

Stolen From Some Great Writer

By Bartan Tirix

The Suburbs were quiet, though a bit on edge due to the largest house in the area having a lot of guests over. Not only that, but the strange change in weather when entering the perimeter's sidewalk; going from a cool autumn-day to sudden snow, then back again. Such things were common with this lot and the fact that behemoths seemed to be somehow living in a house that looked like it could barely shelter one, let alone two.

However, the sudden appearance of a 'ski resort' in the six-legged bear's backyard was a little jarring to the neighbors. Spotting little magics from afar, sure, but nothing quite like this. Let alone being invited to such parties due to the large guest list. Some agreed to attend for the fun, others didn't quite trust the beasts enough to let their own children play in the sudden resort. As shameful as that was, likely being one of the few times in their children's lives to enjoy such a thing.

But there was nothing the Santa-dressed hexaped Counterweight could do, staying at the front door and greeting the near train of guests that appeared through various portals. Many of different species, while some human or human-looking as well. Putting on a bright smile as the giant white furball welcomed them to the year's event, gladly accepting any treats and meals that guests had already prepared and brought with them. Placing them on a conveyor belt behind him that led into the home's kitchen, where others would handle it from there.

Some curious locals came around to look at the constant snowfall, being the first time for many of the younger ones to experience such a thing. Though a tad spooked when some large shadows flew overhead from several dragons returning. Circling around to make sure the landing zone was cleared before touching down one at a time. A large brass and red titan nearly shaking the ground as he touched the snow, giving a warning to those nearby to stay put while others began to do the same.

A black and fully red pair that looked quite similar landed soon as well, followed by a deep blue and then a white fluffy one. Slipping with his landing on the snow but still sticking it,

getting the attention of others as the winter-coated wyrm panted. "Not bad." The brass behemoth smiled.

"I'll never get used to flight." The white whimpered, getting a chuckle from the others.

"Which is the exact same thing Thea used to say." Beo nudged the furred one with his large metallic snout. Getting several creatures of all kinds to head over, all dressed in holiday attire as the dergs rested on the snowy grounds. The many goods and gifts they carried were carefully taken off by the crew. "Though, usually after crash landings."

"I wasn't that bad." The blue one snorted.

"You crashed 137 times." Dia bluntly stated, his scales morphing from the red to an orange as his tail lightly tapped the blue wyrm's side. "Still better than the bear so far today, but."

"Regardless, no more flying for me today." The white one whined, flopping his head into the snow as a present rolled down his neck and inbetween his horns. Quickly being scooped up by a grey gnoll, one rather cautious about Beo. "Thanks Kassel."

"N-no problem."

"Tell me that was the last set though." Bartan half whimpered again, getting a few licks from the brass dragon.

"Yes, yes. Though the rest of us still have a few things to do for the party, you can enjoy it while the afternoon is young." Once the cargo was off of the titan, he sat up as the furred one was as well. Only for him to put a large paw on the fluffy wyrm's shoulders and pin him down with a bit of a yelp, reaching behind for a grab of that white tail, giving it a gentle tug. "Back to bear mode."

As soon as Beo let go, the fluffy creature began to shape back into his polar slightly smaller bear-ish form, causing his fluff to puff out once Bartan was released from the hold and able to get up and shake his coat freely. "Thanks for helping out, furball."

"You're welcome." Bartan took a gift by the maw and bunted his way past that broad metallic

chest, getting a deep purr from the brass one before heading up towards the front door; where his larger and six-legged counterpart was greeting many of those attending. "Special delivery."

"Bartan One! Glad you could make it, and without being kidnapped this year. Surprising." The larger bear nearly chirped, giving his smaller version a large fluffy hug that nearly made the quadruped disappear.

"Back to the codenames, are we?" Taking a moment to enjoy the embrace before being let go. The smaller one jesting with an overexaggerated loud inhale as if he couldn't breathe in there, and getting a chuckle.

"We kind of need to, for situations like this." The Counterweight teased. "Though I have been going by nicknames to prevent confusion."

"Bartan Two, I imagine." A nod from the larger one. "Fluffy Dad or FD."

"As well as Fluffybutt as well." A head tilt in question from Bartan One, making the Second chuckle. "And many others, though trying to keep it under the radar for any innocent ears."

"Fluffybutt isn't that bad. Our rears are quite-"

"More like TILFW." Though smaller ears perked as the Counterweight whispered. "Tail I'd Like to Fornic-"

"-With, got it." Bartan One blushed a bit as another guest was greeted, likely reading the conversation a bit and making him feel a tad embarrassed. While the hexaped was a lot more opened and composed about such a thing. Feeling the taller set of brown eyes over him.
"...No-"

"We should try that session together at some point." A whimper in defeat from the smaller bear made the Counterweight laugh. "I understand your struggles, but you did manage to get through other one this year; with Yoder-"

"Barely! And even then I had to change so much just so I could telegraph it clearly, if one can even call that clear!" A snort from Bartan One, then a breath afterwards. "Okay, maybe as a DL

or something, but right now I'm kind of swamped with work."

"We'll discuss it later. But as for this present, I believe it belongs to the Mistress."

"Arson?"

"Kindle, yes. Can you deliver it?" A narrow gaze from the smaller bear. "Last I saw her, she was in the barn around the corner."

"'Last I Seen Her'?" Bartan One quoted the second. "You're a god above gods, you know exactly where she is at this very moment, where she will be ten minutes from now, and what is inside this box." He snorted, getting a clever smirk from the larger one.

"Indeed, but I'm also one to guide people. So go be her delivery boy and earn that tip." The smaller bear's ears went backwards, but were soon tinted deeply in blush while Bartan Two attempted to hold back his chuckle. "Yes, we have special rooms dedicated for that." B-One put a paw over his eyes. "Go on, people are waiting." The hexaped nudged him, then the present that made the smaller furball sigh.

But he didn't argue past that. Only approaching the large barn where music was playing and many many people were inside and around. Specifically two dragonesses laying down outside enjoying each other's company; one copper stroking a white one to relax. "Evening ness's." The bear greeted them, placing the present down, looking at the crowded dance area inside the building with a little bit of anxiety.

"Speak of the devil~" The copper one nearly purred, getting the furball to double take at Travv'esa while the white wyrm whined a bit. Opening her eyes and blushing deeply at the sight of the bear.

"I was wondering if you've seen the Kindling late-" A sharper whimper from the white dragoness, getting all eyes on her. "...ly. Is Jyrn okay?" A higher pitched one as she froze.

"She's fine. That's just Jyrn-speak for 'Please let me have your hatchlings'." A loud record scratch came from inside the nearby barn as an awkward silence fell over the area for a moment, making the white wyrm completely cover herself with a wing. Hearing the music start

up at least removed some silence, but definitely not the questionable blushing stare from the male.

"U-uh...?" Bartan whimpered, eventually causing the copper one to laugh out loud.

"She spotted your dragon form for the first time and instantly wanted to get mounted by it-"

"I-I didn't say that, Travv!"

"But you were feeling it~" The copper female purred, giving the slightly smaller dragoness a pestering lick before returning her eyes to the bear. Still looking quite bashful at the compliment. "It's a wonder you're not using it more often."

"No offense, but being a dragon isn't quite my thing." Bartan replied, setting down the gift and rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Don't get me wrong, I love dragons. I just..."

"Never quite seen yourself as one." A nod from the furball in agreement. "Any specific reason why?"

"Eh... Polar Bear just suits me. Big. Fluffy. Insulated. Unusually passive for being large. Bear just kinda works."

"I-if that's what you want to call yourself." Jyrn whimpered a bit, trying to collect herself and getting the eyes on her again. "You have to admit, you don't quite look like a polar bear." The two dragons studied the furball in front of them for a few moments as he nodded in agreement.

"It's like a cross between a fluffy wolf and a polar bear."

"W-well, Alaskan Malamute, not wolf. A lot of people tend to assume that, but regardless, any fluffy canine kinda works." Another awkward neckrub. "I never... Quite fit into any specific circles in the sand that people seem to draw, even when I was younger. I wasn't confident enough to 'make it my own', so I never just created a new species."

"Which is why you still go by the term bear?" Another nod as he looked around at the large lot, covered in Xmas decor and even a skiing hill in the backyard. One that seemed to stretch

impossibly past the property's outskirts, yet didn't affect any place outside of it.

"Yeah. It feels... Right to me." A slight exhale through his muzzle. "But I've tried some of the other ones; dragon, deer, dog/wolf, 'beast', eastern noodle." A couple of chuckles from the two females. "Don't get me wrong, they're fun, but... I don't feel like 100% Me when I'm in them. They're a nice change, and I definitely don't mind using them once in a while. Especially if-

"-A certain white dragoness would like to get mounted?" Travv purred.

"-A certain white dragoness would like to get mounted, yes." The two said together, sharing a small laugh while Jyrn whimpered shyly. "As well as you, copper beauty~"

"We'll definitely take you up on that." The more confident female smirked, still stroking the white one that was slowly coming out of her shell. Only to suddenly hear the bear groan a bit. "What?"

"Too many story ideas, not enough time." The male grumbled into his paws, rubbing his eyes and temple a bit. "I still gotta finish Party Monster- which the title might change, I dunno. Your Story, is what I mean." A nod from the copper. "And I should finish up Afterlife this year, but I'm not sure if I can. I might push it to 2024." A shrug from Travv.

"Just work on what you feel like. Forget about deadlines or what you ""owe people""." Those four fluffy ears lowered a bit, along with his snout. "Even if it is mounting your inflating female self again." An instant groan from the male as he let his front half fall directly into the snow, burying it as if trying to hide from embarrassment while the metallic one laughed.

"W-wait, what!?"

"One of his most recent shorts was that. It was quite cute, honestly." Bartan felt eyes over him, one curious, one entertained. Once again releasing a muffled groan before pulling his head back to the surface, still covered in blush and snow. Trying to stern his expression in front of the two dragons.

"...I know this question is coming, so just ask it-"

"Are you enjoying my gender?" The copper one chuckled at the sudden head tilt and perk of those ears. Still unable to keep the male from whimpering slightly. "Are you going to transition into something else?"

"N-no, at least I don't plan to." Bartan took a small breath. "Gender... Has honestly had no meaning to me. It's the same with species; I honestly can't find a circle I feel like I belong in. I just kinda stick with male for the most part, but I honestly just do not care."

"S-so you've been experimenting?" Jyrn asked, getting a nod from the fluffy one.

"Even with herm on occasion, but again: nothing specific. It just depends on what I'm in the mood for at the time; male stuff, female stuff, M/F stuff, and everything else." Another look off in the distance. "I made Nukarhru, or Nukka, just to keep things clear because... Well..."

"You're a male and you knew eventually that you wanted to mount yourself-" Travv teased.

"-V-very hard, yes." Another shy whine from the furball as the two chuckled. "But it's fun. Fun to change around, experience different things. I felt like I've done soooo much Male on Male stuff that people have just assumed that I'm..."

"Gay?" A grumble from Travv'esa's answer, lightly puzzling her.

"You're right, I just absolutely hate that word." Those furred ears spayed. "I could never find one I felt comfortable using for male/male that didn't sound like a derogatory term. But yeah... People just assumed I was, and to this day it still catches me off guard."

"So, wait..." Jyrn shyly asked. "Are you... Not then?" A shrug from the furball.

"I'm not anything. I like what I like at that given moment, that's the best answer I've got."

"Then why so much- ...'Male on Male' stuff?" The copper one attempted to watch her words.

"Because it was easy enough to write and understand from my perspective." A pair of blank stares from the dragons. "Legit, that was the answer; because I found females a bit hard to write for- especially from the beginning." Bartan looked into the barn from his sitting position.

"It's not something I enjoy talking about, but my relationship with Kindle was like maybe 4% sexual. We did it on occasion, but it was never a defining thing in our lives. We could deal without it and be just fine."

"But with that came...?"

"Inexperience when it came to females, and inexperience causes me to be inconfident. I'm always worried about making a mistake or doing something offensive to people. When I wrote my first novel; Zhailthe's Tale, I had a sentence somewhere in act 4 about 'Having a chink in his armor'. Then, after posting it, I learned that 'Chink' is also a *verrrry* offensive word...!" Bartan covered his face with his paws again, groaning through them. "I was just using the idiom, but it stressed me out. Thinking that somebody is going to look at that and think..."

"But context matters."

"Only when people feel like it does, dear." Travv snorted after replying to the white one in her embrace.

"But anyway... I didn't do a lot of female stuff in the beginning because *I didn't know how*." Bartan admitted.

"Yet, that changed."

"Yeah... After meeting up with some others that were brave enough to talk to me about it. Every person and every species is different, but I got a good idea of the similarities that can be used to help it feel more... 'Real'? I feel like that's a little weird to say considering dragons and such." Another awkward neckrub.

"Regardless, have you been feeling more confident in it?"

"Enough to... Try a different gender or two, yes." A gesture from one white one to the white dragoness. "I've been trying herms on occasion for what, two years now? And I'm fine with them for the most part, but..."

"But what?"

"They still don't fit... *Me*." Those four ears fell a bit. "I think of female, and it still doesn't fit Me. I look at male and... It's closer, sure. But I think only because that's what I've been called all my life."

"What about non-binary?" The copper wyrm asked.

"I've thought about that too, but I feel like it's just being a pest to everyone." Two head tilts nearly in sync at the bear. "Correcting everyone everytime they use the wrong pronouns, making them feel awkward/'embarrassed' that they got it incorrect. I mean, it still doesn't feel like it fits me, but that's why I've never tried it in practice." Another gaze off into the distance, this time towards the front of the house now vacant of the line of people. "I've never been one to have an easy answer for anything. Ask any of the people who are close to me what my favorite 'Blank' is and you'll get six to twelve different answers, whereas my answer will almost always be something entirely different."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Travv shrugged a wing.

"But it's a difficult answer to what should be an easy question. 'What's your favorite color?' I don't have one. I like a combination of colors vs one solid block." A slightly sad look from the white dragon, while the Copper one with the silver underside shrugged. "N-no offense."

"Again, nothing wrong with that. And I think a little orange would help Jyrn stand out~" A confused look from the white wyrm while Travv just smiled slyly. Not ruining the surprise.

"But the only thing I know for sure are my dislikes, and my identity shouldn't be based around those... Should it?" Bartan sighed through his muzzle, looking off to the snowy hills people were sliding down again. "And if my own likes keep constantly rotating around... It's hard to pinpoint exactly who you are."

A sad look from Jyrn while the metallic female just shrugged and spoke. "You are You. Doesn't matter if you change species, gender, mindset, anything. You are just still yourself." His sad brown eyes looked into her grey ones. "Look, this concept of Identity you have in your head is backwards; it's supposed to be made for others primarily over yourself. It's nothing more than a combination of facts from the past crammed together in a messy ball of information for people to latch out and find something in common with. Is there something wrong with that? No. But it doesn't define who you are."

"Then..." The white dragoness started, looking at Travv'esa. "Who are you?"

"Whoever you are at that given moment. Whatever you like at *That* given moment, whatever you dislike. The point is; it is okay to Change. You seem to think that you are given this blank sheet of paper when you are hatched- or born." The copper one corrected herself. "And whatever you decide to stain it with is permanent. When really, you're given a Whiteboard. **With** an Eraser. And you're free to use this however you want. If you're tired of the color red and want to go with something else, like..."

"Cyan and orange?"

"Exactly. Then you're free to do so. If you get tired of that, even after a month or so, your eraser still works." The male's gaze lowered along with his ears, as Travv continued. "No one is set in stone. People are allowed to change, bear. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worst, and sometimes very often. But they should always be allowed to change, be it their opinions, favorites, their likes and dislikes, but most importantly:"

"Themselves." Bartan mumbled, getting a nod from the copper one. Watching him exhale and lower his gaze. "I guess..." He trailed off.

"You guess?"

"I guess I always just felt like as soon as someone became an adult, they were just supposed to figure all this stuff out. Like going through this metamorphosis that you're going to become this person for the rest of your life."

"Bear, you'll never stop growing up. Even when you're old and gray-"

"-I am already old and gray. I literally dye my fur white." He grumbled, making the two chuckle. "But I... Know what you mean." Another breath as he gazed over the visitors in their far surroundings again. "I've just... Met a lot of new people this year it seems, and they all... *Know* for certain what they like. They can easily define themselves; what they're interested in, what they don't really care for. What is too much, and what they enjoy. Me...? I flip-flop like a fish out of water. My dumb brain can barely figure out what I like at the current moment."

"Which is the reason why you often 'lose yourself'." Jyrn added in, watching the furball nod. "Has the new form been helping at least?"

"Immensely. I'll definitely say that; changing myself from anthro to feral, updating this form- regardless of its flaws-

"Like stairs?" Travv teased, making the male whimper a bit and blush.

"I-I was mostly thinking the, uh... Tail thing. But, yes. Stairs too." The furball stroked the back of his neck a little. "Often enough people will look into my galleries and favorites to find out what I enjoy, but even that's kind of a scattershot of content. I've been putting tags on my thumbnails for a few years now, aside from actual novels and the Drunken Lullaby series. Often enough newcomers will take a quick look at that and see Inflation sixteen times and just assume that's what I like at all times. That works for probably most people, but for me...? I go all over the place. For fish sakes, I've even written things I don't enjoy but thought I would give it a shot anyway."

"Vore?"

"-Yes, vore." Bartan answered the copper one surprisingly quickly. "I've even done it on more than one occasion too, so... People just make that connection. I can't **blame** them for it, because that's just how most people work. Me...? I don't fit in those circles, I never felt like I have." A remorseful breath from the furred one. "And it's because of those assumptions that I lost a friend earlier this year, who took a look at the tag Bestality- because it kiiiiind of fit the story. Regardless of the fact we knew each other for nearly two years, and I thought we were... I dunno."

"Friends?" Travv half snorted.

"Yeah... But as soon as he saw that tag, without giving any chance for an explanation or discussion, he just told me he found it and cut ties. Go figure it was also the novel that actually showed the "'Animal'" break the barriers of its definition, and move into the realm of intelligence. Showing the entire time that he was understanding what was going on and was giving his consent." Another breath. "But I guess that hardly mattered, people are going to think what they want to based on their half observations or even lack of discussions. Instead of actually asking about it and attempting to keep a friendship, he assumed that... I donno, that I

promoted people fucking cats in real life? These stories are fantasy- all the creatures within that series were fantasy."

"To some people it does not matter, bear. It's a line for them, apparently one that can even break off a friendship."

"I know, Travv. But it just... Won't get out of my brain. I keep worrying that if I make content that some person is going to find one tinnie tiny detail about it, claim it's offensive-"

"Like Chink?"

"*EXACTLY* like Chink." Bartan groaned, putting his head in the snow again at the white wyrm's interruption. "And then just... Label me as a bad person? I don't know what I'm afraid of, honestly. Be it the rejection, being shamed, socially lynched? All for what...? Making content for some people who REALLY enjoyed that series? But now I can barely look at it- not because I don't like it or honestly enjoy it... But because it has this... Stain that basically states 'You Did A Bad Thing And You Should Feel Bad About It'... What's going to happen the next time I write a story involving Anthro and Feral characters? Where's the next line that I'm going to cross? How is someone going to find something offensive in my writing and how do I make it fool-proof? Spend the next 8 hours- not actually progressing the story, but carefully making sure every little detail doesn't aid some kind of mental conspiracy that will make someone fly off the handle-?"

"Bartan." Travv'esa stopped him a bit sternly, making him sigh and shake the snow off his face. "People are going to... Well, be people. It's in their instincts to either fight or seek some kind of validation of justice. Don't ask me why, but it's something I've noticed as well." She half grumbled. "You can't please everyone, and odds are someone is going to find something they consider offensive in your art. It's kind of a given in the media, and slightly part of its own definition."

"I suppose..." The bear mumbled.

"Don't be afraid to step on some toes, furball. Don't intentionally do it to get a reaction out of people and don't add something possibly offensive for that specific purpose alone. People looking for a power trip will make a scene. Trust me, this isn't the audience that you want." The copper one looked down at the white. "Cold? I can feel you shivering a bit."

"A little." Jyrn admitted. "Just not sure if I want to go back into the barn, it's a little crowded."

"Let's head inside then and get warmed up. I'd like to try this sledding thing they have setup here." Bartan chuckled at her, shaking his muzzle while Travv smirked at him back. "Want to join us later tonight?"

"Tonight or tomorrow, we'll try something this weekend. Don't worry." A slight whimper from the white dragoness was heard, then a bit louder when the bear nudged her with his snout. "Though I can't guarantee you hatchlings-"

"S-stop!" Jyrn covered her face with her paws, making the other two chuckle. Peeking through the divides in her 'shelter' to watch the bear turn and pick up the gift with his maw again. Only to sway that tail and show off that heavy pouch, immediately making her whimper while the copper one purred.

"Well, that certainly warmed you up." Another tease caused a sharp whimper behind the bear as he moved towards the opened barn. Looking around from the outside but not spotting the white fox anywhere within the dancing floor, nor around it. Really not wanting to go inside the crowded building, the furball did his best to look from the outside until a brown tirix left the area. A holiday shawl over his shoulders, perking the bear's four ears as he caught up with the smaller panther.

"Ryoko, hey." A sudden double take and a smile from the brown one, as his blue eyes looked over the giftbox hanging from Bartan's maw.

"Hello, on delivery duty I see."

"Y-yes. I've been looking for Kindle, was she in there?" The tirix took a moment to think.

"At one point, yes. But recently she disappeared. My guess would be in the kitchen, which I'm heading to myself." A sudden chuckle from the bear tilted the brown one's head, following his sight to the far slopes of snow. Within the joyful sledding was a large black Wolpertinger [Think... Jackalope with wings and like sabertooth fangs], playfully chasing after some of the sleds and making some of the younger ones scream-in-fun. Instantly making Ryoko chuckle as well.

"Good, I'll join you then. I'm honestly quite hungry already."

"Skipped lunch again?" Those four white ears fell a little bit as Ryoko chuckled. Leading the way underneath a snow tunnel where sleds and innertubes were heard racing overhead. "It's alright, but you shouldn't feel so nervous about these things." The playful screams of excitement were suddenly interrupted by the sounds of warping when they got too close to the landing zone. Then the sounds of something larger soon after it; nearly giving off a yelp before the teleportation kicked in, making the two look up and attempt to picture the Wolpertinger sliding on his belly like a penguin. Shaking their heads in sync, but smiling. "Especially to the point where it disrupts your hunger."

"I... Can't always help or control it." The white one mumbled, getting them both to lightly shrug as Bartan overlooked the clothing around the tirix's shoulders. "That looks good on you."

"Almost as good as the one Cross made, but thank you. I've been liking the stylistic choice, to be honest." That made the white bear smile. "He did really good in that reference-"

"Cross *killed it* with your reference sheet~" The two chuckled. "Seriously. But it's really nice to finally get a piece of art of a Tirix. Or at least a more proper one. That very old one... Kind of worked, but."

"The limbs were way off." A nod in agreement as another series of sleds flew over. "You've gotten a lot of art this year."

Bartan released a small exhale. "Yes. I have. But it's not what people think."

"I know. You've honestly been spending your 'snack budget' on art instead, helping your health and weight while also treating yourself and others."

"That's only possible due to Red, she gave me quite a good price for her- well... It used to be Patreon, but now it's currently Ko-fi." Another breath from the bear. "I feel a little guilty about spending money, but at least it is going to people in need as well. And to bring you guys 'to life' in a visual sense has been..."

"Quite a trip, yes." The two smiled again, entering the house while greeting the six legged

bear once more while he was hugging an orange cat with a long black coat. 'TILFW' had a large donut hanging out of his smiling muzzle as he buried the small feline with his underfur, soon letting him go and snacking on the treat. Completely oblivious to the cat's sudden double take at the approaching Bartan One, and making Ryoko nod. "Yes, there are two of them."

"There's two Bartans?" The orange one slightly whimpered. "Heck! But I pack spares for this very reason. Here you go, furball~" The cat offered the smaller bear a donut.

"Thanks, this'll do me while I wait in line." Bartan One took the treat into his own maw while also giving the small cat a hug. Hearing him purr loudly within the 'soft white forest'. "I'm glad you could make it this year, Donut."

"Thanks for having me, dudes! And don't worry, this is just a taste of the presents I got for your family!"

"And I imagine some are going to want to give you some... Gifts this weekend~" The six legged one purred, instantly making the cat blush.

"Heeeck, guys...! N-not so early in the day, okay?" The group chuckled. "I'm going to see if I can find Linet-"

"She's sledding out back, but is coming to a stop in neary 4 minutes and 13 seconds. You can catch her out on the deck, Donut~" A strange look at the rather specific timing as the other two smaller ones gave the cat a hug. "Enjoy your stay-" Bartan Two's ears flicked as he looked off towards the front yard. Catching soft ramblings of an amethyst dragon building a snow fort, occasionally laughing maniacally about 'winning this year'. "I, uh... I should take care of that before it gets worse. E-excuse me." The hexaped quickly trotted over, apologizing to many of the guests still waiting in line.

As concerning as that was, the smaller bear and Tirix moved themselves into the house. "Of course, not just from her." A double take from Bartan as Ryoko continued. "...Talking about Red and getting art-"

"-Art, yes! I'm all over this." A chuckle from the brown one. "Yeah. Thanks to Cross, Jinx, Jack, Donut... I've been humbled the past couple of years. Some are trades or that I do save enough to pay for, but quite a few of them end up as gifts." The two moved into the kitchen, moving

around some of the busy crowd and getting in line along a large wall. On it were many screens and tablets, showing off most of the goods available while a dozen more were being used for orders.

"Special gifts." Ryoko smiled at him, still browsing and overlooking the setup. "Linnet really outdid herself on this."

"I'm surprised, honestly. Did she finally work out all the bugs?"

"There weren't that many to begin with, if I recall. The way she and TILF-" A shy grunt from the larger bear made the tirix chuckle. "were talking I could only catch half of it. Its like they were having three conversations going at once, but her ability to create AI and help them learn-"

"Something that is way over my head." Bartan half mumbled. "It's basically machine magic to me."

"Most people see it that way, it tends to keep some futuristic wonder about it as well, but it can also cause some frustrations if said machines do not work properly." The tirix theorized. "People can forget that they're not talking to a being that can rationalize with thought and experience."

"Y-yeah, I'm guilty of that sometimes. Especially after seeing it perform what appeared to be Rationally." Bartan admitted, looking at the many offers but double taking at a sign that's been repeated. "Scan Option Available?"

"Apparently it can read your cravings based on your body's nutrition values as well as your preferences, if I recall correctly." The brown panther informed him. "It'll give you what you want, even if you don't know."

"That's kind of..."

"Scary?" The bear nodded in agreement. "To some people, yes. Especially if used incorrectly. But it is the best option to be able to feed everyone, whereas everything is being made outside of space."

"Wait, what?"

"Kind of like that 'pillow zone' that makes your Future Self's bedroom. Nothing here is actually made in the kitchen, due to it being surprisingly limited. However, everything is exact replicas of pre-existing dishes that both Dia and Beo have made. As well as any guest dishes that were added in today." Ryoko explained, getting a blank stare from those brown eyes and chuckling. "Again, they worked hard on it this year."

"I'll say." Bartan mumbled, looking at another sign. "Everything Can Be Ordered At Tables. Well, that definitely reduced the line time."

"Indeed. They wanted to keep it to a minimum, and I think they succeeded. Nobody wants to spend the holiday in line, but everyone needs a card."

"Card?" The white one questioned as two order tabs opened up, getting the gesture to follow the brown one as he walked up to a tablet. Scooching over to let the bear observe Ryoko operate the touchscreen. Adding a few things, and getting a small card with a number on it. With instructions to have a seat somewhere where serving areas are set up. "So...?"

"Think of it as a ticket of sorts. For now, let's do yours." A nervous look from the bear as he studied the choices. "Want a self scan? It'll make the choices easier."

"Y-yes, let's do that so I'm not holding up people." A slightly narrowed look from the tirix, making the four white ears fall. "Sorry, I just..."

"They can wait, Bartan. Just like you have. Take a breath, relax. There's no pressure here, you're not holding anyone up." A faint nervous nod from the larger furball as he did take a deep breath. "Alright, hit the Scan Me button there. Then stand perfectly still, looking up at the little camera there... And done." A card popped out after processing. "We can always either return food or order more at the table. Come, we'll find a spot."

Bartan took another breath, accepting his card and obtaining the giftbox again. Following the brown tirix and his white glowing tail through the orderly crowd, many making groups off to the side and socializing. A few being policed by the TMs for getting too frisky in public, soon the two little ones jumped on the back of a big blue female gryphon. "Onwards!" The small brass wyrmling chirped, making their 'ride' chuckle and happily move along.

"There has been a wardrobe malfunction out on the slopes!" The wolfling explained, making the Gryphon gasp.

"Oh dear. Those seem to be popular today."

"We must attend to the situation before it escalates! To the winter closet first!" The gryphon starts on her way, but quickly realizes she's not exactly sure which way that is. While seeking directions from the eager duo, she spotted Bartan among the crowd. Taking the opportunity to greet him.

"Hey Draft, on chaperone duty?" The white furred one smiled.

"To my surprise! I was... Drafted, if you'll allow the pun." Bartan chuckled at the gryphon, a colorful bloomed flower exposed on her chest got his attention for half a second. Thinking it was a brooch or something at first, but it seemed real.

"Codename Galaxy; the misfortunes of nudity will not wait to provoke others!" The small brass wyrm nudged the blue ride.

"We must help with the situation ASAP before we are forced to detain others!" Rev chirped, almost heroically.

"Oop, right! I'll catch up later. Thanks again for having me!" Draft chirped, before putting on a playful officer's clip and squeezing the two upon her back with her wings. Loving their playful giggle. "Aye aye, Captains, lead the charge!"

"No worries. Maybe we'll meet up when you get time." Bartan smiled at her, quickly returning his sight on the brown one. Moving through the crowd to a large dining hall, filled with tables that almost seemed to rotate in large half-bubbles. Approaching another tablet with a few options and tapping one before the bear could fully read them; however, spotting something about Accepting Guests. The tables shifted around and stopped at one with a deep blue dragon and another that started red, but then shifted to a calming cyan during a conversation. One the furred creatures could not make out until entering the bubble. "You keep putting it off though." The color changing wyrm teased.

"It's a hill of cold, resting on an object of cold, while getting wind of cold. What could be so fun about it?" Thea, the blue one snorted. Instantly getting the two guests to chuckle as they set their cards (and presents) down and slotted them into the four-way device in the center. Soon Bartan's and Ryoko's meals were warped in, as if fresh out of a hot oven. Filling the bubble with a pleasant scent. "What difference is it from flight?"

"Flight you have control." Dia bluntly stated.

"Speak for yourself." The white one snorted, getting the others to chuckle. "But I'm guessing you're talking about sledding?"

"Skiing-" The rainbow one attempted to correct, getting an interrupting hiss from Thea.

"Don't even joke about that! Skiing just sounds terrifying. At least with the other things you have some means of defense or control."

"Actually, those who tend to learn skiing actually say you have more-" Another hiss interrupted Ryoko, but he took it lightly.

"Bi-peds, no doubt! I can barely sit on two legs let alone stand." The blue one grumbled, looking at the smiling now-pink dragon with maximum grump. "...You're going to sick the TMs on me if I don't comply, aren't you?"

"I warned you that I would two years ago. Just kind of forgot last year." Dia shrugged. "Too busy."

"It must be nice to have the year off this time, huh?" The bear added in.

"Kind of. Moreso that we did a lot of the work beforehand. The previous years we were stuck in the kitchen for 70% of the party, this year is our first full break." Dia took a breath, finishing the last of his eggnog and setting it down. Putting in his own card while Thea did the same. "Kind of like you did this year, Bartan."

"What?" The furball double taked.

"With your writing. You really didn't post a lot this year." The white furred one mumbled a bit awkwardly at Dia's statement.

"W-well... Kind of. Honestly? I didn't post about 30 or 40% of what I wrote this year. Most of which being gifts that I didn't get the 'go-to' to post them- granted I kind of forgot to ask too." Bartan lightly whimpered, taking a bite out of his food. "But... There were a couple that I kind of finished, but wasn't happy with. I did end up doing another WTMM, for example."

"The muscle-inflation series?" Dia asked, his scales shifting from red to yellow with interest.

"Y-yeah, but I couldn't... Get the ending or anything else really right with it. It's not my thing to begin with so I feel like I'm stumbling in the dark when it comes to writing, just guessing what might work and I guess what I had down just didn't." The furball shrugged. "A few others were just silly birthday pieces, some of which I liked but again: kinda forgot to ask about posting them."

"You've got quite a pile now of unposted content." Ryoko half teased.

"Y-yeah. Something I might bring up to others at some point, but I donno." Another bite and a purr over his food as the bear continued. "Aside from that, I did get a start on Party Monster, but didn't finish it. The event with Waiting For Tonight 5 kinda left me shellshocked for a while, so a lot of the late winter I didn't post anything special. The April Fools one was kind of fun, but it didn't top last year's."

"It was kind of hard to match Look At What You Made Me Do." Thea added, getting a nod from the table.

"It was a good try though." The panther smiled.

"Aside from that... I talked to a friend about what to do during these down-times when I just can't get the motivation to write, and he suggested... Kinda like Flyers for my previous stories."

"Oh, the Novel Card thing?" A nod from Bartan. "Who was that?"

"Jack, actually." A puzzled look from the two wyrms. "Purple noodle, somewhere around

here." A large nod from both of them. "So, for every week, I wrote up and even fixed up some of those stories. My own favorites and ones I felt were worth visiting. Some people looked at them, but nothing really... Bloomed out of the idea. But I'm still happy I did it; makes it much easier to explain what it is. All people have to do is just click on the novel card and read a very quick description of the novel. If they like the sound of it, great. If not? They didn't waste too much time."

"I wouldn't word it so negatively, but I understand." The tirix said inbetween bites. "Reading is a rather time consuming hobby, people tend to be surprised what they might like when they give it a try."

"I guess my entire 'career' of it I've been trying to make it easier on people by not wasting-" That narrow gaze from the brown panther interrupted the furball for a moment. "...Consuming? Their time so much?" A nod, stating that was a better word. "I felt like whenever I was reading, be it through hobby or for something like school, so often did I come across paragraph upon paragraph of needless details. All feeling like Red Herrings of sorts."

"Fish?" The dark blue dragon questioned.

"It's a writing term used for details that are meant to be misleading." Ryoko explained, letting Dia follow up.

"Like a clue that leads further away from the answer to a mystery. Peppered with too many details in general, people are just going to dislike attempting to filter out what is useful information and what is irrelevant."

"It's a technique of writing that I honestly don't enjoy using, because I feel like I'm toying with the reader. But sometimes I'll throw in little details that seem out of place, but some people catch on." Bartan added in. "A recent example of this was the yawning in Psychopath."

"That was important?" Thea half questioned, finishing the rest of his eggnog and feeling their bubble slow to a stop. Releasing a low but sharp whimper along with Dia that got the two furred one's attention, making them look back to witness two Otters dressed in... Well, 'rather revealing holiday attire'. A short female with a ridiculous bust, and a taller male that was clearly not shy about how much of him was being shown. A surprised double take from the bear as he watched the two fill up the dragon's mugs with more eggnog.

"Y-you're working as a waiter, Theo?" Bartan whined, blushing at the outfits. Making the female giggle.

"He got caught by the Troublemakers, getting too frisky with some of the guests."

"It's hardly a punishment though~" The male otter purred. "Want a mug, deary?"

"S-sure." The bear lightly whined, feeling Kayla press her chest up against him while setting down a mug. Then Theo pressing up against the other fluffy side to pour it in, causing that long tail to wag as Bartan was sandwiched inbetween. "T-thank you."

"You're very welcome bear~" The male otter purred, turning about and flicking his tail. The two servants catching several pair of eyes as they moved between tables.

"...So why was yawning important?" Thea asked, clearing his throat. Snapping both the bear and the rainbow dragon back into the conversation.

"R-right. That's what we were talking about." Dia huffed, trying to calm himself down.

"Yawning is a common thing done to test someone's Empathy in general." Ryoko explained. "In the Halloween novel we worked on; Psychopath, it looks like an odd detail to put in. But those who know of this test can kind of see the progression one of the characters tend to take in response to yawning." A small drink from the tirix. "Nothing specifically definitive, but it was implying that they were losing empathy for others."

"Hence the title." Thea mumbled, taking a drink out of the eggnog and purring.

"Mostly." Bartan replied. "There's a bit more to it than that, but regardless the clue kind of worked- as a bonus. Because you don't need to know about the empathy test to discover the final result, while also not slapping people in the face with the concept later on. But again... Things aren't always what they seem." The table stared at the bear for a moment, not realizing he was done. Only for those brown eyes to shift around and swallow his bite. "I'm not going to spoil it here, go read it for yourself." Bartan snorted, making them chuckle. "Anyway, have any of you seen Kindle around anywhere?"

"A while ago, yes. But we're talking like an hour or so." Thea took another sip. "I should see if I can find Zelly somewhere."

"I think both Zeltra and Kindle are in the 'Living Room' area. That wouldn't be a bad place to look." The rainbow dragon added in before turning his attention to the other wyrm at the table. "And no socializing before sledding! I'm getting you down that hill at least once this year!" Dia playfully snorted, getting one back as Thea tossed his snout.

"*Fiiiiiiine*. One time, then I'm sitting by a heater for the rest of the night." The blue one looked around. "Now where's my scarf?"

"You're wearing it." Ryoko bluntly stated inbetween bites, making the dragon curl his neck and attempt to look down at it.

"...I swear, this is doing less and less for me every year that goes by." The two dragons finished their eggnog in one long drink before setting the mugs back down on the table. Taking their cards before standing up and stretching a bit.

"Have fun sledding." The bear half teased, getting a bit of a glare from the blue one. "I'm serious, I used to do it quite a bit as a cub. It is fun."

"Yeah, yeah." The grumpy wyrm muttered, getting nudged away by the now red one as their table rotated to a stop and they got off. As Bartan took another bite and set his utensils down, he looked over the device in the center that took the cards.

"Had enough?"

"I was just looking to see if there was a... Leftovers option of sorts?"

"For later?" A nod from the bear as Ryoko pointed out the option. "Right there. Put your card in first so it knows who the plate belongs to. After that, hit the button, it'll ask if you're sure and done. Whenever you're hungry again, just put your card in and bring it back. It'll be just as you left it, though you can heat it up a bit more."

"Neato." The white one got up, retrieving the gift box once again. "My search continues." A

chuckle from the tix as Bartan bunted the panther's side and trekked off. Out of the large dining area and into the wide hallway, many different rooms scattered along its walls. Quite a few were already closed off/'reserved' for the occupants inside, several were still open. Making the bear take a peek inside to see if he could spot the white fox.

A large computer room of sorts was the theme in one of them, many devices already built and set up, including several large spaces for VR. A platinum dragonborn playing Killing Floor 2's holiday event did catch the bear's eye, looking somewhat familiar but couldn't quite place him. Beside the dragonborn was a black and green tix, playing the same game and cursing about 'getting attacked by living presents'. And instantly Bartan felt his pain, nearly groaning himself as he gazed around.

Above the PCs were large screens, displaying the games being played to observers resting on couches. Occupied by several different species all socializing while watching the games and eating goodies, including a blonde fox with orange fur, being flirted with by a few wyrms. On another couch, one red dragoness enjoying some time in Animal Crossing: New Horizons while snacking on some treats. Talking to an orange tix the size of a tiger, technically resting on a surprisingly large pawed and busty fennec. Looking like he was slightly uncomfortable but just socially, due to the... Surprisingly squishy bits. Likely getting pulled into such a position and not wanting to hurt her feelings, but it did make Bartan smile to see Deago in a likely situation the furball himself would probably find himself in.

Yet no sign of the canine in search. Continuing on to the next was a very large bathroom-like space. A massive hot tub being used by several creatures in the center of it, while each corner had the same warping tables from the dining area. Serving drinks to the guests, one large anthro Polar Bear reaching over to grab one and lightly double taking at Bartan; looking ridiculously similar, but needing to study the smaller furball for a moment to recognize who it was. Even after Bartan shyly waved, now realizing the last time they met; Bartan's fur was not dyed. Instead having the natural grey color.

The two silently greeted each other from afar as those brown discs scanned the room. Spotting a snow leopard with mechanical limbs (save for her right arm), a brown lady rat, a white spotted Charr being nuzzled by a raptor who refused to get in. His head between her neck and another female Charr's, this time brown, and shifting for pets and attention. And the last corner was actually occupied by a large black minotaur of sorts, looking a bit shy but breaking out of his shell thanks to the guest bear within it.

Another scene that made Bartan smile, but still no Kindle. Continuing down the hall and into a massive room that held a few fireplaces along the walls. Some stairways to inside-balconies were nearby, getting the furball's attention and climbing them. Slipping a couple of steps and grumbling but eventually making it up.

The opposite side was a bit more occupied, easily spotting a fluffy grey/white dragon of sorts with red mixed into his coat. Lazily leaning over the arm of his reclining chair, sipping away at some hot cocoa while his talents levitated a small block of wood. One being carved by an ethereal red blade under the dragon's control; shaping it into... What appeared to be a certain 'bear' in an unusually suggestive position, instantly making Bartan blush and accidentally drop the present he was carrying. Nearly losing it to gravity and a set of stairs, but catching it after a fumble or two.

Vearin gave the white one a wink from afar as he took another sip, knowing quite well what those brown eyes were staring at. Though the mood was killed quite short when another nearby furred one decided it would be a good idea to attempt to swallow down a prepared turkey bigger than his dark green head. Sitting next to a large coffee table that was absolutely filled with plates and trays, some still having food remaining on them. "There is a dining room for that, Stitches." The white dragon snorted, barely catching the swift actions of a burlap sack from the corner of his eye. Causing his fluff to raise up, only to realize that it 'kidnapped' the statue he was working on. "Hey!" He got up and chased after the scampering wyrmling and wolfling. Making Bartan chuckle at the four of them... And hope that the green one wasn't going to choke. Then took a breath to overlook the large room from higher up.

Though it did look like someone took a Christmas Cannon to the entire area, it was nicely decorated. Perhaps a little too much, but it still gave a cozy atmosphere to the party. Many people were by the several fireplaces, and though furniture did seem to be lacking several large creatures offered their services to the smaller ones. A black latex anthro dragon becoming a large air mattress for many, laying down with a near equally large beige one with brown spots and a white mane. All enjoying the magic performances of a dark purple eastern dragon, calling a volunteer to help out and instantly accepting a familiar white tirix's offer. Letting her finish her gifted donut before being complimented by the swave magician.

The spots that did have some tables were all occupied, a particularly vocal one was occupied by several telling boasting stories to each other in a friendly competition. A black badger telling the tale of a dangerous hunt, in a glorious fashion. Being intently watched by an anthro Sunglow Boa and a surprisingly busty orange fox with teal stripes. Nearly as tall as Kindle, but definitely

different colors and... Uh... 'Shape'. Regardless, they did seem to be enjoying themselves and entertaining the rest of the table with such tales.

Aside from that, nothing really stood out to the bear. Though one nearby conversation below him did catch his ears, that of a familiar red wyrm pleading to his black dragon... 'Companion' to go sledding. Making Zanna toss his snout and spot the bear on the balcony, sharing a wave and getting the attention of Eura. "Tell him how fun it is!" The red one shouted at the bear, urging Bartan to take his side.

"Don't knock it until you try it, Zanna." The furball called, getting a snort and a head shake in defeat from the black wyrm.

"See? He agrees with me. Let's go!" Watching such a large creature nearly act like a hatchling always made the bear chuckle. Even more so when Eura grabbed Zanna's scarf and led him to a set of doors; a shortcut to the outside sledding area. An entire wall that was mostly glass, creating a vista to the winter outside while watching people fly by on sleds and 'crazy carpets'. Occasionally hearing the vocals of those who braved the hill if they were loud enough, including the exciting calls of a certain blue wyrm that he met before, instantly making Bartan chuckle along with some others.

Including two large creatures on his same balcony. "You sure you don't want anything? They have plenty." A very colorful raptor asked his partner. Hearing a deep voice mumble in thought.

"...What were those thin things called?"

"You mean the Christmas Crack?" As much as the bear tried not to laugh at such a name, a little snort left his muzzle. "I'll get you some while I'm out. But first..." Not long after, Bartan felt a large hug behind him, making the furball chuckle at the affection. "Are you enjoying yourself this year, bear?"

"I am, yes. Thank you Naught." A nod from the dinosaur as he nodded and nuzzled the white one before heading downstairs. Making Bartan release a breath a bit awkwardly as he looked over at the partner; a very large... Quadruped Minotaur-like red beast. A shaggy grey mane flowing down from his head to tail, while the rest of his body was covered in a very short fur. Despite such a muscled and threatening appearance, the behemoth seemed a bit nervous. "You okay?"

"I am fine, thank you." A deep voice left that broad neck and muzzle, oddly sincere.

"Just missing your Emotional Support Raptor?" A questionable look from the large one, but a nervous nod regardless. "How've you been, Karmu?"

"Managing." The large beast said in a sigh, a bit anxious when the bear about half his size moved closer and leaned up against him. "Still getting used to... Crowds. Let alone high places that can apparently support my weight."

"Is that why you're a bit nervous?" A faint nod from the red one, watching those black eyes and the constantly shifting iris move about with all the slow shifting lights. Both from the decor and the flames below. "Trust me. This place was built with a 200t dragon in mind. Even if you did break something, it can easily be repaired."

"Less about property damage and more about..." The large one trailed off.

"Others?" A larger and slower nod that time. "I honestly don't think anyone can get hurt here. At least not tonight. We kinda learned that from the first party where someone got a concussion." A puzzled look from the Render, making Bartan tilt his own head in a shrug. "You gotta watch Beo's tail, especially if you're little. Sometimes it just has a mind of its own."

"Were they okay?"

"Yes, but it's not a good ice breaker, sadly. There's still some... Roughness when it comes to social encounters." A bit of a worried look from Karmu. "But they're both nice, so there's no hard feelings."

"I see..." A bit of silence as the two looked down below.

"...This is the first time we talked, isn't it?" A slow nod from the red behemoth. "I swear it feels like I have spoken to you before in one of these things, but I think it was only Gorret." A gesture down below at a large black bull-like minotaur. "You two are very much alike in some ways. Large, intimidating, but surprisingly soft spoken." A mumble in response. "You should introduce yourself sometime. I think you'd find some common ground quite easily."

Karmu nodded nervously, not really sure how to respond but the bear didn't push him. Eventually taking a deep breath through his crimson muzzle before silently stumbling over some words. "Bartan?" A noise in question. "What... Am I? To you." A blank stare from the smaller one. "Every story has some... Part of the writer that influenced them. Be it an actual personality trait or an experience-"

"Laziness." The white one bluntly stated, actually getting a neck curl from the beast. Making the bear chuckle. "It's not quite that, but more I guess... What people perceived as such? Maybe what I used to perceive as such."

"What do you mean?" Karmu looked over the furball, watching as the white one took a breath.

"...I've been writing for over 9 years now. And I know I have a little, but I don't feel like I've changed that much. I don't feel like I've improved... I don't know if I can."

"Everyone can, bear."

"I think you're misunderstanding. To change for the better ('improve'), you need to put in time and effort. Effort takes energy, a lot of energy for my case. To the point where I don't... Really know how to improve my work. I could go onto thesaurus.com and just replace every other word with something different, but that feels too... Amateur. I could use really flowery language, fancy words but I legit detest that."

"*Detest?*" The red behemoth questioned, lightly pointing out the hypocrisy.

"I don't like using the word Hate unless absolutely necessary." Bartan snorted. "But using that kind of language, coming off 'hyper romantic'? It feels like someone is trying too hard to me. And nobody wants to spend time looking up every 4th word used in a story. It's tedious." A grumble from the bear.

"But there's something else beyond that, isn't there?" Karmu mumbled, looking at the furball and his white ears. Slowly falling.

"Two things, actually... One of which is; if I do manage to make a story that is incredibly

'Flowery', so to speak... Who is going to be excluded from that content?"

"Excluded?"

"Not everybody's native language is english. I've had several people say to me that they enjoy my stories because they're easy to read for them, especially when they were still in the process of learning the English language. I took this... 'Test' of sorts a few years back, where you would put in a paragraph or two in this box and it would determine what level your writing is at. And it told me... I think 4th or 6th grade level." A questionable stare from the beast. "Think like... Late-Child stages of readability. And I was told to believe that was a bad thing, that I should be aiming for University levels of readability. Yet I could not understand why."

"Because doing that would... Limit the range of your readers?"

"Yes. At least that was my perspective." A sigh through that white muzzle. "Maybe it was due to the way I write and that... Program or whatever didn't like it. But damn did that ever make me feel inadequate for months. It hit me so hard that I fell into a depression, and it took a lot to drag me out of it." Another deep breath. "I still struggle with that, because I KNOW that's the thing that is holding me back. But I don't like leaving people behind, because I have been left behind my whole life." A strong red paw was felt on the bear's shoulder, getting a much smaller one on it and a nod of thanks.

"...What was the second thing?"

"I have no idea what I want." Bartan bluntly stated surprisingly quickly, starting straight forwards in an expression of near fright. Causing the beast to chuckle. "I'm serious, I have No clue what I'm aiming for with anything. I don't even know what I'm doing half of the time." The bear groaned into his other paw. "Everybody seems to have this goal or desire of what they want out of their hobby or passion. They want to 'Make people happy', they want to 'Become Popular' or 'Recognized for their Greatness'. And there's nothing wrong with that. I just have-"

"Absolutely no idea-"

"AB-SOL-LUTELY no idea what I want." A slight whimper from the bear. "Other than to be appreciated for the work, which I honestly have felt that way a lot this year. Sometimes I do have these down moments as everyone does, but... This was one of my better years, I find."

However, I still get stuck on that question: 'What Do I Want'? 'What Do I Desire'?"

"...And you don't know."

"I've never been able to figure it out. I've never understood how anyone could." The white one mumbled a bit sadly. Hearing the beast sigh as well through his muzzle.

"...You're not the only one. I found myself wandering for decades just attempting to find some sort of direction. For anything that felt suiting other than what seemed to be a destiny to destroy." A nod in response from Bartan. "I still don't feel like I found it, but sometimes... 'Progress' can seem that way."

"That's true. I imagine that's when you found...?" The two gazed off in the direction where the colorful raptor went.

"Naught, yes. And I... Feel like it was a step in the right direction."

"I think so too." The two smiled at each other slightly.

"And you will find yours eventually, I'm sure."

"Yeah... I'm just tired of waiting, I guess. Feeling like I should be doing something to work towards it, but..."

"You have no idea what 'It' is." A whimper of near defeat from the bear. "Don't most people go with improvement though?"

"But what does that even mean?" A heavy breath from Bartan as he continued. "When it comes to drawing, it's easy to figure out. 'I want to get better at shapes or backgrounds'. 'I want lines to be straighter', etc. And they can physically practice them over and over and over again until their body improves. What can I do? Expand vocabulary that will shut out other people? Add flowery language that makes me want to toss my snout until it falls off?" A sigh through his white muzzle. "I feel like I'm kind of stuck. The pieces where I'm trying to work out my ability never get read, and wasting so much time attempting to 'Decorate Junk Food' just seems pointless. I've tried combining complex characters and meaningful stories in with fetish

material, and it just does not work. It comes off as jarring or silly, but with an audience so addicted to junk food... To get them to try something different is beyond difficult."

The large one remained silent, not really sure what to say. "I'm not trying to blame them, though. It's just... It's easy to look at a picture and see if it looks good or if something is off. Sometimes it's literal seconds. Reading? It takes time. A looooooot of time. It takes investment, it takes concentration, and that's not something everybody can devote. But I don't know how to improve because I don't know what I'm doing wrong. Unless I'm doing everything wrong, which at that point what's the purpose of even trying?" A mumble from Karmu, again not really knowing how to respond. "I'm not trying to be a downer, I'm just... Stuck. Even if I did get some critique, I'm afraid it will hurt too bad that I won't even want to try anymore."

"Bear-"

"I know, it's stupid. It's so dumb to even think about that. It feels like a taboo to 'not want to be better' at something, but sometimes I swear I just... Don't have the energy to do it. I have chronic fatigue, which already puts me at a disadvantage. I have people who want to socialize with me nearly every day, who want to have 'sessions' or write stuff for them. I have a roommate who doesn't really talk to anybody else, using me as their only source of social interaction. I have a house to look after- which is a LOT of work in of itself... Maybe I just hit my limit, y'know? My peak, and past this point... I can't improve without giving something up."

"...You obviously can't give up your home."

"And to give other people up just feels hurtful." A quiet sigh from the furball. "And for what? To get attention that I probably can't handle? To have more people who want to 'talk to me' or 'commission me' -which don't even get me started on how I feel about money." A light chuckle from the behemoth. "Maybe I'm just... Done. Content with where I'm at. Not 'give up', but at the same time not aim for 'getting better'. Is that wrong? It feels like it."

"I'm... Not certain, Bartan." The large one admitted.

"We all have to hit our limits sometime. As expected, I hit mine a lot sooner into my life than average."

"Do you really believe that though?" The bear's brown eyes looked up at those abstract ones.

"Or do you just... Want to believe it because it makes it easier to take on failure?" A moment of silence before the white one sighed heavily. About to answer, only to accidentally tap the present he's been escorting all this time. Causing it to slide underneath the railing and fall down, making Bartan yelp loudly and attempt to reach it from over the railing.

...Only to lean too far and flip over it with another panicked howl, making the behemoth lean over and barely catch the end of that fluffy tail. Preventing the bear from falling, but also making him whimper as he watched the gift fall down towards a navy and red wyrm resting below. Showing off by tossing one of the larger treats into the air and opening his maw to catch it, -and yep, instead getting the box into his large muzzle and immediately swallowing it down.

A long whine in defeat as the bear dangled over the edge, just as surprised as the red beast currently holding him up at such events, let alone the sheer fact that the wyrm didn't even notice that he missed the treat entirely. Being tended by a few others who didn't see the event nor paid attention to the accident above. "Are...?" Karmu nervously asked, though not struggling in the slightest holding the furball up. "Are you okay?" But he didn't get a response, however a chuckle from behind as the raptor returned.

"An excellent catch, Karmu. You have a knack for catching people in mid-fall."

"Naught? Doesn't he have uh... Some sort of tail thing?" A rather energetic nod from the dinosaur. "What... Should I do?" The colorful one whispered in the behemoth's ear. "Are you sure?" Another excited nod as he watched the bear intently. "Erm... Fall slowly?" The beast nervously looked at the colorful one again before carefully letting go. Allowing the tail to slip out of his grasp but surprised to see Bartan descend easily at half the fall speed.

Though, he was still flipping and rotating, attempting to correct himself in real time. Soon making eye contact with the dragon below, and watching the navy one smirk before licking those scaled lips. "B-Bunsen...!" Bartan whined, watching that maw open up wide underneath the furball's falling location. "N-no eating people! It's against the rules!"

"I'm only yawning, dear bear." Bunsen purred, playing coy as he mimicked the motion. Causing even the bear to yawn while still falling. Watching the wyrm close his mouth and offer his head as a platform... Only to pull it back at the last second and playfully 'bite' Bartan's upper half, making his crimson throat bulge as the furball yelped and struggled a bit.

Only to get pulled out by a white anthro fox, dressed in holiday clothing as well. Grabbing the fluffy foot and lifting him out of the dragon's muzzle. "This is how you get hairballs, Bunsen." Kindle playfully tapped the wyrm's nose while still dragging Bartan down with a single arm. Then across the room with very little effort. "If you want to eat him, we have rooms for that, but later." The canine teased.

"Y-you're not actually going to let him...?" The furball whimpered, not struggling in the slightest as he was pulled along the smooth hardwood flooring. Getting swayed around some obstacles until some struggles were heard nearby; just under the giant Xmas tree in the center. A few grumbles and SFW 'curses' were heard as Bartan looked up and the fox let go of his foot. Moving towards a stuck deer who got his antlers caught in the decor around the tree, bending over and freeing him.

"Thank you. Stupid pretty tree."

"Arresting innocent deer? The nerve." Kindle chuckled, playing along. "Were you looking for something specific?"

"I lost the little ones. And I swear I saw someone hiding or sneaking around the presents." The brown buck grumbled, a familiar multi-colored flower bloomed on his chest.

"Odds are Dia or the T-Ms, they tend to be very curious." Kindle picked out a couple of bits from his horns. "Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on them. Go enjoy yourself Draft." The fox got up, and turned around, double taking at Bartan who was still laying on the ground staring at her. Now blushing a bit as his ears lowered. "You can get up anytime now, furball."

"...What if I don't want to get up?" He lightly whimpered in a joke, making her question what he was talking about, only to remember her position when helping the deer out; 'Bent Over'. Tossing her snout and smirking at the white male before walking up to his foot and taking hold of it again.

"Enjoying the view too much?" Kindle played along, once again dragging him across the floor with ease.

"It is a nice one."

"Good answer. You're also giving everyone else a nice view too." They chuckled. "You might end up being forced to wear something if you don't cover up." The fox moved past two large dragons offering to be couches for guests, allowing them to enjoy the magic performance. One beige with brown spots, giving a polite wave and a 'Howdy' at the passing two.

"I have fluff, they're covering bits." A playful snort from Bartan, watching the anthro reach over and pet the black latex dragon. Specifically at his whisker, making Jinx blush a bit at Kindle's smirk and causing his own body to swell a little bit. Lightly panicking a few people resting on him as the giant 'furniture' moved.

"A lot less than you think, furball~" She chuckled, still dragging him across the floor and onto an unoccupied sofa. Resting on his fluffy form herself and giving the bear a few pets while she gets comfortable. "How did it play out this time? Did the Troublemakers get you while you were sleeping again?"

"N-no."

"Haytre or one of the other dragons kidnap you?"

"N-not this year, no."

"Did someone drag you back after finding you looking over the ocean or taking a nap in the snow?" A blank stare from the male as her head tilted. "...You actually came here on your own will?"

"Y-yeah, though I did get pulled away to help carry and deliver some things. So I was missing for about an hour or so." A sudden shock look from Bartan that morphed into awkwardness, easily caught by the female's red eyes.

"What?" No response, but his expression grew more uncomfortable. "What."

"I... Was carrying around a present for you but..." Those white and black ears perked.

"Where is it?" Kindle watched as those brown eyes trailed over to Bunsen, taking a moment to study and realized what happened. Not expecting her to get off and walk across the room

back to the navy dragon, greet the dragon, then watch her climb into his maw without warning! Making Bartan yelp as she disappeared into nothing more than a lump within his body down to the wyrm's already quite large red gut, then 'phase' out of his underside without creating an exit wound of any sorts. Her and the devoured present.

Shaking it clean, along with herself before looking back at the slightly blushing large dragon. Tossing her head up in a friendly gesture towards Bunsen as she returned back to the bear, who was completely stunned. "...Couldn't you, uh... Just reached in with that and-"

"Shut up." She ordered playfully, getting the two to chuckle. Setting the present down and sitting back onto the furball. "I shouldn't smell bad either."

"All I smell is Xmas, if that makes any sense." They shared a small chuckle as she got more comfortable, embraced by the larger furball. "Either Bunsen ate a lot of fresh gingerbread or-"

"That's probably you, you're smelling." The fox teased. "So, think you're finally understanding celebrations?"

"Not in the slightest." Bartan half whined. "But... I'm beginning to feel more comfortable participating in them. I just don't always know what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Do what you find enjoyable, so long as it doesn't ruin it for anybody else. Including the host."

"Like trash the place?" The two shared a small smirk. "I don't think it's even possible here, but I get you. It is nice to see people though, right?"

"Enjoying themselves, yes. I just... I'm not really sure what to do with myself." The fox shrugged at him, petting his arms as the furball embraced her.

"Eat. Socialize. Flirt. Maybe participate in some of the activities."

"Like Spin-The-Bottle?"

"Yes. And you can consider that Advertisement." That made Bartan chuckle. "Hey, you chose the career path of a Companion."

"In character and story, yes. But not in real life. I don't think the guests would be comfortable with me going around kissing them."

"Actually-"

"Okay, the non-frisky ones." He playfully snorted, causing Kindle to laugh a bit. A sudden flare of light from the magic show caught their attention as the two watched the purple noodle perform from afar. Making the furball take a deep breath.

"Whatcha thinking about?"

"Just... Something that's been on my mind lately." A noise in question, urging him to continue. "Things are changing a lot for me year by year... I'm just wondering what the next one will be like. Where will I be? What would I have done? ...As well as who will I lose."

"Are you planning to lose anyone?"

"Not specifically no, but things are sometimes sudden and unpredictable." Bartan mumbled. "With my condition getting slowly worse, I'm not really sure how much time I've got left in me. Could be years, could be decades. But it could also be months, and there's just that... Uncertainty."

"Mmm." She lightly answered, only to turn her head sharply and call from afar. "Donut! Hit me up!" A meow from off-screen as a delicious treat was thrown to her like a frisbee. Catching it and taking a bite. "Want one?"

"N-no, I'm okay." A nod from her as she took a bite and purred. "Maybe later." A nod in response.

"Keep talking."

"...I keep thinking about the far future, and whether or not I'll be remembered for... Well, anything. Let alone what for." He grumbled, making the fox chuckle at his tone. "Are people going to find my work in 20 years and see the complicated, albeit one-sided, stories? The characters and how they react with-?"

"And fornicate?"

"With each other, yes." A whimper from Bartan that time. "Or... Are they just going to see a bunch of fetish work? Inflation, terrible muscle-growth attempts, or is it that one vore story I did for an April Fool's joke going to become my *Catcher In The Rye*?" The bear grumbled, getting a few taps from her.

"There, there."

"I just... Keep thinking about what I'm going to be leaving behind. The messages and themes I want to share with the world, hoping in some foolish way that I would get through them enough to change. To stop looking at each other specifically in this Us Vs Them mentality, and see that they're one species... On a single planet full of problems." A quiet sigh from Bartan as he felt Kindle nod.

"So, 1989?"

"Basically."

"And Red Hypergiant?"

"...Basically." The furball awkwardly whimpered, making her slyly smirk and glance at him. "...You're gonna say-"

"And Afterlife?"

"Yep, you are." A whine from Bartan as he covered his eyes with a paw. "You can kind of argue that, yes. But there's more than just that."

"As with all stories, don't worry Fluffy. You're okay." A few taps on his side as another flashy spectacle got their attention. Hearing several claps and joining in as well. "Jack's really going all out tonight."

"Yeah..." A few moments of watching and the bear nudged her. "Not to put you into a position, but what's in your present?" A strange look from the fox, but with a smirk and a raised

eyebrow.

"Not to put me in a position?" She quoted, making him blush a little. "You're really thinking about a certain something tonight, aren't you~?"

"W-well, I actually meant p-putting you into an awkward position-" A few taps on that padded side as she leaned over to retrieve the box. "Because I know how much I dislike being watched as people want to watch you open a present, expecting some huge reaction or-"

"This present is for you." A very sharp whimper from the bear, actually getting the attention of half the room. Making Bartan freeze in place and nearly become red with blush. "Did you hear me, furball?"

"W-what...?" Kindle chuckled at his response.

"This present. It's for you. And no, not CW Bartan [six legged one] either. For 'Bartan One'." A stare of near fright from those brown eyes as the fox smirked and shook her head. "Did you even look at it?"

"...What?"

"Look. With y'know, your eyes?" That stare didn't lift, making her chuckle a little louder and bring the box up. "Now you get to open it with an audience." A loud whimper of discomfort. "Hey, relax. No one is expecting anything."

A heavy breath as the bear looked at the present... Though, not without double checking the name tag twice to make sure it was actually for him. Getting a head shake from the white female. "I can't trust your eyes, they don't work."

"That's true, but neither do yours in a figurative sense." Kindle teased and playfully shoved him into the couch a little. Waiting patiently as he stared at the present, swearing he felt dozens upon dozens of eyes on his white self, all waiting to see what was inside the box.

But a nervous look around revealed that no one really... Was looking at him. Occasionally there was a wave from someone glancing from afar, but no one was specifically waiting for him

to open it. No grand expectation of his face lighting up, no forced surprised gasp from his muzzle needed. Just the furball, his wife, and a box. With a deep breath, he took a dull claw and struggled to open the wrapping paper. Lift the lid off... And peered inside.

Only for a series of bodies to come flooding out from it! Fur and scales alike, all from friends and family; the attended guests piling onto the couch and a series of surprised yelps. Confusion and panic as many of them were squished underneath larger guests as they all attempted to grasp onto something. "Don't worry! Don't worry, I've got this!" Kindle shouted within the center of the pile, reaching down for the bear's tail. "Macro sized."

"I can help! I can help!" A shout from a red kobold was heard. "I can feel something fluffy, let me just-!" From the very center of the pile a large fluffy ball began to take up the weight. Spreading the pile of people outwards as Bartan grew in size... Only to start increasing at a rapid speed! Alan's own growth magic accelerating the bear's upsize along with the tail-command, causing his body to sweep across the floor of the room! Covering it with his soft winter coat, but in turn giving a soft space for all the guests to rest as they were spread out into a long blanket.

A blanket of hugs, making Bartan smile and nearly shed a tear of happiness as he gently attempted to hug everyone back... Not realizing he was still growing within the near-stadium sized room! His fluff devouring all the unoccupied furniture as his tail arched up against the far wall! Creating a near sandwich of soft white as it arced over his underside where the guests resided. Continuously growing until the bear nearly covered the entire flooring with his coat. Nervously looking around to make sure everything stopped 'shrinking'. "...Bigger-?"

"That's big enough, Jinx." Kindle playfully scolded the latex dragon, causing everyone to chuckle. "Merry Xmas, furball."

"M-Merry Xmas, everyone." And the Macro Bear gently embraced the crowd.

Sincerely Though, Thank You~ <3

"...Can someone please make me fireproof? Just in case?"