

III Mind Of Bartan

By Bartan Tirix

The whiteout continued badgering the old house, even after it knocked the power out and leave the only resident inside in the dark. Matching the very night that seemed to come earlier and earlier every day, rendering the windows useless as a light source. Just there to remind the one lying in bed, sheltered by his blankets, that the freezing rain outside was still attempting to get in.

However, he wasn't the only one in the old house for very long. Scampering through the home like every mission before and reaching that attic. Dark as ever, the thick curtains over the windows to keep the cold and the heat out. Spotting the dark lump over the bed in the corner, carefully approaching while looking out for any traps before dismissing the shelter of blankets-

Only to find the polar bear resting there. Not moving. Not responding from the small paws pressing into him, climbing on top of the bed to see those brown eyes opened. Once in a while blinking, but not acknowledging the two Troublemakers. Even when they slipped the sack over him and carried the bear off.

The doorbell rang, and the large six-legged furball answered the door. Meeting his two sons with rather worried looks on their faces, yet still dragging the sack inside to get out of the weather. "What's wrong?" The Counterweight asked, seeing the small wolf and brassling share a look before undoing the string to the bag. Unmasking the anthro bear inside, still not moving from staring straight forwards. Then looking to their father for instructions, seeing him nod. "It's okay, I'll handle this." He whispered to them, freeing them from any duties and letting the two scamper off.

The six legged beast leaned his smaller counterpart up against the wall and sat beside him. "Hey." The large one almost asked for his attention, but didn't get it. "I know these things are hard on you, even though most people don't think..." He trailed off, still not getting a response. "You came so close to enjoying it the last two years-"

"You have a very strange definition of Enjoyment." The smaller Bartan nearly growled, his jaw becoming really stiff. Not getting a response from the Counterweight as he slipped out of the bag. Tossing it aside and getting up. "...I'm not doing it this year." He stated thickly, opening the door and stepping out to the cold weather. Still shirtless and only wearing pants as the two little ones scampered out behind him, standing in his way as the smaller Bartan came to a complete stop.

But neither started a conflict with the other, the two detecting there was just something... Wrong. Uneasy about the situation, each placing a paw on his pantleg and whimpering. As usual, not getting a response and not fighting it when he stepped over them. Walking out into the whiteout.

It was an endless white field, covered in snow and creating a flaky fog that reduced vision drastically. Yet, he kept moving on, neverminding the cold or the wind scattering his fur and squinting his eyes. Still needing to cross his arms to contain his warmth and protect his chest. As well as steering his head away from the winds when they picked up, one lasting so long that he nearly ran into a yellow wyrm. "S-sorry." She apologized, avoiding his path for a few steps. "Um... Excuse me?" The bear slowed to a stop. "Do you know which way the gathering is? I've been... Out here for too long, and..."

It got those brown eyes to study hers, then drift around the way he came. However... His tracks were soon being covered, and there was no sure way to tell if he was walking in a straight line. Looking about to see if he could find any possible light signal or sign, but... "...No. I don't."

"But you came from there, right?" He didn't respond, but the yellow one took a few moments to study him. "Wait..." Bartan sighed, knowing what she was going to ask. "Are you the-"

"No." He interrupted, seeing her frilled ears fall at his tone. "...I'm the literal writer, but I'm not the storymaker."

"Storymaker...?" He gestured the house in a wide angle.

"They're the ones who came up with everything, all I ever did was hold them back."

"What do you mean?"

"Characters, designs, personalities, dialog. Setting, storyboards, the works... That was all them, next to none of it me. And I'm getting so damn tired of taking credit for it all. I'm just the damn laborer that gets bored with the ideas, the shoots down some suggestions because I don't find them interesting enough... And the ones that leak through? Apparently people seem to love." Bartan took a breath. "I'm no writer. I've been trying to make something of this dumb hobby for six years, and what have I done besides waste time? Mine and theirs?"

"That's not... True though." The yellow dragon stepped forwards, using her wings to shelter them from a harsh gust. "Look, I know the feelings that you're currently battling with. I... I know them all too well, but you need to realize that you have made a lot of people happy with your work."

"It's not My work though-"

"Be it actually yours or theirs!" The white one sighed in half frustration. "Even then, they're all figments of your own mind. Who cares if you've personified parts of your own personality, as long as it's

coming from the same source, doesn't it count for something...?"

"Then why is it that I feel so damn disconnected from them?" The wyrm curled her neck. "I can't mimic them, I can't tell what they're going to say next, what actions they're going to do. They're their own person; Arson, Beo, Linet, Dia- They are *Themselves*! I'm not part of them, they're a part of me! And the only reason why they are is because they're not physical. That's the only god damn thing *Special* about me: I'm the one rooted in a damned reality."

"Bear..."

"They're the ones that people fall in love with. They're the ones that make people interested or feel something meaningful. Be it happiness or even arousal. I'm nothing more than just a negative hollow husk of a person, and I cannot understand why people want to 'Meet Me' because of this... And I can't handle this disappointment when they find out for themselves just how terrible I really am." A heavy breath from Bartan. "So no, Ukase'fu... If that's what you want to be called anymore. I'm not a writer, I'm a translator. A mediator. A puppet-"

A harsh wind caused them both to defend themselves until it passed, letting the two take a few breaths afterwards. Gesturing the direction he came once again before speaking. "You shouldn't be out here. Go, odds are you'll find the building or signs of it."

"What about you?" He didn't answer, just turned around and walked deeper into the storm. Ignoring her calls until she could no longer be heard through the occasional gust that stung his black nose. His body starting to jerk a little harshly, warning him that such conditions were dangerous. But the bear pressed on, eventually hearing something large fly overhead and circle around. Landing heavily behind him.

"**BEAR!**" The brass dragon called through the storm, actually silencing it to a heavy snowfall as he caught up. "**Stop!**" The smaller one did so, not facing the much larger wyrm. "What are you doing out here!?"

"I'm not going back." Beo growled at that response.

"The hell you're not! It's too dangerous for you to be out here!"

"I don't care." Another loud growl, as someone slipped off his back. Landing in the snow.

"Bartan...!" The dragon nearly roared, almost expecting the brass beast to just pick him up and carry him off. Yet, something else embraced him; a heavy coat of sorts.

"He's not going back." The white fox's voice came from behind, enough for the polar bear to look at her in question. Just as she turned around and threatened the wyrm at least 40 times her size with a finger. "And if you bite him again, I will break you into a metallic pretzel. You damn well hear me!?"

"Arson...?" Bartan half whispered, the two ignoring Beo's neck curl and snort. Folding the hood over his head and tightening up the heavy furred jacket before heating it. Leaning in and giving the side

of that muzzle a small kiss before whispering.

"Through The Looking Glass." A stare from those brown eyes, but he understood. *I Walked A Thousand Miles Just To See For Myself. Looked Behind My Eyes And Found My Hell.* "Just... Be careful." Giving her a nod before carrying on, placing one foot in front of the other until he disappeared into the white fog.

"I don't understand." Beo grumbled at her. "Why let him go?"

"I know him best when he gets like this." The fox stated softly, looking up at those green peppered eyes. "He's searching for something."

The coat helped drastically against the harsh winds as he continued to wander, nearly letting them steer his direction like a ship lost at sea. Until it was soon dying down to a faint breeze, allowing the conversation of two females to reach his ears even with the hood on. "Lost an arm?"

"Yep. Technically twice. Pacifistic male sidekick?"

"He wasn't a complete pacifist." The silhouette of the smaller one said, becoming more and more focused as the fog parted from the area. A small table and chair set was made out, along with some sort of sauna heater nearby.

"But he had some kind of hidden strength that was never used for actual combat purposes." Some silence. "Yep, your look says it all."

"Did you nearly die once?"

"More than once. Came back as something much worse? Borderline monster?"

"Yeeep." The larger one chuckled, her darkened fur having this strange shimmer to it along with dozens upon dozens of white lights. "Did you take on an army by yourself?"

"Practically."

"What weapon?"

"Chain, actually. One with long weights at the ends."

"Ah, I used a firearm: a rifle that weighed about that of a car."

"Sounds about right." The two chuckled, the larger feline spotting something approach through the storm behind the smaller while taking a sip out of her tea.

"Prepare yourself."

"For what-?" The small rat was suddenly grappled from behind, instantly kicking in instincts to elbow her attacker in the ribs then snout. Getting the bear to slightly whimper but not let go, though the leopard's chuckles did reveal that the rodent wasn't in any real danger. In fact, she was only getting a somewhat tight hug. "...I feel like I'm missing something here."

"He did the same thing to me on my first year, give him a minute. Use claws if you have to-"

"Please don't." Bartan grumbled, still dealing with the sting against his nose. Waiting for a little bit before lifting Zhoja out from her chair and carrying the rat towards the feline. Thais, tossing her snout and chuckling before setting down her tea and getting up, opening her arms for the inevitable embrace that the small one was sandwiched in.

"Fine, fine." The snow leopard chuckled. "I got away with it one year." A half whimper from the white male as all three remained still for a few moments, the snow covering them with a thin membrane.

"...I feel like I'm missing some context." The rat stated from between the two.

"He feels bad about what he puts us through."

"What he puts us through...?" The beige rodent repeated, soon piecing it together. "Oh, you're the writer?" A heavy grunt from the bear.

"There's that word again." He grumbled, releasing a heavy exhale. "Despite what you might think, I'm not the... 'Storyteller' most of you assume I am." Noises in question as the rat attempted to adjust between them.

"Not to break up your confession, but I'm getting a little uncomfortable here."

"He gets emotional like this every year, you get used to it-"

"As in, physically. You're not the most comfortable to be pressed up against, Thais." The leopard chuckled at that, patting the bear on the back.

"You heard the lady, bear. Let go or get the claws." A grumble of disappointment as the white male took a breath, pulling away with the surprisingly light rat and setting Zhoja back in her chair. Soon taking his own seat after adjusting it towards the two. "Alright, talk. What's all this about?" The feline crossed her legs after sitting, sipping at her tea.

"I guess I'm just... Tired of people making that mistake. As if I'm doing all the work here when really: I'm barely doing anything."

"That's not surprising, but these stories are a team effort, bear. No one is claiming credit for anything except for a few performances." A noise in question from the other two, making Thais shrug. "Eman and Krow, for example. More 'Guest Stars' than actual characters, even if they don't entirely write the script. The ones who don't aid in the rest of the stories-"

"A-actually..." Bartan rubbed the back of his neck, those round ears picking up the noises in question. "Eman did help out on something this year..." He slowly gazed and gestured towards Zhoja: the rodent.

"...Crownless? Her story?" A motion towards the small one and the bear nodded at Thais. "I... I don't recall ever seeing anyone like him in it."

"He wasn't in it specifically, but I got him and Exile to work on a certain... Scene in it." The male explained. "I won't go into details due to spoiler reasons, but if you've read it, you know the scene I'm talking about." A sour look from the rat and Bartan nodded. "Yeah... I have them a quick rundown of the things that were going to happen, and three songs: DMC5's Devil Trigger, Bring Me The Horizon - Throne, and Doom 2016's BFG Division."

"Suiting..." Zhoja mumbled as the bear thought back.

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Bartan stared at the black and platinum dragon while sitting in front of his computer desk, his entire attention towards Exile for a few moments in silence. "...She decapitates a guard." It was barely a question.

"Yes."

"With a chain." Those green eyes shifted for a moment and the wyrm nodded. "...She decapitates a guard."

"Yes?"

"With a chain." Bartan repeated, getting the larger one to start to rub the back of his neck in awkwardness. "Not by whipping it around or striking him with it, but by wrapping it around his neck..."

"Y-yes."

"And pulling back." Bartan stated almost thickly.

"You wanted it to be brutal, and it's not like it took a single pull to..." The bear exhaled and placed his hands over his eyes for a few moments. Making the dragon start to quickly brainstorm another idea, but double take when the furred one turned his chair towards the keyboard.

"Okay then." Bartan bluntly stated, resuming writing.

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"What they came up with was a little harsh, but in some way... I wanted it that harsh."

"A little is an understatement." The feline rolled her eye, taking another sip.

"I know, but it's what I wanted." Bartan sighed as he was handed a small cup of tea. "I asked them to come up with something brutal. Upsetting, almost hard to read or get through, because that's what I wanted the Rot in that story to be. It would've been so damn easy to just let them see the aftermath, walk through a dark castle with 'bloodstains on the walls'." He air quoted and growled a bit. "A description that has lost meaning or value of shock nowadays. A description that tells almost nothing of what happened-! I wanted to make a scene where the reader could hear every damn bone break! Every creak of plated armor, every choke and howl of pain...! And they delivered." A few breaths later the white one took a drink.

"What's the problem then?" Thais asked.

"The problem? The problem is that it hardly got read. The problem is that you guys-not me, come up with these amazing ideas and they go unseen. The problem is that I waste months sometimes writing these things, only to get washed away in a sea of other content."

"That's typical of the system though." Zhoja added.

"I know it is. It's dumb luck if people find it, it's dumb luck if they feel like reading it, let alone get all the way through the piece. They don't have time to read and have a life, I've heard it all before. I'm just-" The male exhaled in frustration. "I'm just sick of it. And this year, I was especially sick of it. Sick of the system, sick of the porn, and so damn sick of my own writing." Some slightly sad looks from the other two as he took another drink. "...So much so that I wanted to retire."

"Retire?" The two asked.

"Quit. Finally put the damn thing to rest and stop wasting my time with this 'Hobby'." Another heated exhale as he stared into the remaining tea. Showing a reflection of himself. "Stop wasting my time, stop wasting your time, stop wasting everyone else's with it. Stop feeling like I need to spend every moment of my existence working on it. Stop feeling completely stressed whether or not someone is even going to like it. Stop getting my hopes up when I nearly get something done that I'm happy with, stop feeling so fucking depressed and worthless when it doesn't even get damn well looked at-!" The teacup shattered in his paw, getting him to growl and shake it off towards the snowy ground. Sending a sprinkle of red through the carpet of white as he released another heated breath and continued.

"To 'Become A Legend' is Exhausting. All I can think to myself is How Much Is Enough?" The rodent carefully took his injured hand without struggle and started taking out the broken pieces from the cuts. "...That question has tormented me over and over again. I've been writing for Six long years, but How Much Is Enough? 4,517 Pages, but How Much Is Enough? 1,930,336 Words, But How Much Is Enough? When I barely have 200 watchers total across five different sites, How Much Is Enough!?"

The two went quiet as Bartan nearly deflated, lightly flinching as the last shards were taken out

of his wound. "...I'm tired. I'm tired of this. I'm tired of bashing my head against the wall. I'm tired of trying to spread a meaningful message. I'm tired of the stress, I'm tired of the anger. I'm tired of the breakdowns, I'm tired of the depressions. I'm tired of losing myself over and over again, I'm tired of trying to wrack my brain around what people like. I'm tired of trying to find reasons to believe that all this work and effort we put in wasn't wasted."

"And you think that getting people to notice will fix that?" Thais asked, getting a few moments of silence before the bear shrugged. "Is that what you want?"

"...I don't know." He admitted, not hiding the few tears sliding inbetween the strands of white. "I don't know what I want out of this. I didn't really have much of a goal in the beginning, other than to possibly enlighten some people, as foolish as that sounds." Bartan slowly took his hand back, looking at the wound and sighing. "...It's always haunted me, the way adults talk to you when you're younger; saying that you'll understand when you're older. That you'll have everything figured out, learn who you are and understand how your brain works... I guess I'm still a cub, because I don't have any answers. I don't have any goals, I don't have aspirations or wants... I don't know who I am. All I know is that I'm not immortal." He shook his head and got up. "And here I am still, wandering blindly in hopes that I'd find one of those damn answers. Even if it kills me."

The other two looked at each other, not really knowing what to say. However, it didn't take long for the bear to disappear into the white snowfall. Still barely being tracked by the brass titan and the fox on his back from far away, letting out a low rumble in his throat as the female spoke up. "Do you see it now?" The wyrm looked back towards her and half shrugged his wings.

"So he's a little upset."

"It's more than that."

"He'll get angry for a little while, then he'll get sad for a little while. After that, he'll be fine like always."

"You're still not seeing it then."

"Seeing what?" Arson motioned just to follow him, getting a low grumble from the dragon but following instructions regardless.

Bartan continued through the whiteout, keeping his limbs close to his core to battle the cold and the occasional harsh wind. Catching a glimpse of some light through the storm and walking towards it, eventually seeing something black rest on a covered bench. Like a large feral feline relaxing in the small shelter that defended against the gales. The bear approached it and slowly rested on his knees, seeing a black paw open up towards the white one, as if leading that chin and eyes to look at the Tirix' red ones. The prideful and sly smirk from Rixix looking over the snow covered bear as those brown discs fell to the paw. Feeling those cold white ones grasp a hold of it as Bartan spoke. "...I love you."

"I know you do."

"I admired you for years... Your philosophy, your ideologies. I wanted to be you; terrifying and smart. Ruthless and unpredictable. I wanted your conviction. I wanted your Zeal. I wanted-"

"Power." Rixxix said calmly, unable to release the grin on his muzzle before clicking his tongue. "Such a shame that Deago got into your mind first, built an entire garrison to prevent me from entering. Or anyone else, for that matter. Even yourself." A sad but curious look from those brown discs as a single claw scratched that white chin of Bartan's. "Poor bear, so lost within his castigation."

"What?"

"Is that not what you're doing out here?" He barely asked, smirking again while raising a single eyebrow. "Being *Punished* for your lack of identity? Vacant of thoughts and opinions labeled your own? Torturing yourself in hopes that deep down inside you will find some substance within the fresh wounds?" Those chestnut eyes shifted a little, dropping from time to time until that very same black paw snatched the bear's jaw. Making him whimper as he was pulled closer, nearly muzzle to muzzle with the tîrix. "Show me. How much do you want me-?" And Bartan kissed him, closing the distance with no resistance and barely any reaction out of the black feline. Lapping his own tongue against the bear's redder one until the white one slowly broke it, hearing a very faint and sly chuckle from the smaller one. "Predictable. But you'd sleep with your own Self-Centeredness as you would your Pain and your Regret, wouldn't you?"

No response from the white one as the wind blew a little, leaving the tîrix to study the redness in Bartan's injured paw. Rather unimpressed at such a thing at that. "I don't like torture. You know this about me." He faintly gestured his own right arm, where the black fur doesn't flow so well like the rest of his coat. "I can safely say that lately I have not found you very attractive, bear. I've never seen anyone as toxic as you."

"I'm not-"

"You Are." Rixxix stated thickly. "To Yourself." No response. "You think Arson and Beo were the only ones who paid attention to that? Several nights of you metaphorically skinning yourself alive, and for what? Just to feel something again? To once again *punish* yourself, because something you finished didn't meet your expectations?"

"Are you saying I shouldn't be angry-?" The large feline, about tiger sized, pounced on the bear. Pinning him down in the snow and towering over him, meeting once again muzzle to muzzle and a few inches off from touching.

"Yes." Rixxix stated, actually holding back his frustration. "I'm saying you shouldn't be angry. At them, the readers. At us. At Yourself."

"Why n-"

"**Because You Are Not Entitled To ANYTHING!!!**" He roared loudly, silencing the wind entirely. "You don't Deserve any recognition because you finished a piece! You don't Deserve to have a thousand watchers because it's been six fucking years! You don't Deserve anything because you've written nearly two million words-! **You Fucking Look Away From Me Again Bear And I Will Really Show You What It Feels Like To Be Skinned Alive!!**" A few heated breaths from the tirix as those red eyes glared harshly into the tear filled ones below him. "If you get any of those goals on your own, *fine*. You've earned it. But you damn well don't **EXPECT** any of this! You damn well don't **COMPARE** yourself Constantly to others and their roads to success! And You better not fucking DARE for a damn minute start blaming those who've followed you! Who've helped you along the way!" A pause as Bartan swallowed. "They don't deserve it, just like you don't deserve being **Tortured.**"

A slight whimper left that white throat, as Rixix closed the gap for another kiss, almost digging those claws into the winter coat's chest before breaking the action. Taking a few deep breaths and half snorting. "And they say *I'm* the bad guy in this little trio, but I've never once convinced you to hurt yourself." The black one turned about, flicking the green flame on his tail as he climbed back onto his bench. "...I love you too much to do so." No response from the bear as he slowly got up, not getting eye contact from the feral feline. "Maybe it's about time you figure out what's really bothering you, hmm?"

That brown gaze fell and Bartan faintly nodded, moving in for one last hug on the Tirix. Feeling it get halfly returned as the larger one took a deep breath. "...Thank you." A nuzzle against his white neck as if to say *You're Welcome* before he released the black one. Once again walking through the storm, as the dragon and fox viewed from afar.

"Do you understand yet?" The white female asked her large ride, getting the wyrm to glare at her with those frilled ears flat against his head. "Let me ask you something: what's the bear's favorite color?" Beo curled his neck at her.

"What does that have to do with anything-?"

"Just answer it." She nearly scolded, getting him to grumble.

"Blue." The fox shook her head in response. "Green?"

"He doesn't have one." A slight head tilt from him. "What's his favorite season?"

"Winter."

"It's autumn." Another snort. "Favorite metal."

"Brass-"

"Brass is an alloy." A snout toss from the dragon. "It's Platinum. Favorite smell."

"I get it-"

"Answer. The Damn. Question." She growled, making him exhale near flames.

"Blueberries."

"It's the smoke from blown out candles." Another snout toss. "Do you see it now? The reason why I'm usually the one who he leans on when he gets like this-?"

"Just because you've known him longer and you have a list of his favorite things doesn't specifically mean you're closer to him-"

"Then you don't see it." A low growl left that plated throat at her tone. "You're missing a large piece of the puzzle, something you haven't quite figured out yet."

"What." He barely asked, only getting a gesture to follow Bartan further into the storm. Releasing another growl but doing so, keeping those large wings close to him for some added protection against the rising winds.

The snow was getting deeper, coming close to his knees and nearly freezing his bare feet. However it was still light, making it at least possible to go through as the storm continued to add more. Trekking through it for several minutes as he started to see a separate trail ahead of him. One for something... Tiger sized, much like Rixxix. Though likely a little bigger.

Following it directly for a little while made him start to catch up to someone calling his name in the white fog. Recognizing exactly who it was, Bartan advanced forwards faster and faster. Soon starting to see the tirix' red tailflame in the heavy snowfall, approaching the orange beast made it stop calling and turn around. Leaving the two to stare at each other in silence for several moments until the bear spoke up. "I know what you were trying to do."

"Bartan...?"

"I know what you wanted of me. What you wanted me to accomplish in my life."

"Nevermind that now. It's dangerous out here, you should get back inside-"

"I wasn't the right choice." The bear's gaze drifted off to the side. "Someone invisible to his peers. To his family. To his teachers, to the world. **-How the Hell was I supposed to change it!?**" Those red eyes stared at him with guilt. "I tried...! God damnit, Deago, I fucking tried to save as many as I could. To spread message after message in hopes they would listen...!" The white one exhaled in defeat. "You can make them hear, but you can't make them listen."

"Bartan..."

"And now it's too late. That's why I gave up several years back. That's why I told you to find somebody else." A slight choke and a sniff from the bear. "I'm past my prime... Long past. This body is breaking down, it's unable to keep enduring the work. What I can do with writing is held back by my curse of being unseen and unheard." No response as the white one took a breath. "You saved my life, but I'm still struggling with the question: was it a life worth saving?"

"What do you mean? Of course it was-"

"Knowing how it would turn out?" A bit of anger filled Bartan's voice as he looked directly into those red discs, tears in his own eyes. "If I would've died then, when you found me, would Roxann have lived? Would Betsy have? Would my father have shown signs of Alzheimer's sooner and given them the money they needed to keep our first home? To stop going bankrupt and keep from some fucker burning down that house for the insurance money?" Silence. "You could've chosen somebody else, anybody else and actually made some progress in this world- **Why The Fuck Did You Leave It To Me!? Why The Fuck Did You Choose ME!?**"

"...You want the honest truth?" The stripeless tiger asked, almost seeing that white jaw tense up.

"...Yes."

"You were the right choice-"

"Like Fucking Hell I Was!!" Bartan roared loudly. "I was nothing more than a dumb cub! No skills or talents other than being *transparent* to the species **YOU** asked me to save! To lead down a better path, which was fucking impossible! I worried about it so fucking much that I Grew To Hate Them!! Becoming So Damn Disillusioned By A Destiny That You Gave Me That I Convinced Myself They Were Not Worth It!!" Several heavy breaths as something large behind the bear started to approach from a distance. "All I did was witness their instincts, how it was nearly written in their nature to kill themselves! To kill each other! To destroy everything they damn well touched! And you wanted me to save them *somehow*!? Well their '**Salvation**' Gave Up!!" Looking away caused a round ear to flick towards the beast from afar, getting the bear to turn about at the large white figure in the back and nearly growl at it.

"And seeing you didn't help." Bartan continued. "Seeing what I was supposed to become? In some fantasy that I took too seriously, so much so that I get a glimpse of what I turned out to be in the future? How the hell was that supposed to help accomplish this so-called 'Mission To Save The Human Species'!? How the hell was I supposed to follow in such footsteps!? To Become... You!?" No response as the smaller Bartan exhaled. "...Well, I can't do it. I can't save a species with a fetish of destroying each other. I can't be some God-like savior that magically fixes any problem he comes up to. I'm just an old, decaying bear with a life of no accomplishments to show for it. The only thing I'm decent at is writing, and even then it's not even me doing it. Left on my own, I can't even..."

A moment of silence before a female spoke up towards the largest one. "Well, yeah. The Director isn't expected to do all that." Making Bartan double take at the approaching large one, the fog slowly

revealing the brass dragon just covered in snow. Those green peppered eyes looking down sadly at the bear covering his own, now realizing who he was talking to as the dragon approached, laid down, and gave him a sturdy hug.

"Have you guys been following me this entire time?"

"Of course we have." The fox said, sliding down off Beo's shoulders as the brass one purred sadly.

"I'm sorry bear..." A noise in question from the white male... Naturally white-wait, polar bears are clear-You know what I mean! "This is half my fault. This entire time I just assumed you two were the same person." He looked over towards Arson. "But she's right: I haven't taken the time to see that. And during your breakdowns, especially during the summer... I wasn't around to comfort you."

"I had others-"

"But you should have your mates... All of them." A deep breath from that plated chest. "I keep forgetting you're not a dragon, you're not built like one."

"Physically, he means." The fox stated, getting a look from the two as she shrugged. "And with perhaps the mental fortitude. This has been happening a lot lately."

"That is... Partly my fault, I'm afraid." The tirix mumbled, approaching and getting pulled into the dragon's embrace with a faint yelp. "...Sorry. It seems that my efforts in making you a good person have..."

"You're a good conscience, Deago." Bartan sighed. "A little too strict, but I understand why you have to be. But..."

"You can't keep..." A noise in confirmation as the bear hugged him. "Why didn't you tell me you were struggling with this so much?" A sigh in disappointment from the white male.

"...Because I never got over how I failed you." The bear admitted. "That for as long as I delayed it, every *Serious* story I could muster out had that one in a billion chance to connect with people. But you know how my luck is, especially when it comes to life. I'm just... Tired of fighting with it." A few moments of silence before the orange tiger nudged Bartan grabbing his attention again.

"I make you a deal then." A noise in question, even from the others. "You can be relieved of my... Request, on two conditions: Never remove your stories from the internet, and don't... *Completely* give up writing them, okay?" Bartan tilted his head at Deago. "They matter more than you think. However, if you do wish to delete them and move away from this, you need to take that weight up again." Several moments passed as the bear stared into space, thinking. Not reacting to the second nudge. "Deal?" A heavy exhale and Bartan nodded. "I know I haven't done right by you, but I was working on doing something for you this season."

A groan of discomfort from the white male. "You know how I feel about gifts, guys."

"They're not in on this." The tiger chuckled, gesturing behind the brass tank. "Only he knew about it." Beo curled his neck as they all made a noise in question, looking back at the Counterweight, six-legged Bartan approaching them.

"You could catch your death out here." He called, almost teasing the group. But that expression faded when he caught the dragon's slightly sad gaze, once again returning to the smaller bear. Catching up to them and sensing the tension within. "...Ah. I see what happened." The brass behemoth adjusted his arms a little bit around the group and lifted them (some against their will). Walking towards the six-legged one and letting him join the embrace as the others were sucked into the fluffy abyss. The two largest ones booping snouts before looking down at the others in the embrace, the six-legged one picking out his younger counterpart. "Mind if I borrow him?"

"He's all yours." The others said at the same time, getting the smaller bear to groan.

"It's like I don't even own myself anymore."

"You owned yourself at one point?" The fox teased, getting him to whimper in defeat. "We'll meet you back at the house, don't wait too long out here."

"We won't, Mistress." The Counterweight playfully bowed, placing his younger version onto his large shoulders. Deep within the warmth of that overgrown white mane, waiting until the others were out of earshot, though not without a whimper when that brass tail lifted to flash them. Snapping out of it when such a sight disappeared within the snowstorm and feeling the defeated aura from the smaller Bartan. "...I know you can't-"

"I can't be you." The smaller one groaned again, feeling so easy to read. "I can't even be myself anymore, it feels."

"What does that mean?" The large one asked softly. "I know it's a question you've been struggling with a lot lately. More-so this year: Who Are You?" No response as the six-legged beast started walking slowly. "...I wish I had an answer for you."

"So you don't know either."

"I don't believe anyone does, deep down." The Counterweight stated, sadly smiling. "Your hobbies don't define you, your actions don't define you. Your convictions, your beliefs, your very thoughts and ideals. Are these things really who you are?"

"You're not helping."

"I think I am. Let me ask you something: who is Beo?" A low grumble was heard behind the large one's head. "You can state what they are: brass dragon. You can state what they like: fur and oranges. Even what they dislike: Domination and Humiliation. But does all that define Beo?" The smaller one tossed his muzzle.

"Let me guess: no."

"Actually, kind of." A loud grumble in question that time, getting the CW Bartan to chuckle. "They may not be able to identify who exactly you are, no, but think of it as a form of language. The reason why Kindle is so good at this is because she *knows* you. She can read you a lot easier, past the point of words. But for everyone else, they need to boil it down into the form of a language."

"Hence the standard Likes and Dislikes."

"Exactly. It's a simplified way we can define a person without getting into complete complexity. There's nothing wrong with using this, even to introduce who you are to others. After all, they often use the same system to find those compatible with you: sharing likes and opinions, even dislikes." No response from the bear on top while the other shuffled his shoulders a little, bouncing him up and down slightly. "I know what you're thinking."

"A sentence that has haunted me for so long."

"Which is why you used it in your first novel." A heavy sigh from the smaller Bartan. "You're thinking: what counts as a like? You have many, many, manymanymany dislikes, but there's not a balance." A heavy breath was heard. "Yet, the kicker is: there doesn't have to be. It's normal to have more dislikes than likes, and this is what makes the system work: it's all about your experience."

"Or my lack there-of."

"Then it's perfectly fine not to have an opinion until you do get some experience. Let me test it here real quick:" A grumble from the younger one. "How did you feel about Devil May Cry? The first game?"

"It's been at least 12 years."

"Just what you remember." The hexeped smiled.

"...It was alright."

"How was the gameplay?"

"Alright?"

"Story?"

"It's been **Twelve Years**." A chuckle from the large one. "I don't remember it, so I'm going to say Meh."

"Okay. Now, how was the second game?" A loud groan from the smaller bear. "I think I hear experience."

"It was boring. I did all I could to get through the damn thing." Another chuckle. "And don't dare ask what the story was like."

"Fair enough. Now what about the third?" A deep breath from the younger, making the CW smile again. "And I can even feel that: easily within one of your top 10 best games of all time. Both in gameplay, story, replayability, the perfect amount of challenge and fairness. Your experience with it was a highlight of gaming history, even with an injured arm." No response from the smaller Bartan. "Are others going to have the same experience? No. Same opinion? Likely not. You recently met one of those people too, and you are still friends with them."

"I'm not quite seeing where you're going with this."

"That all these little opinions help define who you are. Trust me, I know how often you find yourself questioning that very statement: Who You Are. How much it's haunted you for years. I'm just trying to give you some solace by telling you that it is written in your instinct: your experiences will *help* define who you are. Your opinions, though they will change over time, *help* define who you are. What you like, what you're attracted to, what you fear! The list goes on; there's no simple answer for such a thing. And it's overwhelming- I Get It! ...But that doesn't mean you can't become something."

"Become you..." A nod from the large one as he stopped and took the younger Bartan off his back gently. Pressing him against that fluffy chest and continue walking.

"I wish I could tell you that it's an easy road from here on out. That you'll never have to be haunted by these damn questions and conflicts again and again. That nothing bad will ever happen to you by the time you become... Me. But you know the answer to that. Damn it bear, you've written some of the worst pains I've gone through already." A heavy sigh from the hexeped. "That's why we wanted to do this."

"Do what?"

"This gift." An uncomfortable groan from the younger one. "Because... I know it feels like you haven't made any progress inbetween of late. It's been a long time since we met, ever since E-W ended or so?"

"...Something like that."

"Which has been about ten years. A good 15 or so since you've started using this image of a polar bear to identify yourself with. And again: opinions change. That's why we decided to do this, bridge the gap." Though it was hard to see through the massive white coat, a slightly worried look from those smaller brown eyes was felt. "If you don't like it, you can always go back. If you want something to change, you can ask any one of us."

"...It's going to be something sexual, isn't it?" The younger one grumbled.

"Not specifically, no. Unless you want it that way." Another groan made the Counterweight chuckle. "But we want you to enjoy yourself more. I know it's nearly a personality trait for you to be somewhat apathetic when you place yourself within your own stories, outside of Somewhere Out There. That's where we came up with this idea: giving you a new form."

"New form?"

"One with whiskers." CW Bartan teased, getting him to stop and look at his smaller counterpart for a moment.

"...Arson?"

"Arson."

"Figures." The younger one snorted. "You do realize she's going to chew those things off, right?"

"She has made promises not to." A snout toss from the little one, grumbling something about promises. "Me and Deago worked on this design to fit your own desires a little better. To make you more happy as yourself, especially in your stories." The larger bear stopped a little ways in front of the house, music still being heard inside. "On one condition."

"Ah crapbaskets-"

"Which is actually relevant to such a thing:" Those two pairs of brown eyes met. "We want you to enjoy yourself. Experiment, try something new- On Yourself. No more being shy about some of these things either. Even keep it to yourself if you like, that's fine. But no more of this apathetic attitude. Deal?" A heavy sigh from the smaller one as a long silence fell over them. Aside from the snow. "This is the part where you say *Fiiiiiiiiine*-"

"I know, I know." He grumbled. "I just..."

"Dislike gifts, I know that too well." Another breath. "Think of it as an exchange then. One you'll pay off over time."

"...With adultery, no doubt-"

"It's like you're *living* with a bunch of sex deviants." The CW teased again, chuckling. "Maybe I just want a little something as well."

"Isn't that a little weird?"

"Everything we come up with is a little weird. Not like you've never written this before anyway." A questionable look from the smaller one as he was set down. "I'm talking about that piece with Khol and Ziik-" A large nod from the younger bear, understanding.

"Right. All over this." Another breath and he shrugged. "Fine." A blank stare from the CW and he tossed his snout. "*Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiine*."

"Better." The large one smirked. "But it isn't completely ready yet. For now, head inside and enjoy yourself for the rest of the evening." The six legged furball walked inside, flashing his package at his younger self in the process, making Bartan sigh and cover his eyes for a moment before following him. Meeting Beo and Kindle in the doorway as they requested a hug.

"...Sorry guys." The bear mumbled.

"We almost expected it this year." The fox stated, getting a double take from the metallic dragon. "Well, I did." A snort in response as he squeezed Bartan tighter.

"Bear?" A noise in question. "What's your favorite color?" A sour look from the white male. "Answer or I'll compress you into an atom." A sigh in defeat.

"I don't have one." A snout toss from the brass one.

"That doesn't answer the question."

"I mean, it's not a single color." That plated neck curled. "It's a combination of colors and contrasts that make things look better to me. One solid one isn't enough."

"Told you." The fox said proudly, getting the larger brass one to growl a little bit at her.

"Alright, favorite season." A more questionable look at them this time.

"Late autumn. Why?"

"Inbetween what we both said." Beo grumbled, getting a shrug from the female. "Favorite smell?"

"Frozen chocolate chip waffles-?" The bear answered.

"The smoke from blown out candles, called it-" Arson double-taked at the other white one, getting him to (attempt to) shrug in the dragon's embrace.

"I mean, that's fine too I guess?" The other two gazed at each other, the brass one smirking at the fox being wrong. "Are you two done interrogating and threatening me now?"

"Fine, fine." Arson tossed her muzzle slightly. "For now. But we'll settle this for real later." She tapped the groaning white one on the head while she passed, getting him to look up at the dragon in both irritation and question. Causing the behemoth to whimper slightly.

"We... Wanted to see who knew you better."

"That's impossible. I barely know myself."

"But I keep assuming you're..." The large one looked inside the house, seeing the large furred hexeped bear from before. "I'll work on that this year, I promise." He hugged the smaller one tighter and gave him a lick. "After all..."

"That's what we're here for."

A loud crack was suddenly heard as the white one whimpered sharply, causing the dragon to freeze in place for a moment. "...R-right. He can handle my hugs too-"

"Beo...!"

"I-I know! We'll get you fixed right up! ***Bartan two!!***"