

Light Escapes Act 1 - Trinity

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"Access Denied."

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

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

"After Installation, prep the container for release."

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

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

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

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

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

"Of Course, Sir."

Within Temptation (Feat. Xzibit) - And We Run

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Free...

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Miles-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How!?"

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

"Pay to Win." He grumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds like you want a player-"

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

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

"When do you leave again? Two days?"

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

seem to combat worthy-"

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

"Breakfast?" She asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You... Said it right."

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

"But the others...?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I need to find you a different name."

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

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

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

"You mean: 4891276645-4NX7?"

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

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

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

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

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

"You sound like a male."

"More male than female, yes."

"And you look like a Chinese dragon."

"A what dragon?" He tilted his head.

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

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

"Maybe. You don't like them?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How long were you in storage?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Days!?"

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

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

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

"Peanut Oil is pet food."

"And you're a pet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well then, your HUD is broken."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

"Fell asleep!?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not a player."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Falhoorik?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What did he mean by Wraiths?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She was dragged away? By what though?"

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

"Falhorrik's?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please, You Only Live Once."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And if you did-?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hugging her.

"How did you possibly survive?"

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

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

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

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

"Oh, thank the Gods you are safe!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

"Was that a compliment?"

"Maybe." She teased.

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

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

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

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

"Which one?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Or Heavy?"

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

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

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

"Oh, my IV is getting low."

"IV?" The dragon tilted his head.

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

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

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

"You just ate though."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Evans."

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

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

"Hey Grandma."

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

"It depends on how I feel-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Says you-" She sadly mumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Body Pillows are off limits."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" She said rather harshly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"...No."

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

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

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

"Ego."

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

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

Patch Notes v1.2456

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

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

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

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

"Yes Ma'am."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wow..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why does everyone assume that?"

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

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

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

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

"Oh, yes I could-"

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

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

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

"Says you." He grumbled.

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

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

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

"I swear all he thinks about is food."

"And body pillows-"

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

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

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

Chapter 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"O-okay."

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

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

"Any minute now, I'm sure."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fair enough. Rocky, lead the way."

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

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

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

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

"You're lazy, you know that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, Evade. Don't defend."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

snap at the cleric made the younger woman almost freeze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

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

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

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

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

"Are you trying to kill me!?"

"I feel like that's rhetorical-"

"You pushed me off a cliff!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Crystal!"

"I can't hear you!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What word?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What were you hoping for?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe 10C a piece?"

"And the Fullness Value?"

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

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

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

"W-what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I swear, if you try anything-"

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

"Isn't the roofs off limits?"

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

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

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

"What did you...?"

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

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

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

"Should I not?" He half teased.

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

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

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

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

"You eat too much."

"Well, yes-"

"Stop touching me."

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

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

"Should I not be?"

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

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

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

"It's been several hours-"

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

"I will think for myself."

"You will keep your trust in me."

"I will keep my trust in you."

"Your faith revolves in that trust."

"My faith revolves in that trust."

"And you will share my goals."

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

"Damn right we will-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SilverThorn

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

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

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

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

Light Escapes Act 2 - Intoxicated

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

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"Let's talk about school." The older woman said, barely taking her eyes off her notebook. Even when laying down lazily on the couch, the younger one had a hard time to get comfortable and relaxed. These sessions were always hard on Trisha, forcing her to always analyze her life in the real world constantly. Something she just never wanted to think about. "Have you gone to school since our last session?"

"...Yeah. But I really don't want to talk about that."

"Did something happen?" She asked. Though, Trish couldn't really blame the therapist. She was just doing her job, but it didn't make it easy on the younger one.

"Not really. Just people... Talking." She mumbled, hearing a few more scratches of the pen.

"Talking about what? You?" A deep sigh as Trisha covered her eyes with her hand and massaged the space between her eyes. Remaining quiet about the question and hoping the adult would get the hint. "What did your teachers say?"

A heavy sigh and swallow came from the younger one, staying quiet for a moment while she gathered her words. "...I met someone a few weeks ago." It got the scribbles to stop for a moment.

"In real life? Or in a game?"

"Game." She muttered.

"Is this the same ones you've been playing? Escaping to?"

"...No. This is a new one." She heard the older one sigh through her nose, telling Trish that the therapist was not impressed with the answer. "He's... Different from everyone else I've met."

"How so?"

"...He said he trusted me. Placed his entire life in my hands."

"You mean his virtual life." The younger one shook her head. "Have you met him in real life?"

"...He doesn't exist in the real world. He keeps telling me that he isn't a player, but... He doesn't talk like an AI."

"AI? As in Artificial Intelligence?" Trisha nodded. "How did you meet this AI?"

"...I bought him. From a trading post type thing. He's what is called a Companion. An NPC that fights with you within the game."

"So, kind of like a pet?"

"...But he's more than that. He talks sensible. Thinks outside the box, and in Meta."

"Meta?"

"Like, he knows it's a game world. That it's all digital, virtual."

"What did you name him?"

"...Endzeit."

"Endzeit?" The older woman muttered, taking a few notes. "Why would you call him that?" A light shrug was all she got in response. "You said he trusts you. Do you trust him as well?"

"...Yes."

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Her vision started to sharpen and focus on the digital world around her. The room they last rented looked familiar to her as the morning sun started to glare over the wooden walls. Along with quite a few small HUDs [Heads Up Display] above her belly a bit. Feeling the small red tail instinctively fluttering around while the dragon started typing. The faint noise she made while she started to move got the small critter to close everything and try to leap off her torso before she woke up, but Sarious snatched him in midair. Getting the little one to yelp.

"Busted." She muttered, hearing the dragon whimper a bit while it was bringing brought back to her body. "You're never going to learn, are you?" Another loud long whimper while he was being stroked by her.

"...I'm getting... Mixed feelings, here." He eventually whimpered. "Unless you're planning to rub my scales off as punishment."

A light chuckle from her. "Not really. It's been about two days since I've caught you." His furry ears lowered. "Yes, I knew. You leave a rather warm spot on what you usually lay on."

"But bonus points for trying not to get on your bad side in the mornings?" Endzeit looked at her with really sad eyes, getting her to chuckle and shake her head.

"You mean trying to sneak in your comfort urges?" The dragon snorted at her.

"Well, when you put it like that it just sounds selfish." He grumbled, resting his head on the lumps within the white cloth. Still feeling her stroke him made the red one release a noise of discomfort. "Seriously, you're getting under my scales. Are you going to punish me or not?"

"I swear you're a masochist." The dragon's ears went back and he grumbled, but didn't argue. As Sarious sighed, looking towards the ceiling, she took a moment to think. "I guess I've been thinking about what you said a few weeks ago."

"About what?"

"About... Not doing it to make me mad. But just doing it..." Another moment to think. "Actually, I'm not sure why you're doing it-"

"Because you're comfortable."

"Because I'm comfortable, apparently." That time, Endzeit chuckled. "I suppose I should stop punishing you for it, providing you don't do it in public."

"Why?" He questioned, getting a very odd look from the woman.

"You seriously enjoy getting beaten, don't you?"

"I meant about doing it in public!" He hissed, getting her to laugh. Tossing his snout and landing a bit heavily on one of the mounds.

"Because it's embarrassing! People might think-" She stopped herself, feeling her face start to blush once again as the dragon's ears perked. After a bit of silence, he tried to study her with curious golden eyes.

"Might think what?"

"N-nevermind Endzeit." Sarious place a hand on his head and eyes, making his yelp at the first sight of it. "You're such a wimp."

"You usually beat me to near death whenever you cover me like that, I have a reason to be a wimp towards you." He snorted, pushing the hand out of the way to look at her again. The

dragon seen her eyes trailing off towards the side, a bit hurt. "What?"

"Nothing." She tried to keep her original tone, but it slightly choked. The red one just grumbled and padded the body pillows a bit, getting her irked attention as he flopped his body on them.

"What is it?" He grumbled, feeling the hand behind him once again.

"...You know that sound you make when someone other than me touches you?"

"My growl?" He curled his neck.

"Not that one, the other one. The one where you like it." A loud snort put a small smile on her face.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He grumbled and closed his eyes. "You must be hearing things."

"Really now?" The woman gave the small one a sly smirk, which only made him feel more uncomfortable. As the dragon tried to raise up, the heavy hand on his back pinned him in place. Getting him to hiss towards it as the glove started to grope the back of his neck and mane. Making the red one instinctively start to purr silently, regardless of how much he was trying to fight against it. "There it is."

"It's... Your... Imag-" He tried to say, but gave into the harsh strokings. Pushing himself towards the glove and almost guiding it around his collar and shoulders. Sarious chuckled at him and slowed down, hearing him growl a bit. "Don't stop." He grumbled.

"Too bad. It's time to get up and get some leveling done. If you're good, you might get more later."

"What about breakfast?" He grumbled, getting on the nightstand, then her shoulder once she was up.

"It's either get pet, or food in the mornings."

"Oh, come on! Don't make me choose!" He whimpered loudly, getting the woman to chuckle. Another loud whimper told her to look at him and see the bit golden saucers. "Please?"

"Didn't you have enough last night?"

"That question is illogical. You can never have enough food." He snorted, seeing her smile even got him to. "Please?"

"How about a small breakfast then?" Seeing him toss his snout half got on her nerves.

"I know what that means..."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted me to take the cooking expertise."

"Yes, but I didn't think food could come out so poorly-!" A loud yelp as the hand came up over his head once again.

"Practice makes perfect. And you either get used to my cooking, or you go without."

"Fiiine. Let's go beat on some dough. Better than beating on me this morning." The dragon grumbled as the two left the Inn.

"No-no-no. You fold, then press. Fold and press in. It's how you knead bread." The red one coached the woman, who was clearly getting annoyed at her companion. "Put some effort into it. I don't want to see any two caramel stripes touching. Like right there."

"Put a sock in it. It's perfectly fine if they touch. Besides, you couldn't do a better job."

"Of course I could!" The dragon hissed. "Here, I'll show you how it's done." Endzeit leapt off her shoulder and aimed for the pile of dough, but she quickly removed it. Landing with a white floury Poof.

"Don't you touch this! I'm planning to at least try it after it's finished!" The small one groaned as he got up and snapped his jaws while searching for any loose fangs. Getting the unpleasant taste of the white powder on his forked tongue forced him to make a face.

"What's the big deal if I touch it or not!?"

"Trust me, I know you don't wash your paws." Sarious glared at him, and the dragon growled back.

"You don't have to every time. I don't know why you're so obsessed with your food being held by someone so clean." He grumbled, giving her the workspace once again.

"It's just sanitary."

"Please, my claws are not venomous. There is no way you could obtain an illness from bad food within Skyline." The little one snorted loudly.

"Well, I don't want to be the first. Let alone by failure Dragonbuns."

"We'd be using Maple if it was Dragonbuns. These are... I'm not sure what these are." The woman double taked at him. "What?"

"Maple!?" She whined in defeat. "You said Caramel!"

"I questioned caramel, and pondered what it would taste like if the maple was replaced." Another harsh glare from her. "Why are you looking at me like that. It's not like it's

going to explode or something."

"Is it?"

"Shouldn't." The dragon said, taking a slow step backwards and getting another glare from her. "I'm... Just going to wash up."

"Sure you are." A moment later, the dough started to glow blue with a faint light as it completed into a loaf of bread. "Well... I was expecting something else, like sticking it into an oven first, but okay." She looked around, but couldn't find the small red one anywhere. "Endzeit?"

"It didn't explode, did it?" A muffled voice came from her left, seeing the red one slowly lift open a lid to a can and stare at the loaf of bread.

"It apparently did not. Thank you, noble pet, for the concern." Sarious grumbled sarcastically.

"You're welcome." He said, quite seriously while climbing out. "Want the honors of the first slice?"

"And the only slice." She muttered, cutting the heel of the loaf and taking a bite. "Not bad, really. Probably the best thing so far I've made-" A loud swallowing sound got her attention of the missing bread, and the dragon licking his paws for crumbs. "...Did you even taste it?"

The little one looked at her for a moment, and cleared his throat. "...Yes."

"Are you saying that because you actually did? Or because you don't want me to force feed you a boulder?" She put a hand on her hip, then instantly regretting it.

"...Yes." He replied, getting her to sigh. "It tasted like... Caramel."

"You could hardly taste the caramel in it."

"Maybe on your half-"

"My slice. Not half. About my 5% of the bread-"

"It was 7.4698-"

"That I made!" It made him whimper and lower his ears. Sighing once again, Sarious grumbled. "Did you get enough?"

"...Yes."

"That means no." She pressed on the space between her eyes and heard him whimper again. "Well, I suppose we can both get something else to eat." Putting away several of the cans and Tupperware made Endzeit think for a few moments.

"Wait." She made a noise in question as he scratched the back of his ear. "No. I didn't have enough. But..." She stared at him and waited for the red one to finish. "Let me make you something this time."

"Pets can't cook."

"I'm not a pet." He grumbled, pushing against the can with the flour in it, until the can fell over and opened up. "I'm a Companion. And Companions can cook, if they're smart enough to."

"And you're going to start from scratch?"

"I'm going to use your cooking skill, actually." He pulled up his HUD and typed in a few things. A faint grunt came from him as the windows closed. "There, now just let me--"

"Wash your paws." A double take from the small critter, then his ears went back. "Do it." A toss of his snout and he flew off towards a sink. Plugging the hole, adding some soap, and bathed in it for a few minutes. Coming out and drying himself off with other people's clothing.

"Happy?" He grumbled, getting a smirk from the woman as well as a nod. "Alright, we'll start with the dries, then do the wets." Endzeit struggled with measuring cups, getting them in a much larger bowl.

"You could always use your larger form, you know."

"That form is for combat use only." He wheezed, trying to add some sugar into the bowl. "If I use it, the game might register me attempting to attack the table or other objects, instead of just interacting with them." Sarious rolled her eyes. As much as she did enjoy the comical struggle of the red one, she got up and helped him. "...Thanks." The dragon muttered.

"No problem. What are you going to add next?"

"That'll be a surprise." She looked at him oddly. "Don't give me that, you wanted me to make you a small meal, I'm making you a small meal." He climbed up onto a small container. "A little bit of this."

"You realize that's salt."

"Yes. And I require a little bit of this."

"What exactly are you making?"

"You'll see." Endzeit said, searching the containers on the table. Then flying off to another cabinet. "Here we are." He pulled out a bottle with a near black liquid inside. Squirting some within the wet ingredients.

"Is that Maple Syrup?"

"Nope." When she tried to examine the bottle, he covered it with his body and halfly hissed at her. "No peaking!"

"Is it brown?"

"Well... Yes."

"Is it sticky?"

"Yes." His ears went back.

"Then it's maple syrup."

"It is not maple syrup." He grumbled. "You'll see what it is after. Now I need to find another dark substance-that is not Maple Syrup!" A faint chuckle from the woman as she motioned him to go on. Placing a few more odds and ends at his lead, they poured the wet ingredients into the dry, and started kneading the dough. "I never knew this stuff to be so sticky." The little one grumbled, prying his leg out from the large mess and struggled to get it off his claws.

"Just needs a little more flour. I'm glad it seems to regenerate."

"The system isn't that picky. I cannot imagine what it would be like to only have a set amount of ingredients that could possibly expire." A few minutes of working on kneading, and the meal completed in a faint glow. Revealing a set of twelve rolls that were stripped with an orange and brown filling. "Looks like they turned out well. And you even got some Proficiency Experience out of this one."

"What are they?"

"Try them." The red one nudged, his ears went back when he met her uncomfortable glare. Trying to think of what that mystery ingredient was, she took a breath while tearing off a roll. Biting into it and getting a very slight salty, but sweet molasses taste out of the fluffy bread. "What do you think?"

"They're rather good. Surprising really."

"Surprising?" He lifted an ear with a rather irked look on his muzzle. When Sarius shrugged, he let it go. "And check out the middle." She did, seeing a faint orange and brown design within the white fluff that almost looked like a fireball.

"What is this?" She asked, taking another bite.

"Dragon Balls." He answered, getting the woman to almost choke while blushing. "What?" He studied her for a moment, and his ears fell. "Uh oh..."

"No-no... Just..." She half tried to cover her face, getting the little one curious.

"What's wrong?"

"You called it... Dragon Balls." He motioned her to go on. "The treats from the festival were..."

"Dragonbuns. Do piecing together themes make you... Red?" The dragon tilted his head at the woman.

"N-no. It's just..." She took a breath. "I can only imagine someone made a long loaf of bread named after a dragon's..." She half whispered.

"You mean Dragon's Pride?" This time, she whimpered and completely hid her face. Losing balance and sitting on the floor. "It's that bread that's like six feet long. A bit thick too-"

"Stop. Please." Her whimpers made him chuckle.

"I don't understand why you're so Red. They're not hot, are they? I didn't really put anything spicy in them." He took a roll and bit into it. Releasing a purr before devouring the rest of the treat. "I love Dragon Balls." Another whimper from her. "I don't know who doesn't. But the bigger ones are much better, though harder to get off-"

"Endzeit!" She yelled through her clothing, getting the red one to laugh.

"Seriously, what's wrong with you?" He landed on her shoulder with caution. Almost expecting to be snatched. "Sarious?" When she didn't reply, he started to bring up a HUD. Sending some slight tingles through her body for a moment. "Your Blood Pressure is a bit high, as well as your Body Temperature." It got her to look up at the panels he was examining. "And you're getting a slight increase in energy, probably from your adrenaline."

"What are you...?" He looked into her eyes for a moment, and it shown concern in his golden ones.

"You worried me. But you seem fine overall." He closed the menus, only to find the woman still looking at him. In result, he sighed quietly. "...I looked up that word a while ago. Allergic. I was half thinking that maybe..." He looked towards the rolls on the table.

"I shouldn't be. And no, it's not... That." She rubbed her arm once again.

"You sure?" Sarious nodded at him. "Alright. But now you've got me worried sick about you. Players can be allergic to nearly everything." The dragon sighed.

"I don't really have any allergies. And It's doubtful that people will break out or have attacks when exposed to anything in a digital world."

"I hope so." He nudged her until the woman looked at him again, meeting Endzeit's smile. "I cannot imagine anyone being allergic to food." It made her chuckle.

"It's not just all food, but types. Nuts is a very very big one." She got up and walked towards the table once again.

"I remember water being one as well." He shuttered, getting a very faint clicking noise out of his scales that almost sounded like a beetle's wings. Getting the woman to almost try to move away from him by instinct. "Not much of a life if you have to watch what you eat and drink."

"Or lay on."

"Still want some of my Dragon Balls?" A faint whimper again from her, as well as a bit of blushing. "There it is again. Why do you do that?"

She halfly looked around, though only a few players fixed on what they were doing, she didn't feel comfortable telling him here. "I'll explain later. But yes, I'll take a few more rolls. They are rather good."

"Wait until you get a glaze on them." Sarious covered her face, getting the dragon to chuckle at her.

Chapter 2

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"Is there any specific reasons why you trust him?" The older woman asked, finally putting down her notebook. But keeping the pen in hand.

"...He's given me every reason to."

"But nearly every NPC is trustworthy, is it not?" Trisha didn't reply. "It's usually their reason for existence within a virtual world, for the players to rely on to play a certain role. How is this Endzeit any different than the others?" The younger one glared at her a bit harshly, getting the therapist to lift up her hands slightly in defense. "It's just an honest question. Something I want you to think about."

"Because he talks like a person, not like an AI."

"Nowadays, most NPCs talk sensible-"

"The way they talk is still somehow fake. You can feel the difference in them still." Trish sighed for a moment to calm down. "The Uncanny Valley still exists, if only faintly within them."

"But not with your pet?"

"...No. He's just..." A moment of silence. "Somehow alive."

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"Innuendo?" The dragon tilted his head at the woman.

"Yes. And once you learn about it, you start seeing it everywhere."

"But how did you get Sexual-" A hand covering his head made the small one yelp.

"Don't say that out loud." She whispered under her breath. "I don't want people to hear you." They looked around the half busy streets of the city, not seeing anyone pay attention to what the dragon said. However, getting a few points here and there from other players. The thought of it bothered her, being pointed out and talked about almost in whispers.

"But where do you see that from rolls?" He whispered, eyeing out a bakery stand with breads on display.

"You called them Dragon Balls." She grunted, trying not to get embarrassed once again.

"And?"

"Balls are another common term for... You know."

"Rolls?" The woman covered her eyes.

"You've never seen them, so it makes sense why you can't piece these together."

"So, it's not about the rolls? Hmm." The small one pondered. "I can't say I understand this."

"There's a news flash." Sarious grumbled, sarcastically. Getting yet another confused look from the small one. "Nevermind, you're better off just staying innocent."

"I'd rather know things than remain ignorant of them. You never know when this kind of information could prove useful." Another whimper from her. "What was the other one that incapacitated you, again? Dragon's Pride?"

A mix of a whimper and a sigh from her. "The long one, yes. I can only imagine the idiot who made it a thing in this game."

"I can't. Bread has nothing to do with dragons." Endzeit snorted. "I can't see who would take pride in a loaf of bread."

"That's not what it means."

"Then... They add them to the hoard instead? Who in their right mind would collect food and not eat it?" He curled his neck.

"Not you, apparently."

"Seriously, Serious." A sharp glare from her got him to chuckle. "I still don't understand."

"And I think it's better if you remain that way. Now if you don't stop asking questions about it, I'm going to end up as red as you are."

"Just one more question." A loud growl from her got him to sink his head a bit. "...Are you going to eat those leftover Balls?" A sigh in defeat from the woman, as she flopped down on a bench and opened up her inventory.

"I can't believe you're still hungry."

"We were talking about food for ten minutes straight, can you seriously blame me?"

"I can only try." She gave him the rolls, but took one for herself. Taking a bite out of hers while she watched the dragon eat one almost whole.

"So." He tried to say with his mouth full. "If the bread is supposed to be symbolic-"

"We're not talking about it."

"Of something sexual-"

"We're not talking about it."

"What's the glaze supposed to be?" A heavy grunt in frustration from her, as the woman covered her face once again.

"You're going to eat bench by the end of this conversation if you keep this up. You realize this, right?"

"And it just might be worth it." He chuckled. Finishing the rolls while Sarious composed herself once again. Feeling a shadow fall over them. "Hey, it's this guy." The red one said with a full muzzle. Making the woman look up towards a large, navy-blue panther with several volts of arcing lightning around it. Mounted on the feline was a man in abyss-black and red plate armor.

"Oh, hey." He said to the woman, as she tried to get a good look at him away from the glare of the sun. "I haven't seen you for a few weeks. How are you making out?"

She studied the man for a few moments, not really knowing how to respond. "We're doing fine." The dragon answered, swallowing a roll. "You?"

"Been alright. Still recruiting people for the Faction though. I don't suppose..." The woman's face went cross and he chuckled. "Alright, alright. Just asking."

"Don't take it seriously. She has a habit of turning friendly gestures into insults." A sharp glare from Sarius made him whimper a little bit. "Don't look at me like that. You know you do."

Half a grumble from her made the man chuckle again. "Why does everyone think that I need a Faction?"

"Don't you?" Endzeit asked, getting another glare, but it was weakened by shyness. "You can't complete this game alone." A quiet sigh came from her exhale.

"I take it you've been asked alot, huh?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. At least three or four times a day it seems." The dragon nodded, agreeing with her.

"Here I was thinking that you were just not invited to any others after my offer." The black knight pondered for a moment, then dismounted his large cat. "Dalton." He offered her a handshake.

She looked at him oddly. "...The main character from Roadhouse?" He laughed out loud at that and nodded.

"From the original. Not the remake several decades ago."

"Can't say I've seen that one." She looked at his gauntlet for a moment, seeing a strange contraption on the index finger and thumb of the metal glove. Shaking the hand eventually. "Sarius. And this is Endzeit, my Companion."

"Companion?" He questioned. "I thought he was a miniature."

"Miniature!?" The red one hissed. "Why would you think that?" He curled his neck at him, then noticed the two look at the red one rather blankly. "...What!?"

"Apparently it's not obvious." Another chuckle from the man. "So he's actually a Tamer's Companion?" He leaned against the Thundercat, stroking its neck.

"Yeah, and a melee one at that. It's kinda hard to believe from the look of him." A growl from the dragon as he tossed his snout in the air away from them. Looking back at Dalton, she noticed something strange in his expression. "What?"

He exhaled, rubbing the back of his dark blue hair. "Sorry. If I knew that, I wouldn't have pressured you so badly when we first met." The woman lifted an eyebrow. "Remember when I offered to buy him? I thought he was a Minipet." She made a noise in agreement with a very slight head nod. "Sorry about that, by the way. It was a bit impulsive on my end to do that."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad I turned it down, kind of."

"What do you mean Kind Of?" The little one growled, getting a smirk from Sarious.

"He's a complete pest at times. And eats a truck load. I've probably burned over a million in the past couple of days just feeding him."

"Oh please! I'm not that bad!"

"I still don't know how you haven't gained a single pound." The man chuckled at the two.

"Sounds like you've been getting along quite fine. I'd love to have you in Draconica." She looked at him again, seeing a similar word under his nametag.

"I'm just..." She sighed quietly, and he held up a hand.

"You need to be ready for one, I know. But I would love to have a Tamer with a dragon pet in the Faction."

"Companion." Both the woman and the red one corrected him. Dalton chuckled and lifted his hands while nodding.

"Force of habit, forgive me. But seriously, consider it. Please Sarious?"

"You want me in your guild?" He nodded. "Even if it means I'm not optimal?" She asked a bit coldly, getting a puzzled look from the knight. "I'm a... Melee Tamer, if you can even call me that. I don't use magic spells or anything."

He shrugged. "Whatever. I don't mind. If you made it here alright, especially after those patch changes over the weekend, you're perfectly capable in my books."

"And the others in your Faction?" Another cold question.

"Their opinions don't matter. I'm the Leader, and they can't argue with me. If they try, I'll warn them how much my greaves sting when I kick them from the guild." He studied her for a bit. "Now you've got me curious."

"About what?"

"About this... Melee Tamer idea. Could you show me how it works?" The woman studied him for a moment, wondering what he meant. "A friendly duel. Doesn't mean anything to whoever wins."

Sarious got a very uncomfortable look on her face when she turned to the dragon. "Basically what it sounds like. A Player vs Player in-town event. The game will end the duel whenever one of them reaches 1 hp." An exhale from her. "No one can die during these, but any consumables will be affected as normal."

"And you want us to fight you?" He nodded at her.

"Two against one is fine. I'm used to fighting multiple targets."

She looked at the dragon once again, and he shrugged. "There's no risk, but it's entirely up to you."

"If you win, I'll buy you guys dinner-"

"Okay, now we have to fight." Endzeit said, getting the woman to roll her eyes and shake her head.

"What the hell, let's try. But I'm not holding back." She got up to stretch, and the knight gave a friendly salute. Tapping his mount to make it disappear in a flash of lightning, and reach back for a large greatsword that appeared stowed on his back. Pulling it over his shoulder while walking out in the streets as the red one flipped and landed in his combat form. "He's a much higher level, isn't he?"

"Yeah, 87." He whispered.

"Figures. I was hoping maybe that armor was just an appearance skin from the Cash Shop." She sighed, walking towards the middle of the street facing Dalton. "We've got no chance."

"Don't say that!" He hissed. "If we somehow win, we can make him spend a million on food! Maybe even fluff up your body pillows-" She swatted him hard on the shoulder and he laughed. "Okay, okay. But seriously, he's going to have some wicked defenses."

"What was the thing on his gauntlet?"

"The lock, you mean?" She half shrugged. "Keeps from being disarmed. Basically making you never let go of your weapon."

"I guess that's never been an issue with me."

"Considering how often you tend to do it, it's no wonder some players pay the extra for that." He chuckled. "You ready for this?"

"Ready as ever. We Rampage As One, okay?"

"Got it." The dragon slammed his fists together and faintly roared, seeing his Hitpoints deplete about one third and start regenerating, while his second bar jumped up a quarter full. "I

love this damn thing."

"Just don't abuse it." She gave the knight in the distance a solid nod, and he returned it. Sending a Duel request towards her and seeing the small UI [User Interface] pop up. Sarious stared at it for a moment while her heart beat faster. Taking a breath to relax, she accepted. Seeing a ten second timer pop up.

Collision Course 3 (Linkin Park & Eminem) - Dead Space

"I'll let you make the first move." Dalton hollered from the other side, getting himself into a defensive stance and pulling down his full helmet.

"Initiative advantage. It's something." The dragon mumbled. Waiting for her orders. Another breath, and she got into her stance. As soon as the buzzer went off, the two charged side by side, getting into a position to flank the knight. At about six feet away, the red one did a small hop and stomped on the ground hard. Sending a shockwave towards the man and exploding into a massive force that he barely blocked. But not without being pushed back a few feet.

Before the debris could even clear, Sarious dived at Dalton with a heavy kick. Cracking the road when she landed, and just barely missed the knight. As he went in for an overhead slash, the dragon came in from the smoke with a front flip. Trying to scrape the black knight with a hind claw that marked the flat side of his blade. Continuing the assault with a rising body blow interrupted Dalton's counter attack, and feeling a heavier than usual hit through his armor. A heavy downward red fist followed that attack, pushing the man back a bit more.

Swinging the greatsword across to hit Endzeit, the dragon ducked under it. Sarious stepping off of the red one's back and getting in close with another dive kick. Getting the man to curse at the constant barrage while she punched him in the face, then the chest. Going for a slight uppercut with her palm didn't quite reach, and gave him enough time to swing back at her side. Feeling the blade actually hit the woman felt like hitting a wall, as a green lightning effect covered her body for a moment. Allowing Sarious to continue her attack on his solar-plexus; a thrust with the vertical fore-knuckles of her fingers, followed by a very quick rotation and hitting him a second time with the back knuckles of the same hand. The step she took with it added Inner Strength to both attacks, pushing the knight back once again.

Before he could even breath, the dragon's roundhouse connected with the cheek of his helmet, almost hearing the thing crack and sting his face. Barely seeing the red one spin backwards for another kick, Dalton ducked under it. Finally getting his first real hit in with a swing against Endzeit's torso, putting him down a quarter health.

As the woman entered the fray once again, she spun backwards and slammed her elbow into the knight's face, getting him to curse once again and spin with the attack. Hoping to get refooted before her next one. Guarding his midsection, his left shin took a heavy hit from her back kick, getting him to almost stagger forward. Leading him getting rammed by her entire back and shoulderblades. Staggering backwards, she tried to continue the attack with a shoulder ram [Not to be confused with Shoulder Tackle, like in football. Using your shoulder as an attack, not your entire body's momentum. This is sometimes called Mountain Splitter], and Dalton did the same. The two hitting each other in a heavy deadlock for a moment, until she gave in early. Sidewinding behind him while the dragon slammed down on the knight's helmet in a hammer-like fist.

Rising up, Dalton tried to slash the red one, but barely missed his mane. Trying to follow through with a backwards slash as well, Endzeit interrupted him with a heavy kick to the ribs, which lead to another one from Sarious on the opposite side. A fist to the knight's chest, then a slam against his back, Dalton almost growled. Hating being flanked, defending his mid-section from the dragon's knee, and trying to back kick the woman behind him. Only to have his armored foot grabbed by her and lifted upwards. Getting him to almost yelp while keeping balance, until her foot tripped his grounding one. Sending him rotating in the air before landing heavily on his back.

The two backed off, giving the man a chance to get up and take a breath while they did the same. "You really don't hold back your punches." The knight chuckled, adjusting his helmet correctly. Looking at the dragon, then the woman behind him, he got into a ready stance once again. "I hate being flanked." He grumbled, taking another breath. With his free hand, he gathered some black mist and threw it into the ground beside him. As Endzeit Dashed forward, Dalton swung his blade upwards, throwing out a shockwave along the ground towards the red one, then a heavy swing across from him. When the sword got near the black mist on the ground, a large bomb came out from it. Getting hit by the great weapon like a baseball and launched towards Sarious.

As the dragon jumped over the shockwave, the ground projectile exploded beneath him. Just barely avoiding the debris it created, but landing on uneven grounds. While the woman slid under the bomb, just barely seeing the skull and crossbones painted on the side of the thing to make it look almost like a Roundshot, she got back up. Only to be pushed back by the knight's very quick dash attack across the ground. The attack stung, and took about a third of her HP away, unable to get in her defense in before she seen it.

As she rolled to recover, the bomb exploded a ways behind them. Seeing Dalton come in with an uppercut-like swing, Sarious got her Lightning Defense in on time, covering her with Green Bolts once again, but only enough to not take the damage. The attack still sent her upwards into the air, and see the knight come in for a second one. Activating the defense once again took alot out of her stamina, but she was able to block the attack. Riding on the large weapon the full ways over the man's head and rolling on the other side of him.

Landing on her feet in a crouch, the black one continued his assault with a heavy jumping slash onto her. Seeing Sarious raise up and block it with her forearm, this time with a more pink and purple colored Lightning around her body, which then exploded outward from her, pushing Dalton back and staggering him for a moment. "Endzeit!"

The dragon dived in, hitting the man once again in the helmet with a heavy punch and getting it to crack. Letting the heavy right fist follow the rotation to a light back one with his left paw, then a right hook. The hook put him into a boxer stance, pushing the man back with two very quick punches to the helm, then a heavy straight to the chest. When one set was done, Endzeit weaved forward and did another, starting with the opposite fist. As much as Dalton tried to block one, the other two would often get around his defense.

Soon enough, the knight was backed up to a wall, and the heavy straight to the chest knocked the breath out of him. Trying to retaliate by using up some of his Hp, the greatsword cut off a spike of the dragon's mane, and nearly his ear. Rolling with the sideways swing, the red one kicked the black knight in the gut, then a Knee to the ribs. Following with two body blows to the opposite sides. A quick hook to the right cheek, then a right kick to the side was slightly deflected by the large weapon. Trying to shove the red one away, Dalton got a heavy backfist to the side of his helm, hearing the thing crack loudly and loosen up. Then a second backfist to the other side did the same, splitting the nose guard quite a bit.

A kick aimed at the gut pushed the man against the wall again, telling him there was enough room for a slash. He took it desperately, only to hit nothing but air and see that the dragon crouched under it. Rising up with an uppercut to the chin finally broke the helmet off and sent it upward into the air. Rising his free hand to guard himself, he seen Endzeit slightly retreat, and the woman jump off the red creature. Doing a rotation kick in the air, and snapping the airborne helm straight back at Dalton. Getting the black one to catch it with his face.

The massive sting behind it got the man to growl in a bit of rage. Realizing that he really shouldn't have underestimated these two, despite being a higher level. Roaring, the knight activated an ability that increased his attack speed. Cleaving through the wall behind him with ease for a full-circle swing got the woman to evade backwards out of the attack's range. Swinging the blade upwards covered the ground in a black mist in a liner attack. Exploding a moment later in a backwards force. Though, Sarious managed to sidestep the attack, the dragon's HP depleted by quite a bit. Very close to 7% remaining, but getting his Wild meter to regenerate quickly.

A few very quick slashes from Dalton was getting too close for the woman's comfort. Waiting for a good time to counter attack was difficult with his increased attack speed and trying to foresee his ability effects. The one that was quite clear was his right eye glowing red and leaving a long trail of his previous movements. With the same jumping slam as before, Sarious evaded to a wall, and jumped off it for some extra height. The landing strike of his attack cracked the ground with a very large area, almost exploding in force and dust, but still missing the

woman.

Landing rather close to him got Dalton to try another overhead swing at her. But with Sarious' sidestep, she landed a very heavy blow to his ribs. Hearing the plate armor crack loudly with all the previous damage it took from the dragon. Another one to the opposite side of the ribs did the same, leaving an opened way for the final slam in the gut and push the man back, winded.

For a moment, they caught their breaths. Her eyes glancing over towards the dragon's UI, and seeing that he was still conscious, but not really knowing where he was. Turning around and looking for him would only give the knight the upper hand, and the duel could be finished with a few of the black one's blows.

But he was taking his time, getting back into his defensive stance with a rather crossed face. His eye still glowing red, and following his heavy panting. It was reasons like this that she detested PvP [Player Vs Player], one would usually take it too poorly or personal. Demanding rematches over and over while trying to reclaim their pride with one simple win. She was caught in those messes from other people before, getting harassed because they found out they were beaten by a girl. And it looked like this high level player was no different. This day, what almost turned out to be a friend was turned into an enemy within a minute. What made matters probably worse for them is the rather large crowd that was developing to witness the intense fight. Most likely being heard from the other side of the city.

With a heavy grunt from the man, she refocused. Seeing him nod, and her as well, they engaged each other once again. Deflecting each other's attacks, avoid taking damage as much as they could. But eventually a back-spinned, downward slash got the best of her. Thinking it was actually a horizontal one and knocking her down to 20%. Seeing Dalton go for one final thrust forward, Sarious barely got her deflect in, pushing the blade upwards made her take a fraction of the damage, leaving her with 9%. Activating her Lightning Guard, she locked the knight's gauntlet down with her hands, having the greatsword's blade rest on her shoulder and pin him down.

Fighting against his strength was rather difficult, but through his one cleared eye, Dalton gave her a very strange look. "Aren't you forgetting someone?" She grunted with a smile. Ducking her head at his widen eye, and seeing the dragon's Wild completely drain out, Endzeit dived behind her. Spinning around three times and roundhousing the knight in the face with a loud crash. Feeling the impact, Sarious let go of him and defended herself from the massive force of the fully charged kick. Hearing the buildings crash and break apart in the distance, as well as the word "Victory!" appear largely over the two's head.

As the crowd cheered for the two, the woman laid down in the streets to recover. Just now noticing the large grove in the ground from where the dragon tried to stop his final attack in the road. Sitting down himself, he panted heavily. "Damn that hurt." He chuckled, rubbing his left foot and half rocking to ease the pain. Making Sarious laugh and shake her head.

"That went better than expected." She smiled at him, while shyly waving at the audience. A few moments later, the sound of the Thundercat mount could be heard coming through the damaged buildings. Just barely getting through before the game repaired everything. With Dalton riding it, he stopped it in front of the two. Noticing a rather crossed look on his face, made the two worry a bit.

"...I just want to know one thing." He said, a bit sternly. After hearing the noise in question from her, he took a faint breath. "What level are you?"

An exhale came from her. (Here we go...) "...43."

"43..." He repeated it, almost in a raspy voice. Only to soon start chucking afterward, leading to a loud laughter. It made the woman uncomfortable while looked at Endzeit and seeing the red one shrug at her. Unexpectedly, Dalton picked up Sarius and the dragon with each arm, still laughing and spinning them around once. "43! You're half my level, and you beat me!? Unbelievable!"

"Wait, you're not mad?" She asked, still feeling rather uncomfortable.

"Judging from his laughter, I think he is." Endzeit whimpered. "But that might be our fault. Too many blows to the head."

"I just can't believe it! Wow!" The knight set them down, taking a good look at them. "I mean, I've played with skilled players. Even dueled quite a few, but nothing like you guys. You barely leave any openings, don't just rely on the heaviest damaging attacks-" He interrupted himself, holding his head while smiling. Then going back to hugging the woman. "You, Sarius... I Salute you! You've gotta be the best player I've ever met!"

"N-no. I'm nothing without Endzeit." She blushed.

"You hear that? It was all me." A small stomp on his foot made him yelp and fall down. "Not the left one!" He hissed, holding it up and grunting.

"Anything you guys want, it's on me." Dalton finally let go, looking at the two and waving at the crowd. At first, she just thought he was putting on a face for good sportsmanship. But everything that he said... There wasn't a bit of falseness in it, none of it seemed fake. She really impressed this player, and he didn't come off as jealous, envious, or...

"...I want to join your Faction."

Chapter 3

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"What makes him alive?" The older one asked. Half chewing on the end of her pen. "The way he talks? The way he moves? Because devs have been getting better at programing these things."

"...It's not quite that."

"Then what is it?" Some silence. "Is it possible that you've been without someone you can lean on for so long that you've developed an attachment for-"

"He has hopes." Trisha said. "And fears. They're not fake or programmed in, either. They're... Developed. Learned. Like a real person would."

"Is that what you think makes someone alive?" Another silence. "Because many AIs are being programmed to learn and-"

"Insult the players? Joke around with them? Play around with them, and actually understand terms like YOLO?" This time, the older woman stayed quiet for a bit. "He thinks outside the box. He knows the programming language that is used in Skyline. He's found access outside of the game, and I'm guessing the entire internet. He learns and understands how a real person would. Better than most, really." A sigh from her. "Whoever 'Developed' Endzeit programmed something else into him that makes him different."

"And what would that be?"

"...They gave him a soul."

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"You are not a Tamer." The black knight halfly joked at the restaurant booth. Highly amused at the accumulating dishes that the dragon was burning through.

"That's what I keep telling her." The red one spoke with his muzzle full. Moving onto another plate, but the woman beside him place a hand on it.

"Taste your food, you. Okay?"

"Why? He's paying for it." He tried to snort, but just pulled the plate from under her hand and devoured it.

"You were not kidding about how much he eats." Dalton chuckled, making her a little embarrassed. "You sure you don't want anymore? I really don't mind."

"I'm alright. I know the drawbacks to over-eating. He clearly never experienced it."

"I never found anyone rich enough to experience it." Another full muzzle of the dragon's words, as he tried to swallow the entire thing. Eventually getting it down and exhaling. "But I'm reaching my limit."

"Really? Only 43 plates?" Sarious grumbled sarcastically at him.

"How much does he usually eat?"

"I cap him at 12. Sometimes less if he makes me mad or causes me other bills." The little one whimpered, trying to look innocent.

"Getting close to four times that. Here, I thought you were almost starving him to death."

"As if. I'm the one suffering in this relationship."

"You mean your wallet is." Endzeit picked something out of his fangs. "And we earn enough to keep you stable."

"Only out of dumb luck. We could've bought a house by now with your food budget. And I've only been playing for like three weeks!"

"Maybe rent an apartment. Lands in the city are very expensive."

"You haven't seen your bill yet." Just then, a small UI appeared before the black knight and he looked at it with surprise.

"...Okay, you could afford a house." He chuckled, accepting the charges.

"How much did it come to?"

"I'm not saying. Only because I don't want you to feel bad." The woman crossed her arms. "But it didn't make a dent in my wallet, so don't worry about it."

"That means I can eat more-?"

"No." The two players strictly said, making the small one whimper and lower his head.

"But back to the main topic, have you ever thought of calling yourself something else? Tamer is very misleading to players now."

"We've been... Brainstorming here and there, but nothing decided." She said, rubbing her left arm a bit.

"I keep suggesting Dragonmaiden, but she says-"

"No." Sarious answered rather quickly. "You don't own me. If anything, I own you." A decent in his ears and a small whimper made her roll her eyes.

"She kinda has a point. But you should try to stay away from names like that. Try to find one that tends not to state one over the other." Dalton pondered.

"Meaning what exactly?" The woman asked.

"Well, from what I've seen, you guys treat each other equal-"

"As if." The red one grumbled.

"I meant on the field. Not one of you really have a specific job, but you make it work as a team. You should find a name that represents both of you, instead of just one over the other."

"Like Tamer does?" Another grumble.

"Well... Yeah. Come to think of it, it does kinda give control to a specific person." The man scratched his chin in thought.

"Don't worry about it right now, I'll think of something eventually." Sarious muttered towards him. Pulling up her HUD, she let out a slightly disappointed sigh. "We're behind on schedule. I wanted to get done a few tasks around Hilterwood by lunch."

"That's my fault. Let me come with you, might be able to speed things up." The knight said, getting out of the booth.

"How exactly?" The woman questioned while doing the same. Seeing a large mist of blue pixels disappear from both booths that they used in the past hour. Still shaking her head at the ridiculousness of it.

"I got an idea. It's when I got Impenetrable." She gave the man a questionable look. "The reason why you guys took a while to take me down wasn't because my level, or that your damage was bad. Actually, it was very good for 43. It's because of that buff. It drastically reduces the damage I take, on top of the plate armor."

"So you're more of a tank then?" The dragon asked, getting a chuckle from him.

"I can be whatever you need me to be. But for you guys, I'll tank." He lead the way out and summoned his Thundercat. Getting on it, and offering a hand for the woman with the dragon on her shoulder. Letting her ride it in front of him as the large panther took off to the nearest teleport system.

The meadow was rather quiet and unpopulated by players. A rare sight to find in Skyline, which almost gave a feeling of loneliness with the dark clouds passing overhead. Within the faint darkness, a black figure was rushing through the fields, disturbing the large herd of hairy Bo-Bisons. Causing quite a few of them to panic and trample the fields with their six hooves. Leaving behind the ones that always looked a bit deformed and on edge. A quick slap of the shadow was all it took to set off their rage and follow it. Tagging one cow and bolting straight for another. While also getting a few extra dire wolves in the process.

Gathering them all in the center, the black one stopped. Activating his defenses and slightly roaring at the group. Seeing his right eye once again glow with a deep rage. "Ready!?" He shouted outwards, but it didn't seem to be towards the large group he provoked. Soon after, he charged the mob of enemies. Cleaving through the first few, but getting heavily surrounded by the sheer numbers.

A heavy quake from the already shaking ground seemed to stand out from the rest. And a moment later, several wolves and a couple of bison were shot upward from a red explosion coming from the below. Making the heavy creatures land on another and stun them briefly.

From the outside of the pile, the woman struck one of the Bo-bisons hard, sending a large electric shock between several of the creatures. But not harming the Knight in the center, who was still managing to cleave through several enemies at once while grunting through all the gores and bites. Hearing the dragon's roar as his Hp depleted quite a bit got Sarious' concern, but the sudden jolt in his Wild meter put her a little at ease. Though, it also warned her to step away, especially when the meter suddenly drained quickly and a massive impact could be heard.

Nearly half of the creatures exploded into a shower of red pixels while the Endzeit rebalanced himself, shaking his right paw. Meanwhile, Dalton used the new cleared area to turn the flank around on the enemies, now surrounded by the three. A quick slash upward, and another rotation one across, the knight took out two wolves.

A step forward provoked a dire wolf to attack the woman, but she leapt over it. Landing on a bison, she braced herself from one of its awkward, jagged back horns, and pried open its large shoulder blades while charging up one of her strikes. Very quickly letting go of the armored plates within its mane, she struck the bare spine with a heavy palm. Sending an electric shockwave through the large beast and exploded in a wave of lightning, culling the Bison and a

few nearby enemies.

The rest of the enemies were already weakened, and it took no time to finish the group. Once the final bison was taken out, the dragon cheered loudly into the meadow with a roar. Making the other two smile while the clouds passed by. "That was Intense!" The red one shouted.

The knight chuckled. "Yes. A bit reckless, but it makes it more fun and much faster. I started doing this when I got my Iron Defense ability. Granted, I was loaded with Hp charms to make sure my health didn't go below half, so."

"I can see why you suggested it. Though, now I kinda wish I invested more AP [Ability Points] into my AoE [Area of Effect] attacks." Sarious said, looking at her UI and reading the summery of the battle. "Three Tasks complete in ten minutes. That would've taken me all day with how hungry and lazy he tends to get."

"Lazy only because doing them one at a time is boring. This is just... Invigorating!" A slight purr came out of him when he detected the respawn. Going after a few of them in a playful motion.

"Hey, we're done with these-"

"Don't care." The dragon replied, getting another chuckle from the man while the woman sighed. Shaking her head and returning towards the road that lead to another area.

"Just let him play around a bit, I guess. More exp can't hurt." Dalton shrugged, walking beside her. "Just as long as he doesn't try the pulls I did just yet. I only make it look easy." Another head shake from the woman.

Another loud quake from the red one's direction go their attention, chuckling at the dragon's howl afterword. "Endzeit, if you really want to try that, go after the grey wolves on this side. I need a few things from them." A slight purr came from him, then he started prowling to the other side. "I swear, it's like he's on catnip or something."

"I guess it just really excites him. Here I thought over-eating might ruin his performance. Apparently it makes him better-" She covered the man's mouth with her glove.

"Don't you dare say that out loud!" She whispered, getting him to laugh. "Seriously, if he hears that, my wallet is going to remain empty for the rest of my days."

"Okay, okay." They chuckled. "Not to ruin the conversation, but... Are you sure you want to join the Faction?" She sighed and looked away. "I only ask because I see you struggling with it." A bit of silence from her. "Can I ask why?"

"...My last one, in another game... I guess took me for granted. I never really felt like I was good enough for one after that. I felt like I was just better off alone, or with someone else I

could trust." She looked at the red dragon in the distance, toying around with several smaller wolves like he was herding them. "It's why I wanted to choose Tamer, so I could rely on something..."

"That wouldn't betray you. Take advantage of you, and always listen to you. I can't say that's exactly what you got, but..."

"He will still obey. He feels more alive than any other pet that I ever thought I would have. Even if he does have a few... Quirks." Another glance at the red one, finishing up a group of enemies. "Not the Giant Manti, Endzeit. I don't need those for anything." She shook her head with a smile. "You've influenced a bad habit on him, I think."

"Eh, call it a more exciting way of playing the game. It's still kinda easy until you get up to the elite wraiths." That term always half worried her. The deeper Sarious got into the game, the more grotesque the wildlife seemed to get. Even the Bo-Bisons that were notoriously aggressive here almost seemed corrupted and deformed compared to the rest of the herds. The extra back spikes that always came out crooked. The swelling bulges that could be difficult to see within the thick manes. Sometimes even growing fangs and tusks, claws on one of their six hooves. "A Sacrificial Assault can just wreck an entire pull and become very dangerous."

"Sacrificial Assault?"

"A type of Elite Wraith. Sometimes they get prefixes that make them stronger in some ways. Sacrificial Assault tends to have half the Hp of a normal, but they do double damage."

"So, Glass Cannon style, huh?" The woman pondered.

"Yeah, it's unreal when it's something ranged, or just already does a lot of damage to begin with. That's why it's good to play in a party, it's so easy to get ambushed and overrun by some of them later on."

"I can imagine why..." She said a bit sadly. "...And I'm guessing you want me to party up with others too."

Dalton exhaled. "...Yeah. But with people I trust. Maybe a few newbies still getting used to the game, but overall..." Another exhale from Sarious. "Like your companion keeps saying, you can't do this game alone."

"...I know. But-"

"You don't like putting your hands in other players, thinking they'll let you down." She looked at the knight for a moment. "I felt the same way. Granted, with my extra cash backing me up, I could get a lot farther than others, but eventually..."

"You would still have to party with others." She mumbled.

"Welcome to Skyline." The man muttered and chuckled a bit. "It's just something you're going to have to accept if you're going to stay here. And I want you two behind me in the later raids."

"Later raids..." The woman whispered in thought. "They probably have those prefixes too, don't they."

"...Yes. But only way later on." She nodded faintly. "I won't force you, Sarious. But I would like to nab you before anyone else does." The woman exhaled quietly.

"Can you give me a few minutes with him? Just to kinda..." He held up his hand.

"No need to explain. I'll be on all day, and I do have a Faction Meeting to host tonight." He brought up his HUD and hit a few things. A moment later, Sarious got a UI for a Friend Request. Once again, taking a painful look at it made her heart ache. "Am I your first?"

"...No. But..." He lightly chuckled, still smiling at her. With a deep breath, she accepted it. Seeing him and Meowmix currently online.

"There. If you decide, then you just need to send me a voice message." Another silent nod, but looked at him when she got a hand on her shoulder. "Just don't get ahead of yourself, okay?"

"...Alright." She muttered. Hearing the dragon's purr getting closer to them, she couldn't see Endzeit anywhere in the fields, but could still see his Healthbar. Getting suddenly grabbed by a red frame from behind made her yelp a bit, feeling his muzzle and stupid hair behind her. "What's with you?" She almost growled at him, getting Dalton to chuckle.

Taking a hold of her hand, the red one made her pull up her HUD and then her inventory. Scrolling down towards an item called Mantis Blade, and a good twenty three in the stack. She made a noise in question about them, and then he checked the records for them on the Trading Post, selling for 345k a piece. The sudden shock almost made her speechless for a moment, getting the knight to look at them as well. "Yep. Seems about right."

"The hell?"

"They're used for crafting, but not very many people seem to go this way to find these enemies."

"Which explains why we never seen anyone yet." She muttered, looking around. Getting a large lick on the back of the neck and up her ear, the woman growled and tried to grab the red one. Still hyped up as he went towards the respawns. "Damn thing." She grunted, wiping off the lick.

"He's just being affectionate. It's weird, I don't see any other pet do that or act the way he does." Another chuckle. "Alright, I better go. I got a voice message a while back asking for

some assistance." She gave him a bit of a worried look, as if to ask why he put her first. "Don't worry about it. It's nothing major, and it could wait. Still, just take some time to consider the invite, okay Sarious?"

"Okay." She said, a little lighter this time. Seeing the man pull up his HUD and his Thundercat appeared before them. Mounting it and saluting her before taking off towards the nearest Teleportation Center.

With a heavy sigh, she watched him run off, then watched the dragon take out his last group. Focusing his heavy attacks for last and shattering the remaining enemies quickly. "You're learning that a little too fast." She shouted at him, walking through the long grassy field.

"It's just soooo much fun!" He purred back. Catching up to her and circling around her in the air. "We need to do this more often. I wonder if I can edit one of my abilities to take the hits better." He pondered.

"The more we do this, the worse off my repair bills are going to be." The woman grumbled. Punching a respawning Mantis in the face, then locking one of its bladed arms by stepping under it and putting pressure on the back of the shoulder. Dropping to the ground and causing the appendage to dislocate. Hearing the creature hiss in pain, then muffle when the dragon sat on its head. "Do you mind?"

"But it's so much more exciting and much quicker. I mean, after a while, you can only punch someone in the face so many different ways."

"Would you like me to demonstrate how many different punches I could do on your face?"

"Maaaaaybe." He teased, trying to tickle the occupied woman with his tail, until she tried to bite it. "Okay, fine." Endzeit tossed his snout, bouncing off the creature's head and flipping backwards into the air. At his peak height, he somehow changed direction into a front flip and landing heavily on the Mantis' head with a heel drop. Shattering it into pixels.

"Show off." He gasped overdramatically, getting her to smirk and chuckle a bit before carrying on past the tall grass. It opened up into a larger meadow with many hills in the back ground. All surrounded by forests, stretching on into the distance. Only seeing the one real road; the one they came from. "It's beautiful, isn't it." She said, taking a seat. Feeling him sit directly behind her, crossing his legs under her knees, and resting his paws on her waist. Hearing her once again almost growl only made the dragon nuzzle her on the neck a bit. "Seriously, you are way too affectionate today."

"Think it was something I ate. It made me feel so..." He murred a bit. Breathing deep while looking in the distance. "*Sariously* though, it is beautiful." An attempt at a harsh glare only made him chuckle, and her as well.

"...What do you think I should do?"

"You know what I think you should do." He muttered. "Find out what I ate and give me more-Ow." Feeling some of his fingers begin to bend backwards by her well only got him to chuckle. "Okay, okay. Mercy, you."

"Like you really deserve it." Another nuzzle. "If you don't stop doing that, I'll punish you."

"You like it." Another sharp bend backwards of his paw got him to yelp as she turned around and grabbed his muzzle. Blowing into it point blank got him to whimper and cough. Snorting out the air and sneezing constantly for a good few minutes, stumbling along the grassy grounds as the woman laughed at him. "Why!?" He asked so seriously, but even he couldn't help but laugh.

Eventually they recovered, and Sarious pushed the dragon over, resting her head on his belly. Still holding and massaging his muzzle from the very strange feeling like he somehow sneezed inward. Occasionally cursing a bit and making the woman smile. "But seriously-"

"Sarioulsly." He mumbled strangely.

"You want another one of those?" He did his best to whimper in reply as she tapped his chest with the back of her hand. "Should I join them?"

"You're gonna have to join someone's eventually, unless you want to go through the pain of making your own." She never really thought of that. "Trust me, if you're having a hard enough time bringing yourself to join one, trying to recruit for one will probably kill you."

"I suppose you're right..." She was quiet for a few moments, looking up at the clouds overhead as she passed through the sky. Still unbelievable how real it looked.

"Why are you hesitating so much?" She didn't look at him. "Just do it."

"I just don't like other players-"

"And you think I do?" That time she glared at him, still tending to the strange feeling in his muzzle. "But like it or not, you can't do this game solo. That's just how it is. So either you get to know others within a guild, or forever team up with PUGs [Pick-Up Groups]."

"Don't even get me started on those. They're horrible to work with." She exhaled loudly. "I just have a hard time bringing myself to..." Trailing off, she faintly seen his paw motioning for her to go on. "What if I'm not good enough to suit them?"

"You're good enough." Endzeit replied without a second thought. "We just beat up a player twice our level. I'm pretty sure we qualify." A bit of a sour look on her face almost stated otherwise. "I think I get it though. You don't feel like you've met the requirements yourself. You think you need to be overly prepared, beyond expectations. Or perhaps..." He scooted down so

her head was resting on his red chest. "You're expecting them to expect too much out of you." There was a pain in her eye that she was trying to hide. "I know what it's like though."

Sarious was quiet for a while, petting the end of his tail that curled up and fluttered every so often. "...How much do you think a place out here would cost?"

"As in Real Estate?" She nodded, not even paying attention to his strange look. He sighed, closing his eyes. "About 2.5 million."

"...Really?" That time the woman looked at him, only to see him nod.

"It's way out of city limits, let alone teleportation limits. An area near Wraiths, regardless of how much of a threat they actually are. And well... There's nothing around for miles. It wouldn't be expensive, but why?"

"...You wouldn't like to live here?" He shrugged.

"I wouldn't mind it, but it's just almost better to pay for a room every night. I mean, housing is quite expensive when you get down to building the damn thing. Then to decorate it, mark off your land. Defending it from enemies..."

"Can it be reclaimed or damaged?"

"Well, reclaimed if certain payments are not made or something. But not destroyed by other players. If the land is destroyed by future patches, yeah. It can be removed that way."

"I guess it wouldn't cost much to replace it."

"...Where did this come from anyway?" She didn't reply. A faint grumble from him, and he left it alone. The two falling asleep in the grass.

Chapter 4

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The older woman tapped the pen on her arm rest. "They gave him a soul?" She asked, not believing it. Sighing and fetching her pad once again. "No offense, but I think you're imagining this, Trisha. Perhaps maybe there is something different about this AI, but-"

"That's the thing, though. He's not an AI. He's more of a person." She sighed.

"...What do you think defines a person?" A long silence filled the room. "What do you think defines Endzeit as one?"

"...He's just... Sensible. He seems to have been through pain like I have. Experienced it before I met him."

"What do you mean?"

"...He was... I guess you could call him Second Hand. I'm not sure how many other players he was with, but it's possible that a few of them hurt him."

"Have you hurt him yet?"

"...Yeah. Alot. Mostly mistaking him for an AI. It's no wonder he dislikes players like I do."

"Dislikes players?" The younger one was quiet. "Why do you dislike other players?"

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The Faction Hall was huge. Almost already lost from the Teleporter, if it wasn't just a straight line behind her. Hearing the dragon on her shoulder whistle and echo through the dark castle gave a very uneasy feeling. "Well, this is... Nice? I really like the blood on the tattered tapestries." The red one muttered.

"It was a Halloween special. I've always loved haunted castles like the bad guys have in fantasy movies." Dalton chuckled. "The only reason why I started a Faction was for this beauty. After that, and a few other failing guilds, mine started to get some members. Here we are, breaking 150 in like a year and three months. Hard to believe really." He opened up some large doors to a very large and long table. Several people already sitting and chatting with one another. "It's very easy to navigate, as long as you don't go snooping around. If you ever get lost, then you can always leave the Hall from your Faction Menu. Just remember, you'll teleport exactly where you left off in the field."

"I'll keep that in mind." Sarious muttered, already feeling uncomfortable seeing the other people begin to half eye her. She took a seat away from others while the Knight took the large chair at the far end. Kicking out another player goofing around with him.

"Looks like Boss brought us some new chow." The young man who's seat was abducted teased from afar.

"Ahh, Fresh Meat." Another jested, in a very deep and rather scary voice.

"This isn't the first Diablo, DarkFlames. And you are not the Butcher." Dalton chuckled. "Everyone, this is Sarious and her-" He cleared his throat, nearly making a mistake. "Companion, Endzeit."

"Companion? So she's a Tamer?"

"Not exactly. If anything, a different variation of one."

"I thought you didn't like Tamers, Boss." One of them grumbled. Dressed in rather noble robes.

"I'm not a Tamer." Sarious grumbled back.

"If you have a pet-"

"No. Seriously." The black knight interrupted again. "She isn't a Tamer. She's something else entirely. Better than one, I'd say."

"Then what are you?"

"We're an... Iconoclast"

"Yeah-We're a what?" The dragon questioned her rather seriously.

"I've heard of that term before."

"It's like... A destroyer of religious symbols or something." Another explained.

"Close. It's more someone who almost attacks settled beliefs. Destroying the image of Religion, in a way." The robed man answered.

"That... Actually fits quite well." Dalton pondered, getting a few strange looks from his guildies while they went back and forth between him and Sarious. "You'll have to see it for yourself. But Iconoblaster fits."

"It's Iconoclast." The Noble and Sarious grunted at the same time, covering their eyes.

"I donno. Iconoblaster sounds kinda cool-" A loud whimper as she placed a hand on the dragon's head. "...Or Iconoclast. That works too."

"Wait... I thought we only recruited 65+." A woman asked, looking at the knight once again. "That is a level 45 Glove. Either she's severally outdated in gear, or...?"

"She's unique, and if we run her with Regondale's group, she'll catch up in no time-"

"My group?" The Noble asked, almost offended.

"We're in level 70 areas. That's twenty five levels above her-"

"Which won't be an issue. If anything, they'll be carrying you guys. Not the other way around." The other woman gave a look of disbelief. "They beat me in a duel. The only thing I gave them was Initiative, as I usually do. I've seen how they work, and you guys are in good hands."

"PvE [Player Vs Environment, as in AI] and PvP [Player vs Player] are two entirely different things-"

"Scharlot." Dalton said a bit thickly. "Take my word for it."

She sighed and shook her head. "If she gets killed, then it's your fault."

"And when they save your asses, you can buy them dinner. Just expect the tab to be over 5 million." A rather surprised look from her, then it trailed to Sarious.

"It's all him." The younger woman pointed at the dragon.

"It's all me." The dragon pointed at himself.

"Was the tab seriously that much?" Sarious asked Dalton, and he motioned 'So-So' while lipping 'A Little Higher'. Making the woman sigh and rest her head on the table.

"Anyway. Raid talks. Can you guys get to 75 in a couple of days? I'd like to have you ready for raids by the weekend."

Dusk was settling in quickly. It's like this forest was tainted by something, and it did everything it could to keep the sunlight away from it. The air felt heavy, possibly from a nearby swamp which held alot of stories within. Many of which was the cause of many wraiths and creatures.

The creatures... At the higher levels, they were almost nightmarish by design. And just as threatening up close as they looked. Particularly these Minotaur-centaur things. It's bad enough they had four legs, and were ridiculously hard to trip or stagger, but the extra two arms at its torso were also wielding hand axes with a nasty DoT [Damage Over Time, think effects like Poison that deteriorate Hp constantly] was devastating at its full dosage.

A few wild swings from the enraged creature nearly caught the red dragon and Archer, but it was exactly what Sarious was hoping for. Blocking a swing with her Lightning Guard, she sent out a stunning shockwave, giving the team an opening that they needed. "Scharlot!

Broadhead Arrow!" Regondale shouted, keeping up a protective shield on everyone. Though at times rather arrogant, he knew what he was doing while taking command.

Scharlot drew a specific arrow in her shortbow and fired it at the centaur's head, getting the large creature to growl and become disoriented. "Sarious! Strike the horn!"

"Better idea! Sarious!" Endzeit suggested, taking a stance beside the beast at its hind legs, while the woman took one at its front. With a heavy forward hit, the two struck at the leg joints together, tripping the Minotaur and making it fall on its side. As the two pinned it in place, the dragon hit the horn with a slightly charged hook. Breaking the large bone from the creature's head.

"Alright, that works. Stand back!" The Noble gave a strong motion of hitting the ground, and within a moment a small ball of white hit the creature, followed by a bright pillar. Exploding it into red shards. The group took a breath and made sure everyone was okay. "Well done. But try to follow orders a little better."

"I guess we just need to practice with each other a little more." Sarious said, looking at the dragon who just shrugged. "Whereas our skills are not in any database, it's unknown to you guys what we're capable of." With an UI pop up, the two were very close to another level. "Almost. One more should definitely do it-"

Some movement in the bushes got everyone in a ready stance. Hearing some heavy panting from players as they came through, getting startled by Sarious' group. Especially Endzeit. "A-are you...?"

"We're allies. And that's just a Tamer pet." The archer's explanation put the dragon's ears back, but he didn't argue.

"Are any of you White?" One of them asked.

"I'm a White Mage, yes." One of them whispered their thanks to God. "Someone hurt?"

"Yeah, down to his last Hp." Two more came through carrying a player who was unconscious.

As Regondale looked at him, he muttered something. "Take a break for now guys. I'll tend to these players for a bit."

"Is it...?" One of them asked.

"It's safe here. We pull our targets to a secure zone. No respawns." They nodded in relief. As the dragon looked at the wounded one, as well as the others, he transformed back to his smaller form. Flying up on the trees and looked around, then flying to another in the distance.

"Where are you going?" Sarious asked him.

"Just looking around. Don't worry about me, I can't Aggro [Attract Enemy Attention] like this." She gave him a less than pleased look. "I'll be fine. Just stay here."

"You better be fine." She grumbled. Still overlooking the area herself.

(It's been ten minutes.) Sarious thought to herself, as Regondale prepared the other party and rested himself. (Where is he?) Tired of waiting, she pulled up her HUD and then her area map. Seeing a small icon of Endzeit's portrait close by, she looked towards the area. "I'm going to find Endzeit, he's not too far from here."

"Be careful. Shout if you encounter anything."

"I will."

"Actually..." Scharlot spoke up. "Don't forget that you can use your Faction Hall Teleport in battle. Get yourself out of there quick if you absolutely need to." She nodded in response, and left to find her Companion.

The forest was already dark. Almost pitch black, if it wasn't for the faint light of the full moon and the slight glow from her HUD. It was a half stupid idea to run around with it up, but the woman was unsure if any of the creatures were attracted by the light.

A few noises from afar halted her, trying to make out what they were. Slightly pitched and a little bit out of place, they almost sounded like notes from an old stringed instrument. Coming from the direction that the dragon was located on the map. With a faint breath, she slowly went towards it.

Coming up to an aged path through the woods lead to an enclosed opening. Barely being able to see the small red one on the ground where the notes were coming from. Along with a few deep breaths from his lesser form. "...So watch my chest heave as this last breath leaves me. I am trying to be what you're dying to see. So take me and make me. Weaken and save me. This hate that you gave me keeps saying the same thing-" He choked and took a breath.

"To sing when you hurt, and to sing when you cry. To sing when you live, and to sing when you die. And here at the end, at the end of the hurt. All the pain isn't the same when it's your time to burn. The hearts for the heartless, the thoughts for the thoughtless. The Lies for the Honest, We're just Gods for the Godless..." Another shaky breath and a few sniffs as the small

one started playing with the strings a bit once again. A half a step got him aware of the woman's presence, and he sighed. "...How long have you been there?" He half muttered, and she didn't answer. "...He loved music. Carried this damn thing everywhere he went. Nearly off that cliff past here, if it wasn't for those poison spitters..."

She walked beside him and knelt down to study the instrument. Slightly covered in some plantlife and faintly damaged. A string broken, and a few scratch marks here and there. "It's a wonder it even lasted this long without its durability expiring." The red one muttered again. Taking another heavy breath. "...I couldn't protect him. He didn't build me for that. All I could do was just try to catch up to him after our tank died. He just ran for his life... And I gave mine to save him. Or at least I thought I did... I wasn't sure what happened until someone else bought me from the marketplace..." Another sniff, and Sarious picked him up gently. Leaning against a tree and holding him close to her chest.

"...I know what it's like... The last thing I said to my mother was 'Fuck you. I'm not going to dad's so you can attempt to OD again.' She died in a car accident, along with my brother and sister." A faint whimper from him as he shed a few involuntary tears. "My father shot himself about four days later, and I was alone. Except for my grandmother and my uncle who... Isn't good with empathy, let's just say that." A few strokes. "I know what it feels like, Endzeit. Especially when you want to be alone, and others just keep pestering you. It makes you bitter, instead of giving you the time you need to heal. All you're reminded of are the bastardized habits they try to drown you with. You see fault and flaws in everything, to the point you'd rather just lock yourself away from the rest of the world."

"Sarious...?"

"Every one of them tells you that you need to move on. That you should rejoin the rest of the horrible world. And that 'Not Doing It' isn't an option. They can't understand how someone could not want to be with another human being... Another Player. But they're not seeing beyond their own two eyes. They... Can't."

"Yet, they force you to stay in line." The dragon added in. "Keep going, until the day your Hp drops to 0 and you... Disappear. Because that's the only way to live. That's the only way to survive..." Another few strokes, and he tried to return it on the pillows he was up against. For once, not making her angry or uncomfortable. "...You're not a Player, Sarious."

"...And you're not an AI, Endzeit."

"...I'm sorry for thinking that you were."

"...I'm sorry too-" A slightly loud grunt came from him as he lifted himself and perked his ears high. "What is it?" She asked, though just starting to hear very strange noises back at the party.

"...We need to get back." He whispered. "They need us."

It was complete gibberish. It was almost like they were trying to speak over the commands of Regondale with cries of madness. It was nothing like Sarious has ever heard before, and considering the voices... They sounded human.

Rushing through the forest was difficult on her, and flying would be much harder. Even if it was over the forest. The dragon warned her earlier that there were flying creatures above the thick trees that would sometimes drop down and ambush players. But it was very rare for it to happen. But an ambush would explain the sudden attack on her group.

Shoving through a bush, she ran into someone, knocking them forward and completely down. "Sorry! Where is everyone!?" The person was quiet for a moment, then started speaking in gibberish, just like the echoes from afar. Jerking rapidly while standing up, the woman could make out a rather swollen 'Hive' of skin where someone's head should be. Lacking any trace of a face while it flailed its lifeless limbs around. Almost dancing in a player's armor. None specifically that she knew of, but one Sarious has seen before.

"Sarious..." The dragon grunted, growling at the creature. "That isn't a player..."

"What the hell...?"

"It's not anymore." She looked at Endzeit who was keeping a sharp eye on it. "Back away slowly. It can't see, but it can feel and hear you." He whispered. Though his suggestion was difficult in such an area. No matter where she stepped, the creature would know her exact location. Stumbling towards her with more sounds of insanity, the woman took a step back to position herself for an evade. The single step was all this thing needed.

It held its head forward, draining its swollen head and expelling a torrent of flames from the very top. Just barely getting out of the way of the attack, the fire quickly spread to the trees and lingered for a very long time. "We need to regroup..."

"That is if there's anyone left." The dragon's words worried her, but she could hear the sounds of combat in the distance. As well as a few screams. Pushing through the forest and towards a bright light that illuminated her objective location, she could see the many shadows of these... Creatures. Jittering and jerking constantly as they moved through the shadows like she did.

Getting close to the light, one of these things got close to her. Sarious' instinct was to punch it in the face, right in its swollen head as it sprayed out a bit of flames and half wailed in pain. "Sarious!?" Regondale shouted.

"I'm here!" She replied, feeling the dragon leap off and transform as they came closer to

him. Still trying to protect the wounded player that was brought by the other group. "What the hell are these things!?"

"No frakken clue! They just came in like a large army-"

"Or a herd." Endzeit stated. "They're attracted by something, like it's a beacon..."

"What exactly?" Scharlot asked, putting an arrow into another one from afar then pulling back another injured player. Sarious looked at the Red one, constantly staring at the first injured player that was brought to them.

"Endzeit..." She almost whispered to him. "Are they...?"

"They're players infected by Wraiths." He looked at her, a sheet concern within his golden eyes. But a large torrent of flames broke the moment. "Try to get them out of here, Regondale. Me and Sarious will push them back."

"You better be damn careful. I don't have much Mana [Spellcaster version of 'Stamina'] left." The two nodded at him. "Everyone, Fall Back! This way! Get him up and let's get out of here!" Another player from the stray group came over to pick up the unconscious man by the legs. As soon as he touched him, the wounded one jerked and spoke gibberish himself. His ribs bursting out of his chest, then thrusting into the player helping him. Shattering the man in a series of blue pixels after a cry of pain. "Shit!"

With a heavy punch in the chest, the dragon killed the infected man, seeing him burst into Red pixels like an enemy would. Noticing how the game didn't stop him like before. (...I was correct.) He thought to himself, and felt a strange change in his heart.

Turning around and going after the closest Grudge, he jumped over the archer and hit one with his knee. Rotating with a right backfist against another creature, then a heavy hook with the same arm on the first one. Building up his Wild more and more with every constant strike between the two. Finishing the two with a roundhouse and a spin kick in one rotation.

With one of Sarious' kills, the two leveled up in a flash of bright light. Feeling completely refreshed, as well as a new power unlocked. There wasn't a better time for it, and the dragon went after three more of these Grudges. Stunning them with a heavy hit one at a time, building his Meter past its limit, and turning the flashing colors into a bright white when the three were taken care of.

He could hear the heard of them still passing through the forest, but one in the far distance looked almost familiar to him. The armor worn by it, the color and slight damages to its blue uniform. All at once, Endzeit got enraged. Charging the target with lightning speed and slugging it brutally. The large crack of the attack echoed through the entire forest, and drained the entire Hp of the Grudge, but it didn't shatter.

With two heavy hooks against the main target, a large wave came from the swings. Hitting a couple other Grudges that were trying to flank the dragon. Completely focused on the target, he gave it an uppercut, then a slam down. Followed by a body blow. A swinging upward kick launched the red one into a spin and he landed a second kick before a sweep with each leg. Sending out faint waves and tripping the other two Grudges that tried to attack him.

With a rising blow to the stomach, the red one back flipped and kicked the target high into the air. Then continued his evasive acrobatics to avoid a few more Grudges that joined in. Giving him enough room to roundhouse in a large arch, covering an area much bigger than his normal range, followed by a spin kick of the same fashion. All leading to one massive pivot punch that connected with the falling target.

The hit was unreal, finally draining all of his entire Meter as it exploded from his fist. Feeling every bone, every muscle shatter and tear in a tremor that echoed loudly across the region before launching the creature and a good chunk of the forest in front of the dragon.

Sarious covered her eyes while retreating, trying to see through the bright flash of light from afar, and noticing Endzeit's Health and Wild bars deplete quickly before disappearing. Her heart stopped as she froze for a moment. "Endzeit..." She whispered. "Endzeit!!"

She stumbled forward, calling his name through the trees before witnessing the devastation of the attack. "Endzeit!"

"What?" The dragon's voice grumbled, as she looked around quickly to find him. "Up here." He said, leading her to a tree branch with the lesser formed Companion resting on it.

"What are...?"

"It's called hiding and resting. I can't really fight like this, can I?" The question puzzled her. "There's a... Defect to that ability." He grumbled awkwardly.

"Which is?"

"It disables my combat form for a while. Looks to be about five minutes. But good lordy, the Powah [Power]..." He slightly purred, smiling at the memory of the feeling.

"You're insane." She chuckled, constantly looking around to make sure she was safe. Then motioning for him to come down, and he did.

"One of us has to be." He snorted, resting on her shoulder and feeling her hand cover his head. This time, he didn't whimper, but purred into it, smiling at her.

"Let's catch up to the rest, before anything else comes this way."

"Yeah..." He looked behind, still barely seeing the clearing of the forest in the darkness.

As well as a faint sorrow that came to the fate of his old companion.

(This Hate That You Gave Me Keeps Saying...)

Chapter 5

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"Trisha?" She remained silent. "Why do you dislike other players?"

A quiet sigh from the younger one as she tried not to face the therapist. "...They suck. Even with the more realistic communication towards each other, they just suck at being human beings."

"How so?"

"...Have you ever wondered why people nearly a hundred years ago were so much more friendly and trustworthy? Even twenty years ago it started getting to that point again. Where people had to act humane towards one another. Where they treated everyone with respect because to say something insulting to another's face would probably get them hurt or worse."

"It's not that bad-"

"How many games have you played in, Miss? How many did you just study on your way to a Degree? It's different in the field than what you actually think-"

"I know what it's like-"

"No. You don't." She replied thickly. "Or else you would understand what I'm talking about. Maybe you studied it from afar, or through someone else's experience. But when it's an attack on you. On your Identity. How they treat you, because they can get away with saying anything. Doing anything to disrespect or insult you or your loved ones..." Another sigh. "You think we would've learned this lesson way back when it happened in the beginning of the millennia. It's part of what ruined the culture and forced it away decades ago. Four or five generations of jerks growing into these games without any consequences..."

"Trisha. I understand what you're-"

"Stop saying that." She replied sternly. "You don't. You don't know how much it ruins you inside. You don't understand the effects it creates in your world-" The younger one interrupted herself.

"...Our World?"

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"One bed, double if you have one in stock." Sarious smiled at the Innkeeper. Still hating having to put on this face, especially after everything that happened that night.

"Yep, Last one available too. You're pretty lucky, lady." He handed her the key as soon as she accepted the charge. "Have a good night Miss."

"You too." Another smile as she took off down the hall. Sighing heavily once all NPCs were out of sight. "We really need to get our own place. I'm getting tired of dealing with this."

"It does look exhausting." The red one said looking back at the desk.

"It really is." She grumbled, unlocking the door and closing it once they were in. Looking over the rather spacious room. Seeing the dragon glide to the headboard of the bed and look at her.

"Which side do you want?"

"Does it really matter?"

"No." He snorted, making her smile.

"At least you admit it." She sighed, shaking her head as she walked to the left side of the bed and laid down. Seeing the red one come down on the other side and start laying down against her. "Actually..." He made a noise in question. "Could you...?" Her face flushed, making the dragon curl his neck. "Nevermind. Forget it."

"Could I what?" He asked, seeing her look away. "Sarious? What is it?" He shoved her a

bit.

"I was just wondering if you could... Sleep in your combat form?"

"Are you asking if I'm capable?" She didn't answer, but covered her face a bit. A toss of his snout and the dragon got up. Flipping as he usually did and then jumped in the bed beside her. "Happy?" She looked at him with a bit of surprise, then shyly nodded at him.

Laying there beside him, staring at the ceiling for a little while before searching for one of his paws with her hand. Holding onto it and swallowing loudly as she dealt with her embarrassment. Faintly seeing the dragon's muzzle look towards her, then down at her hand. Studying it for a while, until she whimpered again. Checking up on her vitals to make sure she was alright, she covered her face once again. "I'm sorry..." She muffled.

"...Oh. This again." He looked at her while muttering. Sighing through his muzzle as he laid back and placed an arm around her. Getting her to stop for a moment, until he slightly tugged on her far shoulder. Bringing her head to rest on his chest. "Is this what you want?" He asked, rather sincerely. Hearing her exhale and nod slightly. Rubbing his scaly body with her other arm while they embraced for a while.

Listening to the sound of his heartbeat and breaths, the woman began to relax a little bit. "...I'm sorry. For..."

For a few moments, he just waited for her to finish. "...I'm sorry too. For interrupting our moment back there." It made her smile, knowing it made him smile as well. Stroking her back a bit.

"That wasn't really your fault." The red one lightly shrugged at her.

"But why are you sorry?"

Another heavy sigh from her as she almost drew circles on his abs. "...I shouldn't be treating... The best thing that's ever happened to me like that... Like this..."

"Oh? I'm not." She made a strange noise in question that made the dragon chuckle. "You treat me the way you do because you have to. Because you care."

"I care enough to beat you senseless?" Even Sarious chuckled at that.

"Exactly. Everyone else... They let me do whatever. You're the only one who really didn't let me walk right over you. You're strong, Sarious. And you make me strong too."

"By beating you senseless."

"By beating me senseless." He agreed, getting another chuckle from the two. As she tried to look up to him, the tips of their noses touched. Staring into his golden eyes, her heart fluttered. Staring into her brown-orange ones, so did his. Leaning in for a slight animal kiss, a tap

of the lips as he purred a little bit, and once again she smiled. Pressing the full way.

The slight licks of each other's tongues held a very slow rhythm to their breaths. Both almost too shy to push it further. But at the same time, they pressed their slightly parted mouths together, lapping tongues very slowly. And her just realizing that his tongue was forked.

The shape of it almost tickled her, and it wasn't as slimy as she imagined it would be. It had this welcoming warmth to it, even if it was a little damp. It was almost like warm water. Granted, there was a lingering flavor within the muzzle of the dragon's favorite red drink. Leaving behind a strange blend of spicy tomato juice with faint traces of an alcohol, something the younger woman never really cared for. Or was it that she was too afraid to try?

Her mind was in a few places. But one she attempted to stay away from was her current actions. It was a strange feeling that she read with the red one's purple tongue. It was almost curious, perhaps what was inside the woman's mouth. Studying her teeth and own tongue. Almost scanning every little detail, but not so far back as to trigger a reflex. It seemed to somehow know enough.

In the meantime, she tried to study his. How the roof of his mouth had faint ripples. The several fangs that were almost threatening, yet calm like they were comfortable around her. But she couldn't reach the back end, twisting around his own oral appendage. It was fine with her though. This was fine for her.

A few minutes later, she slowly pulled away. Still smiling in those golden saucers that nearly mirrored her. She sat on her end of the bed and pulled up her HUD. Unequipping all of her armor first, then her Aikido outfit. Something Sarius hasn't done since she got the thing. Looking down at her bare figure, she exhaled a bit in disappointment. "What's wrong?" Endzeit asked.

"I figured they'd do something like this." She grumbled, laying down and letting him see a two piece set of underwear that was covering the naughty bits. "I can't take them off."

"And you were going to...?" The woman shyly looked away as he once again checked her vitals. "I mean, the records say you liked me eating your face." She double took at him for a few moments, then started laughing. "What?"

"Eating my face?"

"Isn't that what it is? I seen people do it all the time." The red one snorted. "Sometimes it's sucking on their cheek for a moment, other times it's like you're trying to share your food-" A shove from her interrupted him, actually getting him to chuckle too. "But really, what more is there? And why...?" The dragon gestured her mostly bare body.

"It's called kissing, you dolt." Sarius covered her face, though unable to hide her smile. "It's just..."

"Something people do?"

"...Something couples do."

"Couples...?" The red one overlooked her again. "...Oh." He said rather curiously.

"This was a dumb idea-"

"No, I just... Never had one before." The dragon shrugged, once again snuggling against the woman's chest like before. "It's just something else you're going to need to teach me about. Or, I guess I could look it up while you sleep-"

"Please don't." A purr in question as she once again became flushed. "There's, uh..."

"Is that what a pervert does?" A whimper from Sarious but it also broke her into chuckles, giving that mane a few playful taps. Getting another purr as he nudged her chin with that snout. "Come on, uncover yourself. There's no reason to be... Red all the time."

"If you knew what I was trying to do then you'd understand." She half grumbled, feeling her covering hand be gently pulled off and those golden suns look deep into her. Filled with both caring and curiosity, as well as trust. Making her take a breath and brush that ridiculous mane out of those eyes. "I... I've never really been with anyone else, Endzeit. Out in the real world." A snout toss from him.

"There's that word again." He snorted, feeling the woman shrug slowly.

"I don't know what else to call it. It's like... Here, but not. There's freedom, but there's also a lot of restrictions." The dragon's head tilted and those furred ears perked, getting her to lightly chuckle. "I don't know how to explain it, but I spent so much of my life in it... And hating it." She gestured around. "In these worlds, I can escape the real one." Those ears went back but he didn't say anything. "But there was always something missing."

"Until you tried Skyline Online." Endzeit followed, getting her to nod shyly and blush again. "What was so different?"

"...You." A noise in question. "I never met anyone like you. You talk like a player, but you're clearly not. You work with me, but come up with your own ideas. And nearly losing you today... That brief moment..."

"You didn't though."

"I thought I did. And I... I don't know what I would do if I lost the best thing in my life." That made him smirk and nuzzle against her neck. Soon feeling a scaled paw rub against her bare side.

"That doesn't explain why you took your armor and clothes off." A light yelp of embarrassment leaked out of Sarious' throat.

"It's... Just something that couples do. Or in this case, try to do."

"Lay in bed in combat forms without clothing?" The woman's hands covered her eyes again, making the dragon chuckle. "I mean, I'll do anything to get these pants off."

"It's more than that, Endzeit."

"Then talk to me. What do you want me to do?" A whimper that time from her. "Is it Kissing you again? Maybe kissing other parts of you?" A louder whimper as he half looked back at his HUD. "I mean, it was giving you... Pleasure? Is that what it's for?"

"I-in some ways, yes. But it's also..." A few playful nudges from the scaled one. I can't say 'red' one because- "It's also how... Babies are made." A long awkward silence as the two froze in place.

"...What's a babies?" A strange mix of sobbing laughter from Sarious that made the dragon just purr in curiosity. "Seriously, what are these things and why do you want it?"

"I-I don't-!"

"Wow, you are red." He checked her status again. "More red than usual, but also...?"

"Say it, and I will shove you off this bed."

"Then talk to me, Sarious." He almost teased. "Why do you want babies-?"

"Stop talking!"

"Start talking." The dragon tormented, nudging her pillows again and purring. Feeling a small stroke on his ear that made it flick.

"Babies..." She swallowed loudly. "They're how people appear in the world."

"It's how they're spawned?"

"Y-yes, kind of. They... Appear as babies and slowly have to..."

"Level up?" A whine but a nod was felt, making the dragon tilt his head.

"You could say that. But it takes 365 days or so for a level." A groan from Endzeit.

"Geez, I thought Skyline was grindy." He tossed his snout. "How long does it take for one to spawn?"

"About... Nine months or so-"

"*Seriously?*" He actually half got up to look at the blushing woman. "Do people in that game have that much trouble with coding? I could probably write us a babies in a week tops-" A

few sharp whimpers from Sarious as she shoved him off balance. Making him chuckle, even after she shoved him off the bed. "But is that what you want? Another pet?"

"N-no! I just...!" She whimpered, almost in defeat. Feeling a bit of change in her mood as the dragon climbed back onto the double bed and embraced her again. "I don't know what I want. I just..."

"You just...?"

"...I don't want to be alone anymore." A bit of silence between the two.

"You're not alone, Sarious. You've got me."

"Only here. But not out there..." Another silence as she sighed. "I'm so... Tired of it, Endzeit. I know you don't understand the hardships of the real world, how much of a terrible place it can be... How it has been to me, and I don't ever expect you to." Those furred ears fell. "I almost want you not to."

"Why?"

"Because... I don't like who I am there. I don't like the world I grew up in and I... Don't want to be constantly reminded of it. Especially when I'm with you." She finally removed her hands to show her wet eyes, but only for a glance as she held the dragon back. "What I want from you, Endzeit, is to never be reminded of that place. To keep my mind here, focused... And happy." Though he didn't quite understand, the dragon nodded in response. Holding her close and using her HUD to put her equipment back on. Staying in place for what felt like hours before a small little alarm was heard from that same HUD. "My IV's low. Should probably check it."

"So, logging off?"

"...Yeah. I should do a few things too." He nodded, lapping her still moist cheeks and letting her lay down in the bed comfortably.

"I'll be here when you get back." He stated sadly, and she smiled. Softly taking her hand before hitting the Log Off option and leaning towards her face. Giving her one more kiss before letting her leave.

Waking up in the darkness of her old room, she seen the picture of the two in a makeshift hammock. So much has happened since then, but it was the night that she really felt something special about him. Taking the relationship to the next level this night felt like the right thing to do, that is if such a thing were to even work. She expected it wouldn't, but Trish just

needed to try. Changing her IV and clothes once again, she found herself staring at a broken mirror. One that she broke herself during one of her... Bad nights.

Hoping those days were finally over, she couldn't help but look at the person reflected in the shards. Not really knowing who it was. The name of the person was Trisha, yes, but what did that even mean? Who was Trisha? She felt like she's been Sarious for so long that it overtook her identity. Because Sarious is who she wanted to be. Sarious is who she enjoyed being. Because Sarious... Was in love with Endzeit.

Shaking her head, she did her tasks for the night. But kept looking at the visor. As well as the computer the long cord was connected to. Wondering... What if...?

Chapter 6

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"What do you mean Our World?" She asked again. "Trish?"

"What do you think it means..." The younger woman sighed. "...I hate it."

"Hate what?"

"Your world... That world." She half gestured the window. "It's never been something I've been a part of. It's never been something I've been accepted to. I was just forced into it, and pushed out constantly. To the point where I just didn't want to bother trying anymore. Is that what you want to hear?" The therapist was quiet. "For years I've struggled with just trying to find that one answer. That one purpose here. And everytime I tried, something or someone pushes me back. So I gave up. Thinking that maybe I could find a way away from this one. Find a different world."

"Which would be a Game World..." The older one muttered.

"But even there, it felt corrupted. Trashed by the sons of jerks that ruined it before. The only difference this time was that I actually stood a chance. I could stand, if stand for nothing at all..." A slight sniff. "It's no wonder I trusted Endzeit. It's no wonder I want to spend the rest of my life with him. We share the same pain, except he's just... Stronger than I am. He can stand, after everything we've been through-"

"He's programed to-"

**"He Is Not Programed To Do Anything! He's A Person! Not An AI!"** Trish roared at the woman, startling her. Taking a few breaths, then scoffing. "I don't know why I even bothered with this." She said after a few moments. Getting up and grabbing her jacket. "Not like you or anyone could understand." The door slammed.

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She woke up to the glow of that HUD, the warmth of something small still on her chest. Even after she started to shift and stretch a bit, he didn't move. "You're getting brave."

"I figured that you wouldn't mind it so much, considering last night." She went a little quiet but looked at what he was typing. A bunch of paragraphs and lines that made no sense to her. "I mean, if you wanted to beat me senseless again, you would've done so already."

"You know me too well." She smirked at him sadly.

"It's my job, ma'am." The dragon playfully responded, accent and all. Getting her to shake her head.

"...What are you doing?" He paused for a moment, looking at her with lowered ears and slightly widened eyes.

"...Okay, I'll tell you if you promise me that you won't freak out." A chuckle from her that time. "I... Might've looked into what you were planning to do last night, with the unequipping and such."

"Oh lord." She grumbled, covering her eyes.

"I might have to show you a few things just to double check, but regardless, it does require to get around some boundaries that Skyline provides. There's a few places that are missing in your wireframe, kind of. More or less under that extra clothing you were disappointed about." An unimpressed stare from the woman, making the small noodle swallow loudly.

"...You watched porn, didn't you?"

"Yes." He admitted, getting her to actually chuckle and Endzeit to breathe a sigh of relief. "Or at least that's what it was called repeatedly, as well as some rather descriptive words: nice, hot, sexy A.F. Whatever that means-"

"Just..." A motion for him to go on.

"Whelp, the scans that make your wireframe skip these areas people were using in the videos and photos-"

"Porn."

"Yes. So I found a way to disable such restrictions and let it scan those areas, what I'm guessing is your... Body in the" He cleared his throat in a half grumble. "**Real World**. But it's going to take some more work."

"You mean...?" The two looked at each other for a few moments, and his ears fell again.

"I can likely... Make us something to do what you were hoping for. Though, I can't promise any Babies." An uncomfortable laugh from the woman. "Is that okay?"

"I-I mean... Is it safe?" A shrug from the small one.

"I don't even know if it's possible yet. It's just speculation still at this point. I'll even have to make up a design for myself, seeing as I don't have one of those-" A hand told him to stop. "So, that's a no then?"

"N-no, feel..." A breath from Sarious as she sadly smiled and held the dragon. Making him slightly whimper. "Try it? Please? Just don't get caught."

"Are you level 18 or over?" Another chuckle from her. "I mean, aside from some game rules and such, but these inns are not monitored by the game for privacy reasons. -Speaking of, is that what people are often doing in their rooms?" A playful shove from her. "Either way, it's going to take a lot of work and I should probably only do it while we're in here." He closed the screen and noticed her somewhat saddened stare into space. "Something wrong?"

"...No. Just, thinking." She gave a sad smile as she got up and started walking out. "Just don't mention it to anyone, okay?"

"Private matter, gotcha."

"What should we do today-?"

"Eat." The sudden answer made her chuckle. "Snuggling or spooning worked up quite an appetite last-" The incoming hand over his head made him playfully whimper as she shushed. Purring a bit and leaning into it. "But it doesn't matter to me really."

"It matters to you."

"Okay, it does matter to me, but can you blame me?" A shake of her head, but she still smiled. More than she used to. "What do you feel like?"

"Well, I've got quite a bit saved up, but..." She half sighed, getting a troubled look on her face. "Trying to cook something right now would take too long. And Dalton would probably want us to... Report last night."

"With the Wraiths, yes." The dragon nodded, getting a bit cross himself and looking off into the distance. Probably of the direction of where the battle took place. "It's a strange feeling, isn't it? Being... Vulnerable to them."

The woman swallowed, nodding at him. "Let alone to go out like... That. It was horrifying. The sounds they were making, the movements." Looking around at a few mounts passing by in the streets, she half hesitated to ask him the question. "Do... They...?"

He studied her for a moment, then looked at their surroundings. "...It's more of a Madness that overcomes them. Odds are the Mounts could possibly get it too. First they would probably give into common Vices. Then grow more and more violent. Aggressive, even towards a herd or a pack. Their own family." He muttered. "I've even heard of pets..."

"I can't believe that." She bluntly stated, getting a worried look from the red one. "You actually *wanting* to eat more? That's insanity." It eased up his mood a bit. "Besides... I won't let them."

"And neither will I." He nodded at her, as they entered a restaurant.

"They turned into Wraiths?" Dalton asked, leaning forward in his chair and onto the long meeting table. A large shadow covered his face from the moonlight and distant hall lamps.

Barely seeing the knight's head turn to every person that was in the party last night. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." Regondale answered. A little irked when the leader turned towards Sarious' Companion.

"Endzeit? Did you attempt to scan them at all?"

"...Yeah. They were traces of each for the most part, but the Wraiths were taking over the resistance."

"Still... It's unheard of." Dalton sighed. Looking at the archer. "And he was at one Hp?" She nodded at him.

"Honestly, it almost seemed like they didn't want to kill him. And the... Other ones that came..."

"That herd." The Noble stated.

"They were drawn to it. It was like he was some kind of tracer."

"Perhaps maybe they were searching for a city to take over. Even after two years of this game being out, not many players really know what's in that swamp area, besides the Wraithgate." The knight exhaled. "It's very possible we missed something."

"Without the advantage of flight, or a reliable scout, it's difficult to map anything." Regondale muttered.

"Endzeit can fly, but..."

"He can't be too far away from her. So either she somehow keeps up on the ground..."

"Or I could take her flying with me-"

"No." The woman grumbled, getting a faint nudge from the small one. "I thought about having a Shadow go through. A Rogue specialized in stealth and trickery scouting for us. Those... Things didn't seem to be horribly aware of their surroundings."

"By their description, I can't imagine that they would." Dalton pondered. "Dark is the only Rogue I know enough to really trust well, but he's more of an Assassin than a Shadow."

"We could raid it. All of us together if we can organize a time." The knight slightly nodded at Scharlot's idea. "It can't be any harder than the Wraithgate. Let alone something Open World [On the main map. Not within a dungeon or another instance like the Faction Hall] being this powerful."

"Are we sure it just isn't an event? Something that the Devs are just planning?"

"I suppose that's possible, sir." The noble muttered. "But this..." He exhaled.

"The way they were infected. The way they were acting, almost possessed or irrational. I can't imagine that happening to anyone. Let alone how unfair it would be." Sarius stated.

"The Devs for Skyline have been trying quite hard recently to kill players. It is a F2P [Free to Play (game)] after all." The archer grumbled.

"Meaning, the longer the player stays alive, the more money people will try to throw at the game to keep it alive." Sarius thought to herself, noticing the conversation was over the dragon's head.

"Well, the most we can do right now is start posting warnings to others. Perhaps make sure that they prepare any other players for such things." The knight got up. "I'm just glad you guys all made it out safely." They all nodded. "I need to get to work soon, but I'll post a thread on the forums before I head out."

"I'll do it, Sir. I recorded a video of our gameplay last night. I can upload that as proof and provide a better warning." The Noble said, getting up.

"Do you have the infection recorded too?" He nodded. "Very well. Thank you, Regondale. Anything else we wish to discuss right now?" Everyone shook their heads. "Alright. Be careful out there. Never fight alone, it's too dangerous. Until we get a better understanding of what is going on with these wraiths, be very cautious. Use cheap tactics to get the upper hand, and always have an escape route ready. Even if it's the Faction Hall."

"Okay." Sarius and Endzeit said a bit shyly.

"Alright, I'm off. I'll see you guys tonight." With a faint salute, Dalton disappeared. Then Regondale. As Scharlot got out of her chair, she looked over at the other two.

"You Tasking anywhere?"

"N-no. I'm going to do a few things in lower level areas or in town. We should be fine." She nodded at the woman.

"Eventually, you gotta tell us what happened to the herd." The archer said, a bit thickly. "You fell behind, and we thought we lost you two. Only to find out they were all gone."

"Yeah, I'm not sure what happened." Sarius looked at Endzeit, who was lowering his ears. "I'll get it out of him later."

"Have it ready for tonight." She stated, walking towards the teleporter. The statement made the red one whimper a bit, still feeling the woman's gaze on him.

"We don't have to talk about it now." She said to him, picking up the small dragon and putting him on her shoulder. Taking a good look at the dark castle now that she had the time,

and making her way to the teleporter.

Handing in a few old Tasks they skipped out on, the two found themselves back in the grassy fields from before. A location they called Forlorn Skies, the place where Dalton taught the two a fun new tactic that the dragon could just not get enough of. Always excited to play in the fields with the other Wraiths and just pester them in a large group. The silliness of it all just put a smile on the woman's face as she casually walked through the fields and past the excessively long grass.

Sitting down on a flat hill overlooking several bare fields and watching the sun set in the distance, it was still all breathtaking. Somehow a pleasant shame that this place was hardly seen. Pleasant because it was a spot that the two could enjoy together, alone. Away from other eyes or noisy players. Just the two to stop and relax.

Relax. It felt good to relax after the long days of grinding a bit. Just thinking of it almost made her feel tired. Laying back on the grass and almost yelping at the sight of the hovering dragon overhead. "Good god..." She whispered, getting a faint chuckle and a purr from him as he circled her a few times and laid his silly maned head on her belly. "All done?"

"For now. Might do some more later. Did find you a few more blades though." Another purr as he nuzzled against her chest pillows a bit. "...We should buy this place."

"...Yeah. We should." She said with a smile. "It's perfect. Almost exactly what I wanted."

"What's missing?"

"The house for one." The two chuckled. "But I guess that's obvious."

"Yeah."

"...I always wanted a porch swing. One made completely out of wood, that would rock back and forth. Facing the dusk." He nodded.

"I want a kitchen." A bit of laughter and a few taps on his snout. Playfully growling at it and licking the glove a bit. "A big kitchen. One half the size of the house."

"Geez..." Sarious shook her head. "I swear you love food more than anything."

"Maybe. But..." He lightly shrugged, holding onto her hand a bit. "I'm starting to like something else more."

"It better not be my chest."

"It is not your chest." He bluntly stated. Getting laughter from both. "...So you're okay with this? I don't think anyone has ever..."

"Fallen in love with their Companion?" A faint nod. "...No. I guess most people do not. But, most people... They have pets. I wanted something more." She smiled. "And I got something more."

"And the others? All the others?"

"...The others... They follow the rules. Guidelines that other people have made for them." A pet on his head. "We don't follow those rules anymore, Endzeit. This world, it's freedom. We should do anything... Everything we like in it."

"You mean... Iconoclast?" She made a noise in agreement. "A Destroyer of Religious Symbols. Someone who attacks the lines others are willingly forced to follow." The definition of it all sounded so negative, yet the deeper meaning... "Last Days." The dragon broke her thoughts. "Or sometimes called End Time or Date. The end of days." Sarious stayed quiet. "That's what the name means, doesn't it? Endzeit."

"...You found out, did you?" She felt the red one nod. "...Did you listen to the song?"

"It hurt my ears." She faintly chuckled.

"It seems so old now... Yet so powerful."

"Is that why...?"

Lacuna Coil - Intoxicated

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The therapist sat at her desk, took a breath and cleared her throat. "It's been a few weeks since I was able to get these back since you've requested them. If you want my professional opinion on Trisha's condition, she's a bit disillusioned when it comes to identifying the real world. Many cases of people jumping back and forth between different worlds with Virtual Reality causes them to have a hard time to make sense with what is real and what is not."

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The woman sighed, holding him a bit tighter. "It's not the only reason..." She almost whispered.

"What's the other?" When she didn't answer, he nudged her a little bit. "Sarious?"

"Endzeit..." There was a painful look in her eyes. "You... This was going to be my final attempt at a world."


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A quiet sigh from her. "VR, like many other things, can be addictive. And those who tend to thrive on such things will do whatever they can to get a fix. With all the recent hardships of Trisha's life of late, it's no wonder she drowned herself in such things. A place that no longer houses the pains of the real world."

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"Final attempt?" He looked at her worryingly. "...Last Days." He muttered. "It was me, wasn't it?" She faintly nodded. "Sarious... What is this Real World you keep talking about? Where do people go when they... Log Off?"

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"...Make sense what you will out of these recordings, it's all I have of our sessions. And... Mrs. Johnson, I'm sorry for your loss. You didn't deserve to lose your daughter's family. And you didn't deserve to lose Trisha too."

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"It's... Nowhere, Endzeit. Not anymore." He gave a puzzled look at her. "It's nowhere I want to be, and... I left it. Forever." The woman held onto the red one tightly, sadly smiling. "The air I breathe here... It's poison free. I'll never have to go back there again."

Light Escapes Act 3 - Sky

By Bartan Tirix

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 led 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-"

"Sarioulsly-" 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, Sarious 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 he made 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 the dragon 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 chomps 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. "Sarioulsy, 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 flop 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-" Sarious 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 Sarious. "Oh, you're in Draconica?"

The question almost shocked Sarious, 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?" Sarious 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 alot 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 Sarius. 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 Sarius 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 Sarius to look at Endzeit for an answer.

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

"A mod? [Game Moderator. Think Supervisor]" Sarius 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 severs 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-" Sarios 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?" Sarios asked, just getting a concerned look on Endzeit's face.

"Sarios? 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." Sarios' 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 panicked. 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 a lot closer than she expected. "Is Sarius around here?"

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

"Last I seen, he took the Square. A lot 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 a lot 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 Sarius. 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 open 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 Sarius' 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 a lot 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 alot 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 Sarios 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 heath 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 afterword and causing the creature to groan. "Sarios!" 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?" Sarious 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. "Sarious, 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 Sarious' 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 Sarious 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 skitting 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. Sarious' 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." Sarious 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!?" Sarious 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 morning, 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.

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 discomforting, 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 Sarius 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, Sarious, 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 Cliffsides 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 Sarius 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 sideward 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.

"Sarious... 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 through 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 in game 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
K1YOKO
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 high, 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..." Sarios 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.

"Wherever My Light Escapes."