

# Lost

By Bartan Tirix

The sun started to set, it's glare no longer shining in the water of the deep pond as it rippled with the warm breeze. Distorting the dragon's reflection as he stared at it for what felt like hours. Weeks maybe, hoping that maybe the one he was searching for would end up finding the wyrm instead. Blinking slowly as the behemoth staring back morphed into a series of brass waves, finally releasing the large one from it's hold.

Beo took a deep breath, the warmth of the air filled his lungs and caught the scent of baked treats from afar. Resting on the grass next to the water, still making soft and calming noises as it attempted to move the nearby wooden bridge. One the beast still didn't quite trust, recalling quite vividly the first time he stepped on it; causing the entire thing to snap and cave in under the weight of his massive body.

...He missed those times terribly at that moment. Taking another deep breath and giving up on his task out here. Stepping over the bridge and hearing it crack in pain under the equivalent of a steam engine, not wanting to risk it and admit to the others that the path needed repairing... Again. Spreading those huge wings and letting the red furred membranes catch the breeze for a few moments before taking a very short flight to the other side. More of a prolonged jump than anything.

The ground nearly quaked against his landing, the water splashed when his heavy tail landed in it, sending rather warm droplets raining down on the area as the wyrm studied the ground under him for a moment. Swearing that it caved in a little but upon his impact and confirming such a thing with several cracks under his armored paws. Snorting at the idea of the others questioning the brass one's weight as if it was a bad thing, and continuing on regardless.

Long grass looked to be nearly everywhere along the path up the small hill. Then feeling it start to become sand under his feet as twinkles in the sky began to appear. It would definitely be dark soon, and that damn furball was still out here somewhere. Taking one more scan around his surroundings before the dragon rested his gaze on the waters of the beach. And on it: a large wooden house somehow staying afloat on the water.

More of a mansion than a house, making the design and it's location all the more impressive. Especially when the lights turned on, nearly becoming an elegant torch within the darkening sky beyond it. The sun setting behind the dragon's head while saying it's farewells to the day that passed, another long one. And with that, the brass wyrm exhaled. Walking the path to that house, a trail that seemed to

divide the green grass that soon morphed into sand. Going from dirt to planks of smooth wood that soon became part of that very lot.

Along that path was the white fox, sitting on a bench with her legs on a coffee table. Drinking some hot chocolate while watching the sun set, greeting the large one rather calmly with a nod as the wyrm sat down beside her. Exhaling through his muzzle before curious about her drink. Taking a few stealthed sniffs and catching a few extra ingredients; honey. Mint. A bit of maple syrup and some salted caramel. "I was wondering when you were coming back." Kindle stated, getting the larger one to almost sigh and look over at the dusk. Watching as the last few rays of light hid behind the distant hills.

"I'm... Just worried, I guess. This isn't really the safest of places at times, considering how often there are sinkholes around." A noise in confirmation. "Not to mention I'm always afraid that he's just going to randomly run off again, get so upset that he risks his life like last year."

"In that storm, I remember."

"Yeah... I couldn't find him. For all I know he's either fallen or still walking somewhere-"

"Or he came back." A double take from the brass dragon as the white female took a sip out of her drink. Smirking at his rather surprised expression. "Oh yes."

"He... Came Back." Beo slowly stated, getting a nod in confirmation. "To the house we're having the yearly Xmas Party in." Another nod. "Willingly?" That one made her chuckle.

"The furball has been surprising a lot of people lately, yes." A breath of relief and something slightly heavy left the titan, making the canine lightly chuckle. "And yes, he's unharmed."

"Depressed?"

"Didn't seem to be." A bit of a worried look from Beo as he looked back at the house, unable to see any of the white furred ones that attended this year. "Are you?" Her question caught his attention, but was actually stunned by it. Lacking an answer the dragon shrugged his wings.

"...I don't know." Beo mumbled, gazing over at the calm water. "Usually that's an answer I have, an easy one at that. But..." A long exhale. "What the hell even happened this year?"

"Do you want a list?"

"-No." The large one half grumbled at her quip, hearing the fox chuckle at the quick response. "I just..." Some silence as she took a sip.

"Talk to me." A gaze from those green peppered eyes. "Out with it, what's on your mind?" No response for a moment until the large one sighed and looked back at the beach house briefly. Laying

down on the soft sand and wooden path.

"...He never seemed to be phased by the others. It's something I could understand."

"The others?"

"His... Sisters. Father." Kindle nodded in response. "It's one reason why I always questioned the bear's mental strength; when it came to self confidence and identity... It's so damn fragile. But when it came to loss..."

"Bartan is quite strong."

"He acts like a dragon would: remembering the good times and not sulking over them." A heavy breath from the large one as his expression fell. "It wasn't until her that I... Even I..." The wyrm paused, soon feeling a furred paw on his bicep. "It was like that dream I had, when I lost FD."

"Furry Dad, yes."

"Only this is real. I keep thinking that one of these days I'm going to wake up out in a field and head to that house in Zealand. Observe the sink hole in the front for any progression, squeeze through the front door or just look at the attic window to see if the bear is awake. That we're going to try to work on another SOT act together, or escort him to the city for a food run. Following that red car from the sky along with Dia and Thea, the TMs riding in the back. Spend time in the parking lot looking at other people's carts and guessing how much they spent on food..." Another heavy breath as the titan attempted to keep himself composed.

"...It's hard, isn't it?" Beo nodded slowly at her. "You're not the only one who keeps waking up, wondering when she'll come back. Because that's what it feels like: that they're just gone for a very long time. Months. Years. And that they'll be back home any day now." No response from the large one as the canine's gaze narrowed. "What." She nearly demanded, getting a slightly worried look from the one at least 30x her size. "I sense guilt, what is it."

A sigh from the behemoth. "It's not what you think. I... I just never got to know his mother, honestly. That's why I've never really talked to Bartan about this since. Like the other wyrms, I'm just affected by the impact that the loss created. That's not to say that I don't miss her, I just... Never really knew her that much. The only real thing I remember liking is her cooking, and trying to push the bear to learn more of it himself."

Beo took a deep breath and continued. "But I understand now... Again, I was in the bomb-blast of the result and it hit me, Dia, and Thea heavily. I can only guess how hard it really hit the bear, because I never felt like that towards anyone I lost." A noise in confirmation from the female as he glanced back at the mansion over the water again. "...Is Siggy here this year?"

"I don't think so. We kept the guest list at a minimum due to..."

"The bear, yeah..." The behemoth got up. "I think I'll... Pay him a visit, if everyone is okay with me leaving for an hour or so."

"I'll carry the weight, don't worry Beo." It made him smirk a little sadly, though knowing fair well that if anyone could carry... "Just try to be back for supper, okay? Dia's been working all day in the kitchen."

"I will." He nuzzled the fox, surprised that she didn't spill the hot chocolate in the process before moving on. Once again flashing that massive pouch under his tail and getting her to chuckle as Arson sat up. Drinking the last of her mug before heading back to the home along the wooden path. Soon turning into docks as the sand began sinking into the waters below, still rather calm and clear regardless of the coming night.

But before the main building, the docks lead to a large shed of sorts. One made for storage, likely to house many things like small boats and surf boards. Beach equipment and the like, though most of that was not terribly useful to many of the residents here. Instead, they fixed it up to be a guest room of sorts. Small, but good for some privacy.

Speak of the devil, those white ears perked up when a familiar pair of voices were heard before the fox even reached the door. Opening it just a tad loudly to let them know she was entering, revealing the rather vacant storage area, save for extra planks, ropes, containers and crates. A bar in the corner with some drinks already poured, though the chairs were missing. Then the pole and rope ladder that lead upwards to the bedroom, those same ears following the voices up there and climbing it.

"Hey you." She heard the white tirix (think "panther" or large cat) say, laying on what honestly looked like a large blue gelatin bed. Wobbling like firm water with every movement she or the black tirix made on it while the anthro fox climbed out of the trap door. "Getting cool out?"

"Only a little. But it'll probably get a lot colder later, since I think Dia was planning for a little snow."

"Hopefully." The dark male snorted. "I detest the heat."

"It doesn't make for good snuggle-weather?" Kindle teased Rixxix, hearing a low grumble from his black throat. "I'm sure Linet wouldn't mind."

"Not at all." The white panther replied rather quickly. "I'd offer you some quality snuggle time as well, but I don't think Rixxy is ready for that level of commitment." Another grumble from the male as his ears spaded. The black fur doing a decent job at hiding his blush.

"Don't worry about it. I gotta find my body pillow for the evening anyway. I'm guessing he passed through here recently?"

"And offered the same thing once it became colder out." Linet chuckled. "Good to know we have some options." The females shared a small purr, but soon the white panther's expression fell a bit. "Should... We be worried about him?"

"With how chipper the furball seems to be tonight?" The smaller female nodded in response as Arson took a small breath, gazing through the glass wall and door that led towards the mansion. Xmas lights now slowly coming on every so often and working on getting them in sync. "I don't know. I'm honestly hoping to find that out."

"Is there any reason why he shouldn't be?" Rixxix snorted. "Aside from the obvious, that is."

"I'm pretty sure the 'Obvious' is the big factor here." The fox crossed her arms. "Everyone's first set of Holidays without their mother is hard."

"Yes, but it'll also be his first Holiday without those damn kids around." The black one grumbled, hearing some scampers down below suddenly stop and nearly stare at the three through the floor. "And I don't mean you two, for once!" Rixxix hissed, hearing the childish giggles of the wyrmling and wolfling as they continued on. "He doesn't have to worry about being plowed out, getting up and down that damn hill in the winter."

"I get it," The black panther continued. "He lost someone very close to him- we all did. It sucks. It drastically changed the lives of everyone here, but how am I the only one here who sees this as a blessing? That losing that house had a lot more benefits than it did detriments? No more swamp, no more sinkhole. No more mowing the lawn, him having to deal with the salt, the heat, the dust in the summer. Poor water, terrible and shady electrical wiring- the list goes on. Sure, we had a lot more room there than we did in the Bartan's current apartment, but that's a given." A heated exhale left him. "I'm just so tired of everyone acting like this is the worst thing that ever happened and there's no merit behind it, when in some ways... He's never had it better. **We've** never had it better."

"So, you're saying that we shouldn't worry about Bartan hiding his depression-?" Linet started, getting a snout toss in response but she couldn't help her slight smile at his frustration.

"You two have hung around him for the majority of this year. You *know* that he's felt sad about it- that he's clearly not afraid to hide it in front of you! In front of everyone! The furball's been through a lot of hardships and witnessed all of ours, he knows better than to 'Hide His Depression' from those who are just trying to help. No, I'm telling you two to Stop Being Suspicious. Because the way I see it; he's trying to move on. Like we all **Should** be doing."

The fox sighed, her gaze returning to the center home again. "Maybe you're right. It just feels wrong not to think that we're better off without them, because it makes us think that they were a bad person. Which is far from the truth."

"Very far." Linet added in. "The reality was, Charlotte was too kind for her own good. It reminds me of

that silver dragon in the bear's first novel."

"Khol? Yeah, he did mention that their relationship was based off of a few things. The big ones being Beo's and CWB's [Counterweight Bartan; the six legged one], the other being the bear's own relationship between his mother. How he often felt like others took her kindness for granted." Arson took a breath. "But... You're right. We shouldn't be mourning because we lost her, we should be celebrating because she was in our lives."

"Exactly." The black one half grumbled. "If you need to feel sad, then fine: Feel sad. But don't keep the mindset that 'Everyone must feel sad for the next ten years out of respect for her'. Bartan's been through this enough times, he knows how to move on. Let alone when." The females nodded faintly, soon hearing the door below open again and the scampers of small paws run through towards the main building. Kindie chuckling at them while getting up.

"Well, I want to get some treats before those two eat them all." The fox headed towards the glass door. "Also gotta track down that furball too, see what he's up to."

"Alright, see you later tonight then?" Linet asked.

"Planning on it, so don't get too excited in here." She teased back, hearing Rixxix grumble again and just flop his head on the pillow. Causing the bed to wobble in response as the door closed, the white one watching the canine leave and lean over the roped bridge just outside. Likely hearing someone along the water-bridge/dock-thing below and asking how the weather was down there. A statement that made the white panther chuckle out loud and the black one to groan.

Though it did get Linet's attention. Rolling to face and embrace the male, their snouts meeting on a downward angle. Easily noticing his spaded ears and grumbling at the females pets along his neck and collar. "You've been hanging around her too long." He snorted at her.

"Why do you say that?" Another chuckle but no response. "I know, I know... This is about our time together, yes?"

"The lack thereof, yes. Or at least a little, but she's also rubbing off on you."

"And you don't like that?" His red eyes shifted away. "That means Yes." Linet pestered again, nudging his black snout and letting his long mane with green highlights bounce a little. "I've said it before, you can always join us."

"And be the center of deviant attention, I imagine."

"That's what's bothering you, eh?" She teased again, clearly not taking any offense to the conversation. "I never knew you to be so embarrassed about it."

"I'm not, but that doesn't mean I enjoy the constant fetish material. Once in a while is fine, but lately that's all it's been. Nothing normal, nothing 'fun', just-

"Well, fun to you."

"So you enjoy it now, is that it?" Rixxix snorted, though still participating in the cuddle. Watching her tilt that white head in a shrug made him flick his ear in irritation.

"I guess I've just learned to like it."

"And this is what I mean about her rubbing off on you, as well as many others."

"I like to think of it as me expanding my boundaries for a while. Do I love everything? No, but it's finally nice to find that out. But shouldn't you do the same?" A nudge against that black snout as it tossed the best it could while laying down.

"You forget; I've already tried. Why do you think I've rejected all the offers? And before you start, it's not one of those 'I don't like it but I secretly do' type of deals either, like that blue dragon. This is me-

"I've tried it already, and I don't like it, thank you very much." She finished his sentence, though again with a hint of mockery. Getting him to take a breath and grumble, breaking the embrace and getting up. "Oh come on, don't be like that."

"No, I'm..." Another grumble as he stopped at the foot of the mattress, ears still spaded. "She mentioned snacks, and now she's gotten me craving them." It made the white panther chuckle. "Can't shake it off. She's a bad influence on everybody." He overdramatically tossed his snout. "Did you want anything?"

The female got up, bumping his side and ruffling up his winter coat a little. "Nah, I'll come with. If we stay here I may get 'too excited'." A groan from the black one. "I can't help it, your angst gets me off."

"Please stop." A laugh from Linet that time. Opening the door and instantly picking up not only the aroma of baked goods from the main mansion, but also something in the air. Causing them to actually stop for a moment. "Wow..."

"Yeah, they weren't kidding about it getting colder out, and rather quickly. Already smells like frost." They crossed the large bridge together, spotting another couple below that were still talking to the fox; a gerbil and a white cheetah. Then a pair of larger wyrms on the deck along the other end of the bridge; one black and the other one pink. Though the pink one started to turn purple when spotted the couple, his ears lowering a bit and blushing while his father tossed his snout.

"Don't start with that." The black dragon grumbled, hearing a nervous chuckle from the purple scaled one as the two passed by. Then breathing a sigh of relief when the Tirix closed the door behind them. "I

swear you're going to give us away if you don't control your color."

"S-sorry. I just..."

"You're just terrible at keeping secrets, always were." Haytre snorted.

"Not that I really think anyone would care though. They're all pretty open minded-"

"That's not the point!" The black one whispered in a hiss, blushing himself as he shifted his purple gaze around. "It's... More enjoyable if you think you're getting away with something." It made his son chuckle as the older one sighed, his ears flicking in irritation. "It also means admitting that the furball was right."

"Right about what?" A narrow gaze just made Dia chuckle.

"You know. Don't make me say it." Haytre snorted, taking a drink from a nearby (large) cup. "Ever since that first time that he stuck us together in that small room..." The black one started to blush just thinking about it, channeling his Air Attonement and turning his own scales purple to hide it. "It basically gave me a new fetish." He grumbled underneath his breath.

"I'm not complaining."

"Maybe not, but admitting to such a thing publically..."

"Would tell FD that he was right." The father curled his neck in question, making the more frequent color-changing one doubletake. "FD = Furry or Fluffy Dad. AKA: Six Legged Furball."

"So, the bad one." Haytre grumbled again, making his son laugh. "But... Yeah."

"And that's a bad thing?" A growl from the large one, but it didn't intimidate Dia. "If you want to keep it under wraps, that's fine. I don't mind anyway, but do know that... I'm glad it happened. Even if you think that game was rigged-"

"It was." The father snorted loudly. "I know it was." Releasing a slightly heated exhale from his nostrils while looking away, though he was really just observing his surroundings. "...But I'm glad it happened too." It made the smaller wyrm smile brightly to hear that, turning his scales into a vibrant pink as he nuzzled the now purple dragon. Hearing him grumble loudly in response. "Now you're just embarrassing yourself."

"No, I'm just embarrassing you." Dia teased, nearly getting a growl in response as his father hissed in a whisper.

"You're lucky I haven't found a private room to mount you yet."

"Or kitchen closet?" The suggestion made the larger one cave, covering his eyes with a paw and grumbling loudly. "I've been looking forward to it all year-"

"Of course you have." The snark statement made the son chuckle again. "You've just been..."

"So busy tonight." Dia sighed. "This is the first break I've had in hours. I'm a little worried about what's going on in the kitchen currently."

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The blue wyrm stared nervously at the cookbook, trying to carefully read the instructions to simple gingerbread cookies. Taking a deep breath and giving himself a pep talk, not noticing the little scampers entering the kitchen. The small white wolfling and his brother; the brass wyrmling following the scent for more sweets and spotting some, but catching the perked attention of the two in sync. "You can do this Thea... It's just gingerbread. It can't be that hard to make... But the entire party is counting on you, so don't screw it up...!" Another whine from the large one as he shook his head, still completely unaware of the two 'Troublemakers' who shared a look.

The wyrm closely followed the steps one by one. "Gather dry ingredients: Flour, cinnamon, ginger, cloves- where's the cloves?" Thea turned around attempting to look for the spice, while the rather stealthy smaller ones added in the baking soda and nutmeg without him noticing. "Oh, here-" A double take at the mixing bowl; the TMs completely out of sight. "Is... Is that more brown than I remember?" No response as he lightly whimpered before shaking his head. "What else was there-?"

The sound of something dropping from the counter spice rack got Thea to turn around just for a moment, seeing the small container come to a stop though before detecting a small breeze on his chest. Looking once again forward and seeing nothing out of the ordinary- but instead of the cloves, he was holding the salt! The previous container he once held was by the mixing bowl, the ingredient already added in! Making those frilled ears fall as he looked around, unable to see anyone else in the kitchen...

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A snout toss from Haytre. "The kitchen will be fine. You've done enough cooking for tonight-"

"Baking."

"Whatever! You deserve a break, let the others handle it this year. Or even get Beo to do it." A double take from the son, taking a moment for Haytre to notice the oddly surprised look on the now yellow dragon's face and curl his own neck. "What?"

"You remembered Beo's name?"

"Of course I did! Who said I didn't?"

"But you still won't call him my husb-"

"One admition per year, Dia'vidd." The father snorted, getting the smaller dragon to chuckle. Hearing the older one release a grumbling sigh in frustration. "How much more work do you have left?"

"Well... Turkeys are done and were just cooling off on my break. I have more Mocha Cakes almost ready, just needing to be frosted and nuted. Peanut-butter balls need the chocolate, gingerbread needs to be made up and baked. That last one is what I tasked Thea to do during this time."

"The blue one? Does he even know how to cook?"

"Not... Really. But it's just gingerbread, it can't be that hard can it?" The father just shrugged, his gaze shifting over to the female fox approaching, finally crossing to the other side of the bridge.

"Evening lovebirds." She teased, walking through the door into the main mansion, getting a smile and a small nod from Dia before he started to feel an intense glare from the larger wyrm. Double taking to witness just that; staring right at him in near anger.

"I-I swear! I never said **Anything!**" The rainbow dragon's yelp made Arson chuckle as the door closed behind her. Leaving the slightly smaller wyrm to whimper and lower his ears, turning a deep purple as his father closed his eyes and sighed. "I... Need a drink." Dia mumbled, starting to get up but feeling a firm paw on his. Rooting him while Haytre remained still and his eyes softly shut, soon whispering.

"Hot Tub. In One Hour. Be there." It made the son smile shyly as the older paw was removed. "And for goodness sake, change your color before you go in!" The father hissed under his breath, making Dia chuckle and do just that. Forcing a red color before entering the door and taking a breath. Spotting the white fox and a pair of Tirix at a table; this time an orange and brown one. Arson motioning the wyrm to come over and saving him a drink, fading his red color to a pink as he approached and sat down.

"Extra rich, some honey, and no marshmallows." She smirked at Dia. "Just how you like it."

"Thank you." The large one took a sip and let out a purr of satisfaction. "Perfect... Whoever thought it was a good idea to add marshmallows in hot chocolate should be shot." That made the canine chuckle, while the other two nearly hid the top of their mugs with a paw. "So..."

"-How are things?"

"How are things?" A snout toss from Dia, as the others chuckled. The fox predicting what he was going to say. "I see we've hung around the bear too long."

"Not quite enough. Speaking of which, where is the furball?" She asked the orange tiger.

"Upstairs in the master bedroom."

"Alone?" A slight whimper from the larger tiri as Ryoko, the brown one, answered her with a nod.

"At least, I don't think anyone is up there. And we haven't heard anything." He took a sip of his own, attempting to get some of those marshmallows to hide them from the dragon. "And before you ask, he looked okay. Cheerful even."

"Which was honestly more unsettling." Deago admitted. "But... It does make sense."

"How so?" The wyrn asked, tilting his head a little.

"Bartan has always seen the terrible in good news, naturally. To the point of being accused of a pessimist."

"Isn't he?"

"I'm not so sure, Dia'vidd." The brown tiri added, adding some leftover mint frosting into his hot chocolate, one that came from a previous pastry.

"But he's always seen the good in bad news all the same. Maybe not immediately, but he does come to be that way eventually." The orange tiger sighed. "Something I wish we all had."

"You must be exhausted," Arson stated softly. "Having to listen to so many of us lately."

"I have counseled quite a number, yes. But Bartan was not one of them." A couple of surprised looks from the table. "I honestly worry that he blames me for what happened in some way."

"He doesn't." The three nearly spoke in sync, letting the fox continue. "I've been around him more than anyone, I would've picked up on that if he did."

"Annnd likely beat it out of him, no doubt." Dia coughed.

"What was that?"

"N-nothing Mistress!" The dragon played along. "But seriously, he doesn't blame you Deago. No one does. We all just need to adjust to the changes, for some of us... It's our first real loss of his family."

"And nobody is really sure how to deal with this one." Ryoko added, looking back and forth between the tiger and the fox. "His father was pretty easy, due to it taking so long. How did you...?"

"With his sisters?" Arson asked, releasing a breath through her muzzle. "One day at a time, really. Same with the move; just... You learn to move on and get used to the change."

"I kept bringing the idea up though." Deago mumbled. "Even before her passing, I... Wanted him to be prepared."

"Even though the bear often dismissed the ideas at the time, it's those small brainstorming that helped us figure out what to do." The brown one added. "It worked out for the better, and we're managing."

"Quite well, as Rixxix was saying earlier." The tiger made a slightly sour face at Arson's comment, but didn't say anything. Watching the other two Tirix' pass the table, now equipped with a tray of snacks they were both carrying to the Guest Room across the bridge. Though, upon passing the table, Linet did flash her tail at the table, getting a whistle from Dia and Kindle. But a groan from the orange one.

"You guys are becoming a bad influence on her." Deago grumbled.

"She's just having fun, there's no reason why we shouldn't let her." The fox stated. "Besides, it's all harmless anyway." The orange one just covered his eyes and groaned again, though his ears were spaded, they were also covered in blush. "Honestly, I think if you let loose it would help your stress."

"I don't believe it will-"

"I'm not sure if Deago's ever tried it." Dia interrupted.

"He's had a couple of sessions with Bartan before-" Kindle added in, getting an embarrassed whimper from the tiger and smirking at him. "Really tame stuff, but he has tried."

"C-change the subject... Please." The orange one whimpered, the others chuckling before turning their attention to the blue wyrm bringing in a tray of gingerbread. Getting a motion to bring it over so they could have a taste, almost jerking in surprise at the first bite.

"Wow, these are amazing!"

"You've got a gift, Thea!" Ryoko added, getting a worried look from the dragon.

"A-about that..."

"...What's wrong?" Dia tilted his head.

"I... I think the kitchen here is haunted." The large felines made noises in question while the fox and rainbow wyrm just laughed it off. "I'm serious! A ghost made these, not me!"

"Well, I'm going to have to give my compliments to the chef then." Dia'vidd chuckled, following Thea down to the kitchen again while Arson took two more cookies. Heading upstairs to where the bear's trail led, opening the trap door to find the room empty but the large window opened. Allowing the cool breeze to flow inside and nearly fog the skylight above the bed.

Peeking through the window, she spotted the bear sitting at another nearby table. An empty tray next to him and a mug in his paws. Still that feral form he 'got for Xmas' last year, not giving the fox more than a smile and a glance as she sat down beside him. Handing him one of the gingerbread cookies and playfully demanding: "Try this."

"Dare I ask?" Bartan just lightly chuckled, but taking a bite out of it anyway. Getting the exact same expression as if the flavor itself shoved him in the back. "Geez...! Dia's getting good at these!"

"Apparently it wasn't him, but a ghost in the kitchen."

"Oh that's wonderful." He grumbled, sarcastically. Though still purring as he nearly devoured the sweet. "Best Xmas present you've given me." A snout toss from the canine as she shoved him a little, but then rested in his fluffy chest. Together they looked over the bright stars as the snow (somehow) continued to fall in large flakes. Adding up over the ground and even on them, but together they kept themselves warm.

After a few minutes of silence and enjoying the scenery, Kindle looked up at him. "...Where did you go earlier?" A question that made the bear release a bit of a heavy breath.

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The old small bridge resided in the dark winter night, being faintly lit by the half moon overhead. A truck crossing it created two large cones of light, scanning over the old numbers carved in it: 1986, before continuing down the road. Taking a few moments before a portal opened up towards the side of it, and two bears stepped out; one with six legs and much larger, while the other remained with four. "Thanks." The smaller one mumbled, glancing over the area with a heavy heart while his larger 'twin' nodded.

Bartan 'One' walked forward while the other closed the portal for now, looking over the damaged set of public mailboxes behind them. Though roughed up, they were still secure with no signs of being broken into. A compliment to their durability, really. "They're still beating these up every Halloween?"

"It looks like it." The smaller Bartan mumbled, looking over the numbers carved into the stone sadly. "It's that, or they've been desperate to steal checks from people's mail." The hexaped just shook his head in sorrow, but didn't let it phase him too much. The scene was still beautiful after all.

He followed the smaller bear as they looked over the small river or large brook that passed under the bridge; it's surroundings already covered in a light snow while the waters ran steadily in between. "Why here?" Bartan 'Two' asked, looking uphill from the bridge where he could see the tall house within the now bare trees. "And not...?"

"...I don't think I could handle going in there right now." The smaller one responded, letting out

another heavy breath. "Not sure if I ever will be able to again."

"Still, it's a bit fitting." The Counterweight, or 'Fluffy Dad', smiled sadly. Looking over the carved numbers himself. "To end it where you began these."

"I... Wouldn't call it an end, honestly."

"The end of an era, I mean." The six legged one moved forward and sat down beside his smaller version. The two resting their forearms over the railing and looking down at the water. The stars shining brightly through the rippling waters, and from this high up... It was difficult to tell who was who. "I know you were planning to at least take a break."

The two were silent for quite some time. "...I'm tired of being sad." The large one made a noise in question as Bartan One's ears spaded. "I know you were going to ask eventually how I was; I'm... Sad. Sad that she's gone. Sad that everyone there has had to once again bend over backwards because of something that happened to my life-"

"Bartan-"

"And I'm so tired of just... Constantly thinking back to that damn place every other night. Wondering what I left behind, wondering what happened to it. Was it just thrown away like the piece of junk it was? Did someone even look at it and wonder to themselves what the story was behind this item? Perhaps thinking something was salvageable and maybe kept it for themselves so it could be useful to someone? Or was it just thrown into a landfill where it would rot and become nothing but garbage... Something of Mine, something that made me so happy at one point in my life, reduced to trash. All because I deemed it less than worthy of keeping close to me."

The smaller one continued. "And that was just my stuff. What about the others? My sister's old drawings, the ones that got her rejected from art school and ruined what confidence she had, despite the praise everyone in that retired old dead-end town gave her. A portfolio that basically ruined her future, because some assholes told her that 'She Wasn't Good Enough To Be Part Of Our Art Program' even though I can promise you she was 10x better than most people in it!" He growled, taking a breath.

"...That crippled her. And it crippled any hope of me ever getting somewhere through that system. If someone like Roxann couldn't, I had no chance." Another heavy breath while the large one just listened. "That regret fell onto all of us, not just her. And when she took her own... I can't blame her. To this day, I cannot blame her for trying to escape. And all I feel is sad when I looked at those drawings."

"But you weren't the only one who felt like that." The hexaped softly spoke, getting a faint head shake in response.

"No. I wasn't. Betsy at least tried to make something of herself, but at that point she... She was just filled with so much hate and anger that she couldn't let go of anything. She didn't show it very much, but

I got the feeling Rocky's death haunted her immensely. She snapped at everyone, especially my father. Granted, he was so far gone at that point, I couldn't blame her for being frustrated. But when it was us that started arguing over silly things... I discovered something."

"What?"

"...Me and her were best friends growing up, for years upon years. I mean, we were dumb kids, but I never forgot the fun we had. She felt embarrassed about it, to the point where she grew to hate that part of herself. The part that liked drawing and anime, cartoons and silly videogames. The dumb and campy, roleplaying and general silliness of being just... Fun to be around with. Something inside of her just snapped and she grew to loathe that part of herself." A heavy breath from the smaller bear. "When she ended up taking her own life... Deep down, I felt like I already lost that person before. Deep down... I didn't like the person she became. I missed the person she was, but I didn't miss her. And *That* made me sad."

The small one glanced at his old house in the distance. "That place... It felt like a giant coffin. One my sisters were buried in, even if they specifically die while we lived there. But my father, and now my mother did... I swear it was where I was supposed to. Time and time again, I convince myself to just put off that date. To give me a week longer, a month longer, a year longer. Because I felt just too God Damn Sad to keep going. That I was at my limit when it came to tragedy, only to put it off longer and let someone else get taken."

"Someone else?" The smaller one crossed his arms over the rail, using them as a padding to rest his head upon.

"I don't remember if I said this in a previous meta or story before, but I always felt like Death was stalking me in some way. I love Deago and all, but I can't help but feel like at some point I'm going to be suddenly taken back to my first 'attempt' when I first heard his voice. As if to pull off a Donnie Darko; showing me the reason why I needed to die, so that so many others could live a better life. That Roxann and Betsy could be the ones to survive, Becka would smarten the fucking hell up and stop turning our family against each other. My father would've started showing signs earlier and got the help and pension he needed to save our first home. And though it would've been a tragic stain on our family... They would've lived better lives without me. Instead... I'm somehow the survivor. And I'm so fucking tired."

"Bartan..."

"I'm so fucking tired of being sad! I miss them- most of them. Still never cared for my father too much, but I wanted him to be well enough to fucking teach me something! I want to look up to Roxann again; the person who always seemed to have a good understanding about life! I want to have fun with that past version of Betsy again, without the fucking hate and anger! Without the fucking misanthropy! I want her to realize how dumb we were and love it for how stupid it is!"

"Like Extreme Dinosaurs?"

"**EXACTLY LIKE EXTREME DINOSAURS!!**" The two chuckled sadly. "I want to see my mother again, go back to that living room where she was strapped to that chair the paramedics used to move her because she couldn't get herself out of bed due to the pain! I want to tell her that I'll be fine, that I'll figure something out so she doesn't have to be worried about me! That I'll move in with Cameron- which would help with her mental health issues by having a friend nearby! I want to go back to that damn living room and tell that fucking bear to move!! To Not Stay Still And Silent, In Fear That His Goodbye Would Cause Her To Die!! To tell her that I've loved that old woman for as long as I can remember- that she was always my favorite parent! That she was a damn superhero and that she no longer had to take the weight of the world on her shoulders any longer! That it would be in good hands, so just Rest because you've dealt with enough! You've survived long enough to finally enjoy life, and that everything will be... Okay, so just Rest..."

The two stayed silent for some time, not hiding the tears running down his face. "...But now I feel caught in a web of Sadness. I'm so damn tired of being Sad that I want to stop, but if I do, it feels.. Somehow disrespectful to her. That for the sake of honoring them, the rest of my life needs to be sad and nothing else."

"That's not-"

"I know...!" The smaller one hissed, taking a breath. "I know it's not what they would want, but I've got this damn voice in my head that's **DEMANDING** me to feel that way for all eternity or else 'I never actually liked her'! As if it's judging me for being happy- for enjoying my life the best I can and it's going to call me out because I'm not sad 24/7! And I'm so damn **Tired** of being Sad! I'm tired of making other people sad whenever I walk into a room! I'm tired of everyone thinking of me as the person who lost his mother this year, and has had to move out on his own-ish without a damn safety net! That one little fuck-up and he'll be on the streets or in a ditch somewhere!"

A heavy and heated breath as Bartan One closed his eyes. "At the risk of sounding like an afterschool special, I discovered this year that part of growing up is about learning how to let go. Be it your material items, your feelings, your memories. That's why I wanted to come here, because I'm leaving my sadness behind. If there's one thing that damn well **deserves** to be thrown out, it's that. I'll miss the items, I'll sometimes long for the days of that attic- *In The Winter*." A small chuckle from the large one. "In The Winter. ...But I'm leaving it behind here where I can't hurt me anymore. Where it can't make me think that I'll be better off dead, that everyone would be better off with me dead." Another breath. "I may not be able to leave all of it, but I can... Try."

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"And... Yeah. That's where I was, along with FD." The bear said, back on the lower roof of the beach house. "I just... Everybody's been having a rough time this year, for once I didn't want to add to it. Let people enjoy what they have while we try to make our own traditions, y'know?"

"Sounds like something I'd suggest." The fox chuckled.

"Pretty much, yeah. You've been rubbing off on me for quite some time." He joked, holding Arson into an embrace as Bartan released a breath. "I figured it out this year."

"What?"

"What you do differently." Bartan could feel the canine's puzzled look. "A while ago, during one of my depression episodes I think last year, Jinx asked me what you did so differently than Beo to help me cope. You always did it this entire time and I just couldn't put it into words."

"Put up with it?" She stated jokingly, making him chuckle.

"Aside from that... You... You love me. As in, that side of me. When I look at myself, I'm ripped at every edge. But when you look at me, you still *somehow* see a Masterpiece. Where Beo gets frustrated, you... Still love me when I'm down and at a low point, because you've..."

"We've seen each other at our lowest, and fell in love with those parts of each other."

"Of ourselves. That's not to say you only love me during that time, but Beo... As much as I do love him, and I know he loves me..." The bear trailed off.

"He still doesn't understand, he still doesn't quite love it." A slow nod from the male. "But I think he's starting to get it, how easy it is to become shattered and broken. But still love the person underneath."

"Even if all that's left is Misanthropy?"

"Even if all that's left is the worst part about yourself." Kindle said, kissing him after. But still feeling something a bit off within it. Going back to holding him for a few moments and nuzzling under his neck, almost feeling the furball's heart sink a little.

"...I wish she could see us. See everyone and know that we're still here. Even if I wasn't planning to be." A slow nod from the fox.

"...You should sing for her." A heavy breath from the large one as he nodded back.

"She so smooth... Smooth and cool.

She's got a secret you don't know, and she's never letting go.

It's amazing, she ain't changing.

She's got a fire in her mind, and a promise in her eyes.

She ain't gonna change  
Yeah, she's made her mind up  
Baby wanna live  
She don't wanna die young  
Don't you be afraid  
Dare to take a chance, love  
If you lose your way  
I'll be there to find ya

Sail Away To The Sun, Yeah, I Hope You Find  
A Little Truth In A World Full Of Pretty Lies  
Don't Cry, Don't-" And he chokes, being forced into sobs as the tears fell down into his coat. Unable to hold it back while she comforted him.

"It's okay, bear. It's okay..." Kindle said softly, holding him tight.

*"We All Get Lost Sometimes..."*

To Charlotte  
1949 - 2020

*"I Give You Thanks For Receiving, It's My Privilege  
And **You Owe Me Nothing In Return...**"*