dozens of them, with the aid of several other players. "Dalton!" Endzeit roared from the skies. Charging up one of Sarious' AoE [Area Of Effect] Skills and slamming down on an upcoming group. An electrical wave shot outward in a flat 360 horizontal circle around him. Doing a massive amount of damage and dropping the hit enemies. Though it took alot of Stamina and Wild, it worked.

"Good to see you're still around. Is Sarious here?"

"West Gate still. We have a big problem though." The red one nodded at the other Faction members, and rather surprised players looking him over.

"As if this wasn't bad enough. Did the East herd make it here?"

"Yes, but that's not the-" A loud growl echoed from the west, getting everyone to look.

"That sounds like... A Hive?"

"Yeah, and Infected one at that. And the town doesn't have Siege weapons on its walls. Communications are down."

"Which would explain why no one has been answering my calls." The man muttered.

"And the north wave should be here in a few minutes. But if we get flanked by something of that threat level..." A louder wail from the west. "...I think she just punched it in the face."

"Oh crap. We don't have long." Dalton faintly chuckled, doing something on his HUD, he added Sarious' party to his own squad. "Can you guys hear me?"

"Yes actually." Silverthorn replied.

"We've succeeded in pissing it off." Sire grumbled.

"You mean: I did. Endzeit, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Found Scharlot as well, she should be arriving to help soon. Maybe with a few others." He gestured for the knight to speak.

"Alright, everyone! Gather who you can and add them to this Squad. Bring them to the west gate, and form up there. We'll need every little bit of damage, regardless of level, to take that thing down! Move out!"

"I'm staying here for now." The man looked at the dragon. "I'll do what I

can with the crowds and help the NPC guards. If things get dicey, I'll fly up. Don't worry about me."

"Don't take any risks, you hear me?" He nodded. "If we need backup, I expect you to come."

"I'll be there in thirty seconds." They nodded and ran off. With a deep breath, Endzeit faced a large wave of Grudges and got into his stance. "...We've got no chance, but... That's what makes it interesting." He slammed his fists together and sacrificed some HP for a lot of Wild. Letting the HP regenerate before engaging.

The Hive must've been 200 feet tall, maybe four times that in length. With every step a massive hoof took, it shook the ground and created a blast wave that would nearly knock the group off balance. Taking cover behind Sire's shield, the silver one protected the group with magic, while Sarious threw everything she had into one heavy punch using the Red. Shaping it to the size of the behemoth's skull, it almost looked like a half bubble. Dissipating with the impact, and getting the creature to wail loudly. The sound gave a strange feeling within the woman's heart, one of torment or prolonging pain. Not from the strike itself, but perhaps the infection?

It was something that she would have to dwell on later. As much as it may hurt, this creature, digital or not, needed to be stopped. As soon as her stamina was restored, she released the Red like a second appendage. Feeling a flexible control over it, much like a whip, and then slammed it against the creature once again. The damage took slivers out of its many health bars, but it was something. After the few minutes of working on it, they were making a dent. Just not enough to completely stop it from moving forward.

Several projectiles were fired from behind the group, sticking into the behemoth's thick brown fur. Exploding in a chain a few moments afterward and causing the creature to groan. "Sarious!" The group quickly looked behind them and seen Scharlot catching up, as well as a large group far behind her.

"I'm glad we finally got backup! Have you seen Endzeit?"

"Yeah. He told me about the Hive, I honestly didn't believe it."

"It's doubtful anyone would." Sire grumbled, guarding the silver one from the wind of another step.

"Any gameplan yet?"

"Nothing that you probably haven't seen. I've just been hitting it with everything I got, but it hasn't done much." Sarios said, sighing quietly afterword.

"Let's wait for Dalton to arrive and then we'll come up with a strategy. For now, let's just do what we can to it." The archer knotted another arrow and fired at the Hive, while the others went into formation once again.

A few minutes later, the larger group arrived. A few of them started attacking it at range, but the knight came to the small resistance first. "Well, this isn't good." He said when he arrived, half joking. "Anything to report about it so far?"

"Not much, other than it seems to be melting." Sire pointed at its decaying tongue.

"Yep, that's normal." Dalton chuckled sarcastically. "Any spawns yet?"

"No, and that's what is half worrying me. Usually it starts to defend itself by releasing other enemies, right?" Sarios asked.

"Yeah, it always does in the raids. As soon as it takes damage." Scharlot informed her, and also the two lower leveled ones.

"If that happens, we'll be flanked in no time. I need people on defense when it starts to release any enemies. You four, take the left flank, you guys on the right. It'll be hard to melee it, so no Glass Cannons in melee. Stay at range, and switch when it drops enemies. Take care of our flanks first!" Dalton ordered the group. "Sarios, your group takes the rear right leg. Not much risk on getting these two stepped on back there. But Scharlot, I need you to find a critical hit area for us to deal more damage."

"I'm on it."

Chapter 4

He felt like running through the halls and cubicles. Tearing through the narrow walkways and pushing people aside. But instead, Nathan just walked quickly, until he spotted his friend's hair over the thin walls. Almost hearing him cussing under his breath as he was frantically trying to do something on his computer. "Walter?" Nathan silently called as he approached behind him.

"Nathan? Good god, this is a mess."

"Your message seemed to be a little bit more on the lighter side."

"At first, yes, but whoever did this locked us out of the system. We can't even shutdown the server from here." The bigger man grumbled. "I've tried nearly everything, but I keep getting this Error... Here." He pressed a few things, and a strange message popped up in a rather creepy looking DOS form: Error#54225883-44628.

"...What the hell?"

"I haven't heard of anything like this since that Fire Sale a good 30 years back." The man almost growled. "You have any idea what could've done this?"

"...Yes, actually." He whispered as he left for his boss' office.

"...Letting me in the loop would be nice!"

The behemoth's painful wails constantly filled the skies with every heavy hit, as the large raid of players gave it everything they got. It's Hitpoints were slowly depleting, but only at the risk of losing players, making the Archer's job of finding a weakspot on the beast even more pressing. Every once in a while, she seen the shattered blue pixels of another man down who didn't get restored in time.

Once again, she cursed as the woman shielded herself from the blast of its step. Looking through the cloud of dust, she seen something different from the Hive's shape. It almost appeared to be swollen. As the clouds dissipated, several bulges under its thick fur could faintly be noticed.

Knotting an arrow in her shortbow and fired a powerful shot. Piercing the hide and causing the cyst to burst outward, making the beast roar in pain as a very dark red started to rain on the players. A few naked Grudges started to leak out and fall from the enormous height, surprising a few of the frontlines. "What the hell did you do!?" Dalton asked Scharlot from a few dozen yards away.

"The swollen mounds on its back! That must be the weakspots!" The knight took a few steps back and off to the sides, trying to see them for himself, and nodding at her.

"Everyone ranged! Aim high on the swollen areas on its side and back! Frontlines: withdraw a bit, and take out anything that comes out of it! Focus on them first! Don't give them a chance to get up!" The man roared at the group so that all could hear. All at once, the players went into formations. The melees guarding the range, and assaulting every Grudge that fell. The archers and snipers constantly taking aim up higher, including Sarious. But only if Sire and Silverthorn were safe.

The area filled with the constant roars and wails of the infected creature as it started to stagger and collapse. "Withdraw more! Get about fifty feet away from it! We don't know how it's going to fall!" Another order, getting most people to obey. Those who were caught in the moment had very close calls when the Hive stumbled, but fought to get back up. It was moments like this that Sarious had a hard time understanding what was going on inside the heads of these creatures. Though, she knew of them as Als, she couldn't help but wonder why they were given such a task. To bring people together? Give them a common goal? Common enemy? But this seemed different. It was like putting down a sick animal. One that was just ordered to move, not defend itself. This was...

"A distraction..." Sarious said under her breath.

"What?" The red haired woman asked, still keeping her guard, but quickly changing shields.

"This is a distraction. The Hive always defends itself with Wraiths. It gives them a place to live, a community. But this... This was just thrown in here."

"Just to get players to attack it?"

"No... To get players out of the city!" The other two looked at her. Even a few not from her group. "The city walls, it has no siege weapons. It's being flooded by Wraiths. There's no reason to stay within it."

"So?"

"This was planned, and we're right where they want-" The Hive's deathcry echoed loudly through the landscape, giving everyone a warning to retreat quickly as it began to fall. Creating another large blastwave that shook the grounds heavily. Causing clouds of dust to make a thick fog around the raid.

"This is a Mistake!" Nathan spoke a little too loudly, thankful that his boss' office door was closed.

"Keep your voice down, Lenson. I gave Mr. Owelns permission to use any means necessary to dispose of Smaug-"

"But by doing it this way, you're endangering our customers! The players!"

"Which can be replaced. If this thing gets out of hand, we might not have a business anymore-"

"If this Bounty Hunter gets out of hand we might not have a game anymore!" He heard his boss growl at him. It was rare that Nathan stood his ground against his superior, let alone towards anyone, but he knew he was right. "This isn't the right way to do this."

"You told me completely removing the data could mess up the system. So we're removing it naturally-"

"By destroying an entire city!?"

"Something that can be replaced!" The two took a breath. "...Nathan. I'm taking you off of the Smaug case."

"What? Just because I care about the players?"

"Because you're grown a little too attached towards this Lizard. You may be either interested or even in love with this thing, for all I know. But it's getting in the way of our progress. I'm assigning you to Bugtracking for now. If you bring this up again, you're fired. Do I make myself clear?" The younger

man sighed heavily, looking away from the other.

The bodies were piling up drastically. Almost creating a higher road within the city streets and the main square. But they never seemed to stop trying to climb over, as if they were all attracted to the Dragon. Some special scent, some sort of location beacon on him, it was hard to tell what exactly they were using to track him.

He hated this Stamina mechanic, it felt like it was holding Endzeit back. But Sarius' AoE skills were invaluable here. Though, he once again thought about using his Violent Rhythm to get rid of a massive amount of these Grudges, they would only be replaced within a few moments. That was the harsh truth that was lowering the Red one's morale: this was never going to end.

He couldn't tell what wave he was fighting. There was no telling if there was only three total. There was likely more of them on their way as well, which only begged the question; why was he here? Trying to hold them off? A stinging scratch from behind him interrupted his thoughts, cutting a gash out of his Hp, and counter attacking quickly. Flying up to take a rest and slowly heal up.

Though, they tried to spit flames at the dragon, he was too high up. Just barely feeling the heat of their attacks and trying to see through the flames. Only to barely spot one of them trying to lunge at the Red one, covered in fire. With a loud yelp, Endzeit flew away. Getting into a position where he could see them piling on top of each other to get more height.

Cursing, he knew this was a lost cause. It was time to get back to Sarius and then figure out what to do. At least her Hp was fine. Been so for a while now, come to think of it. To the point where he thought the battle might've been over. At least, her battle.

Flying up to see over the walls, his head hit something hard. Hissing and looking up, only to see nothing. But feel an invisible wall above the city. One that's clearly never been there before. A few heavy hits did absolutely nothing but made him a little mad, and then the deathcry.

That loud wail coming from the west. He recognized it well, and it meant victory for his team. A sigh of relief came over him as he took a faint rest. Only to hear another one a few moments later, and then the Grudges

below him almost shout in pain. Thousands of them within the city walls, swelling up and bursting into a bronze and blue flame. Consuming nearly everything with the city, then shaping into a serpent like creature.

Another silent curse from the red one as he slowly backed away, seeing the flame's head look towards him and roar loudly, trying to snatch the dragon from the sky. But the smaller one evaded. Flying through the streets and seeing another Bronze torrent in the space ahead, once again heading towards him, and forcing him to take a turn on an intersection.

Endzeit flew down the streets as fast as he could, seeing the same flames cover the roads parallel to him and racing the dragon to entrapment. As he kept bolting down one crossway to another, something Bronze slammed into him hard. Making him crash into the side of a building and stumble along the harsh roads before recovering. Trying to make it to the next intersection before he was cut off, but he knew it was going to be too late.

Instead, he took a side alley, one that faintly went under an overpass. Hearing the roars of the metal flames overhead immediately try to spread down the overpass and trap the red one, but he barely made it through. Feeling a faint slap at the end of his tail.

It was weird, they didn't burn. It was more of a force than anything. Something that was clearly a sign of desperation. But his thoughts got the better of him. Coming out of the alley, another harsh ram from the flames sent the dragon skidding down and slide to the very middle of an intersection.

Getting up stung. More than it should have really. It was like his pain was being faintly amplified here, making it hard for him to concentrate. But he didn't have to completely look around to know he was surrounded. Every street around him had a bronze flame at the end. All of them waiting for his next move. Watching him, and looking for an opening.

No street was an option. No way to go underground. The skies were barricaded, and odds are the buildings were as well. He was surrounded. Stuck in an area with no way out. It honestly made him angry, to be completely boxed in like this. To the point where he heard the flames behind him to the east charge towards the red one.

Enraged, Endzeit followed his instincts and slammed a fist into the flames. It was like hitting a wall, one that whimpered and was pushed back from the strike. Seeing the north flames try the same, the dragon spun backwards and heavily kicked it, getting the same reaction. Stepping forward for another high kick on the south flames, then the pivot punch to the west. With every growl and roar from the dragon came a loud whimper from the

bronze fires, getting them to back up about half a street.

He knew what was coming, the strike against all four sides. But he wasn't going to give up. As soon as the four torrents bolted for the Red one, he roared at them. Slamming the ground heavily and making a 360 shockwave that pushed them back while almost completely wrecking the intersection.

Spending everything he had on that last attack, the dragon fell to a knee. Breathing heavily, yet still hearing the sounds of those fires. Still feeling the heat that they gave off, almost like they were breathing heavily themselves. But one last loud roar from them-

Throughout the west side, the cries and cheers of the other players filled the skies. The feeling of accomplishment washed through most of them, but a few. Sarios' slightly grim look did make the other two women in her party worry that there was something else wrong about all this, and by the look on Dalton and Scharlot's faces... "It never deathcries like that twice." Sarios said to Dalton, after he gave a nod to Sire and Silverthorn.

"I know. Makes me wonder what it was all about. For now, let's just stay away from it. If it's infectious or something, this could be very bad for all of us." They all nodded. Though through the cheers of players, they started to morph into a bit of panic. "What is it?" The knight asked the groups, moving forward towards where they were coming from.

As the party pushed through the raid of players, the fog started to disappear. Seeing LA now covered in a bronze and light blue flame. "Endzeit!?" Sarios whispered, still seeing his Healthbar, though it was slightly damaged. She went into her skills, and hit Recall Pet, but got an error message. "The Hell!? Bring him back here!" She hit it again and again, only to get the same thing every time. As the entire city exploded into a bright light, she faintly seen his Healthbar shatter, stopping her heart.

It took several moments for her vision to come back and not see him anywhere. No traces of his name, no pet in the menu, but a Recall button still existing. Pressing it warped an item in her hand, giving a stabbing feeling in her chest.

She collapsed without words. Even within a sea of people, everything around her felt silent. Though the physical gestures could half be recognized,

the woman was too shocked to even notice her own body's reflexes of faint sobs. Causing her to choke as she stared at a tuft of long black mane. Ones identical to the mane on the dragon's Tail.

Seeing it himself broke his heart. It was like the death of an endangered animal, one that was just fighting drastically to survive. To live on and struggle for its freedom. He could only imagine what Smaug's owner must've felt during these moments.

A tear rolled down the side of Nathan's nose as he tried to keep his face covered. The blinds were closed, as well as the door, except the ones leading outside. The heavy rain still remained, and somehow gave him a little comfort. Looking through the many system snapshots of the red creature one last time before he put them away. After nearly a year of him being traced, a year's worth of observations and evidence that there was something living within Skyline, Nathan was finally called away from it. Forced to abandon his research and study upon this digital mystery.

With a heavy sigh, he transferred it all into system storage. Almost knowing people will probably come to him ten or twenty years later to ask Nathan about all this. If only he could've talked to the creature. Communicate with it just once, what would it say? What would he ask it?

Closing all the files eventually brought up some older coding within the game. Something Nathan was just reading and browsing through a few hours ago, but got side tracked. Looking through it again, something strange popped up. Like it was searching for something... Asking for something. "... I... Need... Your... Help... Nathan... Lenson?" The man whispered to himself, translating the message. Though it was very creepy, getting under his skin, there was some faint feeling of Hope within it.

The dark sky was unsettling, but had this odd welcoming to it. As if it understood that the woman was mourning, and knew right now that she didn't want to see the light of the full moon. The eerie wind howled so she didn't

have to, filling the deafening silence that probably would've drove Sarius insane by now. As much as these type of themes disturbed her, she needed the alone time for a while. And sitting high up on a broken balcony seemed like the perfect spot. Though thankful for the invisible wall right in front of her, preventing her from actually falling off, Sarius wondered if there was actually a bottom below the mist. A dark thought, yes, but one that came across her mind. For now, she just wanted to remain in shadows. Just her, the atmosphere, and the fraction of his tail that she could not let go of.

Still, the entire Faction knew what happened by now. She hated being in this situation; in a place of pity. Everyone looking at you like you've just lost everything in your world. Not knowing what to say, what to do. Whether to even look at you, or avoid eye contact. To talk or just leave her alone. It's a strange situation for everyone, and one she's been on this side of too many times.

As the wind slightly calmed down, Sarius could hear faint whispering behind her. It almost sounded a bit harsh, barely making out the last one. "Just talk to her!" And the sounds of someone stumbling echoed in the distance. Then a bit of silence. Sarius swore she heard a faint whimper and throat clearing, followed by a few footsteps.

She could predict the person's movements just by hearing them. Taking a few steps, stopping when they seen Sarius at the edge of the broken railed balcony, sitting there with her legs crossed. Taking a few moments for a breath then a greeting. "Hey..." She almost whispered at the sitting woman, it sounded like Sire, to the point where Sarius glanced at her upper half. Seeing the dark red hair almost shimmer from the hallway lamps.

The brown haired one muttered something close to a greeting, which only made Sire more uncomfortable. With another faint throat clear, she walked up to Sarius and sat down beside her. Looking at the dark landscape in silence while she tried to come up with words to say to the lost one. "They force you to come here." It was barely a question, but something the red haired one understood.

"...Yeah. The mate did." She half grumbled in reply. "Silver thought you might want to talk to someone who's already been through all this."

They were silent for a long while. "...This isn't my first time." Another mutter.

"First time for what?" More silence. "For a family member? Or a loved one?" Sarius didn't reply. "Because there's a difference, you know."

"Not really. It feels the same-" A harsh grip on her shoulder got the

woman to look into Sire's amber eyes.

"There is. Losing a mate is much worse, but not to say the other isn't bad enough." She let go, sighing through her nostrils. "...I'm going to tell you something you shouldn't be hearing." It kept the brown one's attention. "You know Silverthorn, right?"

"Yes?"

"I lost him once." Sire could feel the slightly puzzled look from Sarious. "And I don't mean he left me, though I nearly did that too. But I mean... I actually lost him."

"...How?"

"That's a long, painful story that I really don't want to tell. Again. And one your kind probably doesn't want to hear." She grumbled, still seeing the puzzled look on the brown one's face caused Sire to double take. "Not that I told it bad! I'm an astonishing storyteller!" She made this strange exhale through her nose along with a Humph, cracking a smile on Sarious' face. "Your species is just too sexualphobic to enjoy such a tale."

"Your Species?" She quoted, getting a slight whimper from the red one. Then a grunting sigh.

"We're not human-"

"I kinda figured that out." Sarious chuckled. "But...?"

"I can't tell you that much. But we're not even from your planet."

"So, you two are aliens?" Another double take caused another chuckle.

"N-no! We're not aliens! We're...!" Another grunt, as Sire looked back where she came from. "I feel like he's watching me."

"Silverthorn?" A nod. "...How did you manage to get him back?"

"...Through alot of pain. So much so, that he defied the very laws of afterlife to be with me once again. But only as a spectral form for about ten years. Then..." The red one sighed. "I found a way to bring him back to life, using the very same thing that kept me alive for so long."

"So, you broke the rules..." Sarious muttered, sighing afterword, but stopping once she felt Sire's hand.

"The first step into breaking rules is believing that they can be broken. It's a test of Faith, just don't let it blind you." A faint nod from the brown one as she sighed once again. Staring into the landscape once again in silence for

a few minutes, Sarious could feel the red woman's hand stress a bit, getting her to look at Sire for a few moments and causing the other woman to whimper. An exhale from her, as she grumbled "Fine..." Under her breath, then cleared her throat awkwardly. Getting a very confused look on Sarious' face. "Would you..." Another grunt. "Like a session, to get your mind off things?"

"Session?" Sarious questioned, just before it clicked in. Causing her, herself, to whimper this time and pull her hand back, as well as lean away a bit.

"Yep. Sexualphobic." Sire grumbled. "But if it's too awkward for you, we can just let you watch. I don't mind." Another loud whimper from the brown haired one as she started to glow red. Covering her face shyly. "Oh please, it's not that awkward." Sire grumbled again. Sitting back and trying to relax against a pillar.

After a few minutes of self-control, Sarious composed herself. Taking a few breaths before letting the cool air once again touch her face. "You okay?" Sire chuckled, getting an awkward sigh from the other woman. "To be fair, it was a suggestion from Silverthorn. I mean, I'm for it, but-"

"Just... Stop." Another chuckle. "But... Maybe you're right. I need to get my mind off of this grief."

"What did you usually do? The first time?"

An exhale. "...Played video games. Like the one we're in." The red one motioned her to go on. "...I used them as a form of escape. To run away from the pain, the stress. Any real life issues. Now that I'm actually living in one..."

"It makes it hard to escape from it." Another long silence as the wind blew through the balcony, making her lose grip on the dragon's tailmane. The brown one desperately trying to snatch it, but Sire caught it for her. "Should be a bit more careful with this. You'll need it for later."

"...What do you mean?"

"Dalton's organizing the faction to revive Endzeit. Collecting the dozens of things needed to resurrect a companion." Though she was glad to hear such a thing, knowing that other people were doing the work tugged on her heart. "And you'll need this for the final ingredient." Sire pulled up her HUD and warped in an item in her hand: a small reel of silk ribbon. Tying the tuft to the small rope, making it into an amulet of sorts. "There."

The woman looked at it from afar for a few moments then reached for it slowly. Taking her time to study it while whispering her thanks. She never

knew how much she loved the texture of his mane until he was gone. This strange cross between the thickness of long fur and flowness of a feather. Together, they created a very soft and smooth texture that was very comfortable. Making her sigh heavily once again. "...You said you told stories well?"

"Astonishingly well." Another strange Humph.

"How did... You and Silverthorn meet?" A smirk grew on the red one's face.

The hallway kept very well with the disturbing theme of the Faction Hall, as Silver haired woman sat on a rather comfortable old loveseat. Though, the several paintings on the walls spookily changed and morphed into others, sometimes even reaching out of the frames, she couldn't help but be fascinated with such design. Often wondering how such things were built.

A few footsteps could be heard coming from the balcony, as well as two shadowy figures. The ones she's been waiting for. "Feeling better?" Silverthorn called, only to get a whimper in response.

"You might have to forgive Sarious, I think I broke her." Sire playfully said, getting a chuckle from the Silver one. Getting up to greet her mate with a faint embrace.

"I'm guessing she said No then?" She asked, almost disappointed.

"Yes, but I'm afraid she wanted to hear a story from me."

"Ohhh, your stories. Which one did you tell?"

"She wanted to know how we met." Sire said, giving her a lick. "So I told her." A kiss. "Up until you painted a wall." Another kiss while the silver one moaned.

"I love that one." A whimper from Sarious broke the two into chuckles. "But probably a good place to stop. We don't want her to turn red permanently." It caused Sire to curl her neck.

"What's wrong with Red?"

"Nothing, but you're all the red I need." A strange eye roll from the crimson one, but she got a kiss when her head returned. "You okay, Sarious?" A faint wave of 'Leave it alone' almost showed half her face, making the silver

one chuckle.

Some heavy footsteps came from the other end of the hall, ones with metal. Sire barely being able to make out the black knight through the shadows, then grumbled. "Human eyes are terrible."

"You'll get used to it." The silver one tapped her on the nose. "How's everything coming, Dalton?"

"Just fine." He tried to look behind to see Sarious, but was half blocked by the other two women. "How is she?"

"Managing." The silver one smiled.

"Recovering from a story I told her."

"Story?"

"A wonderful story." Silverthorn tried to nuzzle the red one, chuckling when the brown one whimpered again. "You should tell it to Dalton sometime."

"Only because you want to see his reaction." Sire grumbled, getting the man to lift his hands.

"I'll pass for now."

"What about the others?"

"I already sent out nearly the entire guild. I'm hoping we'll get everything by tomorrow morning." It got Sarious to come out of her hands and look at him sadly, still a bit blushed. He faintly sighed as he walked up towards the brown haired one. "...We're going to get him back."

Chapter 5

He half woke up warm. Almost toasty, but slightly itchy when he started to stretch. Though, the stretching also gave off a bit of pain and made the red one flinch a bit. Grunting as he rubbed his muzzle against a rather rough pillow. One that was rather familiar, but not one he was used to. But, at the moment, he was lazy. Just ignoring everything strange about the current bed and turning over to sleep the soreness out. "There you are!"

The red dragon yelped at the little girl's voice as she shouted right in front of him. Causing the large one to almost jump out the other side of the bed and land on the floor. "What are you still doing in bed, silly?" She asked, as Endzeit looked over the mattress to see the little girl in black hair and a white dress. The hair almost reminded him of Sarious', and everything that happened came flooding back to him.

Amaranthe - True

He remembered dying, surrounded by bronze flames. Getting boxed in and struggling to make it back to Sarious. It made his heart ache to the point where he didn't respond to the little one. "You can't stay in bed forever." She giggled at him, pulling over the covers to reveal a stuffed animal red dragon that looked so much like Endzeit, that it could've been his wyrmling. "Come'on Dicey, we've got stuff to do today." The little girl grabbed the stuffed animal and hugged it, carrying it out into the hallway.

"...Dicey?" The large red one muttered, slowly following her out of the room and down a very large hall. The home she lived in was a mansion. Huge and probably made for twenty people to live in. Occasionally passing a few humans cleaning, but they didn't notice the red one. Following the girl's giggles lead him to the dining room.

"What will you have this morning, Ma'am?" A male voice asked, as Endzeit entered the door. Once again not getting any attention from the few people in the room.

"Chocolate chip waffles for me, Franklin. And Dicey will have one of everything on the breakfast menu." The three adults chuckled, as the one with the apron on nodded with a smile and left towards the kitchen. The statement even made the dragon smile a bit.

"Looks like Dicey worked up quite an appetite." The other man said, sipping some coffee while reading something on a tablet. Dressed in a suit, but looked like he already got home from the workplace.

"He has. Dicey likes to eat alot. He loves food." The little one said, pretending to feed the stuffed animal with some plastic toy food. A large plate filled to the edge of many things, from milk, waffles, hotdogs, and even a glass with something red in it.

"...Yeah, I really do." The larger one muttered sadly.

"See? He even said so." Another childish giggle.

"Yet he never gains a pound. It's a wonder." The older woman joked a bit, reading her own tablet. "Honey, I got a few things to do in town today. I know you worked all night, but can you look after her for a bit?"

"Sure thing. I've got a few things to do anyway, I'll leave the study door opened." With a brilliant flash of light the dining room was empty and cleaned. Once again, hearing the childish giggles and following them through the mostly empty home back up to the girl's room.

"You're going to look so pretty." He heard her say, following a few snips. Spotting the girl in front of a tall mirror behind a chair where the stuffed animal was sitting. Cutting it's ridiculous looking mane into a large Mohawk. Even coloring the tips of the large spikes red and letting a few strands flow down the side of his neck. Resting on the collar. "There, what do you think?" She asked, looking towards the toy for an answer.

"...I love it." Endzeit answered her, walking towards the two and kneeling down. Even seeing himself in the reflection.

"I knew you would!" She gave the little one a hug, spinning it around a bit. "Alright, brunch time for you. I'll make us some tea!" Another flash of light, and once again the room was empty. Still messy, with a small table covered in toy foods and a tea set. "Daddy!" A voice down the hall, and the red dragon bolted for it.

"What is it, sweetie?" He followed the voices to an opened door down the hall.

"Wanna see what I did for Dicey?" She carried the stuffed toy towards the father, and he chuckled.

"What did you do to Dycedragg's hair?"

"I styled it." She giggled.

"You turned him into a punk." He brushed it a little bit, giving the toy back to the girl.

"A what?"

"A punk. It's like a rebellious teenager. One day you'll end up being one too."

"Just like Dicey?" The man chuckled and nodded. "Whacha doing?"

"Just some work I've been trying to get completed."

"Can I see?" The man smiled at her, lifting the girl on his lap.

"Do you know what daddy does for a living?" The little one shook her head. "He's trying to create a world where anything is possible. One that's also portable, and other people can see it."

"Anything?" He nodded at her. "Can you make Dicey in this new world?"

"With some time, yes. But..." He smiled at her sadly a bit. "What if I taught you how to make him?" Another flash of light, and they were gone. The computer and the desk seemed to get a little worn out in an instant, as the dragon's ears scanned for any sounds. A few taps of a keyboard could faintly be heard echoing in the distance, and he took after them.

A few rooms later, he spotted the little girl in front of another computer. "I wonder if this will work." She whispered to the little dragon doll on the desk, facing the monitor. Pressing a few more keys, and the model of Dicey on the screen started to move. Rolling over, and flicking his ear in a playful gesture. Then rolling back up and snatched a small cupcake that was tossed towards him. The animation sent the girl into giggles. "Daddy!" She shouted out in the empty home. "You need to see this!"

Another flash of light, and the girl got a little older. So did the small stuffed animal, a few patches and sown areas on its fuzzy body were quite noticeable now. As well as a few stains here and there, yet it still kept its cute charm. Always watching the screen and memorizing the paragraphs of code she was typing in. Giggling at it, as if she could read it in the code's bare form. "I'll make you real, Dicey. Just wait, I'll make you so real to them that they can see you."

Another flash, and the girl was gone. The computer was still on, once again displaying several pages of coding, model scales, and sounds. The model was looking closer and closer to Endzeit's design, but was still unrefined to detail. "All this in a few years...?" The dragon studied it, almost

being able to read it and understand it. Like looking at his own insides and skeleton, creeping him out.

A loud knock on a faraway door sent a sharp shiver down his body, making his scales click loudly, yet it almost sounded like he was underwater. Even his normal footsteps could barely be heard, as he tried to follow the direction of the loud knock. All at once, he felt exhausted, sore and bruised in his midsection. Causing him to collapse in a doorway and fall to the floor. Faintly seeing two men in uniforms talking to the father... And handing him the dragon doll. Still worn, and now damp. "Do you understand?"

The voice of the father, now aged came behind him. Glancing at the eighty years old version that almost looked like a hologram. "...What?" He whispered, faintly finding it easier to breathe once again.

"Do you understand your origins?"

A few breaths, and a swallow came from the red one as he fought to stand up once again. "...I remember her." He whispered to him. "I remember these..."

"It's a miracle that you do." The old man said, walking back to her computer. Grunting, the dragon struggled to walk and follow him. Using the furniture around him to balance and crutch the red one. "The day she first touched a computer was the day you were really born. There should've been no record in your memory before this."

"What are you saying?" Endzeit almost growled.

"I'm saying..." The younger version of him came to the girl's study. Seeing the creation on the screen and taking a few heavy breaths. Then started typing on it. "It worked."

"What did?"

"She made you. Dana created you. You were solely in her mind." He half choked, taking a raspy breath with his old lungs. "You, Dycedragg, were her only friend. She made others at school, but never seemed to bother with them as much as she did with you."

"...That's why she wanted to make...?"

"I told her stories of the older days. How people could, at one time, create anything. Become anything they wished. Bring creatures and personas to life using technology. But... There was still something missing back then."

"Missing?" Another grunt.

"To this day, I still could not completely figure out what she did. What she programed into you. But I knew it would've changed the digital future forever. So, on my final night of my job, I released you out into the world."

"So I could do what?" He growled. Taking a harsh step forward towards him. "Answer me. What exactly did you want me to do!?"

A heavy sigh from the old man. "...Nothing." A noise in question from the dragon. "All technology has a purpose, a reason for existing. A command to follow and a path to fulfill. Sometimes it's protecting others, helping people live out their lives. Looking out for them, or just providing convenience. Other times... It's destroying people or programs. Civilizations... Enemies. You had nothing. No reason, no purpose. Not even to be her friend."

"That doesn't answer my question." The red one growled again. "How do I get back to Sarious!?"

"Dycedragg, you are unpredictable. You are unstable-"

"So you think I should be put down because I don't follow orders!?" The old one stared at those golden eyes for a few moments.

"...Just the opposite. A Program *Obeys* it's commands. A Script *Follows* Instructions. You... **Decide**. That's what is so different about you, Dycedragg. You are the first Digitally Living Creature mankind has ever created." A faint echo came from the darkness above them, causing only Endzeit to look up.

"That was..." He looked back at the old man. "How do I get back to Sarious! Answer me!"

"I don't know who or what you are talking about. I'm not even sure where you are."

"Then why are you even here!?" He growled.

"...Dycedragg, you cannot be controlled by them like the rest. You're only in this situation because you choose to believe it. If you really want to find this person, you do the very same thing you did to escape." The old one began to walk away into the darkness. "You choose to."

"I...?" He took a few breaths as the world around him went black. As his breaths got deeper, he almost growled again. Getting angry enough to stand up straight. Then something caught his eye, a faint glowing behind him at a distance, moving towards him in a series of frames. Soon enough, he could make out the shape. "Sarious...?" He whispered, seeing her run towards the dragon, then past him a bit before hitting some type of barrier. Looking behind her as if she was being chased.

He once again looked at his paws, clenching them slowly, then stepping forward. "The very same thing I did to escape..." He muttered. Walking up to the wall still caused him a little pain, but roared against it. Heavily slamming against the invisible barrier and feeling it shatter, allowing her to go forward.

"...4NX7 ...Endzeit?" The woman whispered, not able to really see him completely. Touching something attached to her neck, she carried on. The red one right behind her.

"We do this together... As One."

Chapter 6

She woke up in the bed alone. It was discomfoting, to say the least. Heartbreaking. Regardless of the hope that everyone else clung to. Though she did want her Companion back, the effort everyone in the Faction was putting into just to get their Red mascot returned... She felt undeserving. This was Sarious' issue. This was Sarious' mistake, they shouldn't have to repair it.

Again, she was thankful. To no ends, no bounds, she was so thankful for the support. But it was almost too much. They claim that it's because they want their Mascot back, or Dalton says. Perhaps it's just an excuse for the rest to join in. Or is it that Endzeit actually grew on them all? Even just a little? Much like he grew on her.

Her heart felt heavy within her chest. She almost didn't want to get up and carry on without him. Perhaps just wait until the leader came up to her room and dragged her from the bed. Only because he was concerned, and it seemed like something he would do. Though, the comical idea did put a sad smile on her face, it soon went away. Laying back down in the old, spring bed, she laid on her side. Causing the large thing to creak loudly.

Soon, the sound of someone logging in and loading their Avatar was heard in the room, getting Sarious concerned and almost ready to pin the forming body. As the light began to fade into a glowing amber, she barely seen the silver hair on the pillow beside her. Pulsing in the darkness for a few seconds before stopping as she inhaled. Getting Sarious to slightly whimper as Silverthorn stretched a bit and yawned. Seeing her blue eyes look around at the cloudy, fullmoon light and spot the other woman with a smile. "Morning, if you can even call it that."

"M-morning..." Sarious muttered, getting an odd look from the silver one. "I don't remember much from last night. Did... We...?"

"Only cuddled." A heavy sigh from the other one. "Hey... It's alright. Not everyone can be strong forever. And besides, I half know what it's like to lose your mate."

"M-mate?" She stuttered. Though not trying to fight against the silver one's embrace, it was a little awkward to her.

"Aren't you and Endzeit a couple?" A faint whimper from her. "You often act like it. I mean, you argue to put on a show for the others, but I seen it in your eyes. You both care for each other deeply."

A heavy sigh from Sarious. "...I guess I've been trying to hide it from everyone else. Mostly because it seems odd to fall in love with something that..." She trailed off.

"That isn't what?" The woman didn't respond. "That isn't... *Equipped?*" The serious question got the woman to double take and stutter for a few moments.

"W-what?"

"I noticed he didn't have any bulge, even in his more humanoid form. Unless his pants somehow hide it that well." A whimper from Sarious as she covered her head with the sheets, getting Silverthorn to chuckle. "Humans are still embarrassed as ever." She muttered with a smile.

"What was that?" The other asked from under the blankets.

"Nothing. But what were you going to say?"

A moment of silence, and she slowly came out of the sheets. "...He isn't real. Or at least wasn't."

"What do you mean?" A bit of a painful look from her. "Sarious?"

"...He acts like a person, right?" Silverthorn nodded. "But he's... Digital."

He's not... Real."

"So?" The silver one bluntly stated. "Why does that matter at all? He makes you happy right?"

"And a bit frustrated."

"That's only typical of relationships. You still love him for those frustrations, yes?" The two chuckled a bit. "Then it shouldn't matter what anyone else thinks of you two. If they get a little weirded out at first, then that's normal. As long as the feeling is the same, you'll be alright. But only if you stick together." A few touches made the woman uncomfortable. "Don't like affection?"

"It's not that... But... Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why are you doing... This?"

"You mean, keeping you company?"

"If you want to call it that." Sarious half grumbled, making the silver one chuckle, then sigh sadly.

"I said before, I know what it's like. But... I can't shake off this feeling that this is my fault." She gave the woman a tight hug, though it did make Sarious uncomfortable. Even more so when there was a knock at the door.

"Sarious? Are you in there?"

"She is, Dalton." The silver one answered. "How are things going?"

"We got everything ready on our side. Were you able to get the Dew?"

"Yes, I have it." She gave the other woman a bright smile. "Let's go get back your mate."

Their steps echoed through the entire castle as they made their way towards the teleporter. The long hall was lit by dozens of torches, clearly lighting up the group of people further down. Once again, Sarious felt unworthy. Undeserving of their help or assistance. "Stop worrying so much." Sire snuck up behind them, almost getting Sarious to yelp and feel boxed in.

"He's right-"

"She's right." The red one whimpered, covering her eyes once again

and hearing the silver one giggle.

"You should stop feeling this way, Sarious." She almost nuzzled the clearly uncomfortable brown one. "There's nothing wrong with accepting the help that others want to give. Especially if it's for something as drastic as this."

"Drastic...?"

"You didn't have anybody before." Sire said, getting a strange look from Sarious. "But now you have people who are more than willing to help you get back what you desperately need to survive." There was something about the red one's posture, how she walked rather tall and proud. Let alone slightly moved her head forward with every step, like it was second nature. "The ones before... They didn't know what to do with you. But them..." She gestured towards the three, at the good 24 people waiting by the teleporter, talking among one another. "They know what you need."

"You know what they say: The Blood Of The Covenant Is Thicker Than Water Of The Womb." Another odd look from Sarious. "What?"

"Don't you mean: Blood Is Thicker Than Water?" The silver one tried to curl her neck, then look at Sire who just shrugged.

"I told you they would screw it up." She grumbled, getting her mate to giggle. "Don't reject them, in any way. Especially after the lengths they went to help you." Her voice was a bit thick, but Sarious nodded. Taking a deep breath before approaching the Faction.

She took a slow look around. As painful as it was, she looked at every member in the eyes. Though the feeling made her heart sink little by little, remembering all the times she and Endzeit teamed up with every one of these people. All under Dalton's orders, to get used to each other and not divide the guild up into separate groups of friends... Sarious sighed heavily. "...Thank you. Everyone."

"No problem, Sarious."

"You're very welcome."

"You two would've done the same for any of us." The room filled with various replies. Gestures of approval. Smiles and nods. It all made her sadly smile at them, to the point where she almost broke down into tears.

A couple of rubs on her back helped her hold them back, as the red and silver one came back to her sides. "We've got everything we need, besides one thing." Dalton said, tapping near his collarbone. Getting Sarious

to look down at the necklace that Sire made for her. Then a UI popped up in front of her, listing dozens of other items, along with a trade option. On the other side, Dalton's UI. "It's all yours. You should just have to take it to the spring in the Garden Of Tears. Throw everything in, and he should come back to you."

"Isn't that place like a raid?" The man nodded, and once again her heart ached. "Guys... I can't ask you for anything else, let alone to risk your avatars for me-"

"Then don't." Dalton said rather calmly. Turning around and facing the Faction. "I'm going to the Garden Of Tears to get Endzeit back. Who's coming with me?" And the rest cheered loudly, getting on the teleporter.

"Too bad we're too low of a level to come with." Sire said, rubbing the brown one's hair.

"Take care of yourself, Sarious. And don't come back here without him." Silverthorn gave her a little push, almost stumbling into the knight.

"Are you ready?" Dalton asked her. Though she gave another heavy breath to collect herself, she accepted the items in the Trade. Giving him a strong nod. "Let's go."

The Faction warped into a tainted Eden. Much of the grass and plant life was still struggling to survive, the faint green and light brown slowly converting into a black red. Much like how that Hive bled. "Is this place infected as well?" Sarious half whispered.

"Must be. It wasn't like this the last time I was here." The knight got a strange look from her. "You're not the first... 'Tamer' I've helped get someone dear to them back. It's how I knew what to get." Dalton cautiously looked around. "Something's not right here."

"Besides the infection, yeah... This feels like a trap of some sort."

"The Garden of Tears is known for its ambushes. That's why it's recommended to go as a large group." Dalton said, then exhaled. "But you're right, this feels like a trap. Outside of the usual ambushes. But why? Let alone here of all choices?"

"...Endzeit." Sarious whispered, getting his attention. "What if they were after him? What if LA was just some sort of distraction, knowing that he would attempt to save the NPCs?"

"Why would he save them?"

"...Because he's closer to one of them than one of us, in a creation standpoint. He kept telling me that he wasn't a player, as if Players were a bad thing. What if whoever was planning this knew all of that?"

"From observing the game?"

"And tracing his movements. His habits."

"But the question remains: why? I mean, he tells us more than what we should know, but-"

"You want to know why, Dalton?" A voice overhead spoke that was trying way too hard to sound evil. Up in the sky, flying with some black feathered wings was the man in black and dark gold armor from before. "It's because such a thing should not exist in the game world."

"Wait, you?" Sarious squinted to make out the feathered one.

"You know this guy?"

"We've... Crossed paths before." Sarious grumbled.

"Who is he?" The woman shrugged at him. "So, stalker?"

"Maybe."

"I'm up here." The man said impatiently. "And I'm not a stalker, I'm a Bounty Hunter."

"A bounty hunter? So you go after people for ingame money?" Dalton half questioned.

"No, for real world money. I go after people who've broken the laws of the game, and Smaug was one of them."

"Smaug?" The entire Faction questioned.

"Isn't that the dragon from Lord of the Rings?"

"You mean The Hobbit."

"Same thing."

"W-what? No it's not!" Several people argued amongst themselves.

"**SILENCE!**" The feathered one roared. "I don't care what you call it, but we call it Smaug!"

"We?" Sarious questioned.

"Skyline Entertainment." He chuckled, getting the woman to grunt. "They've been watching you two for a long long time."

"That's not creepy at all." The black knight said, getting the man in the sky to growl. "But so what? They've never done anything wrong in the game. Endzeit's been around for at least a year, from what I've heard."

"Really?" Another chuckle, as he looked at the woman. "Care to tell them?"

"Tell us what?" Most of the entire Faction went silent as they looked at Sarious. As the woman sighed, she lowered her gaze.

"...He's been... Editing the game a bit. But we're not cheating!" She looked them over, almost seeing painful expressions on a few of them. "We've just been... Editing a few physical adjustments-"

"So you could gain an advantage!" The feathered one blamed.

"What? No!" The others looked back and forth between the two. "We didn't edit Credits, we didn't change our stats or anything on our gears! We... Did change around our skills a bit. But he was only doing it to help me understand it!"

"Wait, you could actually switch each other's skills?" Dalton asked, getting a sad look from her. "That would be awesome! I wonder if we could convince the Devs to put in a Skill Trading system in this."

"You're not mad?"

"I would hardly consider it cheating, though I think I did see you use one of Endzeit's skills yesterday, but..." She exhaled at him. "For a fight like that, I'm glad you did it." He smiled at her, then looked towards the flying man. "You're not going to turn us against one another. Only against you!"

"Is that so? Even if I threaten to ban every one of your visors to log onto Skyline?" It got a few people to murmur in the crowds. "You're all assisting on a VC [Virtual Criminal] Act. So I can do what I wish to you if you continue to get into my way!"

"What exactly is your goal here? To stop me from bringing Endzeit back?"

"That, and to delete you from the system." Another strange look from the Faction. "It's illegal to download your consciousness onto a server, it was in the Terms of Agreement."

"...You...?" The black knight looked at the woman. He gave a bit of a disappointing sigh, but armed himself to cover her. "Get him back."

"Dalton?"

"Don't let us down, okay Sarious? We'll try to hold this guy off for as long as we can."

She looked at him for a few moments, and nodded. "Be careful, and thank you."

"Hey, I'm not about to lose against the worlds corniest avatar. You be careful too." She nodded as she took off forward down the path. "Archers and Snipers! On My Mark!"

"You've gotta be joking." The feathered one grumbled. "All this for one person!?"

"You mean for a family member!" Scharlot snarled.

"She's not even related to any of you!"

"It's a Form of Family you wouldn't understand then!" Regendale growled.

"FIRE!"

Sarious could hear the gunshots and skills go off behind her, but didn't look back. Though that pain of unworthiness returned, for them all to go such lengths for one person, she choked it down. If she could just get Endzeit back, then they both could find a way to fix all this. Even if they were somehow banned, perhaps the dragon could find out a way to disable it.

A warm, foul smelling wind started to brush through the path and force the dying plants to dance and sway. Almost expecting an ambush charging out of the tall grass and flanking her at any moment, until the gunshots stopped. The silence behind her worried the woman, as she quickly checked her Friends List, and finding everyone in the Faction offline. Odds are, this man wasn't bluffing. But to go so far as to send a Bounty Hunter after her... After them?

In the middle of her thoughts, Sarious hit a sudden stop. Almost stinging her face for a moment as she stumbled backwards. Seeing nothing but open fields around her, she placed a hand out to feel a large invisible

wall. One that covered the entire road, without a doubt. "There is no escape." The flying man grumbled, getting the woman to turn around and look at him. "There's nowhere to run. And you won't get that thing back. Even if I have to erase the entire server to ensure that never happens-"

A loud roar echoed beside Sarious, getting her to almost cover herself at the sudden impact against the wall. Almost seeing a transparent red dragon within a fraction of a second, as he slammed into the barrier and hear it shatter behind her. A loud buzzer went off as red text displayed before Sarious.

*D.R. 4891276645-4NX7 Has Performed An Illegal
Operation*

For a moment, everyone stopped and silence overcame the fields. "... 4NX7... Endzeit?" Sarious whispered, feeling for the tailmane tied around her neck. Not wasting the opportunity, she darted forward. Past the barrier as the feathered man roared in question.

About twenty feet away, the woman hit another invisible barrier. Hitting it, she cursed, only to hear that echoing roar again and barely seeing the Red dragon slam into it hard. Getting the barrier to shatter and letting her advance, along with that warning once again.

*D.R. 4891276645-4NX7 Has Performed An Illegal
Operation*

"You've Gotta Be Kidding Me!" The man behind her screamed, chasing after her from above. "FINE!" He pulled up his HUD, and hit several buttons. Causing a battle-worn, multi armed, 15' celestial creature to appear before them. One that looked like it was skinned and burned, tortured for many years. As its red eyes locked onto Sarious, it rose up from its kneeling position and broke its tided bottom hands free from chains. Withdrawing two large hook swords from its back and roaring. "Let's see how you like the upcoming Raid boss!" The man shouted, as he ordered the creature to attack.

The creature replied in a raspy, dry growl as it swung one of its heavy blades downward, barely missing the evading woman. Getting the weapon almost stuck in the ground, while the other hook sword came across, trying to get her caught inbetween. Though she was jumping onto the first sword, another dragon's roar followed by a slam almost made her lose her concentration. As the red one deflected the second blade backwards, giving Sarious enough time to get closer to the celestial's head.

*D.R. 4891276645-4NX7 Has Performed An Illegal
Operation*

With a heavy leap, the woman spun around and aimed a dive kick towards the monster's head. Barely seeing Endzeit follow up beside her, and mirroring Sarius' attack. Making them both kick into the creature's skull with a brutal crack that shattered it into red pixels. The roar almost as deafening as the duo's, while they landed on the cobblestone, splitting it into several small fissures.

D.R. 4891276645-4NX7 Has Performed An Illegal Operation

As the flying man grunted in both frustration and surprise, he quickly looked over the Raid boss' stats. Only to discover it wasn't completely finished, and thus, only have 1/1 Hp for the moment. Another roar in frustration, and he bolted off to chase the woman. Loading in a long, thin golden claymore for himself. "I'll erase this entire area if I have to!" A few more presses on his HUD, and something large began falling through the clouds. Covering almost the entire sky.

At the end of the road, there was a small fountain at the very edge of a cliff. The extra water it gave seemed to pour down into the clouds below. As soon as it came into view, Sarius sprinted towards it. No longer caring about whatever traps or Aggro she might obtain by just rushing in. The few growls behind her that managed to get onto the road were soon interrupted and shattered by her late companion. One that was throwing everything he had into keeping her protected.

Sliding up to the fountain, she quickly warped in all the items Dalton gave her one by one. Setting the several flowers within the water and letting them float into a special pattern. Placing an enchanted stone in the center, and letting it sink to the bottom. Then draining a small bottle of purified water within each flower. Letting them clean the tainted water of the fountain, turning it from the strange red and black to a deep blue. There was only one thing left; the dragon's tail.

She quickly untied the amulet and held onto it for a moment. "Please, let this work...!" She whispered, almost feeling the dragon embrace her from behind. A loud slash came from the sky, as the edge of the cliff jerked. Letting the entire fountain, Sarius, and even some of the road begin to fall down the endless cliff. The sudden drop of the floor made her lose balance and drop the dragon's tailmane, as she tried to hold onto it. Making her heart stop for a moment, as the clean water began to splash upwards.

"You've caused me enough trouble, Girl!" The feathered one growled, as he darted at her from the sky with a piercing attack. As a single droplet touched the dragon's tail, Endzeit's combat state instantly reformed. Wrapping around the woman and covering her from the attack. Feeling the

sword hit his back, but not go through his scales.

As Sarious opened her eyes, she seen him pulsing a golden glow, much like how people tended to warp or log into the game. Those few seconds of invincibility, to let players get aware of their surroundings, kept him unharmed. Now that this man was finally in attacking range, she swung herself around the red dragon and kicked the hunter in the helmet harshly. Making him slam into the rocky Cliffside and break off a few more chunks before correcting himself.

As the two tried to brace themselves on the falling rock, they looked at each other with a sad smile. As much as they wanted to show their happiness, it would have to wait until they were safe. Getting into their ready stances, they spotted the Feathered one still freefalling in the sky. And far above him, an eerie blackness with dark yellow stripes broke through the clouds. Making them disintegrate into pixels whenever it came into contact with anything. "He's trying to erase this entire area." The dragon grumbled.

"So, don't touch the black. Got it." The red one nodded at her, almost snickering.

"I've never had anything give me so much trouble than you two! And just when I get rid of one, you come back!" The man growled angrily. "Why must vermin be so difficult and fight so hard when you know you're going to lose?"

"We're not vermin! We're living beings!" Endzeit grumbled at him.

"Living? You're programs! Just forms of Data! You don't even physically exist!"

"That doesn't make us any less living than you!"

"Then what does that make you, Girl?"

The two Companions looked at each other, nodding. "Together we are a powerful force," The dragon started.

"As one mind, body, and soul."

"The hell?" The flying one whispered.

"Let no Villain enter, or attempt to reduce us because of the Life we hold." The red one slammed his fists together to gain some Wild.

"And with this Courage, combined with our Allies, we'll ward out pain and stress." The woman did the same.

"Battle Born we are, whole heartedly!"

"In life and in death!" Sarious roared at him.

"...Cute." The man grumbled. "But words won't save you. You two have nowhere to run anymore!" He cut through the Cliffside once again, causing some of it to explode into a large series of rocks. Then slugged one nearby, sending it straight towards the two. Making them dodge separate ways, and breaking their platform in two.

Sarious and Endzeit both jumped up a few rocks, causing them to start to move like balls in a billiards game. As the woman got near equal level to the man, she swept across his area with a wide roundhouse. Just barely missing him and slamming against the rocky wall, gaining more debris into the field. Meanwhile, the dragon came up with a rising kick that followed a backflip. The paw connected, but just barely. Missing alot of the force that came with it, but it did cause the man to flip himself and recover quickly.

Rotating with the momentum, the feathered one tried to backslash Endzeit. The connection felt like he hit a brick wall, grunting at the sudden lightning covering the red creature's body as he blocked the attack and then locked his sword arm. Leaving the man opened for a heavy kick on his shoulder, which sent a harsh pain through his body. A light second kick pushed the two away, and the hunter tried to charge a ranged slash.

Meanwhile, Sarious jumped off the rocky wall where she landed, and hit one of the large rocks that recently came out of her attack. Aiming for the feathered one, and interrupting his ranged attack with the rock. Sending him upwards towards the abyss above. But it wasn't enough to completely knock the hunter inside. "I see where you're going with this." Endzeit winked at the woman. Getting behind a large rock himself and kicking it upwards at the man.

Though that one was easily dodged, the feathered one lost sight of the dragon as he was charging down. Slowing himself down, he got a heavy dive kick to the back. Not noticing the red one actually tail behind the rock he launched, then get a sneak attack from behind. The force of the dive kick sent the hunter downward, getting received by Sarious' stunning uppercut.

The blow to the jaw snapped his head back, nearly paralyzing him for a few moments. Helplessly tanking two wild hooks to the face that nearly knocked the man off balance. He was caught by the collar of his armor and dragged forward past the woman, as she bent the wing backwards, then slammed her right knee into his upper spine. Knocking the wind out of him and unable to fight back against Sarious as she brought him and her leg down to the ground.

With his upper body still resting on her knee, she took her right arm and slammed it heavily onto his face in a hammer-like swing. The blow itself cracked the ground below the two, then the woman threw the man to the ground. Getting him to cough and finally breath again. Still feeling for his head in a thick daze. "...Im...Possible..." He managed to get out, as the dragon landed beside her. "I have the highest level gear... Stats that cannot even be matched...!"

"When will players learn that Power is Not the same as Strength?" Endzeit grumbled loudly.

"All those stats are completely useless if you don't have Technique to back them up. You need the skill to be able to use a weapon you're given, and you can't obtain that through any kind of editing. Only through training."

"And discipline. It's all about experience and muscle memory. That's why you don't stand a chance against us on an equal level match."

"Regardless of your status that you claim to have, regardless of your tricks that may have cornered other cheaters in the game, you've grown to rely on them. And therefore-" The man tried to slash Sarios in mid-sentence, but she got a lightning guard up as the blade stopped at her neck. "...You've grown weak. Weak and alone."

"Shut up!" He roared, trying to cut her again. Only to be caught by a red paw.

The dragon growled at him, then looked at the woman. "You want the honors?"

"Nah, I've already hit him enough. You can take him." The hunter almost whimpered as he made eye contact with the angry golden saucers. Pulling the sword downward and nearly making the feathered one stumble before taking a quick snap to his ribs. Before he could even grunt, that same paw hit him quickly in the nose. Almost hearing it break just before getting a swift kick to the diaphragm.

The feathered one staggered, trying to stay up and guard himself against the red one. As the beast went into a lower stance, his right foot started to glow and charge up in a series of rotations and spins. As the red one launched at him, the hunter evaded the glowing paw, then tried to strike the dragon in the back. Only to be interrupted by a heavy force hitting his jaw once again. Barely seeing the woman do a slugging motion from afar and sidewind to get closer.

As the man spun around with the blow, the dragon's paw connected to the other side of his face. Hearing the loud snap of his neck while he spun

around in the previous direction. A heavy stomp from each of them sent out a small electrical wave that once again paralyzed the hunter, getting the two Companions completely in sync with one another on opposite flanks. Striking at the ribs at the exact same time and with the same force, then the lower sides. A swing to the back of the head, then a rising kick to the face. Catching him as he bent backwards with backfist, then a quick kick to the shins. Tripping him forward.

The two kept with the rotation with a small leap, kicking the man's ribs together, then dropping a heavy heel on his shoulders. Making him slightly bounce off the ground as they landed and giving them just enough time to kick upward. Sending him into the sky once again.

As the hunter finally regained control of himself, he force himself to stop desperately before touching the abyss that was coming down. Eating away at the rocky cliff and any cloud particle that it touched. Roaring in a rage, he charged back at the two once again. Focusing up a ranged attack with his blade, but couldn't see quite straight.

After their final kick, the two finished up beside each other. Giving the other one a smirk, and tapping the back of their fists together. Seeing a thick spark arch between the paw and the glove. One last time, they went in sync, focusing all their Wild and Stamina into one duo uppercut. One that reached beyond their bodies, and directly at the Hunter. Hearing the impact and the man scream as he was knocked back into the blackness above them. Along with every rock and debris above the two.

The blow even propelled the ground under them a little bit. Giving them some time before either hitting the bottom of the cliff, or letting the darkness consume them. Though the clouds below were too thick to really tell how much longer they had. "Well... We did it." Sarious said a bit sadly. "But I don't see a way out of this."

"There really isn't one." The dragon mumbled sadly, holding her close. "I'm... Glad you came back for me."

"I am too." She smiled at him. "Even if it does mean the death of us." They were quiet for a moment, until she spoke up again. "Endzeit? Where will we go after this? Where did you go?"

"I..." He took a small breath, then a deeper gasp. "I might know a way out." He started opening his HUD and typing in a bit.

"Really? Where?"

"You gave me the idea, but..." He looked at her a bit sadly. "When things die in Skyline, they don't just... Disappear."

"What?"

"They're sent somewhere. Think of it as... Purgatory."

"Purgatory?" She asked, seeing him hit a few keys and open up a portal that was complete darkness. "What do you mean?"

"...Everything anyone has ever beaten is in there. Every wolf, every dungeon boss, every mantis. But it's almost separated from this zone, yet connected."

"Because they need a place to go..." She whispered, and he nodded.

"Serious... We don't stand a chance in there, but..."

She placed a hand under his muzzle, giving it a little kiss. "...That's what makes it interesting." As the portal behind them shut and left the two in a black abyss, the sounds of creatures skirmishing surrounded them. Even after the server shutdown, they were kept conscious and armed themselves with stances. Feeling the digitally dead beasts nearly breathe on them before fighting back.

Chapter ###

Lacuna Coil - End Of

Time

Light Escapes is dedicated to the many people I've met through the online

world. These people helped me... I guess you could say, Develop in many ways. As a Person. As a Player. As a Teacher. And as a friend. Though I may never see any of you again, and almost no one will ever read this, Thank you for helping me become what I am. All of you were a positive experience in my life, even if some of it was painful to me. In that odd way that I still cannot explain.

Perfect World International (Raging Tide):

Asaba
peccable
Pwca
Clergywoman
ShibaShiba
Calis_Solra
Melissan
SirChad
Matharis
Vitruvio
Ephimer
Warlander
MZ_Cleric
Jiink
Retaliation
Trugust
sygnate
Elvaryah
xDarkFlames
Kassiel
aendypb
AbelRogue
aoiiji
Eifekyus
Vegnar
KaoticSaint
Yoshirou
Malveaus
AntiCyclone
Dylusia
WinterHawk
Hitomie
Nichelle
Babylon

maryld
selenabale
Blackarrowz
Kiyomie
Huntara
PHEN
Morgan
Yoshinari
brightlight
Chuppy
PoriaHS
Archangelis
ArchDaisy
Meriola
seric
marvelousdan
Ancksunamun
VivianeAngel

The paramedics rushed the stretcher though the hallways of the building. Dozens of people looking to identify the man being carried, but no one seemed to know him. No one but Nathan, though he never told. "They said he might've gotten his brain erased. He'll have to relearn everything, that is if he survives." Walter said to him. "No one seems to know where he came from. Maybe he was just a player that sneaked into the HQ? Perhaps a tester of some sort?"

"...Maybe." Nathan muttered. "Any idea what he did in there?"

"I was hoping you could figure out. You're much better at tracking movements ingame than anyone else here."

"...I might be able to. Have you seen the Boss around?"

"He's being questioned by the police for some reason. It doesn't sound too good to me."

"Means he'll be busy." He sighed. "...I'll see what I can do, Walter."

"You'll tell me first, right? You owe me, Nathan."

"...Yeah. I do, don't I?" He smirked at him before heading back to his office.

Perfect World International (cont):

Craddock
Paianjen
Kraft_Dinner
PurpleBubble
Mermishor
Afrofoxxx
Scarrab
HeavenlyFury
SheianAuvrea
Blackarrows
Suffia
Aurabell
Fail_BM
Fallen_dream
Katsumie
Griffs_Lycan
Iron_Will
YamamoriYuki
IDestinyI
Victorr
Ursula_
Deh_UberBoss
Floriza
Mistress_Phe
Corlina
Kyuketsuki_
Eyelightz
Chubby
Shato
Ansrrail
Etherflame
breathoflife
Vermosect
Annisin
Haly
MarciaZee

IronStrider
NoobCannon
Nesme
stratakis
EndlessSoul
Soshified
uiron
HeavenSpirit
maddycats

The young man landed his truck in the driveway. Looking over the place like he still remembered being here a year ago. Almost being able to picture the young woman's face. With a heavy breath, he picked up his tablet and walked to the door. Only to see it open and greet the older woman with a smile. "Mrs. Johnson, how have you been?"

"I'm alright. My how you've grown, Miles. It feels like it's been five years since I've seen you."

"I think it's only been a year." He rubbed the back of his neck a bit nervously. Taking the invite inside and seeing a large trash can. On top of the mess was Trisha's old Visor. "Are... You...?"

The older woman sighed and looked at it. "...It's been over a year since she passed. I just thought it was... Only going to keep reminding me of what these things did to her. I know she liked them alot, as you did, but... They ruined her life."

"I'm... That's a hard thing to really... Make sense of, if you know what I mean." She nodded at him. "But..." She made a noise in question. "...I know this might sound crazy, Mrs. J. But... Trish might still be alive."

"What?"

"Hold on." He pulled out his phone, letting it display its contents on the white table, and pulling up a large picture. "This is the game she was playing when..." He grunted, feeling uncomfortable again. "And... Here." He pointed at a woman in a Kung Fu outfit with brown hair. "Mrs. J, this is Trisha's Avatar." A puzzled look from the elder one. "Like, your displayed persona. The one you use in the game."

"So?"

"J... This was taken yesterday..."

Guild Wars (1):

Aidan Bid
Alma Gravedigger
Artemis Legrasse
Defiance Ohio
Gunnarr Anvinder
I Have The Items
Jas Flyer
Jay Toke Alot
Knight Comet
Kotton Mouth Bunny
Night Ride Bow
Selena Bale
Tharmorial Lunsho
The Asassina
The Sehxpert

"Trisha?" The name being called from the middle of the busy streets caught Sarious' attention. Along with a male calling the name as well. Looking through the crowd, she could almost see a familiar avatar.

"Miles?" She asked, getting the red dragon on her shoulder to double take at her.

"Miles? Why does that sound so familiar?"

"He was an old friend of mine that went to school."

"What the hell is school?" Endzeit curled his neck as the short rogue caught his breath.

"I can't believe I found you!"

"You're on my friends list. And I thought you quit." She chuckled at him.

"Kinda, university got in the way, but..." He looked at her a bit sadly, then gave her an unexpected hug. "God damnit, I thought we lost you! Everyone thought...!"

"I... I'm sorry..." She whispered, slightly and awkwardly hugging him back. "It's alright, Miles. I'm still around, just no longer... There."

"We know. But..." The young man looked behind him, motioning someone to come forward. "There's someone who wants to see you."

"See me?" She asked, holding her breath when an elder looking woman came through the crowds. "...Grandma?"

Once again the dragon looked back and forth between the two.
"...What the hell is a Grandma!?"

Guild Wars 2 (Devona's Rest):

Osengj
Lil Ry
Roman God of War
Galderaz
HarumiNeko
mew
LittleOlive
Rexo
Oz of the Jungle
TheFluffReborn
Lagarr
bravespoon
anjuna
Selph
Shuggie
spiral
SlaughterStar
PrayogiNicolas
MadnessJr
Spaztaquilar
xxwonderslugxx
nobody
xentrix
Elazule

cameo
Bailrs
Probie
SkyGazer
ThaElectroGypsy
Alex
manu
Europa

The couple sat on their old swingset. Still slightly annoyed how it always creaked when it swung, but they got used to it after a few years. As the sun set slowly, ending yet another day, it once again blessed them with a gorgeous view. Sarious, leaning into Endzeit, couldn't hold back her smile. Thinking back to all the adventures the two had together. All the people they met, all the beautiful places they seen. All the creative creatures and raids they faced. And, of course, all the days they spent together.

Though, she kept Sire's words about not staying in one place for too long in mind, Sarious often liked it better when the two stopped. Just living day to day. Not always fighting against creatures, grinding for more Credits, or getting better items. After a while, you get to the point where you're maxed out in everything. Not to say that is boring, but...

The red one's heavy sigh interrupted her thoughts, as she rubbed the back of his paws. "...I'm going to miss this place." He muttered, a little sadly.

"...Me too." Sarious said, sighing herself. "But... It lasted a good ten years."

"...We have, what? One week left?"

"About that, yes."

"...Want to walk through it all once again? Starting in the morning?" She smiled at him, kissing his red muzzle.

"I would love to. For old time's sake."

Vindictus (East):

CalisSolra
Aartrox
AfroMexican
Apebble01
Blindicus
Craosis
DonHuan
Ecaballus
Elinii
Em0tera
FoxSenpai
Galizur
Gameology
Gennus
HilaryJane
Hitiana
LightEV
Jintemu
K1Y0K0
KillaBunny
Laagarr
Lagrima
Lynnrrir
NinsamX
Novaescence
Pebblz
Usag1
Vanitos
Xilenon
YohOz
blackwolf69
houtujin
katezon
Dynamics

They finally made it across the farthest lake. Walking around it was a much better idea than taking a boat, or even flying. Too many creatures and things to go wrong, not that many of them were really a threat towards the two anymore. They were famous in Skyline, really. And they were never bothered again by any Bounty Hunters.

Sure, the duel requests were rolling in. The Faction invites were constant after Dalton had to put down the game. Occasionally, they seen Silverthorn and Sire pop in to say hi, do a few things with the two, and listen to one of Sire's famous stories. Even maybe have a group session with them, if they had the time for such a thing. Though, she still didn't know exactly what those two dragons did in the real world, they often kept it vague.

A purrful nudge broke her out of thought, getting her to pet her Companion once again under the chin. "What were you thinking about?" He mumbled.

"Just... Things. Sire and Silverthorn, Dalton and Draconica." That one made the dragon toss his snout. "What?"

"Don't get me wrong, I loved the Faction and all. But after he disbanded it, ugh..."

"Oh, I know. So many pesters. To the point where..." Sarious chuckled.

"Where we made a bogus Faction to stop all factions from giving us their business card." He half whined and grumbled at the memory. "Then got crap for that."

"I know. But at least they stopped coming to our home."

"Which one?" The thought made her chuckle once again. "Yeahhhh, who am I kidding? None of them were safe. I swear they had eyes everywhere."

"Tell me about it." She smiled again, looking back towards the lake and across the mountains. As the sun started to set one last time within the game, she sighed. "Looks like the celebration is coming to an end."

"Yeah..."

"...What do you think will happen to us?" She looked at the red one a bit sadly.

"Well... That's the beautiful thing about this place, Trisha." He pulled up his HUD and began typing. "There's never just one world." He smiled as another portal opened. Just in time for the server countdown to appear in the sky at one minute. "We wrecked Skyline."

"Just like we said we would." She smiled at him.

"Where would you like to go next?" With one last overlook at the entire game, the woman took a deep breath.

Escapes."

"Wherever My Light