

# **Skeletons**

By Bartan Tirix

A deep breath of that cool winter air that covered the beach, spreading a light snow over the thick sands while the ocean waves massaged them. Rocking the deck that the white anthro fox rested on, legs crossed and just staring straight forwards. Yet, she could see everything, despite that her original eyes no longer worked. A talent a friend of her brother's taught her, making her life after a harsh change that much more tolerable.

Granted, that all happened before Kindle met the furball. Noticing that by instinct that put a sad smile over her own muzzle just thinking about him. About that time so long ago, while her spherical vision moved around to overlook the beach house at night. All the decorative lights coming on and hearing cheers from inside, making the fox chuckle. Likely knowing that was Linet's doing; getting everything working for another year.

It was about time the fox rejoined the clan after her shopping trip anyway. Getting up and stretching, causing her winter gear to move with her and expose some parts, adjusting accordingly. Picking up the handful of bags and heading across the floating docks, not bothered by the movements from the water and the massive multi-story beach house that was resting on the blue.

When approaching the door, it began to open as chuckling was heard inside. The brown tirix; a feral panther of sorts, getting the door and leading her within the cozy shelter. Greeting Ryoko with a smile while being careful not to let the bag straps get caught on anything, the white fox continued her way into the kitchen. The scent of many holiday baked goods filled the area as a few wyrms (reduced in size) continued to prepare Xmas Treats for the evening. One of them double taking at her, causing his scales to turn from pink to a bright red. "Did you get it?"

"Maybe." Kindle teased, setting the bags down and taking off her coat, fetching something from one of the bags without looking. "How you ran out of Cloves is beyond me. A vial of that stuff lasts for years." She tossed it to the wyrm as he quickly looked at it and opened the thing, instantly getting the brass giant-of-a-dragon and the dark blue one to hold out their measuring spoons. Making Dia's scales turn orange but fill them accordingly before his own.

"We use enough of them, as you can see."

"While also burning a hole in everyone else's stomachs, I hear you." Another tease as the fox started unloading the shopping bags, getting the brown panther to help out and receive a pet.

"Though I still find it strange how you just didn't spawn the ingredient in. I'm almost certain the system-" Ryoko started, getting cut off by Dia's snort- which caused a small brown cloud to fly into his face. Making him growl.

"Oh, that's how we ran out of cloves-"

"It's not about whether or not we can spawn stuff in." The brass one answered while Dia struggled not to sneeze. "We could just spawn in a feast, but it's fun to prepare it. That's where the enjoyment is."

"Speak for yourself, Beo." Thea, the dark blue dragon grumbled, making a face while looking at his paws; covered in cookie dough. "I don't think I've ever felt so sticky in my life." The others chuckled. "Why did this look so easy when you guys do it-?"

"No snorting, Thea." Kindle playfully ordered him, putting something away in a nearby cupboard. Pretending not to notice as her chest pressed up against his shoulder and made him blush. "You're doing fine though, keep at it." A little smooch on the dragon's cheek further caused those ears to tint.

"Y-yes, Mistress." A few pats on his head before she returned to the bag, emptying another and putting some things into a large fridge. Reaching for a second one just as the tirix was too.

"I can finish this, Kindle. Go enjoy your evening." Ryoko offered, getting a pet and a chin scratch as she smirked. Making her way out of the kitchen and looking at the rear deck on the first floor. Seeing a few others, but not the furball she was expecting.

Still, there were plenty of other areas where he could be. Taking the indoor stairs up to the dining area and spotting a white tirix working on the dumbwaiter lift built into the wall. Taking a moment to pet the bob-cat fluffy back end sticking out as the large dog sized creature grumbled. "Your winter coat is coming out very nicely this year." Kindle complimented.

"Anne? Good. Can you tighten this for me? It's in an awkward place-" Without even observing the area, the fox reached in to find the adjustable wrench and gave it a firm tighten to whatever it was holding. Almost hearing the metal warp in the process. "-Okay, okay. That's good. I don't want to end up calling Beo over here to loosen it."

"Especially when he's so busy?" The anthro helped lead Linet's head out to the open

space safely.

"Yes. Thank you. Both for the help and compliment."

"It took a few years for your body to adjust for the seasons, huh? Every year it seems to be getting thicker."

"That, or I've been hanging around the bear too long. I swear we're all getting more fluffy lately."

"Must be something in the water." Kindle joked. "Speaking of which, have you seen Bartan?"

"Nope. Not since this afternoon. I believe he's still in bed." A worried look from the fox, but got a reassured nuzzle from the 'Bobcat/Border Collie' mixed creature. "Not depression, don't worry. Though he did seem a bit..."

"I should get him up anyway. It's getting too late for a nap. Need any more help?"

"I'm almost done here. If I do, then I'll call Rixxix over." A motion towards the mini-elevator in the wall; not made for people but objects and plates of food & drink from the kitchen. "Just some rebalancing before the big dinner gets done."

"Don't want the gravy spilling?"

"Not over into that Jello marshmallow salad stuff." The two chuckled. "Go get 'em." The two hugged, and the fox lifted Linet to her all fours in the process. Chuckling and thanking the anthro again before Kindle left for another set of stairs. Not without gazing out both doorways: one leading to the mainland beach, having a roped bridge of sorts leading to a smaller cabin. The other pointing in the direction of the ocean along with an active hottub, occupied by an orange tiritix relaxing while looking out on the ocean.

She and the furball would go out to keep him company, Kindle decided. However, she needed to drag Bartan out of bed first. Climbing up another set of stairs that lead to a hallway of doors, many just lead to more private rooms for the 'clan'. At the end of it was the furball's; approaching it quietly and creaking the door opened to hear the bear in a deep sleep, making her smile.

The fox entered the dark room, half closing the door behind her as she approached the waist-high bed. Spotting the large polar bear laying sideways, facing her and completely lost in a slumber. Making the canine smile as she watched him for a few moments, then gently petting that snout, around his head, and twin ears. Suddenly getting them to flick and Bartan to take a deep breath, as if to power on the furball. Making his large paws flex and stretch out around her

body as he lightly grumbled, still receiving pets. "Wakey wakey, eggs and bacy." She whispered, getting another grumble in response.

But those paws barely moved, flexing against the anthro's sides as the large bear shifted little by little. Only for him to take a hold of her middle, pull Kindle close, and roll over onto the large bed. Taking the fox with him and putting her into a 'body pillow' position while she chuckled, resting his head on her chest with both arms wrapped around the soft female. Patting the bear's head a few times while still stroking his ears and muzzle. "I know, I know. Sleepy burr. I'll remind you in about five."

A vocal noise in confirmation from the white male as she gently pet him, often shifting from his head to neck, shoulders, under the chin, etc. Attempting to keep him somewhat away as he yawned a few more times, eventually falling into that deep slumber for another eight minutes before once again being woken up. Purring loudly as he nuzzled and gripped the fox tightly, and though his strength was pretty high, Kindle showed no signs of it being a threat. "You up~?" She teased.

"Maybe." Bartan grumbled, stretching his body again but still flopping his head down on her chest. "No." A chuckle from the canine in response. "What time is it?"

"Close to about 8:30pm now."

"And the others are waiting for me?"

"Nope. I just wanted to get you up." An expected deep exhale from the bear's muzzle puzzled her. "What's up?"

"...I just don't think I can do it."

"What do you mean?" Kindle scratched behind his ears.

"The 10th year anniversary 'party/celebration' of me writing. I just... Don't have the energy to do something big or elaborate this year."

"Is something on your mind?" She felt his head attempt to shake.

"Nah, I'm literally just... Too tired. Too tired for a big Xmas party like last year, too tired for some silly game or write 7 sessions worth of adult content."

"Mmm."

"And I keep feeling like I'm failing people because of it. That I'm letting them down, because '10 Years is a big deal. It's an entire decade's worth of writing, and you should do

something special.' But I... Just don't have the energy for it."

"It's been draining on you, I know." Half a whine came from his muzzle and Kindle chuckled, scratching his chin. "That's why we didn't plan on one." A noise in question, almost like a grumpy 'Oink' from the large snout. "We're not doing some grand celebration this year. We just want you to talk."

"About what?"

"Whatever you feel like. Mostly about the stories you've written, but any of them. Popular, non-popular, ones that didn't get off the ground, etc." A playful tug on one of his ears caused them to flick and make him grumble. "It may not be the most interesting thing for people to read, but that's fine. *They Are Free To Stop Reading At Any Time*. Nothing else really special will happen during this meta, just... Talking. No big announcements, no secrets about the future. Though try to keep it more positive, no ranting about Rex Overboard." A loud snort from the male.

"...M'okay." Bartan answered after a long pause. "We can... We can try that."

"But you need to get up first." A disappointed grumble. "Those are the rules, furball. I don't make them-"

"Yes you do." He answered rather quickly, actually making Kindle chuckle and purr. More so when those large paws stroked up and down her figure while the snout rubbed her chest.

"Don't make me get the riding tack." A deep huff from the male as he started to climb on her, despite the foxes playfully scolding warnings. Nibbling at her neck and burying the 6 foot anthro underneath the pile of fluff and blankets, one ignoring such warnings... Only to feel the fox actually begin lifting him up, making the bear growl playfully as Kindle attempted to escape. Slipping out from his side and out of any hold Bartan could manage. Sliding off the bed into a roll while the large male flopped off of it with a padded thud. Grumbling at his loss as the fox approached and sat on his shoulders. "Maybe later if you're good, but no bells."

"Linnet stated these walls were soundproof." Bartan snorted.

"Apparently not soundproof enough, you were just rocking those bells too much." Another huff from the male as those ears blushed, getting more scratches behind them as well as his neck while Kindle sang. "Jingle bell, Jingle bell, Jingle bell rock~" A grumbling whine from the large furball as his tail fluttered and wagged. "I'm going to keep teasing you until you start moving. Whether or not you want the others to see your red-"

"It's not like they haven't seen it before." Bartan snorted, getting up with the fox still on

his shoulders and heading into the hallway. Once again stretching as she easily adjusted before heading downstairs, still somehow riding the polar bear. "Still say these extra wide steps were the best change we made to this place. And you thought an elevator was a good idea-"

"That was River's idea and I just passed it on without thinking. Unlike you," She playfully shook his mane. "I don't have tail on my mind 20/7."

"A-hem, I think you mean 19:56/7." Bartan snorted at her. "And you're telling me you've Never gotten your tail stuck in an elevator before?"

"Oh it's happened, yes. It just usually stops until I pull it out."

"I never trust those smart-doors."

"Doors?" The fox asked surprisingly seriously, causing Bartan to completely stop mid-step and double take at her. Blinking and blankly staring.

"...Damn Volratters." He snorted, getting her to chuckle while she led him to the hot tub outside. Passing through the doors and getting the attention of the tiger-sized orange tiriix resting in the cool evening. Steam evaporating from the bubbling waters while the ocean as the moonlight and stars sparkled brightly. "Wow... That view."

"Yeah. Deago in a hot tub is definitely December Calendar material." The fox teased, catching the orange one completely off guard and making him whimper while the bear double taked at her. Getting a tap on the nose and a smirk from the female as he was motioned to walk forwards, getting beside the tub, then flopping sideways into the water with Kindle still riding him. Deep enough to actually submerge the two with ease and create a splash with... Surprisingly little water lost.

They resurface as normal, but somehow the fox is now in a black bikini. Making the white furball double take and blush, looking at both her chest and undergarments through the water. "A-are those...?"

"Double strapped, yes. Your favorite~" A huffing whine from Bartan as she drifted over to a corner, pulling up some futuristic holographic screen and ordered some beverages before rejoining the two males on the other side. Deago and Bartan made eye contact and still blushing a little from statements and sights as the tiriix cleared his throat.

"I-is everything okay?"

"Y-yeah." The bear responded. "Just... Teased a lot this morning."

"As my job."

"That is true." Bartan whimpered, getting the fox to chuckle while the orange 'tiger' looked at him with a little bit of concern.

"So, no heavy thoughts or anything?"

"No... No, nothing like that. I was just really tired and needed a nap."

"You've been needing one close to every day this year. Or at least some sort of rest." A noise in confirmation from the white furball as he took a breath to relax.

"I want to just blame it on this condition getting worse, but..."

"This year's been rough on you."

"It really has, Deago. Not super bad, but enough to knock me. That's not to say I didn't do anything, but a lot of the writing and stuff I did didn't get posted. They were often gifts or silly animations I glued together that I didn't feel right posting. Besides that, just a project I didn't quite finish this year because something else got in the way I really wanted to just... Get done and over with." He grumbled at that last part, and the two nodded.

"But that other project...?" Deago pondered.

"For Those Who Wait Act 2." The female teased, instantly getting the bear to whimper and grab his own muzzle shut for a moment. Nearly answering Yes.

"N-no, I really really really don't think I could possibly match the first act of that one. To the point where I'm just terrified of ruining it. But you were really close; The Thread Of Dawn."

"...Isn't that basically the same-?"

"-Kind of, yes." Bartan interrupted the fox, making the three chuckle. "But really, when I did that second act of Thread/Dawn over four years ago, it got NOTHING for attention. Maybe a Fav or two, and I just thought people didn't like it. It was one that I got Tissthalliss to write the adult scenes for in a collaboration of sorts, so he posted it too..." The two nodded largely in response. "You can see where this is going: I discovered midsummer that people still wanted it to continue."

"But they didn't tell *you* about it." Kindle concluded, making the other white one nod.

"Yeah... My post is still an absolute desert, but after finding out that people still wanted it, I started thinking and writing act 3 of it. Thinking about where I'm going to take the story, but often enough... I just wonder if it's worth putting this much effort into these things. Everytime I do it feels like it flops unless I stuff it with sexual content." A bit of a shy whine from the tirix that the two pretended not to hear. "I get thinking that I'm probably just doing this wrong. That

there's something wrong with my writing and I can't quite tell how to fix it."

"Let's explore that a bit;" Deago started. "What do you think is wrong with your work?"

"Personally? My biggest problems are villains, or antagonists. They're either generically boring, cartoonishly evil, or don't have enough time to really be considered a threat. Lets go over a few [And if this wasn't clear enough already, SPOILERS AHEAD. Like, a lot], starting with Zhaiothe's Tale. There isn't much of an antagonist through the series in general, you've got that kingdom of humans to the... East? West? I don't remember, but they're rarely given the light of day in terms of perspective. They just see Zhai's land being very fruitful and want it for themselves. After it gets desolated, it's replaced by this orc-elf hybrids that...???" The bear shrugged and spoke gibberish for a moment.

"They're just occupying Zhai's land and he wants it back."

"And they're willing to put up a fight for it for... Some reason? I don't even know. I just kinda felt like Zhai needed it back, and that required a conflict of sorts. But that story itself wasn't enough, hence..."

"Splitting the final act up into 3 different stories." Deago chuckled. "But go back for a moment, why was Zhai's land so fruitful? Was that ever explained?"

"Oh, that was because of Ziik; the 'Immortal' who created Zhai's mate Khol. He eventually 'fell' from his position of godhood or something, and that's when he found himself on the world the gods were guarding/taking care of. From here, he met Haytre and they became... Cloooooosse?"

"As close as one can become with an immortal black and grumpy dragon, yes." Kindle teased.

"Y-yeah. Anyway, Ziik felt powerless to really help anyone in the world he was now trapped in, so one thing he wanted to try was to find the most desolate location and bury himself deep underground within it. Hoping to act like a seed of power for new life to return to the land."

"And this worked?" A nod from the bear in response.

"Yes, and this was long before Zhaiothe discovered it, what he would call 'his land'. However, after losing Khol and unable to cope without it, he scorched it and left. During act 7, Haytre returns to that area to wake Ziik up from his... I hesitate to call it a 'sacrifice', it's more of a slumber of sorts. But sadly... When he once again sees that land desolated again, Ziik thinks that his plan did nothing."



"When really it actually did." Deago concluded. "I remember now. It's been a while."

"Ten years or so, yeah." The furball sighed a bit, but a floating tray came up to the three, offering hot chocolate to all of them... In surprisingly frisky looking mugs of other clan members. Making the two males whimper but accept the drinks anyway. "But yeah, maybe a good story and decent writing, but antagonists? Boring, non-existent, savage or cartoonishly evil."

"Have you made one that was actually cartoonishly evil?" Kindle asked, getting a blank stare from the bear as she smirked. Watching those four ears flick and spade as he half grumbled. "Answer the segue, furball."

"Light Escapes, Act 3. The ""Bounty Hunter"" attempting to erase the main characters from the server."

"Sarious and Gnargwrist-"

"Yeah- W-wait, what?" Deago nearly yelped, making the fox laugh.

"It's not actually your son Gnarg, Deago. We just used the concept of his stupid looking mane, that's all." An orange paw lifted to get the two to stop for a moment.

"He does not get that from me."

"Yes. Yes he does, but somehow it just got amplified." The three chuckled at Bartan's statement. "But yeah, I kinda based Endzeit off of Gnarg with a few other Anime-style tweaks."

"Have you actually ever used Gnarg anywhere? I know Krow and Linet have been in a few." The tirix asked.

"Memory's Fragment. The one with Dawn in it." Kindle answered. "And that's the one that ended on a cliffhanger."

"Yeeeeeep, my first ever failure of a story that never got off the ground- and I still think about going back to it too!" The bear took a sip. "I still *want* to do that pirate act of it, but that one is act 3. I'll still have to go through act 2 before I get to it."

"Pirate...?" Deago tilted his head and perked an ear.

"Well, more of a Sailor." His other ear perked, still not quite getting it. Watching the bear suddenly play with Kindle's hair a little bit. "Your hair is quite nice this evening."

"Thanks. I've been thinking about making it a dark or golden blonde." The fox responded quite quickly, looking directly at the tirix. Watching for that moment to click in like a lightbulb

and chuckling when it did.

"Ohhh... Oh no."

"Yeah, and you know what that explosion was at the end of Memory's Fragment. Ashes Of The Innocent." Bartan looked over at the white female. "Where was I?"

"Cartoonishly evil-"

"Right! Light Escapes!" The two chuckled. "I mean, the guy was just supposed to be some professional digital bounty hunter/investigator, trying to seek out those who have (against their terms of service) uploaded their consciousness onto the virtual reality game. Deleting them from the digital world is actually considered killing them, so I thought that would be a pretty decent threat, but..." The bear shrugged. "I really don't think I gave him enough time, yet I only had 30 days to make it."

"It's a bit tight, but you've done better with less time." Deago complemented.

"Thanks, but we'll get to 1989 soon enough. Fear Is The Weakness (act 4 specifically) and Destruction Preventer? They're basically the same thing as well: otherworldly creatures who think they're in control of things/view others as beneath them. And if you're familiar with how things need to be in order for universes to run- Which Fear/Weakness explains, those antagonists... Are kind of right. The idea here was Traditions, or being so entrenched in them that you can't see any other way of making things run better. It takes the suffering of people, but it makes the world keep spinning and keeps the lights on. And if you look at it from the antagonist's perspective, it actually makes sense: they are the ones doing right in their eyes."

"But the problem is that you never give them the light of day-"

"-I Neeeeeverrrr gave them the light of day. And I think now I possibly could give them something, but you have to realize that... They can't be convinced. But I should have gotten them to try. I touched a little bit on it in Fear/Weakness, but that AI was just too far gone. However..." The bear sighed. "I never quite gave her enough time to really show that perspective."

"Which is where Rixxix fits in?" Deago questioned, getting a bit of a shrug and a nod from the furball.

"But first, some context for those who don't know: 1989 was the novel I wrote for NaNoWriMo 2016 - National November Writer's Month challenge. Basically 'write your novel in an entire month'. I had an entire other idea that I prepared the final week of October-"

"Hatchet's story." Kindle informed Deago, hearing the bear groan and covering his face

with a paw. Getting them to chuckle.

"Which was a Terrible idea because of how action-based it would have been. The sheer style and speed of that story would've been so much better for a visual media. Movie, game, puppet show, anything else-" A sudden burst of laughter from the fox. "So I scrapped that idea and we panicked, throwing something else together last minute. No real plans, just me writing and you guys doing dialogue when it came."

"Those were dark times." The tirix said dramatically, but as a joke. "And a rough 3 weeks, but..."

"I feel like it was one of the best things I've ever written- but back to Antagonists. And I'm sorry Deago, but I'm going to have to gush about Rixxix again because Holy Fish was his performance immaculate-!"

"That's okay, that's okay." The orange one took a sip.

"Though I will admit that the Kill Tomorrow scene; the very first scene in 1989, was taken from something he's done before. It's named that from the song he's 'singing' during the intro of the scene; Mushroomhead - Kill Tomorrow. And yes, it is absolutely **Drenched** with Antagonist energy." Bartan paused to take a drink for himself, letting the fox continue for him.

"For those who've read Zhaiothe's Tale, Fear Is The Weakness, and maybe Somewhere Out There's third season (act 15+) before you got around to 1989; you may have gotten a glimpse of Rixxix. In those, he's bored or entertaining himself. But they're basically figments of another character's imagination, to put it bluntly. Here in 1989 though? Rixxix is himself. And he's Hunting."

"It is a bit of a red herring, I admit that." Bartan spoke again. "For those who it's been a while since, the scene and entire novel opens up with a king duck strapped to his throne. Anchored in place by what appears to be sentient spiked chains through his thighs, stuck in front of a long meeting table with several of his consultants. Their bodies cast in shadow with the glow of fire from outside being the only light, but you know that they're dead. Everyone but the King. In comes Rixxix, climbing on the table, humming a song that these 'serpents' chime into. He has a surprisingly friendly conversation with the king while letting the duck know he isn't going to be making it to the next dawn. Rixxix comes off as 'Evil' here, because we're trained to look at intelligent life as sacred or something to be treasured."

"It's... Half revealed or hinted at through the story that this is how he 'eats'." The bear continued. "This is how he feeds himself, and much like how we prepare and cook our dinners to be delicacies, he (somehow) gains substance from Falling Will. Despair. Again, to us that feels

inherently Evil, but one needs to eat in order to survive, and he cannot get this from, say, animals. To Rixxix, there's no difference between Beo making a turkey dinner and what he's doing."

"Those two scenes of his were there to prove a point," Kindle added. "not necessarily to throw off the trail of the reader but instead see it in a different perspective later on. One involving the wyrmling."

"Mmm, and I've said this before on FA, as well as the fact that Rixxix directly talks about it: Saessl [the wyrmling] is a dragon. He is going to be a very powerful creature when he gets older, and one that does contain the world's magic that is now outlawed by the people. He's going to have to make a choice in his future (if he survives that long) and he gets the experience of two extremes: Karmu, an alien beast who does not want to use his immense power for destruction. To the point where he attempts to follow the laws of those people and live among them, searching for a purpose. However, everytime disaster strikes the blame is almost always pointed at him, 'Because he is able to cause such destruction'."

"He'll be living in a house of cards." The orange tirix added. "Constantly needing to defend his innocence in order to enjoy the pleasures of company and their luxuries. Sadly, as Saessl learns from Karmu, such things do come at a cost due to the dragon's long lifespan. He will eventually lose friends while also restraining himself. Because..."

"Even the slightest flap of a large wing, or a twitch of a tail can cause that house to collapse around him." Kindle continued with the metaphor. "He will be fine if it falls, his nature is to be durable. But that doesn't mean everyone else within the house will be."

The bear nodded as he finished. "Then you have Rixxix's side; to reject attempting to convince them that you are not the 'monster' they believe you are and give into your nature. Maybe not go out of your way to destroy them for your own entertainment, that's just a good way of getting a bounty on your head- whether or not you can handle such a thing. But if you need to feed, you will prey on those weaker than you. Neverminding if it's animals or people, you will take what you need to survive, to live your life free with only a small social circle. You do not abide by their rules, you have your own."

The door opened and a black tirix walked through, smirking at the three as he moved to a nearby wall and got a tray of goodies from a dumbwaiter. One with floatation to be placed on the water. "Now, does such a lifestyle make one Evil or 'The Antagonist', hmm?" Rixxix pondered out loud, making the others chuckle as he joined them.

"I was about to argue that it doesn't. However your ego does make it appear so." Bartan teased, grabbing a cookie for himself and the other two. "But then who is? And I struggled with

that question for quite some time, due to the novel being so damn broad. I had to really think about who was actually the main character? Was it Saessl? If so, that would make his parents the antagonist due to them (likely) planning to sacrifice his life. However, I always felt the story was about Karmu and him trying to find a place where he can exist. Sadly, due to an unfortunate event, he no longer trusted himself around people. Growing an anxiety and losing what he wanted in his life; knowing he didn't want to become the beings of destruction his kind was known for."

"Which is why you felt that Karmu was his own antagonist." Deago concluded. "He was holding himself back, wandering to find a purpose or meaning besides Destruction or Obliteration."

"Which is where Naught comes in." A nod from the bear as Kindle continued. "Being his healer and Emotional-Support-Raptor." Another nod until Bartan double took at her smirk. "Conquering Karmu's Antagonist with the power of Friendship-"

"Fish!" The bear cursed, getting everyone to laugh. "Like, when you put it like that..." The furball groaned and covered his eyes while they finished chuckling. "I donno. I feel like that was one of the better twists I've done in terms of Antagonists."

"Speaking of which, I have to ask, dear bear." The black tirix nearly cooed.

"Oh no."

"Who is the Antagonist of Thea's story? Anthem of the Lonely-?"

"*FISH* if I know." Bartan grumbled, getting everyone to laugh as Linet and the blue wyrm walked on the balcony. "I tried tackling that once, and the closest thing I could come to was the Blackstar."

"The what?" Thea curled his neck.

"The evil black rock that made you break the fourth wall." Kindle teased, hearing him snort.

"I think that was my conclusion anyway." Bartan started again. "Usually my stories end up being closer to Slices Of Life than actual plots like the Hero's Journey. We gather/create characters, throw them into a situation, fish happens. So 'Antagonists' are usually these abstract forms that are halting the protagonist's progress. Like the wilderness of nature/an unknown place. Being stuck in unfamiliar territory and attempting to either find an escape for find someone within it. That kinda jazz."

The group nodded as they all cleaned off the tray of treats while Linet requested another

from the dumbwaiter, along with several warm drinks. "To change the subject, if you were to make some visual media out of your stories, which would you choose?"

"You mean like a movie or game?" Rixxix added to her question, getting her to nod as the white tirix carried the tray over and entered the hot tub with some help from the others.

"Hmm..." The furball pondered.

"Let's split this up into several, because one story isn't perfect for everything." Kindle suggested, getting the others to agree. "Movie. No budget limits."

"Movie? I was almost going to say Afterlife, but I'll save that for a different one. For a runtime of like 2 hours? I suppose it also depends on the type of movie too, live action or animated- but okay. Average runtime and animated? Probably Crownless. There's no humans, no sexual content- which is one of the biggest factors considering everything here. And I feel like it would've done very very well in a visual setting."

"Okay, live action?" Deago suggested, getting an expected half grumble from the white male. "I'm guessing Afterlife."

"I would, but Afterlife is just too long for a movie. I was thinking of a live action series instead, even if it was like 12 episodes. A live-action movie... I'm leaning towards Psychopath. Most of the cast is human, the main character included, even the 'zombies'."

"Zommmmbiiiiiiiies!" Thea, Kindle, and Linet all cheered in the same vocal pitch. Even hearing Dia and Beo down below getting in on the inside joke. Making the others chuckle and shake their heads.

"Yes, yes, zombies. There would need to be like a CGI for Zhiaxha (the hyena) for both her feral and warrior form, but it would be the most do-able and I feel like people would be more likely to give it a shot."

"Okay, Animated Movie was Crownless?" Linet suggested.

"Yeah. About an hour and a half of runtime, all of the cast are animals. I could see the visuals working very well- especially in the castle scenes. And gore in animation is becoming more and more common nowadays. It would likely fit right in." The bear concluded. "Though we are not going to get into voice-casting and such. I do Not know enough people nor have any experience who would be good for what roles."

"Sounds good. Live action TV series?" Thea asked.

"Real quick: animated short." Bartan offered. "Because it's kind of like a mini-movie that

doesn't fit anywhere else. And I'm feeling Ultra Heavy Black for that one." The blue dragon stared at him blankly. "Which is the one with the golden Allosaurus-"

"The grumpy one on the space station?"

"Yes. The one who put the lie detector in her neck wound. It's a small mystery that doesn't take long to get through, it requires almost no context, and it does not have sexual content. I just feel like that would be a good honorable mention." The group nodded. "Live-action TV series? I'm a bit torn with Afterlife because I feel like it would be better as an animation. But it's also like the Only candidate for this option: Modern setting in a human world, most people in the background would be human. Only Gorret, Eman, and the shadow monster thingys would be CGI."

"As well as practical effects." A nod at Deago. "I'm surprised you haven't suggested Light Escapes, or at least the clean version of it."

"That could possibly work, but definitely better in an animation/Anime setting. That's what I pictured it as anyway. But you'd have to remake the locations, all the creatures, the entire game world... If it were live action, it would have more CGI than a Marvel movie." A grumble from Bartan, making the others chuckle. "Budget or not... I don't like Live Action stuff, myself. I don't watch TV series or movies, I find it's a waste of my time. I could be enjoying myself by doing *anything* else. I'd rather clean or exercise than watch a movie."

"Okay, okay. Rant over, bear. You're getting off topic~" Kindle playfully scolded. "The tough one: Animated Series." A groan that time as a paw covered his eyes, getting a little ear rub from the fox.

"Oi, hard to decide here... Light Escapes is a great pick, and I might actually go with it. Another one I was thinking of would be Anthem of the Lonely." The blue wyrm double taked, blushing a little. "Good mystery, lots of over-the-top action and I've been DYING to see Exile perform on the big screen."

"He's basically a Devil May Cry combo made character." Linet joked, getting the others to chuckle.

"Not only him, but Flyare too- but holy Fish to animate her...?" A stunned exhale from the bear. "I don't know if I want to torture an artist team by getting them to draw a dragoness made entirely of thousands of individual 'gemstone' shards. Ones that can and do move independently, often creating a lag of sorts when she moves too quickly."

"Not to mention her nuking an entire city." Rixxix nearly purred.

"I wonder if I could license Ancient Glas Ghaibhleann for that one scene?" The bear pondered. "That OST is a Fishing masterpiece of a track, a little overwhelming at first, but once you recognize the patterns, mm!" He suddenly double-taked at Rixxix. "Oh right, you make a little appearance in it too."

"Kind of." The black tirix tilted his head in a shrug.

"Okay, next one." The fox suggested, getting puzzled looks all around. "Porno!" Nearly everyone whimpered and blushed, except for Kindle and Rixxix; who just chuckled. The orange tirix getting a little uncomfortable and out of the tub. "Awwwh, Deago. Come on~"

"N-no thank you, it's fine. I should swap places with Ryoko anyway." The crowd playfully booed and coaxed him to come back, but the tiger-sized creature only shook his head and left through the door.

"Oh well." Kindle shrugged, then focused on the bear. Making him blush and lower his ears. "Let's hear it furball, if you were to make a porno story, which one?"

"E-erm..." He groaned, covering his eyes again. "I really gotta think about this one, it never came to mind." Another series of laughs as he blushed and groaned. Hearing the door open where the rainbow wyrm and the brass dragon decided to join in. The brown tirix as well, as the house seemed to shift and extend the hot tub for the addition of the larger creatures.

"Alright, we'll have to help him out, gang." The fox led, giving nose pats to both Dia and Beo as they passed her and got into the warm waters. "We're thinking of a porno that would be good to adapt from a novel."

"And not Destruction Preventer?" Beo suggested.

"I mean... Maybe the more tame version? I really liked the story, mystery and Anton's performance. But I can't see it being like... Porno material. Way too long and not enough adult content."

"Means Zhai's Tale is out of the question too." Ryoko added. "And possibly Fear Is The Weakness."

"Too bad~" The brass one purred, nudging the still whimpering bear.

"Somewhere Out There!" Dia teased, getting a very loud and long groan from Bartan that made everyone chuckle.

"No. Definitely NOT. Like, ever." The bear denied. "Licensing and 'Fanfic' aside, SoT is terrible. Porno material, for sure, bit it is TERRIBLE in terms of story. The only thing I enjoy out



of it is the conversations you guys made."

"It was a lot of fun." Linet added.

"Waiting For Tonight?" Thea suggested, getting mixed signals from Bartan.

"I kinda want to say yes, because I really really enjoyed the series. But it's suuuuuch a grey area when it comes to people and their own definitions of Bestiality. Let me be clear here for those not in the know: WFT is a series starring a FICTIONAL species having intercourse with other FICTIONAL beasts that DO show levels of intelligence. They cannot speak, but they do give their own consents. But for some people, that's still crossing the line- and that's okay if it is too much for you. But to me it's never been a big deal because It Is **FICTION**." The furball snorted. "You wouldn't accuse someone who finds vore hot as being a cannibal in real life, but apparently when I write a story of a Charr getting it on with a raptor, it's perfectly fine to accuse me of 'Fucking Cats As A Pastime'?" A loud grumble left his throat.

"Ranting, bear."

"I know, I know. It just... Irks me to no end. If you don't like the subject, fine. Just say so and we can change it. 'If you don't like it, don't look.' That should be the common social rule in the furry fandom, because we all have our kinks. Even if it's relatively tame, but-"

"Bearrrr." The group playfully called, getting him to raise his hands in surrender.

"Okay, okay. Rant over."

"So, what about Pretty Life then?" Ryoko asked.

"Another Grey area, but... It's a better one I think? Or worse since it involves humans, I donno."

"The Thread of Dawn?" Dia suggested.

"Now we're getting somewhere. And I'm surprised you didn't suggest Rex Overboard-"

"Rex Overboard." Beo and Kindle teased, instantly making Bartan groan.

"...No." A series of laughs. "Ugh, noooo. But Thread; that's something I'm much more leaning towards. Relatively tame, a good premise/story behind it. Not to mention, a lot of people like the taste of forbidden fruit. But that does bring up another one:"

"For Those Who Wait." Rixix and Linet suggested, getting a large nod from the furball.

"That is by far one of my favorite stories to date. There's not a lot of sexual content, so I

hesitate to call it a porno. But holy Fishsticks, the feeeeeeeels...!" Awwhs of agreement from the entire pool. "But if we're looking for something a lot more leaning towards the Porno side of things, the only other one I can think of that's not just silly fetish fun is Everything You Want."

"Which was that again?" The brown tirix asked.

"That was the one starring Bunsen and a random... Yellow dragoness?" Dia answered. "The heat driven one."

"I honestly liked the sequel myself, but I donno. For Those Who Wait honestly makes a better story overall." The furball reached for another sweet from the newly placed tray. "Any others?"

"3D Blender animations?" A sharp whimper from the bear as the group chuckled, getting a teasing tap from the fox. "Just kidding, but let's move onto Games. If you could make a Videogame about anyone, who would it be?"

"We're talking just character, right? Not 'recreating novel through interactive media'?" A nod from Kindle. "Haytre [Wrong Side Of Heaven] would be one of the absolute **Best** choices out there. He could fit in any setting, a massive amount of skills to use, skill progression could be based on his body's maturity; so the older he gets the more powerful and versatile his atonements are. Death Cycles could be a thing, whereas he just gets back up after 3 hours, or gets sent elsewhere if his body completely disintegrates. You could do so much with that mechanic and it would be amazing for interactive stories."

"Would also be a complete nightmare for the devs." Linet chuckled.

"Ooooh, yeah. Trying to think of all the possibilities and storylines of the world and its inhabitants. Not to mention the extent of his powers, not only for attacks but utility. Then mixing them up, factor the possibility of his... Did I change the name of his Conjured weapons? I can't remember what I called them. But yeah, creating temporary weapons out of said elements- or a mix of them..."

"You get a Badass Simulator." The brass titan chuckled. "He definitely would be a great choice, but I'm surprised you didn't choose one of us."

"Don't get me wrong, there's plenty of good ideas here. But the big problem is that all of your defenses are too good. There really wouldn't be any challenge. Haytre, on the other hand, gets hurt."

"A lot." The other dragons said together.

"**A lot** a lot." The bear and everyone chuckled for a moment. "And he's super reckless."

It'd probably be something closer to Devil May Cry- not in terms of actual gameplay or style, but in terms of presentation. Dante, Vergil, and Nero are all badassess, sure, but they can still mess up if they get too cocky." Nods in understanding. "As much fun as it would be to absolutely decimate people as one of you guys (minus Thea), I-"

"I heard that." The blue wyrm snorted, getting everyone to chuckle.

"Okay, okay. We talked about a star of a game, but what about a hidden character added to a game?" Linet offered, getting the bear to ponder for a bit.

"It would be easy enough for anyone to be an NPC, that's for sure." Ryoko added. "But odds are she means a more playable role."

"Though the thought of dating Beo in a Visual Novel would be hot as hell." Kindle stated, getting a proud smile from the brass one.

"That would be one awkward date." Rixxix commented. "Especially if you were meeting inside of a restaurant."

"I'd say it'd make things more interesting, being restrictive of what locations he could visit (because of how much he dislikes downsizing)." The color changing wyrm teased. "It also gives the main character more of a purpose; they could go in and order all the grilled cheeses and meatball popsicles for the date." The group chuckled at the silly idea.

"That's a fair argument for a VN, yes." Bartan admitted. "But for a random NPC in a game? I'd honestly love Anton, the griffon from Destruction Preventer, or Sig'eaal from Fear Is The Weakness."

"I wonder how he's doing with the Troublemakers?" Dia and Beo pondered, making the others chuckle as the bear continued.

"I feel like they would be fun to interact with. However! For a playable/hidden character? I've got two in mind: Endzeit from Light Escapes would be a lot of fun, because there needs to be more games like Aces Wild: MBA."

"Using enemies as living projectiles by punching or hitting them so hard they fly," The fox teased him. "Always fun."

"And the second, I'd love Thais from Red Hypergiant. For a hidden character, I feel like she would be very useful."

"Until she steps on an elevator with that cannon of hers and sets off the weight limit." Thea snorted.

"That would be one of her limitations because Thais would never leave that thing behind. C.A.N.C.E.R. has a lot of versatility to it as well, mostly ranged but she could melee with it to save ammo." The furball pondered for half a moment. "...If ammo existed in the world. That's a thing up for debate. But regardless, I just keep thinking about her and would love to put that cybernetic snow leopard in a random game."

"Ever consider modding?" Linet asked.

"Random Stardew Valley NPC!" The fox joked, instantly getting the furball to facepalm and groan. "I wonder what her loved gifts would be?"

"Battery." Dia shot, getting everyone to chuckle.

"Tea Leaves, Green Tea, Aquamarine and maybe Frozen Tear because they would remind her of Artheas." The furball answered, yawning as he shook his coat. "Phew, I'm starving."

"The dinner's all set when you want it." Dia smiled, getting rather excited ears perked from everyone but the dragons.

"I think it's about time we head in then. I'll set the table-"

"We'll set the table, furball. You rest." Kindle interrupted him, getting those ears to half spade when she patted his snout. Snorting and denying such an order by starting to climb out of the hot tub, until the brass wyrm rested his chest on Bartan's body in a half hug. Getting a playful growl as he attempted to squeeze out of the hold while everyone else moved back into the house. Getting the bear to grumble as the dragon on him chuckled.

"You're lucky you're heavy."

"And you like my weight, don't you~?" Beo purred, giving his head a few licks and making the white one blush. "We just want you to relax this season, you've had a tough year."

"I didn't do that much."

"Maybe not physically, but it's taken a mental toll on you." The behemoth eased up his pin and instead picked the furball up in a hug. "You've... Been sleeping a lot more lately too. Concerningly so."

"I'm just having a harder time staying awake is all."

"Moving around can help with that, and that's one reason why you haven't been doing a lot of writing; you're up doing other things. You or they don't see the hours you put in cleaning or doing dishes. Doing yardwork like mowing- both for your home and your aunts. Dealing with

Bees-" A loud groan from the bear and his fluff puffed up just thinking about them. "By the end of it, you're tired and don't feel like writing..." The dragon took a deep breath. "We get it, and they should too. Not to mention, even though we don't see it, your confidence in your hobby has been declining."

"I just..."

"You don't need to explain yourself, just take your time with what you have. Enjoy it, it is a hobby after all."

"Until I'm forced to write something I don't want to." The bear snorted, though feeling a strong digit under his chin and pulling that bear snout upwards where those brown eyes looked at the dragon's green ones.

"You are not forced to write anything you do not want to. Be it for your happiness or anyone else's. ANYONE. Even if it makes them sad or disappointed, doing so only makes you resent what you make. If they can't see that as a negative- even if you're doing it for free, then they do not deserve it. It's your writing. YOU come first... Providing money isn't involved."

"Money complicates things."

"It really does." The dragon awkwardly grumbled, letting that white snout rest down and just cuddle with the furball for a few moments, looking at the ocean view for a few moments. "We just want you to be happy."

"I'm... Working on that. More and more." A noise in question, urging Bartan to continue. "I've been less hard on myself for not getting writing done. I've been trying out some new things, getting more time to relax and just thinking about things. Writing what I want, regardless if I know it'll flop so hard."

"Resound wasn't that bad." Beo snorted.

"It was kind of bad." The bear lightly corrected him, making the two chuckle. "In some ways I want to try to fix it, but some part of me is asking 'Why bother trying?' It was supposed to be a more personal piece, because I lived with someone with a deteriorating memory. Who's losing track of the world around them, trying so hard to preserve what they have- what they KNOW, and not realizing what it's doing to the next generation who's living in it. If anything..."

"Keeping them prisoner." Beo mumbled, getting a nod from the white one.

"That's how I often feel lately; stuck like Travv'esa is. Forced to watch as people bicker about problems- sometimes even existing, and never doing anything productive about it. I try not to let it get me down, but sometimes the future just looks so bleak and I just don't have the

energy to be productive." The large wyrm looked down on him sadly and gave him a nuzzle.

"Which is why writing took a back seat?"

"Writing, exercising, attempting stuff in Blender. Anything considered productive or beneficial to my future self. I haven't abandoned any of those things, but I'm still just so... Tired. That leads to a lack of self-worth, fragile confidence, and depression."

"Bear..."

"But this year I... Wasn't hard on myself in terms of productivity. I did what I could to enjoy my life a little more, especially during those episodes. I relaxed more, enjoyed some games, read some of my old stories. I spent time outside with you guys and did what I could to fight those heavy feelings. Not always everyday, but... I tried not to make it these long dark periods. And I feel like it worked, just... Didn't really get a lot to show for it. And what I did get; no one really cared about or liked-"

"-Yet." Beo interrupted, a little sternly. "Maybe if they tried it, they would like it. But-"

"I know, I know. I'm not gonna force anyone to try things. If they don't enjoy it, they don't enjoy it. I don't really like reading other people's work, and that's gotta balance somewhere. If that means I don't get eyes on my work because I don't look at others, fair enough." Bartan took a moment to yawn. "I'm kinda tired of this hobby to be honest. I don't feel like it's worth anything, let alone worth it to keep improving and attempt to make something good out of it. It takes too long to make, too long to prep, too much time and emotional investment in the audience to really enjoy." A bit of silence as the brass giant rested his large muzzle against the bear's side.

"...Kuri'Frven'ala nth Vin'javv." A noise in question from the furball. "It's... Hold on, I need to translate." A chuckle from the white one as the titan stared into space, thinking intently. "It's an old saying I remember Nalchulus muttering on occasion. Along the lines of Enduring Mental Conflicts Inside Ourselves."

"Fighting Wars Within?" A large nod was felt, nuzzling the fluffy body in the process. "I suppose we all are lately." A knock on the door signaled the two that everything was nearly ready, getting the two males to nod. The behemoth got up and lifted the furball out, letting him shake out all the water stuck in his fluffy coat. Smirking at him as Bartan stretched and double taked at the dragon. "What."

"If you won't start it, I will." A small chuckle from the bear as he took a deep sigh.

"We Live In A World Gone Mad That's Lost Control." Letting Beo take the next line.

"What Doesn't Kill Us Leaves A Hole In Our Soul." Then the two together.

"Chase A Satellite, Get Lost In Outer Space. We're Only Furballs/Dragon, Flesh And Bone. Lonely Skeletons." The brass one leaned down and the two put their snouts and foreheads together (the best they could due to size difference), in a sign of affection. "We're Only Furballs/Dragon, Flesh And Bone..."

*"Lonely Skeletons."*