

The red forest path was calm and unusually quiet now that much of the commotion had stopped. That didn't relieve the tension of the two walking it though: an anthro jackal dressed in rags, and a much larger dark beast with a flaming mane. The Blazeowl kept most of his focus on the ground, spotting the pawprints he left behind on the journey upwards.

"Are you still nervous?" The jackal asked, though it sounded more like a statement than a question. Not really getting any response from the beast easily five times his size. "You may relax. It sounds like their hunting parties have stopped for the day." Again, silence. "I assure you, if we encounter them, you will not need to fight."

"It's not that, Anty." Noct finally spoke sadly.

"Then what is it?" Once more, lacking the uptalk indicating a question, but the beast didn't see it as offensive. However, he did end up looking away from the anthro. "Do you know why I asked you to accompany me today?" A head shake from that glowing mane. "I wanted you to get out, to get used to it. I could tell you were nervous when logging last week. And you haven't left the furnace area since-" The beast stopped, and with that so did the jackal. Staring at him as Noct collected his thoughts.

"I don't think I'm cut out for this." A blank stare from Anty's unwavering gaze, getting a small glimpse of the golden irises of the Blazeowl's.

"What do you mean." A quiet breath was the only reply as the anthro placed a strong paw on that large shoulder. "I'm not a good therapist, Noct."

"A good what?" That at least got the large one to look at him.

"Therapist." The blunt statement didn't help. "It's... Someone that helps others with mental and social issues. Usually by getting them to talk about them and discover solutions." Noct's gaze returned to the ground. "The other Pals are afraid of you. Worried that you might explode at them. I cannot tell if that's figuratively or literally, but your actions lately have been troubling. Speak." Though it was a command, it was a bit softer. Causing the large one to sigh.

"I just..." Some rustling in bushes a bit far, but it didn't amount to anything. "...I thought coming here would help."

"Help with what?"

"Help with... I've been feeling like something is missing, and no others seem to understand. I don't really think that I do either. But I thought that being in a safe place was the answer. I thought that if I didn't have to worry about fighting I..."

"...And you still feel that something is missing." A quiet breath from Noct as Anty attempted to understand. "Forgive me, I do not know a lot about Blazehowl culture-"

"I-it's not that, sir. It's nothing to do with Blazehowls, none of them knew what I was talking about either." The large one sighed heavily. "And I... Don't want to be a burden to others, I know they're afraid of me. I-I don't know what I did, but I know they are-"

"Calm down." A heavy breath from Noct as he sat down and kept his head low. "You know why they're afraid, and it's not because of anything you did." A shaky nod. "That's just their instinct to be frightful of something they're not familiar with."

"I know, I know... Which is why the Sanctuary is better off without me, isn't it?" The anthro's paw on his shoulder tensed up, making the beast lightly whimper.

"...Continue." Anty commanded.

"...W-well... I don't do that much for you there. Venara can manage the forge, and... The Dinossom-"

"Mo'thrua."

"R-right can already do logging better than me."

"You two are about the same." The anthro answered bluntly.

"I'm really not-"

"Stop." A breath of near deflation from the large one. "Your fires are much hotter than Venara's. When it was just her, I was worried that the workload would be too much. Possibly causing her to develop Sullivan's Burnout." A worried look from those golden discs. "An injury when a fire Pal overuses their specific power too much. It's something I've always kept in mind-"

"Which is why you want us to take so many breaks..." The Blazehowl mumbled, getting a nod from the jackal.

"And two great loggers are better than one." Anty took a half a step closer to the beast. "You're important to the Sanctuary, Noct. You're the only one that can easily melt ores into metals, that alone has improved the lives of everyone." Those twin suns shifted away. "It will be your

decision, however. I will not force you there against your will, but I would rather you not leave." A large breath. "Give it another week. Maybe something will come up to help you understand what you're missing."

"...Okay." Noct mumbled, getting up. "Five more days."

"Seven." The anthro corrected him, getting the larger one to double take. "Don't ask me who defined or created the measurement of a Week, but it is 7 nights passing." A tap in agreement on that shoulder, stronger than the jackal likely meant to do, and the two began walking. Several minutes later, they got eyes on their home's walls... Along with some new ones approaching the main gate. "More asylum seekers?"

"Maybe..." Noct mumbled, staring at a large... Black bird creature with them. And feeling something. "What is that...?"

D.I.E Act 2 - Composure

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

"Four...? Four...? Four?" The black gryphon suddenly snapped awake, letting go of the warm fiery mane around Noct's collar and taking a step back. Taking a quick look around his surroundings in the middle of the sanctuary, busy and in mid-day. "Is everything okay?" The Blazeowl before him asked.

"Y-yes." 495 mumbled, mostly out of embarrassment as he lowered his head and gaze. Not expecting that broad body to take a step forwards and place a large paw on his feathered shoulder. Getting the two to lock eyes again, muzzle and beak very close together- perhaps too close as each moved back slightly. "I just... Spaced out there for a minute."

"Not that I mind getting neck-grappled." The beast chuckled, at least getting a shy smile from the gryphon. "You must be tired though, I can see it. Let's get you back up for a rest."

"But I..." The bird trailed off, looking back at the items he and Anty had just bartered for. Already retrieved by other pals as they began putting things away.

"They'll take care of it, don't worry." The lion began leading the way as the 495 stared into space, meeting eyes with the Lifmonk who waved at the black one while carrying a small thing. Calming the large bird a bit for a smile and a shy wave back. "Four?"

"C-coming." The gryphon followed the Blazehowl up to the largest building, climbing the stairs awkwardly step by step. However, noticing that the lion seemed to be taking them two at a time, reaching the landing much faster and looking back at the bird to watch him for a moment.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Noct quietly chuckled, half looking around for someone down below. "Every new person here complains about these stairs, no matter what size. I find it easier to take double steps."

"Double steps?"

"Two at a time. It's a little more effort, but it flows better." 495 did understand what the Blazehowl meant, just looking at the stone layers for a moment before giving it a try. It still came off as climbing a large hill, but... It was a bit easier for his larger size, as the beast suggested. "Just don't mention them to Anty, he might get upset."

"Heffer said the same thing." A faint chuckle in response as the gryphon looked over the two buildings, blue eyes resting on the smaller one. "Is... That where Anty stays?"

"Yes. It's also where he makes his plans and blueprints." Noct explained, looking over it himself. "...I won't lie and say I'm not curious, but at the same time..." The two large ones shared a look. "I do feel like there's skeletons in there."

"S-skeletons!?" 495 whispered in surprise.

"A-as in the expression." A breath of relief, with a surprised look from those golden suns. "You... Understood what I meant?"

"Y-yeah-" A slight pain in the gryphon's head was visible in his expression. "Means... A secret that could harm his reputation and/or trust, right?"

"Yes... Funny, it's a phrase that Anty used before, but no one else knew what it meant." A moment of study as the lion's face painted with a shade of worry. "Are you okay, Four?"

"Y-yes, I'll be..." A heavy exhale from the feathered one as he took a breath and nodded, not noticing that the larger beast came closer for a look and nearly spooking the bird. "I-I think I just need some rest."

"A day's worth, I would say. Come." The two went inside the large stone building, walls made from a different style than the defensive fort that was built around. Thinner, more crude, as if used less refined materials. But the shelter was holding, even against the more coastal winds that came about from time to time.

Inside were rows and rows of straw beds spaced out. Wooden frames attempting to hold in the 'comforting' golden grass, which was better than sleeping on the stone floor, but not by much. Especially for something the gryphon's size. Easily spotting a few of them that have been flattened out, one by 495 specifically and moving towards it. Not taking too long to look at it and just spotting some of his own black fluff within before laying down.

It wasn't until a few moments later that 4 noticed those golden suns looking at him a bit sadly. "What...?"

"You really... Don't fit on that too well, do you?" The large bird looked over his body, specifically where it currently made contact with the ground. His lower half completely off the bed, with his ribcage resting uncomfortably onto the wooden frame.

"It's better than the cold ground." 495 replied, resting his head down and taking a deep breath, still feeling that warm gaze over him before the Blazehowl began to leave... Then come back? Getting the bird's attention when he heard wood being dragged across the stone floor, perking his black head up to see the lion with a frame in his maw. Trying to lift it and walk on all fours at the same time before bringing it closer to the gryphon. "W-what are you doing?"

"Oove." Noct half commanded, making the bird get up and take a few steps back and watch the beast place it down and line it up next to 4's bed. Doubling its size before going back for the straw that was left behind.

"I-I can't take-"

"It's my bed." The Blazehowl bluntly stated before trying to grab the straw... And requiring his two forepaws regardless. Giving the large one a slow awkward walk as the black bird stared at him worryingly. Watching Noct put it down in the empty frame. "I want you to have it."

"B-but you'll be without one."

"I don't sleep, 4. And I'm honestly worried I'll set it on fire if I lay on it too long."

"But that doesn't mean-"

"And you can't get a good rest on that tiny thing. Even doubling it probably isn't enough, but it is better than a single." Noct tapped the bedding after dispersing the two piles of straw into one large one, motioning for the gryphon to lay down and catching that saddened gaze. "Don't worry about me. I want you to be comfortable."

"B-but..."

"You need your rest. When you get your energy back, then we'll see about maybe building me a new one. But for now, you need it more than I do." A whine in defeat from the large bird as he sighed and nodded faintly. Approaching the large bed and sitting on it for a moment, turning and wrapping those forearms around that glowing mane again, this time much less surprising to the Blazeowl.

"...Thank you, Noct." 495 whispered, detecting a large paw tapping his feathered back. "I'll make it up to you, I swear."

"Just... Do what you can to help out people here, okay?" The lion smiled and adjusted his position to better hug the bird. "But in order for you to do that..."

"I need..."

"Rest. A lot of it." The gryphon exhaled in a quiet sigh and nodded at the beast's statement. Taking a few moments to enjoy that radiating warmth of the strange mane, like that of a large fireplace. Breaking the hug before laying back down on the double bed, which was definitely more comfortable. "I gotta get back to work." Another nod at the whisper as 4 rested his head down and closed those blue eyes. Feeling that warmth get a little closer before the Blazeowl turned and left.

"He's so... *Big*."

"And dark." The whispers came from afar, barely able to be made out by the gryphon during his deep slumber. "Like a dark pal."

"I heard from Anty that it wasn't a pal at all."

"Why is it here then-?"

"What are you guys doing here?" One more familiar to the gryphon spoke a bit louder, making the bird open his eyes a crack but not move. The group wasn't in his vision, but he could picture... Three of them. Four now, the fourth being a light green. Squirrel-like. "Are... you watching him sleep?" Lifmunk.

"You know what it is?"

"I... Don't, no. But he's nice. Friendly." Heffer paused. "And hurt. Alle said he was attacked like I was."

"With the bangers the humans use?"

"Yes." Another pause. "Fore needs some rest, I seen him return with Anty, he has already talked to him." Some whispers of discussion. "If he's still here, then that means Fore must be okay." Some quiet but soured grumbles. "What is it?" A bit more was picked up.

"We don't need any more big Pals here, taking more of what we plant and build." One of them nearly... Quacked?

"We have plenty of food, even for something their size. And it's nice to have protection, they're not taking-"

"Then why is that thing sleeping on two beds?" Fear struck the gryphon's heart, nearly paralyzing him enough to not whimper. Several eyes scanned over his form and the placed together single-beds, wooden frames not quite aligned after the large one adjusted during his rest.

"Whose bed even is that anyway?"

"I hope it's not mine." As much as the black bird wanted to speak up, his throat clenched and muscles stiffened. Unable to force himself to say anything, just trying to breathe quietly and take control of his body once again while his mind filled with worry.

"I... I don't know. But..."

"You only knew him for a short time, Heffer. It often takes more time before you can see someone's full picture." Some silence as disappointment fell over the conversation. "Come on, guys... We've got work to do." One by one the stares lifted, but that anxiety remained. Taking several minutes to calm down and adjust himself, looking sadly in the direction of where the group was talking. Now completely vacant of any Pals, but a heaviness still remained over the area.

His body still hurt a bit from discomfort, but 495 did sleep better with the second bed. Just the frames that were closed together in the middle were... Definitely noticeable. Leaving a lingering ache across the bird's lower ribs, worse than sleeping on a single bed. Making 4 question if it was even worth the comfort for his lower half.

Regardless, he couldn't rest here any longer for the moment. However, some part of him didn't want to be seen by the other Pals. Taking a moment to look out the large doorway and spotting the entire sanctuary working together at their own little tasks... Did he really belong here? Especially if he was doing so little to help out? What did the gryphon have to give that was so special... What did Anty see in him, again...?

It weighed on him heavily, releasing a breath and just drooping his wings while that black beak pointed to the ground. Nearly on the verge of tearing up again at the painful thoughts, taking deep breaths before looking over the area and instantly spotting that dark beast at the forge. Working away smelting more ore, and for what? To pay for 495's meals and slumber? Warmth and security? The guilt was heavy...

But what would Noct say if the gryphon just left? Vanished away from here one evening so he would no longer be a burden to the other Pals? What would the Blazeowl think...? That hurt worse. Especially for everything he's done for the bird. Noct was growing attached to 4, for reasons the bird cannot see himself. But... What did 495 think of him?

From the top of the stairs, mostly hidden by some of the foundation, the gryphon stared at the lion. The colorful flames on his mane, back and tail, dancing shades of cyan and purple. Recalling the night before when the gryphon couldn't sleep, accidentally spooking them both while resting on that wall... Where the bird took his private spot.

Was 495 intervening? Was he in the way that night...? It was hard to tell. However, the beast ended up staying. Approaching the bird and starting a conversation with the strange... 'Pal', for lack of a better identity. Something that would've been difficult to do if the gryphon was pushed into that situation at this moment. It was Noct that took the first step, it was Noct that heard 4 out when he opened up. It was Noct that gave him warmth, encouragement, -his very own bed to the gryphon.

-And then a flash in 4's mind. A still frame of the blackbird embracing the lion's neck tightly, not afraid of the dark flames. A snapshot of warmth within the gryphon's chest that echoed to his present form, giving his own heart a warm flutter as those blue eyes stared into space. Stared at... Him.

...No. With a deep breath, the bird's resolve strengthened. No. He wouldn't leave until he made it up to that lion. 495 would find some way to repay him. To repay Anty for his help. "(I... I just needed to figure out how.)" The bird whispered to himself as he got up and took a few breaths. "(And the best way for me to do that is to ask them.)"

Chapter 2

That resolve was disappearing with every step down the gryphon took though, becoming more and more nervous as he became closer to the other busy Pals. Already getting some eyes onto him, causing those wings to tuck in and droop a little as his blue eyes scanned the area. The anxiety kicking in again, making him mentally question every step closer as they started to slow down. "(Just talk to Noct.)" 4 whispered to himself. "(He'll know what to do.)" Coaxing to just keep moving. The lion would just take another break and hear him out again, Noct always knows what to-

"Hey 4!" The large bird suddenly stopped and double taked towards the voice, spotting the Vixy near the base of the stairs nearly hopping in place at the sight of a friend. Making the gryphon smile and resume walking, approaching her.

"Hello Rooth, how are you making out?" He leaned down and the beige fox bunted that still tender beak, but the large one powered through it.

"Good! Everybody's so friendly in this place." She looked towards the busy part of the courtyard: the garden area, getting a wave or two from some tending to chores. "I haven't really seen you since that... Tour?"

"T-trials, yes."

"That was harder than expected." The Vixy panted just thinking about it, causing the bird to feel nearly as uncomfortable as he recalled the results. "Makes me wonder if it was that hard for everyone."

"Probably..." 495 muttered silently. "What do they have you doing?"

"Oh! I've been searching for whatever is in the ground. Normally I just dug for food, but here there seems to be a lot of useful things. Including those metal bits and pointed sticks."

"Metal bits...?" Rooth gestured towards a small pile of things that she had collected in the area. "Coins? Money?" The large one quickly scanned the area and noticed a lot of holes that were filled back in. "There's money here?"

"Those things are everywhere, but they taste awful. Very hard too, so I always left them." Those cyan discs looked at the pile again, noticing the sticks and his head hurt.

"Arrows...?"

"I shouldn't be surprised that you call them something different. I gnawed at them when I was teething growing up."

"T-that's something else to use them for, at least."

"Did they have another purpose?" 4 didn't know how to answer that, saddening his expression but she could tell it was something on the darker side. "It's okay, you don't need to tell me. The important thing is that they're useful for someone here." Rooth smiled, making the large one smile back. "What about you? Have you found a job yet?"

"I'm... Kind of, yes. I'm still half recovering and struggling to fit in..." The small fox made a noise of sympathy. "I-I'll be fine though. As you said, people are kind here, just..."

"Afraid." A faint noise in question from the bird. "They're just afraid of you, until they get to know you, 4." Another bunt, this time against the black forearms. "But they don't have to be. Once they realize that..." She trailed off, looking at those bright blue eyes smiling.

"...Thank you." 495 smiled back, though wondering if she was right. Maybe the Vixy was a tad naive, but those big green eyes did make the bird feel... Safe. Hopeful. Taking a moment before laying down and gently embracing the fluffy fox into his chest as she cooed. Resting for a little bit and feeling Rooth squeeze out of his 'hold'.

"Okay, I gotta get back to work. Come find me if you get lonely, 4. Find Harater as well, we really should catch up."

"Okay-"

"There you are." An unfamiliar voice surprised the gryphon, making him yelp loudly and get the attention of nearly everyone for a second. Startling the Dinossom a little bit in the process as the three looked over each other, never being so close up to the plant-like creature until now.

"S-sorry." 495 whimpered at her after a moment. "W-we were just catching up."

"Oh. Right. You two came together yesterday." The rather tall anthro dinosaur looked over the large bird, her longer neck and blooming flower-of-a-mane making her look on par with the feathered one, and nearly Noct. "I wasn't... Telling you to get back to work, I wanted to ask you something." She raised a paw holding a small package that looked familiar to the gryphon. "Anty said you 'bartered' for this." A moment of study from those blue eyes, mostly into her pink ones. Eventually breaking off and looking over at Rooth for a moment.

"I'll see you later, 4." They shared a nod and the bird looked back at the dinosaur.

"Yes." 495 finally spoke.

"Do you know what these are?"

"Wheat seeds." He mumbled, looking over the plantations and now realizing that another set of frames were being made and put into place. "I was... Hoping we could grow them- only to now realize we would need to get a windmill in order to grind it into flour."

"Flowers?" A double take from the bird.

"N-no, flour- i-it's pronounced the same, I suppose, but it's a different substance. A powder of sorts that can be used for baking." The dinossom tilted her head and looked at the seeds. "I was... Just hoping we could get a different form of foods, and this was a big step."

"I'm just... Surprised." A noise in question from the bird as she continued. "Some of us are able to make these seeds, but..."

"Of us?" 4 quoted her. "You mean, Dinossom's-?" A sudden grunt as a bit of pain was felt behind his eye.

"Yes. But I wasn't one of them. I can still grow it but..." The dino looked back at the frames being built. "The soil we have for the berries won't do well for it." Another pain in the bird's head, causing him to hold it for a moment and pant. Concerning the lime dinosaur.

"Because it's... Lacking things. It needs a more... Loamy soil?"

"Y-yes, one that is mostly sand, silt-"

"And a bit of clay." A sharp exhale from the bird as he closed his eyes.

"Are... Are you okay?" 495 didn't answer. "Anty told me you knew what you were talking about when you got these... I honestly didn't believe him."

"I didn't think of that when I got them..." The gryphon exhaled in disappointment, shaking his head slowly; he didn't notice the anthro take a step forwards and place a rather bulky hand on his shoulder. Making those feathers and fluff puff out a bit.

"I'm Mo'thura. Most people just call me Mo here though."

"4-9-5..." He frowned at the strange look, lowering his head a little bit. "I'm sorry..."

"Hey, it's alright. Not all is lost, I have an idea." She stopped suddenly right before explaining, hearing some larger footprints that got the gryphon's attention; the flaming lion approaching the two.

"Is everything okay?" Noct asked, spotting the disappointed look on the bird but looking to Mo for an explanation.

"Yes. He just traded for some wheat seeds earlier with Anty."

"-But I didn't think about the soil." 4 half grumbled and whimpered at the same time.

"It takes different soil?"

"Nor how to grind it out-"

"One thing at a time, erm... Four-five-nine?"

"4-9-5." The two corrected her at the same time, once again making the bird whimper.

"I have a plan. We can get the soil, but I'd rather ask someone who knows more about it than I do." The two males looked at the dinossom. "There's a cave system not too far from here, and some pals use it as a home. Some have spotted a labour of Fuddlers within them."

"A... Labour?" The Blazeowl tilted his head.

"Probably just a small family or two." The gryphon mumbled. "They do spend most of their time digging to sharpen their claws..."

"And they might know where to find our loamy soil." Mo nodded at them. "Are you okay with going out?"

"A-alone?" 495 barely caught his whimper.

"No no, we'll find someone to accompany you. That Nox you came in with maybe-"

"I'll go." Noct spoke up, surprising the two. "You said it was in a cave system, right? I want to see if we can find any source of ores there. I just got done melting down everything we had." The two males looked at each other, catching eyes that nearly had a worried conversation within as the Dinossom just shifted her gaze between them.

"A-alright." The sudden drop in Mo's composure snapped the two out of it as she cleared her throat. "Just be sure to tell Anty or Darvis where you're going. Ongito told me about the cave, speak to him about the directions." She pointed at a Cattiva hammering away at some nails in the frame. Double taking at the group of larger one's staring at the pink feline where he accidentally smacked his own paw with the tool, causing everyone looking to flinch while the cat cried sharply. Comforting the injured paw for the time being.

"(Be more careful.)" The telepathic vocal of the Katress could be heard as if at a distance, giving some time for the two large males to share a look. Nodding at Mo'thura as the group moved a little closer, spotting the dinossom beckon the pink feline to come closer. With a worrying whine, the small one did while Noct sat down on the ground. Causing the gryphon to double take at him before mimicking the action himself.

"I-is something wrong...?" The Cattiva whimpered as if in trouble, and the bird instantly placed the voice... ["I hope it's not mine..."]

"Nothing is wrong, no. But you've been to that cave we discussed this morning, yes?" A shy nod from the feline as his blue eyes shifted from the large female to the two males.

"B-but...?"

"They're going to scout it out today, but they just need directions. Hopefully they can find a Fuddler in the area to help get our soil."

"S-so I'm not in trouble?" The three large ones tilted their heads a little bit.

"...Why would you be in trouble?" Mo barely asked, getting another whimper from Ongito.

"N-no reason." The Dinossom didn't like that answer, but didn't dwell on it. "I-I'll cooperate."

"That's a slightly odd way of agreeing to help." Noct muttered rather puzzled, making the small one whine. "We're not twisting your tail to help us, this will benefit everyone- large and small."

"Don't we do enough around here?" The Pengullet nearby grumbled between watering some crops. "Our workload is already twice yours, why are you-?"

"Stay out of this, Callider." Mo half grumbled. "We're just asking for directions, that's all. And we'd be out of here if everyone would stop making a big deal out of this." She half scolded the Blazehowl with a look, getting those golden suns to roll for a moment but not reply further.

"That cave you spotted a Fuddler in, where was it." She barely asked.

"Stand up for yourself, Ongito-"

"Stay out of this, Callider!" The dinossom nearly hissed at the pengullet again.

"I-I..." The pink feline whimpered, looking back at the penguin before the three larger ones nearly towering over him. "I-I... I want... A steak." Mo curled her neck, Noct tossed his snout again, while 495 tilted his head. "S-some meat, and not berries again. Get m-me a steak while you're out and I'll tell you-"

"We're not hunting for you." The Blazehowl growled, while the bird looked back and forth between the two with a bit of worry.

"You know the rules:" Mo started. "If you want other foods, you find them yourself-"

"A-and I can't. Not only do I have to finish this and four other projects, including building another bed because that one took one of ours," Ongito pointed at the gryphon, instantly making 4 nervous which didn't help his case when the dino studied him. "You guys just-"

"He didn't steal one of your beds, I *Gave* him mine!" Noct growled, his mane flaring up as he tried to take a step forwards, but was blocked by Mo's arm commanding him to stop. Instead taking a step back and turning away in frustration, leaving the bird to look back and forth between the lion and the small feline... Then speaking up.

"A steak." 495 stated in agreement, actually getting a surprised look from Ongito as the feathered one laid down closer to his eye level. "Anything else?"

"...I'll think about it." A faint nod from the gryphon in response.

"But we'll need to know where that cave is first." Mo'thura added in, getting the Cattiva to look nervously between them.

"...The closed off path that Anty tells us not to take. The one that runs beside the river..." The pink one almost whispered. "There's a bunch of old equipment."

"Equipment...?" The gryphon repeated.

"...H-human equipment... Back before I came here, I took a look inside and spotted them going into a cave, they were..."

"Hunting." Mo answered, getting a nod from Ongito.

"All the pals that took refuge there." The feline paused and glanced at the direction. "I didn't go far in, just enough to find some water that wouldn't drown me. But did witness a Fuddler escape the humans by digging underground-"

"Burrowing." 495 half corrected him, giving a nod and sitting up. "Thank you, On...jeeto, was it?"

"C-close enough." The Cattiva answered then corrected. "Ongito."

"Ongito." The gryphon looked at the main gate. "I'll do what I can when I'm out there, but hunting is often based on luck. If I don't get it when I'm out there, I'll owe you." The smaller one nodded a bit nervously as the large bird got back up on all fours. Leaving the Cattiva to his work before rejoining Noct, hearing his rather heated grumble but addressing Mo first. "Was there anything else?"

"For the moment, if you can get those things done that will be enough. We'll work on getting the plots ready and getting a team to help dig and transport what we need. We just need to know where." A solid nod from the gryphon and the dinossom headed back. Leaving the two large males to take a breath, the lion took lead towards the gate.

"Are you...?" 495 started, getting the attention of Noct but not getting him to stop. "Okay?" Another heated exhale through that muzzle before the beast answered.

"I'll explain later."

"I-I mean with... Going out?" There wasn't really an answer, but the bird could feel some tension. Dropping it when they got to the Penking at the gate.

"Heading outside?" Darvis asked.

"Yes. We've got a few things to scout on that path along the stream." The Blazehowl answered. "I also ran out of ore to melt down this morning, so I'm looking for new nodes."

"You sure, Noct? We have other scouts that can check these areas first."

"I..." A pause as the lion took a breath. "I feel like I need to get out for a little bit."

"Alright, if you say so. I'm not too worried about anyone bothering something your sizes anyway." The anthro penguin added, opening up the gates for the two. "Just be careful out there. It's awfully quiet compared to yesterday, but that doesn't mean they've gone off and left." The two dark ones nodded and moved through.

Chapter 3

The water was refreshing, almost enthralling as the two took a long drink to the point of gasping for air. Crystal clear, reflecting the sun's light at just the right angle, and it never tasted

so good. Perhaps a little chilly, but with the heat out today it was honestly a benefit. "Oh... I needed that." Noct exhaled, but going in for another drink.

"Y-yes, it is very... Different from what I'm used to having, that's for sure." The gryphon took a few more laps, not nearly to the point of the Blazehowl's gulps.

"Okay, I gotta stop or else get waterlogged." The lion panted. "Don't get me wrong, the water in the trough is fine enough, but it gets... Stale after a while."

"I-I noticed it too, yes."

"But this water... It's so much better than what I'm used to. Almost painfully better."

"I think that's called a brain freeze." The gryphon chuckled as the two began walking across a makeshift bridge, clearly made mostly for smaller pals so they could cross the brook safely. Trying not to look at the beast's haunches in front of him, but instead looking at the water. Able to see the bottom quite clearly through the flowing liquids, when it wasn't almost blinding him. Closing those blue eyes for just a moment and the thought of the Nox falling into the water flashed in his mind, instantly bringing back that fear in his furred chest.

"Are you okay?" Noct's voice snapped him out of it, now realizing that the bird was frozen for several seconds and the lion was off the bridge. Waiting for him on the other side, taking a few seconds to nod faintly.

"Just... A bad memory of water. I'll be alright." A nod as the Blazehowl waited for 4 to catch up and move down the path alongside the river. "...Are... You okay? You seem... Stressed." A deep slow breath from Noct as he half looked away, almost swearing the heat was getting more intense around that flowing mane. To the point where the beast stopped in place, not facing the gryphon. "Noct...?"

"They..." A deep exhale, one of anger and... Regret? "They blamed you."

"What?"

"I gave you my bed and they accused you of stealing it." The lion nearly growled, shaking his head. "I should've known, I'm sorry-"

"Don't be, it was a kind thing to do-"

"But I didn't tell anybody. I just got lost in my work and forgot to let others know." The Blazehowl began to walk forwards again, powerful steps of anger. "Of course the smaller pals look at that and can't possibly comprehend that it was an act of kindness, no. They instantly

accuse anyone larger than them of wrongdoing instead. Accusing me? Whatever. They already don't like me but they also can't complain to Anty." Another heated growl that honestly worried the gryphon, to the point where 495 moved up a bit further and placed a paw on that broad shoulder. His instincts warned him to not go any closer to such flames, but it did cause the beast to slow down to a stop. "But you...? I... I messed up-"

"You didn't."

"They know I like you. They don't see the value of you, 4, but I...!" Noct trailed off, once again trying to hide those twin suns from the large bird. "Sometimes I swear they're trying to get me. Ongito, Callider, Balzar. I swear they just want to antagonize me-"

"W-what? Why would they want to do that?" It took a moment for that golden gaze to come around and glance at the blue eyes. Some of which were filled with guilt, but also some frustration.

"On my first week being here, they were already afraid of me. To them, there's never been anything bigger than Darvis or Pertheer."

"The Capirty?"

"Yeah. If he was considered a giant to them, I was a titan. Andy and Alle [Katress] kept telling me it was just their instinct to fear something large. I kept to myself, just focused on my work, and slowly made friends with Venara [Foxsparks]." A breath as the gryphon let him speak. "Then one day, I suppose they were getting a little too comfortable being around my form- despite being told to be cautious around me. Because I don't see well behind myself."

"O-oh no."

"Oh yes. Ongito specifically, he was pacing back and forth under my tail filling up our food pail with berries. I swear one branch at a time. One delivery, he got too close when I started to back up and I-"

"Sat on him!?"

"W-what? No! I stepped on him though. And the berries. Which squished and startled me further..." Noct lowered his head a little. "Which made me panic and kick what I just stepped on." 4's face started to twist. "...Into the water trough. I-I didn't mean to! I just panicked."

"Was he alright? I'm pretty sure Cattiva's-"

"Are very brittle, yes. And uh... Well, he survived." The Blazehowl whimpered, lowering his head further. "All the other smaller ones fled, Anty was alerted, Alle at least witnessed the entire thing and immediately tended to Ongito. He ended up getting a... Construction?"

"Concussion?"

"Y-yeah, I think. I don't know what that is though-" A grunt from the bird got Noct's attention.

"It's... An injury to the brain. Usually caused by an impact of sorts that makes it... 'bounce around' in the skull, for lack of a better word." The two stared at each other for a few moments, and the lion sighed in defeat.

"A kick to the head would do that..."

"Or hitting the water trough..."

"But all the smaller ones think I did that on purpose, even against my and Alle's word. Which stoked the flames of tension between the small and large pals even further, making me doubt whether being there was a good decision." The beast exhaled, feeling that black paw rub his shoulder. "Ever since I feel like they've been plotting against me, and now they're pulling you into it too."

"It's just a misunderstanding-"

"You've barely been here for two days and they're already trying to provide evidence to get rid of you. Be it because of me or just the fact that there's now another large pal around, I can't really tell-" A heated breath was taken as that taloned claw gripped his shoulder, pleading for the lion to stop. "...Sorry 4. For dragging you into this, for-"

"Noct. Please." 495 moved forwards into his sight, the saddened look over that beak making the beast feel even more awkward, letting Noct take another exhale. "Let's... Let's just get this job done." A nod at 4's suggestion as they continued up the path. Letting the massive cliffs above almost arch over it and give the once-traveled road shelter.

But with that came dangers, as the path ahead was leveled by several large and flat rocks. Nothing that the two couldn't easily climb over due to their size, but perhaps something that could climb well... Rooth [Vixy] and Harater [Nox] came to 495's mind. Picturing them both requiring some sort of assistance on the 'large step up', likely being just too high and rounded for their jumping ability.

There was still something in the air, not just a heat from the Blazehowl, but... Tension? Anxiety? All it took was a moment for the gryphon to study Noct's face to tell he was arguing with himself internally. Causing the bird to almost do the same, wondering how to help the lion's issues with the others. But what should he say?

"Do you want to know what I think?" 495 started, having absolutely no idea what he was even going to say, but the piqued expression on the beast told him that Noct was willing to listen. Taking a small breath for himself, the bird looked around at the scenery: the waters, the rocky walls, the plant life growing. "...I think they're scared." He spoke softly. "I think everyone is scared. And it's easier for them... For all of us to blame others for our own fears, than to admit that we are afraid." The gryphon sadly mumbled. "Doesn't matter if we're big or small, it just feels like everyone is..."

"Afraid..."

"I don't specifically mean they have to be afraid for their own life either, or the lives of others. But of anything, like pain, rejection, or-"

"Loneliness?" The two looked at each other with somewhat sad expressions. Slowing to a stop as the bird nodded, yet that sorrow did seem to ease up on both facades. Even if those golden eyes fell a bit as the lion thought. "...Maybe you're right, it's a good...Erm."

"Answer?"

"Yeah..." The two sat down again, taking some time in the silence to process a few things... Or at least that's what the gryphon was hoping for, feeling more and more awkward the longer the silence dragged on. Making the bird second-guess himself and possibly hurting Noct's feelings, maybe his pride-?

But detecting the beast scoot closer towards 495 both surprised and decimated his doubt. Almost double taking at the moment but stopping himself just in time. Instead taking his own 'sitting half-step' closer to the Blazehowl, yet see the lion turn his head away. Sending mixed signals until 4 spotted something.

A smile. A bashful smile while the heat from that mane began to climb higher, the lion was just trying to hide his shyness. Which in turn made the gryphon smile too, once again fluttering his chest. Unable to stop himself from glancing until he was caught by those twin suns, the two blushing a little, unable to stop themselves from smiling as they rested in the opened tunnel. Sitting in silence while the noise of running waters passed through, and for the precious moment; unafraid.

"Are you doing okay?" 495 asked as they continued on the path. Still following the stream as directed and spotting something up ahead. Barely able to see the beast nod while looking around, the two spotting some pals around in the wild but far away. A few green monkeys up ahead spotting the walking pair but not taking any chances of the two large ones; bolting away at first warning.

"Y-yeah..." Noct eventually spoke up. "Just... I'm a little worried... A bit irked that Ongito pushed you to hunt for him." A nod from the bird, but there was a strange confidence in the gryphon that got the Blazeowl's attention. "What? ...Are you actually just not planning to fulfill your end of the deal?"

"I mean, I am, but later. So do not worry." A half frown from the lion as the two gazed at each other. "I was thinking about it earlier, and how strange it was for him to request Steak of all things."

"Why? That's usually what me and my brother ate back when he hunted for us." The larger lion faintly sighed. "I miss Pyrin steak."

"Well, Cattivas are carnivores, yes. But their..." A grunt from the bird as his head hurt again, nearly making the beast whimper as it reoccurs. "I... I never had Steak before, but I... Know about it. It's tough."

"Very tough."

"And often chewy."

"Yes." Noct concurred, but still looked at 4 with worry.

"For a set of jaws like yours, it's made to deal with tough meats. But a Cattiva's... Their fangs are too thin. Most of their teeth are. Ongito wouldn't be able to chew or enjoy it unless he wanted to spend the next week and a half licking at it." A very faint chuckle from the lion.

"So... What are you going to tell him?"

"After we get back, I'm thinking about going out again. I have concepts of an idea, but I... Need more time to figure it out." That slightly worried gaze returned on Noct's face, but something else caught his attention up ahead. The path led up a curved ramp, however... The upper edges did have a wooden fence around it.

"Four..." The beast whispered.

"Yes... I know." Those blue eyes stared at the man-made barricade and he approached the path cautiously. Not hearing any humans about, nor any scent in the air. "I... Think it is abandoned though."

"I'm not hearing anything." The lion whispered, trying to put on a brave face. His mane changing colors in waves with every third heartbeat as it raced. "Maybe... We should turn back."

"We just got here, Noct."

"I don't want you getting hurt again." The Blazehowl grumbled, getting a narrowed look from the bird but also giving one back. Only lasting a moment before 495 exhaled in admission, he had been getting hurt a lot lately.

"First sign of trouble, we'll leave. Okay? But let's see if we can get some information, be it for your ores or our soil." Though he didn't like the answer, the lion faintly nodded after a breath. Following the gryphon as the two slowly made their way up the long twisting dirt ramp, not trusting the makeshift wooden stairs and opting to just climb the rock ledges. Occasionally looking closely at the old poorly-constructed fence that guarded against the drop from where they came from, even if it wasn't very high.

Then it opened up, a small flat surface still sheltered by the rock spire. Creating a small shelter and tunnel of sorts, but with light on the other side. Many objects remained around the walls, mostly large wooden crates and worn tarps. But many tools were left behind that made the lion uncomfortable. "I wonder what these were used for?" Only for 495 to stop and grunt in pain, holding that beaked head with a paw and panting. Causing the beast to frown. "I... Really should be careful what I ask around you, huh?"

"Mining..." A noise in question from Noct. "They were mining around here... Years ago." The gryphon approached the crates and gear, making the larger lion slightly whimper.

"F-four..."

"I... I don't know what they were mining for, and there's several things missing for a mining expedition, but..." The gryphon moved closer to the crates against Noct's whimper of worry. Unveiling the old tarp and trying to pry the lid off for a better look, taking more effort than he expected but eventually getting it. Pulling his head back when the scent reached his beak, only to feel the beast's paw against his black chest. Pulling the bird back for safety against the opened crate as the two stared at it for a moment, then the lion looked at 4 for an answer. "Garbage."

"What?"

"Trash. Broken tools, old packaging, waste. Stuff they left behind." Those twin suns looked at him with anxiety and lack of understanding, but didn't ask. "Nothing dangerous, but definitely signs of abandonment."

"How can you be sure?"

"If there wasn't-" Another grunt from the large bird, not as painful but there was severe disappointment in 495's expression. "...There would be a lot more of it..." A moment of quiet to compose themselves before those blue eyes caught a large rocky tunnel. One that didn't look specifically man-made and with light at the end of it.

"Four..."

"We should be almost there."

"We should go back-"

"Noct..." The gryphon exhaled just as the Blazehowl did.

"I just... Have this terrible feeling about this place." A nod in response, but 4 still moved towards the tunnel. Saddening the lion's expression further as Noct stiffened his jaw and hardened his resolve, following the black one through.

It was a bit cramped for something so large, but it was a worn path of sorts. Lasting longer than expected, but still coming out to the opened air and an opened space up ahead. However, along the rock wall seemed to be a cave, this time much darker within. "This must be what Ongito was talking about." 495 spoke, feeling the heat of the lion move beside him.

"Four..." Those blue eyes looked towards him, almost expecting another suggestion to retreat but instead followed Noct's line of sight to the opened air. More importantly: the sky, where a trail of thin black smoke was seen not too far from here. "Is... That...?"

"It looks like smoke from a large campfire." A worried look from the beast as the gryphon nodded. "...Likely from a human camp." Noct then looked at the tunnel from where they passed through, then the cave. Moving around the large bird and towards the mouth of the darkened area.

"Let's..." The Blazehowl started, clearly uncomfortable with such a thing. "Let's get this done." With a small pause inbetween, 495 nodded and followed him in.

It made perfect sense to the large bird now, considering how dark the cave was. Now being illuminated by the lion's mane as he cautiously led the way through, from the great lantern of flames around his neck to the stream of dancing light all the way to his tail. Almost too bright that it was difficult to see past Noct. But up ahead there were some... Signs of a glow, one of a different hue.

The cave opened to a great and large one. Pillars in the center accompanied and supported by larger rocks, covered in a glowing moss of sorts. Boulders of all kinds scattered around, with some corners once again having evidence of human tools and structures. Old, though not as weather-worn as the ones spotted before. "Oh." The beast spoke above his breath, quickening his pace towards one of the large boulders. Brown with white/silver streaks through it.

"What is it?"

"I believe this is what I've been smelting. I didn't realize they were harvested from something so large, just expected to be random veins of it through the stone harvests." Noct explained, circling the boulder. "But..."

"There's no way we're getting this out of here."

"Even if we had the muscle strength for it. We'll have to break it apart." The bird tilted his head at the beast, making the larger one double take. "O-oh, by 'we' I mean the Sanctuary."

"R-right."

"I can deal with breaking trees, but not rock." The lion grumbled in thought. "I wonder how they did it-nevermind-" But he was too late, hearing the gryphon grunt from a little bit of pain and Noct sighed in disappointment, mostly of himself. Looking at the black bird in a bit of worry as he followed those cyan eyes to the ground a bit farther away. Towards a worn path that seemed to have... Something else at one point.

"Carts...?" A noise in question from the beast as he tried to take a closer look at the path.

"Wooden carts on metal wheels and railings, ones built onto the ground." The bird explained, spotting another tunnel leading deeper and moving towards it.

"In the ground...?"

"Onto the ground, like here." 495 motioned the lion to come closer and study what looked to be small railroad tracks. Worn with age and damaged likely beyond repair or salvageable at this point. "They loaded up the carts with the heavy material,"

"And pushed it around like that wagon Anty designed?" The bird looked at Noct in question. "It's what we use to transport wood. It's an absolute pain to move when it's loaded, but it is better than carrying logs one by one."

"That's what these tracks were for, forcing the cart to go in a very specific direction that has been previously cleared out." Another bit of pain in the gryphon's head. "It was... Terribly hard work, often used as a form of... Punishment? To overwork them with manual labor if they did wrong or... Were accused?"

"What?" The saddened expression on 4's face made the Blazeowl frown, moving a little closer as a sign of comfort and was a little surprised when the bird leaned into him a bit. Though still with a rather saddened expression and a sigh from 495 as his beak fell.

"...They often didn't make it out." The larger one didn't quite understand what that meant, but after some thought Noct had a good guess. Sheltering the gryphon's head under his chin and neck, pulling him closer to that warmth for a few moments until a squeak was heard further in. Getting both of their attentions, sharing a look, and once again the Blazeowl took lead to light the way through.

A longer tunnel than expected, one that held water along the floor that flooded part of the cave. The reflections of the two, specifically the lion, walking beside them as they moved along the built tracks. "Are...?" The gryphon started, getting Noct's attention away from looking at rippling images of the mostly still liquids. "Are you okay with water?"

"Yes." He lightly smiled, showing the tips of his fangs in the process. "Most fire pals are, but there are a few who do not enjoy being wet." The beast began to step down into the cold, releasing a little bit of a grumble from that bright chest. "Just a little cold on the paws." The bird followed suit, getting a shiver of coolness from the shallow waters but soon an area of warmth irradiating from the lion. As if leaving invisible footprints of heat and causing 495 to stay close behind the Blazeowl. Though spotting some... Lines along the flooring, the remains of a possible old railtrack?

Another small tunnel to an opening cave, one that had more mining equipment barely illuminated. Both from the moss and the Blazeowl, causing many of the rocks inside to sparkle in greeting of the new light while things in the darkness scurried away. Making the lion freeze on occasion as he scouted the area before moving forwards. "I think it's clear, but..."

"But?"

"I saw something move in the darkness." A moment of study. "But I think it's gone." Noct mumbled cautiously moving inside and scanning the area, allowing the gryphon to move in and do the same. Spotting more equipment, several sets of staging along the walls to reach more veins, wooden supports around the exits and even more large rocks in the center. "This is a lot of ore we could use."

"Yes, but did Anty ever say what he wanted to do with it?"

"Mostly just make nails, as far as I know." The lion bluntly stated. "I just melt out the rock and try to shape them into blocks the best I can. Others are the ones who file them into different shapes." The Blazeowl gestured his forepaw, as if to display the lack of dexterity in it. Something the bird definitely empathized with. "But what is...?"

A noise in question as 4 followed his movements to another boulder. A larger, more grey one with bright blue veins in it. Though the lion was curious about it, looking at the colored hue gave a very... Foreboding feeling to the gryphon. Like that of observing a corpse. "I..."

"What do you suppose this is?" The larger one thought aloud, nearly biting his tongue again knowing it would cause his friend pain. Yet looking to him for an explanation as 495 panted, squeezing those cyan eyes shut for a moment.

"I... I don't know." The feathered one almost whispered, taking a step closer to the rock and some nearby pickaxes that were left behind. "But why...? These don't even look very used. Why leave in such a hurry? And why...?" A deep stare into that strange cyan glow within the solid material, causing his black plumage to puff out more and more, completely oblivious to the Blazeowl's calls until he felt a large paw on his shoulder. Double taking at the lion as they barely touched snouts.

"Are you okay?" Shaken, the bird took a half-step back.

"...It's something to do with Pals. I just... Don't know what." 495 mumbled. "But it's... It's not good for you."

"Not good for us, you mean?"

"Y-yeah. I just..." The gryphon's gaze rested on that strange rock, stuck on a worried expression.

"We should probably leave it alone then." A faint nod in response as the two rested for a few moments, but the beast spotted something. Moving around the gryphon and digging up a loose chunk of that blue gem and looking at it. "However... Maybe we should ask Anty about it? A

piece of it wouldn't hurt, and it might be valuable." Though it still made the feathered one uncomfortable, 4 nodded regardless. "Just to be certain."

Some muffled coughing caught their attention towards one end of the cave, causing the two to share a look before moving forwards and spotting a hole in the ground. Rustling within it of dirt being pushed aside as something began to scurry out of it back-end first. A dark brown tail not far from its bottom and small legs squeezed out and managed to get its long arms out of the hole too. Clearly wet and still trying to catch its breath, while the larger Pals behind it just shared another look. 495 nodding at Noct, confirming the strange mole was indeed a Fuddler.

...Only for said Fuddler to turn around, yelp really loudly and attempt to dig back into its hole. "W-wait-wait-wait!" The Blazehowl shouted after it. "We're not going to hurt you!" A grumble in disappointment from the lion as he looked at the bird, tossing his muzzle as if to rant his frustrations with smaller pals once again. Turning around and pacing back to the ore while the gryphon took a step back and laid down.

"Excuse me." 495 spoke to the hole after it stopped making noise. "We're not here to hunt or anything. I'm looking for information, specifically about soil." A whimper in question from the dark void in the ground. "We're from the Sanctuary and recently obtained seeds, however we need a different kind of soil for them."

"S-Sanctuary...?" The voice in the hole asked in a muffled voice. Then some digging was heard before those cyan eyes could barely spot a... Nose in the darkness. Being lower to the ground and a few feet away made the bird much less threatening, gently nodding in confirmation. But when the Fuddler didn't continue, 4 did.

"Yes. It's... A gathering place of sorts, a home of pals, made and operated by pals." No response. "The seeds we got were for wheat, which I was... Hoping to grind up for some flour."

"It... Exists?" Though the bird slightly tilted his head, he nodded when he understood. "I thought the Sanctuary was just rumors."

"So did many, but it's not far from here if you want somewhere to feel safe." It was hard to see, but there was a distinct... Not 'mistrust' nor 'doubt' in the mole's expression, but something similar. Something sadder. "But I would really like to know where I could get some loamy soil."

"Loamy?"

"Mostly sand, silt, and a bit of clay mixed into it." Those big yellow eyes crawled a little closer to the exit of the hole. "I was hoping a digger like you might know where I can find some."

"W-well... You will not find it in here, that's for sure. Most of this is gravel and sand." The small one stated. "I-if you're looking for loam soil, you want the stuff grass is growing on-"

"Top soil?" The bird blurted out, instantly hurting his head thinking and giving off caution to the smaller critter. "But... Mo would've known that. There's grass around the Sanctuary."

"H-how close is it to water?" The Fuddler got the attention of those cyan discs as 4 thought about it. "If the soil is too wet, it probably would be okay for some plants but not all."

"Like berries..."

"Or if it's too sandy, like close to a beach." A slow nod from the feathered one, but still pondering where to look. "What you want is top soil, likely further inland. You'll know it when you can clump it together and it'll keep its shape."

"Keep its shape...?"

"L-like rolling it into a lump. If it crumbles apart by itself or if you poke it-" Another slight pain in the bird's head made the small one whimper at the sudden flinch, and even further when 4's expression turned ecstatic.

"It has too much sand in it!" He whispered loudly with excitement, causing the mole to sink deeper in his hole. "If it's too solid, then there's too much clay...!"

"Y...Yes." The Fuddler whined, clearly uncomfortable with what he's witnessing. "Y-you want... Something that you can mold, but will still break apart easily. And nothing from a source too wet."

"Yes! Thank you!" The bird got up to a sitting position and used his forepaw to rest the end of his beak; a 'thinking' gesture that was clearly over the two pal's heads. "So further inland. We can do that. Might have to take some exploring, but perhaps in the red forest?" Another faint whimper from the hole as those discs returned to it. "Thank you, sincerely. We do plan to return to this area for some of this ore here, but if you wish to join the sanctuary, you are more than welcome to."

With no more response, the gryphon turned towards Noct, who was giving him a rather strange look. The black bird tilted his head for a moment but still walking towards the lion. "Is everything okay?"

"Y-yeah, just..." A noise in question from the feathered one. "It's strange seeing you talk about something you barely have a clue about, only to suddenly know it extensively..." A shy look from 495. "And those pains you keep getting..."

"I... I don't know what they are, even when I think about it."

"I guess I just want to make sure you're okay." A slow, almost faint nod from the bird. But the gesture didn't relieve Noct of his worry. "Alright, is there anything else we need here? Besides your hunt."

"I'm... Still working that bit out." Those cyan eyes gazed off to the side, soon getting a small nuzzle from the beast.

"Let's head back then." The larger one bent down to retrieve that cyan stone and carried it in his maw, still making 4 a bit uneasy by looking at it. They had their answers though, so the gryphon didn't protest. Following the lion through the lightly flooded cave and small hall, Noct suddenly stopped in place. Causing the feathered one to double take, and then heard it; through the nervous breaths of the Blazeowl... Running. Panting, and whimpering. All approaching.

"Hide!" 495 whispered, but the lion froze in the small passageway. Unable to move until the gryphon shoved him forwards and snapped Noct out of it. Finding some of the larger sets of rocks and pillars to move behind while the steps came closer and closer. Bipedal, a group of them. At least 3, maybe at most 5, as the two hid out of sight.

One slipped in the gravel, causing something to fly nearby in sight of the two large Pals, putting them on edge as a handbag of sorts came into their view. A slight whimper before a scamper to their feet, leaving it behind- then a gunshot followed by a female human's cry in fear. The bullet clearly hit some rock, but putting the pals on edge. "You don't like listening to instructions, do ya?" The bird could make out a voice within some sort of headpiece, almost making 495 want to peer around the rock, but opting to just try to see through the pillars to witness... Well anything.

Soon though, getting a near snatch at his backend that caused his plumage to puff out and face Noct; gripping the bird's body tightly and shaking his head. Telling him not to look, not to be seen in silence. A gaze filled with worry and firmness. "Somebody's been robbin' our camp lately, so we only want information..." The man continued. "Judging by how often you stranglers tend to run at the first sight of us though... It's hard to tell if you're guilty or just that scared." A few steps and the female whimpered a bit, not answering.

"...That bag. You. Check it." 495 suddenly gazed at the object in the gravel, clearly in view of them and sending some fear in his chest. As footsteps began to close in around the cover the two pals were hiding behind, the lion's claws started to dig in slightly. With a deep breath, one that Noct was not too fond about, the gryphon began to step out- regardless of the whimper in protest.

Spreading those wings and keeping his head low in a prow, 495 let out the deepest, most threatening vocal he could just as the walking person came into view. Instantly making the human yell out in curses and stumbled backwards and grabbing the attention of everyone else. "Oh FAWK!"

"What the hell is that!?" Another cried, three of them carrying clubs while only one seemed to have some kind of pistol. Taking aim at the black gryphon but not firing it, as 4 slowly moved around them, trying to herd them to the entrance of the cave.

"B-b-boss!?" The third nearly whined in his mask as they started to step back, only to hear the growl come from the other side of the pillars; that of the Blazeowl. "S-shiiiiit!!"

"There's another one!?"

"The Fawk is that!?" It only took a moment for one to start running to the exit and the others following without instruction. Including the armed one, shifting his aim between the two until they were cleared. Leaving the pals with a bit of relief, mostly Noct who came around the other side to make sure the gryphon was okay. But those yellow discs ended up spotting the female sitting on the ground; up against the wall and trying to be as still and quiet as possible.

No longer in their threatening stance (though the Blazeowl was still cautious), 4 looked at her. No one he recognized, clothing not of the masked ones nor from the home he grew up in. Just... Different. Reminding him of the rags that Anty was wearing; woven with plants and such. And of course; fearing for her life. Shifting her gaze between the closer gryphon and her bag, one that those blue discs soon pieced together.

Slowly, the bird moved towards the handbag, gently picking it up and instantly getting a growl from Noct. "Four...! What are you doing!?" He half whispered, getting the attention of the bird for a moment with the strap in his beak, but didn't answer. "Leave it!" Another whisper, but the feathered one didn't listen. Instead slowly approach the young girl, despite the vocal whimpers in her breaths.

She looked so small to him. The gryphon always knew he was bigger, even to Allen and Steph, but... Never to this degree. Gently he placed the bag down at her feet and began stepping back.

"Four...!" Another near begging whine from the Blazehowl, but the bird finally listened after a few more steps back. Turning to the lion and pressing heads together in relief.

Until a loud click was heard, once again striking fear in the chest of the feathered one as he turned to face the girl. Now with the strap of her bag around her arm, and both hands on a makeshift pistol. Shaken, frightfully so, especially when the bird began making himself look bigger. Trying his best to shield as much of Noct as he could, without any vocal of threat.

However, when the beast finally understood what the gryphon was trying to do, he stepped over the closest wing, pressed down on 4's shoulders, and stepped over the bird to try and protect him instead. The three having a stare-off as the female slowly got to her feet and aimed the makeshift pistol at the two. Taking a step to the cave entrance, shaken to the point of almost crying while the two just stared at each other. Trying to keep their stone composure.

Each step closer to the exit came easier and easier. And once the two pals were hidden behind cover, they heard her take off running again. Without a single shot fired. A large sigh of relief left the two as the Blazehowl dropped all of his weight onto the black bird, forcing 4 to lay his back half down too. Landing that warm muzzle onto the feathered neck and resting there for a moment. Eventually getting up and taking that gemstone once again, this time without a single word. Leaving the cave after making sure it was clear, but 495 could tell something was wrong. Looking back over the area again before following the beast back outside, and through the small stone tunnel on the way back home.

Chapter 5

He could tell the Blazeowl was angry... Or something along those lines, as they made their way out of the stone tunnel and into the opened area. The place where they first saw the abandoned human equipment. Staying several steps back until 4 saw the beast set the gemstone down and sit in the opened area. Head a little bit low, horns hidden within that bright mane as the gryphon slowed to a stop. Taking a breath himself and slowly approaching Noct, sitting beside him while the wind blew, covering the bird with a rather... Large amount of heat.

He wanted to say something to the lion, but every time something came to mind, it never felt quite right. He wanted to ask what exactly was wrong, but he half knew. The Blazeowl didn't like conflict, 4 knew that much. But there was something deeper than that- "What is... **Wrong** with you..." It was barely a question, and the bird could tell there was a lot of anger being held back from the beast's vocal.

"Hey..." The gryphon started, but not really getting a response. "We're safe now, okay?"

"For how long?" The larger one grumbled. "We could've gotten out there without being seen, but you had to announce yourself to them-!?"

"How could we? They were going to retrieve that bag, they would've seen us-"

"You don't know that-"

"I do!" The gryphon hissed, actually getting angry himself. "I can understand them, Noct! I can hear what they're saying!"

"It's just gibberish-!"

"It's words! It's a language, just like what we're speaking now!" The Blazeowl only shook his head in response. "I didn't have a choice, Noct-"

"We could've...! Snuck out when they weren't looking."

"No." The bird tried to look at those twin suns. "No, we could not have. We would've been seen, and their only method of retreat would've been blocked. They would've tried to fight if we tried that- and running away would've only made them think we could be intimidated-"

"So now they think we're a threat and will likely hunt us down!? That's better!?"

"I had to do something! They were going to hurt her!" Those wet golden discs stared at the bird in disbelief.

"...Then let them!" Noct hissed. "Let them kill each other, Violence is the only thing they know!" 495's head lowered. "They're not worth putting yourself in harm's way!"

"...They don't deserve that."

"They are the source of all our problems." The Blazehowl growled. "The only reason why the Sanctuary even exists is because of them. It's a Safe Haven away from Humans." No response from the bird as that gaze just focused on the ground in front of him. Making the lion shake his head as the memory of when their first night together echoed in his mind. ("Four... Nine... Five? Such a name sounds... Objectified, if you know what I mean. Like, you were seen more as an object to whoever gave it to you.") Making the present beast exhale through his muzzle. "...Son of a Tombat..."

"What?"

"They named you." The gryphon's expression sorrowed. "They gave you the name 4-9-5, didn't they?" It was hard to look Noct in the eyes, but 4 did and slowly nodded in near defeat. The Blazehowl releasing a long breath of almost remorse before adjusting himself to hug the gryphon; with his neck behind the bird's own. "Whatever they did for you... Whatever they did to you, you should leave it behind. You need to *abandon* it, and this... way of thinking that they deserve to be saved."

"Noct..."

"Please... For everyone's safety." The beast nearly whispered, his grip around that feathered chest growing tighter. "Especially yours." For a few moments they stayed there in silence, until some gunshots were heard, far enough not to grab their attentions. "...We should get back, warn them of the new habitat-"

"Camp..." 495 mumbled sadly. "...They call it an Encampment." A muzzle-sigh from the lion as he just curled his neck around the bird's.

The gryphon waited outside of the gates, staring out at the waters in the distance while the noises of the pals inside the Sanctuary's fort walls could be heard. Hoping that the clear air and mid-day scene would help him think a little while the Blazeowl reported their findings. However, the weight of that encounter was still heavy on 4 as he replayed it over and over in his mind.

...The way back was quiet, both of them knew that they just needed some time to relax. But the gryphon was left with a lot of questions... Was Noct right about the humans? They are dangerous, that's for sure, but so are Pals. The bird could sympathize, stuck in a series of islands full of creatures that reappear constantly. Some preying in the night, while others stalk in the plant life. Humans have a right to be scared, to be aggressive first, and not show any mercy.

The more the bird thought about it, the deeper the feeling in his chest got. Overwhelming so that he didn't even notice Darvis waddle over. "Is everything okay?" A sudden jerk from the black one was half expected from the large guard; difficulty telling who actually was bigger whereas the Penking seemed to be... 'Well dressed' for lack of a better word.

"Y-yes. We just... Encountered some humans while we were out." 4 mumbled. "They have an encampment nearby."

"A what?" Darvis asked, but immediately answered himself. "Oh, a flock."

"K-kind of, yes."

"Is anyone hurt?" The gryphon paused for a moment before shaking his head.

"No... Not physically anyway. Just... Spooked, I think."

"What do you mean?" Darvis asked in a lower voice, but not quite getting an answer from the black one. "Everyone in here has encountered them in some way, save for maybe the Vixy."

"Rooth."

"Yeah. She's quite a sweetheart but a little naive to the dangers of them." The blue bird chuckled. "All I'm saying is, we've all been there if you're shaken up. They'll understand if you need some space."

"I-it's not... Exactly that." 495 mumbled a bit, taking too long to find the words.

"I lost... My flock to them." Attention from those blue eyes as the Penking's own large black discs stared out to the distance. A much more gruff and serious vocal coming from the guard. "They were not my kin, but they were my family. While I was out foraging, I heard those bangs. Rushed back as fast as I could, took down one of them, but my flock was taken away." A deep exhale. "I spent moons tracking them down, from one... What did you call it?"

"Encampment?"

"Yeah, from one to another. Often teaming up with other pals trying to find their own loved ones." A strange... Flipper? On the black one's shoulder was felt; not quite hand, not quite wing. "Believe me when I say that we all have our stories. Many of which are tragic, very few have good outcomes."

"...Did you ever find them?" 4 couldn't help but look at Darvis, then back inside the sanctuary at the Pengullet within. Getting a head shake in response from the Penking saying that Callider was not one of them, and causing those black wings to fall. Then notice a familiar dark flamed mane heading towards the gate at the corner of his eye.

"...Maybe someday I'll tell you, but for now, know that we've all been there. We've all felt that fear, and it has shaped us." A pat on the shoulder from the... Appendage. "The only one who seems to have overcome it is Anty. Since you've been out with him... You know."

"Yes... I do."

"Maybe you can get him to open up about it then. It's a touchy subject around here, and Anty hasn't been too vocal about Humans. I think it's probably because of the trades he's been making." A nod in response to Darvis' whispers as the Blazehowl approached. "Maybe he can give you some perspective."

"I'll... Keep that in mind. Thank you." 495 mumbled, keeping his attention on Noct who didn't seem interested in their conversation, but was looking to the gryphon. "Are you okay?" He asked while the Penking excused himself.

"I'm... Not sure." The beast mumbled, sitting beside the black feathered one. "They took the information, will likely gather up a squad within the next day or two. Might need someone to watch the habitat-"

"Camp." The gryphon corrected him with a sad smile, almost chuckling at the snout toss.

"Whatever..." Noct grumbled, and sighed. "I'm... Exhausted."

"You should rest."

"I don't sleep, 4. And I don't have a bed anymore-"

"Then take mine." The feathered bird said more sternly, actually getting the lion to stop for a moment and look at him. "I'll be fine for a few to several hours. Get some rest, Noct." Those golden suns studied the gryphon for a few moments before caving in and nodding.

"Where will you be?"

"Just out here. In the open. You might be able to even see me at the top of the steps there anyway." A bit of worry from the Blazehowl. "I'm going to try something, but it will not involve conflict. Darvis said he'll keep a watch on me anyway. So will Harater." That beak gestured to an old stone tower of sorts, and a Nox watching over the area. "Please, Noct?"

"Okay... Okay. I will. But... Just be careful, alright? No more risks today, and no more saving... People."

"I won't."

Chapter 6

The pink sky was starting to show in the clouds as the black gryphon rested on the massive rocks. Acting like a second wall quite a bit in front of the Sanctuary's, and a good resting spot for the bird to overlook the area and rest. Admiring the view of the beach, the calming waters, the small patches of land that emerged through the blue liquids, and the island to the east.

495 had no idea if it would actually work; occasionally keeping an eye on a pattern of rocks just inside the shoreline. Placed together in a large V with the point directed deeper into the waters, but the most the bird could hope for is that the tides would pull back for the evening. And by his judgement over the last two hours, he thought it just might, which means 4 might get lucky.

The large one felt like he needed this. A session of peace. A few hours to stop and reflect on everything that's happened, and unwind from all the stress. But the encounter today shook him mentally, wondering if what Noct said was true or was the Blazeowl just shaken as well at that time.

The warm winds passed over as the black bird took a deep breath, letting his feathers dance a little by the caressing breeze. As if knowing of the whirlwind in his mind and trying to slow it down, if there was any slowing it down. Making the gryphon sigh and not notice that someone was climbing the very rocks as well, with surprising ease as the Blazeowl's head was soon seen peering up before climbing. 495 scooching over a step as if to invite the beast beside him, and Noct took it. Though, not without giving the large bird a hug from behind first, making 4 chuckle. "Have a good rest?"

"Yes... Wow, did I ever need that." Noct exhaled, not letting go just yet. Not that the gryphon minded. "I can't remember the last time I actively slept."

"You sound better."

"Yeah... I'm sorry." A noise in question from the bird. "I... You were right, I was stressed and I couldn't see it. And I may... Have said a lot of things that I now regret not putting proper phrasing to, either to you or to others." A slow nod from the feathered one. "So, I'm sorry. About today."

"That's... Fine." The hug was released as the lion laid down beside him, those curious yellow discs held a concern as 495 exhaled.

"You don't sound fine." No real response from the bird, but Noct could sense that the slightly smaller one didn't really know. "...One of those things I regret about today is... When we left that cave. After that..."

"Event?" A faint nod from the beast.

"I... Told you to abandon this idea of trying to save them, the humans." A frown from the Blazehowl. "Though I still think it is the best course of action in terms of your, and our, survival... I didn't even consider your feelings about it."

"What do you mean?"

"As in... Why would you try to save them?" Noct sincerely asked, rather softly as well. Giving the bird a few moments to talk but not quite getting anything. "Ever since they appeared... They've caused nothing but damage to our habitat. They've hunted our kind for what seems like sport, not survival. I've heard many stories about how they abused Pals, harvested them-"

"I know!" The gryphon snapped in a whisper, looking away and squeezing his eyes shut. "I know what they've been doing! I've seen it with my own eyes, was warned about them again and again- both by Pals and humans! I've been told not to trust them, to avoid them, to see them not as family, but I just...!" A quivering breath as the Blazehowl frowned, placing a paw on that feather back as those wings drooped in sorrow.

"...Family...?" The lion spoke, only to get the bird's head to just fall to the ground in defeat. Releasing an exhale himself, Noct rested his own head onto the feathered neck. "I'm sorry. I often forget that you... Were with them at some point."

"I'm just... Caught in between everything, Noct." 495 admitted, trying not to sob but with many tears running down his beak. "I don't know what to do... They're just scared, trapped here and surrounded by what they call monsters. To us, they're invaders, and rightfully so. Unable to understand each other- yet I'm the only one who can...!"

"Did they... Do something to you? Up on that mountain?" No real response but a heavy exhale from the bird.

"Noct..." Another breath in defeat. "I... I don't know. My life was up there, my entire life, and I was set free in hopes for a better one."

"Set free?"

"Against protocol."

"Against what?"

"As in... Illegally." That curious stare from the lion didn't lift. "It was not something my caretaker was supposed to do. To the point where he could be punished for it, but it was either that, or I was going to die..." The gryphon attempted to look at the beast. "Maybe humans have done some terrible things... Maybe most of them have, but not all of them. Allen gave me the chance at having a better life out here... Even if it's harsh, unforgiving, and cold compared to what I was given in there, I'm thankful for what he did." As much as Noct wanted to speak, he restrained himself for now as the bird looked off into the distance. Spotting the smoke from that encampment somewhat nearby. "I... Know they're not all like that. Deep down, I know...! And maybe I'm just being naive, but... How many more Allens are really out there? How many people that actually want to care and take the effort to get along rather than live in constant fear of monsters?"

"Four..."

"I really should get rid of that name..." The feathered one whimpered. "It is very... Objectified, as you said."

"What was it?"

"4-9-5? Just a... Serial number, I think. We all had one, maybe to just keep track of everything."

"One that Allen gave you?" The beast asked, almost feeling the gryphon's heart sink.

"...No." A sniff. "Allen always wanted to call me something else, I could feel it. But that was against Protocol as well." A grunt of discomfort as a slight pain in the bird's head. "They... Didn't want our caretakers to treat us like pets. To get too attached... But Allen did anyway." A moment of silence as the feathered one exhaled in defeat. "What's the right answer...? To exterminate the humans out of these lands, culling even the very ones who are kind and trusted?"

"Four..."

"I can't tell... I can't tell anymore. I look more like a Pal, but I feel like I have a closer connection with humans. I know more about them and their way of life, and I know there's good there... But at the risk of Pals being kept in a grinder of endless suffering..." 495 took a breath, trying not to lose his composure completely. "What's the right answer, Noct?"

Several moments of silence as the lion just held him from behind. "...I don't know." Noct finally spoke. "...I'm not even sure Anty would have an answer to that, but like you he seems to sympathize with the humans more than most." A bit of an uncomfortable whine from the bird at the thought of having a conversation with the boss about a sensitive subject. "Though he tends to disappear towards the evenings, nobody's sure where he-"

"Anty? He's just down there." The gryphon stated, feeling the beast double take at him. Watching a black talon gesture outwards, getting the Blazeowl still on top of him to look in the direction. Spotting the jackal on a very small and nearby island with some ruins, sitting down calmly. "He's been there for the last hour or so. Occasionally... Dancing? Practicing form maybe?"

"Dancing...?"

"It must be some kind of religious ritual, but I... Actually don't know much about him." The bird admitted, his mood lighting up a little with the lion still over him. "When I try to think about him... My head doesn't hurt, but I don't recall any information. Only one other Pal I've met did the same."

"Which one?"

"...Frostallion." A noise in question from the beast. "She was like... A large ice horse with wings."

"What's a horse?"

"E-erm...I-I more or less mean in terms of body shape. Quadruped, but with a much longer snout and head. Hooves, usually taller."

"Like a Pyrin?" Noct asked.

"Yes... Yes, actually. Though probably closer to a Univolt." A long vocal in understanding.

"I've never heard or even seen a cryst Univolt or Pyrin before. Let alone with wings."

"Yeah... Neither have I, but Anty seemed to know her." 495 mumbled a bit quietly. "...Almost personally."

"He hasn't talked about his past too much, but with everything he does for the Sanctuary, it is quite understandable." A soft noise in agreement from the gryphon. "He looks like he's heading back now though, if you're waiting to talk to him."

"I-I wasn't up here for that specifically." 4 mumbled again, almost feeling the curious stare from those twin suns before meeting them. Getting a worried look from the Blazehowl that morphed into shyness.

"O-oh... Did... Did I disturb your-?"

"Noct? Oh-no no no no. That just came from waiting." That saddened look from the lion didn't falter. "I was actually up here for that." Another point to the rocks within the shoreline; the ones shaped into a large V.

"...What is that?"

"I... Y-you know how I randomly know things, right?"

"Yes. Concerningly so."

"Well, when coming down the mountain, I randomly found a small book. Tattered, with some writing in it." A nod from the beast and a gesture for him to continue. "It was written by a human, I could tell that, but I couldn't make out the writings. However, there were some drawings in there for many different things. Knots for ropes, ways to weave branches and leaves together."

"Wait, pictures? For what exactly?"

"I... I think it was an old survival guide someone made, or started to." The gryphon paused, looking down at the small formation of rocks. "One of them was for catching fish. Usually humans get this... String on a stick and try to catch fish with it, but there was a suggestion to place down rocks in a shape like that. When the tide comes in, the fish don't pay it any mind. But when the waters go back out with the tide..." A blank stare from those yellow eyes as Noct looked back and forth between the shore and the bird.

"I'm not following, I'm afraid."

"They would get stuck within the formation of rocks."

"Stuck? Why would they be stuck when they can just swim over..." 495 could see the gears turning in the Blazehowl's head. "Because the shore drains out the water and they become stuck-?"

"W-well, the shore doesn't drain the water. The ocean just moves due to the gravitational pull of the moon." A blank stare from Noct as the statement was clearly over his head. Looking to the sky where some part of the moon was slightly visible.

"...So the Moon is a water type?" A chuckle from the bird as 4 shook his head. "I'm afraid you've lost me there."

"I-it's okay. All that we need to know is that the tides of the ocean move in and out. I can't even give you a proper timeframe because it shifts throughout the year." A blank stare from the beast. "M-my point is, right now the tide retreats in the evenings. So that was my best bet to try this method."

"Because fish...?"

"Need to be submerged in water in order to survive- H-have you never seen a fish before?" A shy whine from the Blazehowl in admission and 4 just chuckled. "It's okay, there's not really too many around... And I don't think any Pal looks like one. The closest I can think of is a Surfent or Celaray."

"I've seen them out on land though."

"Yes, they're not quite fish. Kelpsea are quite close too." The gryphon got up and stretched. "Let's go to see if we got lucky."

"And you're sure that Ongito will even like these?"

"I'm positive he will. It may not be what he had in mind, but it will be easier. T-though maybe it's better if Venara cooks it."

"Likely for the best, yes." Noct lightly laughed and got up as well, leading the way down and around the barrier of large rocks to the beach area. Spotting the jackal nearby and approaching him slowly.

"How did the scouting go?" Anty asked in his own half-'commanding' way.

"It went... Well." The Blazehowl admitted, though a bit nervously as he looked at 495, causing the anthro to do the same.

"We got the information we wanted: found some ores and a location of where we can get the soil, but we... Encountered some humans in the process." A concerned look from those blue eyes, specifically on Noct and the lion shook his head.

"W-we didn't really engage, but..."

"They needed to be scared off." The gryphon admitted. "Non-violently."

"Good." Anty exhaled, then looked to the west where the black smoke trail was in the sky. "I spotted that this afternoon. They've never been this close to the Sanctuary." A worried half-whimper from the larger beast.

"What... Do you want us to do...?"

"I'm going to return and warn everyone. Tell them 'We are not to engage and doing so will only make us a threat to them'." The two larger ones nodded faintly. "If we lay low, avoid their patrols, we shouldn't be spotted. The forge will need to remain out until they're gone, maybe even the campfire too."

"That's alright." Noct answered, still a little nervous about all this.

"Was there anything else to report?" The lion and gryphon looked at each other.

"We found something." 495 answered. "Some kind of cyan gemstone that I don't recognize. They were mining it almost a decade ago, but productions seemed to seize since. The place is abandoned, save for some pals that live within the cave systems they made."

"A blue...?" Anty lightly questioned in ponder.

"A very light blue one. We managed to find a chunk of it and I left it near your quarters." The Blazehowl informed, slightly shaking his muzzle. "Maybe it's just be being spooked, but there's something... Funny about it. It feels... Cold?"

"Cold?"

"I don't know how else to explain it. But my tongue felt like it was losing a little feeling while in contact with it." The jackal tilted his head slightly at Noct's statement, then pieced together that's how the lion carried it. "But that is all."

"Alright. Will you be returning to base soon?"

"Y-yes, I just want to check something." That canine's gaze didn't lift off the bird, making 4 whimper shyly. "I... Attempted to fish."

"Fish?"

"Y-yes. Ongito wanted some meat and instead of going hunting, I wanted to try..."

"Fishing?" The jackal seemed to be even more confused, making the gryphon whine a little.

"You found a line while you were out?"

"A-a line? -Oh! N-no, just made a little trap to see if I could catch anything." A gesture towards the shore, getting the anthro to look but not spot anything specific from his location. "I-it's... Just a series of rocks, I'm not sure if I even did it correctly."

"Rocks...?"

"We'll be back shortly afterwards though." Noct added, but the jackal seemed a little lost in memory for a moment. Nodding while still keeping an eye on the shore before moving around them.

"Alright. I'll tell Darvis, try not to be too long, it will be dark soon."

"Y-yes."

"Will do." The Blazeowl gave a solid nod and the two waited, sharing a worried look before back to the sky where the smoke could be seen. "Four..."

"It'll be alright, Noct." The bird assured him softly. "They don't stay in one place for long."

"But... What if they come out here next?" The beast asked, getting a more saddened look from the bird as those blue eyes looked past the lion. Taking a pause for his head to hurt and hearing the larger one make a vocal of concern. "...What came to mind?"

The dreadful expression over the gryphon's face told him it wasn't good, following 495's stare towards the walls of the actual Sanctuary past the rocks. "...That their first order would be to make a shelter. And why bother making walls when you can just..." An almost whine from the Blazeowl. "...Take."

"Four... The people there are not fighters."

"I know. I wasn't going to suggest we defend it." Another pain in the gryphon's head as he looked around. "But it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a place to retreat. An escape plan of sorts."

"A place to start over...?"

"A place to hide. They won't stay there for long. I'm... Not sure what they're after, but once all the Pals in this area have fled, they'll have to move." An exhale from the bird. "It's such a horrible thing to think about; what they're doing to them. Outside of Harvesting them, they've been shipping them to different locations."

"Do you... Know where? Or what for?" 4 didn't answer. "N-nevermind, I'm sorry. I... I don't think I could handle it anyway." A moment of silence as that cyan gaze fell.

"Nothing's coming to mind, aside from stories I've heard, witnessed, and speculation."

"That's probably for the best." The beast took a step closer and sat down, pulling the large bird in for an embrace which 4 did not struggle against. Instead holding him back. "Maybe... They just won't come this way."

"I... Hope so." A breath for the gryphon to harden himself. "But it is best to be prepared." A pause, but he felt the lion nod. They squeezed their arms around each other's torso, with 4 breathing a little easier with the Blazeowl's mane against him. Holding on for several moments before giving the larger beast a few taps on the back. "Okay. Let's... Let's go see if I got lucky."

"Just... A moment longer?" The bird chuckled in response, squeezing a little tighter.

Chapter 7

"Okay... I think I'm satisfied." Noct half joked as he felt the gryphon smile, giving a solid nod as they let go and began walking to the beach again. "I'm... Sorry, I just-"

"D-don't be." 495 bashfully chuckled as they started walking side by side. "It's alright, and I... I like the hugs." The shyness of the beast through that colorful mane was quite noticeable. "I imagine you've... Wanted to do that with someone for a while."

"...Yes. But..." The Blazehowl looked towards the direction of the Sanctuary, mostly making out the stone watchtower in the shape of a 'Rook' [The chest piece, not the Bird]. "Everyone in there is either too small, or..."

"Afraid of you." That shyness faded from his mane. "But only because they don't know you."

"Or they only know what they've been told." The lion spoke with a defeated sigh, feeling the bird's talon on his shoulder stopping him in place gently.

"Noct... That is a two way street." The beast tilted his head in puzzlement at such a weird statement. "Erm... Double-edged sword?" Those twin suns blinked at 4. "I-it's a two-way effort."

"I'm not following." The Blazehowl stated bluntly.

"What I mean is, have you made the effort in attempting to... Make them less frightened of you?" A snort from the lion.

"Four, I haven't done anything to them."

"So, nothing?"

"Aside from stepping on Ongito that one time, no." It was the gryphon's turn to stare blankly at him, watching the beast curl his neck before 495 added a head gesture to lead him on. "I told you about that incident, didn't I-?"

"Yes, but what did you do?"

"I... Stepped on him-?"

"I meant afterwards, Noct." The bird chuckled, getting a playful grumble from the slightly larger one.

"I... Panicked? Froze in place while people crowded around him to give the rascal aid."

"But you never apologized?" Those golden discs hardened, knowing exactly where the bird was going with this now. Showing some guilt in the process. "Never did anything for them-?"

"I work all day giving them metals-"

"In a gesture of kindness?" The beast's maw was left open for a moment, exhaling a grumble soon after. Looking away and didn't notice the bird scanning the beach nearby. Spotting a small hole in the sand that was flooded with water, and giving that broad shoulder a nudge. "Follow me."

"Hm?" Noct's noise in question didn't get a response, doing the suggestion otherwise, even though it wasn't the direction they were going. Hearing that painful grunt from 495 that grew more and more concerning to the lion. "Four?"

"I don't know much about the Volcano area. Judging by the name and the fact that the humans call it Mount Obsidian, I can only imagine the dangers there were growing up in such a place."

"There's... Some natural dangers, sure. But I actually feel the humans here are much worse."

"And you don't have them there." The gryphon spoke as if he knew, giving the beast a look of worry. "The area is just too hostile, and humans are very prone to heat stroke."

"What?"

"When their bodies get overheated and cannot cool themselves off." The feathered one explained, reaching the puddle and sitting next to it, motioning Noct to do the same on the other side. "When they cannot get cooled, they start getting headaches, dizziness, nausea."

Passing out and leaving them vulnerable. You haven't had humans to worry about there because-

"They... Can't survive."

"At least, they haven't found a way to yet." The gryphon looked up to the snowy peak of where he came, making Noct do the same while he heard the heavy breath. "They found a way to deal with the extreme cold of the mountain tops by keeping themselves warm and insulated. It'll only be a matter of time before they find a way to keep themselves cool."

"Four..."

"My point is, I don't know a lot about it. But the Pals in this area are all different from the ones in your homeland, yes?"

"...Yes."

"Because, like humans, they cannot survive the heat well. So therefore the most they would hear are stories about what lives up there." The gryphon gestured to the puddle and Noct looked down to see... Himself. A dark navy beast with horns and curved fangs. The panthera muzzle accompanied by the heavy mane of calm flames; hues of cyan, violet and magenta that shifted around while licking the air. Nearly covering the small pair of wings along the beast's shoulders that added the same effect.

The more he looked at it, the more his reflection frowned. Almost frightening the golden eyes that stared back at him while that mane puffed out. Making the Blazehowl lean back slowly before catching those blue eyes studying him. "Fear..." The gryphon started. "Is a natural response to everything living. Especially those around here. It comes in many different forms, be it fears of certain creatures, fears of the dark, fears of-" Some gunshots in the distance, still quite far away but getting the attention of the two for a long moment before returning their gaze at each other.

"I..."

"Noct, how often have you seen fire in this area since you arrived?" A sad but puzzled look from the lion as he thought for a moment. Back home, it was very common. Not everywhere, but whatever the rivers of magma touched seemed to cause some sort of flame. Though often short lived.

"Not... Much. Maybe some Foxsparks like Venara or Roobies. I also think I saw some flaming goat on my way here."

"So, very uncommon... Unless you count the Foxspark sneezes and them starting wildfires. From which, those who don't often see fire and cannot stand the heat..." 4 lead on.

"Are... Frightened of it." Another look down at the puddle, spotting the same flaming lion staring back at him. "And something covered in this amount of fire..."

"Let alone a different color, it will provoke those same fears naturally." The gryphon got up and moved to sit beside the beast. "But when I came here and accidentally ran into you on my first real day, you were kind to me. Why-?"

"Yeah, because you were scary." That broke 495 down into chuckles at how blunt Noct was. Hearing the Blazehowl snort in response. "I'm serious, I've never seen anything like you before. I never seen anything bigger than me before!"

"Yet, you didn't think the same for the smaller ones?"

"Of course not. They were... Different, sure, but they kinda reminded me of Gobfins. Annoying red buggers-" Another loud chuckle from the feathered one, making the beast smile. "But... That night after, I wasn't expecting you in my break-spot. To the point where I was just going to find another until you spotted me." Noct admitted, getting shy again. "I... Recognized that same look you had before noticing I was there; one of anxiety." He felt the bird lean against him, prying a smile out of that feline muzzle. "I thought... Maybe you were like me. And I really... Really could use another like me around here."

A slow nod as the Blazehowl wrapped an arm around the feathered shoulders. "...You know what they could use?" An immediate groan from the beast.

"Don't say it."

"Someone like you too." The bird spoke as a growl that morphed into a shy whine. "Someone big, intimidating, smart- if not a bit unaware." A playful grumble from the larger one. "Most importantly: someone reliable and caring." Then a whine in disappointment from the beast, making 4 chuckle.

"But... They already don't like me-"

"Only because they don't know you." A shy whine as that snout attempted to look away, only to be gently brought back nearly to meet with that beak. "Two Way Effort: if they get the chance to know you, they will like you. But you need to put just as much effort into it as they do." A sigh in defeat from the beast. "...And if they still don't like you then they are Gobfins." The two chuckled at the joke. Shaking his head, Noct sighed.

"...Alright. I'll try." He soon felt 495's head bunt gently underneath his neck and jaw, causing his own to curl around it the best he can. "For you and the sake of everyone there."

"If we're going to make this haven safe, we need to remove tension from one another. All of us need to." The larger beast slightly whimpered in discomfort while those feathers rubbed against his mane. "But I'll be right there with you, okay?"

"O-okay." A quick hug from the Blazeowl before feeling the gryphon wiggle slightly out of it, only enough to embrace him back. Only lasting a few moments before they let go nearly in sync.

"Good. Now, let's see how this trap did." A light noise in question, but one that was answered when the black bird began moving towards the shore. Causing the lion to nod again and follow, but before they approached, 4 gave a strange signal to him. Whispering a shhh while extending a digit upwards close to the end of his beak. To be... Silent? But why?

Noct didn't argue, but instead just followed the gryphon's lead from a few steps behind. Watching the feathered one nearly prowl closer as he did the same within the sticky sand. Spotting the series of rocks shaped into a point leading outwards into the deeper waters. The waves getting lower, barely covering the makeshift 'fence' when it attempted to reaching the beaches. And the closer the lion went, the more he could see... Movement within them?

Creatures. Small little things without limbs, but fins? Attempting to squeeze through the very small gaps between the set stones without leaving the waters. Searching desperately to find a way to escape, moreso when the 'black titan' came closer with a faint smile on his beak. It... Worked. They're not super big, but the trap did actually work.

Quietly the bird approached, taking a silent breath and lifting a paw. Focusing on one for a moment and standing completely still, to the point where Noct was just about to ask what he was doing. Only for that talon to reach out and snatch one of the fish from the small pool of water, sending the others into a panic while the grabbed one squirmed about. Impaled by the large black claws while 495 struggled to contain himself. Nearly whispering 'I'm Sorry' several times as the sea creature slowed down more and more, until...

Yet, all the Blazeowl could do was watch and look at the fish as the gryphon set it down in the sand. Reflecting on the very first time Noct had to take the life of another in order to not starve... And how much his own brother scolded him for being too sensitive. With a quiet breath himself, the lion took a step forward closer to the bird and rested a paw on that feathered shoulder. Trying to silently help him through the pain that toll nature often demanded. Spotting 4 nod silently, almost in a form of Thank You before raising another paw up. Ready for another snatch.

"Are you okay?" The Blazeowl asked, walking slowly on the open beach back to the sanctuary. Alongside the black bird who's pretty much been silent since, and getting the expected nod. "The... First time is always hard. Even knowing that they'll come back, it doesn't really make it easier." No response. "I'm... Surprised you reacted a lot like I did on my first hunt. Most predators enjoy it, and I could never understand how..."

"...They don't."

"You haven't met my brother." Noct snorted.

"N-no, I mean... They won't come back." A noise in question as the gryphon stopped and looked away. Causing the lion to do the same, but instead look back at 495. "They..."

"What do you mean?" Silence, but he could feel this weight when looking in the blue discs from afar. "Four, everything from here comes back. It's just how it is, they might not remember everything, but I always thought that was a good thing-"

"Pals come back, Noct." The bird said thickly, still avoiding the gaze of those suns. "Only..."

"Four...?" With no response, the beast moved towards the large bird and placed a large paw on that feathered shoulder. "Four, look at me." It took a few moments, but the gryphon eventually did. Meeting that sad smile with a frown that turned a bit awkward. Having a hard time to hang onto the gloom when the caught fish were impaled on Noct's large horns, making the Blazeowl look... Unusually silly. "It'll be alright."

"I'm sorry." The bird whimpered, embarrassed. "I was so caught up on How I was going to catch the fish that I didn't think to prepare for when I did." A chuckle from the beast. "I should've brought a basket or something."

"A what?"

"A-a basket?" A blank stare from the lion. "L-like a bucket?" A couple of blinks. "I-I've seen a couple of crates and boxes in the Sanctuary-"

"Oh, those." He attempted to look back at the fish attached onto his horns, to no avail. "I don't think that would've really helped here anyway. Often enough ores aren't big enough without them falling in the holes of wooden crates."

"I-it's just... You've really never heard of a basket or a bucket before?" A head shake in response, and the gryphon thought for a moment. Getting a bit of a pain in his head. "What do you use to hold the water then? To cool off the ores?"

"Ingots." He corrected. "And I use an old trough that was built for collecting rainwater. Darvis fills it up every day for me if it gets low." Noct answered, getting a strange look from the bird, but one of half understanding. "I guess I just never heard those other terms before, but I'm kinda new to all of this... Work. Smithing or otherwise."

"That makes sense..." 4 mumbled. "When... I think about them- really think about them, it's all new to me too. But instinctively... I felt like I've been using them all my life."

"Maybe you used it in a past life?" The gryphon wasn't sure how to answer that, coming dangerously close to a sensitive subject that he just was not ready to bring up again. "Some Pals learn things from their previous lives, without any experience with them."

"I..." The bird started, provoking a head tilt from the lion that nearly shifted one of the smaller fish from the end of the horn, nearly falling off as the gryphon reached for it mid-fall. But required to move forwards in order to reach it, and Noct to move his head back at the sudden rush-!

495 did manage to catch the fish, but not without pressing his beak against that beast's nose. A long pause was left as the two remained still, blushing heavily while staring into each other's eyes; 'snouts' connect and holding breaths. The warmth/coolness from their connection creating a [metaphorical] charge at the meeting point, as if some kind of switch went off in their chests. Fluttering both their hearts as they started breathing again, but 4 pulled away first. Showing the fish that was falling off and the beast faintly nodded, turning his head and offering that horn so the caught game would be placed back on.

An awkward silence fell between the two as they were not really sure how to respond. Noct eventually signaling back to the Sanctuary and the gryphon nodded. The two walked for a bit while their feelings calmed down, in silence until the lion spoke up. "Have you... Thought about your name any? What you wanted or wanted to avoid?"

A bit of a pause before the bird's vocal cracked- instantly clearing his throat... Twice, before finally answering. "Well... I don't think I want a human sounding name. That would probably make a lot of Pals uncomfortable, and..."

"It would make you feel sad?" A slow nod from 495, getting one back in understanding. "I don't think any of us know what a human name even sounds like."

"D-depends on the region."

"You mean which island they're from?"

"Kiiiind of? The world outside here is massively bigger than this archipelago." He expected the blank look from the beast. "A-a group of islands in a relatively small geographical area."

"Ah. And that's where their return-point is?"

"Return point?" 495 questioned.

"You know, when they die? They get put back into the world?" It was the feathered one's turn to be a little confused, and almost saddened. "If I died here, 4, I wouldn't return here. I'd return back in the Volcano area. That's just how things are; we all have our own spaces in the world."

"And you think that humans...?"

"They keep coming in from the coast, that's what other Pals say. As well as a lot of their objects." Noct stated, but that was what the bird's mind told him as well. However... "Anyway, we should really try for a name. I'll try to think of a few to start out and we'll work from there."

"O-okay."

"Why wheat though?" The penguinlet asked, munching on some baked berries. Sitting in the grassy corner within the wall's shelter with four others. "I've had grass before, it's not great."

"Isn't wheat different from grass?" Heffer, the Lifmunk, added.

"It is, yes." The Depresso answered lackadaisically. "Mo told me you could do more with it."

"You can." Harater informed, pawing to adjust his cloak. "Knowing that bird though, he's got something planned..." It was hard to tell if the Nox's tone should be taken with worry or not. Making the Cattiva a bit nervous and sigh.

"I just don't want all this work to be for nothing. Odds are we can just use this soil for something else, right?" A half whimper as the pink cat laid backwards in the grass, feeling a bit sore and closing his eyes for a moment. Barely noticing the approach of two larger ones, and only really detecting the strange light/warmth of the beast. Nearly making the feline panic and scamper back a bit. "W-what?"

"Oh, you two are back?" The small blue bird asked.

"Again?" Harater added, actually getting a puzzled look from the others.

"Yes." 495 started, looking over them but resting his eyes on Ongito.

"What's with the pail?" The Depresso barely asked as Noct put it down. Allowing them to see a series of... Small sticks peering above it.

"Bucket." The Blazehowl half grumbled at the object. More towards the gryphon who only smiled at him. "Apparently this has a few different names, I just never knew them."

"Ongito." 4 started again, getting a whimper from the small cat. "I know I said I would get you a steak, but... It was harder to do that today. And I don't think it would be healthy for you."

"W-what...?"

"You said you would get him something!" The Pengullet pouted.

"The way your teeth are designed would not perform well when it comes to tearing apart meat. Thick meats, specifically." The bird continued, looking over the bucket and pulling out a stick with his beak. Revealing a small cooked 'fish', that was hard to tell what it looked like before being crisped. "I want you to try this instead." The black feathered one gently leaned forwards for the feline to cautiously take hold. Looking over the strange food that was mostly cooled down by now.

"What... Is it?" Ongito looked at the large ones for answers, then the others. Not really getting a response except for the violet fox who took a breath.

"Try it." The Nox confidently suggested, getting a worried look from the Cattiva but soon giving it a big bite-! Freezing in place for a moment while everyone else just looked at him.

"Did... It paralyze him?" Callider [Pengullet] asked in a whisper, only to soon hear the pink cat purr loudly in satisfaction. Tearing off the bite and chewing with songful meows, in turn making the gryphon sigh in relief. Smiling at Noct who only shyly smiled back.

"It's... Delicious!" Ongito claimed, making the others curious about it. "Guys, you have to try this!" He gestured to the bucket and the two large ones stepped back. Allowing the others access, and having just enough for one each. Letting them share the expressions of the first bite with one another as the gryphon sat down, and the warm beast sat down with him. Enjoying their reactions, both vocal and expressive, to the point where it was getting some attention from others. Including a glance from the Dinossom and jackal who were in conversation from afar.

A large sigh of relief from 4 as his idea actually seemed to have worked. Letting the smaller Pals finish up before giving Noct a nudge, hearing the Blazehowl give off a grumble in discomfort before stepping forwards towards the small cat. "Ongito. I'm... Sorry for stepping on you a while ago... And kicking you in my panic..." A look back at the gryphon who only nodded at him. "And giving you a Construction-"

"Concussion."

"Concession." The mis-correct made the black bird chuckle. "It occurred to me that I never... Apologized to you about that, and I didn't because I was too afraid..." Noct trailed off, both his words and gaze. Feeling so vulnerable to the point where he didn't notice the cat faintly nodded.

"I-it's okay. I was... Asking for it, and Alle really... Really gave me a scolding for it already." A bit of silence as the stick was put back into the pail. "Did...? Did you cook...?" A double take from the large lion, then a gaze at the bucket before back at the bird who looked a tad worried.

"...No. No, I thought it would be better for Venara to cook it. She's much better at it than I am." Noct took another look at the bucket. "None of this was my idea, it was all Four's. The trap, the fish-"

"What's a fish?" The Lifmunk asked, only to get a double take from the Pengullet.

"W-wait, the small things that swim in the water? How did you even catch those!?" Noct only smiled a little, looking back at 495 who only shyly smiled back, rubbing the back of his own mane.

"We'll..." The Blazehowl started, stepping backwards to once again be beside the gryphon.
"We'll teach you. Won't we?" The two smiled, and 495 nodded.

The bedroom was dark, only the moonlight from the office window made any sort of illumination as the man attempted to rest. Occasionally hearing the patrols go by in the hallway outside of the office door, half keeping him awake but he didn't like closing the door to his bedroom. Too many people interested in what Victor was doing and his space of work would be the first any spy would seek out. Already capturing a few over the years.

Not that those ever revealed anything; be it who they worked for or what they were after. But the white haired man knew well enough, many of which considered what this lab was creating to be 'unholy' or 'forsaken' or whatever buzzword-of-the-week they decided to preach. It was no worse than any other syndicate was doing on this island, including that Free Pal Alliance.

...The stress was getting to Victor. Being so close to his goal but something was missing in his formulas. He just couldn't tell what. Thoughts and theories created a web in his mind that he attempted to make sense of in his mental exhaustion, but it wasn't until a small vibration that snapped him back into reality. The glow of a phone placed face-down on the nightstand got his attention, almost grumbling at it as he answered the call. "This better be important."

A voice spoke on the other line and the anger faded from his expression. "I see. How far did it get." More vocals on the other end. "...It's alive?" An answer. "Where is it then?" Some more vocals with small confirmations from Victor. "Interesting... Keep an eye on it." And he hung up. Resting his head on the pillow again while placing the phone back onto the nightstand. Staring up at the ceiling as Victor attempted to make sense of what he just heard.

"An outpost... Made up of Pals...?"

