

Avalanche

By Bartan Tirix

Darkness. A veil of black nearly covered the entire land of leafless trees and slumbering homes. Though very few had their lights on, preparing to work for the day to come, they knew not of what lingered within those shadows. As two figures moved as one across the cold asphalt that was stained by the embrace of winter. Leaving its presence behind as a thick blanket of white that covered nearly everything.

However, the white seemed to glow with the early morning moonlight. Nearly making it harder for the figures to go by unnoticed. Hiding within the cold banks when a pair of headlights were being detected, and remaining out of sight until it long passed before they continued. Making their way up the split driveway, one that lead to three homes on a hill. Yet... Only one really interested them.

Moving up to the red deck with caution and silence as they pressed an ear against the door. Not hearing or sensing anything before quickly picking the lock and waiting for the faint breeze to slow down before carefully opening the door and moving inside. Locking it back up with the levered bolt and observing their surroundings. A canine slumbering just ahead, on the other side of the room. A feline curled up in the chair. Both completely unaware of such intruders.

But they were not the target. Slowly and carefully climbing up the corner set of stairs, the carpet masking their sync'd pawsteps until they got to the top. Studying the floor carefully and avoiding certain areas they've studied before coming here, ones that often omitted loud creeks towards the three sets of doors. Two being closed, and one being a restroom.

The intruders took the one on the far right, leading up to a set of wooden white stairs towards the attic. All furnished with wood as the uncovered window let in the moonlight, just enough for them to see and attempt to avoid any obstacles towards the back of the long attic. Spotting the unoccupied Futon, and the main bedding. As well as the target sleeping in it, covered up completely by the large black comforter.

The two looked at each other for a moment and nodded in sync. One pulling out a large durable bag while the other took a stance. Silently counting down before bolting to uncover the bed-! Only to find a series of pillows that lay within, in the shape of the target. Confusing the wyrmling and wolfling for a moment before their danger instincts flashed!

Within a fraction of a moment, a large box folded up from the ground where they stood. Sealing almost instantly and launching it through the roof with a loud crash. The moonlight revealing the polar bear looking at the hole irkfully as the unsync'd harrier door slowly opened until it was jammed. Whatever. He'll fix it later. For now, he could finally get a year off in peace

without being kidnapped by a dragon or a wolf-

Yet, his own primal alarm went off, nearly seeing something brass and white in the corner of his eye. Hiding in the darkness, and once again within stance. No way...! They couldn't have possibly avoided such a trap, could they!? "You've gotta be kidding-!?" The bear grumbled loudly before-

The softness was unreal. Especially only after spending a single night with one pillow that felt like this. Now? An entire field of said pillows, making the blue wyrm feel like he was sinking into the most comfortable quicksand ever conceived. Not wanting to get up or move for the next fourteen thousand years, regardless of how much that light in the sky was trying to make the dragon submerge into consciousness.

But it wasn't a glaring light in the slightest, more just the sky shifting into a brighter color. Leaving the inevitable awakening to be rather pleasant. Even after reading about it time and time again, the dimension of near endless pillows was something that had to be experienced more than told about. There were no words to describe such a thing.

Just thinking about it made Thea shift a little bit, stretching his body in several different ways before snuggling back into the now empty spaces where others were serving as blankets and body pillows. It was somewhat of a lonely feeling, yes... Something that you'd think he would be used to by now, but after caving in once and spending the night in someone else's arms... It takes more than a few days to build that wall back up again.

Yet, was it really something the young wyrm wanted to do? In some ways, Thea almost felt like he was still a prisoner here. Taken from his home, kidnapped really. Then forced to take part in session after session, even though some of those were driven by his very own instincts. Stamping their paw down and anchoring the dragon to tend to such neglect ion... Another wall that was broken down that couldn't possibly be fixed.

But at least such urges have been getting less and less frequent. Let alone, they collapsed around those who seemed to know a lot more about it than Thea did. Which honestly wasn't surprising. The wyrm hardly knew anything about being a dragon, a person, the world around him -new or not. The blue sack of scales was just a dead weight, being carried by those with much stronger shoulders than he ever could have.

And the younger one knew it well. Before even that first party he was dragged into two years ago, the bear gave Thea access to all their stories. Reading into quite a few of them and seeing the same patterns over and over: the main character being strong, talented. Special and very often immortal... What was he? Used. Expendable, as the smaller bear put it last year. A term that echoed through his mind over and over again. Thea was expendable.

The blue wyrm sighed, not wanting to get up but mentions of that 'party' earlier reminded him that today was this years. He knew it was coming for quite some time, but it didn't keep Thea from worrying about it. Let alone, where it was taking place. Still stunned by the fact that... Well, he was a father now. Kinda. Sorta. Hell, it's confusing.

With a deep breath and the warm orange glow of the sky, the blue one staggered himself up. Finding it somewhat odd how the pillowed ground seemed to almost change whenever one of them intended on walking anywhere, as it making the softer grounds more solid and less squishy. It made it much easier to travel without worrying about breaking your paws, at least.

Approaching the large double doors and just giving them a tap was enough to get the scent of baked goods to rush into his snout. Everything from Gingerbread to Candy Corn, for some odd reason, could be picked out as Thea walked through the large decorated halls. Freshly constructed and still a god damn maze to the young wyrm as to everyone else that was busy. A few familiar faces stood out that he knew from the stories; a pair of human females that were Dia'vidd's actual mothers, dressed as typical angels with small fake wings made those maroon eyes lock on with puzzlement.

Yet all they did was wave as they carried several plates and bowls on trays from one destination to another. Everything from bowls of candy to the most wonderful cooked birds that nearly made the now hungry dragon whimper. A scent so strong and powerful it was likely to knock him out, yet he followed it.

Into a massive dining room, tables of all sizes decorated both with Christmas and Halloween themes, as well as with courses and courses of meals. Such a sight nearly made the blue one cry of happiness, but was almost shy about the others he spotted around. Some he didn't really recognize, like a certain blue jay with a hooded snake. Chatting it up with another blue, eastern looking dragon and a rather embarrassed looking T-rex.

Those large wings kinda of slumped and half covered Thea's sides, standing a bit against the side of the door as people left and entered. He couldn't quite place it, but he felt so unwelcomed in such a place, as if he wasn't invited to even be here. Let alone sample the platter. Curling his tail around his front paws as Tia and Elexus passed by to go gather more food, hoping the two didn't see him. However, the brown haired one touched his wing, getting the membranes to tickle and move away from the hand a bit. "Help yourself, dear." Elexus said, getting the blonde woman behind her to nod.

"No need to wait for everyone if you're hungry. There's plenty to go around, Thea."

"Y-you... Know my name?"

"Yes, David's told us quite a bit about you." Those frilled ears tinted purple and fell a bit, getting the two to giggle. "Please, enjoy yourself. Nothing is off limits."

"It's your home after all." That statement left the wyrm stunned, unable to take his eyes off of Elexus until a wall divided them. Home? The dragon never really had a home, let alone one this nice before. He's barely been inside of a building, a total he could count on maybe two paws. But is that what this place really was?

His underside growled at him loudly, nearly causing Thea pain and demanding that he cleaned out an entire table himself. Though such a belly has been able to get far beyond that size, the blue one didn't want to make a scene. Regardless, moving up to that roasted turkey was like approaching pure desire. Looking around to make sure no one else was watching the wyrm before pulling off a drumstick and biting into it.

The very first moment those juices touched that red tongue, those purrs went to maximum volume. Granted, his mind was too occupied to worry about anyone staring, letting that large piece of well cooked meat dance inside his maw. Every chew released more and more of those wonderful juices, almost not swallowing until his belly demanded such a thing. Which lead to him getting another bite, then another. Another, until the dragon was nearly choking, jumping when he felt two soft paws on his back. "Easy there, buddy. The turkey isn't going anywhere."

A double take at the large polar bear muzzle, only chuckling at the blue one's bloated cheeks currently occupied with food. Shyly nodding at him while slowing down and feeling the six legged furball 'Santa' (beard and all) giving him an easy hug. "How'd you sleep?" The bear asked, waiting patiently for the wyrm to finish his fresh mouthful and taking a layer of the crispy outside for his white self. Sharing a deep purr with the younger one as they took a moment to enjoy such flavors. "Beo makes the best skin... I don't know how, exactly, but it always comes out perfect."

"Yeah..." Thea mumbled in response, getting a playful nudge and a lick from the larger Counterweight. "And I... Slept well."

"That's good. Hope the awakening was pleasant." A shy nod only made the furred one smirk. "I set it a bit later for you, thought with all this going on you'd need your sleep."

"Y-yeah..." Another mumble, almost too embarrassed about eating anything else, but a plate with several things on it hovered towards the bear's paw. Presenting it to the dragon to try the many samples.

"Go ahead. Dig in." A worried look from those maroon eyes. "Nervous?"

"...About a few things, yes." A nod in understanding as those pair of paws rubbed the blue scaled back. "I'm... Not one for social gatherings."

"I never was either." A puzzled look from Thea. "You grow out of it eventually. Took me eons, but I came around. So there's hope for you yet."

"What... Changed?"

"Practice. That, and making a fool out of yourself in front of friends helps. Only if you own up to it though." That gaze didn't lift. "And you have friends here, Thea." A kiss on that blue snout that only sighed in response.

"...Friends, ones that are friends with everyone else and are often occupied."

"Doesn't mean you can't make new ones at those times." Those wings drooped to the floor as his frilled ears fell. But the muzzle was caught by a soft paw, lifting it back up nearly snout to snout with the polar bear, making the wyrm release a faint whimper. "There's no reason to be embarrassed, especially with these people. You even know the rudest person coming here." Those ears perked up a bit, following the gaze of those brown discs to the door as a pair of large black panther-like creatures walked in. One with a red mane and the other with a green.

"Krow...?" A slow nod from Bartan.

"If you can somehow make friends with him, you can make friends with anyone." The bear smiled, getting a shy one from Thea. "If that fails, you can always ask for a session-" A sharp whimper as purple invaded his muzzle, nearly causing those wings to turtle the dragon up as the hexeped chuckled. "I don't jest, but it's entirely up to you."

"Haven't I gotten enough recently!?" The dragon hissed in a whisper.

"Hardly." The white one teased. "But if something else is bothering you, feel free to talk to someone about it. Most are great listeners, after all." An awkward half frown from that blue muzzle as those four furred ears flicked to the side a bit, grabbing the larger one's attention towards the doorway. "Excuse me for a moment, but please help yourself to anything, Thea. On the table or not." A loud grumble as the wyrm covered his eyes with a paw, letting the six legged beast head towards the door, but not without giving a quick flash of those furballs towards him. Clearly showing that his outfit did away with the pants, nearly getting the dragon to focus such a desire for that pouch as his eyes locked onto it through the crack between his pawed mask.

The Counterweight followed the very faint click around an unoccupied space along the large hallway. Stopping, but not sitting. Looking up at the ceiling until a panel opened up and a burlap sack fell down, being caught by the furball's back for a soft landing. Both for the sack and the two little ones that dropped down soon after, chirping as a greeting as their father looked behind them with a smile. "Mission Complete!"

"I see that. Any trouble?" A loud grumble and several possible muffled cursewords came from the struggling sack, eventually slipping off the bear's back and landing on the floor hard. Getting the attention of the three for a moment, then ignoring it.

"Nothing we couldn't handle!" The two stated in sync.

"Excellent. You may enjoy your sweets for tonight then." Another pair of chirps as they scampered off into the kitchen, dodging between legs of everything larger than them as they chased each other. Once again putting a bright smile on the larger bear before the grumbles returned. Getting him to turn about and assist the younger Bartan's escape. "Glad you could join us, Bartan One."

"Yeah, yeah." The smaller anthro one snorted, brushing off any itchy looking debris from the bag. "Know where Dehoken is? I need to punch him in the face for making a hole in my roof."

"He should be around here somewhere. But I have a request for you." The smaller bear crossed his arms.

"I'm sure you kidnapped me for more than just a request." Two of those four shoulders shrugged.

"Well, for your own personal benefit, of course."

"Benefit?" The younger one grumbled.

"What else did you have planned this evening?"

"For your information, I had something really important planned." The two stared at each other for a few silent moments.

"...Sleep-?"

"Is important, yes." The larger one just chuckled as the writer sighed. "Fine, what is it?" He lead the smaller bear to the doorway to the dining room.

"I've been thinking a bit lately, about how these are getting a little... Formulaic."

"It's only the fifth one, Counterweight. And they've all been rather different."

"True but..." A motion to get on with it, yet the larger one only gestured inside. Towards the blue wyrm who was still shyly trying out samples of that platter given to him before. "Do you mind? Taking him with you this time?" A moment of study at the dragon, then back at the hexeped Santa.

"...Sure." The younger one stated rather optimistically. "Sure, I'll take him." A bright smile as the large one hugged him, nearly losing the writer in the forest of white sticking out of the opened red coat before suffocating him (not really). "So, there's that."

"It will mean a lot to him. Thank you." A few affectionate licks from the large one until he got a few taps on the side of the neck. "I'll tend to our guests in the meantime."

"I guess... I'll do the same?"

"As usual." The larger one teased with a nudge before turning about. The younger one doing the same and not noticing the flash attempt again, instead focusing on the wyrm currently stuffing his muzzle like he hasn't eaten in eighteen days.

Though the Counterweight was a bit worried about him choking on such delicious foods, he'd keep an eye on him from afar. Walking down the halls, greeting any new faces he came across that entered the building, as well as studying every corner of the home and hallway. "Absolutely fascinating!" A rather colorful raptor said, looking over the same upper walls and whatnot, all while walking beside the hexeped.

"Not bad for something last minute." The white one smiled at him, the two walking side by side and stepping over every stray tail in the way, not watching out for the scampering crowd of little ones but stepping around them flawlessly.

"You're too humble. Such designs are simply genius." The theropod smiled brightly at him. "Where does this place get its power from?"

"For the moment, it's just operating on a small source I've used to replace a Terrasque, but it is far from a long-term solution. It'll take me quite a while to make a stable system, but I'll get there." The bear nudged the dinosaur. "It would be a great opportunity for you to learn my methods for yourself, if you wish."

"I would love to!" Naught nearly chirped, still overlooking the walls and decorations. "Though it's difficult for me to tell what is festive and what is just interior design." A chuckle from the furred one.

"I does take some practice. Honestly, the little ones were more interested in such things than I was. This is all their doing, a rather good job too." A noise in agreement as the raptor took a nearby beverage from a tray. "How are you and Karmu doing?" A double take from the colorful one as his expression turned to worry. Making the bear perk his four ears as the two slowed down.

"We're still together, yes, but..."

"What's wrong?" A near frown from Naught.

"...He's been deteriorating." A slow nod from Bartan. "At a significantly slower rate than many others that I've seen, but... It still hurts to watch such a thing."

"I know." The white one gave him a tight embrace, not caring that his coat was slightly dipping into the drink the dinosaur was holding. "It's a difficult thing to see or accept."

"Knowing that they'll have very little time..." They scooted off to the side while a pair of large feral wyrms carried several more trays of food to the dining room, getting greetings from them as the Counterweights hid their sorrows. "Even they...?"

"Everything and everyone has an expiration date. Even us, Naught." A slow nod from the theropod, as a white paw lifted his chin up. "That just makes the time we have to spend with them all the more precious."

"You are correct." A sad smile as they took a breath, passing an opened doorway where the large red behemoth could be seen. Causing the raptor to stop and stare at his current mate for a few moments.

"Go." The bear stated, getting a look from the dinosaur. "Enjoy yourself tonight. I'll let you know when I'm about to adjust this universe for sustaining life." A thankful nod from Naught as the two went their separate ways.

"Remember to taste the food." Bartan half grumbled while approaching the table, hearing a faint whimper as the blue one's head lowered. "They worked hard on it, y'know."

"S-sorry." Thea put the tray down.

"That doesn't mean stop, just enjoy it a little bit. Nothing wrong with eating a little slower." A bit of a shy nod as he got a stroke on that blue shoulder, watching the bear take a little bit for himself while still talking. "So, how are things?" A double take from those maroon discs, nearly puzzled at first as the wyrm remembered all the events that happened since they last met. Only to morph that look into a glare and growl slightly. "That bad, huh?"

"You made me into a father!" Thea whispered in a hiss.

"You and Dia, you mean. And I'm *nooooooot* sure if you can really call yourself a parent of a universe, specifically."

"Still, I can't help but feel like you're the one to blame." The blue one snorted a bit, taking another few bites as the bear nodded.

"You're not wrong. Technically, I am responsible for everything bad that's happened in the train wreck that is your life." That gaze returned. "But, you could argue the same thing for all the good as well."

"What good!?" Another whisper as the wyrm curled his neck, those cheeks still half full of food only to follow the white paw's gesture towards the large doorway. Two western dragons walking in: one fully red and rather muscular, while the other a hot pink that looked very familiar to Thea. Both of them, really. Though the strange antlers, Christmas tack, and fake red nose on the pink wyrm was throwing him off. Calming him a bit, but also putting him in a state of shy paralysis as the two dropped off a few trays onto the tables. Waving to the blue one with a single wing before the left to retrieve more food for the guests.

Once they were out of sight, those dark red discs returned to the writer's; who was looking off at the decorations and other attendees. Not noticing the guilt that was growing within the younger one's gaze until much later. "You don't picture them as a good experience? I thought the one with Zhai was rather nice, myself."

"And... You made that happen?"

"I may have forced that pairing a little bit, yes. It was an idea that I had for quite a while, and I thought you deserved it." A neck curl from the dragon.

"You thought I deserved...?" He asked, almost insulted.

"Getting plowed by another dragon that you admired and who wouldn't completely dominate you? Yes." Those frilled ears started to turn purple as the larger one lightly whimpered. "Zhaiothe is really good at what he does, and he was perfect for you. Besides, there was so much mentioning of your balls in Anthem that I couldn't get it out of my head."

"And so..." A paw on that blue scaled bicep, nearly shocking Thea to a standstill for a few moments.

"I wanted to see you in a session. I wanted to see you happy, knowing what was going to come in act 4 of Anthem." A sad look from the wyrm. "Even then, I wanted something better for you. A way to symbolize my own hope, just in a written way."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"My life has changed **Drastically** this year, and for the better." Bartan took a bite out of some candy corn gingerbread dragon cookies. "I finally got a new pair of shoes after 12 years, thanks to an online friend. I finally got my Identification renewed, which was outdated since 2011 and was a *Complete Pain In The Ass* to deal with. After being out of, and unable to, work for ten years, I finally got a monthly income. Resulting in a plethora of much needed things to be updated; the biggest of which was my chair that was causing severe damage to my sciatica nerve."

A worried look as the bear continued. "And the best thing of all: my sister moved out with her own autistic children- and no. That is not used as an insult. They have been clinically diagnosed with autism." That blue head lowered at his tone. "Finally moved out and after 9 years: started **actually** taking care of those children." A deep, almost stressful breath from the furred one as he took a drink. "My point is... After being stuck for 15 to 18 years, I am more free than I've ever been. I'm more happy, to be honest." The bear looked the wyrm in the eyes, nearly seeing them somewhat shaken from realization. "Shouldn't you deserve something like that too?"

It stunned the dragon, unable to take his gaze off the white one even after he broke the connection between their eyes. Making him wonder over and over, what would really make the

blue one happy? After all the things he's been though and even done... "Why me?" Thea asked, getting a noise in question as the bear looked at him. "Out of everyone here, why choose me!?" He asked almost harshly.

"Well, to be fair, there was a spinner involved-"

"But you still chose to use me!" He hissed, losing control of that whisper as his mane started to raise a bit.

"Thaaaat's the point of the spinner, to choose for me-" A growl from the larger one.

"You still decided to use-...!" A breath from the blue one. "If it would've landed on Zhai, or Dia, or Beo- anyone! You could've forced a re-roll!" Bartan just stared at him in silence as the wyrm released an angry exhale. "You still chose...!"

"And I should've picked someone else, is that what you're saying?" The smaller one asked, rather calmly for being in the presence of an angry beast over twice his size. "Something I don't mention very often is the fact that I've been... Thinking about myself a lot lately. More or less..." The bear gestured himself, curling the wyrm's neck at the sudden subject change. "Especially when I seem to be more attracted to dragons than polar bears and the like. I mean, when have I ever used another bear in any of my stories?"

"...I think there was one in 19-"

"Doesn't matter. Point is: rarely, if any at all." A moment to take a bite out of some tomato soup cake. "What I'm getting at is, for someone who likes dragons a lot, why am I not one myself? Why don't I see myself as one?" A few blinks of confusion and slight irritation from Thea.

"...Why aren't you-?"

"Because." A stare as he waited for the bear to finish. "That's all I got: Because." A bit of a growl from the blue one. "But if I ever were to be one..." A tap on the dragon's shoulder, leaving the large creature confused.

"...You'd...?" The bear just stared at him. "I'm not following."

"I'd be you." A neck curl with a rather surprised look.

"...Me?"

"Yes." A long silence between them as those spines raised.

"Why!?" Thea hissed loudly, getting the attention of others in the room. "I'm a socially awkward mess that has next to no stamina, physical ability, experience or knowledge of the damn world I even live in! I've been treated like I've been expendable for as long as I can remember, every relationship I've ever had has been a disaster, and I feel like the only way to

keep a friend is to basically **Enslave** myself to them!" The entire room went quiet when the wyrm finally realized just how loud he was being, causing him to freeze up as Bartan just looked at him.

"Own up to it." The bear whispered to him, getting a whimper from the large one blushing uncontrollably. "Keep the anger. What would Krow say?" A bit of a worried look as the blue one took a quick breath. Standing straight up and looking around the room, glaring at all the stares.

"*Do you mind?*" Thea grumbled at them, seeing them shrug and carry on with their own conversations. Getting the large blue one to exhale deeply before covering his face with a paw for a few moments. Lifting it to find Bartan continuously looking at him and nodding. "What?"

"**You are Me**, Thea." A slightly worried look from the large one. "Maybe it didn't start out that way, but you project more of my own personality than even this avatar." The furred one gestured towards himself. "You also have a hard time really detecting good things when they happen to you, often finding the faults to them or convincing yourself that you don't deserve such treatments. Like..." Another gesture towards the doorway, but nothing came out of it. Causing the blue dragon to look back and forth between it and the bear for a moment. "Miss-timed that a little bit."

A noise in question before the red and now-red wyrms returned with more food. Talking about how this would be much easier if they just used portals before waving at the younger blue dragon again, this time a little bit closer to him and within speaking distance. "H-hi..." Thea mumbled, getting a chuckle out of the two as they returned the greeting with a couple of quick nuzzles as the bear playfully slapped their haunches. Giving loud yelps before heading back to the kitchen.

A bit of silence as that maroon gaze returned to the writer, once again taking samples from the table. "You feel as if the only things that have ever come into your life have been negatives. That events like this have some kind of consequence and you'd rather just not risk getting hurt again after being let down." Those sharp brown discs made the large one whimper after locking onto his own. "I get it. But if there's something I learned this year is that good things will happen, but **you** have to be strong enough to damn well accept them."

"...Things like..."

"Being chosen by a spinner to fertilize some pink dragoness' egg with about 140 other 'donors', then finding out that you were thrown into some strange love triangle filled with people, mostly males, that actually like you. Who treat you well, despite their flaws and strange habits. That are only attempting to help you without any sort of payment, other than a few thousand gallons of your seed over the next ten years." A sharp whimper from the blue one as he covered his face again. "They don't need anything from you, and you are not obligated to join them, be it the father of this universe or not." A semi-harsh tap on Thea's chest got his attention

again, meeting that stern look of the bear's and making his frilled ears fall. "If you have a legitimate reason not to become part of their family, that's fine. But don't you damn well reject them because you think they deserve **Better**. That you don't belong with them because you're somehow not *good enough*. Understood?" The wyrm nodded a bit shakily as the bear took a breath. "Walk with me."

"W-what?"

"Walk. With. Me." Another whimper in response as Bartan took a plate with several treats and started to head towards a group. "If you want to take a few things for yourself, then feel free to. But follow me afterwards." Those blue ears fell in a bit of shyness, yet he loved being on a leash. Even a metaphorical one. Taking another look at the table and grabbing a mouthful of some dressing before tracing the furred one's footsteps.

Leading up to the table with the blue noodle and a brown T-rex, as the two females of the group; the blue jay and the corn snake, got up to browse another table for possible tasty treats. Passing the blue wyrm with a couple of winks, and actually feeling a warm gaze look under his tail from behind as they continued. Making the younger dragon double take and almost lock onto the pair of round female hips, releasing a whine before being called by the bear via a whistle. Double-taking and approaching the table rather quickly, granted still looking back at the two. "I think I was just checked out."

"You were." Bartan stated, finishing his greetings with the male couple. Gesturing them by dragons first. "Loqe and Zarrel, Rex Overboard." Another double take at the somewhat familiar title, as those red discs studied the two. Granted, not without some shyness. "Guys, this is Thea'daisis, Anthem of the Lonely."

"Arrren't... You the bear that gave us Dia?" A noise in question from the wyrm, as he followed Zarr's question to the furred one's shrug. "I'm almost positive it was you-" A faint slap on the Rex' side from his mate.

"Not all white bears look the same, you." Loqe snorted.

"But he had the same black collar around his neck and everything!"

"Relax." Bartan stated. "It wasn't me specifically, but you've seen this six legged wolf-bear-thing walking around, yes?" The three nodded. "He can look like this too."

"Oh, you're the writer?" A nod from the bear at the rex' response, noticing the larger blue one was tilting his head trying to follow along.

"Must be. There's only two bears around here... I hope."

"For the most part." The white one stated, catching Thea's puzzled gaze and giving his own questionable look.

"When... Was Dia given away?"

"It was just the start of their series." The furred one explained. "A freeloader T-Rex gets-"

"Hey!"

"You are a Freeloader, Zarrel." A whine from the brown dinosaur as Loqe continued, patting him on the pack a few times. "Granted, I'm choosing to pay your way, but regardless. He's mooching off of my place, some bear delivers a package to him that contains a living pooltoy that apparently-"

"Turns you into a living pooltoy as well...?" The wyrm finished, getting a questionable pair of nods as well that made the larger one start to blush a bit. "D-Dia... Asked me about your series during one of our..." A whimper left him, leaving those maroon eyes to look over at Bartan.

"I don't know why you're looking at me."

"Probably asking where you came up with these strange ideas." The noodle dragon playfully snorted. "Not complaining, because I finally got into someone's tail-" Another whine interrupted him, alongside a second set of taps on the rex' back. "Oh please, why are you still so embarrassed about it? These guys have basically seen you naked, save for the new one."

"This must be what it feels like to have done armature porn."

"Tell me about it." Thea snorted, glaring at the white furred one. Letting the others look at him as well while Bartan continued to chew on a cookie. Staring at all three of them a bit blankly before making a noise in question. "And why would that be?"

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"You've kinda written a lot of adultery this year, bear." Loqe stated, getting the others to nod. "I'm not really complaining here, but why?"

"Because that's the only thing people want to read, apparently." The white one grumbled. "Don't get me wrong, not everybody is like this. If you've read any of my clean, non-fetish works, then you're excused from this rant. But the rest of those 98%?" A breath from the furred one as he tended to the space between his eyes. "That's the only thing that's ever going to grab attention. If it has the labels: Inflation, Transformation, or just plain Maturely Rated. Anything outside of that will never be read or even looked at-"

"To be fair, bear, people do have tastes." The blue noodle interrupted. "That's the entire point of a tagging system: to filter out what you like or you don't like-"

"I get that, but can I ask you something?" Bartan asked a bit harshly. "How do you *know* you're not going to like it? If it's something that does not appeal to you in the slightest: Vore,

Gender Transformation, ***Humans***." The bear shuttered at the last one, getting his coat to puff out and exhale a breath of heat. "I can understand. But other than that, what is your reason? Did somehow your future self go back in time to warn you not to spend the next ten minutes of your life to look into the first chapter or intro to a story?"

The table remained a bit quiet, looking rather uncomfortable as the white one took another breath. "If you like a person's writing, these things shouldn't bother you. For Helga's sake, I have a fan on SoFurry that went through Destruction Preventer. That went through *Counting Stars*, and they don't find Inflation appealing in the slightest. But they still read those stories. Why? Because they are **Good Fucking Stories That Are *Worth Your Time!!***" The room fell silent as Bartan calmed himself down, taking more than a few moments. "Now, I want you to ask yourself. Really Ask Yourself: What is your excuse? If you don't want to read *my* stories, then fine. You don't have to, but you should damn well start supporting those who you do read. And I don't mean with *money*, just comment on them. Tell them that you enjoyed something they poured their heart and soul into, that they worked hard to get done. It's enough to keep them going. To keep them doing it."

"...And you know from experience..." Thea mumbled, getting a nod in response as the furred one tended to the bridge of his nose again. Attempting to hold back tears of frustration.

"Silent Moonlight Dragon." The three tilted their heads. "They were my first. I nearly gave up writing after Zhaiothe's Tale, my first novel. Even the one who I originally *Made* the damn novel for wasn't fucking reading it." Another deep breath. "April 21st, 2014. About three days after I posted Act 4 - Canto 34." A series of questionable looks. "I know, a confusing title, but Canto 34 is by Five Finger Death Punch."

"That sounds like a wonderful band name." The rex snorted, getting a faint chuckle from the bear.

"But I spent... I think the next two and a half, maybe three years writing stories. **Meaningful** stories with very little adultery in them, all because **one** person spoke up. Told me: *I came across your story and I wanted to say I really like it! In my opinion, it very much succeed mixing something tragic with romance and some humor. I am curious and excited to see how this story will be developing!* And that... That was enough. Lucky for me they commented on nearly everything I wrote back then."

"...What happened to them?" The blue wyrm mumbled, getting a shrug in response at first as the bear reached over to another table for a drink. Bringing a few rounds of eggnog to their current space, and seeing the facial reactions out of the three scaled ones at the taste of such a thing. "How can people...!?"

"Even like this stuff...!?" Loqe finished his sentence, but went back to drinking regardless.

"It grows on you." Bartan stated, taking another drink and making a slight face at the

rum inside it. "They... Just moved on. Had to focus on schooling and such, got trapped in the void that is endless youtube videos and TV shows. But by that time, people were actually reading my Somewhere Out There series."

"Your what?" The younger pairing asked in sync.

"Angels With Scaly Wings fanfic." Both Thea and the bear said at the same time, not thinking anything of it.

"...Oh."

"Is that why a few of these people look familiar?" Zarr questioned, gesturing around the room at a couple of them, as well as a group of hatchlings that were playing games.

"Mhmm. Remy chasing after the group, Anna chasing after him. Bryce at the bar." The furred one answered, taking a long drink before putting the cup down. "But that's what started all this..."

"All what?" The larger dragon asked, watching the polar furball get a refill, down that, and then get another. Returning to the table with a few unpleasant, almost disgusted looks. "How the hell can you even drink this...?"

"You think this is bad?" A brown drake with a few noticeable scars on his throat and muzzle, nuzzling the back of Bartan's neck as he passed by. "You should see the concoctions this furball makes for breakfast." He snorted. "Peanut-butter and brown sugar on chocolate chip pancakes..."

"Your vocabulary is getting better, Bryce. That means you've had too much to drink, slow down." The drake snorted playfully, leaving the table and causing the three's attention to turn back to the bear. "Don't-"

"Peanut-butter?" Loqe quoted.

"And brown sugar?" The rex asked, seeing the furred one shrug and look over at Thea's turn to butt in. Only to witness those large wings shrug back.

"I'm not questioning it. His entire family eats the strangest of things. They're all whacko." The large blue one snorted, nudging the bear again. "Carry on."

"Not going to let it go, are you?"

"I'm pretty sure we're all keeping track." Zarrel stated, trying the drink again. "I think it *is* growing on me-"

"We will never make this on any holiday. So don't get attached." The smaller blue one grumbled, hearing the dinosaur whimper and lower his head. "Now what did you mean? What started?" A breath from the white one.

"I started SoT because I was not satisfied with the ending the game provided, specifically for that one." He gestured a pair of much smaller dragons; one light cyan and light purple.

"...There's two there-"

"The blue one." Bartan answered Zarr rather quickly. "It was literally supposed to be a one-shot, much like..." The couple looked at the bear a bit sadly. "Yeah... Rex Overboard."

"...But people demanded more." Thea guessed, getting a nod and another drink from the furred one.

"They wanted one with Bryce, then Sebs, then Maverick." He stated, pointing out to the dragons as they were listed. "The list went on. And yes, each one of them had adultery. This moved onto an entire series full of adult content, save for one or two acts." Another drink. "And people loved it, I guess. I was getting the comments, the favs, the suggestions and participation about the series. It died down a little when school started again, but people still... Enjoyed it." Another refill, one that he was just sipping at this time.

"Then what happened?" The smaller blue one stated, feeling stares and watches from other tables.

"I... Honestly got tired of the sex. So when I announced that issue 16 was going to cut back on the adult content..." A deep breath and the three sadly nodded. "People stopped reading, save for a few who were *actually* interested in where the series was going. It was a weird turn, don't get me wrong, but it was still... The characters, the relationships, the events that happened in the past and whatnot. However..."

"The sex was gone, and barely anyone stuck around." Thea finished, getting a nod in response.

"I had my first writing crisis then. I ended up posting a fake issue as act 20 titled Drown. Saying that if there was no response or comment on that act, I was going to stop posting them. Stop writing it. Keep in mind that I was posting my content on five, count it: FIVE different sites. And... Nothing. Outside of FurAffinity, anyway. And at the time of writing this Meta... FA is the only one I got a damn response on."

A deep breath from Bartan as he took another drink. "I finished SoT season 3 for those on FA who were actually interested in the series, all while working on another little experiment I had..." He tended to his bridge again, shielding those eyes while gesturing towards the couple. "Keep in mind: Writing Crisis. I started with Rex Overboard: a series that was supposed to be pure adult content with next to no background or story in it, whatsoever. Nothing was thought out, nothing was hardly developed. It was nothing more than Smut. I'm sorry, but it was." The eastern dragon and the rex dropped their gaze.

"I see where this is going..." The wyrm mumbled, getting the attention of the two and

their sad looks.

"Yeah... People loved it. After that, I made Drown. But I tried it again soon after with RO act 2: didn't do quite as well, but anything past 10, yes TEN, favorites to me is doing good." A sigh in frustration. "Then I put out another one that was based on Transformation and sex: Pretty Life. One that was supposed to be a one shot as well- And yes, you can see where this *pattern* is Going." Bartan growled, taking a deep breath before lashing out anyone again.

"And that...?"

"Pretty Life broke my records on SoFurry. Fuck, it even got on the Popular List for a few days, #4. That is **Huuuuuge** for me! Yet, I couldn't help but fucking hate the idea of it! Because of what it was to me: Another one shot that had next to no thought put into the setting or the damn characters! It was Mindless Smut!" Almost a minute of silence from the table as Bartan collected himself. "...So I tried to add some story into the second act. Make it more... Like a damn **Story**... And it tanked. Hard. And cue another damn Crisis..."

"Bear..." Thea mumbled.

"At this point, I'm just thinking to myself that maybe I'm not cut out for writing. That my stories are not as good as I *really* think they are. I started... Wondering why I even bothered."

"It's not a popularity contest, Bartan." Loqe stated, not getting a response from the furred one.

"Maybe not, but I just don't know what I want from this... Talent. I have no goals for it, no accomplishments that I feel I need to reach. Yet, I damn well feel like I should have these things! But I can't fucking *think* of them! I don't know what I **Want**! Watchers? A statistic that makes me feel insignificant to others. Views? Just a damn number to me: Meaningless. Favorites? They're Bookmarks. Not indications that something has been read!" Another breath before he downed the cup. "...Maybe I just want to be recognized for more than just porn. More than just someone who helps 14 year olds get off via inflation sex stories."

More silence before a white anthro fox came up and took Bartan by the arm. "Okay, enough of this sulking bear. Come with me." She started dragging his chair to the bar, only to get a few taps to signal her to stop. Getting up and putting the chair back, looking over the couple again before taking a breath.

"I don't hate you. I don't hate Rex Overboard, I kind of like it in a weird way. Even if it's just for the arousal of such a silly concept. I did what I could to make you both likable, but..." Another breath as the fox tugged him again. "You're as much as victim of this fucking system as I am." He turned around to find the canine's red eyes stare at him, nodding after a moment and then turning back. Hugging the couple in a gesture of No Hard Feelings before being lead to the bar. The awkward feeling wyrm soon followed.

The golden serpent coiled through the air, casually avoiding decorations and taller creatures while nearly being enthralled with such an exotic place. Well, exotic to him anyway, gazing at many of the reflective objects and decorations. Chuckling at the azure bearded eastern dragon staring back at him before moving on.

As much as he wanted to explore such a large place, he'd rather do it in the company of another. One specific, of course, as he glided from room to room gazing across a large amount of different species. Wishing he could meet with them now, but knowing Zarj was likely wanting the very same thing.

Bypassing many different dragons, from wyverns, furred wyrms, even a few eastern ones like him. All different sizes and shapes, those blue eyes locked onto a familiar pair of red haunches, putting a bright and almost devious smile across Alkardoc's muzzle. Sneaking up to the wyrm lying down beside a slender looking silver one, it warmed his heart that the shy western was already making friends. Proud of him, really, especially since poor Zarj was so nervous about coming here to begin with.

But the serpent just floated over and landed on that large winged back, feeling it lightly shift as he was listening to a story that was being told with the group. Coiling around that broad chest, he never noticed how much bigger the wyrm looked in a brighter light. After all, most of their time spent was in a very dark cave, barely illuminated by the occasional strike of lightning.

Nuzzling up against that red chin as the silver wyrm attempted to hold in his laughter, that forked tongue tickled Zarj's jaw a little bit. Feeling the western one purr at the attention and get a few strokes from a paw that felt... Almost larger than expected, but not enough to question it. At least not until their eyes met, and Alkar definitely picked out the more amber looking discs, not the orange ones he knew well within the darkness. "Hello there." The red one greeted, unable to hold back his smile as his silver mate cracked.

Those furred ears of his blushed deeply, now piecing together what had happened. "O-oh my! I-I apologize! I swear I thought you were someone else!" The two just chuckled as the silver one placed a paw on the larger wyrm's.

"This is Zhaiothe, and I am Khol. We're from the bear's first novel."

"You must be... The Thread of Dawn?" Those blue eastern eyes almost lit up.

"Yes! Precisely correct! I was searching for Zarj'annan, have you seen him?"

"There's very few who have a tail as perfect as this one." A dark purple female western one stated, getting her black companion to double take. Nudging her for an explanation. "What?

You're surprised I want a taste of it?"

"Considering he's my great grandson, Nitaka, yes." He snorted, getting a chuckle from the group.

"Well, I didn't have a turn with him last year, so." She teased. "Not that you're bad, I just want to see exactly what was passed down in those genes of yours."

"Not experience, I'm sure." Haytre grumbled, flicking his black frilled ears as they were licked. Watching the group get up as he stayed put.

"Let's go find your partner." Zhai smirked, leading the way as the rest followed. Leaving the black one to finally close his eyes and take a rest before he felt someone else quickly take the female's place. Growling in response as the other large dragon only curled up against him.

"Sleeping here." The black one grumbled.

"I know, and that's fine. I need a rest too." Dia'vidd said in a lower voice, actually getting a bit of a surprised look from his father's purple eyes. Gazing over the now pink wyrm that was resting on its own paws, though the strange look in question was definitely felt when those fake antlers and red nose were seen, as well as the riding tack. Feeling a slightly larger wing cover over him after a few moments and making the younger one smile as the two rested. "I actually thought you were still small, especially after the way SoT ended."

"Yeah, well... I wanted to be more comfortable." Haytre grumbled.

"And a certain someone wanted to play Conquer-?"

"Yes, yes." The father snorted. "As well as many others. I still say I detest wyrmlings."

"I wasn't that bad, was I?" Dia teased, feeling a slight head shake from the black one.

"No... Not in the slightest." A deep sigh as he continued to whisper. "I remember being absolutely terrified of being a parent again. Caught in the shackles of responsibility and wondering just how different it was *really* going to be this time around..." Those sad blue eyes stared at Haytre. "But... Leaving your mother in control was the best decision I made in a long time at that point." That made those scaled return to a bright pink.

"She often did know best."

"Tia always knew best." The black wyrm snorted. "But don't tell her I said that." A chuckle from the younger one. "I... Took some time to read... You know."

"DP?" A noise in confirmation as Dia's scaled faded to a grey.

"...You're a lot like me, to be honest. More than I wish you would be." The son's head lowered. "Though I might not like who you're living with..." Haytre grumbled, almost glaring at

the six legged santa walking by the doorway. "...I'm still..." A double take from the younger one, his color shifting from a yellow and a red. "Dia'vidd, I never got my father's approval. I ended up becoming a monster in my family's eyes, my entire nest's-"

"You're not." A breath from the older one, but he nodded that black wedged head.

"What I'm trying to say is... I'm proud of you, Dia'vidd." That pink hue returned. "I'm proud of the life you've made here, the hardships you've been through. And... How happy you've become after such..."

"That wasn't..." The smaller one started, nudging his father to look at him. "Something I did on my own." He finished, seeing a faint nod as those purple discs fell a bit.

"I know... I can tell when someone is good for you, no matter how much I-" A playful shove from the younger one, telling Haytre that it was enough.

"Thank you." A nuzzle against that black neck. "It really means a lot coming from you." A noise in confirmation as the two laid in silence for a bit. Enjoying the cheerful pop music playing softly overhead, until Dia started feeling something specific from the larger one. Looking at him again and noticing that his father's scales turned a purple; something he would often do to hide his embarrassment. "Everything okay?"

"There's... Something else I'd like to..." Those ears perked and the younger one's now yellow head tilted. "It's about the last time we met."

"Last year-?"

"Before that." A puzzled look, then it connected. Making Dia nod largely, but still look at his father in question. "You are... Very good at what you do. Better than I ever expected, or ever..." A couple of blinks as those purple gemstone eyes almost glared at him. "Don't make me say it bluntly, let alone in front of others."

"Oh. ...Oooh..." The smaller one said under his breath. "And you-?"

"Have been around minors for pretty much a year or two straight now and am... Getting a little frustrated, to say the least, yes." A few slow nods from Dia as he scouted around the room. Leaning in to whisper in the purple frilled ear.

"Beyond the kitchen is a room with a large storage closet, filled with things no one will currently need. Meet me there in ten minutes." A bit of a shy look from Haytre, but he nodded. Watching the now red wyrm get up and leave the room as he stared at the clock, likely beginning the longest ten minutes of the evening.

"Well, this is turning into a great night." Thea snorted as they approached the bar, overlooking a brown coyote and a snow leopard with a cybernetic tail. Closer inspection resulted in both her hind legs and left arm were also abyss black like the machined parts, unable to keep from staring until the fox half swatted him. "S-sorry."

"No gawking." Arson demanded, taking a stool beside the bear, who was beside the leopard and the coyote was on the far end. "Dawn." The brown one slid over two sealed and chilled drinks to her, passing one to the bear. "Drink."

"I'm not really into anything this hard-"

"Drink if you ever want me to be in one of your sex stories." A sharp double take from the blue wyrm as the bear just looked at her in question, slowly noticing with every moment of silence those blue spines were raising along Thea's head and neck.

"Mother of God, bear! If you don't drink, I will shove that bottle down your throat myself!" The dragon hissed, getting questionable looks from the others (besides the coyote) and then blushing at their banded gaze. Releasing a faint whimper and lowering his head a little as if to attempt to hide.

"Who's the blue biscuit?" The brown canine barely questioned.

"Thea. Anthem of the Lonely." Bartan answered, though still not releasing his puzzled stare for a few moments. Then gesturing the coyote. "At the end: Dawn. Memory's Fragment. Thais. Red Hypergiant. And I think Dia introduced you to Arson-" A sharp whimper in response from the wyrm that only got them a bit more curious, not releasing their gaze until the white fox let it go.

"Meh. He's been acting like that ever since we met." The white canine opened her bottle with her teeth, then opened the bear's. Literally swallowing the caps after and taking a drink out of her own. "Barkeep! Onion Rings!" A monstrous response came from the kitchen that got no one's attention, only getting them to once again tend to their own drinks.

"He probably had a sex dream about you-" A sharp, nearly missed whine was released after Dawn's half bored statement, getting a few ears to flick towards the large blue one. Then all the females made a noise in confirmation at once. "Yep. That's what it is."

"Not sure why they act like that towards sex, but they do." The fox took a drink with the bear, going out of her way to tilt his bottle up a little higher before a basket of onion rings shot out of the cabinet in front of them. Catching it flawlessly and setting it down. "Talk."

"About what?" Bartan grumbled, making a face at the strong drink and clearing his throat. "The fact that it seems like everyone nowadays only wants their pelvis to be entertained, save for a few people who actually give a damn?"

"If that's what you want to get out, sure." Those brown discs glared at Arson. "Talk about the good ones. Everyone in this room already heard you complain about the bad already, what are the good doing that's so different?"

"Aside from actually *attempting* to try something out of their comfort zone of sexual pleasure? They communicated." A long drink and another face accompanied with a grunt. "They said something about it, and I don't mean they wrote an Essay on what they liked or disliked. Just left a message saying 'I enjoyed this' in some way or form. Private or public." The furred male tended to his bridge again. "Because it's so damn infrequent, it feels like a Gift. One... That I feel like I don't even deserve."

"The hell are you on about?" Dawn grumbled.

"I feel like this... Silence is some sort of punishment for me. Like, that I've done something wrong in this life, and I'm forever unnoticed by the society of... Anyone!" Another drink. "Every time I tried to be in any form of social activity, I get left out and left behind. Be it in real life, in games. Family, friends, relatives. Online or offline, and of course: writing." A pause as he stared at the bottle, not noticing the wyrm gazing over him as well. "I see these people... These other writers that have been doing such for a few years. Thousands of watchers, comments on every submission, favorites in the fifties at minimum..."

"They took time to get where they are, Bartan." The feline stated, giving him a tap on the arm, then a gesture towards the basket of snackfoods.

"...You realize that what you're asking will result in me getting a prosthetic hand." The leopard tossed her snout at him. "Just order some of your own."

"But I only want a few."

"Then we'll split some, how's that?" A shrug from her. "Barkeep! Onion rings and Honey Garlic Chicken Wings!" A dolphin noise came from the kitchen, and only the dragon double took at it. "Point is, you do the work, for free no less. The least they can do is say if they liked it or not. Is that so hard?" One last drink to finish the bottle. "Apparently doing this for five years, posting on five different sites, it's just not enough."

"Is that what you want?" Arson half asked, catching the second flying basket. Stealing a wing with her teeth before setting it on the bar and sliding it between the bear and the leopard.

"That's... That's just a damn question that I can't answer."

"Why." The coyote, and her lackadaisical form of questioning, slid over another drink for the furred male. Getting him to look at it for a moment before the fox took it and opened it with her fangs again.

"Because I don't know the answer to it."

"You know the answer." Thais grumbled. "You just feel like it's too much to ask of others." A sad look from those brown eyes. "Go on. What did they do?" No response. "Speak or you're getting the claws." A grumble from the bear.

"...I've already mention Silent Moonlight Dragon earlier, the first one that actually seemed to give a damn about my stories. I mean, I was lucky enough to receive freaking paragraphs from them, nearly per act and per story." A drink. "Though, I think they found me through being interested in the adultery parts, they at least stuck around to read the rest of it. Much like..." The leopard put her cybernetic hand on his thigh. "-Just taking a drink, you!"

"Surre you are." She watched him as he slowly sipped at the bottle. "Go on, much like the next one." A double take from him.

"A-actually... That's how I got into writing." That blue-grey eye looked at him in question, raising an eyebrow at the fox and she nodded at him. "I'm kinda under oath when she's near me, you realize this."

"Hush." She half smirked at him, giving him a gesture to go on.

"I ended up hosting a game of D&D quite a few summers ago, one where my player actually befriended a black wyrmling. It got me interested in thinking just how he would look like he was older-"

"So you wanted to see porn of him." Dawn again, downing her possibly 15th bottle and not getting a single effect from them.

"I don't really need an excuse to look at dragon porn, this was literally for research." Everyone at the bar stared at Bartan, making him look back and forth at them. "I mean it!"

"Then why was the safe search off?" The coyote grumbled.

"Why was it not off?" Arson and the bear questioned back, seeing that brown muzzle toss a bit as he continued. "Regardless, I spotted quite a few black dragons, yes. But I was looking for ones specifically that wasn't putting them in an Antagonist light." A breath. "I came across one of a black dragon lying in a large tub that looked... Interesting, and it was apparently based off of a story. So I decided to give it a shot-"

"Because you were thinking with your pelvis-"

"Puppy, you have rings to eat." Bartan grumbled at the fox. "Yes, I was interested in the sex. But even after reading it, I enjoyed the story so much that I started from the beginning."

"And that's how-?"

"It was boring." A double take from Thais. "It was like 30 minutes of a human woman being escorted down some stairs, and I just slogged through it until I got fed up. I skipped until

the dragon was introduced, and *Then* started really reading it." Another drink as a few sets of eyes were staring at him. "It's a *human woman*, I'm not going to give a damn about them or why she was being dragged into a dungeon!"

"How do you put up with this?" The leopard asked Arson.

"Believe me, you haven't seen the worst of it yet." She replied, her muzzle full and motioning for more rings.

"But I read through it... And I liked it. So I read the next one, then the next and next." A heavy breath from the bear. "I mean, the artist ended up teaching me how 'not' to write, but they also showed me how to do so much. I kept thinking to myself... I could do this." A drink. "And I'm damn vocal, pissed off, and harsh about these other people reading my stories because *I Was Like Them!!*" The bear growled. "Even if it was for the sex at first, reading that story changed my life! Spending time with something meaningful and thought provoking was actually worth reading a single story across two freaking weeks! Are mine that long? Hell no! But I can't stress enough how much they could teach you...! Even if it's not the lessons that are shown on the surface..."

Another long drink as he continued. "JinxMontalgo (FurAffinity)... I mean, he's mostly into the inflation deal of stuff, but he at least tries some of my other stories. Much more than most of these others attempt. He was... Honestly, the first real friend I had that liked inflation, the silly concepts that half of these dragons encountered. Though it's not written on any site, he does talk to me about things. Providing feedback, catching spelling errors or overused words. And I... I like to think I've improved on those inflation based stories, but that's not all I want to do! I want to be remembered for doing something enlightening! Important! Not to satisfy a few dozen dicks for every submission." He finished the drink. "But at this point... Everything meaningful I write just feels like a waste of breath." A few moments of silence before the bear quietly sighed. "Go on, let it out-"

"Yeah, I know you know that we've been living a lie." The fox started.

"Turn a blind eye, until the day we die." Thais continued, leaving the last lines to the bear.

"Maybe we've passed the point of no return. Maybe we just want to watch the world burn."

And the three together: "We just want to watch the world burn."

"You guys are a bunch of dorks." Dawn grumbled, taking another drink. "Next."

"Bunsen.dragon (FurAffinity), who I can't even believe-"

"I meant my next case of drinks." The four just looked at the coyote for a few moments,

hearing a colossal goat sneeze as a large pack of chilled bottles was slid out to her. Then sliding one to the bear as he continued.

"...Who I can't even believe actually went through Somewhere Out There at least four times. To the point where he requested me to put them all together, saving the royal pain of downloading each act. Fun fact: all of them together was like 681 pages, including Act Zero. Seriously, I can't even fathom that... Both the commitment and the fact it's that large, more the commitment though." Another drink. "He even read through Wrong Side Of Heaven, Red Hypergiant, and Anthem of the Lonely. Possibly even others that I don't know about." The wyrm and the leopard looked at him.

"Yet, no one reads Memory's Fragment." The coyote half grumbled.

"That's because it's a terrible story."

"You're the one who wrote it." A snout toss from Bartan.

"So much from getting a reaction from you, Dawn." A breath from the furred male. "SoT, as much as I detest the idea of riding off of the popularity of Angels With Scaly Wings, it's brought me a lot of fans. Padmaiden (Luigifan212 on FurAffinity) was one of the few that actually stuck with the entire series, and even was inspired *by* me to try writing. Not to mention, introduced me to Wagakki-

"What?" The dragon, leopard and coyote asked.

"It's a Japanese band that uses more traditional instruments along with a rock/metal beat to most of their songs." The fox explained, once again with her muzzle full. Seeing her husband gesture her in confirmation.

"A band I'm still listening to, and where The Thread Of Dawn got its name from." Bartan stated. "Seriously, try Senbonzakura and just try not to fall in love with how well it flows together. Granted, I'm just a fan of great drummers of all kinds, but it was this style of music that I was really looking for, searching what felt like years for this Samurai Warriors OST style." A drink. "Perhaps it wasn't intentional, but a fan of mine *Gifted* me that..."

"Don't get sappy on me, bear." The brown one grumbled.

"Fine, fine." A breath from Bartan as he ate a wing, purring at the taste. "But... This isn't to say that my inflation or transformation pieces are bad in any way. If you like them, you like them. I'm not going to shame anyone for doing such, let alone myself. I know I have fans that are primarily focused on a specific fetish, the ones who've spoken up are the ones I write for. Krauser...?" The three just looked at the bear in question. "I'm honestly not sure what to call them, specifically. Jack was another name they went-"

"Isn't that the soldier guy from Resident Evil 4?" The leopard asked.

"Mhmm." Arson answered while drinking.

"FA really needs a way to change usernames." The furred male grumbled, taking another wing. "But they... They seem to really like inflation in a way that others like, say, Pokémon. Not just in an adultery way, but also in a clean, passionate way. Much like Jinx, they seem to have this interest over it, and really enjoy talking about it." A breath from him. "They're the ones that really gave me the confidence to take my first commission. I can't say that one was a disaster, but Jack's request... It made me feel good about myself, made me feel like I actually did something *correct*, what a 'customer' would want and what others would like to see. Let alone from something clean! ...Inflation based, yes, but clean."

"Then there's Numinos X (SoFurry)... Who has been plowing through my stories ever since I did that collab with Tissthalliss, and commenting quite often about them. Even something like Counting Stars, and they're not into Inflation." He took a deep breath. "They were interested in the story, the relationship between Dia'vidd and Beo..."

The bear slid around his stool and looked over the room, spotting a blue lizard sitting next to a gnoll. A human woman next to a red noodle stuffing his face. A black and platinum dragon trying different foods with a red one of his kind. A colorful raptor asking an endless amount of questions about the decorations within a group of a lizard, a golden dog, and a threatening looking red behemoth. Yet, several little ones using him as a jungle gym.

A brown, more bat-like looking dragon snuggling up to a yellow lizard, shy about such displays in public. The color changing wyrm from before wrapping up a conversation with a female sphinx with breasts, for some reason. A griffon talking to a cyan nightmare (horse on fire) in a heated debate, likely about morality or beliefs. An Allosaurus having, what he hoped was, a pleasant talk to a one eyed grey tirix. It was a sight that nearly tugged the bear's heart as he took another drink.

"There are just... So many stories in this room alone. If you point to any one, I could tell you who they were, and what happened to them in their past. Written or not... Am I the only one that's ever going to remember them? Maybe most of them are written for someone like me, but..." Bartan faced the bar again, taking another wing and not noticing Thea stare at him a bit sadly. Looking over the room again for a moment before-

"That one." He gestured with a wing, only getting questionable stares from the three at the bar... Again, minus Dawn, because you should know at this point; she just doesn't care. "The brown tirix-"

"Ryoko?" Arson and the bear asked, getting a shrug from the wyrm and a nod. Seeing the two look at each other for a moment before the female said. "Go for it, answer Blueballs."

"He's actually a Necromancer, if you can believe that." A double take from the larger one, looking over at the rather civil looking feral panther. "He studied the art of life and death a

lot, and no: not in a typical 'Bring the dead back to life as zombies or skeletons' type of way. Ryoko was one of the first ones I ever started seeing that was Outside of Veritas: the universe where Dawn, Arson, Exile, Krow-

"Got it." The blue one snorted.

"-was from." A heavy breath from him. "He lived as a bit of a black sheep to his peers; in a rather hot, savannah like place. Never knowing what he actually was, as in: species."

"Being... Tirix?" The two white ones nodded at Thea.

"It was a heavy tourist spot, so it wasn't uncommon to see different people. However, there was this... Polar Bear that showed up one day, dressed rather warmly for the climate." A noise in question. "The CW Bartan ended up warning him that his world was coming to an end. And that there was an escape nearby, if he was willing to choose to use it. Keep in mind, that Ryoko was just a pup."

"He ended up telling his friends about it all," The fox continued. "But nobody believed him. Ryoko himself actually questioned it's reality himself, but that next morning; very early next morning... His world was starting to be torn apart. Yet, there was no sign of anyone he knew. No sounds, no bodies, the homes were empty and he didn't have time to search for anyone. So he took off where the bear suggested, and he found himself a timestorm: taking him to a safe place."

"And that's maybe the 2% mark." Bartan grumbled. "If you really want me to keep going, I can-"

"Save it for a different time, bear." Dawn yawned, taking another drink. "This meta's getting kinda long as it is." The furred male let out a sigh through his muzzle, finishing off his drink.

"I need some air." He mumbled, getting up and heading towards a pair of doors leading outside. Granted, not without a detour to wash his paws of the honey garlic sauce.

(Still no sign of him...) The golden serpent thought, still floating over the somewhat crowded hallways. Passing the silver wyrm he met earlier and exchanged a head shake as if to say No Sign Of Him Yet. (Where could Zarj have gone?) "I'll check around the kitchen, perhaps." Alkardoc informed, seeing Khol nod and gesture a different direction.

Worries flooded his mind, let alone concerns of the red dragon possibly being thrown out to empty space. Maybe he even left without the eastern one? He was definitely shy about things, but Zarj seemed to be more curious about the event than the serpent was. Glancing through the kitchen and not seeing a speck of red scales within, he moved on. Granted, now

noticing the two sets of doors to the large room: one for entrances and the other for exits.

It was a genius idea, really, keeping others out of possible collisions with rather hot food. It's a wonder most kitchens didn't have the same thing. None of the one's Alkar's been in had something of the sort, thinking through while he browsed the many doors along the way, closed or not. Until he opened one to find a black wyrm's back turned towards him. Double taking before getting hissed at. "**Occupied!**" The purple gemstone eyed one growled, getting the eastern one to whimper loudly.

"S-sorry!" And the door seemed to almost close by itself, before hearing a few chuckles from afar. Turning about to find the white furred host approach Alkardoc.

"It can be difficult to find privacy in such occasions, can't it?" The six legged bear stated, giving a friendly smile towards that blue bearded muzzle who was returning the very same. "Are you looking for something specific?"

"Forgive me for being a snoop-"

"Not at all, I meant it when I stated nowhere was off limits." A shy nod.

"But I've been looking for my partner."

"Zarj'annan?" A series of quick nods and the bear looked around the room. Getting a puzzled look from the golden one, especially when that white snout started moving up to the ceiling. "He is on the roof, apparently."

"R-roof?"

"Yes, there are plenty of layers and staging. It is perfectly safe, I assure you." The white one smiled, seeing the sigh of relief from the eastern dragon. "You can reach him quickly by going out this window."

"Thank you!" He started to head towards it, but turned around for a moment. "By any chance, can you...?" A large nod made him trail off.

"I will inform Zhai and the others to halt their search, do not worry." Another thanks was sent as the serpent slipped out the window and moved upwards. Leaving the bear to smile and hear a growl from the nearby storage room, one that was trying really hard to hold back.

Chuckling again, Bartan turned about and started heading down the hall, seeing a familiar pair of muscular haunches come out of the kitchen with a few trays. Catching up to the behemoth and sharing a nuzzle from behind, rubbing the currently white dragon wearing a red scarf. "Is this the first time you've been out since you entered that kitchen?" The furred one questioned, getting a near exhausted sigh from Beo. His cyan mane and beard almost looking a little messy and stressed. "You should enjoy yourself a little-"

"I'm not going to let others go hungry." The wyrm grumbled a bit, though taking a moment to hold the Counterweight in his arms. Only to feel the weight of the trays be taken off and transferred to the bear instead. "FD-"

"No buts." The Counterweight playfully scolded. "Go take a break. I'll deliver these, I'm going this way regardless."

"And the kitchen-?"

"Will survive without you. I'll look after it, now go talk to someone." A bit of a worried look, but the six legged bear left before the white titan could argue. Sighing a bit then turning around to head back into the kitchen, only to find it guarded by the two little ones. Actually stopping the behemoth for a moment as he slowly curled his neck.

"You heard FD!" His wolfling son chirped.

"Go talk to someone!" A grumble left Beo's throat before snorting at them playfully. Moving into the next guest room filled with others, but a certain skinny brown wyrm was by himself. Looking over him from afar put a sad smile over that bearded snout, a series of cyan spines along the jawline. Starting to walk towards him, though getting the attention of the smaller dragon with heavy pawsteps and making Sig'eaal double take. Both in surprise and a bit of shock.

"Enjoying yourself?" The large one asked, laying down beside the brown one. Letting those yellow eyes overlook the strange white paint on his scales and wings; ones that replaced the red fur with what looked to be feathers.

"...What the **Hell** are you wearing!?" Siggy hissed at him, getting a bit of a chuckle from the titan.

"Bartan wanted us to go in costume this year. Something to do with both holidays."

"Is that why I seen the furball wearing a red coat?" A nod. "...And your little boy-toy sporting antlers and bondage equipment?" The brown one snorted at the second nod, looking at the hallway from afar. "I haven't seen him in a while. What, is he stuck in your kitchen?" Those green peppered eyes looked at the smaller dragon for a moment, then looked off in the air to ponder.

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"This is a lot harder with the nose and the antlers on-"

"I don't care! They're Staying!"

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"Probably just out helping someone." Beo stated, shrugging his wings and once again feeling that puzzled gaze from the brown wyrm.

"...And what exactly are you dressed up to be?"

"Well... We tried a few things. I had the antlers on before, but the moment I even attempted to speak, the string snapped off." The behemoth grumbled. "We couldn't really think of anything else holiday related, so Bartan just suggested Cosplaying instead."

"Cosplaying...?"

"As in, dressing up as another dragon. We tried Jinx at first, but the... *Rubbery* textures made it difficult to cook with, and the two couldn't keep their paws off me." A snout toss from Siggy as the white one continued. "So we just went with all black, only for Haytre to comment on something about me looking like a bigger version of him."

"Bigger...?"

"Likely in build." Beo grumbled. "So then we went with Malfaren; brown wyrm-" A near growl from the smaller one. "With a tubby underside."

"...I'm okay with that."

"And I didn't mind... At first. But in order to make the... Belly..." A blank stare from the yellow eyes.

"...Ohhhh..."

"Yes. And they just A: couldn't decide how much was enough, B: It also got in the way of cooking, and C: They wouldn't leave it alone." The titan flopped his head on the soft blankets. "So we changed again."

"...To...?"

"Jerbie, apparently." The large one shrugged his wings. "The bear even made me grow fur and feathers at one point, but people kept asking where I was." Another grumble as the behemoth adjusted himself, pulling the smaller one closer to him as he rested his heavy head on Sig'eaal's shoulders. Getting him to growl a bit. "Shut it, stick. This is what you get for taking the last pillow."

"There's plenty of them over there!" The brown one hissed.

"Oh, you would rather me say the real reason out loud?" A very slight whimper from the smaller dragon. "That you secretly like-"

"Fine, fine. I took the last pillow." A loud snort as Siggy grumbled in defeat. Feeling that large head nuzzle against him. "Ugh... Kresskre. Must you embarrass yourself?"

"There's nothing embarrassing with showing affection, Sig'eaal."

"For you maybe. Or did you just forget how to be a dragon-? Ow...!" He grumbled at the shifting weight, trying to look back at what the behemoth was doing. Especially after those large paws braced him down by the shoulders. "Ow! Hey! What are you-ow-ow-ow-ow-!" A sharp snap was heard as he whimpered. "Oh... Ooooooh...!" Siggy purred as the paws started to stroke. "That's good... That's very..."

Beo just smirked at him, half shaking his head as they remained in silence for a bit. Those paws studying his much thinner form, but... They were a little different than he remembered. "You've been...?" A noise in question. "Actually...? Working out?" No response. "You feel... Better, Siggy. Even look more healthy-"

"I know where you're going with this, Muscles." The brown one snorted. "And I will not admit it, so don't even try." A light shrug from those cyan wings could barely be seen. Hearing the smaller one sigh underneath him. "...It was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"Aside from opening up to me-?"

"That never happened, Kresskre. It was all in your head." Another snort, but the larger one just smirked sadly. "After... Losing that..." The brown wyrm looked over his own rather scrawny arm and forepaw. "State..."

"That Bartan gave you-?"

"Shut-up." A tormenting nudge from the titan. "...But fine. His... Trial Run, I suppose you could call it, of having a..."

"Body that was in shape-"

"I was getting to that! And again: Shut-up!" A chuckle that time. "...I hated my old self. To wake up one morning and to find it was all gone..." Those paws stopped for a moment, and the larger one adjusted himself again. "Taath-no! Don't you-!" Sig'eaal nearly squeaked at the tight hug, the extra weight almost flattening his rather wide tail and pressing him further into the pillows and blankets. Unable to keep himself from nearly purring though.

"But you came back." A series of muffles were heard and Beo double taked, lifting himself off the brown one. "You'll live."

"Regrettably. Until you attempt to flatten me once again." Another snort as the smaller one was nudged again.

"...What made you change?" A bit of a low growl from Siggy. "Come on, tell me."

"It wasn't you, that's for sure. Or your furball of a pest." He snorted, getting a few licks from that large purple tongue.

"So, you found yourself a pet?" A sharp whine and a double take, making those thin spines raise up and hiss at the behemoth. More so when he started laughing.

"No! Taath! I'm not like you! I don't resort to a lesser being for comfort!" He growled, but the titan didn't seem to take it harshly. Once again really showing the smaller one how much he's changed. Taking a deep breath and laying his head back down. "...It was... That..." A noise in question. "That... Boy-toy of yours." He could feel the curious stare return from those green eyes.

"...Boy-toy?" A bit of a growl. "Which one?" A sharp look of both frustration and almost disdain from the brown one, breaking Beo into chuckles again.

"You cannot seriously tell me that you have *more* than one!"

"Yes." A long stare and the brown one snorted.

"I hate your family." Another chuckle that just irritated Siggy more. "The... Colorful one, I don't remember his name-"

"Dia-?"

"-Sure." A smile from that currently-white muzzle. "He caught me leaving that last time we met."

"Wait, what?" An uncomfortable grunt from the brown one. "I thought Bartan opened the portal for you."

"No, that toy of yours did after threatening me not to hurt his new owner's *feelings*." A snort as the large one remained still. "Honestly, it made me question exactly who is in charge of this freakshow that is your nest." A bit of silence as Siggy attempted to sigh under the weight. "...I hated him for that."

"...What did he say?"

"You think I remember-?"

"You do." Beo tried to look the brown wyrm in the eyes, but the smaller one looked away. "I know you do." A growl that time.

"...He warned me. Threatened that if I somehow hurt you, he would ruin me. *Shatter me into a million pieces*." Sig'eaal mocked the younger one. "Then told me that *I* needed to change." Another long silence as the stick sighed in defeat. "...I hate him. I hate him because he's..." An almost weak breath. "Because he's right." He mumbled, burying his muzzle into the blankets.

It didn't take long for the large one's head to adjust a bit, then his entire body. Barely

hearing a strange shimmer around them as Beo started to lift the brown one up. Feeling him struggle and growl a little bit as if he were to be thrown on display on one of his weakest moments, but the behemoth gave him a comforting shhh. "They can't see you. They can't hear you." Those wet yellow eyes glared at him, almost in question, then looked around the room.

It was like they were in some sort of bubble together, one that didn't seem to grab the attention of anyone in the room. Even seeing one yellow wyvern from afar look at their direction, awwing and giggling a bit, but her gaze was in a different place of where the two wyrms were... I guess you could call it lovably restraining? I donno. "They... Can't?"

The titan growled loudly into a large roar, one that vibrated the very pillows they rested on. But no one even seemed to notice in the slightest. "They can't." The white wyrm licked at him. "Let it out..." And the brown one slowly collapsed.

Bartan stepped outside on the veranda, one that showed off a wonderful view of the northern lights. Illuminating the large pond that several were using as a skating rink... Okay, I say 'using', but really it was more 'attempting to use'. Regardless, the bear just leaned over the railing. Barely noticing the golden furred wyrm next to him, and a large Charr standing upright. One wearing a dark purple jumpsuit. "Having a good time-?" The dragon started to ask.

"Fish, no." The white one grumbled, still tending to his head a bit.

"Why not?"

"I find it highly amusing that you're still in the mindset of a human, Leslie." A young woman skating on the ice double took at the bear, getting a motion to go on. "Not you." A gesture towards the dragon and the human woman nodded, waving at the Charr and almost inviting him to come over. Though, not getting an answer. "You're new here, so you have a reason to not know yet. I'm normally forced into these things."

"Please." A snout toss from the golden one. "I know people say that, but it's hardly-"

"He literally gets kidnapped every year." The dark orange cat-thing stated bluntly, getting the wyrm to double take and then look at Bartan for a confirmation. Getting a nod from the white one while Li looked back and forth between them.

"...Why?"

"Because he wishes to avoid the discomfort of such events." Eman bluntly stated. "Living in such luxuries has made you rather soft, bear."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be huggable." The white one grumbled, attempting to make it sound like a joke as he leaned his head against the pole.

"Of course. You're used to such things, aren't you? Now what is going to happen the day that you're without them?"

"I'll worry about that when it comes. Honestly, it's the boredom that gets me more than the lack of not having something. I've gone years without the use of internet or computers, social media and the like. I'll just find another way to entertain myself to keep my mind busy."

"You wouldn't miss it in the slightest?" The dragon questioned, getting a shrug from the bear in response.

"A little, yes. But my life doesn't revolve around it. Even when it comes to writing, I..." A deep breath from the white one, not noticing the blue wyrm staring from inside the doorway. "...I honestly welcome the idea of taking a large break from it. An excuse not to spend hours upon hours thinking up something meaningful to write, then somehow involve porn in some way so it will get attention."

"You're not serious." The charr grumbled.

"That's how bad it seems like-"

"No." Eman interrupted him, getting a thick stare from those brown eyes. "That is not a response, that is a statement: You Are Not Serious. That goes against your very beliefs-"

"Beliefs that I once had-"

"Beliefs that you still have, Bartan." A bit of a low growl at the harsh tone, leaving the furred dragon in the middle to get a little uncomfortable. "*G and E Minor*." A silent stare as Leslie looked between the two in question. Then a breath in defeat from the white one.

"Imagination is the key to happiness." A noise in question from the golden one, as Bartan continued. "*And There Forever Remains, That Change From G To E Minor*. It is the exit lyric to Song Of Myself by Nightwish. The album itself, titled Imaginaerum, is a rock opera telling the story about a man who lives in a world with no sense of creativity. All because the 'Imagination' has been considered Outdated or Obsolete. Childish... Kind of like how it is today in the real world."

"Childish...?" Thea whispered from afar, not getting the attention of the others as the white one continued.

"Tired of the depressing grey world he's forced into, this... Artist, I guess you could call him, decides to bring that suppressed childhood imagination back to life. He creates a world and dives into it. Viewing it in the eyes of his characters, the ones he creates using his imagination, and nothing more." A breath from Bartan. "...But not all stories are the happy fairy tales you'd

expect. Many consist of rather frightening horrors and fears... Especially when you find yourself trapped in it."

"Trapped...?" Li mumbled, looking back at Eman for a moment and recalling what they mentioned before about being kidnapped. "Are you...?"

"It's an interesting way of putting it." Bartan grumbled, gesturing behind him but not looking. "Being stuck in a place where you can't escape from, only for people made up of your own imagination to question every action you've made along this past year." Those golden furred ears fell. "But that's not where I was getting at and I won't bore you with all the details... That artist eventually forces himself out of that imaginary world, only to be brought back to his damp, depressing one. Living as he normally would, he sees the world in shades of grey... But realizes that there is still some light that exists."

A breath from the white one. "He longs for that world that he left, as his thoughts and philosophy begin to shroud him with dark truths... Until he realizes something: And There Forever Remains That Change From G To E Minor." A blank stare from both dragons, as their heads started to tilt slowly.

"I'm... I'm not getting it."

"They are parallel." The charr stated, getting the questionable looks from them. "They're two notes with the exact same pitch, meaning: they coexist with one another. Much like a set of moral standards."

"...What?" Li questioned.

"Good and Bad." Eman grumbled. "G and E Minor: Good and Evil Minor."

"But what does -?"

"The quote states that there is a gravity towards the Bad things that happen in life." Bartan started up again. "If you do nothing, you will sink into that dull grey world." A breath from him. "Your imagination is what brings it back up, your *Creativity* is what saves you from depression... Or at least that's what I want to believe."

"It *is* what you believe, bear." The dark orange furred one stated, still crossing his arms.

"So, writing? That's what you're getting at?"

"Writing, drawing, reading, roleplaying, anything that gets you to use your imagination." Bartan answered the furred wyrm. "But things like watching TV, youtube, movies... They give you a false form of it. A placebo that might make you think it's helping, but it's just a ruse. Some of it is okay, but if you're still feeling down while watching this content, then..."

"You should look into something else. Something more creative..." Li mumbled, looking

over those on the frozen pond. "Like us...?" A slow nod from the bear, as he overlooked the same area.

"You guys are my... Self therapy. After being through so damn much in my life, I've done well to get this far without much. I've restricted myself away from medication or drugs, including anti-depressants or any form of substance abuse. I don't drink, never smoked, never touched a drug..." A surprising chuckle from the white one caused a few puzzled looks from the others. "I remember telling that to my psychiatrist and he didn't believe me, almost pressing me to admit that I was hiding it. Beo was so mad..."

"You were seeing a psychiatrist?" The golden wyrm asked.

"Not regularly. Over the past... Three years? I've seen him maybe five times." A breath from Bartan. "He's mostly helped me get disability tax credit and actual income assistance..." A few moments of silence. "...Maybe... I just can't do this on my own anymore."

No response from any of them, getting the white one to take another breath. "You know... I've mentioned this before in Red Hypergiant act 2, but... If one of your limbs gets crushed under something heavy, and I mean literally **Crushed**, it hurts. Painfully obvious, I know, but if the pressure isn't released... It doesn't actually hurt as bad as you would think. Yet, as soon as that weight is lifted, and your nerves are able to once again send signals to your brain..."

"You will get overwhelmed with pain." The charr stated, seeing the bear nod faintly and sigh again. As the furred wyrm looked back and forth between the two.

"I've gotten... A lot of support this past year. I've gotten requests done, both for me and by me, I've done my first commission where I was actually paid for my work. I've done trades and collabs, given and received gifts, and even did a silly piece for someone's birthday. But at the same time... I've gotten these dry spots where I felt like no one is supporting what I worked hard on... What I've put a lot of effort into-"

"You can't expect others to read everything the moment it's released, Bartan." Li half grumbled. "They have their own lives, only so many hours in the day, and often enough it's more occupied than your life is." The golden one looked back at Eman for some backup, but only getting that crossed solid stare from those blue discs. "...Really? You're supporting him on this?"

"He's from Afterlife, what do you expect?" The bear grumbled, getting a puzzled look from Leslie. "Have you ever even listened to Gravity?"

"Well, I tried. But couldn't understand what he was saying-"

"This Is A Wake Up Call." The white one nearly growled. "No Rise Without The Fall. I've Seen The Great Divide. You Can Run, But You. Can't. Hide."

"The threat of an upcoming storm, so to speak." The orange one explained, getting the

attention of the dragons. "As in, it's a metaphor. A storm that cannot be avoided." A gesture to Bartan to continue.

"I Met The Devil And God. And Couldn't Tell Them Apart."

"Most of your leaders, be it in your own country or another. The ones you are sided with or the ones you are against; they are all vultures posing as doves. They are victims of the very same system, yes, but they are the ones supporting it for their very own gain."

"I Thought I Found The End, But It Was Only The Start."

"This system will not naturally **Expire** by simply **Waiting** for it to end. To think that it will come to a close by itself is proving just how much each and every one of you are fools." Eman stated thickly, getting a slight whimper from the golden one.

"I've Heard It All Before, Aren't You Tired Of All Of The Violence Inside Of You? Just Let Go."

"How long will it be until those leaders ask you to do something horrible once more? What will they state next to get you fired up enough to throw your lives into the next war? And what will truly be gained from your sacrifice?"

"Gravity. Hold Onto Me."

"The only laws that you can truly believe are the Truisms of Nature. It is nature to have an expiration date, yes, but it is **Not** Nature to kill yourselves. To kill each other for someone's personal squabble!" A signal to pause Bartan's next line as the charr took a breath. "I'm going to add in something the bear has talked about again and again throughout many series: You, as in the humans reading this, are One Species. You are One Planet. **Start. Acting. Like. One.**" A breath through his orange muzzle and a gesture to continue.

"So Come And Wash Us Away, Just Thank Fuck That We Don't Last Forever. It's Now Or Never."

"Another moral he's actually talked about in 1989: You leave behind something, even if you don't intend to. Someone can and will have to clean up your mess, be it your generation or the next ten down the line. They Will Have to Deal with Your Fallout. Even if you don't have children, specifically, you are still **Responsible** for the future of those **living** here." Those blue eyes glared at Li's for a moment. "For someone who is an upcoming father, that is something you must understand, yes?" A shy nod as those furred ears fell.

"Is This The Catalyst? Just Let Me Burn The Bridge That Leads Me Nowhere. Because It's Gone, And It's Never Coming Back."

"There is no End Of The World. There is no upcoming Apocalypse or Armageddon that will doom everything and cause a reset. There is only you and your species' choices for a better

or worse future. It is a cycle that has been experienced again and again: Put An End To It. Stop living in the past, there is no easy way out of the hardships that you will have to face, and just letting the system repeat is just a waste of what little time and resources you have remaining."

"So Make No Mistake: It's Just A Matter Of Time Before. The. Wave. Breaks. So Stand Your Ground. The Earth Will Shake. So Twist The Knife. Because I Am Finally Awake."

"Change." The charr stated, leaving behind a long silence that almost made the dragons uncomfortable. Eventually gesturing for Eman to elaborate. "It is the entire message of the song and why Bartan mentioned it: CHANGE. Yes, it's going to be a while. Yes, it's going to be difficult, but it is not Impossible. It will collapse if you fight long enough, demand that things will change. They have very little control over you, and most of that is what **You Choose** to give them." A breath from the large feline. "It will be frightening, but you need to stay strong. You need to show no mercy, and be brutally honest with yourself: how much do you want this? And what do you think is truly Right?"

A look at the white furred one to see if he would continue, but he remained silent. Gazing back and forth between the two for a few moments before speaking up. "And this has something to do with Afterlife?"

"Afterlife itself is a story I started on the first year of my writing." Bartan finally spoke. "I've just been slowly getting it done over the years..." A breath. "It's supposed to explore what it really means to be both Human and Humane. I thought Gravity was a nice fit, along with a few others..."

"Now how do you feel?" The charr asked the white one, getting those brown discs to look at him. "Knowing that now some others have seen how your misanthropic mind works when it's paired with music?" A few blinks as Bartan's gaze fell. "And that is why you will never cease writing, bear. Every artist goes through this; comparing themselves to the success stories of 1/1,000,000. It's also a damn good way to end your career."

"So, I'm supposed to do this by myself?"

"Where did you come up with this foolish idea that you are Entitled to these things? To such attention, in order to keep writing? Let alone, expect others to know what you want out of them? They cannot read your mind, just like you cannot read theirs." Those round white ears spaded. "There's nothing wrong with requesting something, but you've been *Expecting* it. That's why you've been hitting these Writing Crises; it's not because of others failing you, it's you setting yourself up for failure."

"That's a bit of a harsh way to put it." Li mumbled.

"You wouldn't starve yourself because you expect others to give you food, would you?" Uncomfortable groans from the other two furred ones. "Now, what do you want from them? Not what you need, but what do you want from others, bear?" A bit of silence, but the white one

was thinking.

"...I want them to try." He eventually spoke, overlooking the view once again. "I want them to change, attempt something new once in a while. Spend 10 minutes just trying a different story, a different song or a band, even if it isn't your kind of music." A breath. "Make a change in your life-"

"Now why should they listen to you?" Eman asked, sternly. Actually catching Bartan off-guard and watching his gaze fall. Not noticing the blue wyrm finally step forward to reveal himself.

"Because he's been trying to change too." The three looked over at Thea. "I-I've seen it, the past several months. You've changed many things in your life, bear. From what you've eaten or consumed..." A couple of puzzling looks from the feline and the golden dragon, as if silently asking what the blue one was talking about.

"I... I started drinking milk, now that I could afford to do so. I started eating cereal, drinking coffee, even though I still don't think it does anything for me." A breath though his muzzle. "I've cut my portions in half, added some fruits inbetween some meals as snacks, mostly apples. I've started going for a walk nearly every day, and I'm... Slowly getting around to the things I missed out on. Be it just trying different things like a poutine- Yes. I'm a Canadian that has never had a poutine." Li slowly tilted his head in confusion.

"It's like fries, but with cheese and gravy on it." Thea snorted, expecting the slightly scrunched up face. "Yeah, I reacted the same way."

"It's on my list, anyway. Along with different other places to eat out, due to me almost never been able to do so." Bartan added, overlooking the rather calm charr again.

"The point is: you've made changes in your life. Both online and offline, writing or reading." An uncomfortable nod from the white one. "If you can do such a thing, I'm pretty sure others could at least make such an effort." A bit of silence as the blue one kept looking back and forth at the bear and the large feline.

"To change the subject a bit, what is he?" Thea pointed at Eman, getting those four orange ears to spade a bit.

"A Charr. A species he did not make-"

"Not species." Puzzled looks all around as the scaled wyrm rubbed the back of his neck. "We are extensions of you, right?" He said to Bartan getting a nod, then a gesture to Eman once again.

"Conviction." A noise in question. "Solid, unwavering belief in something or that something is correct. I suppose in a way, you could almost call it faith."

"Conviction...?" Thea mumbled watching the bipedal, demonic looking cat thing start to leave by turning around and following the veranda around the corner.

"You still have a lot to say, bear." Eman stated thickly as he was moving away. "Take a moment to catch your breath if you need to, but there are many gospels left unsaid. Be it your words, or the words of another, Do Not Remain Silent." The three remained staring until his full exit, and then quiet for a bit longer. Soon getting eye contact with the furred dragon, and recognizing the sad expression.

"What am I then?" Leslie asked, almost whimpering when a half shrug was seen.

"Possibly the mask of a human, or at least what I think a human would act like in your situation. I never gave it too much thought." Those black wings and golden head sank, hearing the bear take a breath and move to give him a hug.

"I... Know you think Pretty Life is the worst thing you've written this year, and I Probably already know the answer to this, but..." He felt Bartan pull slightly away to look at those draconic blue eyes, but they hid for a bit longer. "Do you think there's any possibility that it will continue? Just... Any chance-?" Li finally double took at the curious stare of the writer's. "W-what?"

"Well... I left it opened for a reason, but Les... Pretty Life is not the worst thing I wrote this year." Those golden ears perked up, even feeling Thea's double take from slightly afar.

"It isn't?" The dragons asked at the same time.

"Yeah, if anything... Possibly one of the most important."

"Then...?" The furred wyrm almost whimpered.

"What is?" A pair of nods, letting Bartan look over the two and sigh a bit. "Somewhere Out There Act Zero - Your Life."

"...What?" Thea grumbled. "I thought you liked that series-"

"But I bluntly stated in the comments of Act Zero that it was literally the worst thing I've ever written." The bear grumbled. "It's an autobiography of my fucking life, of course it's going to suck!"

"But you said-" The scaled one nearly growled, gesturing back in the dining area. "You said you hated it!"

"I said I hated the *Idea* of it, Thea." A breath from the white one as he hugged the smaller dragon again. "It was a story about humans, in a human world, being humans and caring about their human lives. Christ, I got bored just *saying* that. It's such a dull, overused setting with nothing remotely interesting in it besides:" A couple of pats on that golden furred back. "Not even the cursed photos were enough to keep me from being bored to tears. So, if there is going

to be another act to it, it's going to have to be *very interesting* in order to keep my attention."

"Maybe..." Les started. "Maybe we'll just have to think of something then." A shrug and a nod from the bear. "Until then, I think you've been interrogated enough tonight. Don't you think?"

"Not quite." Arson stated, coming from behind the blue wyrm. Getting another whimper from him as she leaned against his larger form. "You still haven't done the AMA." A questionable look from the golden one as the fox shrugged. "Ask Me Anything."

"That's because no one actually *Asked* anything-"

"Bunsen did." The fox stated, pulling out a piece of paper. "*What does a typical day look like for Bartan?*" A groan from the bear as he tended to his bridge for the eight hundredth time today.

"Fine. I've been doing well with actually sleeping at night and waking up at a reasonable hour for the last six or so months now. I wake up in the morning, usually between 8am and 11am if I'm just that exhausted, get dressed and grab breakfast. Get some coffee, then typically head upstairs for some writing. Discussing with you guys about several ideas and scripting some things out. Usually: who's playing who, and yes. If you've missed it in last year's meta: these guys are the ones usually taking the roles of characters."

"...Really?" Li asked, getting a nod from the other three.

"For example:" Bartan gestured Arson and Thea. "Anna and Marcus from SoT. Bryce was played by Beo, etc. Honestly, it's not that far different from just having actors and such play roles, except that we're also writing the script together. I do this until about noon, each lunch, go for a walk or do some kind of work around the house that's needed. Sometimes head out for a food run or anything else specific that we might need, like salt for the water softener."

A shrug from the bear. "There's not really much else to say. I go back to writing, or take a break once in a while for a game until I need to get supper going. Do that, write, then shower and sleep. There's nothing really interesting that goes on. Somedays I'll read someone else's work and critique it if they want it, somedays I'll go read something else that I've written." Arson studied him for a few moments.

"...Fair enough. Acceptable answer."

"No others this time?"

"Maybe next year."

"Great." Bartan grumbled sarcastically, heading inside with the group and sitting at the table that Thais moved to. Getting passed another drink each while the ferals got bowls of something, likely the same thing. Looking at it for a moment before the fox stole his and opened

it with her teeth again. "I'd be concerned about you ruining those things, buuut..."

"But what?" The blue one asked.

"Nevermind." Another study of the bottle as the fox placed it back in his paw, getting him to take a breath and think about what the charr said to him a little bit back. Letting his gaze shift to the leopard across from him as the phrases echoed through his mind.

"...What?" Thais asked, only to have that brown gaze blink a bit.

"...Do you want another go?" A noise in question, but she soon followed what he meant.

"Only if I can punch Artheas in the face."

"-What!?" The horse called from afar.

"-Deal." The table chuckled a bit, as the bear took a breath to relax a bit.

"Just... One thing, Bartan." Li questioned, getting the attention of both him and Thea.
"Why... Avalanche?"

"It's got nothing to do with snow, I'll give you that much."

"Snow?"

"Mhmm." He took a long drink. "You figure it out." And I mean that: You figure it out. However, I will give you a hint...

I'm not a religious person, but I have my own Prayer. As Disturbing as it is.