

1989

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

He never felt such pain before. It was difficult to tell which was worse between each thigh. Both impaled by something so black and cold, he couldn't make out what they were. They never fell from the ceiling of the dark room, only illuminated from his burning city outside. The pillars of orange lights barely banished any shadows over the long table, almost as if purposely hiding the grotesque fate of his followers.

The objects twisted, almost hissing like serpents in his lap. Snapping at his feathered arms, as if to crave another bite of the brown fowl now tied to his luxury chair. Ruined from their burrows of the stone floor, they shot up out of nowhere, without warning. Before he or anyone else could even react, one speared through the duck's hamstring. Straight through the bone, cracking it with ease. While the other seemed to penetrate through the muscle like a blade through the air, coiling around the bone and scratching it with its many sharp edges.

Every shift was the complete opposite of Nirvana. Every loud click was a song of despair, singing to him as if lowering the fowl into his very own grave. Resisting the urge to drink up his very own warmth as it leaked from his heirloom and stained the floor. They were being controlled, leashed... Lead.

With no words from his old allies to comfort his vulnerable form, nothing but the roaring of distant flames, the young king struggled to hold on for those few moments. Barely hearing the tapping of claws and pawsteps beyond the barricaded door. Easily split of its metal bars by more vipers from the shadows, he couldn't make out the four legged creature in the darkness. But a faint red light behind it, as well as could hear his voice. "*Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, badum bum...*" It mimic'd the very song in his own delusions. "*Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, bum ba-dum dum dum...*"

Jumping on the table with ease, it stepped into the orange light as it casually walked towards the still alive bird. Still in its own head, it barely paid attention to the bodies of his fallen. Once in a while stopping to conduct the symphony of clicks as they sang along. "*Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, badum hiiim...*" He left the final part of the stanza to the serpents, as the black, panther-like creature took a very deep breath. "***Want To.***" The king whimpered in question. "*We Can If We **Want To.***" With a complete opening of his paw, one of his old friends ripped apart in a grotesque mess, still censored by the shadows. "*Lead You From Behind You.*"

The sound alone was enough to make the fowl nearly faint. Hearing this creature take another

deep breath before walking to the young king, staring nearly into his fragile form with those red eyes. "Hi." The panther slyly smiled at him, not getting a response. "You must be the leader of this... *Wonderful*." A faint sob. "Productive. Beautiful City." A slight nod from the bird, but he couldn't stare into those eyes. Eventually getting the black one's head to slightly tilt to see him. "Look at me." He said, almost in a caring tone. "Hey. Look at me." A shaky tell of denial, and soon something pierced through the back of his chair. Feeling those bladed mandibles grab the back of his neck, just below the skull and force the bird's head up.

"This would be a lot easier if you just cooperate. Mostly because..." Another black viper came up from the side of the table gently, getting a slight scratch under the chin. "They don't know restraint I'm afraid. But I don't blame them, people are just too... *Fragile*." Another whimper. "But I'm here, before you... Your Majesty, to have a polite conversation. A few questions, if you don't mind."

"T-then... Release me." The bird coughed, getting the feline to study him for a moment before clicking his tongue.

"Problem with that." He lightly pointed down, towards the two snakes in those feathered legs. "You see, they've already done a lot of damage to your hinds. A massive amount, to the point where you probably won't ever walk again." A slight sob. "Removing them would only leave a gaping hole in those drumsticks, and thus, bleed out much quicker than I wish." Another look at the free serpent, coiling around his black furred arm. "Not to mention, they don't move backwards too well. I mean, they *Can*, but it is a... Fantastic mess, if you're into that sort of thing."

The one holding the back of the king's neck let go, slithering back into the darkness. "I could cauterize the wounds, but if you thought you were in pain now..." A faint whistle from him. "Tell you what, I'll think about it. But first, I need to ask you a few questions." A light flick of his black paw, and the abyss viper withdrew from its gentle constricting. "There are a few survivors on the west side. Go play." He said to the metal serpent and it clicked before retreating. Hearing a few more whimpers from the fowl, and the feline tossed his muzzle slightly. "I've got to keep them entertained. Nothing personal."

The panther laid down on the table. "Now, first of all, my name is Rixxix {*Ricks-Six*}. Don't bother telling me yours, I don't care, and you won't live past the night." A sob nearly broke the king. "But there's a few things I want from you." A few shy inhales from the bound one got the feline curious. "Something you want to say?"

"...I-if it's the gold, just take it-" Rixxix burst into laughs.

"I don't want your metals. What use would I *possibly* have for them?" A slightly puzzled look from the bird. "You're not the first to give me that look, and you won't be the last. But alright, alright. We'll start with that. Why gold?" That look didn't release. "I mean, I understand you would use **Gold** as a currency: It's decently light for carry, rare enough not to be common, hard to counterfeit in your current times. But do you know why your ancestors chose Gold over, say, Platinum or Silver?" A nervous head shake. "Silver Tarnishes over time, leaving its durability rather questionable long term. And Platinum... Rare, yes, but the melting point of it is ridiculous. Even *I* have a hard time melting it without vaporizing

the damn thing."

"...Why are you telling me this...?"

"**Why**, indeed." The black one smirked, taking another deep breath of almost satisfaction. "Would you rather not have an intelligent conversation during your final hour?" Another sob and a slight cough. "Thirsty?"

"...Parched, yes."

"Fair enough." Another click of his red tongue, and a black viper came. "Can you retrieve a glass of water for our host?" It clicked back and sank back into the shadows. "But alright, let's talk about you for a bit then." A concerned look from him, let alone one of puzzlement from an earlier statement. "Was there anything, **Anything** you could have done differently to plan against this?" The bird didn't answer, and the viper returned with a goblet. "Thank you." And Rixxix handed it to the young king. "Maybe we'll start with something a bit different then. Why did your species choose this type of rule?"

The fowl took a drink. "What do you mean...?"

"Why choose this? Why pursue..." He lightly pointed at the crown on his head. "That, out of all things?"

"...Should one not have the desire to rule the land-?"

"Rule what-now?" The panther interrupted. "Land?" A painful realization echoed through the avian's eyes, one that was in denial for a long time. "Yes... I think you're understand where I'm getting at, don't you?" The duck's head fell in defeat. "To be King, or whatnot isn't exactly what people think. You are nothing without..." He tossed his black head slightly back towards the corpses around the long table. Letting that messy mane with green highlights bounce in the shadows a bit. "**Them**. Nothing against you personally, of course. That's just truism when it comes to obtaining power over a kingdom, yes?"

A faint nod from the brown one. "A King needs an army, a form of law, and a way to collect taxes or treasures. But a single person cannot do that alone, can they? No, you need people to run those... Departments. And even then, those people need others to run their share of departments, and so on. You *Barely* decide anything yourself. Maybe suggest a few changes, but overall, you do nothing more than moderate the kingdom's wealth. A Glorified *Accountant*, one that could be easily replaced if anyone would decide it so." A sad look from the bird's eyes. "Ruling the world doesn't sound too great in the end, does it?"

"...I really thought it would be different."

"You and every other ruler I've met. Sure, from the outside, that silhouette of the throne looks so wonderful. But then to realize that it is built on nothing more than a house of cards, waiting for it all to fall as soon as you take your first rest on it. Though you never actually rest do you? It's an uneasy feeling knowing that if something goes wrong... Something valuable is stolen, they will blame you. And

that staging underneath collapses, then you drop a thousand feet. As well as six more." A shaky nod from the fowl, almost frightened when one of the serpents came close to the black creature. Dropping a few gold coins in his right paw for Rixxix to observe.

"Funny how such things symbolize wealth and loyalty, but is it really loyalty that you're purchasing? Your job is to bribe people to work. To incentivize them for protection, food, or other duties. Not just for you, of course, but the cycle goes on and on. You pay them, they *survive*. Sometimes in luxury, sometimes in poverty. The happy ones will love you, the miserable will hate you with a cold heart. Enough to plan a murder, assassination, or rebellion. And depending how well you pay for your protection, pay to keep that golden circlet on your crown, will determine if they succeed or not. So the question comes back, was there any way for you to prepare my arrival? Anything you could've done differently?"

A nervous nod from the young king. "I... Could've..."

"Hmm?" A sob interrupted the feathered one. "You don't have very much time left. If you wish to confess something to them, you may." Another motion to the limp bodies behind the panther.

"...Put more attention into... Military. Like she wanted me to."

"Is that so?" A moment of silence, and the black one seen the avian show signs of dizziness. "And who would suffer from those actions?" A heavy sigh of defeat and Rixxix nodded at him. "I know, I know. There's no right way of ruling. No second chances, it's just an extremely long juggle between keeping people happy. If you pay too much attention towards the citizens, your supporters distrust you. If you pay too much attention to your supporters, your people suffer. Do you understand why your form of rule is flawed?"

A faint nod, and the feline reached for the duck's head. Getting a whimper and a retreat from the young king, but the creature gently silenced him. "Shh... It's alright." He whispered to the feathered one, lightly taking off the jewels that weighed heavily upon his head. "I release you of your responsibilities, your Majesty. You no longer have to worry about such things, they are past you now. No more balancing or juggling. No more numbers and responsibility. Just rest." It was almost soothing to hear, getting the avian to nearly pass out and force the entire paw to carry that weight.

"All you need to do is answer one question, and then you may sleep." He sleepishly looked into those red eyes once more. "Is there anything you could have done to prepare you against me?" His answer only came in deep, yet faint breaths, as both paws stroked the backside of his brown head. Nearly coming muzzle to bill against such a creature, but seen something move near the edge of the table. The shimmer of a black serpent, pointing towards his head like a spike and fluttering his heart once again with fear. "**No.**" The panther said thickly before slamming the bird's head down.

Chapter 1

A large bump woke the canine up. Though he could hear one of them talk during his sleep, it never startled him until they came to that rocky road. Noticing how much it was rattling many of the kitchen supplies within the wagon. And under all the noise, he could make out a few words while he stretched to get up. "Fascinating! And such things go through the same cycles every year? Absolutely beautiful... Yes, I expect they would make a lovely home. Many are used as such, even in the larger cities."

Another bump knocked something rather unimportant down, nearly hitting the golden dog upon exiting the small closet space and making him yelp. Picking it up quickly while hearing that same voice almost get startled. "N-no, it's fine! It was...! Oh, alright then. Pleasure to meet you!" The rather long theropod started stepping backwards, barely missing many of the pans and grates with every step. "Sorry, Rivo. Did I wake you?"

"N-no." Another dip in the road made butterflies flutter in his stomach, as the dog tried to keep everything inside. "This is what woke me." He half grumbled, nearly glaring through the front of the wagon.

"Yes, these roads are not often traveled for a reason it seems. It's rather exciting!" The dinosaur nearly giggled, getting those long spines that made his mane to sway a bit as he stuck his head outside the front window again. "It looks like it's going to clear up soon though-Heads up!" Another dip made the canine yelp.

"I thought you were going to make camp during the night."

"We were, but Karmu decided against it. He made a pretty delightful argument."

"Figures." The canine grumbled, getting dressed. "How far are we?"

"Two hundred and thirty four minutes away at our current speed. You can see the city walls through the trees when they clear. Very thrilling!"

"You say that about every town."

"But it is! Especially when this is a town within a town, with a neighboring town, surrounded by two town walls!" The enthusiasm was real with this one, making Rivo smile a bit. The large, raptor-like creature seemed so excited about every little thing, it honestly reminded him of a pup. "I wonder what sights will await us."

"Me too, to be honest." He took a breath as the theropod slipped his head back inside. Giving him a puzzled look. "I'm just a little nervous about it."

"I know you are." The larger one bluntly said.

"It's been so long since I've been inside of a city. Now that we're almost here, I wonder if I'm ready..." The raptor took a step closer, gently nuzzling against the dog's golden fur.

"You are. Stuff On A Stick is a worthy investment for anyone's portable metal circles." The statement made him chuckle. "I can understand why people would participate in repetitive acts in order to collect such things." Another look outside the window. "They spend it on experiences, ones they will remember for the rest of their lives."

"You talk strangely, Naught." It only made the dinosaur smile, expecting the bump in the road almost too flawlessly. "How is Karmu doing?"

"He's fine. Considering he has the rest of the day to rest off the trip, we should be alright for a few days. However, the right wheel to the rear container is getting a bit loose. I can attempt to repair it once we arrive, and it will last until then." A bit of a strange look eventually made Naught double take, perking his frilled ears in puzzlement.

"How do you know that...?"

"Do you not hear that squeaking? Just a few bolts becoming loose. The threads are wearing out, and we might have to buy a few for the next town."

"If there is a next town." The gold one said, getting his breakfast ready.

"Do you not want to?"

"It's not that..." Rivo rubbed the back of his neck a bit.

"You enjoy traveling? I can understand why."

"Well, that's a bit of it as well. But..." A gesture to go on. "I want to move my wife and pup out of their current home. Hoping in some other town, I'm thinking inside the walls."

"It would be a better place to set up a stand or store. Especially after seeing quite a few these past months." He gazed towards the city once again. "I wonder why people choose to stay in one place for so long when there is so much to explore out there."

"...Naught?" The large one made a noise in question. "Where did you come from?" The canine asked, once again overlooking the strange orange and dark blue pattern acrossed that scaled body. They were near perfect in tribal marks and slashes, as if they were tattooed with professional expertise to cover the slightly albino underside of the dinosaur. Even those spines looked far stranger than any other creature, highlighted with a bright teal that dimmed to a dark blue when it climbed down to the base of the vaneless feather. Yet, they all seemed to contrast comfortingly with those violet eyes... Which were

looking at him puzzled again.

"I came from the same places as you." Another oddly innocent, yet blunt answer.

"I mean... Before that."

"The same places as Karmu."

"So, you were traveling together. I know that much. But what about..." The theropod's head tilted. "Before Karmu, where did you come from? Where were you... Hatched, I guess?"

The larger one pondered for a moment, scratching his chin with a single claw. "I don't think that place had a name."

"So, an undiscovered island? How did you get here?" Just as he was going to speak, the dog interrupted him. "-I mean, on this land. Not here on the wagon."

"I fell." A bit of an awkward silence as they stared blankly at each other.

"...You fell."

"Yes. That is correct."

"Were there... Others like you there?"

"Not many, no. Every once in a while I did get a visit from one, but they were so spaced inbetween." Another look out the front window. "Unlike this place, it was rather lonely there. I just did not realize it until recently."

"So, you decided to... Fall here?" A rather energetic nod. "Is there any way for you to get back?"

"Oh, yes. When I require to." A moment of study on the golden dog. "You are worried for me?"

"Perhaps a little. I-" The larger one took a step forward and hugged Rivo. Getting that somewhat tight embrace a chuckle, for it wasn't anything new or surprising with this one. "You're far different from others here, is all I'm saying."

"People often say that. At times they mean it to be a good thing, others find it startling. A rather interesting observation, if I don't say so myself."

"That's because of your size, I'm sure."

"Yes. Your species tends to be intimidated by objects and beings larger than them, correct?" A slight nod from the canine, as well as a yawn. "You are still tired."

"A little, yes."

"Well, the roads are smooth from here on out. You should get some rest before we make it to

the city gates." A shy smile from the furred one, and he got one back. "I'll be sure to alert you if something comes up, but odds are me and Karmu can handle it."

"A-alright. Thank you, Naught."

"You're welcome, boss." The label made him chuckle, as he laid back down on the small bedding within a sliding door closet. Slowly falling asleep once again to the movement of the large wagon.

His ear flicked at the sound of that close door sliding, then smelled those strange scales. Processing what it meant in his subconscious rather sluggishly, and getting interrupted by loud whispering. "Rivo... Rivo... Rivo." A loud yelp nearly sprung him out of bed, running muzzle first into that scaly paw, protecting him from the damage of the low ceiling. "Excellent you are awake. We're here! This is so exciting!" The theropod nearly cackled in glee as it headed out the back end of the wagon; the only exit he was able to take.

With a faint grumble, the dog massaged his own head for a few moments. Instantly wishing he invented some magical drink that would allow him to wake up faster, let alone more pleasantly. Still getting correctly dressed, the wagon moved forward just a little bit. Probably indicating there was a line at the gate for inspections. And from afar, Naught's voice was caught. Getting the canine to whimper and mutter to himself. "He's talking again-he's talking again...!"

"Absolutely fascinating. You haven't needed to change a single brick for fifty thousand, three hundred and seventy days? Even after so many weather conditions, it still stays strong. What an intriguing compound of Sand, Water, Gravel, Air, and... Is that Lhosaka Cement? Astonishing!"

"Sir, we're trying to inspect this cargo." The guard grumbled at the dinosaur. "Please return to your vehicle and wait your turn-"

"However, the iron on the gate does seem somewhat new. I'm assuming rust from the bay got at it?" A groan from the beaver in uniform, hearing the golden dog yelp as he came out.

"Okay, Naught. That's enough pestering people with questions and one sided conversations." Rivo said, quickly scampering over and pushing the theropod back. "S-sorry that he bothered you, Sir."

"But I haven't even gotten to the banners and surrounding plant life-"

"Which can wait until they're off duty, if anything. They are busy."

"Just like every gate we come to, yes." The raptor sighed a bit, stopping in front of a rather large red beast attached to the front of the wagon. Giving its broad neck a hug as it stared into space in silence. "A commendable job on getting us here, Karmu." The short-furred creature slightly nodded, giving the talkative dino a few pats on the back.

"Everything okay?" The dog asked, concerned about the red one's silence. Getting a gaze from those oddly black eyes with a white pupil, one that seemed to change depending how the light hit it.

"Fine." It eventually spoke. "Just mentally exhausted from the trip."

"You only hit a total of thirty one holes and rocks on the road here." Naught said, rather cheerfully.

"Considering how many there was-"

"One hundred and eighty two."

"...Yeah." A shake of his muzzle let the shaggy grey mane move a bit, getting the theropod to nearly inhale some of it and snort it out. "You'll live."

"Of course I will. But perhaps you should take a break."

"I'm fine. I can carry it to our designated spot." A study from those violet eyes, trailing over the red one's very broad shoulders and chest. Supporting the breastcollar for the wagon, but also a gemmed amulet attached to a thick chain.

"Your lactate concentrations are a bit high, but nothing dangerous. It's a wonder, considering the rate of travel the past few days."

"Whatever that is supposed to mean." Karmu half grumbled, making the dino smile and give him another hug.

"Yet, you're still not feeling any soreness? I wonder if your natural threshold is too high for your body to realize it." The two looked at him blankly for a few moments, and Naught slightly pondered. "How would you put it... You cannot detect soreness within your muscles until it is dangerously high."

A light shrug from him. "I've never had a problem with it."

"Perhaps that is a good thing then." He smiled, instantly turning around when the wagon before them moved forward. "Our turn then? Does that mean-?"

"You probably shouldn't talk to them anymore." A slight whimper, but the large raptor didn't stay saddened for long. Easily distracted by a guard wearing chainmail.

"Even some of your guards are well equipped. Are you expecting an attack of some sort?"

"What did I-?" Rivo sighed. "Please forgive him, officers. I can show you my current stocks back here." The canine lead the three behind as the red behemoth slowly pulled the wagon forward.

"It looks very crowded in there." Naught observed, walking beside Karmu for the moment.

"I expected such."

"It must mean you succeeded on getting us here on time." A bright smile barely got a smirk from the red muzzle. "Perhaps maybe we can observe one of the games! There's even rumors that a Render is participating. How thrilling!" No response from the beast. "Does that concern you?"

"...No. Odds are it's nothing to worried about. They may claim that it's a Render, but odds are it's staged."

"He would understand if you wish to remain outside the walls, you know." A faint nod from him. "Perhaps it would be for the best, considering your size."

"Yeah. The towns were bad enough. A crowded city is just asking for trouble." A smile from the colorful one.

"Alright, everything checks out but one thing." The beaver said, coming around and getting concerned looks from the three. "If you don't mind, your... Uh, *Carrier* is a little... Big for the city streets and alleys." It made the red beast's ears go back, but didn't respond. "You can rent out a stable if you like-"

"That's fine. I'll just sleep out here for a few days." A look from those brown dog eyes.

"Are you sure, Karmu?"

"He is positive. And I can take his place for the meantime!" Naught said, rather excitedly. Beginning to take off the breastcollar and harness. "Is there anything you need or wish from inside?"

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." The two nodded, and Rivo got a ticket. Along with directions of where to go.

"Enjoy your rest!"

"Yeah. You two make some good sales." And the behemoth went his separate way.

Chapter 2

The pathway felt narrow, but the raptor guided it behind the stalls and wagons quite easily. Barely nicking a thing between the buildings and the supply crates of others, all the while the golden dog inside was prepping everything. Setting up the portable stoves, and getting stakes for the small fires. Setting up the many utensils beside the heated surfaces, and even donning his protective gears, just in

case. All that was left was to get the meats and other goodies out of the portable cooler.

A rather drastic curve was felt, giving him a signal that they were in position. Hearing the harness flip up and snap into place in front of the wagon, the theropod's pawsteps were heard outside. Granted, barely, with all the noise, but soon the cooler was detached. Being brought over to the left side of the wagon, and snapping in place where the main door was. For smaller beings, that is.

The Door opened, and the extension was snapped in. "All set!" Naught almost chirped in excitement. Taking a few steps back, and one sideways to avoid an obstacle, a loud lever was pulled from the inside. Folding out an awning, dropping out a large section of the wall, and set it down as a stand to order within the shade. Several other window-like panels slid down, offering many eating utensils, condiments, and napkins that were stored into the cupboards from the inside. "How entertaining!" The raptor said loudly, but there was still work for him to do.

For now, while many of the objects were being cooked, he could work on fixing that wheel. Getting another small window to slide opened and Rivo to peer through. "Nothing stuck?"

"Not at all. I told you investing in that penetrating oil would be worth it." A few sizzles were heard as the fires started heating up the metal sheet, cooking many meats on it. "Worked like a charm, and you still have more left over, however..."

"Hmm?"

"You should probably take it out of the condiment space." A yelp from the golden one as he scampered over to find the bottle. Granted, little to no concern was heard in the dinosaur's voice. "Such a thing would ruin the taste of your cooking."

"Y-yeah..." Rivo muttered, getting a puzzled look from those violet eyes. "I decided to try my Fish On A Stick out here. Before they go bad, at least."

"Oh?"

"I'm just a little nervous about the recipe."

"As long as you've made the changes I suggested on your try-outs, it will turn out fine."

"Four parts curry, two rosemary, and one garlic?" A slight double take from Naught.

"...Three parts curry." He corrected him, getting a rather shocked look as those golden ears fell, looking at the frying base and whimpering. "It will still be fine. Just warn them it might be a bit spicy."

Another whimper. "First mess up of the day, and I haven't even sold anything yet...!"

"Second mess up. The oil, remember?" A third whimper. "You will do fine, Rivo. You have an extraordinary ability. Besides, there's nothing to be afraid of. It's like any other town. Except much, much, much, much bigger!" He took out a few bolts and held them up to the sunlight. "As I assumed. The threads have been worn down. I'll have to get some more, or see if they can be repaired."

"Do you have enough coin on you?"

"Yes. Perhaps I'll see what this place has to offer in the meantime!" He placed the old bolts in a vest-like harness with many pockets. "I'll be back in an hour and thirty five minutes. Good luck!"

The canine awkwardly waved goodbye and took a deep breath. Turning around to face the customer window with a smile, and calling out to someone passing by. "You Ma'am, would you like to try some Stuff On A Stick?"

The bazar was quite crowded, forcing the dinosaur to watch his step while seeing the sights. The castle in the distance, a large arena dome where many sports were played. The architectural designs of many structures fascinated him, making him wield the brightest of smiles on his muzzle.

A few children scampered within the crowd, chasing each other with the energy of youth. One of them tripped in the sea of people, just within arm's reach of Naught, and he quickly fished him out. Preventing any injury from being trampled, but sneaking his own little hug for a reward. "Careful now." He smiled at the little one, and it took off.

Many things were being sold in the walls of kiosks. From homemade jewelry and artwork, to many forms of clothing and decorations. Mostly rugs, carpets, and beddings. As well as some food stands here and there, giving the warm morning a wonderful scent of attraction. Speaking of which: "You there!" One of the food vendors grabbed the attention of the theropod. "Would you like to try a secret family reci-"

"A slice of dried meat, soaked in salted honey covered in sugary orange syrup!? I would love one!" He delightfully replied. Pulling out a few coins, and double taking at the canine vendor that was giving him a very shocked look. "It's only three coins each, correct?"

"H... How did you-?"

"I can smell it." He said bluntly, handing over the coins and receiving his treat. Granted still not getting any relief from the strange stare. "Is something the matter?"

"Seriously, it's been a hidden recipe within my family for six generations! How did you find out? Who told you?" He whispered harshly to the dinosaur, but not getting a hostile response. Only getting those perked frilled ears and a slight head tilt.

"No one told me. But, I've been told I'm an excellent observer." A moment of study and the vendor sighed in defeat. "What's wrong?"

"Did you have to say it so loudly?" He almost whimpered, getting those frilled ears to fall.

"Sorry."

"No, I've just been struggling for customers. See that guy over there?" He pointed down the street, where many people were gathered in wait. "He's doing something to his treats to get so much attention, and I can't figure out what he does to make them taste so goo-"

"They're marinated in Sadifruit juice for several hours before prepped." Naught said after glancing at the treats from afar. Double taking once again at the canine near him who slightly whimpered.

"...What?"

"He lets the dried meats set in a container full of Sadifruit-"

"I know what marinating is. But...?" A puzzled look from the dino as he blinked a few times. "Are you a God?"

"Nope." He said rather quickly, almost expecting the question. Taking a moment to enjoy the snack. "Your product is delicious though! But perhaps I can make a suggestion for your sales."

"I'm listening."

"Your supply is rather large at the moment, and it's perishable. Try offering a deal: Buy one and return the stick, get the next half off. Or you could offer: Buy One, Get One Free. Even if it's just for today, or until noon."

"Hmm..." He pondered. Overlooking his stock a bit sadly.

"I know you were depending on getting most of them sold, but at this rate you won't sell too many. Your pricing is not necessarily the problem, its advertising or appealing to the people. They naturally crave something they are familiar with, so you are at a bit of a disadvantage. If you get them to at least try your product, they will like it, and you will be over that metaphorical hill."

"Yeah..."

"If you do not get many sold, you might even lose your business. It's worth the cut, whereas you are on a time limit." A strange look from him. "Just very, very observant. I promise." The raptor smiled, and the canine sighed.

"...Alright. Let me make the sign real quick." He turned around to grab a sheet of parchment, but turned back quickly. Handing the dino another treat. "Thank you-"

"Naught. And you're very welcome." He smiled, squeezing his head inside the kiosk and leaning in to hug the vendor. Upon retreating, he looked at the crowd for a moment. "Excuse me, Ma'am? Your blood sugars are rather low. Would you like my free snack? It is very delicious!"

The wind lightly blew through the trees, giving off the fresh scent of the ocean nearby. Passing around the plant life and being redirected by the large city wall, it lightly stroked his tense muscles with a pleasant cooling. As well as brush through his rather long mane, resulting in a few sections tickling his thick ears. Getting them to flick a little and half wake him.

Not that the red beast couldn't really sleep regardless. He felt tired, yes, but more physically than mentally. Even then, a small rest was enough to recharge him. He must've done over that eight times by now, making him wonder what he was going to do with the remaining days Rivo was planning to stay here.

A few things came to mind. Being turned away from the city itself was both understandable and fine to him. Karmu didn't even like the wideness of town streets, let alone anything this crowded. Past experiences and events tended to come out of the dog's wallet regardless. And a behemoth like him wasn't really a welcoming sight.

Perhaps he would just spend the days within the forests and fields. Maybe pick up a part time job of plowing them for the next spring. That is, if winter didn't hit too hard here. By the scent of the air, compared to many other northern areas, it seemed rather tame.

It was about the only passive work his titanic body was made for. Quadruped, yet able to stand upwards with practice. An intimidating, muscle bound build was usually what turned others away with their tails between their legs, and the large black horns didn't seem to help too much either. The only one who wasn't very timid of his structure, besides some of the wildlife, was that dinosaur. Instead, he was curious.

Karmu sighed deeply. Already bored of both the idea of memories and lying here in the warming rays. His broad back against the wall, and absorbing the sunlight through his thick hide, his body refused to move. Perhaps he did work it too hard during the night. Normal roads wasn't terribly hard on him, but that one path was abandoned for a reason. However, Rivo wanted to make it to the festival here, and the beast just couldn't bear the thought of letting him down.

A small bird was felt picking at his mane. Perhaps getting a few bits of grain out of it from a previous incident involving his thick tail and a stack of barrels. Half grumbling under his breath, he thought all of that would've been out by now. But no matter how many times he washed it, let alone went swimming, there was always more within the long forest of grey strands.

Another bird landed on the top of his head, right between the two horns that extended forwards. Feeling it pick at his messy bangs then search over his red hide down his snout, he couldn't help but open his eyes to look at it. Those black orbs shifting a strange display of white, nearly going cross-eyed observing the bird, the behemoth wondered how he got like this. So laid back, uncaring. Lackadaisical to the world around him.

Granted, that was definitely better than others of his kind. As rare as they were, they tended to be a bit more on the destructive side. But as the generations flowed, that ambition was drained out of

them. Karmu often wondered if there was any left, it's been so long.

But the less the better. All this constant business in the older days of Challenging one another for alpha malism got very tiring. Especially after they looked over his physique, sparking that desire once again. He never grew so tired of locking horns with others. The conflict was boring. The purpose meaningless. And it only guaranteed someone getting hurt, or worse.

Recalling that last real battle made him wonder exactly how long as it been? He could recall counting the decades like months, slowly watching the world from the top of a hill. Cool yet warm. Grassy, yet smooth with patches rocks. He watched that city grow to what it was, starting out as a small town that desperately needed his help. Of course, fearing the beast at first, Karmu didn't offer any threats their way. It took them quite a while to realize that.

Apart from the noise in the present city, some shouts from the wall above him flicked his ear. Getting him somewhat curious, but too lazy to bother checking it out. Though that didn't stop his mind from immediately assuming the worst possible thing first: that Render within the area. Perhaps it got out? However, there was no one screaming or any panic that could be heard. With a heavy breath, the behemoth ignored it, until he heard the scrapes...

Chapter 3

The sun's rays pierced through the window curtains, forcing it's attack on the oversized bed. Surrounded by its own protection against such things. A small fortress of blankets and pillows within a wooden frame, elegantly crafted for their special child. Equipped with scratches and marks he did not recall making. One almost overprotected in a room that was viewed like a cell.

A patrol came around, quietly opening the door and peeking through the somewhat dark area. Observing for a few moments before taking witness to the empty plate. Once filled with food was nearly empty, telling them the little one has at least eaten in the morning. Knowing he was probably napping it off after building such a shelter, they took the plate and softly closed the door.

The caretaker's footsteps echoed down the hall, and a small bulge moved in the center of the fortress. Getting the young hatchling to scramble out of his creation and to the window. Though half blinded by the bright sunlight, his Robbin's Egg Blue eyes squinted harshly and almost growling at such a cheap tactic, his small paw and wing helped defend against such a thing.

The glossy purple scales retaliated, but it was no use. He would just have to take the time to get used to the light. Regardless, he could still observe the patrols outside on the wall. Constantly looking both ways while walking down the path. If his breakfast would've come earlier, it's possible this would've been easier with the sun in a different position. But he would have to make due.

It took a bit of time to fiddle with the lock as well. Such things were designed for different creatures, not ones with small claws and teeth. But soon enough, the lock released for the window to be pushed up. It took a lot of strength to push it up, and then some to place a nearby piece of wood under it to keep the thing from falling on his horned head, but with a few tests, he deemed it safe.

Next were the bars, the reasons why he planned such an escape today. Soon enough, the vertical iron frames were getting replaced with crossed ones as well. He was foolish to think that they wouldn't notice the claw marks on the window sill, but his excuse of just wanting to look outside bought him a few days.

Thus at last, the time has come for him to be free. Able to get out and see the world, use the gift of wings for what journeys they were made for. Squeezing through the bars was more difficult than he expected, but the small dragon managed. Though he didn't have much time, quickly gripping the vines that seemed to really enjoy growing on the side of the building and climbing down. They were rather convenient for him, now that he thought about it.

Though landing on the wall's top was a little rough, snapping his jaws a bit to search for any loose fangs, he quickly hid under the safety guards of the walls. Carefully looking out for any patrols and waiting for them to turn around before moving forward. The faster he was, the louder. Even over all the noise below, the hatchling didn't expect one of them to pick up those scrapes. Let alone see him while peeking over cover. Darn bats and their music-I mean, ears.

With a small yelp, the young dragon bolted for the edge. Hoping on the wall and instantly getting butterflies in his belly at the massive height. It looked so safe from up there, but in this new perspective, it was giving him a bit of vertigo. Still, he pushed through it, once again thanking the growth of vines for his aid, he started climbing down. A little more recklessly now that he was being pursued, sliding down a bit quickly and barely getting a grip once again.

He was lucky enough for three slides, while the guards above shouted orders for him to stop. But the forth one was pushing the hatchling's luck. Nearly making him yelp loudly before landing in a grey bush. One that was kinda hard, to be honest, and a little boney. Digging through it, the ground started to move as the little one scampered out onto something very large and red. A behemoth's snout greeted him, getting the hatchling to yelp out as it ignored the calls from above. And those black eyes were that of nightmares to him.

The purple one quickly made it to the grass before becoming the beast's lunch. "Hey...!" It half called out, in a bit of confusion. Getting the attention of those blue eyes, but not for long. At least it wasn't chasing him, allowing the dragon to make it to the forests. Finally free of captivity.

Meanwhile, Karmu was still slightly confused of what just happened. From the rumors he's heard, the king and queen here were human, not of dragonkin. Why was the little wyrmling so important? Granted a question that didn't concern him. That is, until he seen several units of guards come out of the gates. Scanning and heading for the forests, even past him. Granted still half avoiding such a threatening looking creature.

Something didn't feel right about all this, and it was the most interesting thing to happen to him all morning. Giving into his body's desires to get up and move, the behemoth couldn't fit well into the forests. Perhaps instead he could check the cliffside and around the wall. With any luck...

The little one scampered in the forest. Passing over the many large roots and fallen over trees in the very dense air. It almost made him excited to finally be out here on his own. Scaring a few birds while breaking some twigs and stopping to observe every small bug he seen. Almost giggling at their reactions to his big blue eyes. However, their voices were caught by his filled ears, getting them to perk up and fall a bit in fear.

A slight whimper and the hatchling started moving away. Picking up a few to the sides, and doing his best to get through the thick forest. Only to get caught by some vines, and tied a bit while suspended. Struggling against them and slashing his claws at the persistent ropes, he eventually got free and hit the ground with a bit of a whimper. "He's this way!" One of them shouted, too close for comfort.

Fear got to him once again, as he bolted directly away from the guard. Ignoring his calls to come back, and travel through a path made for smaller animals. Only to scamper through an exit to the forest, directly before a large cliff. One overlooking the bay several stories up. The cool winds blew through his small frame, making him want to turn away. But doing so, he seen the exits become blocked with soldiers.

A loud whimper that was trying to warn them to stay back was mostly ignored, as they started to fan around him. "Come on, your majesty. No more games, it's dangerous out here!" One of them attempted to come closer, only to get the small dragon to scamper back to the edge of the cliff and yelp at that. Looking back and forth to survey his options, he hissed at them once again to stay back. "Saessl, please!"

A bit below the cliffside was another wide path with a dead end, one that the behemoth wandered onto, and was paying witness from below. "Come on, Troublemaker... Don't do anything foolish-" One of those purple paws slipped a bit, trying to step away from the approaching guard and hissing once again. Nearly getting the large red one to growl at the stalemate they created, and pressing each other's luck. Another paw adjustment caused a small section of the cliffside to shave off and make the dragon slip down. Barely grasping some plant life in the process and hanging on with a loud yelp.

Cursing to himself, Karmu started moving ahead, concentrating on a flat section of the cliffside wall he was approaching. Hearing another yelp from the dragon, as well as many panicked noises from

the soldiers, the beast jumped heavily onto the side of that concentrated area. Pressing off it with full force and feel it detonate loudly, giving him momentum to reach the length of the cliff above.

The blast it created shook the area a bit, and forced the wyrmling's life strands to break. Making him cry out loudly in fear just as those red arms grabbed him out of midair. Now falling with the behemoth into the center waters, and at least away from the rocky cliffside.

But falling to this height was still dangerous, Karmu knew. Struggling to turn himself around to see below and keep his large body from spinning so much, he twisted while holding back a flexed arm. Timing to see the water below, he threw out a glowing orb at the surface from that readied paw.

As the sphere launched out into the waters, it broke the main tension of the meniscus. But that wouldn't be enough. A moment later, the orb exploded within the water, breaking the liquid's form even more and sending much of it upwards in a fountain. Falling down just before the two and easing the sudden impact drastically upon entering the waters. Though in result, it did send them much deeper into the bay, even hitting the bottom a bit softly, it was better than the injury of hitting the surface head on.

The guards above were still in shock for a few moments, as only a few stood out towards the cliffside. Getting some relief when the purple dragon was barely seen as the red behemoth resurfaced and started swimming to the opposite side of the bay. One with an accessible beach, or at least the closest one. "Sir?" One of them got the attention of the captain, directing him towards the blast from the cliffside wall below. One painted in a black circle of ash, and forcing a look of concern on the leader's face.

"...Send a squad to search for them. Horseback, if you need to! Move!" And the group retreated back towards the kingdom. "Sandford!" One of them returned. "...Call the Horizon." A look of worry and disbelief as Sandford looked at the damage the wall below took.

"Is that really...?" He almost whimpered.

"I *really* hope not, but we need to be sure. Especially if the prince's life is involved." A shaky nod and they retreated to the wall.

The red beast fought against the wet sand and slowly climbed up to the surface, finally no longer having to worry about keeping the hatchling on his head or above water. Still feeling those hind claws just above and between his eyes, as well as grasping tightly around his horns. "You okay?" He half grumbled at him.

"Y-yeah..." The little one whimpered. Only getting a louder yelp when Karmu's head turned to look at the cliff where they came from. As well as the guards already gone from there. Searching the beaches around, this was indeed the closest one.

"What the hell were you thinking?" The red behemoth snorted, walking up to the grassy area and finally scraping the uncomfortable sand off his paws. Rocks and mud, he could take. But sand? Sand was just a whole other level of annoyance. When he got no answer from the dragon, he half nudged it with his head. "Seriously, what was that about?" It was barely a question.

"I..." A loud swallow told him the hatchling was probably scared of him. Getting Karmu to sigh a bit and calm down. "I needed to escape-"

"By jumping off a cliff. Neat plan."

"I would've flown." The purple one snorted.

"How old are you?" Again, a question that was barely a question. One that didn't get any response. "Fine." He grumbled, and started walking.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you back."

"What!?" The dragon yelped, trying to look at the beast's black eyes and almost getting scared again. "Why!?"

"Because you are too young to be out here on your own. And because in a few days I need to be back there to pull a wagon." A small growl from the little one was almost too cute to be threatening, and the red one tossed his head towards the water. "See that body of water? It's called a bay. From above, it's shaped like a large-"

"Mushroom. I know." He snorted.

"Yeah, well, we're currently on the opposite side of the castle, and it's all uphill from here. The only way to make it there is to walk around, or use your miracle of flight." A grumble from the larger one. "And doing that is still going to take two days. Safely going around on the roads, that is."

"I don't want to go home."

"Why." Another demand.

"Because..." A whimpering groan from the dragon. "You don't know what it's like to be locked in there-"

"Of course not." Karmu grumbled sarcastically. "You only get protected and fed your entire life, rarely putting yourself in danger, let alone do something drastic in order to survive. Instead, your forced to learn less primitive skills like reading and writing-"

"Not even those!" It made the red one stop and attempt to look at the purple critter. "I've been begging people to teach me how to read for myself! I have been for five years!" A sad sigh from the little one as his wings drooped. "It's like they don't want me to know, and I think I figured out why..." A long

silence from the beast, and he changed direction. Walking into the woods a bit instead. "What are you doing-?"

"Giving you the benefit of the doubt." He bluntly said, coming up to a clearing. Leaning his head down to motion the dragon to get off onto the grass and proceeded to start digging up the grass in the center a bit. "I'll make you a deal..." A glance as if to ask for his name.

"S-Saessl."

"Saessl. I'll hear you out and we'll discuss a solution that would be the best for you. Even if it's learning how to survive out here on your own, or making negotiations with your kingdom." His ears perked at the word. "It means Deals. As in: 'You'll return to the castle, If you're taught how to read and write.' For example."

"And you get...?"

"You don't tell anyone what you seen from me." Saessl's head tilted the other way. "You'll understand what that means later. In the meantime, I'll make us a fire and get you a meal for the afternoon. I still want to head back there to meet my... Traveling companions, but you can still decide what you wish to do before then."

"...Okay."

"Deal?"

"Deal." The two gave each other a nod while the beast picked up a few nearby sticks and put them in a cone shape. Placing a paw over them, and very quickly, they were set on fire. "Wow... How did you do that?"

"My little secret. The one you agreed to, understood?" The behemoth said a bit thickly, and the little one nodded. "Karmu, by the way. Now help me search for a few sticks and twigs, I'll break apart this tree in the meantime."

The small fire crackled with warmth within the large circle of dirt, as the wyrmling gazed into its dancing flames. Mesmerized by its constant change and bladed shape. He's seen them from afar within the castle before, but it was always surrounded by either brick or a sheet of chainmail. And the young one was always pushed out of the room whenever it was lit, claiming it was for safety.

Saessl could half understand why now. Even being several feet away from it, the wall of heat it gave off was almost too much for his scaled body to remain comfortable. Perhaps when the nights were cooler such a thing would provide more comfort, but around the noon's hour? Seemed a bit odd to actually start one.

The question also popped up, where did the red beast go? After tossing in a block of wood, Karmu said he would return soon. Curious, the young dragon followed out the path he left. Not that it was that hard to discover or follow, giving the size of his titanic body, and the trails of twigs the trees left behind.

He eventually came out back to the beach, instantly spotting the red one from afar. At least, his upper half, whereas the rest was deep into the waters. Finding it strange that he could stand on two feet, but never seen him walk like many others do.

But Karmu was just standing there, his back turned to the wyrmling and looking into the waters. Not moving a single muscle, and worrying the dragon as he approached as close as he could. Already not liking the feeling of sand stuck to his paws. "What are-?"

"Shh." The large one quickly interrupted him, still not moving. Holding something in one paw, while the other was rather opened and straight. A few moments later, the empty paw stabbed into the waters with surprising speeds. Making the little one almost yelp as the red behemoth fished out three fish impaled onto his claws. Holding onto them as they struggled against the wound and the harsh environment.

Watching them slowly stop moving sank the dragon's heart for some reason, as Karmu carefully pulled them off and put them onto the long stick in his other paw. Then went back into that stance once again. Taking a few, slow breaths that were very quiet. Being very patient for the next victim to approach, then be taken by the red paw once again.

After gathering about five, the beast returned to the shores. Noticing the morbid look in those blue eyes, portraying a bit of fear of both the black eyes and the idea of loss. "Lesson One about survival, Saessl: It's either you or them. Make a decision." He motioned for the young one to follow him, and the dragon cautiously did back to the fire.

"How were you able to do that?" The little one asked, looking disturbingly at the impaled fish as the beast held them over a fire, with no regard to the dangers of such thing. But the large one only studied him for a few moments with those black eyes, the white lights altering shape every few moments within the shade. "I-I remember people talking at home, how hard it was to catch fish with tools and boats."

"Probably with fishing rods." The red one exhaled. "Every species is different, and needs to find food in many different ways." A glance at the castle's direction from afar. "They've grown so reliant on making tools in order to survive, that they've nearly forgotten ways to hunt without it. Regardless, that isn't a bad thing, if they're smart enough, let alone lucky enough, to find the materials they need."

A deep breath as Karmu looked into the flames, shifting the fish a little bit here and there. "But sometimes you need to adapt. Change your ways if certain things are not going well for you."

"What do you mean?"

"If wildly slashing at the water is only scaring away the fish, you need to change if you want to capture them. Often waiting for them to come to you, or deceive them into thinking that they're safe around you. But winning their trust isn't enough, you need to be fast enough to catch them. Realize the proper angle of the waters, how to pierce them with little noise made. Study the water's refraction, and remain patient."

"The water's...?"

"The way your sight bends when you're looking down in water. There is something about how light slows down when it enters water, but I'm not going to butcher that concept. Think of it as this: when you look down into water and see a fish, odds are it's actually in a different location from where you're seeing it." A whimper of confusion from the little one, and the beast just blinked at him. "You probably shouldn't fish until you're bigger anyway."

"What do I do for food then?"

"Well, you're a dragon. Dragons eat nearly anything when they're young. But your best bet is probably insects or scavenging a leftover meal. Perhaps going after some fruits if you can climb them." The wyrmling looked at the gesture towards the trees around them and nearly got that vertigo once again. "Granted, if you're going to attempt insects, avoid any with brighter colors on them. It's a common indicator that they're poisonous." Another whimper. "The idea of survival doesn't sound so pleasant now, does it?"

Saessl didn't really want to answer that. Looking at the red beast with sad eyes and drooping wings as he continued. "Aside from food, you'll need shelter. Find a way to get off the cold ground or find a way to keep it warm." A gesture to the fire. "And, as you can probably tell," A motion towards the small pile of wood the two gathered. "Something as warm as fire needs to be fed in its own way to keep alive. Let alone starting the fire to begin with, when it goes out. And it *will* go out."

"Even if you keep it... Fed?" A slow nod.

"Eventually you'll run out of supply like wood. Sometimes the rain will smother it, or what if the tide suddenly rises unusually? You can possibly keep a piece of it for a bit, but even then..." A breath. "Most important... Hydration. Not all water is safe to drink, most common example is saltwater. You seen the seaweed piles all over the beach, yes?" A nervous nod. "Good indication that the water is littered

with salt. Have you had salt with your meals before?"

"I remember having too much on potatoes before. It tasted... Funny."

"It also made you more thirsty, yes?" Another nod. "Drinking that water back there will only make you more and more thirsty. Eventually drinking yourself to death, ironically from thirst." A whimper. "Best bet is to find a body of water inland, like a lake or stream to the sea. Even then, people have gotten ill from such things." The wyrmling lowered his head. "There are many things those walls protect you against. Let alone the people within it, yes?"

"Y-yeah, but..." Saessl didn't finish, instead just stayed quiet for a minute. Eventually double taking at the behemoth moving closer and setting the stick with all fishes on the grass. "You're... Not going to have any...?"

"I don't need it." Karmu said, turning around and lying down. Watching the flames for a few moments. "It might be a bit hot though, be careful." The dragon examined the first fish with a bit of a sour look. Even worst when he bit into it, and getting a bitter taste. "I'm not the cook of our group, as you can tell."

"I'm just..."

"Not used to food outside the castle. I know." Another sad look, adding to the list of things the young one didn't think of before running away. "But eat up. We might not find anything for the next two days." A worried look, and the large one shrugged. "It happens. Sometimes you can't find food."

"Surely someone would...?"

"Not everyone has enough to spare, keep that in mind as well."

"And it's either them or us..." A sad whimper.

"Things have been this way outside these walls for a long time, Saessl. Eventually you're exposed to it, like it or not. Sometimes you're even born or hatched into it."

"Like you were?" The beast didn't respond to that at first. Just took a deep breath, and exhaled it. "Do you remember...?"

"...Hardly. Mine wasn't typical. I just felt like I... Appeared. Along with a few others, and we all went our separate ways." A noise in question from the smaller one. "This stays between us, hatchling. Remember our deal."

"Y-yeah. But...? You don't remember growing up?"

"...I grew up, yes. But not in a mature form like you are. Like anyone else. I can't say I was always this way, but very close to it."

"And by growing up..." More silence, and the little one choked down another fish. Looking at

the rest for a few moments and something came up. "Who taught you how to fish...?"

A deep breath from the red behemoth. "An old hermit. Kind of. I'll tell you on the way up. For now, just try to get your belly full." A faint nod from the purple one, and he did his best to eat the rest. As odd and disturbing as it was to do such a thing, it got a little easier the more he tried. "All set?" The larger one asked, getting a quick nod. "Alright, your turn."

Saessl took a breath, looking into the flames for a moment before taking another. "...My Mother and Father want to... End my life." It instantly got the beast's attention, staring at him for a few moments. "I don't know when, but I know it's sometime soon."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I heard them talking about it, one night after sneaking out of my room. Saying things like they only needed to wait for a year and a half, and asking if everything was prepared."

"...You sure this isn't just some celebration that they're holding for you?"

"They've never done it before. I've been to several events about my parents, and they were grand. For me, it was hardly anything. I might go out of the castle and into the streets for a few hours, able to buy what I want. But the look of the people there..." The hatchling took a breath. "It's like they're sad, or uncomfortable around me. Everyone says it's because that I'm a dragon, but why would that...?" Those blue eyes looked at Karmu for an answer, and he shook his head a bit. Getting that messy grey mane to sway.

"The attitude of dragons vary drastically to what they are exposed of, and the only city around here that had problems with one of them is days away from here. From what I know, she didn't have any offspring. So you're not a descendent of her."

"Then why would my tenth hatch-year matter so much to them?" The large one took a breath, but didn't respond. "They don't teach me anything for... Erm, My future-"

"Long term." A slight nod from Saessl

"Y-yeah. They never tell me that I'm going to be responsible for the people or that castle. The only thing they're worried about is my protection. That I survive long enough to reach my age." A sigh from the little one. "My only friend is a scholar that works in the library-"

"Did they convince you of this?" For once, the dragon's ears went back in irritation against the thick question.

"...She brought up the idea to me, yes. But the more I thought about it, the more obvious it started to become."

"And I'm guessing this is where your vocabulary comes from as well." A slight whimper from the purple wyrmling. "Though, probably still under strict orders not to teach you how to read." After a few

moments, the behemoth sighed. "Alright." The dragon curled his neck to an S for a moment.

"*Alright* what?"

"I'm taking you back." A growl from Saessl. "You may decide if you really want to return to the castle in the meantime, but try to rethink this through first. Odds are, if you're that important to them, they will send out scouting parties and checkpoints along the road. Word will at least get back that you are on your way home." A whimper from the smaller one, as the fire suddenly went out. Still with plenty of wood to feed from. "However."

"However?"

"I'll confront them about this myself. How about that?" A sad look from the blue eyes. "You may remain outside the walls in the meantime, if you wish. But I want to hear it from their side as well."

"And if they're lying?" He snorted.

"And if ***you're*** lying?" Karmu returned the harsh question, getting the little one to back down. "You're called children for a reason, but that doesn't automatically make you wrong. I've seen my fair share of events as such." The red one got up. "But this is my offer. You may take it and travel back with me. Or you can attempt to survive out here with what little I've taught you." The two locked eyes for several moments as the hatchling decided.

"So, it's a Fishstick." The old lizard argued with the golden dog, trying to order and making other people wait. As Rivo grumbled and rubbed the space between his eyes.

"No, sir. It's a piece of Fish on a Stick."

"So, Fishstick."

"But a Fishstick is an entirely different thing. This isn't one entire long piece of Fish in the shape of a Stick. This is a piece of Fish, that is on a Stick."

"What if I don't want the stick?"

"Then you can either place it in the bin over there, attached to my wagon, where it will be cleaned and reused. But I can't just give you a piece of Fish without a Stick."

"Ah, fine!" The grouchy iguana grumbled, paying for the snack and finally moving the lines along. Accepting the treat and moving on home, almost smiling at the torment he gave the younger canine. Not to mention, the Fish on a Stick was rather delightful. The taste sinking into the small twig, giving him something to chew while returning to his home. But something felt off when he approached the door, and those old instincts returned.

Biting the end of the stick harshly and breaking it for a small point, he spit out the smaller part. Wielding the improvised weapon as a dagger, he slowly snuck around to his back door. Listening closely for a moment, and hearing footsteps inside. Almost pacing around, possibly searching for something.

Carefully opening the rear entrance, and silently walking into the dimly lit home, the lizard stayed in the shadows. Listening for the person inside as they came close to a doorway, then snatching them from behind. Pulling back his snout and lightly poking his neck with the sharp stick, getting the burglar to yelp loudly and hold up his paws in surrender. "What are you doing here?"

"R-relax! I was waiting for your return, Sir!" (Sir?) It then dawned on the iguana that this was probably a guard. Taking a look at the light armored uniform he was wearing, the older one grumbled and let him go.

"I almost killed you, kid."

"S-sorry!"

"What are you doing in my house?"

"Well, I didn't want to wait outside of it, in case a citizen pulled me away to look into something for them. And I was hoping not to be completely seen..." The wolf mumbled.

"Speak clearly." A small yelp, and he stood up straight. "What's this all about?"

"S-sir! I know you're retired and all, but... Have you heard about the event this morning?" The lizard tossed his muzzle.

"Don't tell me that thing go out."

"N-no. But the Prince did." An eyebrow raised. "He escaped over the walls, and fled into the forests." A motion to go on. "We then cornered him to the cliffside-" The old one grumbled a curse word. "And he slipped off."

"So, he's-?"

"Still alive sir. But I came to you for a different reason." Another gesture as he got a drink. "Something... Saved the Prince in midair, falling into the bay below. All we seen was some kind of blast in the cliffside wall." A look of concern from the iguana. "The captain told me to notify the Horizon, but I know you've had experience with-"

"What color was it." It was more of a demand than a question, getting the young soldier to whimper a bit.

"...Red, sir. Maybe some silverish grey in there too." Almost a sigh of relief from the older one. "Sir?"

"If it had to be one of them, thank the Crown that it was him."

"You can't mean...?"

"Did you actually notify Horizon about it yet?"

"Y-yes, by message bird, sir." Another curse. "It is a Render then...?"

"He is. But a reasonable one at that. However..." A heated exhale from the lizard. "Horizon just might make the situation worse."

"How do you think?" Nearly a scolding glare at the guard.

"They've been searching for that Render for ages. Depending on your wording, it's possible they will think it's some sort of kidnapping." A shake of the wolf's head. "They still might take it as that, let alone attempt take it out. Whether Saessl is in the crossfire or not."

"You can't be serious-"

"Have you heard of the Glass Desert, kid?" A puzzled look from him. "Yes, the one to the southeast. That used to be a city, until they messed with the wrong Render." A deep breath as he recalled the older days. "That's what he told me anyway, and I honestly believe him now."

"Really?"

"I've seen how they work, soldier. Renders may be dangerous, but it's the Horizon who are reckless and relentless." He took a breath. "Has the scout team departed yet?"

"Yes, Sir. Just a few moments ago, I'm sure."

"Alright. Can you follow them for me? Vouch for me if you can, I still owe that Render a favor." The canine's head tilted. "I'm almost positive this isn't a kidnapping, nor was planned. But I'm going to do some investigations of my own here." A worried look from him as the lizard started to leave. "You better hurry if you want to catch up to them."

"Yes, Sir." And the two left.

Watching them work was fascinating to him. Every hammer hit on the red hot metal, slowly pounding it into shape against the black anvil, and watching as it morphed into a desired shape. So interesting how they learned to alter and manipulate such structures into tools and frames with many uses. This one specifically was to be a large fork, used to place and take out bigger pots from stoves and such safely. Perhaps it could also be used to set in blocks of wood at a secure distance as well.

Still, witnessing such technique was almost surreal to him. How they could learn to do such things, progress so quickly over a few centuries. Words couldn't express the bright smile over the dinosaur's muzzle. "Sir?" Another blacksmith got his attention. "Is everything okay?"

"Perfectly fine. I was just thinking how amazing your species is for progressing in such an art over so little time." A strange look from the badger. "It's fascinating to see how you've discovered such a thing by yourselves."

"...Yeah. Sure." He said awkwardly. "I fixed your threads-"

"Oh yes. I know."

"...And they should last you a while-"

"Four hundred and ninety-two days until they need to be replaced, yes." Almost a whimper and pale look as Naught took several coins out of his pocket. "Thank you for your business, sir!" He handed the coins over, and double took at the odd look. "You are in shock?"

"Are you...?"

"I am not a God." He bluntly stated, and the blacksmith carefully handed over the repaired bolts. "You are in disbelief. My statement did not convinced you?"

"I'm not sure what to believe." He muttered.

"You should believe in Yourself." The theropod smiled, giving the badger a hug that was not fought against. "Thank you again, sir!" The raptor almost chirped, leaving through the busy streets.

"...Biggs?" The smith from afar stopped and looked at him for a moment. "I'm gonna take an early lunch." A faint nod, and he resumed working.

The bazaar was much busier later in the day. With so much excitement with the festival ongoing, that energy was spreading around. It felt wonderful in such a positive environment within a city where people were happy, the dino absolutely loved it. He wished it could last for ages at a time.

He just hoped that Rivo was having a good time as well. By the look of the crowds, both that vendor from before and him were doing much better. Getting a moment of eye contact with the other

canine with the salty treats and giving a pleasant nod with a wave. He would've probably talked with him, but at the moment, the raptor was too focused on getting that wheel fixed.

Perhaps it was best to take the back roads to avoid the crowd. The faster he could get this done, the more time he would have to look over such a large city. Regardless, they still had a few days to remain here. Perhaps take a tour through the castle, or overlook the nearby harbors from afar. It nearly made him giddy just thinking about it.

The theropod arrived at the attached cooler, and replaced the bolts to its wheel. Once again hearing the golden canine argue with a few customers about something being inside his wagon. However, the more Naught noticed it, the more something felt wrong. Getting him to walk around the outside and observe with his own violet eyes. "Oh, Naught! It's about time!" Rivo sighed in relief, half hanging out the large window that was used to take orders. "Please tell these soldiers that I have nothing illegal in here!"

The statement tilted his head and perked those frilled ears. Looking back and forth between the cantine and two soldiers, each carrying a strange gem in their paws that was currently glowing a faint purple. "A Tanure gem?" He stated out loud, getting the two guards to double take at the dino. "Fascinating! They are very rare!"

"Naught..." Rivo whimpered in frustration.

"Sir, you know what this is...?"

"Indeed! It's an old method used to sense Tanure energy signals nearby. But Tanure energy has been banned for centuries, so they're a bit obsolete now." The two looked at the raptor blankly for a few moments. "Is something wrong?"

"It's... Glowing, Sir."

"Yes! Yes, it is." The larger one said, rather optimistically. "Astonishing, isn't it?"

"Which means, there's something magical nearby that shouldn't be in custody of anyone. Especially outsiders-"

"Not necessarily." Naught interrupted. "Some things can still trigger the glow other than objects imbued with Tanure." He stated, getting blank stares from the two before looking at the dog for a moment. Who was only gesturing for him to carry on. "You don't know?" He asked the guards, rather honestly at that. In which they didn't take too kindly.

"Naught, please..." Another whimper from him.

"I apologize. Many substances that tend to have traces of Mineral Oil will trigger the glow as well. For example, Penetration Oils." Rivo tilted his head at him for a moment, then quickly found the bottle to bring it out. "Yes, that."

The guards overlooked it for a few moments. "What is this?"

"It's a lubricant." They stared at him for a few moments, and the dinosaur pondered. "Hmm. How do I put this? It makes things slide against one another much easier."

"And you claim that this will cause the gem to react?" He nodded at the guard. "Alright, let's test it then." A double take from the colorful theropod.

"Really?"

"Yes. Unless you're lying to us."

"No, officer. But... You have been trained with such devices, correct?"

"Are you questioning our job, Sir?" The other one almost snapped.

"Yes. Was that not obvious?" He honestly replied, getting a growl from them.

"Naught..." Rivo whispered again, getting his frilled ears to lower.

"If you must." The larger one took a step back while they opened the bottle...

The cell door slammed shut, as the now faintly charred golden dog, and once colorful raptor were jailed within. Getting the canine to whimper loudly, as the dino happily thought back. "What an interesting reaction."

"And you couldn't warn them that it was going to explode?"

"They stated they were trained in such things." He bluntly replied. "One would only assume they knew the reactions of the gems." A louder whimper in defeat as Rivo slumped over towards a hard bed. Flopping down on it made Naught study his own; clearly much smaller for his size. "Fascinating." He said rather optimistically.

"Why does this happen to me? And what's so fascinating this time-?"

"We are the five hundredth and twenty-eighth visitor in this cell since its construction." A loud groan from the dog as he overlooked the walls closely. "If these objects could tell stories, what tales would they be!"

"Just..." A defeated whimper, and Rivo just let it slide.

I was sleeping in a forest far away from here, so deeply that I couldn't be aware of my surroundings. Let alone something stepping in the grass behind me. I remember half hearing grunting and wheezing a bit, but just didn't care enough to take warning. Until something large and heavy slammed on my head-

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." The hatchling stopped him, still pawing at the forest of grey hairs while riding on the top of the red behemoth's head. "I thought you said this story was about you learning how to fish."

"I'm getting to that. But first, I need to start somewhere else." He could barely see the dragon's snout toss above him. "Besides, we have a long walk ahead. You might as well listen for a while, you might learn something."

"*Fiiiine*." Saessl grumbled.

Right. Anyway, the blow hurt ridiculously, instantly getting me to growl loudly while holding my head. All the while someone was squealing and scampering away. "I'm-Sorry! I'm-Sorry! I'm-Sorry!"

"**WHY!?**" I roared loudly at him, barely opening my eye to see another... Creature like me.

Saessl: "Creature like you...? What are you?" A moment of study of silence from the red one, and he took a breath.

This stays between us, like our deal... That better be a nod.

Saessl: "It was."

...I'm a Render.

Saessl: "What's that?"

Something you're probably better off not knowing. Don't grumble at me, you'll find out soon enough. But this other Render was a lot like me. A bit smaller in build, white and light blue. Let alone, almost cowering behind some trees and bushes while I recovered from the concussion he gave me, apparently with a large rock. "Seriously! What the-!?" ...I probably shouldn't curse in front of you.

"I'm so sorry!"

"That doesn't explain anything!" I grumbled at him, but still didn't even bother getting up. Granted, that still didn't stop me from glaring at him for an answer.

"I... Um..." A whimper as he fought to catch words. From the look of it, he didn't really seem to know.

Saessl: "He didn't know why he hit you with a rock?"

Apparently not. "I... Don't know." My gaze didn't lift. "Something just... Wanted me to murder-"

Saessl: "...What's Murder?"

It's to end another one's life, usually with personal goals outside of survival. Again, something else you'll learn later on in life. "...Did I mention I was sorry?" He whimpered. It was hard to believe he even attempted such a thing, to the point where I half wondered if he was faking being afraid. But I could sense his fear from afar. "I just thought... You were one of them."

Saessl: "One of them?"

Which was exactly my question, actually. "You know... The ones who were hunting for each other." This white beast stated, getting a bit more relaxed due to my lack of defense. "They've been fighting all over the place, taking out whatever was between them." I gave off a bit of a bored grumble as I laid my head back down. "You're really not...?"

"All I've been doing was sleeping. Possible I heard them from afar, but if they want to kill each other, then let them. It's not my concern."

"Until they come after you too..." He mumbled, getting me to half glance at him slowly approaching. "I... I don't want to fight. I don't want to be involved in a conflict." I didn't give a response. "And you don't want to..."

"And you want, what exactly?"

"Just... Protection." I gave him an odd look. "Odds are they won't fight us if we're... Together. You know... Two against one just makes things more difficult than they need to be." It did sound rather tiring. "So, can we? Please?"

"As long as there's no more attempted murders, I don't care." He lightly chuckled at that.

"Deal." He laid down beside me, giving off a much needed sigh of relief. "Larksus."

"...Karmu." And that's how I met him, as painful as it was.

Saessl: "And he taught you how to fish?"

No. That was someone else. Hiss at me again, and you're walking for an hour.

Saessl: "How long are your stories going to be!?"

Not much longer, but I could drag them out for punishment... You're kinda cute when you growl like that.

Saessl: "Dragons are not cute." *Snorts*

They can be. But fine, I'll skip ahead. Me and Larksus eventually found a home together, and later explored our new world.

Saessl: "New World...?"

...And from afar, the other two Renders kept fighting viciously. They eventually ended up culling each other, and ceasing the threat that kept me and Larksus bonded. But I just didn't want to stay in one place anymore, while he didn't want to leave that cave half the time. I never seen someone so afraid to leave home.

Saessl: "But he needed to, didn't he? To get food and stuff?"

Renders don't really need to eat. Someone told me that we actually absorb a lot of sunlight, storing it inside ourselves for energy. Maybe the newer generations need to consume food, but I've never needed to. And neither did Lark, which was as much as a curse for him as it was a blessing.

Whether or not that's true, I'm not sure. That's just how I understood it, but for someone staying out of the sun so often, Larksus didn't get tired like I did. Probably another reason that I felt I needed a change. As lazy as I can be, I don't want to always feel exhausted.

Saessl: "You're lazy?"

I'm very lazy. I just don't complain about working, nor neglect doing it that much. It keeps me distracted. Anyway, I ended up climbing up a rather high mountain instead of going around it, one I half claimed as my home since I rested up there so often. Its peak could get above the clouds, but I usually stayed below them for the most part.

Saessl: "Why?"

The view, I think. Something I enjoyed staring at for days. Rarely coming down for a change, but when I did, it was usually for months at a time. Once, it was a year or two, taking a vacation outwards towards the north.

Saessl: "What made you come back?"

Too cold. You giggle now, but if you ever go as far as I did, you'd freeze your tail off. Safe to say, it wasn't the type of weather I enjoyed. So I returned to my mountain after taking a rather long detour.

Saessl: "Why?"

Enjoy playing Twenty Questions, don't you?

Saessl: "You enjoy talking a lot, don't you?" It made the behemoth smile.

Fair enough. I heard that more Renders were fighting somewhat nearby, and my first concern was-

Saessl: "Larksus..."

But it wasn't him. However... People were fighting them. I'm not sure who started it, but I was caught in some of the crossfire. Assuming I was reinforcements, or just another threat, I don't know.

Saessl: "So they attacked you?"

Without question. I can't say I blame them. And I defended myself. At least, that's how I still justify it. However, I didn't keep fighting or pursuing them. If they retreated from battle, fine. It just meant their ashes wouldn't stain my paws.

I eventually made it back home in once piece, for once actually tired enough to sleep for about a week. It was rather surprising one morning to wake up on a clear day, and see a town built in my landscape. Right smack dab in the middle of it, and it gave me a rather uncomfortable feeling. Like something was stolen from me.

For once, I actually wanted to take back something of mine. Nearly assault or invade them from ruining my home... I know, it was honestly a bit scary for me as well, but no need to whimper. I didn't actually do anything about it.

Saessl: "N-not complaining, but... Why?"

Did I mention I was lazy? That and... *A breath* It was their world.

Saessl: "You keep saying that..."

The harsh truth was: the Land itself was not mine. Granted, it still wasn't theirs, but I was away for at least two years. Any territorial form of marking was far gone. Though, it was still puzzling how they build the da-arn thing so quickly. But after spending another few weeks watching over it from afar, it was rather understandable. When they could put their minds and numbers together, they accomplish rather amazing things.

Apart from the town, there was another thing that changed on my mountain. Turns out, one of them decided to build a home a bit further down from where I normally laid. From here, I could spy on them-

Saessl: "Was this the guy who taught you how to fish-?"

Let me tell the story, you! Where was I? Right. I could spy on him from afar. Watched as he tended to his own garden. Sometimes take off and return several hours later with supplies, usually fruits and water from nearby sources. And then... Out of all things, Dance.

Saessl: "...Dance?"

Dance. A lot. At least two or three times a day, it was very strange. I must've watched over the two for a few months; both the town and this hermit. Often questioning their actions and decisions for so long, I couldn't help but just crave for an answer. So, one day I headed down to where this hermit

lived.

I took my time walking down. Overlooking the sections and areas that seemed to be scavenged for berries and fruits. Small tools hidden away to help retrieve the ones higher up. The worn paths towards the nearby spring, and a few vines purposely tied horizontally along branches. Probably with his arms reach. I didn't know it at the time, but they were for washing and drying his clothing.

Then there was his home, crafted surprisingly well with so little tools used. I almost wondered if some of the townsfolk helped him build it, but it was difficult to tell. Regardless, there was only room enough for one, and it was mostly bedding. His kitchen was outside by a fire, which didn't consist of much. And then his garden, impressively big without being overwhelming.

Granted, he was sitting at the edge of a cliff, which was nothing new for him. Taking a breath, I walked forward and laid down beside him. Overlooking the town below, and getting a rather interesting perspective, though much more obstructed with trees. "...No horses out in the fields today-"

"**JAYBUS!**" And I kid you not, he fell off the cliff. You laugh now, but I was just as startled as he was. Able to do nothing but watch him fall and hit the ground in the loudest... Squeak, I think would be the correct word, imaginable. Once the small cloud of dust cleared, I swore I seen an outline of his body in the road. Getting up to race down there, I got slapped by something as soon as I turned about, something that really really hurt. "Are you **Trying** to give me a heart attack!?"

"...Ow!" I'm completely serious when I say this, whatever he hit me with was possibly the worst pain I've ever felt on my muzzle.

Saessl: "What was it?"

I think he called it a... Spatula. I've seen Rivo use one before, so it's nothing exotic. But pray that you never get hit by one, it nearly incapacitated me. "...**OW!**" I swear there was an imprint of it on the side of my snout.

"Yeah, well. That's what you get for scaring the pants off me." He grumbled, walking back to his spot while I took a good ten minutes to recover. Only to discover that he actually wasn't wearing pants any longer. "Now what were you going on about before your assassination attempt?"

"I was just making small talk!" I hissed, still holding onto my muzzle. "What **Was** That!?"

"My secret weapon, also known as a cheese grater on a stick. My turn, who are you and what are you doing in Canada?"

"...Canada? Is that what you call these lands?"

"I call them Nakapoopoo, which is moonlander speak for Ice Cream. Hence the phrase: There's Nakapoopoo In Your Shoe."

Saessl: "...What?"

My response as well, you would not believe how strange this wolf was. Even with a few tears in my eyes, all I could see was a ridiculously long red mane, and white furred canine. Several tiny black dots with little wings on them were extended out from his head, held in place by very thin, clear wires.

"...Who are you?"

"Makphooliedo. You can call me Surgeon Funnypants for short." I couldn't help but blink slowly at him.

"That sounds like it's-"

"-Yes, it is longer now that I've said it out loud."

"...And you're not wearing any pants-"

"-Not anymore! Thanks to a certain someone! You owe me a new set of trousers, Mr. Muscles. As well as another pet snake." He gently reached down and carefully opened up a nearby flower, then violently stuck his entire other arm into it. Something that looked physically impossible, then pulled out that spect... *clears throat* Cheese Grater on a Stick and threatened me with it. "Now, if you wish to talk small, you must earn it! Fetch my special item that I left down there and retrieve it! Bring it back to me, and then we will engage in chic-chat! But not a moment sooner!"

"Retrieve-?"

"-Not A Moment Sooner!" He shook the object near my muzzle and I took a step back.

Saessl: "What did you end up doing?"

Honestly? I went down where he landed. More out of curiosity than anything, and along the path... Well, I found the hole. Black as the night inside, to the point where I wondered if it actually would end. Looking at it from different angles, it really didn't seem big enough for me to climb down inside. Not without getting stuck.

For the moment, I gave up on that hole, and examined the area around it. Not really knowing what I was looking for, but something caught my eye. The crater looked a little funny when the light hit it. Giving off this glare like the surface was shiny. I ended up poking at it with my paw, and the entire thing was smooth and flat. No depression, nor real hole in that blackness. No matter how much weight I put onto it.

Saessl: "What was it then?"

No idea. But when I turned around, another hole swallowed my entire head. Regardless of how much I struggled against it, clawed at it, or even attempted to burn it, the black void just swallowed me whole. Then I swore I heard it sneeze as I fell inside.

Saessl: "What happened next?"

Well...

Chapter 6

She could hear the painful wails over the whimpers of her children, as they hid within the cellar of their home. As much as she was trying to keep them quiet, the horrific sounds of metal tearing through bone and sinew were more than enough to upset the woman. But she tried to stay strong, as soon as her husband arrived, he would protect them. The law would protect them.

She could never imagine anyone planning an attack so suddenly. They were inside slaughtering people and pillaging before any of the town guards could see them, let alone be alerted. Why did the kingdom have to be attacked just a few days ago, sending so many of their precious own guards to rescue anyone who might have survived? It was almost like this was planned.

The two boys almost yelped as their front door could be heard, torn completely off the hinges, and expecting heavy tramples above them. Ransacking everything they've collected over the years and just take it for themselves. It nearly made her angry, but this was somehow different. Not a single step inside the house was heard, at least not for several moments.

Then a pair of them, one right after another. Cautiously scouting the luxury home in silence, aside from the outside screams and cries. No trashing, no drawers opening. No furniture being toppled over, just casual footsteps. Then, a deep inhale. "I sense you..." A male called out, almost chuckling. Taking his time to look over the entire area as the three held their breaths. "You're hiding, but it doesn't matter. Because *it* is rather strong..." Another inhale and a few more steps.

A long silence, and the cellar doors were torn opened. Getting the three to yelp out loudly as the wooden barriers were thrown across the house like ragdolls. "You can either come out yourself, or I can fish you out of there." He said, rather calmly. Waiting for a response from the three. When they didn't move, and exhale of almost relief was faintly heard, and black chain serpents were ripped out of the kitchen walls. Hissing loudly in the doorway down to the basement.

"Okay-okay!" She shouted, getting the nightmarish creatures to stop in place, but still click and hiss at the ones below. The woman slowly went up the stairs, regardless of her son's pleas, and faced the chain-like demons in surrender. Meeting the black panther across the room with brave, yet frightened eyes. "What do you want?"

"Please, have a seat." He half gestured, almost like she spoiled his fun. "You might want to get your little cubs out there too." The two locked eyes again for a few moments.

"It was just me down there-" His ears went back, and those serpents dived into the cell with a hiss. Getting the two inside to scream, and her shout in denial. Watch almost helplessly as they were thrown out and across the room. Hitting the far wall with a loud whack, and getting the woman to run to them. Or at least attempt, whereas a black chain got in her way, hissing at her to retreat and nearly snapping at her skin.

"I think you've learned your lesson about lying, yes?" He half smirked, overlooking her challenging stance. Struggling to keep herself still, especially after the black creature started walking over to the woman's half unconscious boys, examining their slight head wounds that had a faint smear of red on them. Hearing her whimper in frustration when the feline set them up against the wall. "I don't like children." He bluntly said, overlooking them again.

Placing a paw through their hair a bit made her take a step forward, only to be bit harshly by the serpent guarding her. Piercing her arm very easily, like a cold blade that was just forged. Scratching against the bone, and nearly breaking it with a vice grip. Forcing her to step back, and stumble on a chair as another coiled around her other arm. The bladed body carving anything it slithered up against, and clicking loudly as it almost studied her with jerky movements.

"It was just a statement." The black panther said, looking back at her struggle against the pain a bit. Then back at the two younger sons. "They're... Almost too fresh. Sour. Undeveloped, I suppose. It's almost too easy to get it out of them, making it have this bland taste." The creature then turned about and walked towards her. "But you... Your kind is probably the best. Strong willed, and hard to crack, but when that shell of yours gets broken... Mmm, so delicious." Leaning in to almost lick at her chest, he took a deep inhale. Almost enjoying it like it was satisfying before placing a paw on her midsection.

"Don't touch me-!"

"Or you'll what?" Rixxix said back, rather calmly like he was expecting it. Only getting a grunt from her as the abyss serpents kept her in place. "Are you going to threaten me with your husband? Claim that I've broken some law and I'll pay for it the rest of my life? I've already been locked away in darkness for quite a few decades." He studied his own right paw, extending his own claws out and letting out a smaller appendage that seemed to act like a posable thumb. "It was an interesting time of my life. I admit, a bit scary at first, but after a while... You learn to just befriend the blackness." Another deep breath. "It's not there to harm you, it only wants what you want."

The woman didn't respond. "But you... You don't cover yourself with a blanket of shadows, but instead an invisible cloak of consequence. Much like so many other people in so many worlds, you walk along the streets as if you're being protected by something. Unable to really defend yourself against something that can clearly overpower you. I never understood why..."

A whimper of discomfort when the claws from the other paw resting on her belly started coming

out. Piercing through her white blouse with ease, and slowly seeping into the skin. "How does something so non-existent protect you? ...That's an honest question, lady. Perhaps you should participate into the conversation if you want them to live." A toss of his head towards her boys.

"...It keeps monsters like you away-"

"Oh, it's doing a commendable job then, isn't it? Monster is an interesting choice of word too, considering your form of **Law** is more just an opinion of who is a victim and..." He lightly chuckled. "It's funny really, you state that it's to keep the monsters away. Yet it's responsible for creating said monsters within your society. More specifically, if they were wrongly accused or justified. There will always be vultures posing as doves, people better at the science of lies. Yet, you know about that too well, don't you?"

A slight whimper from her. "You've gotten people arrested or punished just for disagreeing with you, or saying something against your own opinions. Is that really expelling monsters from your society? Or is it promoting creatures like us to co-exist within it?" No response. "Your grand form of defense, this imaginary wall you depend on to keep you and your family safe, has **the** most ridiculous of weaknesses. Being torn down from one sheer act alone. Do you know what that is, my lady?"

When she didn't say anything, those claws in her belly dug in deeper, getting her to gasp in pain. Though barely feeling it over the serpent's grasp. "**Decision.**" He leaned in to whisper in her face. "**We Can, If We Want To.**" He chuckled a bit. "It's just that simple, and you agreed to this form of defense, they all did. Bluffing to anyone who wants to hurt you, but the foolishness of it is; if they accept the consequences, you are **Defenseless**. Left to only be able to protect yourself, which most of your kind don't even know how to do. How does a species **Agree** to a system like this in the first place?"

Another deep breath, and an exhale of satisfaction over her body. "Like a warm, freshly baked treat. And now the cherry on top..." He leaned in closer again, taking another breath. "Your husband isn't coming to save you. Nor is he coming home." That broke the woman down, and the serpents finally let go. Leaving her to tend to her own wounds as the panther headed out of their home.

Walking down their well-made porch and into the streets, well-lit from the many fires on new homes. Their glow unable to illuminate the black sky above them, but a small orb was. Gently falling down over the house the black creature just left, pulsing a few times in a bright orange glow before becoming a large pillar of light. Exploding the home below it into nothing but burning splinters.

Shaking off the debris in his fur, Rixix looked up at the black sky through the trees. "I'm satisfied." He stated rather loudly, getting three large glowing red dots to appear high in the shadows. "But done wandering. Find me something I can use." The shadow gave off a low growl of confirmation, as it started to move upward a bit. Finally able to see an outline of a spiked metal worm before burrowing into the ground. Leaving the feline to continue walking a worn road.

"What happened next?" The little dragon asked, still laying down on the grey mane as the red behemoth slowed to a stop.

"Well..." He looked over at the setting sun for a few moments. "Let's stop here for a bit and prepare a camp. I'll tell you a bit more while you eat." A bit of a whimper as Karmu walked into the forest a ways, searching for a good place to spend the night. Finding a bit of an angled ledge providing some overhead shelter, he gently set the little one on the ground. "Alright, lets search for some firewood first." Saessl chirped at him and started searching the area vigorously, making the Render smile at such energy.

For now, Karmu just looked around for a fallen tree nearby, and started breaking it into smaller pieces. Keeping an eye on the dragon from afar as he gathered sticks in a pile, then attempted to place them up in a cone. Though it fell down a few times, he eventually got it to stay up. "Good job." The larger one said, returning with a bit more wood. "But aren't you forgetting something?"

Those blue eyes looked around, then back at the beast. "The fire?" The answer made him chuckle a bit.

"I suppose that's one thing, yes. But you need to do one other thing before getting the fire going." The hatchling's head tilted a bit, then pondered for a moment. Trying to remember what was different from before. Leading his sight to his paws, then it hit him.

"Oh, dirt!" He chirped, getting a nod from the larger one.

"You always want to keep the fire in a condensed area, or else it might spread into a dangerous mess." Saessl nodded at him, then started digging in a circle. Meeting the little one halfway around the campfire. "Good. Now, how would you start a fire?"

"Without you...?" A slight nod from the red one made the dragon's ears fall for a moment. Not coming up with any ideas, and the behemoth lead him a bit into the woods.

"Come. I want you to search for a pair of special rocks. One is sometimes a bright orange or a silver white, while the other is much darker." His ears perked a bit, but began searching around. "Over here." The wyrmling scampered over, paying witness to a large rock that was clearly too heavy to carry. "Though it can be broken up into smaller sections, this is called Flint stone. We might have to look a bit for the other."

The two started searching again for a few minutes. "What about this?" The purple one scampered back over to the Render with a smaller rock in his jaws. Letting him look it over for a moment.

"It might have some traces of Iron in it, yes. Let's test it out."

"Iron?"

"It's a type of metal. When grinded against flint, it will create a reaction with the air around it." He took the rock and scratched it against the much larger one they found, creating several sparks to

spray out of it. The little one looking at it with wonder, and sniffing out where the small lights landed. "Yes, it will work perfectly. However, since we cannot move the flint easily, what should we do?" He asked the dragon, who just looked at him with a bit of worry and confusion. "I'll give you a hit, if something here is too heavy, find a way to make it portable. Even if it's not the source."

"What?"

"You cannot carry the rock, but you might be able to carry what the rock creates." His purple head tilted, and all of a sudden he understood. Getting that look of excitement.

"The fire!"

"Yes. Let's return to the camp for a moment." And they did, Saessl almost jumping for joy as he grabbed one of his sticks. "Try to find one that looks more like a Y."

"A what?"

"The letter Y. Like... This one." He pulled it out, and tracing the specific shape. Handing it to the smaller one to carry for the moment. "Now, wood can ignite, but it takes a lot of heat to do so. Sadly, just having a small piece of wood is still too resistant towards the sparks. However, the smaller wood is, the less resistance it has to the flames." He stopped at the larger logs he broke into pieces before. "See this sheet around the outside? It's called bark. Sometimes you can find them on certain trees that are rather thin, like this one. So peel some of it off, like so." He took out a few strips. "And try cutting them into ribbons. Alright, back to the flint."

The little one carefully carried the stick with the ribbons back over to the rock. "Alright, now it might be a little difficult here whereas you can't carry the flint, but let's try something. Stand here, and put the far end of the stick on your shoulder. You'll have to stand upright for a bit. Now, with the ribbons of bark on the Y, we take the iron, and start rubbing it very close to the ribbons." It was a bit difficult, but Saessl did his best. Getting many of the sparks, and notice how the end of the stick started smoking a bit. "Okay, a little bit more."

A small ember started appearing in the white smoke. "Excellent, now drop the iron, and gently blow into the smoke." He did so, and the small fire took off. Making the wyrmling both very excited and a little scared at the same time. "Alright, take it back, but be careful not to drop it. If something falls, return to it after you get the fire to your camp." The red one followed him, just in case. A small strip fell, but he stepped on it quickly.

Tossing the flaming stick into the small cone of other ones eventually started a fire. "Excellent." The little one chirped loudly at him, almost dancing around the flames with much energy. "Okay, we got warmth, but we should find you something to eat. I found something while searching for the rocks, so this way."

"Okay!" The dragon did so, leading him to a rather large tree with some fruits on it. "Oh, are those Sadifruits?"

"Yes. I'm surprised you knew that."

"They're my favorite!" He looked for the lowest branch, but in turn found a few of the sweet pears on the ground. "What about these?"

"It's best not to eat the ones on the ground, usually something else got to it first, or they've gone rotten." The little one turned a fruit over, and seen it firsthand. Making a face, then giving the large beast a look of almost saddened question. "How do you get up there?" A nod. "Well, many ways. Later on in life, you'll be big enough to reach it. Otherwise, you could try climbing the tree."

The hatchling looked at it for a moment, then took a step back. Wiggling his haunches for a moment, then got a running start, getting quite high up and really digging his claws into the bark. Karmu came around the other side and acted as a safety net for the moment, almost giving him a nudge. "Go on, you have this. But if you fall, I'll catch you." A bit of a worried look, but Saessl kept going. Eventually reaching the branch, and noticing how thin it kind was.

Clearly, climbing to the end was only going to make it snap, but that gave him a bit of an idea. Getting a firm grip on the tree's base, he started jumping on the thin branch and cracking it. Getting it mostly broken off, but still attached to the tree. Climbing back down, the purple one was able to grab the branch from the ground, pulling at it until it gave way. Chirping in victory and getting the red one to laugh. "Perfect job, if there ever was one." A nudge as the dragon started carrying a branch that was clearly too big for him. "Alright, back to camp. You got that?"

"Yep!" He shouted in pride as they returned to the shelter.

Chapter 7

"How astonishing!" The raptor said, so enthralled while talking to a small mouse within the cell. Getting the canine laying on the stiff bed to groan loudly at him. "And these paths give you access to the entire castle?" The mouse squeaked loudly, munching on a small pocket treat that Naught gave it. "Even outside, you say? That must be quite a sight!" A bit of near silence as Rivo turned over again. "Oh, I suppose much of it would be rather dark."

"Can't you do something helpful?" The golden dog groaned again. "Like think of a way out of this mess?" The raptor looked at him a bit sadly, and whispered for the mouse to excuse him. Rising up to

walk to the disgruntled dog and give him a tight embrace. But Rivo just sighed, almost in frustration. "What are you doing?"

"I'm giving you a hug."

"Why?" He grumbled.

"Because you are wounded." He replied, rather softly, completely changing the dog's attitude. Granted still a bit curious of what he meant. "Maybe not physically, but there is something wounded within you that's effecting your brain chemistry. Hugging heals you. Perhaps not solely on its own, but it really does help." It almost made the canine sad, yet heartwarming in a way. Getting him to take a breath and give a tight embrace in return. Nearly feeling a complete difference.

"Is that why...?" A noise in question. "Why you've been hugging so many people? Because you think they are hurt?"

"I know they are hurt." He said a bit sadly. "I can see it. So many people in pain. How can you not?" Rivo didn't really know how to respond for a few moments, then eventually tapped him on the back.

"Well... At the moment, hugging won't help us from being trapped in here." It made the theropod tilt his head, immediately stopping the hug and looking at the dog's brown eyes for a few moments until he whimpered. "What?"

"Trapped?" A nod. "We're not trapped."

"As in, we're locked in a cell." His head tilted the other way. "The *prison* cell we're currently in."

"I understand, but we're not trapped." It made the gold one's ears go back.

"I heard him lock the door!"

"Well, yes. The door is locked, but that's not the only way out of here." Rivo couldn't help but slowly look down at the small mouse's hole, getting the rodent to squeak and scamper inside it.

"We can't fit in that, Naught!" He hissed, getting the raptor to double take.

"The hole? No. That would be physically impossible at our current size."

"Then...!?" The dinosaur turned to the canine's wooden bed. Taking off the thin blankets and prying off two large splinters, he went to the opposite side of the room. Moving to where the bolts of the bars were being held into the wall, and brushing off around them a bit before lining up the angles. Taking both splinters; one wide and flat, with the other rather sloped when looking at the side, he placed the flat one under the bolt's head. Lightly tapping it a few times before pushing it out of the wall enough to grab hold. Then did so for the others, and pushing the bars out into the hallway.

"See? Not trapped-" He double taked at the canine's rather furious stare. "You are angry? Not

the response I was expecting."

"**WHY!?**" He growled in a frustrated whisper, getting the raptor's head to tilt. "**WHY DIDN'T** You Do That **BEFORE!?**"

"Because the guard told us to stay inside here." Naught explained, clearly confused. "I thought you said we need to obey their orders at all times." Rivo covered his eyes and whimpered in frustration again. "You are very angry."

"Let's just... Get out of here." He grumbled, walking out and carefully looking down the unguarded hallways. Eventually coming up to a large door that lead outside, but it was closed. "Is this 'Not Trapping' us either?"

"Well, it is locked, if that's what you mean." A low growl. "We cannot open it with our strength alone. If I can find a certain object, perhaps we can unlock it."

"Like a key or a lockpick?"

"Yes." Naught bluntly said, looking around. "Perhaps this way?"

"Please tell me you're not going to ask the guards for the key." A double take from those purple eyes as they stared at each other for a few moments. " • • • You were going to ask them for the key. "

"I'm very puzzled on your and Karmu's advice about the city's protection." The only reply he got was a grumble as they walked down the halls. Getting curious about a lot of noise deep within, the sounds of people cheering loudly. "Is that...?" He followed it, led by curiosity. Coming to another closed gate with a guard at the other side half looking through it. "They seem very excited." It nearly spooked the avian soldier.

"You two? Where's Stephone?" The others tilted their heads and the bird grumbled. "He went back to gambling as soon as he lead you down here, huh? Idiot."

"Lead us down-?"

"-Yes, said you could open the gate for us."

"Figures." The guard grumbled, opening the gate in front of him. "They're all ready for you, good luck."

"Oh, is this some sort of game!?" Naught asked excitedly, getting the dog to whimper and stutter for a moment in surprise.

"You could call it that. And it needs... Participants-"

"I'll Participate!" Another whimper from the canine as the dino stepped forward. "What are the rules?"

"Just one: Survive."

"I've been doing that for several months now!"

"-Naught, wait!" But Rivo's words were too late. The gate closed almost immediately between them as the raptor walked out into the dirt arena in awe. Hundreds of people were sitting and standing around as spectators, roaring in excitement as soon as they seen someone. "What the hell is this? What is he up against?"

"A Render." The avian said, almost as excited as the crowd. Making the dog whimper loudly.

"How interesting." The theropod said, looking over the walls at the many crude weapons available for arming oneself with. Then the gate on the other side started to open, hearing rageful roars from within and cracks of whips. Soon, a large war bear came out, covered in wounds. Turning the dino's awe into shock. Looking back at the avian guard. "What have you done to her?" Naught nearly hissed at him, almost scolding. But before the bird could explain, the bear roared loudly. Being forced into the arena by several other guards with whips, and the gate closed on the other side.

"Naught...!" Rivo called to him, but got drowned out by the cheers of people. The noise made the beast furious, and charged at the only one within the ring. Throwing all its weight into one large downward swipe, but the dinosaur stepped under it. Ending up on the side of the larger creature. Completely dodging the attack and getting to the bear's blind spot. Now witnessing the many wounds and cuts it's donned over the weeks.

A sideways swipe forced the raptor to step backwards, making the war beast open an old wound. Nearly staggering from the pain of the torn tendon, it still fought for its life to attack the dinosaur. Lifting up her paw once again to slash at him, Naught stepped forward towards her neck. Gripping it tightly and getting the large animal to completely stop.

It took the crowd a few moments to stop cheering and wonder what exactly happened, as the bear slowly stopped it's rampage. Feeling the tight embrace of the dinosaur around her neck, and being soothed of her anger by the very touch. "How could they have done this to you?" He asked sadly. "Force you to endure so much pain just for mere entertainment, what were they thinking?"

"But I can feel your pain, both physical and mental." Naught continued, feeling the large animal slowly embrace him back. "You don't need to fight anymore." Her wounds slowly sealed up, but the marks remained within the thick and torn fur. "Come, let's leave this place together." A low murmur from the bear as they let go left him puzzled. "Oh, we found the exit, however... We could use your help opening it. It's through this gate." The beast turned around to face the avian guard who only whimpered loudly before scampering off and down the hallway. "Rivo? Could you open the gate for us?"

"Y-yeah... She's not going to eat me or anything, right?"

"No, but she is quite famished. Perhaps we could assist her before she leaves the city." Another mumble of growls the golden canine couldn't understand. "Are you sure? ...Ah. I hope he's still alive then. How long has it been?" The dinosaur asked, as the gate started opening. "In that case, I'm positive

of it. This way."

"I can't believe we're doing this." The dog grumbled, following them to the main prison gate.
"Now what?"

"Alright, Loretta. The weak points in the door are just below here. You'll have to break the lock, but it won't be hard if you lift with your hind legs." The bear nodded and thrust her forepaws into the large doorway. Breaking the reinforcing wood just between the bars, then lifting the entire gate up with a loud growl. Ripping the metal lock mechanism with untold ease, like it was melted, and the three got a breath of fresh air. Along with the sight of some guards approaching. Well, were.

After the war bear took a step out and roared loudly into the blinding light, they ended up retreating. Then looking towards the dinosaur, mimicking his smile and getting a soft hug from him again. "Wonderful job. If you follow this path, it will lead you directly out the front gate. Though a bit more sturdy than that one, you won't have an issue if you lift with your backside." She gave him a nod, then a lick before heading out. As he waved goodbye and good luck, he double taked at the canine staring at him.

"...Are you **sure** you're not a God?" Rivo asked, almost whimpering.

"I am not a God." Naught bluntly stated, quite happily at that. "Come, your wagon is over there a ways. Maybe you can get some more sales today."

"That's probably not a good idea. We should leave as soon as possible." A loud roar of warning in the distance. "Especially since we have a distraction."

"I suppose so. There was just so much left here for me to see." The raptor said, a bit disappointed, but carried on to begin with.

The bear growled through the streets, warning off many people as they scattered in the pathway. Though never going after any of them, nor the guards that were leading people to safety. Carefully, she followed the theropod's instruction to walk the one street, and seen the gate up ahead. As well as hear some of the soldiers argue. "Open The Gates!"

"No, Defend Them!"

"Are You Serious!?"

"Are **You**!?"

"You really want to Keep this thing **inside** the walls!?"

"...Open The Gates!"

"-Open The Gates!!"

The large metal bars slowly started opening, but the bear was anxious to get outside the walls. Pushing the gate up with a massive force, it slammed upwards and got jammed. At least high enough for her to get out, and close behind her was Naught pulling the wagon. Grateful, she waited to ensure they got out safely and traveled together a ways out. Until they started slowing down. "Are you going to be alright from here out?" The war bear nodded at him, giving the raptor another nuzzle and a lick. "You're very welcome. It was a team effort, I assure you." One more hug, and she went her own direction.

Feeling that puzzling gaze on him, the dino looked behind him and met the brown eyes. "How do you hear them...?"

"Can you not?" Rivo shook his head. "Strange. I assumed everyone could. That would explain a lot of events." It made the golden dog chuckle a bit. "Where to?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't see Karmu along the wall." Naught studied the surroundings a bit, then made a noise in question. "What is it?"

"He's quite far down that way. But..." He looked down on the ground, and the canine noticed them too. Several dozen footprints, both of people and horses filled the road heading down that direction. "I wonder what happened."

"Is he moving towards or away? Or can you even tell that-?"

"Towards us." They shared a look. "Should we meet up with him?"

"...Yeah, let's do that. Just watch out for this patrol, if you can." A nod from the theropod, and he pulled the large wagon down the road.

Chapter 8

Those frilled ears flickered as they picked up large pawsteps nearby. Not noticing his scaled body was cold until the large beast's return. Laying down carefully around the small one, as it muttered something in his sleep. Returning to the realm of reality after getting a few nudges. "Saessl, wake up for a few moments." A loud grumble as it tried to ignore him, pushing the red paw away as it came close.

"Just for a bit."

Those blue eyes eventually blinked opened, barely seeing anything through the darkness past the orange glow. He made a noise in question at those black eyes, then seen Karmu was holding something in his other paw. "I'm going to get us some distance while you sleep, but you should get hydrated before we move." He set down a large shell that acted as a bowl. "It should be cooled off enough to be satisfying."

A few more grumbled, but the wyrmling obeyed. Taking laps at it until he could no longer find enough water within. At least getting his fill, as the large one picked him up. Setting the dragon on his messy mane for more comfort before putting out the fire. "Alright, try to get some sleep." The purple one yawned in response, then made himself comfortable.

The bright sunrise was invading through the tree's protection, as the hatchling fought to avoid it. Shifting time and time again to escape the harsh light was getting more and more difficult, until he nearly fell off the behemoth. Snatching at his ear with a loud yelp and clawing into the red hide made the larger one growl a bit before stopping and supporting Saessl back up. "Careful, you." He grumbled, hearing the little one whimper a bit.

"S-sorry... I was just..." He yawned a bit before accepting the fact the sun was here to stay. Perhaps he could find a better spot further down the beast, so the dragon carefully climbed down the grey mane. The thick sliverish strands seemed to spread all the way down to the end of the thick red tail, giving him plenty of space to find a comfortable place. Upon climbing down, his hind paw caught something hard within the forest around the Render's collar. Resting on his shoulders, he felt a chain within, one to the amulet resting on the beast's chest. "What is this?"

The large one made a noise in question, then felt the tug on the jewelry. Taking a deep exhale while continuing to walk, he thought of a way to explain it. "That... Have you ever heard of Tanure Energy?"

"I think in stories, but it was always bad."

"It could be used for bad things, but it wasn't Dark Magic or whatever was in your tales." Another breath. "Again, you keep this between us, right?"

"Yep!"

"...Centuries ago, even before I existed, Tanure was a primary source of energy in multiple lands. It could be manipulated to do just about anything, and provide power a lot of technology to make life much easier."

"But people learned to use it for Bad?" Karmu nodded.

"They made it to power weaponry, they made it for biological warfare. To cast hexes and curses

on people, often innocent people. After decades of war and a massive decrease in population, they didn't have enough people to fight a war anymore. They were forced to stop due to many factors past population; resources. Lack of untainted lands and water, and the creatures they created from the fallout of such weapons." It made the little one whimper.

"What did they do...?"

"...They placed a ban on Tanure Energy. Got rid of its sources and counters for the most part, and they restarted from scratch. A life without Tanure or Technology, or at least attempt it."

"Attempt...?"

"Many didn't think their species would be able to survive against the things they've created within the fallout zones, but they managed in the long run."

"And that's the world we live in now?"

"...Kind of. One other event happened maybe a decade or two after." Another breath from Karmu. "Something fell from the stars."

"Stars?"

"Something massive. Doing a lot of harm to the land, but in a mostly tainted area. People believed it was a gift from the sky, but inside this... Prison cell was a creature from the outside."

"A monster?"

"A Render."

"...What?" Saessl whispered.

"It was the first Render ever seen here. The thing was massive, about the size of a mountain. Once it was freed, it started a violent rampage. Mostly on the nearby tainted lands, whipping them clean of any taint from the Tanure the grounds were saturated with..."

"But it came after people soon after..." He felt the red beast nod.

"And just having dealt with a war they could no longer fight off, they didn't have much to go by. Once again nearly getting extinct from this one creature, those left alive only had one chance."

"...It was Tanure, wasn't it?"

"The weaponry they banned, yes. The last army standing to fight against the Render was forever known as Horizon. They used everything they had against this monster, sacrificed so much, but eventually killed it. Barely, but it was a victory. However..."

"What?" The behemoth didn't respond. "Karmu?"

"Remember when I said I didn't remember being Hatched or..."

"Yeah."

"When a Render dies, it gets split into two others. That's how they pro-create. They are born from the ashes of their parent, already mature and mostly wise. Though a fraction of the previous' size." A louder whimper from the dragon. "...Yeah. I can only imagine how Horizon felt after that battle. Throwing everything you had, only having a tenth of your army left, and suddenly there's two more that appear."

"But we survived?"

"They nearly gave up and accepted that the stars just wanted their end. But by not engaging into a conflict with the Renders, they saved their species. For some reason, Renders don't like others of their kind. To the point where they will fight to the death."

"And these two fought each other...?" Another nod.

"Ended up killing each other in the process. Making four more who went their separate ways, at first." A breath from the large behemoth. "Another thing to keep in mind is that they also carry a fraction of the previous' power. So the younger the generation of Render, the weaker it is. Granted, that doesn't make them not dangerous."

"But...?"

"I've even seen a few of them actually be accepted within society. But I couldn't tell you what tier it would be. Still, it gives me a little bit of hope."

"Karmu...?" No response. "What Generation are you then? What about Larksus?"

"...That still didn't stop Horizon from trying to hunt us down. Some people will attempt to protect us, especially if we were accepted by others. Yet, quite a few people still deem us dangerous. And will often go out of their way to tip Horizon about our presence." A breath as the little one didn't know what to say. "You want to know what this little gem does, Saessl? It's a Choker. Specifically for Tanure energy. It ensures that those in the presence of it cannot exceed a certain output."

"What?"

"Think of it as a funnel: You can force as much as you can fit into the top half, but it will only let a certain amount pass through it. I guess another example would be a Dam." The dragon giggled at that, even making the red one smile a bit. "I don't feel like going into specific details now, but long story short: I saved a soldier once from the crossfire of Horizon. And he helped convinced them that I wasn't a threat. Granted, that still didn't make them completely believe it."

"So... They put a Choker on you."

"To so-called 'Not Blow Up An Entire City Ag-'..." The large beast stopped for a few moments.

Hiding his face from the little one while collecting a few breaths.

"Karmu...?" He didn't respond, but started walking again. "It wasn't your fault-"

"It was, Saessl. And they're right, I'm too dangerous around large cities." Another breath. "But I'm not Unstable like Horizon thinks I am. I'm one of the very few who went out of their way to make sure of that."

"Make sure of...?" The purple wyrmling tilted his head and sucked in a breath. "The crazy old wolf!?" It made the larger one chuckle a bit.

"Yeah... He was pretty old." Even the dragon giggled at that, but noticed the Render slow down.

"You okay?" A deep breath.

"...Heads up." A purr of curiosity, as he climbed back up to behemoth's head and seen a large group of soldiers in the distance. Getting him to whimper loudly.

"Let's hide!"

"What?" Karmu almost growled.

"Please! I don't wanna go back!"

"Saessl-"

"*Please!*" The little one nearly cried.

"They've already seen us. Hiding will only pose me as a fugitive." A loud whimper as he started to move again. "I will take you back, Saessl. Myself. But if we attempt to avoid them..."

"Then what?"

"Odds are I'll have to fight them. Do you really want that?" Another whimper. "I won't hand them over to you, understand? You can even let me do the talking." A small sniff flicked his ear upward. "Hey, you've trusted me this far, haven't you? I'm pretty sure this is a misunderstanding, but it's still an opportunity to put your foot down."

"Foot?"

"It's an expression. But it *is* time for things to change, especially for you." Saessl muttered something under his breath. "Living out here is nothing like in there. In those walls, you're safe. Fed. Sheltered. You know what I would give to have that?"

"...Why don't you come too then?"

"Well, that was the plan. For me to return you-"

"I mean... To live." The large one paused his movement, but only for a moment.

"I can't do that, Saessl."

"Why?"

"Because it will no longer make those walls safe, will it?"

"But, with your control and that gem-"

"It's not *that* I'm worried about." A noise in question from the younger one. "Do you really think Horizon would let a Render live inside such walls? They're built as a defense to keep us out to begin with." A sad whimper from the dragon. "The smallest of towns, they would barely pass one living inside. Mostly due to the risk being somewhat minimal. But a large city like that? Housing how many?"

The red one took a breath as Saessl remained quiet, then continued. "I really wish things were different. I didn't ask for this lifestyle, I didn't ask to be a threat. I was just labeled as one from my species. But at the same time, I cannot blame Horizon from going to such lengths to ensure no one goes extinct. Especially considering the past struggles."

The two groups came closer together, and hatchling slid back around the behemoth's shoulders. Almost hiding behind him as the captain motioned the soldiers to stand down for a bit. Taking a few steps forward, trying to keep himself composed while confronting such a large creature, the human male cleared his throat. "Greetings... Erm. Creature." It made Karmu's ears go back. "We, the Guard of Ortel Castle, thank you for rescuing our Prince from the dangers of earlier-"

"Dangers you could've avoided if you didn't treat him like a wild animal." The red one grumbled, making many of them uncomfortable, and a few a bit hostile.

"Yes, I admit we could've handled that event a bit differently, but we were caught under surprise-"

"Your job is to work under surprise and pressure. Perhaps many of you should consider another line of work." A few more uncomfortable grunts as the captain did his best to remain peaceful. "And now I'm assuming you've come all this way to take him back home, hmm?"

"Yes. Safely, that is-"

"A bit difficult to feel safe when the entire kingdom feels like an Iron Maiden." A puzzling look at Karmu. "Saessl tells me that many within the castle, including the crowns themselves, have been planning a form of ritual. That stunt yesterday was not him playing a joke or a child's game, he was trying to escape for fear of his life."

"What?"

"He claims that his parents are going to sacrifice him." It left the group almost stunned.

"Sir-"

"Karmu." A clear of the captain's throat again.

"Karmu... He is a child. They lie often-"

"I thought the same thing at first, honestly." He almost felt those blue eyes gaze at him both in surprise and slight hurt, as the red beast looked back at him for a moment. "No offense." The little one just snorted at him. "But then I started to think a bit deeper into it. How long have you been Captain?"

"Lawrson." The man introduced himself. "And I've been in this position for the past seven years-"

"So you would be too young to remember the last time King Pharis had a child." A bit of a surprised look from him. "As well as the one before that, and so on for the last... Must have been forty years."

"That's impossible, Sir. The King is only in his thirties."

"And has been for the half century. Fifty years of no disastrous storms, harvest shortages, illnesses to the people within the walls or livestock. That's a bit suspicious, isn't it?" Several soldiers whispered to each other for a few moments. "You can understand why exactly I haven't just handed him over to you yet, let alone plan to."

"Pardon me?"

"You know what I am, Lawrson." The red one took a step forward, and the captain took one back. "You might have your doubts, but deep down you fear for the worst from me. I can smell it. Along with that, I can only assume you've requested backup from the Horizon." A few quiet moments, and the Render exhaled. "That means yes."

"Sir, please let us deal with our own kingdom's affairs. We'll escort the prince back-"

"I'm going to talk to Pharis myself and put a stop to this. Especially if he's been using Tanure to make his kingdom stronger as a whole. A crime that the Horizon might be interested to punish, you see." There was a lot of mixed feelings within the group. "So, I propose a form of truce: I'll escort the Prince back and have a word with your King -A peaceful discussion. And you call off the Horizon, I have the feeling they're rather close by."

"Sir, we cannot just let him go by himself." One of them whispered to the captain, and he studied the red beast for several long minutes.

"...I have your word that your actions are peaceful ones?" A solid nod from Karmu.

"If I engage, that's just literally screaming for Horizon to come after me. A death sentence that I'm not willing to pursuit."

"And if all of these events are just superstitions?"

"Then Saessl has some of his own requests to negotiate over. If all goes well, things will be better for everyone. Your Prince will no longer attempt to escape these walls, and no one will need to go cliff diving in order to save him." A long silence fell over the group. "Feel free to discuss it among yourselves while we take a rest." A moment of study, and Lawrson agreed to the discussion.

Several minutes passed, and the dragon didn't leave Karmu's side. Almost holding onto him like he was a parent, in an area of danger. "You'll be fine." The beast assured him, getting a nervous smile from the little one. "I still think it's a misunderstanding, but they bought it."

"Bought it?"

"The story about your kingdom's history."

"W-wait. That didn't actually happen!?" He whispered in surprise, still getting a shush and a chuckle from the behemoth.

"It happened to one of these kingdoms, but I cannot remember which. Apparently, they never looked twice at it, so." A small nudge that didn't know its own strength, knocking the wyrmling on his side a bit and playfully attacking it. "Things will be better for you, here on out. But it's still your decision."

"You think so?"

"Of course. I mean, you have wings. They're going to have to let go sometime." A playful swat, then the little one perked his head up. Hearing a few of the guards approach and almost hiding from them. "Come to a decision?"

"Yes. Sandford here said he knows someone living in Ortel that can vouch for you." A nod from the red one. "Also said the old lizard owes you a favor."

"I'll gladly take your trust as repayment." A bit of a discouraged grunt from Lawrson and Karmu shrugged. "Or you can take it up with him, but he's gotten grouchy over the years."

"He really has." The young soldier chuckled.

"I'll take both your words for it. However, Sandford is going with you-"

"No." The Render's voice was rather thick and serious.

"W-what?"

"Karmu, you said you would take one-"

"And I will, but he is absolutely terrified of me. I don't want him to be frozen with fear when it comes to saving or protecting Saessl's life." He motioned for the dragon to climb back on him, and he did. Getting up, the behemoth overlooked the group who was staring at them. Getting his sights on a

rather tall lizard carrying a tower shield. "You, I'll take." A rather surprised take from him, as he looked at the Captain for orders.

"Wolfgang?"

"He's not showing much fear, and someone carrying around a shield that heavy knows how to defend himself quite well. Especially in lighter armor. What say you?" The man and the lizard looked at each other for a few moments, as if to ask their feelings about it.

"I'll do it, Sir."

"...Alright. I'm entrusting you to guard the Prince with your life." A solid nod, and Wolfgang got up. "Don't make me regret this decision, Render."

"Considering this was your mess to begin with, I'd be happier with how this is turning out." A grunt from the captain as they got up. "Watch yourself with the Horizon, and don't blurt out anything about what's going on here. Understood?" A nod and the two groups went their separate ways.

Chapter 9

The late sun was still setting through the trees, giving the two a chance to sit back and relax for a bit. The golden canine especially needed a break after a day like this. Barely getting the fire going and cooking their evening dinner while feeling very physically uncomfortable. Though he did take a small rest while the raptor pulled the wagon, that bedding needed to be replaced two towns ago.

Rivo sighed heavily after turning over a few meats and sliced sour potatoes. He was just trying to save as much coin as he possibly could, even if it meant sleeping on the wagon's uneven floor. Just being able to squeeze inside one of his cupboards instead of paying for a tavern's room has saved him a ridiculous amount. Though it has taken its toll outside his wallet.

His back ached, as the dog fought to be rid of its kinks. Hearing the theropod's return of a large pot in his arms, greeting him with that same smile. Getting one in return, but the dinosaur could deliberately tell that the dog was deeply in distress. Seriously, after that sentence my D key hurts a little.

"I found some water."

"Great. It will really save what I have stored. We might even refill that before we leave tomorrow." Naught nodded and set the pot to the side. Sitting down beside him at first, but curling behind the canine while laying down soon after. Allowing the golden one to rest his back on the raptor's middle, but not without giving him a strange look. "You require it. I don't mind, Rivo." A quiet exhale, and the smaller one took it.

The dinosaur was rather soft, unexpectedly so. Yet firm enough to really relax his back, almost drifting off and forgetting about their meal still cooking. Another few deep breaths as they listened to the fire crackle. "...You must be exhausted, Naught."

"Not really. I'm fine, though I will admit that Karmu does make it look easy." They chuckled a bit. "For now, he is still remaining in one spot, but you know him." He nodded. "He'll decide in the middle of the night that 'That's Enough Rest.' and get back on the road." Another small laugh.

"I never seen someone so eager to pull a wagon or travel, besides you two." They smiled. "If only Makalins were so cooperative."

"I've still yet to see any of those animals."

"They're more in the southwest. That's where I got mine, before it ran away that is." A faint noise from the dino as he agreed. "I swear, that was probably the worst day of my life. Aside from today, that is." Another chuckle. "It's a bit hard to top getting falsely accused of carrying illegal magics, arrested, then thrown into a deathmatch arena after escaping jail. Then escaping the entire city by teaming up with a Render." A double take from Naught.

"You mean Loretta?" He nodded. "She wasn't a Render."

"She wasn't? Rumors said there was one inside the arena."

"Well, she was probably the one they were speaking of, but they were mistaken. She was just a dire bear." A moment of study from those brown eyes, then the canine exhaled.

"I guess that makes things slightly better. But I never seen a Render before, so I wouldn't know."

"Yes you have." The raptor blurted out, trying to catch his own tongue. Then standing completely still for a moment as Rivo double took at him. That curious stare made the theropod's ears blush with a purple tint as they started to sink.

"...I have?"

"He..." Naught rubbed the back of his neck a bit, getting those spines to dance uncomfortably. "Also didn't want me to tell anyone." A few more moments of studying, and those purple eyes trailed to the wagon.

"...Karmu?" A slight whimper of embarrassment from the dino. "...Karmu!?" A nervous nod. "My

wagon, the one thing I'm risking my own and my family's entire future on, was being pulled by quite possibly the most dangerous creatures known to... **Anyone!**?" Another nod, and the dog started whimpering a bit. "Worst day ever."

"He's quite in control though. You've seen it for yourself, he's a good person-"

"A good person that could melt my face off in my sleep." He mumbled within his golden paws. "Okay... Okay, okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. Just... Can you truthfully answer me one thing then? About yourself? So there's no more surprises or secrets in my traveling breakfast circus?" A nervous chuckle from the dinosaur, and he nodded. "Are you *really* a God?"

"I am not a God." He said honestly, and Rivo studied him for a few moments.

"Just... Say it one more time." It made Naught smile.

"I, Naught, your and Karmu's lovely caring companion, am not a God." Another moment of study, and he let out a sigh of relief.

"Good. Then I'm not being judged by my past actions by some outside religious force?"

"Hardly. The Forces don't often Judge people like in some of the Religions we've encountered-"

"Then what *are* you?" The raptor gave him a sad look. "Do you know?"

"I do. And I've told Karmu, but he specifically told me not to tell another soul." Rivo's head tilted a bit, along with his ears perking. "It's not just you, so please don't think I'm hiding it directly from you, Rivo. I've honestly wanted to tell you, I've wanted to tell everyone. But... Karmu said they wouldn't take it well. That they might treat me... Differently."

"Did you do something to them?" He asked.

"To modify them? No. But... At the same time, I *didn't* do anything. Especially after they really needed me to." Naught sighed heavily. "Sometimes I wonder if all this pain is worth it, but I don't have a choice but to believe it is." The golden one looked at him sadly. "There is so much to experience here, so much to see and feel. I can understand why such things are almost envied by others, yet... The cost is a time limit. One that can be cut short so quickly-and our meal is now burning." A loud yelp and Rivo took it off the fire. Getting a couple of plates to serve them, at least only getting the meals slightly singed.

"It's still good, at the very least." A nod from the larger one. "I never got to put on the rosemary, can you pass it?" He pointed at a case, and Naught opened it up. Handing him the bottle of spice, and looking over at a small painting within. One of a brown dog, and a smaller golden pup.

"These must be...?" Rivo made a noise in question, then nodded with a sad smile.

"My family, yes. It's a wonder you didn't know that right off the bat." He half teased.

"I can't see their Deoxyribonucleic Acid strands through a picture." The word made the dog's head ache a bit. "All I can see is the materials of the paper and paint used. For me to see a picture is... Difficult. Interesting, yes. Especially that Art Gallery in Lhosaka, but I still have a hard time to imagine what you see."

"You mean shapes and colors?"

"Yes. If that's what your eyes limit you to see, it is different for every person. Usually only slightly so."

"What do you see then? In general, I mean." The theropod took a bite out of his meat first and swallowed. Lightly purring at its taste as if giving the canine a compliment.

"I see information. Endless strings tangled with all forms of matter, time, and function. I see an object's history, chemistry- physical and mental. I see every part of themselves, and the creatures living on them. All broken down to the very basics that they can be. Past Particles and Atoms. Electrical Charges and Basic Function. I see... Reality. Both alive and not."

Though much of it was over his head, it was almost scary to him. "...Well, if that's what you see, I'd hate to hear what you smell."

"I told you already." He happily replied. "Our dinner burning." The two laughed a bit, but the raptor could still sense something off. "Mentioning your family hurt you a little, didn't it?" A breath and a faint nod from Rivo. "They are alright. Missing your presence, but they are fine."

"...I know." A slight noise in question from Naught. "Maybe not as much as you do, I mean, but I believe you."

"But your hurt is not about that...?" A very faint chuckle from the dog.

"Nothing gets around you, does it?" He took a breath. "I'm thinking... I'm done."

"Done...?"

"Traveling, I mean. Done with the wagon business, especially after today." It made those frilled ears fall a bit. "Thanks to you two, I have enough to finally stop this. Barely enough, and might have to swing a few things, but enough." Those violet eyes looked at him with both sadness and a bit of joy. "So, I'll be heading back home after meeting up with Karmu again, if you two are okay with going-

"Of course. I would love to meet your family." He smiled brightly at the canine. "Karmu too, I'm sure." A bit of a sour look at the dino that time. "He's still the same person, Render or not."

"Y-yeah. Sorry, that's going to take some getting used to." He slightly whimpered. "So... Any idea what you're going to do after?"

"Perhaps help you move, then get you grounded well before leaving." That nearly deflated the golden one with happiness. "Don't decline our help, you know more than the average person that Karmu and I would go out of our way to make sure you are safe."

"...Why?" A slight head tilt from the theropod. "N-not that I'm complaining or anything, but... You two have done so much for me the past few months. The sheer fact that you refuse coin payment is the only reason why I have enough to stop in the first place."

"Because we're friends. That's what you called us when we first met. Is that not what friends do?" Rivo didn't know how to respond to that, and the dinosaur moved a bit to hug the dog tightly. "After all the hardships this body of yours has gone through, you deserve kindness from others. Friends or not." A soft nuzzle. "You don't need to hide in a shell of yourself. In fear of both you or your family."

"...So you know about that."

"I seen it the first time we met, Rivo. It's an extraordinary ability, you shouldn't have to hide it from others who would claim it as witchcraft or Tanure magics. Such a thing could be very useful in many professions, including traveling and performance. It's a shame that you were forced to use it for illegal purposes... If I'm reading that guilt correctly."

"...Yeah."

"You can trust us, Rivo. Just like we trust you." He nodded faintly, and the two rested there for several hours. Tomorrow, they would meet up with Karmu after he encountered the soldiers from Ortel. Hoping such a thing would be resolved peacefully.

The three walked silently along the wide roads. Once in a while glancing at the bay as the sun began to shine above them, instead of attacking their eyes. Every so often glancing at each other in awkward silence, not really sure what to say to the Ortel guard sent to protect the young dragon.

The large one couldn't help but sneak studies of his gear, things that were definitely exotic in these parts of the lands. Often decorated with large, flexible feathers along the outside of the shield. As well as smaller ones around the handguard of the long machete. "Is something wrong?" The large lizardman asked, meeting the black voids with his own yellow iris.

"...Your weaponry isn't of the court, nor the Ortel region." A slightly annoyed grunt from Wolfgang.

"You and every captain in those walls complain about the same thing."

"That wasn't a complaint." Karmu stated, getting the two to share another look.

"Do you know where I'm from then?"

"...Southeast. Past the Equator, and the Desert."

"The sand didn't reach our city much-"

"Not that desert." The three were quiet for a bit. "Those markings on your shield..."

"Wasn't by choice. In our culture, we almost praise to the creature that created the Glass Desert. Our priests sing hymns to keep it asleep, and our warriors are painted and fight those who choose to attempt to reawaken it. So much so, that they design our gear based on the cultures we thought were lost in that catastrophe." He tapped the large shield and its design. "There's been battles I've fought in, outside our lands, where all they needed to see was this. Then they'd take off running." The two adult males glanced at each other for a few moments. "You didn't make the wrong choice, Render. I'm more of an aggressive fighter, I've been told, but Saessler is safe with me."

"...Saessler." The lizard tossed his snout.

"I was close." He grumbled, looking up at the dragon within the silver forest. "You don't need to trust me enough to be a friend, your Majesty. But trust me to protect your life." The little one nodded, and waited a few minutes for things to settle.

"...What's the Glass Desert?" It made the behemoth slow to a stop, then look away. "Karmu?" He didn't respond.

"Ages ago, a creature rampaged through the city of Halk'Rasha without warning. They couldn't even get an army prepared to defend against it before the entire grassy lands were turned into a glowing white light. So massively hot that it melted the entire desert into a dense glass sheet." A moment of silence. "Horizon said there was nothing that could be done-"

"Horizon was the one who caused that." The red beast growled, walking forward in anger. "Of course, they damn well blame me for it."

"Why you?"

"Because I'm the one who was defending that city... My City." He stopped again, taking a heavy breath and sitting down for a moment.

"...From what?" Wolfgang asked. "No one said that there was two invaders there-"

"That's because they didn't want you to know about the other Render." Another thick statement with a hint of sorrow in his voice. As he felt the wyrmling climb closer to his muzzle.

"...Larksus?" A heavy exhale told Saessler he was right. "That's what happened...? How?"

"He wasn't himself." Karmu struggled not to shake his head with the dragon on him. "They did something to him."

"Who is Larksus?" A look from the blue eyes, and the red one exhaled.

"Another Render that hit him over the head with a large rock." The lizardman tilted his head at the hatchling. "But he was... Erm..."

"He was a coward. He didn't even like to leave his own cave. Odds are, Horizon found him, kidnapped him, and did something to his mind. Tanure was... Illegal for many reasons."

"And you're thinking they...?"

"They used it to attempt to control a Render. Enforce them to fight each other more often, perhaps finding a way to make us extinct or even just lock us away." A painful sigh. "I shouldn't have left him there. Not alone."

"Did you know about this ahead of time? That they were attempting such things?" Wolfgang asked, getting a light head shake from the red behemoth. "Then there was nothing you could have prepared for. Same goes for Halk'Rasha." He placed a scaled paw on Karmu's shoulder. "They remember it being a beautiful place. An Oasis for any creature that could fit into its lands. It's why our people recall it as a tragedy." A bit of silence, and the Render nodded a bit. Getting a pet from above as well before getting back up.

"You should tell him." The little one got two noises in question. "Your story, about how you learned how to fish from the guy."

"...Fish?"

"I guess I wasn't that far into it, was I?" Karmu half asked. Taking a deep breath before walking again at a normal pace. "I was sleeping in a forest far away from here..."

Chapter 10

"Are you sure you didn't just eat something that made you hallucinate?" The lizardman asked, getting a bit of a glare from the red beast. "Or maybe just stayed up on the mountain top for too long? The air is usually thin up there."

"He said Renders don't need to eat though."

"Doesn't mean he didn't." Karmu just rolled his eyes at Wolfgang, and he shrugged. "All I'm saying is, getting swallowed up by a black hole is a bit farfetched."

"You think I don't know that? I know what I saw, let alone felt."

"How old are you again?" A growl from the behemoth told him not to even go there. "Alright, alright. It's your story. Continue."

"No more interruptions then." The Render grumbled, lightly tossing his head a bit to signal the hatchling. "From either of you." Almost smiling when he seen the purple muzzle make a large circle, as if those blue eyes were rolling.

But yes, I was swallowed by a black hole, that sneezed afterword. Falling into a void of darkness, and landed on the hard stone. It hurt a little, but not for terribly long. Grunting to get up, I couldn't see anything until this rectangle of light appeared. Then a large eyeball in the center of it. "Here's the thing about most long distance plans-Oh Wait! Wrong script! Ignore that!"

"...What?" I grumbled, trying to shield my eyes from it.

"I Said Ignore It!" The voice cleared his throat. "Are you big, horny, and red all over-Gawd that sounds dirty! Who wrote this thing? ...Was it David!? ...I'm saying it was David. Because he sounds like the type to write something like that! ...I don't care if he actually has horns or not, it's still-Y'know what? I'm not getting into this with you." I couldn't help but feel a bit ignored, looking around at what appeared to be a large bowl I was stuck in. "I'm just going to improvise! Okay? Okay. Take 4. You still there?"

"...Yes?"

"Good. You would not *believe* what it's like to work with these guys. Complete pain in the Easy Bake Oven, if you know what I mean." The giant eyeball said, rolling it's pupil outside of the iris. "But anyway. Have you been bored half your life? Struggling to care if someone breaks a rock over your noggin?" My head tilted at him.

"...How did you know about that?"

"I'm a colossal eyeball. I literally See All." Another throat clear. "Have you just got done pushing an old wolf off a cliff-?"

"That is not what happened-!"

"You Know What You Did!!" The eye took a breath to calm down.
"Point is, are you missing direction in life?" I really didn't know how to answer that, and for a few

minutes I stayed silent. "...Hello? I this thing on?"

"Can't you see me?"

"Yes, *doi!*" Another eye roll. "What use would a giant eyeball be if it couldn't see? Pfft." I honestly wasn't sure if he wanted me to answer that or not. "I'll tell you what; a waste of six thousand dollars and a good coupon."

"What-?"

"I said, **Pay No Attention To The Wolf Behind The Curtain!** Now, if you're here for Ze Special Gift of Specialness-"

Wolfgang: "So, his pants."

Saessl: "Definitely his pants. Paws down."

Of course it's his pants. But it came with something else. "You must first survive the **Trials of Pepperflum!**" I'm not sure why, but I had the strangest urge to sneeze when he said that. "The goal is simple! Force all of the objects out of the bowl without leaving it!"

"...What objects?"

"Let The Games Begin! **Muahahaha!**" A bit of awkward silence as the eye looked around a bit in confusion. Then cleared his throat again. "I said, Let The Games Begin!" Nothing happened, and the eyeball rolled again. "For the love of fried cheese. Just... Give me a minute." A few large levers were being pulled, and I could make out several clicks. After a bit, a very dull light was omit overhead, while hearing the canine curse a bit. Smacking a metal box a few times, then all the lights went out.

For a few long moments, everything was awkwardly quiet. Waiting around was almost embarrassing, let alone not being able to navigate in the dark. But all at once, multiple lights came on overhead, as well as a loud crowd cheering. "There! I got it! Phew, technical difficulties are *the* worst. We still good? You still there?"

"...Yes?"

"Okay. One more time, with feeling. Games! Begin! Now!" A loud buzzer was rang, as several objects fell from the sides of the massive bowl I was trapped in. Including, and I'm serious about this, a gargantuan: Apple, Orange, Series of Grapes, and a Pickle. All rolling down the curves of the bowl at different speeds towards me.

I moved to avoid the red apple first, but only got hit by the orange in the back. Knocking me over before getting swarmed by the grapes. They didn't actually hurt that much, but swatting them away hardly did anything. Then the pickle started steamrolling-

Saessl: "Steamrolling?"

Think run over, like trample. However, due to the length of it, I was able to avoid most of its weight in the center of the bowl. All the while, the apple and orange went outside of the green fruit to-

Wolfgang: "Flank you?" *Karmu grumbles* "I still say you ate something-"

I didn't! And I thought I said no more interruptions. Point is, this was some sort of deathtrap-

Saessl: "With fruits?"

With fruits of ridiculous proportions. This wolf was very strange, and this wasn't the oddest thing I've seen him do.

Wolfgang: "So, what did you end up doing?"

Besides face-tanking them? I tried slamming them back with everything I could muster, but couldn't get them even halfway up the bowl. Let alone, at risk of getting mauled by another one. Burning them didn't do anything, not even the smaller grapes were affected aside from faint char marks. And eventually all four of them piled on top of me, then that buzzer went off. The fruits were removed quickly, and that canine helped me up. "You okay, kid?"

"...Ow." Was all I could really get out. Though, I wasn't really overly harmed, I was still a bit bruised and sore.

"Don't worry, I got just the thing." He pulled out a small piece of parchment that had a poorly drawn bandage on it, and slapped it on my neck. "Feel better?" I actually did for the most part, but still couldn't quite understand the point to this.

"What in the... How is this happening?" I grumbled at him, and he smacked my muzzle lightly a few times.

"Listen, kid. I know things seem bleak for your career right now-"

"Career?"

"But you gotta listen to me. This ain't gonna be a fight you're gonna win with brute force." He spit off to the side into a bucket I swear wasn't there before. "The power isn't here." He pointed at my biceps. "It's in here." Then my chest, and all I could do is give him an odd look. "Look, kid-"

"Stop calling me that-"

"You had the right idea with your burny ouchy powers, but there's more you can do with them than just burn stuff." I almost growled at him. "If you let the flames go where they want, they're just going to give its bare effort. You need to condense that energy, force it to spread all in one direction. You're not looking for damage, you're looking for impact." All I could do was study him for a few moments as he adjusted his cap, then the buzzer went off again. "Round two, kitten. Make your daddy proud."

As much as I wanted to question his delusional world-

Wolfgang: "Like I want to question your sanity right now?"

Shut up.

Saessl: "It does sound ridiculous."

You wanted to know how I learned to fish. Anyway, the fruits fell into the curved bowl once again. This time, the pickle came first. I'm not sure why I attempted to follow his advice to begin with, but without that odd idea, I was at the mercy of these giant... Fruits.

Wolfgang: "...Please tell me that's the dumbest thing that's ever come out of your muzzle."

I'm not answering that. Considering what I have, and what I will have to quote. May I continue?

Saessl: "You may."

I was about to be nearly flattened once again when attempted his tactic; condensing a lot of that fire energy-

Wolfgang: "So, Renders can actually do that." *Karmu glares at him.*

Terrible time to ask that. Do you want to hear this story, or slowly watch trees go by?

Wolfgang: "Alright, alright."

...Condensing a lot of that fire energy in my paw, and unleashing it in front of me. Right in the side of this long green plant, and feeling the energy explode outwards into it. Forcing the thing to retreat, while hitting the others as well. The apple and orange launched upwards along the sides, while the grapes scattered around. A few of them, along with the orange, hit the edge of the bowl, and bounced out. But most of the others remained inside.

The force of my blast began to come back down like throwing a rock in the air. Making the pickle bounce a bit irrationally on each side, like it was trying to charge towards me. Leading the assault for the other fruits still in the fight. But if I could cause the blast from my paw, I wondered if I could do it at a range as well. Like a throwable explosive.

Saessl: "Like that thing you threw into the water?"

You actually seen that?

Saessl: "A little. I thought it was the sun until it hit the water."

Well, that was a better form of it. The one I used here was rather... Crude. To say the least. Considering it was my first time trying it to begin with. I threw it at the ground, just as the dark green fruit passed it. Allowing it to somewhat fly over me a bit easier, and scatter the others once again.

But I kept my eye on the pickle, being the biggest threat at the same time. Laugh again, lizardface, and I'm throwing you into the waters from here. These things could've trampled your castle's walls.

Anyway, the pickle went up the slope of the bowl, but couldn't quite make it over. But something else came to mind; if I kept hitting it while inside the bowl, odds are I wouldn't knock it out without some dumb luck. I would have to do more than just pushing it up.

I took a moment to study my surroundings, finding a spot that would evade the recollision about to happen within the center of the bowl and diving for it. Waiting for the remaining fruit to ram into each other and send another explosive between them. Getting a few more of the smaller ones out of the game zone, and relaunching the others up the curved walls.

This time, I attempted to throw an explosive and set it off by myself. Everytime before this, it's always hit something, usually the ground. And I almost missed it, but the pickle was sent outwards. The others were much easier compared to it, and in no time, the challenge was complete.

Strings of colorful paper fell down while loud bells rang. Bright flashes blinded me, and I felt the wolf from before give me a big hug while people cheered. "I always had faith in you kid!" He held my paw up to display to the others in an odd gesture. "And now, your prize!"

"Prize?" I half grumbled, probably out of confusion through this whole mess.

Wolfgang: "Can't say I blame you."

And the wolf ripped off his own pants and threw them in my face. Yeah, I didn't expect that either, but it's okay to laugh Saessl. Anyway, they covered my eyes just for a moment and by the time I pulled them off, I was back out in the dirt road again. Where he fell from before, and no signs of that hole being there.

As odd as it was, I had what he needed of me, so I headed back. Finding him cooking something in that old pot over the fire, he intently started at it. As if he didn't notice me come up. So, while at a distance, I cleared my throat to get his attention and not spook him again, and he started at me until I held up his pants. "That's where those went! Come here boy!" He shouted, and the piece of clothing... Barked happily. Struggling out of my paw and scampering like a pair of snakes tied together before diving into his arms.

Wolfgang: "...What?"

That's what I wanted to say, except I was speechless at the time.

Saessl: "...What?"

"Thank you kind Sir! I had no idea he was missing until his belt was found this morning." All I could do was blink at him. "I supposed you learned something from this experience?" He asked, putting the pants back on and watching his food cook again. I couldn't get that question out of my head for

those few moments. Regardless of how ridiculous this all sounded...

"...Yes." I said, a bit awkwardly. Getting him to double take at me for a few moments. "...I think I'd like to learn more, if you have..."

"Maaaaaybe." He studied me for a few moments. "If you can answer me one thing..." I swear the sky grew darker as he stood back up and glared at me. "What. Does. Nakapoopoo. Mean?"

Saessl: "Oh, um..."

Wolfgang: "Err... Damn, I almost had it."

"...Ice Cream?" I asked, only to get him to stare at me again for nearly a minute.

"Okay." He said, turning around. "However, you did forget to find my trouser snake. So you are here-by banned from my presence until tomorrow! If I see you on this property, you will be pied."

"Pied?" I asked, and he glared at me again.

Wolfgang: "...You were hit by a giant pie, weren't you?"

I'd rather not talk about it.

Saessl: "...What flavor?"

Chapter 11

The three kept their pace into the early afternoon, enjoying the sights the cloudy brought of the bay. Now that the sun was out of their eyes, it was a bit easier to keep their speed. But the behemoth did notice the lizard's slight struggle after a long time, and eventually their gazes locked. "We can take a break if you want to." The red one said, getting a slightly insulted look from him. But Karmu just

shrugged. "I've been told that I don't feel... Tiredness very well. So it's good for me too."

"I'm fine." He half grumbled. "We're not far from the city anyway."

"It's better if we took a break, if not another night just in case." Wolfgang didn't respond to that, but made a grunt in question when he started to see something in the distance. While the other two were looking off to the waters again. "What?" The lizardman pointed out to the distance, spotting a wagon on the same road.

"I hope that's a food stand."

"It is." Karmu said, almost smiling and getting a double take from the other two. "Those are my traveling companions, I know that colorful mess anywhere." He lightly chuckled. "But what are they doing back here so early? They were planning to stay in the city for at least another day."

"Maybe they just missed you that much." The dragon suggested.

"Or noticed you were missing? Perhaps word got around to what happened."

"That's still not really an excuse to leave so early..." The red beast muttered, then glanced at the other two a bit. Giving puzzled looks at those black eyes. "Erm... Just warning you, the... Dinosaur thing will probably be..." A few noises in question. "He'll be very interested to see you two. Almost too interested, and excited."

"Excited...?" Wolfgang repeated. "Why exactly?"

"He's one of those people who find everything terribly interesting. Same goes for other species." Karmu mumbled awkwardly.

"He's not going to do things to us, is he?" The hatchling whimpered. "I've heard of stranger danger."

"Naught is harmless for the most part, but he'll ask questions... A lot of questions. I'm only telling you this so you can mentally prepare yourself when we meet up. But then you'll get snacks... Unless something has gone terribly wrong."

"I hope not. I'm starving." The lizard muttered.

"Me too." Saessl almost whined. "Be thankful you can't get hungry, Karmu. It's the worst."

"Hardly. You haven't gotten stabbed yet, kid."

"Yeah, I'd have to agree with Wolfer, getting stabbed is more than discomforting."

"Don't ever call me that." Wolfgang grumbled, getting a chuckle from the red one as they kept walking. Meeting up with the wagon being pulled by the multi-colored raptor, and being greeted by a bright smile from him. As well as the canine in the back, looking out the window directly behind Naught.

When they were close, the dino took off the breastcollar and quickly hugged the Render by the neck. Holding him tightly for a few moments as he got a thick paw hugging him back. "I'm so glad you're safe."

"I missed you too, Naught." Karmu said, enduring the rather unexpected look from the other males, aside from the canine. "Why did you leave early?" A slight gasp from the theropod as he released his grip.

"Oh! Fascinating story! Almost as fascinating as...!" He looked intently at the hatchling on the red one's head. "You are quite the wonder! I've seen one of your species in the skies from afar, but much older than you!" The little one slightly whimpered as the behemoth lowered his head to give the dino a better look.

"This is Saessl. He's actually the prince of Ortel-"

"Prince?" Rivo questioned, staying unusually far from the red one for the moment. "I thought the royal family there was human."

"They are." The lizardman said, getting a both concerned, yet puzzled look from the dog. "They adopted him. Granted, I'm not sure why-"

"Because dragons have special energies within their blood. The earliest forms of Tanure, still passed down from generations." Naught bluntly said, then double taking at the lizardman. "You are...!" He came uncomfortably close to the armored male, to the point where Wolfgang almost whimpered while clearing his throat.

"M-maybe your theory isn't so far-fetched then- Can you step back please?"

"How very interesting! I always wondered how the people around the crystal desert could survive there with all the poison in such an area." A noise in question. "Your scales have grown a resistant towards the radiation within those lands over the years, you've actually evolved to withstand such a disaster-! Ooo, how exciting is evolution!?" Another whimper from the soldier as he took another step back.

"As enjoyable as this is, remember that talk about personal space, Naught?"

"Oh. I apologize, Wolfer." A whimper in question. "I heard it quite a ways back."

"...Wolfgang. It's Wolfgang." He grumbled, almost as loudly as the dragon's stomach.

"Perhaps we should get you refreshed then, if Rivo doesn't mind preparing something for you." The dino said, looking over the golden canine.

"Not at all, it'll be a nice break from traveling and catching up on what happened. I guess this'll be the first time I served royalty as well." They nodded, and moved off the road a bit.

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The red beast laid in the shadows, feeling completely exhausted. Almost ill, to the point his body demanded him to start moving, or freeze in this place forever. It was something he needed to agree to, and finally obey after the ages he spent in the cave. "Where are you going?" The white one asked, watching the slightly larger Render stagger past him.

"Out..." He muttered in reply, almost in angst.

"B-but, out where?"

"Just outside. I think this cold cave is finally getting the better of me. I need... I need to see the sun."

"You can see the sun from inside, right?" The white one mumbled shyly.

"I'm not going to disappear as soon as I step outside. And neither will you." The red one almost growled. "The others have been gone for what feels like years, there's nothing to be afraid of out here anymore."

"Not true. Landslides are still a thing. So are other Renders-"

"Which are much less powerful than you. You're a Tier Two, Larksus. If anything they'll be more afraid of what you can do to them." Karmu snorted, lying down in the sunlight and already feeling better. All the while, the white one studied him from afar, inside the safety of their habitat for the last decade. Or so it felt. "Why spend your entire life locking yourself up?"

"Because it's safe in here. It's... Home."

"It's no safer in there. Have you ever heard of cave-ins?" The white Render whimpered after the larger one suggested that. But Karmu sighed. "...I want to leave." He mumbled a bit, trying not to be harsh but feeling that painful gaze on him. "I know you can survive just staying here, but I... I want something more."

"Like what?"

"...I don't know. But it's not here-"

"You don't know that-"

"Neither do you." He snapped back, but took a breath. "Look... You don't need to be afraid. You can come with me if you want."

"But that means... Leaving home. I-I don't think that's in me."

"You've done it before."

"And lost half my mane in stress, thank you very much." It actually made the red one smirk a bit.

"...Where will you go?"

"I was thinking over there, by the mountain in the distance."

"That's a long ways away..."

"Some traveling will do us good." The two locked eyes for a few moments, and the white one lowered his gaze. "Come on, how about it. One day outside the cave. If you don't like it, you can come back. It'll always be here waiting for us."

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"Are you okay?" Naught's voice brought the red behemoth out of a daydream. Shaking his muzzle a bit to snap back into reality as he felt the dino lay beside him.

"...Yeah. Just..."

"I know you don't like me saying it, but you do have a limit. There's no need to over-exert yourself." The dinosaur smiled, hugging the thick red arm for a bit and hearing Karmu take another heavy breath. "...The prince said you were telling them a story, about you learning how to fish." A faint nod. "I didn't think you'd ever tell that story again."

"...I was planning to leave out the ending."

"Why?" Those black eyes stared into space. "I understand that it's painful, but... Maybe they should know."

"What difference would it make if the world knew or not? That's not going to change what happened, or what will."

"You don't know that." The raptor nudged him playfully. "It makes things easier on you-"

"By re-opening an old wound?"

"Only so it can be treated again." The beast just sighed. "I won't force you, but think about it."

"...They're all dead. Everyone that was there to witness, everyone who could possibly re-tell the truth, they're all gone. There's no point in remembering a catastrophe."

"And you?"

"...I'm close enough to dead, just walking." Naught gently caught that red muzzle and pulled it to his own chest. Holding onto it without a struggle.

"You don't have to be. I know it's something you've fought against for so long, but you *are* still alive. Regardless if you still feel like the antagonist in this tale, you're not." A deep breath from both of

them, and Karmu felt that amulet move a bit. "You're not like them. You don't deserve to be leashed like this to satisfy those around you." The large one didn't respond, but curled his tail around the theropod's back half.

"So..." Wolfgang started, still unable to get over the delicious taste of such meats. Yet could not take his eyes off the two larger ones a few dozen feet away. "They are...?" Rivo made a noise in question, then trailed his eyesight towards Naught and Karmu.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't know. They don't seem to act like a couple-" The lizard slightly cringed at the thought, and the dragon giggled. "But they've been together for a very long time, from what I've heard." The canine shrugged a bit, refocusing on his cooking in the meantime. "What they've done in that time, I can't tell you-"

"And you just had to put that thought in my head." The lizardman groaned, covering his eyes with a free paw.

"What thought?"

"You'll understand when you're older, Saessl." The little one just snorted at him. "But I didn't mean it like that, so it's your fault for jumping to conclusions." A grumble that time, and the hatchling looked back and forth at everyone else.

"Ohhh, you're talking about the sex thing, aren't you?" A louder groan made the prince giggle.

"That's what Wolfgang's thinking about, yes-"

"Not voluntarily, I assure you."

"I don't think it works that way."

"Kid, your stones haven't even dropped yet." The lizard took a drink.

"But Karmu told me! He said that Renders are created when another dies." The two gave him puzzling looks. "It's like they're split into two, but with a fraction of their power or something."

"So, the next generation; there would be more of them, but much weaker?" The wyrmling nodded energetically at the golden dog. "I guess that would explain the lack of any Render attacks over the past years. I don't think there's been one since I've been born. I just remember hearing the scary stories as a pup."

"Same here. But a bit from where I grew up, we had evidence that one existed." Wolfgang muttered.

"Evidence?"

"He's talking about a desert, one made of... Erm."

"Glass?" The two nodded. "I've heard of it, but never..."

"The entire area is toxic, nothing can survive there. And apparently Karmu's the one who made it." The lizard whispered, getting a worried look from the canine. "Hard to believe something that powerful actually exists, if he's telling the truth." The other two didn't respond past that. "How long have you known him?"

"A few months. I used to have a partner in this business, but he caught the love bug and decided to settle." Rivo shrugged. "I can't say I blame him, she was a lovely broad, and he always was the hopeless romantic. But I couldn't find anyone else to travel with, so I attempted it alone."

"I take it that went well." The lizardman said sarcastically.

"About as well as you would think. I ended up losing my Makalin due to some broken straps, and it took off in the late evening. Leaving me to pull this thing alone." He tapped the wagon. "Which I obviously couldn't do. So, I made a sign asking for help to anyone who passed by during the night, and slept until morning. I was planning to walk to the nearest town or village to see if I could rent a Makalin, but..."

"What's a Makalin?" The purple dragon asked, head tilting trying to picture something about the size of the Render he's been riding on.

"It's like an elephant and a mule put together, if you've ever heard of those two animals. I think they're extinct now." The lizardman said, taking another drink. "Things even used to be pulled by horses at one point too, but times changed. We only use them for mounts now."

"Apparently, way back when, they used to travel with some Tanure technology as well. But those are just tales, I think. Anyway, in the morning..." Rivo chuckled a bit. "I woke up to Naught's excited vocals: 'How Convenient! A Wagon That Sells Meals In The Middle Of The Road!' or something." The canine attempted to sound like the dinosaur. "I instantly thought: 'Yes! Finally! Help has arrived!' But when I opened a window to greet them, I ended up seeing the big guy first." He laughed again. "I admit, I yelped and slammed that window so hard it got stuck."

"What did they end up doing?" Saessl asked, looking over the two once again from afar.

"Just talk. Convincing me to at least sell them something, but they didn't have any coin. Instead, Naught said Karmu could pull the wagon to the next town in exchange for some 'Experience'." The two tilted their heads a bit. "As in food. The raptor is a weird one. But after traveling for a day or two... I realized I wanted the company. And they..."

"*They* what?" The dog sighed and half shrugged at Wolfgang.

"They wanted something to do, I think. They didn't want the money exactly, but wanted a job for the sake of having one I believe. It almost sounds like slavery to me, and a few people accused me of

it, but it's their choice. They've been with me since, helping me out. Helping others out. For what, I don't know. My guess would be redemption, but I won't judge."

"Not even now?" A shake of his head told the lizard otherwise. "Even the Render thing doesn't get to you?"

"I only found out about that last night. Karmu doesn't normally talk much, and for a long time, I actually didn't think he could. He would half mumble to Naught here and there, but barely say anything to another person." The three were silent for a bit. "I mean, the Render thing is a little awkward and unsettling, but... The dino is right; that doesn't change who Karmu is. I guess I can kinda relate."

"Relate how?"

"As in, people tend to judge you for what you are on the outside, or what you're labeled with. Instantly getting opinions, mostly negative, and making others assume the worst." The other two nodded in understanding. "Karmu and Naught... They've warned me of things, but never threatened me. Never been aggressive, but did go out of their way to protect my property. Let alone take care of it. They're friends, almost family to me." Rivo sighed. "I didn't know what they were, but I know what they are now. That's the only thing that matters, right?" The others faintly nodded, and got up to stretch a bit. "Alright, should we head out soon?"

"Probably for the best." Wolfgang answered. "Especially if we're going to make it to Ortel before sundown."

"Can't we spend just one more night outside?" Saessl whimpered, giving the two sad eyes and hearing the soldier grumble a bit.

"It would be cutting it a bit close for all of us."

"Fine, if you can convince the big guy, I don't care." The lizardman muttered, hearing the dragon chirp and scamper off towards the other two. "Hatchlings. Oi..."

I went back the next morning, carefully wandering through the forests and calling out ahead of time. Trying not to spook the old canine again and get him agitated at me. But he was nowhere to be seen within his camp. The door to the shelter was opened wide, and in the insides were a bit messy, but nothing out of the ordinary. I was thinking that maybe he took a trip into the town a ways from the base of the mountain.

I couldn't help but look down at the large village from that cliffside again. It was definitely closer than my original peak, but the view was more obstructed. The many buildings that were put up since my return was unreal, and they were getting bigger every time. I wondered what it was like to live inside such a thing, a structure made entirely out of wood. How does it stay up? And aren't they afraid of it collapsing over them in their sleep? How does it keep in warmth without letting in the sun-?

A loud slam behind me nearly made me jump, as I turned around and seen the old wolf exit out of a trap door. Directly under his bedding. Yawning loudly and dragging himself out of the hut to a nearby barrel. Reaching into his shirt and pulling out a mug and filling it with something that sounded almost metal. Drinking it while turning around and spitting a mouthful of shiny toothpicks at me. "Tastes like a green swan disco." Then took another sip to spit that out again. "Where did you come from!?"

"You didn't hear me calling to you?" I half grumbled, trying to shake the small metal splinters out of my mane.

"I don't remember anything. Including ordering a red bull." I curled my neck a bit at him.

"I'm... Not a bull."

"I meant the drink." He pulled out a small paper from the mug. "Apparently I got a bill for a dozen. But that's something for me to figure out later." He took another sip, at least keeping it down this time. "Who are you again?"

"I'm... Karmu. We met yesterday-"

"We did?" He seriously asked me, to the point where I swear he was joking.

"Y-yeah... You wanted me to get your pants after I scared you off a cliff."

"Sounds like something I would do." Another sip, and he threw the mug over the side hill. "So, what are you doing here Mr. Red Bull?"

"...Karmu. And..." I honestly didn't know what I was still doing here, but he was waiting for an answer from me. So I gave him the first thing that came to mind. "I wanted to ask you a few things."

"Like about my super-secret crumpet recipe?" I shook my head. "Huh. That's usually what people go after. And no, you'll never know it! Those crumpets have brought nothing but evil into the world! I'll take it to my grave, you hear-!"

"It's not about that! I mean it." He studied me for a moment, and I awkwardly cleared my throat. "Why do you... Dance?"

"...Why do you not dance?"

"I mean... I've watched you for quite a while..." I expected the odd look. "From above, up there." My paw gestured at the summit. "And I see you dance... Strangely." I swear, little one, I've never felt so awkward in my whole life. Granted, his looks were not helping. To the point where one of his eyeballs started looking in a different direction. "I'm not sure how to describe it... Slow movements at times, then suddenly quick ones..."

"...Ohhh." He nodded. "I know what you're talking about." I tilted my head. "Blenders."

"...What-?"

"Nevermind. Why do you wish to know how to dance?" I stuttered there for a bit, still not quite getting a reason. Or at least one translated into words. In that moment, I almost felt beneath him. Lowering my head and gaze when I couldn't figure out what he wanted to hear. What I wanted to hear as well. "You want control? Is that it?" I met his multi-colored iris with my own eyes.

"...Yesterday, you taught me how to... Do something else, besides just burn things. You know how to do more with this-"

"For what purpose?" He asked a bit thickly, and my ears slightly fell. "What do you want with your power? Why do you want control?" I had no response, and for the longest time I searched for that answer. Eventually gazing over the town in the distance. "Ah... Is it to get rid of them?"

I double taked, a bit hard too. "N-no. I want to..." I took a breath. "I want to keep them there." A look of study again. "I didn't like the idea of them being there at first, but now..."

"You want to protect them." Perhaps that was what I really wanted at the time. I nodded regardless, and he didn't release his look. "How will you protect them?"

"...With your help?"

"With my methods of control, passed onto you?" I nodded slightly, and we stared in silence for a long time. "...So, you can burn things." He finally said, walking back to his hut for a moment. "What else can you do? What else have you done?"

"You mean... Have I hurt people?" He half shrugged, picking up three marbles from a small bowl to the side. "Only in self-defense."

"So, only attacked others that have attacked you." I nodded. "Why?" My neck curled again, but I didn't really have a response. "You haven't thought about this stuff much, have you?" I only shyly shook my head. It was the honest truth, and I think he could sense that. "Fine, but you're going to do what I say. No matter how odd it may sound." A nod as he held up the marbles. "Do not let them touch the

ground, or else the town will explode."

"W-what!?"

"Do not touch them with anymore than one limb, including that tail of yours, or your head. The two horns are fine though." I gave him an odd look, but nodded regardless. He tossed one up, and I caught it with my right paw. Another one launched in the air, and I used my left paw for it. Now getting a bit awkward for me not to drop them, whereas I wasn't used to standing on my hind legs. Granted, they were really small at first, then I started feeling them get much bigger in my paws. "Oh, and I wouldn't let them touch each other. They're quite volatile." A slight whimper as I struggled to keep them apart while standing on two legs.

But I knew what to expect when the third one was thrown into the air. Growing quite drastically before landing, and I caught it with my horns. The weight of them was getting harsh to deal with as well, as I fought to keep them all still. All the while, the wolf walked over towards a part of ground, and see it flip over into a comfortable chair. At least, I'd assume it was comfortable.

He then snapped his fingers, and it was suddenly night. Hearing something in the east crash in the distance, but I couldn't look at it without dropping the marbles. Then a small cone of thin light came from between my legs, and was projected on a large white screen. A bit fuzzy at first, until he yelled at it. "FOCUS-! That's better." The canine cleared his throat before writing something in a notebook. "Tell me what you see. The very first thing that comes to your mind. If you stutter, you will be slapped with a spatula. A **Rubber** Spatula." He almost threatened me, before clicking a button.

On the screen were a series of strange images. Black, and not really particularly anything. But I answered each one. "Flower. Butterfly? Rainfall. That thing the horses pull in the fields."

"A plow?"

"Maybe. But that's what it reminds me of."

"Fair enough. Continue." Another click of the button.

"Broken mountain. The sun. Lake of water. Someone... Throwing something away in the woods. Wildfire."

"And this?" The last one was that of a Render, nearly breaking my concentration. "Answer the question."

"...A Monster." A bit of a pause, and he snapped his fingers again. The sun returned, the screen and light disappeared, as well as the weight I was holding up. Those marbles vanishing, and allowing me to finally fall to all fours once again. But all I could do was just sigh heavily and not look at him.

"So." He started. "Why should I train a 'Monster' to gain full control of their destructive power?" Something about that statement made me angry, and I glared at him.

"I said that it reminded me of a Monster, that doesn't mean I am one-"

"Are you sure about that?" A moment of study, and I took a breath.

"...Yes." We locked eyes for a very long time.

"What is fire?" He asked me, almost thickly. And my ears went back.

"...Destructive in nature-"

"Everything is destructive in nature. Even Nature itself. Try again."

"...Power."

"Power is within everything. Try. Again."

"...Fire is alive." Another long look, and he eventually nodded.

"It is energy. A living thing that feeds off of carbon based life and objects. It needs to breathe just like everything else, exhaling something that's often toxic to others. And without control, it will eat and destroy everything it touches. You understand this?" I nodded at him. "And you understand that if you go against your own instincts that you showed today, you will be swat into the second dimension by a spatula the size of the moon, yes?" A bit of a whimper, and I nodded. "Fine. Mr. Red Bull, I will teach you how to control your fire skittles."

"K-Karmu. And Skittles?"

"You know, Skittles. As in skills! You'll get my jargon by the end of it kid." He got up, but the ground below him flipped over a bit too early. Catching him and trapping the canine underneath the ground. With a bit of crashing, he came out from the trap door once again. "I need to fix that, but later! Your first piece of wisdom is this: Repeat after me."

"Okay?"

"Don't Squat With Your Spurs On."

"Don't... Squat With Your... What are spurs?"

"Google them. But it's cowboy wisdom." I looked at him a bit blankly. "Oh, you are going to be a lot of fun." The wolf grumbled. "It means, don't hurt yourself with your own tools. Or in this case, Powers."

"But, flames never hurt me."

"Might not burn you, no, but that doesn't mean you can't be harmed by it." I made a noise in question, and he sighed. Opening up his paw and a small orb of fire was created floating above it. It then grew brighter and brighter until it exploded in a white light. Blinding my eyes for a few moments as I grunted against the pain. "Which leads to wisdom number two! Power Is Not The Same As Strength."

Cannot remember for the life of me who said that, but it was somebody important... I think." I grumbled loudly. "Are you okay? Buddy? Bull Buddy? Budlly? Now that just doesn't sound right."

Saessl: "What was with the marble thing?"

I honestly didn't understand it the first time either, but in order for him to Dance, I needed to be able to stand and walk on two feet. Much like the stance I was in while fishing. Something he explained quite thoroughly after we took the first few days getting my balance. Both standing, walking, running, jumping, everything you can think of. It took a lot of practice, and a massive amount of patience. "It's called Martial Arts." He explained, after I asked about the strange dance he did.

"Mar...?"

"It's an unarmed form of defense, yet offense as well. The one who taught me believed that the body itself was the perfect weapon if trained enough. It can become harder than metal, sharper than blades, and can defend itself in multiple ways when hit." He explained, walking around my stance and readjusting my hind paws a bit more correctly. "It can repair itself when damaged, though it may take time. It can learn it's very own tactics, instincts, can think of strategies in the moment, and can have complete control when trained hard enough."

"So, it's... A different way of fighting?"

"It's also a discipline. Meaning, you're not enduring such tasks for yourself. You are learning to control yourself for the benefit of others. If you're doing this for yourself, then leave." I swallowed loudly, but remained put. "You may not have known it before, Karmu, but you do now. If you ever let go of the principal, you will be swat in the second dimension by the all-powerful spatula in the sky."

"I understand, Master Funnypants." It's okay to laugh. It took me a very long time not to either, and you would not believe the beatings I got for it.

Saessl: "Then why choose such a funny name?"

It was to prevent any distraction and learn to keep focus. He did many little tricks like that, things that seemed so strange yet each held a hidden lesson about them. One of them, yes, was catching fish for him to eat. But I had to do it without any tools or bait.

"That's it!?" The large red beast double taked at the hatchling on his head. "That's how you learned how to fish? From some old dog-?"

"I find that offensive." Rivo called from inside the wagon, but chuckling at the younger one's whimper.

"Well, yes. But it had a deeper meaning than just fishing for the sake of a meal. Let alone, one for another person. I learned-"

"Patience, reflexes, water friction, blah blah blah."

"Water Refraction." The raptor corrected the dragon, getting a cute snort afterword.

"Do you see why I don't like children?" Wolfgang half grumbled, sitting on the bow of the wagon, where one would normally steer the creature pulling.

"Not really. Though they might have underdeveloped opinions of the world around them, they can still be pleasant company." Naught smiled at the purple one, almost tempted to give it a friendly lick, but something suddenly felt off. His expression of shock and those frilled ears scanning the area, then the ground below them.

"Naught...?" The behemoth asked, a bit concerned to the point of nearly stopping.

"Karmu..." He whispered, meeting eye to eye with those black voids. "Run. Run!" The grounds behind them exploded back a ways, and the Render took off. Passing another explosion of earth that rammed into the wagon's side, sliding it off the cliff while Karmu struggled to keep it in the air.

The lizard soldier flew off a bit from the impact, seeing the dinosaur run towards the cliffside with unreal reflexes to save him. Grabbing each other's paw barely in time to stop Wolfgang from falling down into the rocky waters below. Then hearing another massive barrier of earth form a few feet down the road. Trapping them between two large walls of dirt, a cliff on one side, and the forest on the other.

The red beast still struggled to hold the wagon carrying the canine from falling, but he was slipping a bit himself. "Saessl!" He roared at the wyrmling, feeling him jump off to safety just in case the behemoth was pulled down. The straps to the breastcollar snapped loudly, and the wagon jerked. Then another explosion of earth just below the Render rammed into the wagon hanging from a cliff, getting the rest of the collar to snap loudly and send it into the bay below. All while giving the red one something to climb on.

The four watched in horror as Rivo's business crash loudly into the water, and then heard the roars of a raid party coming forward. Finally getting the lizard back up on his feet and able to don his equipment, the Render growled. Recognizing the familiar scent. "Saessl." The little one whimpered. "Go with Wolfgang and Naught. I'll carve you a path, and you take it."

"W-what?" The young dragon double taked.

"You two... You fight against anything you see coming after you, understood?" Wolfgang gave a solid nod, while the raptor gave a sad look. "They know you're with me. They won't show mercy." The red one stepped forward, getting into an upright stance as the roars grew louder. "Don't look back."

Chapter 13

The hatchling climbed up Wolfgang's armor, trying to keep himself in this safe area between the soldier's lower chest and large shield as the lizard armed himself. Getting into a bracing stance, the lizardman prepared to charge through when the Render commanded, hoping that the theropod was trailing behind him. The war cries grew louder as their hearts pounded through their chest. "Shield your eyes." And they did without question. "When you can't see the white lights anymore, run."

With a heavy stomp, the behemoth created dozens of orange orbs in a straight line. All entering the forest where Horizon was assaulting from. A few of them called out a warning, and the orbs exploded within a large sphere. Breaking out any trees or rocks the blast hit, but the flames were soon doused.

Another stomp and several white orbs this time, detonating very quickly as they reached a certain height to erupt in a brilliant light that almost hurt. Even with their eyes closed and shielded. Several yells and growls from within the forest were heard, but when Wolfgang could see the ground again, he started moving.

Quickly running down the large path that the beast carved through sheer force was a bit harder than expected. The grounds were still almost hot to the touch, and the dirt rather soft. But a bit further down, he understood what Karmu did. If these warriors were attacking in a wall, most were sent off to the sides after the explosion, while a few were turned into a thick goop that the lizard attempted to avoid.

It even made the wyrmling almost sick, hearing the larger scaled one step in something that almost resembled raw meat with a heavy crisp to it. To the point where he was really trying not to think about it. Though most of his view was blocked, Saessl could see off to one side. Witnessing several dozen soldiers in a mix of fur hide, and light plate armors, as well as a lot of blue warpaint on any bare areas.

Hearing a few up ahead that were not affected by the earlier blasts start to come close, the dragon whimpered in fear. Even hearing Wolfgang's roar as they charged each other, the lizard swung

the large shield back and slammed it into the incoming attacker. Hitting it with a very loud crack and landing several feet ahead. A few more steps, and the lizard leapt slightly. Landing on the same attacker heavily, mostly with the tower shield, and finishing with a coupé via machete before carrying on.

"You okay, kid?" Wolfgang asked, still running and almost excited. Yet uncomfortable with the little one pulling down on his armor.

"K-kind of..."

"Well, we're away from the main force, but there's several others around. And, odds are, we'll get a few more pursuing us after that." The smaller one whimpered at that.

"I can try to lead some away." Naught suggested, keeping up with the lizardman rather well.

"Unarmed? Are you crazy?"

"Do not worry about me, I'm sure I can talk them out of any harm." Wolfgang didn't like that answer, but before he could object, the raptor ran off. Regardless of how much he disliked the idea, the soldier's duty was to protect the prince. Grumbling again when he heard a few howls nearby, odds are warning or signaling other groups.

"Damnit... They're covering this place."

"What are we going to do?" Saessl whimpered.

"If I could get you somewhere safe, I'll probably stand a chance." He growled. "From what I've heard, they're good against those who use magics, but only so-so against non-Tanure fights."

"Get somewhere safe...?" The dragon whispered, looking up at him and seeing a few branches nearby. "Put me in the trees!"

"What?"

"In the trees! I've climbed them before, I should be safe there!"

"You cannot be serious-Heads up!" Another shield bash to someone who jumped out in front of them. Pushing them against a large rock and kicking the Horizon member in the middle before slashing the weighted sword into their shoulder. "You sure about this?" The wyrmling nodded. "Alright, up here, and make it quick!"

The lizardman held the sword with the same paw as the shield for a moment. Grabbing hold of the prince and tossing him up towards a big tree, the little one clawed at the bark easily. Getting up while taking cover via the large branches. Getting a good view of four others sprinting towards Wolfgang. "Over there!"

"I see them!" He growled, almost warning them away. The first came at him with a hatchet, swinging it downward at the shield in hopes to get stuck inside and use it to pull the warrior down. But

he wasn't expecting the soldier to side step the blow, ram an armored knee into his side, then shield bash when they got some distance. Forcing the Horizon footman into a tree, then get his lower spine severed in half.

The other two came in a near pair. The closest one stopping for a moment just outside of the machete's range, but the lizard provoked her with two slashes. Wanting the Horizon warrior to attack the large shield, and push her blow back with a counter bash. Giving a bit of distance for a full wind-up slam that nearly knocked the warrior off her feet, and more distance.

The second one came in to counter that bash, but got another one to push him back instead. Disarming the longsword that one was carrying and nearly spraining his wrist as Wolfgang returned to the first one for a third full portable-wall slam. This time pushing over the female, but not going after her just yet. Turning around and attacking the male with a very heavy upward swing cleanly cut the tail and most of a leg off as they attempted to scamper up.

Another set was coming from afar, and the dragon chirped at his protector to warn him. However, doing so got the attention of them, and they ran towards the tree. Making the dragon yelp loudly and start moving towards the next one nearby. Whimpering at the ends of the smaller branches, and calling to Wolfgang once again.

The lizardman finished the female quickly, and was now working on his forth one. Quickly bashing once, then feinting another one, he got the warrior with a thrust to the neck as he guarded against the midsection push. Glancing over at the dragon's situation, he grunted at the others climbing the tree. "Damn squirrels." He cursed, especially since he wasn't the greatest climber.

Instead, the lizard charged towards the tree Saessl was attempting to reach. Throwing all his weight into the ram, the old tree split drastically, breaking apart on the other side and lowering one of the more sturdy branches that the dragon could grab hold of. Then going after boar, who was doing about a good of a job at climbing as Wolfgang would. Granted, doing so left the warrior opened for a heavy slash.

Saessl scampered across the tree branches with his light frame, looking back at the Horizon member pursuing him, but only cautiously. The squirrel was too big to use the same branches, and nearly growled in frustration when he couldn't make it to other side safely.

Soon after, Wolfgang returned under the prince, and motioned him to jump down when there was no others coming. But the ground started shaking violently, making the young dragon to brace for his life before a large metal wurm burrowed through the ground. Black as the night, and edges like shimmering blade, the creature roared loudly at those in its presence. Putting the lizard on edge before calling to Saessl once again.

But the wurm hissed at the old tree before derooting it in one large bite. The hatchling cried loudly as it was pulled up and swallowed by the massive creature, even getting Wolfgang to roar at it, almost in denial before such a thing disappeared like it came. Burrowing through the ground that was

then replaced with new dirt.

Studying the area in anger, the Horizon squirrel landed on the ground. Instantly getting the attention of the Ortel fighter, but signaling a surrender before withdrawing. Growling once again, Wolfgang sighed heavily. Scanning the area for anymore of them, and his ears perked...

The raptor ran through the forest at excessive speeds, landing every step with near perfection and giving his pursuers a very difficult time to keep up. To the point he had to slow down and wait for them to catch up by pretending to hide, but in the end, leading the five warriors to a more opened area. Yet, leaving them very winded when they finally faced one another. "Now you are in no condition to fight to your fullest." Naught stated a bit thickly, not expecting a reply from them other than heavy breaths. "Perhaps it is time you put an end to this assault."

"And let you go? You were working with a Render!"

"I was traveling with a Render, yes. But one that I understand your ancestors made an agreement with. That's what that amulet was about, was it not?"

"Then why did he destroy three cities!?" Another warrior growled, forcing a puzzled look on Naught's muzzle.

"I know of one city he destroyed, and that was due to your clans experiments from the past *with* Renders. Karmu has not taken any violent action towards any innocents since then-"

"Is that what he told you-?"

"-That is what I **Know**, young warrior." The five stared at each other for several moments. "And the Render at Ortel was nothing more than a rumor, so your Enforcement should not be here."

"Our job is to erase the threats in this world, and that Render-"

"Is **Not** a **Threat**. Your kind is **Forcing** him to become one, don't you see that? He has done nothing-"

"You can't prove that-"

"-And neither can you! I have been by his side for the last seven months, how recent were these attacks?" They remained silent for a bit. "You have accused the wrong person. You and your leaders have made a mistake, one that is costing the lives of your brethren! How can you be so blind?"

"...He's lying. All Renders need to be put down-"

"Only to create two more from the ashes of his body. Then four from theirs, then eight, then

sixteen, then-"

"They will be weaker in power!"

"But greater in number! How long until you are overwhelmed by such creatures? Your clan is attempting to hunt something to extinction that only breeds when they are culled! It's an endless goal!"

"They will stop eventually-"

"You do not know that-"

"-Neither do you-!"

"-I know what they *ARE*! I *Created* Them!" Naught roared at the group, silencing them for several moments as he took a breath. "Do you honestly think I would not know this? They are not from your world!" A bit more silence. "Your task will never end. And right now, you have the most reasonable Render in existence actually **Agreeing** to your demands. Who understands his own dangers. Who went out of his way to learn how to control his strengths. If you kill him, who knows what you will get next-"

The raptor was interrupted by his own gasp. Looking towards the far distance where the other two ran into the woods just before an earthquake reached them. Then a loud roar in the distance startled the warriors. "What was...?" One of them asked. "The Render?"

"No..." The theropod said, taking a few steps towards it. "Something else not of this world." Those purple eyes studied the Horizon warriors for a few moments. "I know... I know what took out those cities. It wasn't a Render."

"Then what was it?"

"Something you cannot face." He said a bit morbidly, taking a breath and walking away. "Tell your leaders to end your hunt, there is no reason for you to end your lives pursuing death." He looked at them sadly. "I will take care of it." For several moments, the warriors looked at each other for an explanation or an order. And when they couldn't come up with one, they withdrew.

The firewall erupted behind the raptor as the three withdrew into the forest, leaving the red behemoth behind to fight the raid party alone. Seeing several of the warriors through the smoke screen begin to get up and cautiously create that wall of soldiers once again. Approaching the firewall made it die off rather quickly, as many of the gems within their armors glowed to absorb it. "You don't make this easy, do you?" The weasel quipped, and Karmu just stared him down for several moments.

"How many of my friends has your clan killed now?" He growled.

"And how many cities have you taken out-?"

"-The Only One Your Kind Sent To Destroy!" The Render roared. "Horizon brainwashed a friend of mine, and forced him to fight me until his death! Then blamed **Me** for that!!" A few of them went into cautious stances. "Time and time again, I try to resolve this with non-violence, but Horizon just isn't convinced, are they?" The red one muttered, grabbing the iron chain around his neck and ripping the amulet off. "And the next time some catastrophe happens, you instantly blame the strongest creature they can think of."

"Considering how each one was leveled to the ground in flames, I'd say we've got the right Render to accuse-"

"-The one walking around with your forged choker, to prevent me from doing such acts!" He stomped on the gemmed necklace, breaking the crystal inside under the fierce pressure. Taking a breath, Karmu closed his eyes for a moment. "For the sake of that city, and everyone I ever friended, I will ask anyone who does not want to die today to leave. There will be no judgement, nor revenge if you leave now. But if you wish to stay, you will die by my paws."

Their response was to only arm themselves for combat. "You realize you are at a disadvantage, Render. Our gear makes us immune to your Tanure tricks."

"What you don't seem to understand is that it was not Tanure that knocked you on your ass." Karmu growled back. "They stop the flames, but not the impact." The two sides waited for the other to make a move first, the red one delaying in hopes they would heed his warnings. But when one of the warriors drew a glyph in the air, the Render sent an orb behind them to explode. Knocking a few of them forward, and specifically the one starting the Tanure ritual.

As the creature was knocked towards the red beast, he cracked it heavily with a lariat. As the opposite side charged, Karmu kept his momentum with the previous attack. Using the wide tailswing to keep them at bay enough for the full rotation and hitting one warrior attempting to get up with the very end of the long appendage. When the full pivot completed, the red one sent his paw forward and unleashed a wide explosion from it.

Though the flames created by such a thing were quickly nullified, the force created knocked the several soldiers backwards off their feet. With one more massive explosive just above them, they were instantly turned into red stains in the dirt.

However, those attacks missed the weasel. Being just outside of every explosion, he scampered

under the red behemoth's legs and started climbing on top of the larger creature while it was fighting off the few that were left. But Karmu noticed the pattern around his back, and when it came to shoulder height, he snatched the flexible critter and threw it off into the bay. Creating an orb from inside the creature and turning it into a red mess that fell into the water.

A large angled pillar of earth shot from the ground and jabbed the beast in the ribs. Seeing another one created as well, Karmu shattered it with raw strength before signaling out the few warriors left. Looking them directly in the eyes and sensing their fear from afar, they started to withdraw. "...You had your chance." He said coldly, leveling the remaining charred trees with them.

The haunting scent of blood and heated dirt made him relive painful memories, but they were interrupted by something roaring from inside the forest. Barely seeing something large and black somewhat close by, as well as the hatchling cry out. "Saessl...!" He whispered, tearing into the forest as fast as he could. Meeting up with a Horizon squirrel that was running in the opposite direction, but ignored them for now. Hoping that letting one warrior go wouldn't come to bite the behemoth in the ass.

As the earth shook a bit, and the black wurm withdrew into the grounds, he seen the lizard close by. "What happened!?" Karmu nearly demanded, just as the raptor came around as well. Both looking to Wolfgang for an answer.

"Some... Thing came out of the ground! Ate the damn tree Saessl was climbing-!" The red beast growled loudly and investigated for himself. "Hey, don't blame me for this! There was nothing I could've done!"

"You were supposed to protect him!" The behemoth snapped.

"-Karmu!" Naught came up to him quickly, trying to grab hold of that red muzzle and comfort it. "Hey, hey. Listen. He's telling you the truth. Calm down." A low grumble from the beast, but he took a breath. "It'll be alright, okay? Just like it's always been."

"And what about Rivo?" Those black eyes stared at the dinosaur a bit coldly, but within those violet orbs was nothing but content.

"He's fine. Alive, and soaking wet, but fine." A puzzled look from the other two. "We just have to wait for him, okay? But you need to calm down."

"That still doesn't forgive Horizon for what they've done-!"

"Shh..." The theropod held the red muzzle tightly, hearing his large heart calm down. "They made a mistake, accusing you for something that's been done. It's understandable-and forgivable. Don't walk down this path of vengeance, it's not you." A deep breath that was almost pure heat, but the Render calmed down. Let alone in front of the uncomfortable lizard.

"...Sorry, Wolfgang."

"No... Erm, Problem."

"You sure about Rivo?" The raptor smiled and nodded.

"You'll see. Four minutes and thirty three seconds, just wait." A faint nod from Karmu, as he looked at the Ortel soldier again.

"Alright, what happened here?" He asked calmly.

The wagon crashed into the water roof first with a heavy force, like ramming into a stone wall. Wrecking most of the upper design and nearly knocking out the dog trapped inside. The water flooded in from multiple directions, stinging his nostrils when he accidentally inhaled and panicking to find a pocket of air. Objects crash around within the moving liquid as the last few bubbles in his lungs escaped.

But they floated up, attempting to escape to the surface and giving the golden canine a direction. Grabbing a hold of the wagon's frame the best he could, he concentrated heavily with his last bit of energy, until suddenly the wooden vehicle fell onto something hard. Crashing, and the water began to leak out.

Finding a pocket of air, Rivo caught his breath while coughing. Taking his time before exiting out of the bow window and onto wet beach sand. Catching his breath, and studying the area he was in, as well as the condition of his wagon. Possibly still able to run again, but he couldn't do much with it sideways. Let alone, a large dent into its side. Sighing heavily, the canine looked out into the water where pieces of it were still floating. That was probably the biggest object he ever attempted to move like that.

Still, the question lied; what happened exactly? The loud explosions from above definitely concerned him, and Rivo knew it had something to do with Karmu being a Render. For now, the wagon wasn't going anywhere, but that didn't mean the dog was stranded. As much as he detested using that power, if he didn't get to warmth before the night hit...

Walking up until the road path, he carefully studied it before looking ahead. Spotting the large pawprints of the behemoth heading upwards and not much else. Odds are, whatever attacked them didn't come from here, and were not watching this road for the time being. With a deep breath, the golden canine looked uphill as far as he could see. With a small jump, he was instantly there. Trading places with the air in that section.

Another careful study before blinking to the next road hill. Then the next. Seeing the large group of prints within the dirt road concerned him, but most were heading in the opposite direction. Another teleport forward, and something roared in the forest. Nearly stopping Rivo's heart when he seen the top of the great worm until it slithered back into the earth. Odds are, they were in that direction, or at least

would meet up to see what it was. Especially knowing the colorful dinosaur.

"So it really did eat the tree..." Karmu muttered, overlooking the area where it was derooted.

"Unless you're thinking that I could've somehow kept it from being ripped out of the ground..." The soldier grumbled, and the red beast shook his head a bit shyly.

"N-no... I jumped to conclusions. Sorry."

"Annnd?" A puzzled look from those black eyes. "You're such a good fighter, Wolfgang. Taking on five Horizon guys by yourself." The lizard spoke for him.

"Don't push it."

"Can't say I didn't try." The two double taked at Naught counting down from five. "What are you-?" A slight whoosh behind them got their attention as Rivo rejoined the group. Clearly confusing the larger males and looking between the two. "The hell?"

"Rivo here has a rather extraordinary ability from his inheritance!" The theropod said, a bit excited. "Glad you could rejoin us." He gave the canine a hug.

"Extraordinary ability...?" The soldier muttered in question as the golden one sighed.

"I'm a... Blink Dog."

"Blink as in... Teleportation?" The Render asked, getting a nod from him.

"He was a bit ashamed of it for so long, please don't think ill of Rivo." Naught replied.

"N-no, I'm just... Surprised. You don't hear of them too often." Karmu mumbled a bit.

"Because we're mostly associated with thieves, and usually executed on the spot by Horizon. Thinking that the power is Tanure."

"It's somewhat Tanure based. But like Dragon's blood, Blink Dogs tend to develop such things from evolution. Like any power, it can be used for any moral purposes." The two nodded at the dino. "If you wish for them to know your trials, you may tell them."

"Maybe another time." Rivo sighed. "...Where's the prince?"

Chapter 15

It was almost black, aside from a series of dark red lights. Ones that looked like they were stained with liquids the hatchling didn't want to think about. Instead, just hang onto the tree branch for dear life, as this black monster burrowed through the cold earth.

He couldn't tell how fast he was going, but the weight was shifting here and there. Then drastically all at once, as it resurfaced with a loud and heavy hiss. Saessl could barely make out a voice outside the metal creature as well. "Excellent, you're back. I was getting bored. What have you brought me?" The massive worm murmured something and the tree started to move upwards a bit, making the dragon whimper.

The weight shifted again, as the gargantuan viper parted it's jaws just off the ground, and the tree slid out gently... For the most part. Still making the little one yelp as he hit the grass and scampered away from the creature. Getting a questionable stare from a rather large black panther in the middle of the road, then he looked at the massive worm again. "*Really?*" The metal construct tilted it's... 'Head'. "This is what you found." It was barely a question.

The viper clicked loudly at the feline. "I know what I asked for, I didn't expect you to deliver me a child like a stork." Another head tilt of the snake, and it made a noise in question. "It's a stupid bird that delivers-Forget it. What do you want me to do with... This?" A few clicks. "Yes! I am asking you! You found this thing!" It nearly made the wyrmling giggle, getting the attention of both of them and whimpering again.

With a heavy sigh, Rixxix tossed his snout. "Fine. Since you won't do it, *I'll* put it out of its misery." He took a step towards the dragon, but the worm hissed. Moving a bit out of the hole as if to move into the panther's way. "You brought me this, and I am not child-sitting *anything*. So unless you want to return it to its owner, I'm not wasting my time." Another hiss that nearly hurt the little one's ears. But whatever this metal viper was, it was protecting the hatchling.

"...What do you mean it'll lead me to him?" A few loud clicks. "They want it alive, and I'm assuming it wants to live." A glare at those blue eyes, as he hid in the grass. "...How far?" The serpent pointed in a direction, and the panther looked. Then tossed his muzzle after a moment of thought. "*Fiiiine*. But don't you ever put me in a position like this again, understood?" The worm almost whimpered before retreating back into the hole. Refilling it when it was several feet under.

As the feline walked towards Saessl, the little one whimpered and took a few steps back. "Don't

bother running. They want you alive, didn't say anything about being maimed." Rixxix grumbled. "Now, we have something we want from each other-"

"Who are you?" The dragon hissed, and the black one grunted in annoyance.

"Or, we can start with that. Rixxix. And you are?"

"What was that thing?" An unimpressed stare from those red eyes for a few moments. Then a faint sigh.

"This is why I detest children. That was Ambition, now answer my question." The wyrmling's ears fell.

"...Saessl. Prince of-"

"Could care less about your royal status. But regardless, whoever you were with wants you back, providing they are still alive, Yes?" A faint whimper, but he nodded. "And I want something from them."

"W-want something from them...? Like what?"

"That's for me to know, and you to never ask again." A look of distrust made Rixxix roll his eyes again. "No, it will not bring them any harm. Promise."

"Then why won't you-?"

"Because I don't feel like explaining it. Now, are you going to cooperate? Or am I going to have to tear off one of your limbs for you to realize I'm serious?" A loud whimper from the wyrmling.

"As long as..." He started quietly, getting a noise in question from the black feline. "You bring me back to Karmu."

"Whoever that is." Another eye roll as the large feline turned around and started walking. Giving the little one a curious display at the end of the creature's tail, holding a semi-small red flame at the last tenth. "Are you coming or not?"

"Y-yes." The dragon scampered to Rixxix' side, but overlooked the quadruped curiously and getting a faint grumble from the large one. "Your tail's on fire."

"Tell me something I don't know." He snorted. "And before you speak, that is a figure of speech." It made Saessl lightly giggle.

"What are you...?" A grunt of annoyance as those red eyes glared at him. Though the dragon was still a bit scared, he stayed firm for the most part.

"Forget the threat towards your limbs. Perhaps I'll tear out your voicebox first and save me the headache." The little one snorted at him. "You're playing with fire, cub."

"You expect me to walk in silence the entire way there?"

"Yes. At least I was hoping, and not playing twenty questions."

"Why?"

"Because I don't enjoy being interrogated. Now be quiet, or I'm getting Ambition to swallow you up again." The dragon looked back at the refilled hole again.

"Ambition...? What was that thing?" A complete stop from Rixix as he covered his eyes with a paw. "It's an honest question."

"It's a pain in my ass, kinda like you are at the moment." Another giggle, as those red eyes glared at him. After a bit, he sighed. "Think of it as a guide, or a form of Zen Direction." Those frilled ears perked as they continued moving. "It solves problems, that's all I can tell you. Well... *Usually* solves problems."

"So it's like a...?"

"Machine?" A slight shrug of those small wings and the little one nodded. "That's one way to look at it; a machine with its own consciousness and morals. But it's not made out of matter."

"It's not?" A shake of the panther's head. "Then what is it?"

"Don't know. Never cared enough to find out."

"It sounded like metal."

"What do you think solidified space would be like?" Another head tilt.

"Solid... Space?"

"That's the closest thing I've seen that matches them." A slight whimper when he mentioned the plural, and Rixix smirked at him. "You honestly didn't think there was just one, did you?" Another half whimper as Saessl looked back at the hole again. "Granted, there's not many of that size. But plenty of others." He stopped again, and one of the smaller metal serpents erupted from the ground before the hatchling. Almost snapping at his paws while the little one yelped and scampered back. "Relax, it's not time yet to dissect him." The feline coaxed the viper, almost getting a mechanical purr from it. "Granted, if he keeps asking so many questions, perhaps you can have a taste. I hear dragon's blood is quite the delicacy."

The black chain overlooked the wyrmling while being scratched under the chin by its master. Abyss metal shimmering off its bladed body with an eerie green light, something irrational and almost maddening to the little one the more he studied it. Then there was that same red glow within its mandibles, one he seen swallowed within the massive wurm.

As the chained snake stared at the dragon slowly walking around it, it snapped and hissed metallic shrieks. Almost as if it were jealous or territorial. "I don't think it likes me." Saessl mumbled.

"It doesn't like anything I deem worth living in the present. Even then, they try to go out of my orders regardless, once in a while. Especially if something is a threat." Another one shot up in front of the dragon, then a third and fourth beside and behind the wyrmling. Snapping at him and getting in a few cuts into those scales. "In other words, they're always watching, cub. Even if I'm not. Savvy?" An innocent look from those blue eyes were also painted in fear, getting the panther to take a deep breath before the serpents burrowed into the ground again.

"So that's what hit the wagon? Tanure magic?" The blink dog asked, now finally dried thanks to the large red beast.

"Technically, you were hit by the earth, which was being manipulated by Tanure."

"What Naught said." Karmu added. "I'm guessing your business is underwater?"

"Actually, I managed to teleport it on the beach, but I can't move it like that everytime. It was a miracle that I was able to, to begin with."

"Adrenaline can do some astonishing things." The raptor studied the canine again, until he whimpered uncomfortably.

"I feel like you're undressing me with your eyes." Rivo mumbled. "But at least everyone is safe, except for Saessl." The behemoth looked over the theropod for a moment.

"Can you find him?" They shared a look for a moment, and Naught scanned the area.

"That way. He's alive, and a little scared, but overall unharmed."

"Let's just hope he stays that way." Wolfgang grumbled. "How far?"

"Marching speeds? About two hours from our current position, however... He looks like he's moving towards us as well."

"So, about half that?" A shake of his spineful head.

"More like three quarters."

"Let's get moving then, before Horizon finds him."

"Or us again." Rivo added to the largest one's statement, and the Render sighed.

"...I'm sorry for dragging you all into this. They've been after me for eons." The dog double taked at him for a moment.

"I thought they were after me." Him and Karmu shared a look. "Why would they-Right. Render.

Dumb question. Forget I asked."

"Yeah... Why would they be after you?"

"Blink dog? Didn't I just get done explaining this-?"

"I mean... There's got to be more than that, right? You're not wanted for anything else?" The red one asked, but got a dinosaur's paw on his opposite shoulder.

"Perhaps you shouldn't pry." Naught whispered softly.

"It's alright... My grandfather on my mother's side was quite the thief, often stealing many things for rebels against Horizon. Caused a lot of trouble for them, but..."

"He was Killed In Action?" The lizardman asked.

"Something like that. Ever since then, they've tested nearly every canine at birth for any traces of Tanure. But I was born privately, away from the standard doctors."

"So you were never tested." Rivo nodded at the beast. "So you hid in plain sight from them?"

"Until we got so low in poverty that I had to start using it to get us by. But after I met my wife, I vowed never to use it again. That's where the wagon came in."

"And that's why you wanted to save enough to move your family elsewhere." Another nod.

"Thanks to you and Karmu, I have just enough. Though, probably soaking wet at the moment." He half chuckled, getting a smile from the other two.

"So, does this mean that you're out of the food business?"

"Just the traveling one, big guy. So..." The three shared a bit of a sad look. "Again, I can't thank you two enough."

"Let's not say any goodbyes until we get your family safe." The Render said, almost as if it were a playful order.

"If that's alright with you, boss." Naught added, giving the blink dog a smile.

"Sounds good." Rivo looked over the Ortel soldier for a moment, who was trying to stay out of the conversation. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Yes, Sir Wolfgang. What will you be doing after all this?" He shrugged at the dino.

"I only had one job, as disastrous as it has been; protect the prince. Probably until he comes home, but if he keeps giving us trouble, this might become a full time job." The others chuckled.

"Not a bad turn of events, even for someone who dislikes children." Another shrug.

"I suppose he's not the worst hatchling out there." The lizard awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "What about you two then?" He motioned Karmu and Naught, and they glanced at each other. "Are you going to... Y'know... Elope somewhere?"

The statement made all three of them freeze in place for a moment and glance at him. Rivo more curious himself than shocked, unlike the other two. "...Elope...?"

"Y-yeah..." Wolfgang's ears started to tint a deep purple. "Aren't you...?" Another glance at each other. "...You know..."

"We're not. No." The red one mumbled, looking at the theropod who was a bit curious himself. "Are we?" Naught just shrugged at him, not understanding what he was talking about.

"As in, a couple." Rivo explained.

"A couple of what?"

"A couple of love birds, Naught."

"Karmu isn't a bird." The blunt statement just made it worse, getting the behemoth to grunt as well. "Oh, it's an expression."

"Yeah, for being..." An awkward neck rub from the soldier, as those purple eyes gazed at him curiously. "...Mates."

"Like a pair of mittens?"

"Naught..." Karmu almost whimpered, covering his own eyes for a moment.

"...Oh! Oh..." A puzzled stare on the red beast could be felt regardless if his eyes were closed. "Are we? We've been together for a very long time."

"Can we please talk about this later?"

"Your right." A few taps on the large one's shoulders as the raptor walked by. "Saessl might have something to add to the conversation!" A loud, surprised whimper from the Render. "We can't leave him out of the discussion."

"N-not what..." A deep sigh as they carried on.

Chapter 16

"You're more comfortable than Karmu." The small dragon said, purring against the black mane with dark green highlights. Rubbing his muzzle against the soft, yet stiff fluff connected to the large panther as he grumbled against the affection. Wondering how he got into this situation, and how he could punish the large worm for such torment. "So soft and fluffy."

"I'm glad you think so. Now stop, or I'm forcing you to walk again."

"But I'm still too tired." Saessl whimpered innocently. "And you're much faster than me."

"And you're a spoiled little runt who's about to lose something of my choosing. Right now, I'm debating between your speech, or that muzzle of yours if you keep rubbing it against me."

"But you're so soft...! I've never felt something so comfortable, including my pillows." A growl from the dark feline. "What are you anyway?"

"So eager to skin one of my kind for their fur, are you?" Rixxix muttered.

"N-no... But, you never said..."

"That's because it's difficult to answer that." A noise in question behind his furred ears.

"What do you mean?"

"As in, it's a universally asked question, but highly difficult one to answer. I am what you see, and probably the last one you'll see too."

"So, you're the last of your kind...?" The panther stopped for a moment and attempted to look behind him.

"You sound so disappointed about that." It made the wyrmling giggle a bit. "No, but I'm not from around here. If you can even wrap that tiny brain of yours around that concept."

"Like Karmu? He's not from here either."

"As in, not this land or planet-"

"Same with him." Another attempt to look at the young one. "He said Renders are from the stars."

"Renders?" Rixxix half asked, not knowing the term.

"They're like big bulls. At least, that's what Karmu is." He felt those shoulders under him shrug a bit. "See? It's easy to say what you are, if you keep it simple."

"Not letting this go, are you?" He felt the dragon shake his muzzle. "Fine. I'm a mix of both feline and canine, something known as a Tirix."

"What's that?"

"I'm what you've been nearly gnawing for the last ten minutes." Another giggle, and the panther took a breath. "It's a creature created to house someone's soul after they've been either deceased or removed. It acts like a vessel for that person to once again make contact with the physical world. Think of it as a form to bring the dead back to the living."

"So... You're someone else? Is that what you mean?"

"I am myself, and I belong to no one." He half growled. "Not all Tirix' successfully carry another's wellbeing. And often enough when they do, part of that personality tends to be copied by the adapting physical body." A questionable stare was felt behind him, and Rixxix muttered. "See? Way over your head. And that was '*Keeping It Simple*' as you would put it."

"...So, you're someone else?" A growl of annoyance made the little one giggle.

"I am who you see in front of you. What this body housed before may have been someone else, yes, but that's not who I am."

"Who was it?"

"Quite the Royal Pest, aren't you?"

"Yup!" Saessl chirped, loving that snout toss of the black one.

"Fine. It was an evil soul that was obsessed with destruction. One that locked away my own consciousness for a very long time." A deep breath of pleasant memories. "It was like being stuck in a black void, while someone hammered at your good will and morals."

"What happened to it...?"

"I devoured it." The black one stated proudly. "I eventually agreed with its ways, and betrayed it. Of course, keeping such desires as my own."

"But... Wouldn't that...?" A noise in question from the Tirix. "Wouldn't that make you someone

different...? If you...?"

"Wished the destruction of everything surrounding you?" A nervous nod from the hatchling.

"Because you lost what morals you had..."

"I didn't lose them, I chose to abandon them. There's a difference."

"There is?" It almost made the feline chuckle.

"Little one, you'll eventually realize that Morality is nothing more than Opinion. Something that is perfectly fine to change. Opinions do not make you who you are."

"But they make you..." A faint whimper.

"The make you, what? Wish to hurt people?" Another whimper. "Let me ask you something, Prince. Why spend your entire life denying that you're a monster when everyone around you claims that you are? Isn't it better to embrace the fact that you are a monster, when deep down that is what you desire to be?" The dragon didn't answer for a moment. "You're too young to understand just yet."

"But that's no reason to hurt people..."

"No, you're getting it backwards. That's the perfect reason to hurt people. As Royalty, you haven't needed to do things that make you a monstrosity in order to survive. But often enough, outside the comfort of walls, where every creature is seen as either prey or enemy... How far would you go to survive?"

"...It's Either You Or Them." The dragon quoted Karmu in a mumble.

"Exactly. Now, does that make you a monster?" He didn't respond. "Never keep your opinions too close, cub. Same goes for the opinions of others. If they think you are an abomination, there's no reason to bend over backwards to change that. Embrace the sheer fact that you enjoy hearing them cry out in pain, even if it isn't physically, and feed off of their despair." The Tirix took a deep breath, and picked up something at a distance. "Speak of the devil..."

"What?"

"There's quite a few nearby that are more afraid than usual. I wonder..." Rixix pondered to himself, as he took a detour off the road a ways. Making the dragon a bit uncomfortable in the woodlands when he could even smell something that was driving his instincts irrationally. Picking up the sounds of someone speaking loudly, but unable to understand what they were saying with his frilled ears.

In the distance though, he started to make out many tents with a strange emblem on it. One that looked close to the Horizon warriors that attacked Karmu and the group. Within the center of the makeshift outpost was a large group of them, all attending some assembly while another group was displayed before them. Mostly unclothed with all gear removed, and nothing specifically common about

them, except for- "I know those guys...!" Saessl whimpered after he let out a small gasp.

"That's nice." The Tirix muttered, almost lackadaisically.

"They're the guards from my castle! But I can't understand what they're saying..."

"Well, if I had to guess, this would be a 'Join Us Or Be Executed' type of meeting." It made the dragon whimper, almost in desperation.

"We have to save them!" He whispered, getting a double take from the black panther.

"What?"

"We asked them to meet up with Horizon to turn them back, we can't just leave them here!"

"Yes, we can. And we're going to."

"Why!?"

"Because it's none of my business, and you've clearly forgotten that you're my bargaining chip. So instead, we're going to keep moving so I can trade you, and finally be rid of your presence."

"Rixxix..." The wyrmling whimpered. Moving into those red eye's line of sight and displaying his own blue ones of sadness.

"You realize that doesn't work on me. The only reason why I let you ride me before is because you're slow and I didn't feel like waiting up for you." A whimper in defeat.

"Please...?" He asked in a whimper. "I can't just leave them here... I'm... Responsible for this..." The feline studied him a bit with an unchanged face.

"...Fine." He said rather optimistically, getting a bright look from the hatchling. "Try to talk them down. I'll be *right behind you*." A chirp from him was a little too loud, as he scampered down into the forests.

"Sir Lawrson." The camp leader said loudly. "You have lead your soldiers rather well, but there is no reasoning with Renders or those who claim to dip into the realm of magics." The lemur stated. "I normally execute the captains first for a display of leadership, but since we've caught up to our target, I'm feeling generous." He took out a blade and held it up to the bound human's neck. "Do you accept your new faction into the Horizon, or will you die as the proud captain that you are?" The man growled the best he could.

"Stop!!" The dragon chirped from afar, catching the ears of several others as he dashed between the tents. A few Horizon warriors got between him and the makeshift stage, armed at first, but eased up when they realized it was just a child. "Please! You don't need to do this!"

"Who speaks!?" The Lemur asked loudly, over the questioning whispers of others, including the Ortel soldiers.

"I'm Prince Saessl of Ortel! I... Made the mistake of getting these guards into this mess. They mean you no harm, and were just trying to protect me." The dragon said, ending in a whimper to try to appeal with innocence. "Please-"

"Ortel doesn't have a prince." The leader muttered. "Who is speaking?"

"It's a dragon, Sir!" It got the aggressive attention of every warrior within the camp. "Just a hatchling, but-"

"Detain it immediately!" The little one yelped and started scampering backwards into the Tirix, who was just casually looking around. Giving the panther rather frightful blue eyes, as if to ask him for help. "Who are you?"

"Me?" Rixxix questioned rather innocently. "Just a by-stander curious about all the commotion." He said, but almost sarcastically. "I take it negotiations didn't go too well?" Another whimper from the dragon. "Some people are just *difficult* to deal with."

"Detain both of them!"

"I wouldn't do that." Three warriors moved forward a step, then instantly growled in pain as something snared their hind paws. As the several directly behind them seen three serpents in the darkness raise up and whip at the approaching creatures, they burst into a red chunky mess when hit by the massive impact. Spraying all over the two, and scaring the wyrmling even more.

"W-what was-!?" A few of them took a step back as the Tirix shook off a few pieces of meat out of his fur.

"Normally they don't do that towards me, but whatever. I tried to warn them." He half shrugged, taking a step forward. "Now perhaps you should rethink the... Bloody Prince's offer, hmm?"

"What was that!?" The Lemur asked one of his own.

"Or you can keep ignoring me." Rixxix grumbled.

"I-it wasn't Tanure! It couldn't be!"

"Then what was it-!?" A serpent shot out of the ground and into the Lemur's neck, transitioning his vocals from a public speaking to a dry wheeze.

"Do I have your attention *now*?" Rixxix asked the group. "The pest wants his guards freed. I don't care who you are, or what cult you're a part of. The faster this gets done, the faster I can carry on with my own business." The group of Horizon warriors stayed mostly silent, and the panther almost growled in annoyance. "Rip it out."

The chained snake within the Lemur tore out his voicebox, getting him to kneel and hold his throat while the attack provoked several members to come after the Tirix and hatchling. One by one, they were snared by several more vipers that erupted from the ground, digging into the shins or calves before nearly tearing the limb off. Dragging them away from the felines slow walk towards the stage and mutilated within seconds.

The screams terrified several Horizon people, while others attempted to aid those who were caught. Only to be pulled into the portable meat grinders and were unspared by sentient spiked chains. "Hey." Rixxix said to the young dragon, absolutely terrified and almost hiding in a nearby tent. "Come **here** and take your place." The black one growled at him. Despite all the nightmarish sounds, Saessl cautiously started moving.

Passing one of the warriors, the dragon got her attention. Taking a swing at the little one with a blade to cull the prince, it was interfered by a metal serpent rising up in the line of attack. Another viper bit into her hamstring, and forced the impala to kneel before getting her arms snared as well by two others.

Still horrified by such sounds and sights, the purple wyrmling looked back and forth between her and the Tirix a few feet away. Making eye contact with those red iris' and the dark red glow of the metal serpent that saved him. "Command it to end her." Rixxix demanded of the young one.

"W-what?"

"Command the chain to end her. *It's Either You Or Them*, that's what you said." The feline took a step forward. "She attempted to kill you. Now, what are you going to do?" A whimper from him, as Saessl made the mistake of looking into her eyes. Clearly afraid to die from a few simple spoken words. Another pitched whine and a bit of a sob, and the hatchling nodded at the viper. "No. That's not enough. You need to do more than simply nod to end her life." Rixxix said thickly. "**Now Say It.**"

Another look at the impala's face nearly broke him. "I'm... Sorry." The dragon sobbed, then looked at the metal serpent awaiting orders. Nearly choking at the very words. "E-end her." The spiked chain hissed in agreement, and lunged for the top of her neck. Digging deep into the antelope's skull before gutting it. Ripping apart her flesh in one single stroke, the entire front flowed opened in a red mess. Even through all the panic surrounding the two, Saessl could still make out her last whimper.

"Congratulations on your first kill, cub." The black one said, halfheartedly. Sharply motioning for him to walk up the makeshift stage. Doing his best to avoid looking at the impala's body and not step into her insides, but another serpent got in his way. Hissing loudly and almost snapping at the little one. "Do **Not** Walk Around It." That harsh red glare once again, and the hatchling sobbed. Giving in, and walking through the pool of deep red to cross over. "Be thankful I'm not forcing you to eat her heart." Half a forceful nudge as Saessl took the lead.

Climbing up the stairs, he met the eyes of Captain Lawrson. Sharing the same horrified look, but more of the event surrounding them rather than what the prince was forced to do. Doing his best to

walk behind and untie the knot binding his guard, the Captain thanked the wyrmling. Shaking his paw, and those blue eyes noticed the deep red mark stained on the human's palm. "I'll get the others, and our gear, My Lord." Saessl faintly nodded, still in shock as the panther took a deep breath while approaching. The haunting noises finally coming to an end.

"*Silence And Screams Are The End Of Our Song.*" Rixxix quoted, not getting a response from the dragon still shaken. "You will eventually come to realize that you are a predator in the vast length of life you have before you. The sooner you accept this, the sooner you can start being what you truly are."

"You mean... A Monster?" A faint chuckle from the black feline.

"Cub, have you still not figured it out yet?" A whimper from the little one. "We are all monsters. From the very day we are born, or in your case; hatched. Hell, sometimes even before then." They glanced over at the Ortel guards, returning with what they set out with. "One would think that would be truism by now. However, it's up to you whether you choose to embrace or deny it."

Chapter 17

"Tell me exactly *why* are we running towards the sounds of people being murdered?" The golden dog grumbled, slightly disturbed by such noises despite being silent for a few minutes now.

"Because Saessl might be there." Karmu called back, already several steps ahead with the raptor right behind him. Regardless of the evening light growing dimmer by the minute, the group increased their speed until the two up front came to a complete stop.

"What's wrong?" Wolfgang asked before overlooking the Horizon camp. "...Wow..." He said, after spotting the view for himself. As well as the blink dog right behind him, nearly hurling at the grotesque nature of the bodies. "You gonna be okay?"

"Just... Give me a minute."

"You prepare meat for a living. How does this-"

"Doesn't mean I'm a butcher!" A few deep breaths as Rivo attempted to avoid looking at the mutilated bodies. "Who could've...?"

"That's a Horizon emblem." The Render said, looking at the tents and some of the gear around. His ears suddenly flicked, picking up something close by and he bolted for it. The others not far behind him.

Through the spaced out trees, he picked up the scent of the Ortel guards from before. Then the strong smell of blood, making him worry for the worst. But the soldiers were not far off from the campsite, and the red behemoth caught up to many of them being overly cautious. "You're...!?" The human leading the group shouted.

"Captain Lawrson!? What are you doing in the woods?" He asked, then his heart fluttered when the large beast heard a familiar chirp.

"Karmu!!" The dragon called, not too far from them. Though the Render couldn't smell him, he discovered why when the purple hatchling tore through the mess of trees. Completely stained in blood, almost coming off as the same color as the behemoth himself.

Karmu called back when he seen the energy of the young wyrmling, catching him when Saessl dove into those thick arms nearly in sobs. Enjoying their own little reunion while Wolfgang talked to the guards. "What the hell happened to you guys?"

"We were heading back to meet up with Horizon when a group of them caught us off guard." Sandford explained. "They took us in as prisoners and were going to force us to fight for them."

"Fight what, exactly?" The wolf's eyes looked over at the red beast, and the lizardman exhaled. Then a high pitched whine came from the dinosaur as Naught struggled to hold himself back. "What's up with you?" But the raptor didn't answer. Instead, just walked up beside Karmu and spotting a black panther following the hatchling's path. "Give us a minute." The wolf nodded at him, and the two rejoined their current groups.

As the Tirix approached the three, a strange fear was sensed from the small dragon. Getting the Render to overlook the feline for a few moments while protecting the prince. "Who might you be?" Another high pitched whine from the theropod, as he held his own muzzle shut. Though, not without a few confused looks. Including from the black one.

"His child sitter for the past few hours." The panther grumbled, hearing another excited whimper from the dino. "Is he okay?"

"Naught-?"

"-You're Rixxix!!" The raptor blurted out excitedly, getting confused looks all around. "Forgive me for, I believe the term is Fangirling? But Oh My Goodness-You're actually here! I mean, I thought I seen you when I spotted Ambition from afar, and I should be nearly morbid in a way due to the near literal trail of death you leave behind but-Wow!" A very confused look on the Tirix, as he looked back and forth between the others. Each giving their own very questionable looks about the dinosaur's state of mental health. "Vyitritvuietoafecr has told me all about you!"

A large nod of understanding while everyone else's brains hurt from such an odd name. "Ohhh, I was thinking the red one was the Counterweight. It's you." An eager nod from Naught as he took a step closer to physically study Rixxix. "Yep, even lack of personal space-"

"-The standard Tirix vessel body, missing the hidden claws in the right arm! The dagger in your heart! Even the imprint when he touched you!"

"Don't say it like that." The black one grumbled.

"Sorry, did Vyitritvu-"

"-C. Weight. We called him C. Weight. And no, he referred himself as a male."

"C. Weight?" Rivo asked. "Counterweight...?" A nod from Rixxix.

"That's what he is."

"I thought Naughty was just an extremely observant dinosaur." Wolfgang added.

"Well, like this, yeah. They tend to have different forms." A few puzzling looks from the others, and the feline sighed in annoyance. "He's an Architect."

"Like a carpenter?"

"N-not quite, Rivo." The raptor said a bit shyly.

"He's an Architect of the Universe." The Tirix explained. "I'm assuming this one." An excited nod from Naught. "And I'm guessing this is your first time visiting it-"

"Yes! It's been very exciting so far!"

"Yeeep. That's a Counterweight for you." Rixxix muttered, almost annoyed at the sheer optimism.

"Wait... You kept telling us that you're not a God." The blink dog grumbled.

"He isn't a God." The black one tossed his snout. "He's a God *of* Gods. They're nearly on top of the food chain, if you know what I mean." Those red eyes looked at the theropod in annoyance. "Now, I've been nice to you and your... Friends?" Another energetic nod. "And took good care of the pest. Now I want something from you."

"Of course." Naught eagerly agreed.

"I want to go back home. To Veritas."

"Well, I'm not sure if I can enter it or even open the metaphorical gates. But I can contact Vyitritvuietoafecr-" Another series of painful groans, and the raptor smiled. "For you."

"Good enough." He motioned to lead the way, and the two walked off.

"I will return soon, Friends! This should only take an hour or so, your time." Naught called back, getting a few nervous waves and a solid nod from Karmu. One that got a few looks in question, mostly due to the lack of shock and awe on his muzzle.

"...You knew, didn't you?" He nodded at the golden canine.

"He blurted it out first thing when we met." The behemoth chuckled. "And I told him to say that he wasn't... You know."

"Things now make so much more sense."

"For you maybe." Wolfgang grumbled, holding onto his head. "I'm just going to pretend that this conversation never happened. Okay? Okay." He headed back to the Ortel group while the others lightly laughed.

The Render laid down in the forest clearing, staring into the fire he recently made while the young dragon slept between his arms. Thoughts and old memories melded together like the endless forms of the flames. Awaking old feelings of both fear, dread, and loneliness. Then, his ears flicked back as he picked up something walking really close to him, puffing his mane out and getting a friendly chuckle as the dinosaur returned. "Sorry, I've never seen you spooked before."

"You've never randomly appeared in my personal space before." The red one grumbled, snorting playfully as Naught laid down beside him. Almost cuddling.

"Where are the others?"

"Wolfgang is attempting to hunt something, so expect it to be basically flat by the time he returns with it." A bit of laughter. "Never met anyone who would use their shield so offensively before."

"I believe that is the point. Deceptive in a way, really, but only because of one's natural portrayal whenever they examine a large shield." A smirk from the two. "And Rivo?"

"Scouting for some water. That is, and I quote, If I Don't Accidentally Switch Places With A Tree." Another laugh. "How did we get such odd friends?"

"Talently, of course." A moment of silence, and the theropod looked down at the dragon. "And Saessl?"

The red one examined him as well. "...Hasn't left my side since he returned. Barely spoken a word either, which worries me." A deep breath. "The blood on him isn't his at least, but I can only imagine what he's seen."

"And that hurts you." The Render didn't notice it until Naught mentioned it, getting the dino to

adjust and hug the large beast tightly.

"...Thank you."

"You are welcome."

"For many things, Naught." A nod was felt from him. "I... Hope I didn't hurt your feelings towards..." A noise in question. "I don't know... The truth is, I don't know if I'm even capable of those feelings."

"You mean, what Wolfgang thought?" Karmu nodded. "I honestly do not know if I am able to either. I suppose... If I can feel excited, sad, happy, I could possibly feel affectionate as well."

"You forgot angry." A chuckle from the two. "I've never seen you angry before."

"I... Got angry once in the city." A double take from the large one. "In that arena with Loretta. After seeing what they put her through..."

"It's a wonder you didn't smite each and every one of them." Karmu joked.

"The scary part was... I almost wanted to. I almost wanted to punish them for doing such a thing. But I realized that they just didn't... Know any better. I just had a difficult time understanding how they got this far." The two took a breath. "It's the same with Horizon. I did believe you when you told your story, Karmu, but... I almost didn't want to believe it." The Render didn't respond, but curled his tail against the raptor. "...Did you want to try, though?" The two locked eyes for a moment. "Being...?"

"It might end disastrously. And I won't live forever, Naught-"

"-I know." A nuzzle. "But... It will be worth it. No matter how painful it is in the end." A faint nod from the beast, as he did his best to hug the raptor back.

The young dragon shot up startled, not recognizing the arms that were holding him in the darkness and faint warmth. Whimpering at first until he got a soothing pet. "It's okay, you're safe Saessl." He barely recognized the dinosaur's whispers, moving a bit so he could see those violet eyes and calm down. "You had a nightmare."

"...Yeah." The wyrmling yawned shakily.

"I... Expected as such." A puzzling whimper. "I know the things Rixxix has done. And I can only imagine what you've seen was no less grotesque." A bit of silence as the prince moved closer to the small fire for warmth. "We seen the leftovers of the Horizon camp." Again, no response for several moments. Telling the raptor he probably didn't want to talk about it.

"...Where's Karmu?" Naught smiled at him.

"Wolfgang couldn't catch anything big enough for all of us, so he's attempting. Doing well at that, considering his size." He finally got the little one to smile a bit as well. "I'm afraid that they ate what the Lizard caught, but I've been keeping your body comfortable until Karmu returns." A bit of a frightened look from those blue eyes, but he nodded. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no... I'm just still..."

"Having a hard time processing what you've heard from Rixxix?" A faint nod.

"About you..." The Counterweight nodded as well. "I never thought that I'd meet a God." A small chuckle.

"You and many others, but I'm not a God, Saessl. I'm more of a designer." A noise in question, as the dino tried to keep him comfortable. "I made everything to start with, but I didn't create, say; you or your Parents. The real 'Gods' do that, as well as process everything. The reasons why the sun rises and falls, it rains someday and others it's sunny, or that you feel hungry from time to time. It's all their doing, not mine." Another smile.

"So then...?"

"What did I do?" A nod. "I created the world and the space around it. I created time, and made it run forward. I ended up starting life, but was not allowed to control it. That duty was in the hands of others." He sighed for a moment. "To see all of this in motion... To witness so many things change since it all started, it's been very interesting but..."

"But what?"

"I question what choices the Gods have made. I ponder on the instincts and decisions of others, and often worry about how things will end up in the future. I've seen people work their entire lives, expecting to live in luxury and relax their later years, but never get to. I've seen people result in taking the life of another, for nothing more than a simple object that they considered of value." Naught sighed. "There is a lot of Malevolence in the world, more than I expected. And I question if it was the correct choice to leave them in control."

Though it was a little confusing, the hatchling could somehow follow what the dinosaur was saying. "Why didn't you do it then?"

"Because Counterweights are not allowed to. There are a lot of taboos when it comes to our... Ways. Culture doesn't quite fit the term." An awkward chuckle got the young one to perk his ears a bit. "I'm actually breaking one by being here."

"You are?" A nod with a nervous smile. "Then why...?"

"Well, I... I was feeling strange lately. Almost sad, or hurt for some reason. Perhaps Empty is the

correct word. That is until I got a visit from Vyitritvuietoafecr." A painful groan from the dragon. "We talked for a very long time, and he fell into Taboo as well. Ended up visiting his own universe like I am mine, and..."

"He convinced you to do it as well?" A nod.

"The more I thought about it, the more excited I became. Those feelings of emptiness, replaced by a new energy, and this...? This was the best decision I've ever made." It made the hatchling smile, and the dinosaur smiled back. Almost giving the little one a lick, but stopping himself. "Right, you should have a bath soon. Maybe in the morning." Saessl half chuckled at him. "I know you probably don't want to think about it anymore than you have to, but... Have you... Thought about what's going to happen when you get back?"

A mutter of sorrow left the wyrmling's muzzle, but before he could speak, the two picked up the noises of the behemoth returning from the shadows. Carrying a large buck over his shoulders. Almost chirping at him, the dragon scampered a bit closer. Waiting for the deer to drop before jumping into the Render's arms again. "Nice to see you too." Karmu said, trying to whisper and not wake the lizard or blink dog. "How long have you been up?"

"Maybe about ten minutes or so." Naught said, overlooking the late night kill with a bit of sorrow.

"I... Tried to find something else, but I have a hard time seeing fruits in the night." A nod from the raptor.

"They don't have large heat signatures, so it's understandable." The colorful one got up. "Rest a bit, I'll prepare it."

"You sure? I know how much it hurts you to see..." Naught nodded at the larger one, and they switched places for a bit. Sharing a quick nuzzle before parting, and getting a few looks from the small one.

"So, you and Naught are a couple now?" Saessl curiously asked.

"We're... *Trying* it." Karmu said, a bit awkwardly. "Not sure how well things are going to work, but..."

"The challenges will be interesting to overcome, once we encounter them." The dino's tone made the little one giggle.

"But I thought only males and females could be together."

"Well... We're not really either, Saessl. We just look like one of them." A strange look from the dragon made the red one chuckle a bit. "You'll understand when you're older." A grumble from the young one.

"Can you...?" The large one made a noise in question. "Can you continue your story?"

Chapter 18

I was sleeping while the dawn came around. Well, more like resting off the soreness of the training exercises. They were getting more and more difficult by the passing day, but I was keeping up rather well. Just wasn't expecting that wolf to make it up to my peak, whereas I usually went to him. "Nice view." He said after he whistled, getting me almost startled at first and mumble at him. "Not sure what that means but-Think Fast!"

It was then I heard a loud crank, and the flat ground underneath me flung me off the ledge of the mountain. Almost howling in surprise as I started to fall down. Acting fast, I started throwing down large orbs in my falling path, and condensing the explosion force upwards towards me. Slowing down my fall to be, let's call it; Non-Lethal. Doesn't mean the landing was soft.

But anyway, I was now a ways off from the bottom of the mountain. The closest I've ever been to the nearest farm house, and almost afraid of what was going to happen. Of course everyone from half a planet away would've heard those explosives I used to keep myself from becoming a pancake, and this is the first time I made eye contact with them.

I couldn't help but notice how frightful they were, and one of them ready to defend their family from harm, despite their lack of training with... I think it was a giant fork, but I've never gotten all the names of their tools down packed. Regardless, we stared at each other a little bit, and I started backing away. Retreating back to the mountain, which was a relief on both sides, to be honest.

By the time I made it back up to Mr. Funnypants' hut, it was already daylight.

Saessl: "Were you mad at him?"

Mad? Not at all. Surprised, maybe. But that was nothing out of the ordinary. Granted, 'Flight' is still out of my comfort zone, let alone him visiting my peak. Regardless, I returned to see him sitting at the ledge again. Not sure if he was just watching from above, or meditating as usual. Either way, I sat down beside him, resisting the urge to shove him off the cliff. "I suppose that now we're even." I

grumbled at him, as he made a noise in question. "I pushed you off a cliff, you launched me off one."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He said almost seriously, and I double taked at him.

"...Seriously?"

"Indeed. However, my Chaotic Neutral Twin Brother is visiting. Maybe it was him." All I could do was just blink at him and sigh. Laying down, I overlooked the farmlands again and couldn't help but think about those people. The looks on their faces, how frightful they were of my presence. Granted, I can't say I blame them now, but after I told Funnypants that I was trying to protect the town...

I took a deep breath again. "...I haven't seen any horses down there for a while now."

"That's because something got at them." I questioned him about that. "An animal was sneaking into the pen, and eventually the horses were spooked out of it. The farmers can't get them back, and without their help plowing the fields..." He half shrugged. "Thus is life."

I'm not sure why, but it made me sad inside. The idea of feeling helpless during a terrible time, and... "What does plowing do?"

"Helps break up the ground so their plants can grow easier."

"And they eat the plants, yes...?"

"Sometimes. Usually it's what they plants themselves grow that they eat, but others helps them make things like clothing and blankets. Keeps them warm." Again, my heart sank.

"Should I...?" He looked at me. "Help them then?"

"If you'd like to, go for it. Go down there and offer if you're content with your control." I honestly was at that time. But it was the idea of going down there to talk to them that was frightening to me. Considering what happened the last time I attempted to. And I'm guessing that showed through my own eyes. "And that look either means I Need More Training, or I Just Realized That Paintcans Are Not Giant Kinder Surprises."

"What? N-no. Neither. But..." I looked down at the farmhouse I nearly encountered earlier.

"Ohhh... Whelp, it's up to you if there will be Weeds or Wildflowers." I gave him a puzzled look. "You know, the old saying: *Will There Be Weeds Or Wildflowers When You're Done?*" I stared at him, blinking. "Do not make me get out the banjo."

I'm not sure what that meant, but I declined regardless. Another infamous tool meant another way for him to torture me. "T-that's alright. I'll..." I took a breath. "I'll go down." And I left after seeing him nod.

Granted, taking the long way down was much easier, and less frightening. Besides, it gave me time to mentally prepare myself and rehearse what I was going to say to them. Start with a casual

greeting, ask if they need assistance, and just hear them out. That's all there was too it, right?

Saessl: "You failed terribly, didn't you."

Well, it wasn't a success. I remember coming around a bit more quietly this time, hoping to see one of them before they saw me. But the windows on the home was in rather strategic spots, hearing the female of the household yelp and hide her children. Even calling out to her husband who was in a nearby barn.

Saessl: "Barn?"

It's a large building that helps store things. See that one in the distance? On the Right? There's a lot of farmlands around these roads that I never noticed before. Anyway, so I've kinda already taken hostages without even thinking of such a thing. Almost wanting to just go retreat back, I noticed the plow still in the fields. Completely unmaned or... Unhorsed? Unmounted? I'm not a farmer.

Saessl: "So you ended up plowing the fields without permission?"

Yeah. Granted, it was a bit difficult whereas the thing was kinda small for my size. I ended up having to warp the metal so it could wrap just in front of my haunches, then use the weight of my tail on the top of it. But I got it to function overall. I ended up doing most of the fields that were obvious, but was unsure about the rest.

Saessl: "What about the family?"

They were watching me for a long time. Eventually the husband took off to the household a bit after I was plowing, and they just watched me do it for several hours. I could almost feel their eyes on me, curiously staring and wondering why I was doing this. Even after I was done, I got out of the plow and walked to the front porch. Laying down in the dusk light awkwardly for a few moments. "Hello?" I ended up calling out to them. "I'm not going to hurt you, I'm just unsure what other areas you needed done."

It took a few moments for the Porcupine father to come out and talk to me, face to face. Still frightened, I could sense it, but almost... Thankful in a way. "It was..." He cleared his throat for a moment. "It was just the two fields. That's all we could get our horses to do, whereas the ground was very hard in the..." I couldn't help but look over to the other areas, noticing an attempt for one strip, not even half way before it ended.

I nodded at him. "I'll get that done tomorrow then." I said, getting up and starting to leave.

"W-wait! Tomorrow?" I looked at him, and that fear of his returned, getting his mane to puff out from instinct.

"It doesn't matter if you're going to be around or not, does it? I'll get it done for you."

"...Why?" I blinked at him. "N-n-not that I'm complaining, but..." That question still confuses

me to this day; Why Was I Doing This? I could never find the answer, much like why I did many things.

Saessl: "Like talk to the crazy wolf guy? Or help make Larksus feel safe?"

Or even why I went out of my way to save you. The questions never really had an answer.

Saessl: "Because you're a good person?"

That's kinda what Naught said as well. *Smirks* But that reason never seemed to satisfy me. Regardless, all I did was shrug at him. "We... Can't afford to pay you." He almost whimpered.

"That's fine." I said, trying to be assuring and walked off back home. By the time I made it to my peak and slept off my soreness, it was getting close to dawn. Coming back down the mountain, I noticed that the wolf's hut was completely missing. Not a single trace of him left, besides a single note:

You Pass Something Down
No Matter Were Or How
Will There Be Weeds Or Wildflowers
Affixed Upon Your Bows?
And There's A Crooked Burning Cigarette
Rollin' On Your Tongue
Will Ther-

Saessl: "Wait, what?"

He ran out of paper. But the end of it was-

Saessl: "Will There Be Weeds Or Wildflowers When You're Done?"

Mhmm.

Saessl: "What does that mean?"

...You'll understand when you're older. As much as I wanted to stay around the area for a little longer, there was nothing really for me here. So I carried on and started plowing a new area for that family. Though, still timid of me, they took a few more days before they would approach me. Always staying at least half a field away from me to plant things. At least until I was done.

They eventually introduced themselves to me in person. I still remember their names: Alfred and Wanda, with their two daughters Rita and Sophie. Maybe it was a mistake, but I stayed completely honest with them. Telling them what exactly I was and expecting their frightful looks. I'm not sure if they encountered such creatures before in their lives, but I have the feeling a lot of rumors were spread.

They grew their own opinions of me though, and convinced many others to abort their concerns. Maybe not with all Renders, but at least me. When there was no more field work I could do for them, I moved on to the next farm. And so on, for the next few years. Having to redo each one every year kept me busy for a long time, but I didn't mind.

Eventually, they asked if I could help them get some wood, possibly for building more homes in the town. I warned them of the dangers of clear cutting, and so we set a limit per area. Many of the adults would help cut the trees and prep them for me to carry them back, while the children in an already done area would replant trees for future use.

It wasn't until they suggested I took a small vacation or break for about a week. Regardless of how much I denied it, they persisted. I honestly wanted to see if Larksus was still around, and almost going to visit him. But there was a large storm system coming around that concerned me. I wanted to watch the nearby rivers in case of flooding or other damages.

That storm went around us. And by the time it did, it was too late to visit him and make it back here. Another mistake I really wish I could've changed, little one. Maybe I would've found him there, and bring him to the town. Become accepted, like I was and perhaps prevent Horizon from...

It was to my surprise when I returned that they used most of that wood to make one large building. A building for me, to sleep in instead of having to retreat to my peak or just rest nearby. I almost felt undeserving of such a thing, considering how much space it needed for me to just fit in and turn around near freely. It was about triple the size of one of their barns, able to hold perhaps eight horses. They used the building for other things as well, but the main reason was for me. They built a new plow, and a home for me

As the years went on, so did the city's growth. Something I rarely visited due to my own size-

Saessl: "But you're not that big."

I used to be bigger, Saessl. Perhaps triple of what I am now.

Saessl: "Then how did...? Horizon?"

Yes. About the same time as that amulet. So it was difficult for me to travel through the areas. If I needed to get around, I would literally circle around the entire thing so not to disturb anyone.

Saessl: "Keeping around the farmlands makes more sense now, seeing how much space they have."

Yeah, they were about the same size as these. Still, many people now had a place to come visit me if they ever needed anything. They would often come to me with different ideas, sometimes blacksmith work as well. Propose new buildings and new fields for crops. It's like they treated it as my land. I even caught them calling me The Spirit Of The Mountain a few times. Perhaps they thought that's where I came from. Granted, they were not completely wrong.

Things went very well for nearly a decade, until Horizon started paying more attention to those rumors. At first coming in to assassinate me- Why the giggles?

Saessl: "You said Ass."

Yes, yes. But you're missing the point. They attempted to murder me within my own home. Not so funny now, is it?

Saessl: "Why would they...?"

Because they are trained not to think of anything associated with Magic or Tanure as a friend, besides another Horizon warrior. All they heard from the rumors was that there was a Render living in the small city, and they went to work.

Saessl: "But you got him, right?"

Yes. Ended up killing him by accident, but it got their attention. Of course they wouldn't believe it was an accident, but the city people vouched for me. Stood up against Horizon, and claimed I was one of them. And they didn't like the idea of a Render being anything more than a Monster.

...You know where this is going, young one. And you know how this ends in a few decades. Horizon kept tabs on me like I was some sort of prisoner, someone unable to be trusted. Blaming every bad thing that happened on me first, and eventually the city people banned them from the farmlands and away from me. There was never so much tension within a small city than there was whenever one of those warriors came to *Visit*. Only, they were not there to visit.

I should've known they were planning something. They weren't trying to keep me in line, they were trying to keep me in place. Near the city at all times, while they directed Larksus-...

Saessl: "...You don't need to continue, Karmu. It's alright."

Saessl... As a creature carrying magics in your own blood, if there's one thing you ever remember from me, it's this advice: Never Be Afraid Or Ashamed To Kill One Of Them, Because They've Already Made Up Their Minds About Killing You.

Chapter 19

The group finally had Ortel's gates in their sights. After a long few days, the scouting parties and guards ahead of the beast's group would return home. The raptor couldn't help but smile once again at

such construction, taking lead along with the lizardman. Giving the Render some space, knowing how hard it was to tell that story.

"They really are green and lushful." Wolfgang said, overlooking the nearby farms from afar. "Even more so the closer they are to Ortel. I never thought of it until Karmu mentioned it."

"Does that worry you?" Naught asked him, rather honestly too.

"Maybe a little. I never really liked the idea of Tanure or magic rituals to begin with, considering I grew up next to one of the biggest catastrophes dealing with it." He muttered, getting a nod from the taller dinosaur. "It makes me a little uncomfortable thinking about it, to the point where I don't know if I can serve under a flag that supports such a thing."

"I understand. The dark truths behind good things can really shake one's faith in it. Especially in a profession where you are indeed risking your own life for such a cause." The lizard looked at him. "The idea of Ending tends to change a lot of perspectives, doesn't it?"

"Ending?"

"As in, having a time limit. I'm still trying to understand how the minds of others are functioning, and I do often need to remind myself that they have an age limit. As well as many other factors that could hinder your gains of experiences-"

"The way you talk makes my head hurt." The theropod laughed loudly at the serious statement. "I take it you don't hear that a lot."

"Not very much, no. Though I do tend to get rather shocked or confused looks from others. I suppose it would be a difficult to respond to such a thing." He gave the scaly male a smile before looking forward at the group ahead arriving at the gates. Probably telling the guards currently on duty about the situation and recent events.

The dragon sighed heavily, seeing the city walls up ahead. Almost feeling sad about returning home, and wishing he could continue adventuring with the others. "Hey." The red behemoth underneath nudged him. Bobbing his own head a bit to make the hatchling bounce. "You'll be alright. I'll make sure of it."

"Yeah..." He muttered back, getting another nudge. "I just don't want to come back."

"Things will be different for you, Saessl. And when you're older, we'll come back this way someday. We'll do some camping, and you can show me what you've learned." A noise in response didn't tell him much. "Have you thought about those demands of yours?"

"Just wanting to get out more, even if it's out into the city. Maybe learn to read and write, and just more about the outside world."

"That's a good start."

"But I don't want to rule anything. I don't want to be trapped in these walls for my entire life, watching others live their own lives. I never understood Why Me, why I was chosen to do this." Karmu just shrugged at him.

"I can't tell you. Politics have always been over my head."

"You and me both." The young one flopped his head on the silver forest. Playing around with it a little bit. "...Thanks, Karmu. For everything."

"You're welcome, Saessl. Or is it Prince Saessl?" The Render chuckled when he seen that snout toss upward a bit.

"Ugh, I'm already sick of hearing that."

"Well, you can let them call you whatever you like. You are in charge, after all."

"Outside my parents, you mean."

"I mean, of your own life. But if you decide to leave, at least give them the chance to say goodbye, alright?" The little one was quiet, but nodded regardless.

The group walked up towards the guards, trying to overhear and follow their conversation before completely arriving. "Is everything alright?" Naught asked them.

"We're just trying to organize a safe clearance for your... Larger friend." Sandford said, getting a double take from Karmu.

"What?"

"Well, you do take up a lot of space, Sir-"

"I'm not planning to enter your city walls."

"What?" Saessl asked from above, looking into those black eyes. "You said you'd talk to them!"

"Yes, I was still planning to. But out here. I'm a Render, Saessl. It's not a good idea for me to be in..." He said a bit nervously. "Especially without..." He placed a paw on his chest, where that amulet would be.

"I... Didn't even notice that was missing." The dragon mumbled.

"What was missing?" The wolf asked, getting a look from everyone there.

"It's better if you didn't know." Wolfgang said, not really helping the nervous canine relax.

"Karmu, we can't just ask the crowns to meet out here. That's just asking for suspicion."

"And me being in there isn't safe for anyone." The red one almost snapped at him, getting the raptor and blink dog to stand between them.

"Relax, big guy."

"Rivo is right, you have nothing to worry about." The beast took a deep breath as the dino held his muzzle for a bit. "I know this is hard for you, but just take it one step at a time. You can do it." Karmu took another deep breath, then a third one before nodding.

"...Fine. But promise me you'll stop me if anything goes wrong." He looked over at the golden dog. "Even if it's teleporting me out into the ocean." He muttered lowly so that the other guards wouldn't hear. Getting a few nods of confirmation. Another breath, and those black eyes looked over the guards. "Lead the way."

They started to form almost a wall around the streets, clearing the way for such a large creature and nearly making some of the people frightened when the red beast walked through the gates. Doing his best to take deep breaths and not look at the people. Ignore the smell of their fears, but the memories began to flood back.

The city gate collapsed as the red behemoth was thrown through it. Still trying to shrug off the several shards of ice that were dug into his thick hide. Barreling through a few homes made of wood and stone, getting them to cave in on top of the Render and infect his stinging wounds with debris. Getting up, his instincts told him to get angry at anything that moved, including the people panicking in the streets. But he kept his focus on the white beast walking through the heavy snowstorm.

The homes all looked familiar, just different shades of roofing and walls. The designs all held something that ached his own heart, and the windows shown were the only real difference between then and now. Even just glancing at them, Karmu could hear how they shattered under his massive weight.

The cold was getting to him. The warmth of the sun was blocked off by the ice age-like blizzard. Draining whatever heat he held onto, and doing his best to keep it up. But those wounds were like holes in a barrel, leaking out precious fluids that only made him dizzy. And the white behemoth, wearing the skin of his old friend, only held madness in his cold eyes.

When they ran out of guards in the front, the ones behind started to move forward. Opening

those synthetic gates within the streets, and allowing them to be flooded once again. Sealing off their only exit and getting the large one's heart to race once again. His body felt hot, his senses hyper, the fear was getting to his muzzle. Demanding him to fight against it. Destroy whatever is driving him crazy. Give into those instincts that he was created with; to just level the entire land. Turn it into waste, and burn every living thing that had a life on it.

The heat itself wouldn't be able to last. The air was too cold to feed his fires, and the red one was getting more and more dizzy after every slam, slash, and bite. There was no use attempting to get the Render he knew back, and it was either Karmu or Larksus... A Render who was able to think rationally, or one who went berserk.

The red behemoth staggered up to his paws once again. No longer hearing the screams of people in the streets. His people... All frozen solid in a storm that shouldn't exist. Their hearts were no longer beating, their fright was no longer sensed. And for once, he needed to be what they all feared deep down. To call down the very purest of heat he could muster. One that could survive such temperatures.

He seen those bright white lights once again through his own memories, and Karmu took a few steps back. Shaking his head violently, accidentally making the dragon fly off into the blink dog's arms. He seen the massive rods of heat strike the grounds in massive area. City blocks were covered by a single one, but they spread over the frozen lands. "Karmu!" He could barely hear the raptor's voice with his ears.

"I can't-!" The Render hissed, trying to resist being held down by the dinosaur. "Get me out of here!"

"Relax!"

"No-!" He grunted loudly. "Rivo! Do it!" But Naught just shushed at him, holding onto that muzzle and forcing the red one to calm down. With a few deep breaths that were almost quivering, the behemoth sat down on the streets. Feeling the gazes of a hundred look at him at first, then it was like they were removed. Shielded from all of their senses.

"Hey... I have you, Karmu. Don't worry." A few strokes on his mane. "You're safe. You're not fighting anymore. You're not in danger." His breaths became slower. "Take as long as you want." His voice was so clear now, but nothing else was heard.

Taking a few more moments, and the red one opened his black eyes. Seeing his surroundings almost completely still. Every person, no longer moving. No longer breathing. In the middle of their actions, as if they were frozen. "What...?"

"Just relax. Take as long as you like, but you're safe with me, okay?" Naught said, being the only other one able to move. "Just look at me. No one else is here. You're not in any city, you're not anywhere where you're in danger or a threat. Just breathe, and take as long as you like."

"How did you...?" He whispered, looking around at everything while his body began to calm down. "Are they...?"

"Just paused for the moment." The dino smiled at him. "You can't even hurt them like this, however, I would refrain from touching them. You don't have much resilience like this, and might shatter on contact." A bit of a concerned look, and the larger one carefully moved his tail closer. "Are you okay?" A deep breath, and he nodded.

"...I think so. I just-" A paw on the tip of his muzzle silenced him, and he nodded again. "...Yes. I'm okay now."

"Alright, deep breath and hold it." Karmu did so, and the noises returned. Exhaling and feeling those concerned looks again, as well as a few guards noticing the sudden displacement of his tail, the Render opened his eyes.

"I'm... Alright. Sorry." They took a few moments to study him, but Naught confirmed with a nod. The hatchling then tried to reach for the behemoth, climbing back on that silver mane when Rivo took the step forward. "Let's... Go." And they carried on into the castle walls.

This place was at least a lot less crowded. Almost more secure, if one could call the thicker stone walls that. Whereas the dragon tended to view such things much differently. Entering a large room of the castle, the red beast recognized an old friend. "Novertos." He greeted the aged lizard with a smile.

"Karmu. It's been too long." The retired soldier gave the larger one a few taps on the collar.

"You look well. More baggy than I expected."

"And you look like you haven't changed a bit. Further proving my theory about your kind not aging." The two chuckled lightly.

"It's alright. They know." A bit of a serious nod.

"But the ears in the walls might not." The older lizard whispered. Overlooking the group to start a false conversation, but double taking at Wolfgang. "Soldier..." The younger lizardman stood up straight. "Where's Private Sandford?"

"Just outside, Sir." Wolfgang almost received a loud grunt from him.

"Here I thought I told that kid-"

"He volunteered, Novertos. And it's just like you to pick one of the most spineless soldiers for

the Prince's care to make my job harder." The senior one almost laughed at the red one's snort.
"Wolfgang did a perfect job."

"If there ever was one." Another backhand tap on the red chest.

"So..." Rivo whispered to the Ortel soldier. "Are you two-?"

"Do not even go there." Wolfgang replied, not trying to keep it very quiet.

"-Okay."

"They share very little similarities, Rivo. So, no. They are not related. Besides very distantly." The senior lizard gave the raptor a strange look. "About thirty four generations back for Wolfgang."

"Great. And everyone needed to hear that. Wonderful." The younger lizardman grumbled.

"Are you talking smack still, soldier?" Novertos said rather loudly.

"No Sir!"

"Yet, you still have that taunting tongue of yours. It's a wonder your captain hasn't cut that thing out yet and use it as a whip."

"It would still be snapping at asses then, Sir!" It made the older ones chuckle a bit.

"Especially your own." He smirked, then looked at the wyrmling more seriously. "Your Highness. Pardon the neglect."

"It's okay." Saessl giggled, but could tell there was something off on his face.

"So, you know?" The Render asked, getting a nod from the senior one.

"And I've been investigating around here since I heard the Prince went cliff diving. I guess that means Ortel owes you another one, whether they admit it or not."

"They didn't last time." Karmu muttered. "But they still haven't...?" That old scaly muzzle shook.

"They're still doing something with Tanure, but I can't tell you what. Seems the entire castle is in on-" Several footsteps flicked their ears. "I shouldn't be seen here, especially with you."

"Don't worry. It was good to see you, Novertos."

"Likewise, aatxe." And he left behind them, while the others gave the red one a few funny looks.

"What?"

"What's an Aatxe-?"

"It's a shapeshifter that often takes the form of a flaming bull." Naught said happily, getting looks from the others. "It's a very interesting legend, considering it's supposed to be a vigilante."

"That's not a word I would like to walk in on." A human male said, wearing a rather royal suit. Accompanied with several men, well-armed, and his lady.

"Forgive him, your Highness. Naught here was just telling us of a legendary creature known as an A... Chee?"

"Aatxe."

"Aatxe." Wolfgang informed him.

"And you must be...?"

"Wolfgang, Sir. D-Company of the Ortel Guard."

"I trust you're responsible for keeping our son safe then?" The queen asked.

"Partially, Ma'am. The credit goes to all of us that stand before you." The two overlooked the strange setup of characters before them. The Lizardman from the southeast. A traveling Blink Dog with a food stand. A Raptor that clearly knows way too much than he should. And a Render, who seemed to be guarding the hatchling like it was his very own.

"I see. Thank you all, from the bottom of our hearts. If there's any way that we can repay you, just say so." The human woman said, almost motioning the dragon to come to her, but Saessl almost hid within the silver forest.

"Saessl? Is something wrong?" The little one whimpered quietly.

"King Pharis, do you know why your son decided to escape this castle?" Karmu asked, a bit thickly. Judging by the looks on their faces, they didn't. "He claims that residents here are after his life."

"His life?"

"Is this true, Saessl?" Pharis asked the young dragon, but didn't get a response past eye contact.

"Mr... Minotaur-?"

"Karmu." The red one bluntly said, expecting something based around his horns.

"Mr. Karmu, Saessl is just a hatchling. I've heard they tend to get into a lot of trouble at young ages-"

"Even if it means resisting capture via cliff-jumping. I indeed heard that was *normal*." The red one grumbled sarcastically. "He also claims to hear of some sort of ritual on his tenth anniversary."

"We were planning a celebration for him, like we do every year-"

"Going outside the castle walls is not a celebration!" The wyrmling almost hissed. "You don't let me do anything I want to, anything for my own future! Instead, you keep me locked up in a few specific rooms-!"

"For your own safety, Saessl!"

"You mean, to keep me alive, Mom! To keep me strictly unharmed! Like me surviving is more important to you than me living a life...!" The two parents looked at each other.

"There's also traces of Tanure magics around the castle as well." The King grunted a bit at that. "Be straight with me, Pharis. Are you planning to sacrifice your son for the sake of your kingdom's wealthy future?" The two looked shocked, and almost angry at the Render.

"That's insane!"

"We would plan no such thing!" The queen yelled. "What have you been telling them, Saessl!?" The dragon gave a slightly guilty look as he took a few steps forward on the beast's head.

"...They're lying." Rivo said, getting the attention to everyone in the room. "I've done enough deals to know the signs, let alone being played." Karmu looked over at Naught for a second opinion.

"He is correct. They might not be sacrificing him exactly, but they are planning something for his future. Something that would hurt them deep down if they treated him like their real child." The dinosaur's statement made the crowns angry.

"Guards, seize them!" The king demanded, just before a wall of flames divided the room between them. As the group waited for orders from the red behemoth, Karmu looked up at the hatchling for a moment.

"It's your call, Saessl. What do you want?" The little purple dragon looked at the humans for a few moments with sad blue eyes.

"...I don't feel safe here, Karmu." He whimpered. "I want to leave. I want to stay with you and..." He looked over at the others in the group, getting a nod from each one, including the creature he was riding on.

"As you say, your Majesty." Karmu said, motioning the others to turn around and exit.

"You cannot kidnap our son, beast!" Pharis shouted, getting a look from those black eyes through the flames. "My Law will find you-!"

"King Pharis. I am a Render. I live Outside your law regardless. That threat holds no meaning to me. If you wish to send the lives of others to forcefully reclaim a child that is not yours by birthright, then expect them to fail. If they attempt, they will be pushed back. If they persist, they will Die." The red behemoth roared in the room. "Until Saessl feels safe inside these walls once again, you no longer have a son." As Karmu turned around to leave, he put out the flames quickly. Almost waiting for those guards to pursue, but they never came.

However, the guards within the city still helped escort them out, despite hearing the Render's statement from afar. Closing the city gates as the group passed through, and the beast overlooked the

others. "Are you certain about this decision to follow us?" He asked, both Wolfgang and Rivo.

"I already have a criminal record. If they want to pin something else on me..."

"You'll just teleport out of jail?" The Theropod asked.

"Providing there isn't another way out. Just to make sure I don't accidentally switch places with the bars themselves." The blink dog rubbed his mane.

"And you?"

"I only came to Ortel to get a bit more entertainment as a soldier." The lizardman shrugged. "Other than a very, very distant relative, I've got nothing here worth keeping. Besides, the Prince isn't home yet, is he?" The wyrmling chirped at him.

"Fair enough." They looked over at the golden canine once again. "Where to boss?"

"Well, I still have my wagon down there. Along with my life savings."

"That would be an exciting idea! I would love to see the beach up close!"

"Of course you would." Rivo half grumbled.

"Sounds fine by me. However..." Karmu looked up at the dragon once again. "Let's take the long way down this time, okay?" Saessl chirped at him again, and they headed out.

Chapter ---

The stormclouds gracefully moved closer, blocking the last bit of sun he could feel through the trees. Trees that he was still not used to, regardless of how long the red behemoth had occupied these forests. Drifting like a ghost from one area to another. Sometimes more opened fields, others within the dense plant life.

This was a little bit inbetween. With the incoming storm, he just felt tired. Exhausted from moving. Thinking. Breathing. Even going as far to care about the world around him. It was all the same after a while. Barren and empty, just like that desert which used to be an oasis.

But as much as he wanted to believe that his sheer will to exist in such a reality was worth creating such a poisonous land, he still couldn't help but blame himself. Ponder if he accidentally rid the entire lands of such life. Granted, that answer was indeed discovered. Rather quickly at that, but he still couldn't bring himself to face another creature. Especially after saving that soldier and encountering Horizon again.

So he remained hidden. Endlessly wandering and inhabiting a forest far away from them. Sleeping his existence away in a rainforest, one about to have another shower. As the red beast exhaled and heard the wind begin to pick up, scattering the leaves and moving the branches attached to them like moving a kite, he paid no attention to them. Not even moving when he felt something touch his tail.

"Fascinating..." His ear flickered, but the large one still didn't move. "A Jhraphine based lifeform existing within a carbon inhabited planet. How exciting!" That time, Karmu opened his eyes while raising a brow. "An extraterrestrial that has adapted to a new way of life here, surviving by..." A grab on his haunches was a bit too much, and the Render looked at the creature behind him; a rather colorful looking raptor. "Absorbing sources of heat? Astonishing!"

"...What?" He muttered, getting a rather energetic look from those violet eyes.

"You absorb heat, much like how many others here consume foods or even other species to survive, you essentially 'Eat' warmth. Like the sun's rays." The red one gave him a very confused look, and then looked where the sun was last seen. "You did not know this?"

"...No." He almost whispered, looking back at the dinosaur. "How did you...?"

"I can see it. And, in some form, I created you." A look of disbelief. "I am your Counterweight, Naughterrjvarijl." Karmu grunted at the name, sending a strange pain in his head trying to understand it. "Are you alright?" A grunt, but the red one wasn't sure how to answer that question. "You are... Wounded?"

"...What?"

"You are hurt." The raptor took a step closer up and laid down beside the larger creature. Still studying its arms and chest a bit with those small claws. "I didn't recognize it sooner, but... I can identify these feelings that you are carrying." Those black eyes turned a bit sad, yet puzzled by such a strange creature.

"...What are you?"

"A Counterweight?" Naught smiled at him. "That is a long, but interesting subject! We are..."

"You are builders." The behemoth muttered under his breath, still trying to process so much information at once while walking through the forests. Following the dinosaur as he went from one plant or animal to another.

"In a way, yes. We built the very basics here, and then planted the metaphorical seeds to start life. However, Counterweights do not look over such lives. We assign other creatures to do such things."

"Which are these Gods that other species talk about, or worship..." The Render muttered again, pausing for a moment before catching up to Naught. Nudging for his attention, and almost bracing the theropod in place. "Do not tell anyone what you told me."

"What?" Those frilled ears perked as his head tilted.

"You cannot, no matter what. If they ever suspect anything, tell them these specific words: I Am Not A God."

"But... Why?"

"People can't handle it. They could barely handle me living around them, a more powerful and more threatening being that was near God-hood compared to them. If you... If they...!" Karmu lost his train of thought due to harsh memories, letting go of the Raptor and sighing.

"There it is again..." Naught studied his broad chest again. "That pain." He looked into those black eyes, but the white iris' looked away. "What happened to you? What caused this?"

The two overlooked the Glass Desert from the distant mountain top. "...That is what I did. What I turned my city into, just to save..." The Render collapsed on the ground, and the theropod took a few moments to study the area from afar. Almost losing his own breath scanning the area.

"It's all... Poisonous. Both drastically heated then cooled while in liquid form due to the lack of the sun...? Am I reading that correctly?"

"All I remember is a white light of desperation."

"And even after all these centuries, the radiation still resides within that land. Anyone who's dared to cross it, poisoned and never returned." The Counterweight said sadly, trailing back to the mountain they climbed and closely studying the grounds there. "Even small traces of it are in here...? You created a cloud of debris, one that partially covered the entire world. That's why its temperature dropped slightly." A noise in question from the larger one. "You thickened the atmosphere a little. An overall better thing for nearly everything else, but slightly worse for you."

"Great." Karmu grumbled, and sighed. "...What is left for me here, Naught?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I am... You created me."

"I did not create you, Karmu. I did design your species, but..."

"Then what was their reason for existence?" Those violet eyes looked at him sadly. "Tell me."

"...What you call a Render is a cousin to another creature known as a Cryomithorous. Its purpose was to sleep within the center of the planet until the world demanded a reset."

"...Reset?"

"As in, start over. It would awaken, and erase all species on the surface before returning to its slumber." The behemoth sighed in defeat.

"And Renders were no different..."

"They were. Just smaller forms of it." Another sad look as if to request him again. "Their existence was to bring ruin to those who became too powerful. Be it a single being, or a large city. It was the idea of punishment or sin, to keep everyone..."

"Afraid." A sad nod from the dinosaur. "So that's what I am and what-"

"No, Karmu." Naught came over to the Render and laid beside him. "That was... The reason for the creation of your species, but that doesn't enforce your essence over your existence." A bit of a puzzled look from the larger one. "Think of Essence as your... Purpose. However, that does not mean your Essence should precede your Existence." Another blank stare, and the raptor pondered for a moment. "In other words: that does not make you who you are."

"Then, what am I?"

"You are... You." Karmu's expression turned a bit sad, making his ears fall. "You are responsible for everything that you do, and those actions make up who you are." The red one couldn't help but slowly look over the crystal desert before him, until the dino pulled his muzzle back gently. "Sometimes, yes. It can be the worst things you've ever done. But those actions alone do not define you."

"But my purpose should, shouldn't it?" A shake of that colorful muzzle. "Then what about my instincts as a Render? Needing to terrorize the world for..."

"Karmu... You do have those instincts, yes. But not every creature is the same, that includes Renders. There have been more than those who wish to engage in conflict, yes? You told me so yourself."

"Larksus... But, even he couldn't explain..." A smaller paw on his red one.

"The instinct still exists, yes. But some are a lot less influential, that includes you. As well as Larksus. Whatever Horizon did to him probably tapped into that instinct and amplified it." A small nudge from the theropod. "You have it too, but it took this much threat in order to trigger it. That does not

make you responsible for this action alone." The gaze of those black eyes dropped, as the red one took a breath. "Can I try something?"

"What?" The raptor moved a little closer and embraced the beast's neck. Holding onto him somewhat tightly, but not to the point of discomfort, all while getting a strange flutter within Karmu's chest.

"I heard this works from a friend."

"That other...?"

"Vyitritvuietoafecr, yes." A painful groan from the Render, made the dinosaur smile. "Someday you'll be able to hear that without flinching. But we talked about many things."

"Like what?" Karmu asked, now walking down a large grassy hill with the raptor. Overlooking the autumn changes to the forests of the north.

"Well, one specifically that might help you. Vyitritvuietoafecr told me when he Fell, he came across a book with many ideas within it. One of them being how most intelligent creatures tend to search for a greater purpose in existence, when really... There is none. Not individually, or in sections. He called this main idea The Absurd, and when these people realize this, they tend to only have three choices."

"Choices...?"

"One is ignore it: where the being would reject the idea and often distract themselves to neglect such a thought. The second is to commit suicide, unable to accept the idea of the Absurd, nor carry on without having that greater plan in motion for them."

"And the third?"

"Rebellion. To embrace the Absurd, but be happy regardless." It made the red one stop and look at him. "*It Happens That The Stage Set Collapses. ...At The End Of The Awakening Comes, In Time, The Consequence: Suicide Or Recovery.* If I quoted that correctly."

"What does that... Mean?" It made the raptor smile.

"It's what we're talking about; after the illusion of purpose is broken, you tend to only have those three choices."

"So, it's all meaningless? The idea of existence itself?"

"It's okay to think of it that way, but the point is, you do what makes you happy. What makes you whole. Whatever it takes to heal those wounds, even if it is to distract yourself from reopening them again." Naught placed a paw on his broad shoulder. "You are in control of your own actions, no

matter what they may be-Including the will to live! But you are also responsible for your own happiness."

"...Then what should I do?"

"What do you want to do?" He replied. Rather seriously, yet almost excited. Making the Render pause for a long few moments.

"I don't know." He finally said. Expecting a sad look from the dino, but got a smile instead.

"Then let's find something. You've only explored so little of this world, yes?" A slow blink but a faint nod with it. "There are plenty of experiences that are just waiting for us here."

"Experiences that will eventually fade away with myself. What is the purpose of doing anything if it's just going to be erased?" Naught looked at him a bit sadly. "...Sorry. I'm just having a hard time accepting this. If it all amounts to nothing, if it's all meaningless, why attempt it?"

"To find meaning." A questioning, yet slightly angry look from the beast. "Karmu, life does not have a plan for you. There's no such thing as your idea of individual Fate, no path that you are walking on that has already been preset." He stroked a paw through that silver mane. "It's up to you to find meaning, for yourself. Not the meaning that has been made for you, because that does not exist."

"Up to me to find meaning...?"

"If that meaning is happiness, then it's up to you to find it. If it's to help those in need, that's fine too. If it's to experience the world, travel, find the elusive Love, make something great for the future to enjoy..." The raptor took a deep breath as they walked through a forest. "It's all up to you. Just like it's up to the dog in that wagon to find his own."

"What dog?" Another smile from the dino, as he walked through a few bushes. Leading the two out onto the main road with a food wagon on the side. One without a carrier to be seen. "There's someone in...?"

"Yes, but they've only been here for a few hours. I wonder what happened." The two studied the strange carriage up close. "How interesting though, a wagon that sells styles of meals on the road." Until a wooden divider slid upwards near the Render's face.

"Greetings, Friends! How can-!" The canine inside yelped loudly after seeing Karmu's eyes up close. Slamming the divider down in fright, and getting the dinosaur to chuckle a bit.

"Don't worry, we're only curious about your wagon."

"C-curious how?" Rivo asked from inside.

"About what you do with your meats in the trailer here. You cook them, yes? Could we try one?" It took a few moments, but the dog attempted to open that divider again. Only to discover it was completely stuck, and went to a different one. This time, meeting the raptor face to face. Surprising, yes,

but a lot less frightful. "Please?"

"So, you're not here to rob me?"

"Rob you?" Naught tilted his head. "Goodness no! We just wanted some experience."

"Experience...?"

"To experience your cooking, of course! If you would be so kind." A few moments of study, and the golden one sighed. Nodding.

"Alright. One moment." He pulled a crank from within, and a large window off the side of the wagon folded out. Letting the three finally see each other, and the canine still being a bit spooked from the Render. "I was hoping to find another wagon passing by, but you two don't look like you're travelers."

"We're traveling to places, just off the roads." A bit of a strange look. "I am Naught. And this is my good friend Karmu."

"Rivo. And I've been stuck here all night." He sighed. "Do you have any coin on you, or...?"

"Coin?" The theropod asked, looking at the red one for a moment, then inside the wagon. "Oh, you use it as a form of exchange, don't you? How interesting!" A puzzled look from the dog. "But I'm afraid we have not collected anything like that. However, you said you are stuck? You could easily fit outside this window or any of those locked doors." A double take from the golden one.

"N-not stuck inside. I don't have any way of pulling this wagon anymore. My Malakin-"

"Oh, then Karmu could help you!" A double take from the behemoth that time. "He's very good at pulling things!" Naught met the rather shocked look with a smile, as those black eyes studied him and the front of the wagon. Eventually nodding a bit shyly.

"Really? That would be great if you could get me to the next town!"

"Oh, the next town! That does sound adventurous!" A bit of a concerned look from the Render, but the Counterweight just smiled at him again. "Is that alright with you? In exchange for food?" Another nod, as he moved towards the front of the wagon. "I'll get him strapped in the best I can while the stove heats up. Thank you, Rivo!"

"N-no, really. We're helping out each other. Probably you guys more than me."

"Nonsense. To Experience..." Naught looked at the sign on the wagon. "*Stuff On A Stick* is priceless!" The canine couldn't help but smile at the enthusiasm. As the larger two got the breastcollar on the red beast, and did what they could to strap everything in, the raptor nudged him a bit. "What are you thinking about?"

"...Do you remember that note I found after that crazy old wolf left?"

"About Weeds and Wildflowers?" A nod. "It would be a good metaphor for Purpose or Meaning, wouldn't you say?"

"...Yeah. Yeah, it would."