

Where The Frost Rose Withers

By Dextor

...Trapped Under Ice Too Long...

He woke up from a daydream, as if he was asleep for hours. The sound of the stream below him was hypnotic, and despite of how long he was out in the cold, his breaths were still visible. Leaning over the bridge's metal guards, the Polar Bear shook his head once again. Trying to relief himself from that fog in his head. Though it was still mid afternoon, dusk was setting in, and seemed to give off a strange pink color to the clouds and moving water in the brook. "It's rather pretty, isn't it?" The Polar Bear knew of that voice. He's heard it for years before he even moved out in this countryland. "Means it's going to be a nice day tomorrow." His guest took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, relaxing and leaning against the Bear's legs.

"When is it not?" The white one replied, rather lackadasically. "You'd think it wouldn't be so calm out." He tended to his stiff neck and shoulders, as he dismissed the guardrail of his weight.

"Should it not be, Bartan?" The orange panther-like thing asked. He was actually closer to a Tiger in size, and came up to the anthro's waist easily. The Bear shrugged at the question, not really knowing how to answer.

"I suppose I just like it better when it's raining or snowing. Regardless of the mess it tends to make. You've always known that about me." The beast lightly smiled at him, as the two began walking up the barren road of the bridge. At the end of it, large numbers written within the stone stood out. The numbers 1986, it always seemed to catch the bear's eye, and his smile always faded.

"...You still hate it, don't you?"

"Yes, Deago. I can't seem to help it."

"Why though?"

Bartan looked at him rather irritated by the question. "How many times have you asked that?"

"And how many times have you failed to give me a decent answer?" The Tirix smirked, getting the bear to grumble a bit, but thinking.

"...I guess it's that it is frustrating."

"What is?"

"Not being able to understand them. You see it everywhere: TV, Magazines, Books, Holiday Specials of all sorts. Especially this one. I can't tell if it's an act or not. Some kind of face that they just put on to please others."

"That sounds like someone I know." Bartan gave him an irked look, and Deago nudged him to carry on.

"I just got tired of trying to act like one of them, and feeling hollow inside. So I just told everyone to stop. I never cared for the presents, they meant nothing to me. I never cared for the cake or the sweets, because I got so sick of it. I never enjoyed the celebration because I never... Understood it."

"So that's why you distanced yourself away from them? Nearly everyone of them?"

"Except to the ones who held on. Even then, I get tired of them. I literally get exhausted."

The orange one frowned. "You really cannot be lonely, can you?"

"I can't. I know you wanted me to do... Many things with this species, but..." The quadroped just gave him a sad smile, and the two left it at that. "Deago, why are you out here? You usually don't come out during the winters."

"Not usually no. The snow reminds me too much of water."

"Because of that bane you used to have when you were the Force of Death. Yes. But why are you out here now?"

"I came out to get you Bartan." The answer puzzled the bear. "Lets just say you have guests." The tirix smiled as he sat the edge of the end of the driveway that lead up a small hill to three houses.

The bear tossed his head. "Taath, Deago. You didn't..." A paw covered his eyes and rubbed them in frustration. "I don't want to see anymore people."

"Well, they're people. But they're not human." Once again, it puzzled the bear and caused him to look at the middle house. "Go on. They're waiting." Another nudge. Bartan gave him a rather sad and uncomfortable look, but he slowly made his way up the snowy driveway.

The house looked rather normal. Old, but in good shape. The deck that went across the two front sides of the house was getting a bit old and needed to be replaced. But you could hardly tell with the snow covering it. The lights inside the house were on, and the bear could hear music playing inside. He could also hear what almost sounded like a series of large rocks rolling around a hollow tree. Looking around, he spotted two dragons laying in the snow; a large Silver one, clearly asleep and laying on top of a black one. "Get out while you still can." The black one grumbled at the bear. Bartan just gave a smirk and shook his head.

Approching the front door, he couldn't help but hesitate. That feeling once again in his heart, something he never could quite place. What he could only describe as a pain of some sort. After a few breaths, he opened it and stepped into the entryway of the house. It smelled of cooked turkey and baked goods coming from further into the house. But straight ahead of the front door lead to a much larger room known as a Storeroom. Through the doorway, he could see two people sitting and drinking a beverage, both in rather warm clothing and coats. The Female Gerbil waved at him and motioned him to come over.

Hesitation once again came over Bartan as he tried not to make eye contact with them. The feeling of entrapment set in when the door behind him was closed by Deago, who gave the bear a smile and a little push. "You're not running away from this one. Get in there and enjoy yourself." A quiet exhale was the only reply the white one could come up with, as he walked through the doorway.

Upon entering it the scenery changed, as if stepping through a portal of some sort. Once again, Bartan was outside of another home that had a second story deck to it. The weather was cool, but a light snow was falling down. It was a beautiful snowy view of the countryside. Forests of pine and spruce trees covered the hills beyond the road in the distance. "Even with your own characters, you still feel uncomfortable?" The Gerbil asked. She was wearing ear muffs and a black winter coat that actually seemed quite thin. Covering most of her white and aqua blue fur, that appeared to be dyed.

"The social awkwardness that is my father. It's rather strange to see compared to the real thing." The male Cheetah said. He was dressed in clothing identical to the female. Light black jacket and pants. Lacking the muffs though.

"Step-father. I actually didn't create you, Hatchet." Bartan corrected him.

"But you did create the one that created him, so in a way, you're still his father." A red dragon said. He was about wyrmling size, and laying down on what appeared to be a large pillow.

"Zhai?" The dragon's ears went back. "What are you doing here?" The bear questioned.

"Is that what his name is? He's been getting us to call him Sire this entire time." The blue furred one giggled.

"Thanks almighty creator. Now that name is going to spread like wildfire around here." The dragon snorted after he grumbled. It made Bartan smirk sadly a bit.

"Come on, sit for a while."

"Lillith has been looking forward to this visit for a while now."

"Looking forward?" Bartan tilted his head as he took a seat. "So you guys have been planning this for a long time now."

"Well, not us. But your mates have." Lillith answered. It honestly lowered the bears head a bit in shame. "Come on, now. This is suppose to be a celebration for you. Not something you're suppose to feel uncomfortable being a part of."

"I still detest that word..."

"Why though?" The dragon asked. "Granted, I feel for you. When the children often held celebrations for me, I didn't enjoy being a part of them. But that was for an entirely different cause."

"Children? Exactly what were you doing in your story?" The cheetah asked.

"He calls most mortals Children. Long reason short: it's because they tend to act like children for 80% of the lives, whereas dragons don't." Bartan explained.

"Yes. But your reason is much different, isn't it Bear?" Once again, he avoided making eye contact.

"If you don't start talking, I'll get Deago back out here." Lillith playfully threatened.

Bartan sighed quietly again. "...I think it started with how much I was neglected in my life. My parents were around, but in a family with four children... They were already worn out from work. My siblings never seen me

as smart or intelligent. I often hid it so they would feel better. I did that with a lot of people around me, Friends, Students, Peers..."

"So you've always acted less smarter than you were so that others would feel better about themselves?" Hatchet asked, taking a sip out of his eggnog.

"...For the most part, yes."

"That still doesn't answer the question though. Why does it make you feel awkward to celebrate something?" The bear slightly cringed when the dragon said that word.

"And usually when a child is neglected, they tend to want attention when they're older." The cheetah added.

"...Perhaps it's the feeling that I don't deserve it. I could not understand how people would celebrate someone's life. Especially if..."

"That person was thought less of?" Lillith finished his sentence, and the bear nodded. "Still, that's no reason not to celebrate their existence. Even if they did think less of you because of that, I'm sure you still brought them happiness." Bartan just lowered his ears and looked away.

"That's not the right answer." Zhailthe said. "You would be more jealous of others getting the attention if it was something like that. The reason why you feel ashamed of it is because you're looking at these people feeling happy about the celebration being held for them, and you can't mimic that. And you're disappointed that you can't get that reaction correctly. You seem to have it engraved inside that head of yours that if you can't please them, you'll let them down. And therefore; offend them." The dragon looked at the polar bear. "I can't say I blame you though. Children are often like that. If they don't get this big reaction out of you like in the movies or tv shows, they feel hurt. But you're taking it the wrong way. You're thinking of it as if you're failing them, not that they're failing you."

"...Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I'm right, I'm a dragon." His neck curled to an S, while the other two just rolled their eyes, smiling.

"Go on. Other people are waiting for you." Lillith said, motioning a dismissal with her paw. Bartan slightly frowned at the three, but got up to leave anyway. Moving past Hatchet, the cheetah put up a paw in the way of the bear.

"Whatever you do, whatever expression you make, you cannot

disappoint us. Even if you make a complete fool out of yourself here by walking around naked, you'll make someone here happy."

"Probably Arson or Beo, but someone." The gerbil added, letting out a slight giggle. It honestly made him feel a bit better. Once Hatchet put back his paw, Bartan went through the doorway again, back to the entry way, and through the first door: the kitchen.

This one seemed like the correct kitchen to the house it was attached to. It was a bit small, but just enough room to begin small meals and such. On the cupboards were many dirty dishes used for cooking. Many servings currently being made by what appeared to be black, serpent-like chains coming out of the walls and surfaces around the kitchen. In the middle of the floor, in front of the oven, was a black Tirix with a green mane. "Oh lord. Really? You're cooking?" The bear grumbled. Only to get half a snout tossing for a reaction out of him.

"Live with it. I'm the only one that can keep everybody out. And how did you get in?" Bartan pointed at the door he came through. "Forgot that was there."

"To be fair, the refrigerator blocks the view. But seriously, why are you cooking supper, Rixxix? Beo loves cooking."

"Beo couldn't fit in the kitchen well, and ended up giving a few people a concussion with that tail of his." It put a smile on the white one's muzzle. "So I'm doing. Apparently they consider me safer than a dragon." He grumbled.

Slightly pointing at all the working chains. "Tell me they washed their... Mandibles?"

Another grumble. "Yeeessss. Why does everybody ask that? They all washed themselves in the sink with soap."

"You mean the one that's full of blood?"

"It's half water." Bartan glared at him. "Okay, maybe 25% water. But still, they're clean. What more do you want me to do?"

"Get out of the kitchen and let someone else cook."

"You want to? Be my guest-"

"Nope, you're not passing this duty to the guest of honor." Deago said, coming through the same door Bartan entered.

"I knew I should've sealed that shut." The black one grumbled.

"Before he convinces you to do something you'll regret, move along Bartan. You've got other people waiting on you."

"What about Rixxix?"

"I'll help him out. I don't shed, so it's alright." The orange one shoved the bear, pushing him to the next room. "We'll be fine. Go on."

Entering the next room was like walking through another portal. Bartan ended up into a long living room. The brown carpet flooring was thin, but still comfortable and seemed to go well with the wood walls. Several chairs and a christmas tree that was a tad over-decorated filled the room, along with several christmas related items along the large window on the left wall. As the bear studied the area with an achey heart, two quadropeds scurried across the floor, laughing. They both looked at the bear for a moment. "Dad! You're home!" The wolf-like one shouted. His fur was quite long for his age, and only slightly messy. But a pure white that almost seemed to reflect the room itself. Bartan was a bit surprised by the statement it said. Which puzzled the second one.

"Have you been working again, dad? You rarely look like that unless you're back in Lyago's universe." The other one was almost a brass dragon wyrmling. Some of the outer edges of his scales had small patches of red fur coming out that gave a few outlines on his body. Though a different species, they had a striking resemblance between the two.

"That's not your father." A silver dragon entered the room, chuckling. He was quite slender, had a mane of long grey spines, and blue eyes. "Well, he his, just not yet."

"Owwwh, you're the past version of Dad!" The two nodded in understanding, and leaned into the bear, nudging for attention from him. Bartan kneeled down to do just that, as the silver dragon came close and gave him a lick.

"Your sons are gorgeous." He said, after they went back to playing with each other. "I've always wanted some of my own."

"I know, Khol. I half implied that you did at the end of Zhaiothe's tale, but never fully stated it..." He said, placing a paw on the dragon's muzzle and lightly stroked it. However, he couldn't hide the pain he was feeling.

"...It's this place, isn't it?" The silver one whimpered.

"It looks just like it used to."

"What happened to it?"

"...We lost it. Financially. Something happened, to make a long story short, and the bank reclaimed it. After a good twelve or so years, someone ended up burning it down. I'm thinking it was for the insurance on the home for whoever still owned it. But they were never caught." Bartan sat down on the floor of where he stood, while the dragon laid next to him. "...Out of all the years I've lived in this life, I don't think I've ever been happier than when I was here. Perhaps it was because I was too young and ignorant, unable to really open my eyes to see what was going on. But..."

"And here? Do you remember?"

"...Probably the last holiday I remember as a child that was perfect in my eyes at the time. I honestly don't recall to much of it. But I remember being part of that family. A series of people, a group of people. This is probably where I lost it." As the two watched the young ones play for a little bit longer, the bear took a breath to collect himself before getting up. Stroking the dragon behind the ears and under the chin to get him to purr a bit, he left his future sons in the Silver one's care.

The next room was another living room. The original from the house. it seemed much smaller, bending out behind the kitchen for some space with a love seat and a couch. Several windows and the door to the deck outside was on the walls, and opposite to the small room was a corner set of stairs that would bend to reach the second floor. Inside the room sitting were a gray Gnoll, a blue Dragonite, two avians; Brown and Red, along with a white fox. The fox spotted Bartan awkwardly looking into the room and motioned him to come over. Once again, that fear got to him and he did his best to stay out of their sight. Leaning against a wall, sitting, and looking under the stairs.

A few moments later, the fox came to Bartan and sat beside him. "Even when it's your own characters, you still seem too shy to say hello." She said, getting a sad smirk out of the bear.

"Lillith basically said the same thing."

"Well, she's alot like me. That's why you hired her. I mean, going to hire her. Y'know, because your identity is a complete mess." She teased, trying to shove a full smile out of him. The smirk grew a bit, and she accepted it. A few moments later, he reached out for her hand and held onto it. Staring forward at the empty space.

"...I still can't believe that it's been almost three years. I can still hear him."

"I know you can. It tends to keep you up at night sometimes, doesn't it?" The bear nodded. "Is that where he slept? Your father?"

"The bed was there, yes. It was right in the middle of the house where everyone could hear him. Regardless that anything that came out of his mouth never made sense. It was all hoops and hollers with zero logic. It's what that disease did... And it ruined us. He ruined our family, and I..."

"Shhh, it's alright. You did a good thing for him."

"A good thing? He didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve to age backwards like that, unable to keep one thing straight in his mind without it being almost immediately forgotten the next moment. We didn't deserve having to live with him for what he did to us. And what did I end up doing to the person who wrecked our lives? I gave up mine to take care of him. All because his wife couldn't do it alone. Now that he's gone, I've got nothing out of it. Just a few pats on the back and sorrow faces. I gave the guy half my life, the most important part of my life, and now I feel like I just can't get over it."

"No one is trying to make you. You can't, and these things take time. Bartan, out of everyone here, you probably have lost the most. In what little time you spent in this world that you lived in, you lost about twice as much as a normal person would."

"It still feels like it gave me nothing out of it. I still don't feel like I'm better off for that world from that experience. All he gave me was misanthropy. To the point where I can no longer be a part of it..."

"Do you want to be part of it?"

"...No, Arson. I don't. Not anymore."

"Then you don't have to." She smiled sadly at him, as she brought his head to her chest. "This will be the only time you will ever hear me say this, but I think Rixxix is right. You need to start living for yourself." The bear raised his head and looked at her strangely. "Only time, I swear." She half laughed.

"It's just hard to. Knowing how much I'm going to be taking from others."

"And if you leave, you'll be taking something as well. I know, you've been in this circle for a very long time. But as your wife, I'm telling you this: After everything that has already been taken from you, it's okay to take a

little back. Just don't overdo it." Bartan gave a small nod as he leaned into her once again. After a few minutes, the Fox nudged him. She got up, and pulled him to his feet, leading him towards the others. Once again trying to resist it, Arson just pulled a little harder to get him to move. "Come on. They're not going to bite you."

"They might, considering what I did to them." She just smirked and shook her head.

As the two stumbled in view of the other four, they got their attention. "It's about time he made it... Who is this?" The Gnoll asked, holding an ice pack to the back of his head.

"This is Bartan. My husband, and who lives in this house. I can't say he owns it." Arson playfully shoved the bear on the couch, sitting next to him.

"So this is Bartan? The mysterious voice that squeaks heard pretty much his entire story?" The Blue dragonite asked.

"Yeah... That's me."

"He finally has a face. I was beginning to wonder if it was all in his head." The Red bird snorted. Adjusting his glasses a bit.

"But... You heard him speak. You all did."

"Doesn't mean he was real. I still have a hard time to believe something like you exists." Kassel whimpered at the doctor, then got a nuzzle from Tobyas.

"I have a hard time too." She said, getting an odd look from the Gray one. "But in a good way of course." She tossed her snout.

"So, you two are still an item? Looks like he did well with you then." The Fox said, holding the bears hand once again. "Have you thought about kids yet?"

The Gnoll whimpered and swallowed loudly, staring into space. Until the Blue one shoved him. "Don't give me that, Kass. We've been trying, but only occasionally. We've actually adopted Cinna for now, and he thinks she's a handful."

"Cinna? Is she here too?" Bartan asked.

"Somewhere, yes. She wanted to throw snowballs at some black bull." Clayon said. Instantly getting a reaction out of the bear; covering his eyes

grunting.

"You guys invited Gorret too?"

"We invited alot of people. But quite a few of them couldn't fit in the house, or had plans already." The bear lowered his head and his ears, then Arson gave him a shove. "Don't you be doing that."

"I'm starting to see a resemblance here." Stigborg said, comparing the two couples.

"It's all in your head." The Dragonite tossed her snout, and said rather quickly. "But what is wrong with him? What is this?"

"He's just feeling uncomfortable around people again. He's always been like that."

"How long have you two been together?"

"A good twelve years?" The Fox looked at Bartan and he shrugged. "Something like that."

"And he still acts like that?" Tobyas' neck curled. "I was hoping he would quit whimpering everytime I mention sex eventually." Kassel whimpered again, giving the Bear a look that said 'I feel your pain.' "Speaking of which, how do you guys feel with a couples session?"

"W-what?" The Gnoll looked at her.

"It's up to you. It's your party." Arson nuzzled Bartan.

"I'm fine with it. But is it okay if Beo joins too?"

"Wait, who's Beo again?" The Dragonite asked.

"He's the one that gave Kassel the concussion with his tail." The Brown one answered.

"Wait-what? I thought Rixxix was joking about that." Bartan looked at Arson for an explanation.

"It's true, you know how happy Beo gets, and well... How small your kitchen here is. Kass went in to get a refill or something, and well..."

"It was just eggnog." The Gnoll whimpered, still tending to his head. "And I'm not sure if I feel comfortable with a group session. Or a session with another male, let alone two."

"It's too bad you weren't still squeaky. I'd like to see if we could get you

on Beo's full sized-" A loud embarrassing whimper interrupted the bear, while Kassel buried his face in his paws and a nearby pillow. The sight made everyone chuckle and Bartan smile a bit. The Fox spotted it and the two locked eyes. A small nuzzle and she whispered to him.

"See? It's not so bad, is it?" Her only reply from him was another nuzzle, and holding her a little tighter. "Alright, head on outside. There are other people waiting to see you."

"We'll schedule the orgy later." Tobyas teased. While the Gnoll muffled something within the pillow, everyone looked at him for a few moments in silence. Trying to translate it. "I think he said 'It was nice to meet you, Bartan.' But we'll see you later." The dragonite looked over the bear. "All of you." She whispered loudly, getting another whimper from Kassel.

Bartan got up and headed to the back door, leading outside. Opening up to the deck of the original house. Though he swore he never seen them while traveling up the steep driveway, there were four people in the yard. One man standing out in the deck, and four out in the snow, throwing it at each other: A large black bull, a small lion cub, and two teenage human females. "Finally made it, did you?" The human male said, lighting up another cigarette.

"At least you're smoking outside. I don't like it when people smoke in the house." The man gave a nod in understanding.

"I was half thinking you might've forgotten about us."

"Not really... I've just been..."

"Busy with the other story, I know." The bear's gaze fell to the ground, and the man chuckled, getting the white one to flick his ear a bit. "They warned us you we shy."

"I'm not sure if that's the correct word for it." He mumbled.

"Can I ask you something, Bartan?" He looked at Gene for a few moments. "How different is Afterlife compared to Gorret's real story in Entropy's War?"

Sighing, the White one lightly shrugged. "I can't tell you. Entropy's War is based heavily on combat. Very heavily. Conflict is basically it's main attraction."

"Which I find odd really, but..." Again, the Bear just studied the man. "All I'm saying is there isn't alot of combat in your stories. Not things that

really take a long time."

"Fights really don't take that long in real time."

"People have just been spoiled in movies and video games, I know."

"But Entropy's War was inspired by them. The fights in there usually last a good 2-12 minutes. They're very fast paced, supernatural, and... A bit one-sided usually. It was the performance that mattered. Not the outcome of the fight, but what happens during it. And how it effected those within it..." Barton sighed once again. "It's just not something I'm able to describe in words. And when I try, it's not nearly..." Gene held up his hand to say that's enough. Smiling while shaking his head.

"You worry too much about what others think. I mean, yeah, I get some of the bigger ones are very hard to follow. Hatchet's action scenes for example, that's just ridiculous to put into words."

"Oh, you mean when he's in Oblivion? That Rusted City?"

"Yeah, we took a look at some of the things you seen in the other characters. And I agree, some of it you really can't put into a story like that. In order to get the full details, it would almost have to be in script form. And scripts really don't hold any personality." The bear nodded a bit sadly. "So, back to the main question: If E-W's main attraction is the action in it, and you take that out, what do you have left? I guess what I'm asking is, what exactly are you planning to do with Afterlife? Where is it going?"

"...I don't know. I'm not even sure if I'll finish it."

"You will, you always do." The man smiled at him adjusting his cap. "It itches at you until you get it done."

"...It's main purpose was to explore exactly what it was to be Humane."

"And do you feel like you've gotten that point across?"

"Not really. Just a huge info dump about the virtues for the most part. I've felt like next to no one has ever looked into them, knowing what they are or what they mean. Alot of it just seems so..."

"Unknown to the world?" The bear nodded sadly, then lightly chuckled.

"...I find it almost ironic. I don't even consider myself human in that world anymore. Yet here I am, trying to preach on how to be humane to others. It's so Hypocritical of me... As If anything I say would really make a difference."

"Bartan..." Gene threw the butt of his cigarette away. "Do you believe in what you write?" The bear looked at him. "And you know very well the power of words. What was that song...?"

"The Weapon They Fear? Heaven Shall Burn?"

"The one about the poet?"

Bartan nodded. "Silence And Screams Are The End Of Our Song."

"Yep, that's the one."

"Victor Jara."

"All that guy did was write or sing words. And look what he did, what he started... A few words can change the world. Depending on how many actually Listen, not Hear." There was a bit of silence between the two, until a snowball hit the bear in the face. A series of giggles filled the empty space. "Want to join them? We can team up against those three and Gorret."

"Not kids vs adults? Males vs Females?"

"Are you kidding? Have you seen the size of those snowballs he throws? They're like beach balls." It made the bear chuckle a bit, but declined nonetheless.

"I've..."

"Got people you need to see. I hear you. Come back to us though. It's getting dark out." He faintly nodded at Gene, as the man picked up a snowball and threw it. Shortly after, Bartan went back into the house.

Faintly looking at the previous group he was with, again feeling that awkwardness, Arson motioned him to go upstairs. A faint nod and he went up, naturally taking two steps at a time. A small hallway that held four doors awaited at the top of the corner stairs. Overlooking them, trying to hear anything to indicate who was in what, he took the first one on the left. Unable to really make out anything besides those talking downstairs.

Going through another portal to a rather harsh environment. It was a dark canyon. Dull, gray, and lifeless were the large rock walls and the gravel-like floor. Very faint remains of plants and grass that once actually survived in such a dead location, along with the smell of ash and decay. Bones of many creatures laid in wait on the grounds, many of them looking humanoid. Large

black pillars of what almost looked like abominations of scales and bone fused together erupted from the walls and floors, reaching up to the sky as if to attempt to grasp the very moon above and claim it for themselves. In the middle, laid the only thing that looked alive within the wasteland. Sending a painful sigh from Bartan, knowing who it was.

An anthropomorphic Tiger, in a long gray coat with white jeans laid on his back. Staring at the sky. His green eyes eventually trailed over to the Bear, giving him a faint smile as the orange one sat up. "Made it, did you?" He asked the white one, getting nothing more than the painful look of shame in those brown eyes. "You remember this place?"

"...BH89: Brimstone Pit." The Tiger nodded at him, motioning him to come over and sit down with him. Slowly the polar bear did.

"You used to love this place." He placed a heavy paw on Bartan's shoulder. Though the coat really hid it well, the tiger was very, very well built. He often didn't know his own strength at times. "You spent hours in here. Perhaps days even. But I could never understand exactly why. Was it the enemies?"

"No... They were a pain in the ass."

"The map layout?"

"Confusing pain in the ass."

"The Bosses?"

"Royal pain in the ass."

"Then what was it?"

"Lyago..." Bartan couldn't look at him. A few deep breaths indicated the bear was having a hard time holding himself together. "...It was the atmosphere. It was so dead, lonely, cold... It reminded me of a grave to be honest. Though I couldn't help but fall in love with it."

"...You would often clear this area by yourself, something many people were unable to do alone. Just so you could lay down here for hours on end. Until the server kicked you out." Another long silence. "Bartan... Lets talk about this." Another heavy breath. "Explain to me, what was this? Start with the basics. What game was this?"

"...Perfect World International."

"And what was your plan for it? Something to do?"

He was quiet for a moment. "...It was a social experiment. I tried so many times to be part of that real world I was in, only to fail time and time again-"

"Most of that wasn't your fault though-"

"That doesn't matter. It's still considered... A loss. The only thing I was good at was learning how to manipulate electronics. And the only thing that could keep my attention for the most part was video games. PWI was an experiment... One that was very... Social." Lyago motioned him to go on. "The idea was: if I lived in a world that was more like a video game, how much different was my life in it? And from an outside glance, there doesn't seem to be a lot of similarities between the game world and the real one. But there are so many... It honestly felt like I was in there."

Bartan continued. "I learned the game by myself. I learned the importance of how to survive in it. Learned the physics and the mechanics of the game... Being an anti-social, that's how I usually did it; Alone. But after so long, you can't do everything by yourself. You need the help of others."

"Bartan..."

"I tried. And I succeeded for the most part. But after a while..." A bit of silence. "I'm sorry, Lya. I... My lack of confidence got the better of me. I drowned in my insecurities. And in the end, I just reverted back into my shell-lifestyle. Trying to stay alone, be alone. Not bother with social activity anymore... I kept thinking to myself that I didn't belong with these people. That I didn't deserve to be here with them. Help them... That I'm not one of them..."

"But the people there weren't bad. Okay, a few of them were." A few sniffs from the bear. "Is that why you liked it here? You described this place as a grave. Were you trying to bury me or something?"

"No... I loved you, Lyago. I wanted so much to be what you became. You were a reflection of everything I wanted myself to be... Strong, cunning, completely posthuman, even on a player level..."

"Bartan... I was only doing what you commanded me to do. In the end, that's all I was. An action figure, or a Doll in your hands. You're the one who did everything-"

"No-"

"You're the one who helped everyone you came across. You protected them-"

"No-"

"You're responsible for what they became. You're the one who lead all those people to be who they are. Regardless of how much you deny it, you still played a huge part in their lives."

"Lya..." The bear whimpered.

"You've got to stop feeling this way about people. You are worthy enough to be around them. To assist them. To protect them. Just like you always did."

"I can't..."

"Bartan..."

A few tears rolled down his muzzle. "I can't do it... It just hurts. I don't know how else to describe it..."

"...Is that why you quit? You did this for three years. You'd stay on the game for nearly 12 hours a day. Starving or exhausted; you were just constantly helping others as if it was your day job."

"Lya..."

"Regardless of what you read in the actions of others. Regardless of how you took the words of that pessimistic opinion in your head. You deserve better than what you give yourself. You are worthy of more than what little you take-" It broke the bear into sobs. Unable to take anymore of it. With a faint smile, Lyago just held onto him for a bit, while he emptied himself. About an hour later, the tiger spoke up. "...Beo didn't get too far with you on this, did he?"

"...He tried. I honestly don't believe there's any fix, Lya..."

"Of course there is. You just..." They remained quiet for a while. "This wasn't suppose to be what this party was about... Sorry."

"You're not the first to bring something like this up... Granted the first one to..."

"You can't be strong forever. Eventually even the strong have to break from time to time."

"...You never do." Again the two were quiet for a while. Eventually, Bartan pushed the tiger on his back, resting his clear furred head on the orange chest.

"Honestly, I don't know why you see a defect like me as a role model."

Something you want to become." The bear looked at him. "...Untamed have two hearts. It's what makes us so... Resilient. But at birth, only one of my hearts worked."

"...That's exactly why I love you. Despite your defects, you've done feats even the other-"

"But so have you. And I've only done those things with the help of you." Pain was reflected in the bear's eyes again when Lyago said that. "I don't understand how that hurts..."

"...Though The Warpath Hardly Knows Your Name, The Taste Of Blood Between Your Teeth Feels Real..." Bartan said, getting up and heading out the door.

For a few moments, he stood in the hallway. Taking his time to collect himself, noticing the pattern of this entire 'Party'. Staring at the door straight across from the last one, he couldn't help but half wonder who was inside, and what prying they wanted to do to him. Some laughter from downstairs broke his thoughts and once again his heart ached. Another breath, and he opened the next door.

The portal lead to a tall library. It was one single room, with a long table with several game systems on it. On the shelves were game cases, all stacked neatly and organized. Up on one of the ladders was a Brown Tirix browsing through the higher shelves. Bartan closing the door to the room got the Beast's attention, making him brace the ladder. "Afraid of heights?"

"Not really acrophobic, just... Cautious." He said, slowly climbing down. Though being a quadroped, it seemed a bit difficult for him. To the point the bear helped him down. "You have a vast collection here. I'm surprised, it's probably even bigger than your knowledge of Entropy's War."

"Collection?"

"Yes. This is your accumulated knowledge of videogames." The tirix said, overlooking the shelves again. When the brown one faced the bear once again, his white head was hung low. "What's the matter?"

"...Some would consider it useless knowledge..."

"Useless?" The creature tilted his head. "No information is useless, Bartan."

"Many people seem to see it that way. It won't help out in the real world, Ryoko."

"Well... Maybe not knowing how much AP Warrior Chiulin gives, or what skills a Bone Dragon has. But..." Ryoko motioned the bear to follow him to the table. "Statistics and facts are not the only types of information, you know." He gave a sad smile to the white one. Bartan just shrugged and slightly browsed the shelves from afar. "But seriously, mind if we try something?" The bear raised an eyebrow at the beast, while he was looking down at the table at several games that have been taken off the shelves. "What did you learn from... Final Fantasy VIII?"

Bartan was quiet for a moment. "It was the first out of the series that I've played. One with a rather complex Junction system-"

"Not looking at the mechanics of the game. But things you've learned from it."

The bear studied him for a few moments. "...That the Guardian Forces/Summons were references to many beings that were from different lore. Also discovered the consequences of thinking too much, but didn't learn from it... And the value of being alone. Mostly due to other people being pests and trying to interfere with your own life. It was the beginning of me realizing that not only I was so different in a social level, but even my Wants and Values held something different. That what I felt was Needed for my future was different from everyone else. It wasn't companionship, currency, or something foolish like a cellphone or a car..."

"What was it?"

"Purpose. A meaning of existence. And here I am, a good fifteen years later... Following Deago's advice to the point where I enslaved myself to others around me. Bathing in Masochism, just to keep everyone happy." The two were quiet for a few moments. "...A Deeply Heart-Filled Goodbye To The Part Of Me That Died, When I Decided To Put Others Before Me..."

"That's... A Poem?"

"You could argue that it is." Another moment of silence. "The Agonist - ...And Thier Eulogies Sang Me To Sleep." Ryoko smiled at the bear, although Bartan didn't look at the Tirix for a few moments afterword. In which he double took at the beast, giving it an odd look.

"Another library of yours. Possibly more vast than this one." It made the bear's ears lower a bit, as well as his gaze. "You know... Back in the older days, I read that people didn't think that studying stories and poetry was in any way useful. They honestly shuned it as a waste of time, instead of learning something much more physical like labor." Another smile while shaking his canine muzzle. "You understand the power of knowledge and

information. You've used it in every one of these games. That's why this library is so big."

"Yes, but it's mostly useless."

"Not to be harsh, but who are you to state that this information is useless?" Bartan was quiet after that. "You've even told people yourself, that no knowledge is useless. Knowing that $2 + 2 = 4$ might not help you in a pop quiz on colors, but doesn't mean the information is useless. It's just not needed for that subject." Again, the bear was quiet. "What about this one? Silent Hill 2?"

"...The value of Abberations and how closely they can resemble your fears. The best monsters ever designed are the ones that torment you, even when they're not around or just in cutscenes. Not things that just jump out to scare you or hide in a closet somewhere. The ones that you can see yourself in, as if staring at a twisted reflection stained by your own guilt and regrets. The best monsters ever designed are ourselves... James Sunderland taught me that. And even though we are stained, regardless how much we try to forget that, it's those scars are what I find the most beautiful thing about the human species."

"So that's where your affection for such things came from? This game?"

"...Games are virtual experiences. And are closely relateled to life alot more than one would expect... I lived my entire life within one it seems, and many of the things that have made me who I am were from them. Something interactive, yet seems so lifeless in the eyes of people who've never been in them." Bartan sighed. "...But, I can't stand what they've become lately. I've seen one of the most innovative games recently fall apart due to poor design choices. A game I thought I would love, that would be part of the positive section of this library. But too many bad decisions in later patches of the game, and lack of interesting content just made it not worth my time anymore." A few moments of silence. "I know these games all meant something at some point in my life. And I know I took something from all of them to heart and mind. But that's not why I'm ashamed of them, Ryoko." He placed a paw on the shelf, looking through some of the game cases. "I contemplated a while back if these turned me into a Masochist."

"A Masochist?"

"Yes. The first ones were difficult, but the reward it gave so much more accomplishment. The difficulty was part of the Learning Curve. I understood that. But the more recent ones... They felt like the reward was nothing more than bragging rights."

"But aren't all of them like that? You never get a tangible reward for completing such things."

"But you do get the one for confidence. Lately, many of the rewards have felt so... Hollow. I don't know how else to describe it. You are compelled to complete tasks because you feel like you have to. And when they're nothing more than a pain in the ass, stressful chore..."

"The reward feels empty. And you feel like you're harming yourself for the sake of nothing more than entertainment." Bartan nodded, not looking at him. "And you think because of this lifestyle you've made that you're...?"

"When I discovered it, I tried to get myself to stop doing it. Stay away from the more stressful challenges that held no reward for me. But in doing that, I also felt like I limit myself compared to other people. I won't do things that they label as 'Entertainment' and therefore are often excluded out. A few things, and it's fine. But when it's half the game..."

The brown creature chuckled, getting the bear's attention. "You're not a masochist then."

"But they are. Even if it's just a minor form of it. I remember there being this ridiculous solo boss in one of the games. And a friend of mine did it, twice. Regardless of how much pain and frustration it brought him, he worked on it for hours before he took it down. When I asked him about it, he shrugged and said 'For the Achievement.' ...For the Bragging Rights. To say that you've done it, and put it inside of a gaming portfolio that no one will ever see. To carry it with you that you've beaten yourself senseless against an AI's wall to just say you did it... I don't have another word for that. It's not quite Masochism in the sexual way, but..."

"You're thinking too much." Ryoko smiled. "If you don't want to do it, you don't have to. And if your friends want to do it, let them."

"Let them down, you mean. Because you have standards..."

"Is that what you're afraid of? Disappointing them?" Bartan stayed quiet. "You don't need to stress yourself out for other people."

"Then how else am I going to help them?"

"Do you want to?"

"...Deago does. He always has... A reason why I play them is to help people the only way I know how. And if I constantly limit myself because the content is irksome, I'm not going to be able to be any use to people. I've been left behind so much lately, that I don't even see the point in carrying on in the

games... What use am I if I can't help people?" The white one left the room with the rhetorical question.

Once again feeling that exhaustion as he entered the hallway, from both the party and the social activity. Looking out the window far above the stairway, the sun had already set quickly. And the remaining light was soon following the snowy froesty landscape. Shaking his head, Bartan just wished this night would end. Yet something compelled him to keep going, that internal conscience that went by Deago's every word. With nothing more than a sigh, he obeyed. Carrying on into the next room.

Upon entering, the warm night air greeted him gently. The sight was breathtaking, regardless how often he'd seen it in his dreams. What seemed to be a long grassed, green meadow with very few trees, an entire island in the middle of what seemed to be the cosmos. Thousands of stars from many galaxies were in view, along with a few Quasars filled the skies above as if out of a dream. It was a paradise, if there ever was one.

Laying in the fields was a Brass dragon on it's back, which appeared to be napping or just resting. One small glance of it put a smile on the bear's face, as he walked towards it. Though the grass wasn't noisy, stepping on it did get the dragon to flick an ear in the bear's direction. Letting him know the Brass one was indeed conscious and awake.

He was huge, nearly 50 feet in length including the tail. And very well built. Without even flexing, Bartan could see the bicep muscles on the dragon's forearms buldge out of it's scales. He always loved how strong this dragon was, and how his pressence seemed to flutter the bear's brambled heart. A soft touch on those scales as he carefully made his way across his large red furred wings and up to his broad neck.

The scales here were very thick and seemed heavy by the look of them. Trailing up to the very top of the throat and merging into the red spines that outlined his jaw like a beard. A dark maroon red, the same color as the rest of his thick mane. A rather rough stroke just inside the jawline caused the dragon to start purring loudly. Rumbles of what almost sounded like a small thunderstorm in the distance came from the thick scale plates, making the bear smile. Bartan then gave the dragon a hug around the neck, feeling the vibration of the purr, and did his best to sing to it.

"And I Can't Wait
To See That Sunrise Again

It's Moments Like This
I'm What You'll Never Be
To Better What I Am
You Won't Hear Lies From Me..."

A soft murmur came from the brass one. "I thought we agreed not to sing that song."

"I like that song." The bear said, still stroking the dragon's jaw. "It's one of the many that reminds me of you."

"I love it as well, but it reminds me... of Him." The two stared at each other sadly for a moment until the white one gave a faint nod.

"I miss him too. Kinda wish he was here, but he would probably cause a lot of trouble. Maybe have a tea party on the ceiling of one of the rooms with stuffed animals of some of the people of Entropy's War that detested him. And wait until someone notices that he's upside-down until he fell face first on the floor." It made the dragon smile, and close his green eyes once again.

"It sounds like something he would do. I miss him terribly."

"...There's others out there, you know. He made many copies of himself, but he's somewhat good at hiding. I say somewhat because I'm honestly not sure just how he gets away with such foolish physics, and no Force seems to notice." The two chuckled. "Speaking of trouble, I heard you gave Kassel a tail whacking."

His ears went low. "That was an accident... I got listening to music, like you often do."

"Jamming out to Sissor, Paper, Rock again, were you?" Bartan chuckled. "I'm rubbing off on you, apparently." It caused the dragon to stop for a moment and try to look at the bear. Leading to the Brass one to leaning up and taking a very good look at him. "Beo?"

"...Oh, you're not..." The bear gave him a sad look, lowering his head. "My mistake, I assumed you were..."

"I know."

"It would explain why you're in this form as well." Beo smiled sadly at him. Placing Bartan on his chest and laying back down once again. "Would explain why I mistook you for him." When his expression didn't change, the dragon playfully pushed him with his paw. Though it was a bit stronger than he meant it to be. "It's a good thing. Means you're getting closer to becoming him."

"Am I? I sure haven't felt like it lately."

"Can I ask you something?" Bartan sighed loudly and lightly tossed his snout. Causing the Brass one to give him a puzzled look, perked ears and all.

"I felt like I've been interrogated all evening." It made the dragon's ears lower. "Come on, go ahead." The bear tapped his chest like a bongo drum.

"Are you happy?" It caused Bartan to stop for a moment.

"...That's not something you ask people in that world." He replied sadly.

"I mean... With 'Stopping'?" The white one's gaze fell.

"...I'm content with it, yes. Most people wouldn't be, but I'm okay with the way things are now."

"You are fine with not moving forward with your life?"

A quiet sigh. "You can't move forward without losing something. A lot of the time, it's parts of yourself, or the entire thing... Roxann attempted to move out farther west by getting a job in the city for a while. And she found that she couldn't get herself ahead, so she ended up overdosing. When Betsy moved out, she changed so harshly for the worst. It was like she wasn't the same person anymore. Constantly haunted by Rox' death, she ended up doing the same thing..."

"Your real life sisters...?" A faint nod.

"And Betsy was my best friend for 90% of my life. It was unreal how that world changed her. That's what stress does to you. You work yourself to death in university just to get a job at a fast food place... Back when we both got out of highschool, our parents could only afford one of us to go to another school. Knowing how bad my father was going to be, I told Betsy to go, and I would stay behind. I half feel like I did this to her."

"You didn't, Bartan."

"...Ever since then, I basically gave up on the world. My life in that world was revolved around taking care of him for several years. I had no future in that place anymore. No real reason to be there except for Him. Even after we lost both girls, not even two years apart, things just never let up on us. And I still wonder if it was all because of me."

"Bartan..."

"I never told you this, but when I was about thirteen... I got so sick of

that world. After getting off the schoolbus, I didn't return home. I just left. Walked for about six or seven hours before I stopped at a small pond at the side of the road. That morning, I took a small knife from my father's desk, and kept it hidden in my pockets during the day." The dragon whimpered at him. "I was prepared to do it, honestly. But that's the first time I heard Deago's voice. I didn't even see him, but he told me it wasn't my time yet... And I stupidly listened to it."

The dragon reduced his size to better comfort the bear. "I took the long road back home, and they didn't even notice I was gone. It was ever since then, things collapsed for the worst. From being forced out of our first home, my father being diagnosed with alzheimers, Loosing one sister due to a corrupted city and enconomy, then having your youngest one become a zealot in her afterimage. All to just be like her until the end. Then to top it all off... Your father, whose never taught you a damn thing through your entire life, who you've spent the last seven years looking after while everyone else made a life, he leaves you with nothing to show for it. Instead of lashing out at the world and wanting to just destroy everything it's become, you're told to just tuck it away. Become a slave to those who've survived, and get nothing in return. You can't ask people if they're happy, Beo. Not in this world..."

"...I'm sorry." Bartan placed a paw on the metal colored muzzle, stroking softly at the more sensitive area.

"I'm only happy here. Pretty much the only place I've ever been happy." The dragon nodded. "I still don't know why he does this to me..."

"Deago?"

"I can't understand what he wanted me to see. What he wanted me to witness. I half expected a Donnie Darko effect to happen at some point, or that something would actually change... Expected being past tense. Like many other things in that world, I gave up on him. I gave up on his advice, his ways, that species. Gave up trying to be the humane creature he wanted me to be..."

"Why follow him then?"

"...Because he's right. Everytime I wanted to just hit someone hard in the face, he stopped me. Everytime I wanted hurt someone in any way, he would say if I just let it go, things will change. And they did. Everytime I wanted to murder that senseless hollering bastard, he told me it wasn't the right way..."

"You mean...?"

"Yes. I came close several times to patricide, but Deago stopped me.

Because he did, we were able to get the life insurance for him. Granted, it was very close. 28 days after it activated, but we had to get him to survive for five years."

"I'm not sure I understand what that is." Bartan gave the dragon a sad smile, and recieved a lick. "But you follow him because you think he knows better?"

"From what I can tell, he does. But I just can't do it anymore, that's why I..."

"Shut yourself off from everything." The white one nodded.

"And I'll be content like this. I feel happier, to be honest. If only I could kick this horrible gaming habit, perhaps I can actually do something worthy."

"You have your stories though." A silent sigh came from the bear. "You're not thinking about quitting..."

"Not really, but... People have always said that I had some sort of talent for writing. Yet no one is willing to show any real interest in it here. I have one fan-"

"More than that." Beo nudged him. "There's many people here that enjoy your stories. It's different seeing it as an audience rather than within it, that's what I've noticed. And for one that's been watching that physical form of yourself, I can see alot of resemblences in your inspirations."

"That's another thing that kinda bothers me..." The dragon tilted his head and perked his ears. "Being accused of 'Copying' something. It seems many of the things I tend to think of or make up are used elsewhere."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the most recent for example: Hollow Bodies. In that story, I called the ghouls in there 'Hollow Ones'. Only to find out that some people/creatures in Bleach are called the same thing. I've been constantly haunted by these similarities for ages." Beo chuckled at him.

"No one is going to make those connections. And if they do... Well, ideas come from many places. Everything is a cliché. And if someone is going to turn inspiration into something negative, they're more of a pessimist than you are." It made the bear laugh a little. "You should stop worrying about pleasing other people so much. It stresses and wears you out, I can see it." Bartan gave a faint nod, and a small sigh.

"...I just feel like I have to. To live up to what Deago wants me to be. It's just something I've been trying to... Kick."

"Just don't abandon everything you've picked up from him. He's done well for you, even if you don't see it... I know it hurts you to say this, but you've made alot of people happy. Even by doing small things for them." The bear lowered his head, and the dragon just held him tighter. "It's alright. It's just one of those things I wish I could change about you. A wound I cannot lick shut."

"Seems like no one can. It's why I defined it as incurable."

"But it isn't." Bartan looked at him. "The other Bartan doesn't seem to be so affected by it. Meaning; after a while it will get better for you. It will get easier, and toleratable." The brass one smiled at him, licking him between the eyes. "Things will get better for you. And that in turn will lead you to us."

A faint nod, and another embrace for a few minutes. "...Thank you, Beo." He felt the dragon nod while purring a bit.

"Now, you should have one more person to see, then you can enjoy the rest of your night how you want."

"A few people downstairs want to have an Orgy."

"Of course they do." They chuckled. "I'll see you soon then." Another lick. "I love you Bartan, be it the one I fell in love with or not."

"I love you too Beo." And the bear got up, stroking the dragon's chin one last time before heading outside the door.

By the sounds of it, Gene and the others had already made it back inside. The window at the top of the corner stairs was painted with the black of night on the other side. Barely the lights of cars could be seen in the far distance, and the stars could half be seen if looked closely. Across the doorway that Beo resided was one last door that lead to the attic. The bear's home. Whoever the final visitor was, they were probably up there.

His mind kept going around who was waiting up there for him. Exile, the dragon devil that used to be his role model for a Hero? Xion, the celestial werewolf that taught the Bear discipline? Could it even be someone he's already met? Deago? Rixxix? Even Ziik that wanted to talk to him? Or was it...?

Opening the door unmasked the white wood stairs, and the golden wood walls. "31 Messages." A voice said. It honestly sounded strange, like it was a recording. "23 comments, 7 favorites, and one watch." Climbing up the stairs lead to a window, and turning around showed the rest of the wooden,

furnished room. Although the ceiling was a bit low, the six legged creature didn't seem to mind. "Granted, the farthest being dated several months back."

"31, 23, 7, 1... My FA account?" The older Bartan nodded at him, looking through the Bear's desktop computer.

"And they all seem to be the same person." The Counterweight smiled at him.

"My only fan... I guess you could consider me grateful." The bear looked down at the floor shyly.

"I don't see any of your artwork on here actually, just stories." There wasn't any reply from him. "Gave up on that, did you?"

"Lack of support, and how messed up my right arm tends to get, I don't think I should even bother really. Writing... Was pretty much the only thing I have left that I can do creatively."

"That's actually untrue." It got the bear's attention. "Though it might not be considered art in your eyes or many others; your games. Those save files and the customization available to you would be considered an art."

"I... Suppose so actually. But no one would consider it as such."

"Why not? Even something like Photoshop is just a 'Game' where you use the tools available to you to create a work of art. Come here for a moment." The bear did, minimizing the windows on the desktop, revealing a picture of Beokros from Vindictus as a desktop background. "That's expected really." The large beast smirked. "But look at the desktop icons: Bartan, which I'm guessing is...?"

"Basic folders: My Pictures, Documents, Downloads, Videos, etc."

"And next we have Guild Wars 2. I've seen what you've done in there. 11 Characters made and at maxed level. All uniquely designed and some with multiple outfits. You had 14 in the first Guild Wars, with the same plus the dozens of builds you've made for them. Vindictus, you have 12 that are over level 60, many of them are 70 I think, decently geared out and they're designed well armor, weapon and color wise. You've always been creating artwork with games that allowed you to."

"Bartan..."

"You know all this, you just don't want to completely admit to it because doing so would probably shame the people in that world."

"Like my father?" The younger one asked rather harshly. "The one who constantly told me that these things were useless. That it was a waste of my life to study them-"

"Don't forget who you're talking to. You're not the only one who had him for a father." The Counterweight replied in the same tone, then took a breath. "But he's not the only father you had." The bear looked at him in the eyes. "Xion was very close to a father figure, and did the job a hell of a lot better than that other guy. Tell me, did he ever shun the things you did with your life? Did he ever call you useless? Pathetic?"

"...No... He was harsh, but not degrading."

"You need to get over this. You're never going to win that old guy's approval, especially now that he's gone. I know it hurts, I still get the same pains. But it's just something that's not going to happen. The sooner you let go of that 'achievement', the easier it is to get up in the morning." The large creature put a paw on the bear's shoulder. "Your achievements have nothing to do with that world. They're here, they've always have been. And someone that cannot see these things as well as you can will ever truly recognize them."

"No one but..." The large one nodded at him.

"That's why you've shown such an attraction to this one. That's why you still savor and cherish every word that they've said to you. They're pretty much the only person that even half understands what you say within your stories."

"And with the combination of music as well. It's like they're the first person I've met that actually knows the value of Tone. Even considering that my music isn't the most pleasant for others too... Yet, they never seem to have anything negative to say about them."

The older Bartan looked back at the computer again. "...Can we talk about them? Your stories?" The bear sighed heavily, shaking his head with a slight smile. Causing the bear lowered his four ears in mixed signals.

"I swear you set this up, didn't you?" The large one shrugged.

"It's nice to tell people what you're going through. Think of it as a form of venting." The Younger Bartan tilted his head at the answer, but motioned for him to carry on. "You said that no one says anything negative about your stories. I know perfection bothers you-"

"Nothing is perfect. Besides the occasional grammar error and 'Incorrect spacing'..."

"...Microsoft Word?"

"Microsoft Word." The bear said, irked.

The Counterweight smiled. "But being a pessimist, you must see things wrong with your writing-"

"There's honestly not enough detail in it. Too much seems to happen too quickly. If you skip a paragraph, you're probably going to be lost for a while until you find out what you missed. Many of the details are not even stated until much later, example being: Zhai's eye color. That wasn't mentioned until like Act 6: Exodus. Many of the characters barely have a description to begin with. Ingkellus was described as 'A spoiled rich son'. I mean, what does that even look like? What does that even mean?" The large one chuckled. "Pretty much the only thing that holds a good amount of detail are the sex scenes. And even then, they seem a little short until there's 'multiple chapters' within it. Different positions, different people, etc."

"But the lack of detail isn't necessarily a bad thing. I mean, the reason why you did it to begin with was because several of the other stories tended to overdo it on the detail, and by the time you were through it..."

"I lost interest in what was happening. Or some of it was just unnecessary information. I don't care what a human wears, don't spend eight paragraphs describing their dress." The counterweight laughed out loud.

"I forgot how discriminate you were." The bear snorted at him. "Come on. I know you have more."

"There's barely even a plot in Zhai's Tale. Let alone an interesting one. It's honestly not really about the story of the orcs and whatever."

"Mmm, I always felt that it was more of Zhai's reaction to it. The story seems mostly about him, and how he faces the problems of his world. Let alone, what he does about it."

"But I can see people not getting that. Thinking that the orcs are the main focus and whatnot. I mean seriously; there wasn't even a main antagonist until Collapse. Even then, it was still unclear what the hell was going on. In the eyes of an outsider I mean."

The beast shook his head smiling. "You worry too much. Believe it or not, you're rather clear with your words. As long as they pay attention, they'll understand. If they don't, well... You have to realize that it's not your fault if you put the effort into explaining it." The bear lowered his head. "You don't need to please everyone. If you somehow do, it'll be dull and boring." Again, the younger one started feeling that pain. "Alright, I'll change the subject a

little. Where did Zhaiothe and Khol come from?"

It made the bear stop for a moment. "...They're you guys. You and Beo." The older Bartan tilted his head. "They're a mix between you guys. How Khol has your attraction to Muscles, and Beo's... Extraordinary 'Releasing' ability. How Beo loves it when you tickle his hamstrings, and how you love to nibble at his ears. Zhai's pride and shame come from you, and his body comes from Beo, as well as his... Arrogance? I don't think that's the right word."

"You mean his ego? How he tends to think of himself much better than other species?"

"Yes." The two shared a laugh. "It's just how he thinks. It isn't anything really discriminate, it's just how he is." The beast nodded in understanding. "But overall, that's who they are. I based them on the most romantic relationship I know." The older one smiled brightly at that, but there was a little sorrow in his eyes.

"What I don't quite understand is that you state that it's based on Me and Beo... Why not you?" The bear lowered his head and sighs again. "Alright, alright. But you're worthy enough to be referenced to. Don't feel ashamed about it." The counterweight shook his head again when the bear lowered his ears. "Alright, final question: why did you write this?"

The younger Bartan looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I suppose the question would be 'Why are you going to write this?' But regardless, this night...Why are you going to write it?" Again, the bear just looked at him for a few moments, until a shout for the two came from down below. "You'll have to answer that question afterword, I guess. Come on, lets go enjoy the party." The beast came over and nudged him down the stairs. As much as the bear wanted to stay in this caged room, he gave in. Heading down the stairs to join the others.

Regardless of who the crowd was, I never understood it. It always made me feel uncomfortable, even if I tried not to let it show. It's not a form of fear, for I never got stage fright when performing or speaking in front of a group of people. A Pain is the best word to describe it. Even if they're with those who consider me friend or family, it still comes back. Although, I feel that quite a few of them have just come to accept it. Try as they might to change what I, myself, consider a flaw and an old wound, their intentions are appreciated. And they've never given me that look of disappointment

whenever it fails.

As the night went on, that question stuck in my mind. I tried to forget about it, attempt to enjoy the company of the ones closest to me. Though, they're not naive. I'm pretty sure every one of them knew what was going on in my head. But the celebration (regardless of how much I detest that word) wasn't about that. And they never made it about those wounds.

Now that everyone has either gone back home, to sleep, or bathing in their afterglow, as usual that question keeps me awake. So I sit here, tonight, writing this to finally get an answer to that question: Why am I writing this? Why did I do something like this?

I could go with the Counterweight's answer and say it was a form of Venting. But that makes it sound like it's about anger and frustration. Confession? I can't say I've never felt guilty of this, but it's still not the correct term. Perhaps there really isn't one word for it. It doesn't need an explanation, it needs a reason... A purpose.

I understand that everybody has hardships in their lives. I know that there are people out there that have it worse off than I do. But these things don't have an Entropy Scale. There is not Hard and Harder. There is only Hard. And everybody has their own Hardnesses within their hearts and minds. Mine just got the better of me, to the point where I froze myself in place.

If there ever was a lesson to learn from my story, it is that Pain changes people. Often for the worst. Learning to deal with it is part of life. I get that, and I know that there isn't life without pain. But after getting hit, slammed, and knocked down over and over again... After a while you just don't want to bother getting back up.

...Maybe that's why I wrote this. Deago always wanted me to help other people in every way possible. Now that I've become more cynical over the years, perhaps a bit more borish, it means I can get my words to sting a bit more. And perhaps my lessons stick better.

Regardless of how much I detest him, I'm big enough to understand what Deago has done for me. I'm thankful for his advice and how much he's helped other people. But there are those out there who are still in pain that don't have something like him. Often enough, they're not as strong as they might think. It was because of Deago that I didn't give into my urges to attempt to destroy your world, much like Rixxix desired me to. He did well to teach me to be selfless and learn humility. But I've seen so much of it lately, people just not understanding what it means to be that.

So there it is, that reason; help others that are in difficult times. Stay

together as one group of people. One reigon, one country, one faith, one world. Because with every person that drowns in pain, you are that much weaker as a whole. Of course, keep in mind that there's many ways of helping people. Even if it will hurt them, they'll know that someone cares enough to take notice. Don't let another person live their life the way I lived mine. No one deserves that.

As I once again hit Ctrl+S, take a few moments to post it on FA, write a little description as well as a bit of a warning/disclaimer, I close Firefox. Looking at Beokros on my desktop, I start to miss my own dragon waiting for me downstairs. A small press of the power button on the tower on the floor, and the computer once again hibernates.

Quietly walking down the white painted wooden stairs and shutting that door silently, I walk though that portal once again to that Paradise. Promised Land, as Deago called it when it was his. The Gnoll, Dragonite, Red, Silver, and Brass dragons all asleep in one large pile. As well as the white counterweight, snuggled up to them with both of their sons and the Fox in his arms. His sons... My sons; Revoros and Lexar. Still awake, Bartan invites me within his arms beside Arson. After a moment of scratching Beo'Karah under his chin, I join them. Slightly opening her red eyes, she mumbled something as I held her closer. Exhausted, but glad that the night is finally over.

The younger ones look so peaceful asleep. Just looking at them got me thinking... After all the hardships within my life... Within all our lives... The things we can control, and the things we cannot. Perhaps maybe that they are our reward. We don't inherit the earth, we only borrow it from our children. And just like we have to take care of them, we should take care of each other as well.

...After All, What Use Are We If We Can't Help

People?