

Hartsick (Winter Meta 2024)

By Bartan Tirix

It was becoming a routine thing for the suburban neighborhood, where the winter holidays remained relatively snow-free except for that one lot. The large house that belonged to the six legged bear and brass dragon, having surprisingly heavy snowfall that kept inside their own home limits. Up to the very sidewalks with large piles of snow but stopped as if caught by some magical barrier, not disturbing anyone just walking by. While also opening up their 'driveway' to the heavily decorated home where people were setting up for a large party.

It was scary at first to all the people living on the streets with them, but they got used to it and once schools were out for vacation. Even their kids could finally have that snow day they were promised from all their TV specials. Building snow sculptures, snowball fights, skiing or sledding- even with the classic toboggans, an area with snow taffy being made outdoors for a little treat. All run by the staff they got to see every year of mystical beings. The ones that would often join in such games and have fun for the holidays.

Such large groups did make a few visibly nervous, more specifically polar bear that often got confused by his larger counterpart. Helping people arrive with goods for the party and guiding them where supplies go. Though collecting quite a pile of things that he wasn't sure of off to his side, making him more anxious as more and more people started to come.

However, a lot of that went away when he heard the strange footsteps of three sets of paws behind him. Making the smaller bear sigh in relief before he was pulled into the fluffy chest from a much larger one: a hexaped with three long tails vs the single one. Giving off an audible 'Meerph!' when he was dragged into the soft white forest from behind, causing the Counterweight to chuckle. "See? I knew you could do it."

"You say that, but I don't know your house like you do. And people Somehow still mix us up."
Bartan 1 snorted; the smaller of the two but still over 6ft tall compared to the 10ft+ version.

"They must just recognize our charm, is all." The larger one teased, hugging him with the frontmost set of limbs. "And it wasn't that bad, was it?"

"Have you not noticed the pile?" The younger one grumbled, gesturing with a free arm as Bartan 2 looked it over. "The 'I Have No Idea What I'm Doing' pile?"

"That's quite a mix of things, but don't worry about it. I'll get it sorted out soon." Some much heavier footsteps came from behind. "Erm, we will."

"We?" Bartan 1 asked too soon, as a titan of a brass wyrm came behind the six legged bear and hugged from behind. Using one strong paw to push the small bear further in the fluffy chest with a whine. Causing the dragon's ears to perk as he looked over the larger bear's front; Beo's head resting on a white shoulder.

"I got some assistance while helping with the setup in the 'inner chambers'." A deep purr was heard from that plated throat. "And as usual: he's a bit grumpy."

"As expected." Beo chuckled, giving the larger one a kiss on the cheek before leaning forwards to talk to the smaller. "Sorry bear, I didn't see you there."

"T-to be fair, no one can." The muffled voice from underneath was barely made out, trying to paw his way out of the fluff. "But seriously, where do these things go?" He felt the two large ones lean and look over the pile, not releasing Bartan 1 from his entrapment. Despite his pawing and squirming efforts. "...You're lucky we're all censored for the children." That one made the six legged beast chuckle.

"Most of these stay up here, but a few go down into the basement. We'll take them-"

"I'll take them. It's your party, you do the meet & greets." The smaller bear snorted. "Because people keep mistaking me for you and it's half stressing me out to repeat myself while creating another awkward situation." A few struggling grumbles from the small one before he started gnawing at the large armored paw, finally making Beo chuckle and release him out of the fluff. Watching the furball exit out with a flop on the floor and take a sharp inhale and begin crawling out overdramatically.

Only for the Counterweight above him to lay down on top, causing the smaller furball to yelp loudly and once again get caught in the fluff with the extra weight of the titan of a bulky dragon on top. The two larger ones purred as they shared a tender moment, bunting snouts and sharing licks while Bartan 1 squeezed out of the side. Shaking his thick winter coat out and half glaring at the other two, but blushing at the signs of affection towards each other- who then looked slyly at the smaller one with bedroom eyes. Making those smaller sets of ears blush and lower. "...M-maybe later." Cue a lot of tail wags all around. "But now we've got work to do before the party."

"I'll hold you to that, Bartan 1." The hexaped chuckled. "The solid reds and that white package, they all go downstairs." The smaller bear nodded and started making them into a separate pile for easier

carry, when someone cried in panic from within the house. Causing all three to look back at the doorway before the brass wyrm sighed.

"That's my cue to get back into the kitchen." Beo grumbled, giving the large furball another very tight hug that didn't seem to really phase the six legged bear. Instead, just making Bartan 2 smile brightly and share a nuzzle as those scaled muscles bulged and the dragon purred. "You're the only one who can handle my tight hugs~"

"We should change that sometime." A playful growl from the titan made the Counterweight chuckle. "What?" That brass snout pressing into that neck fluff for a loving bite that made the hexaped growl in pleasure.

"Or I could chain you down so you don't leave again." Another noise in the same vein from the fluffy beast. "Or..." Then a series of whispers in those fluffy ears, ones that even got the smaller bear's to perk up and the two of them blushed heavily. Whimpering while their tails flicked in excitement- just as another panicked cry went off, specifically calling for Beo. Making the dragon sigh heavily and toss his snout. "What a way to ruin the mood."

"G-go and help him. We'll continue this later." Bartan 2 playfully ordered, getting one last hug from the heavy wyrm before the titan gave the smaller one a nuzzle and headed back inside. Leaving the two 'twins' to share a bashful look while all 8 of their ears blushed. "You're invited too, of course." All Bartan 1 could do is nod in agreement before heading off inside. Taking a breath to calm himself, then a second one before moving towards the basement.

The house was absolutely massive, somehow even bigger on the inside than what was shown out. Spacious for something as big as Beo to move about with ease, and without accidentally swatting a wall or object when turning about. Several creatures of all types tended the decor and setup of the nearly starting party; be it anthro, ferals or somewhere in between. Furred, skin, or scaled, they were just working together with a familiar white and black spotted Tírix leading them. Her red eyes spotted the bear looking around and immediately pointed at a large doorway in the back, as if directing Bartan where to go. "T-thanks Linet."

"No problem- Up higher." She suddenly called at another who was working the upper wall decor. Allowing the bear to walk awkwardly to the door and attempt to open it without dropping anything, surprisingly succeeding... Until the first step down the stairs where he undershot it right at the corner. Losing all balance and releasing a loud yelp while a loud crash and tumbles were heard, causing everyone from the main lobby to just stare at the opened doorway blankly.

"...I'm okay!"

"Good to hear, bear." Linet was heard chuckling above as the furball grumbled and got himself back up. Snapping his jaws a few times to check for any loose fangs, an old habit still after all the tumbles he's taken as someone large approached and helped him up, while others picked up the boxes.

"Thanks-" The bear started to speak, only to lightly yelp while his fur puffed out greatly, not recognizing a large, scaled, six-legged beast with a dark greasy mane and large snout. Almost that of a dragon without wings, startling Bartan to take a step away as he attempted to identify him. "...Gavin?"

"G-Gavin, yes." The larger one answered, taking a step back and nearly backing into a blue anthro marmot that was only a few feet tall.

"Whoa, careful there buddy. You're sporting wrecking balls, you know." The small one patted the side of the oddly grey scaled body; looking more like a placeholder dye than anything. The blue rodent then picked up another box and handed it to the bear. "Welcome to the lower level party, Bartan."

"Disson...?" The polar bear mumbled, looking around the tavern-like bar themed room. Large wooden tables and chairs, a bar with a large selection of drinks set up. Many such tables were occupied with people he recognized: a few other smaller ones like the blue Marmot, a large brown dragon in the corner, a coyote at the bar on her... sixth bottle of whiskey? "What are you guys doing down here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" An orange marten grumbled inbetween drinks. No longer wearing a familiar eyepatch, but still keeping this weird machine-exoskeleton over his legs. "This is where the rejects hang out during your parties. Most of them, anyway."

"Rejects?"

"The ones who..." The large beast started, half looking away from the bear's curious brown eyes. "Didn't make it."

"Failed projects." The coyote called from across the room, finishing her bottle. "The ones who don't get another chance."

"Don't say that, Dawn." The brown dragon sadly smiled at her, expecting the unimpressed glare from the yote. "There's always hope, isn't there, bear?" He almost chirped as the wyrm's attention turned towards the white furball, along with nearly everyone's gaze on him. Leaving Bartan stunned as his four ears fell and looked around the room, the lack of an answer already starting to morph their expressions to what they already accepted.

"...Yes." The bear finally spoke, getting those eyes on him once again, but his own saddened expression didn't change as his gaze fell. "But... It's more complicated than that." Bartan took a step forwards, looking over the large hexaped. "I know why I didn't recognize you now, because I never ironed out all the details. I'm still half mixed on attempting Pretty Life again- even as its own stand-alone series featuring you as the main character."

"You mean Gavin?" The small blue one asked, getting a nod from Bartan.

"Though I never quite settled on that name, but it's one that I highly considered." The bear looked the beast over, from the long greasy black mane that shagged down the bulky body, to the large package underneath. Making that white muzzle blush a bit. "I-I never figured out everything, just..."

"The important bits." Dawn grumbled, not even paying attention to what was being observed.

"Y-you could say that, yes." A whine from Bartan. "As well as that I've been saving Blessthefall - Find Yourself for your story specifically."

"Then why not write it?" The large one questioned, trying not to be aggressive, but his vocals were... Different for sure. Making the bear sigh through his muzzle in thought.

"I just... Pretty Life's ending was a... It left me with a lot of questions. This is the story that involved a human girl being turned into a male fluffy wyrm- but it went deeper than that. It also changed the memories of everyone else who looked at Leslie, making it seem like she's been a dragon her entire life. Causing quite the... Well, mindfuck, for lack of a better word."

A yellow degu came over to him with a glass of eggnog, offering it to him as he continued. "Thanks. But the ending of it came with a mixed result; whereas the transformations were permanent. Some people didn't like that, that's okay. Everybody has their preferences, but it got me thinking... 'Do I like Transformation for the wrong reasons?' And I couldn't get that out of my head." The bear looked at Gavin. "I wanted to continue it, but... I needed to figure out where I stand on that idea: what was I trying to say through the story, should I go for what I want or what others are seeking out?"

"That... Is a tough call." The small yellow one spoke, getting several others to nod.

"It really was, Vital. But... I think about Find Yourself a lot." He took a moment to look at Gavin, then around the room. "I think about all your stories a lot, I just... Only have so much time and energy." The bear took a drink and scrunched his muzzle up. "Added rum, did you-?"

"That's how you make Eggnog, furball." Dawn grumbled, taking a large swig for herself.

"I suppose, but." Bartan looked at the drink and took another taste, at least this time more prepared for it. "Your stories... Just didn't get the attention they deserved."

"That's why we're down here, out of the way." The orange marten's statement made those four white ears flick backwards. "It's where we belong."

"No." Bartan growled, looking at them all slowly, one by one. "No. It isn't where you Belong. You got a bad roll of the dice, the right people didn't look at you or just didn't have the time to read at that moment and never got around to it." A deep breath as the bear took a large swig, finishing the entire drink with a heavy grumble.

"E-easy there." The yellow one whimpered.

"Don't drink too fast, bear-"

"You're coming up." They all curled their necks and began looking at one another... Well, except for the coyote still. "You're all being part of it this year. Be it your first year or not."

"You don't understand, bear. Nobody cares about us-"

"I do!" The bear snapped at the orange marten. "And so should they! You don't deserve to be forgotten, to be hidden under the floorboards while everyone else has their fun. Now get your damn tails upstairs!" He barked, turning around to lead the way- only to stagger and get caught by Disson and the hexaped. "I'm okay."

"You sure?" The blue one- easily like 1/6th the bear's size, asked while trying to help.

"Y-yeah, just spun around too quickly. But get upstairs."

"Bartan, we don't-"

"The party hasn't even started yet. If you're the first ones there- You Fishing BELONG, understood?" A few whispers were passed around asking about 'fish' and 'fishing', very puzzled by the replaced curseword. All while the bear growled, making his way upstairs and stopping just as he reached the door. "Oh, and uh... Gavin? Be prepared to be censored. There are normal people about."

"R-right." The door opened and Bartan stood to the side of it, making sure everyone started coming up. Locking eyes with the questionable tirix ones as Linet looked to see what was happening, then nodded with a smile at the bear. Now understanding what the yelling was about.

Bartan then led the group inside the house, into a massive dining room that was mostly unoccupied. Gesturing the small line against the wall that led to a couple of devices as he looked at the group. "Get in line, you'll get a card for your evening meals, drinks, and snacks. Each table in this entire house has a device to scan it and bring up a menu depending on your age." He explained. "This will allow you to order anything you like, and if you don't finish it, it will keep it as a leftover for later. Don't worry about waste." Those brown discs scanned around the followers, from the three smaller rodents, the still drinking coyote, to the larger hexaped and rather excited looking wyrm looking around. "Nowhere is off limits. I'll try to get around to you all again to catch up, but enjoy yourselves, damnit!"

With a snort the furball started to leave within the sea of round tables, looking back to make sure they were all getting in line to get a card. Spotting the hexaped and the copper wyrm still in the same area, with Phraxxis just waiting for Dawn to start moving, while Gavin locked eyes onto Bartan's

irked glare. Almost picking up the whimper before getting in line and the bear released a grumbling sigh, then picking up a couple of chuckles from a nearby table.

"Giving people the business, are you, bear?" Another copper dragon called him over, sitting beside a pure white one; both scaled.

"A-a different kind of escort duty than he's used to." The slightly smaller white wyrm teased, getting a look of approval from the copper. Then a lick on the snout. "Was that good?"

"That was perfect~" She purred as the bear arrived. "I'm proud of you."

"You shouldn't be teaching her such things, Travv'esa." Bartan snorted in a tease. "You're going to turn poor innocent Jyrn here into a degenerate."

"You've already done that, bear. In like the second story she was in." Travv purred, remembering such a tale as she nuzzled the white dragoness. "Or would Unreal be considered distasteful to the public?"

"I hardly would, but I can't speak for the public." Bartan half snorted. Scanning his hard and phasing in a hot turkey sandwich onto the table before him. "I liked it, specifically the second act most, but that's because I can relate to it more."

"You spoke from the heart." The white wyrm mumbled, getting a nod in confirmation from the male.

"Yeah... And now I'm not really sure what to do with you two." A pair of questionable looks as the bear took a bite. "Resound kinda flopped last year, and I'm not sure if writing another act would really help. It could've very well been that the first act didn't have much in terms of sexual content, let alone a session. Whereas every act in Hung Up or Unreal at least had something sexual about it. Many of these other ones..." A grumble from Bartan as he looked around.

"Take that one of there." He gestured to a table where the three small rodents were: orange, yellow, and blue. "Their story: Come With Me To The Otherside, is set in a post apocalyptic world. It's about a guy who is kinda stuck in a Groundhog's Day theme, but it's not the 'Same Day Over And Over', everytime he dies, it's like a 100+ years into the future. Where everything has gone to hell. In his first life, he was trying to cure the idea of aging, to escape the entity of death entirely for everyone, but it backfired horribly. He's the only one that really remembers his past lives, while constantly encountering the reincarnations of his past. Those he loved, those he rivaled with." A deep breath through that muzzle. "And the only conclusion he can think of to end this exhausting loop where everything just keeps getting worse and worse is to just destroy the very planet stuck in it."

The two dragons looked at him strangely, then shared a glance for a moment before Travv spoke up. "Uh... Bear?"

"That is it. That is the big reveal of the entire novel: that Kuolon is trying to destroy the world so he can stop the Wheel Of Death from turning." He took a sip of non-alcoholic eggnog. "And I'm telling you this because I don't think I'll ever finish CWMtt-Otherside. There was no interest in the series whatsoever, and I just cannot blindly put sex into it to try to keep people's attention. I planned it for months, I worked hard on it for six weeks, thinking I made something special, only for it to absolutely flop. Which is a shame, because I actually really liked it."

"So..." Jyrn started. "You gave up on it?"

"Basically. I've made my peace that nothing's going to happen with it, but I'd be lying if I said I don't think about it from time to time. Gushing over some of the ideas with Kindle as we lay in bed at night. But I realized then that some stories are just... Not worth the effort, which is a shame. Many of which I liked..." Bartan trailed off as he felt something approach him from behind, and upon looking he spotted Gavin awkwardly pausing mid-step with his plate of food. Getting a gesture to be invited to their table, while the two dragons swooned over him.

"Now who is this handsome devil~?" The copper one purred. "I haven't seen him around before."

"This is Gavin, name in progress, but for now..." The bear explained. "And he was supposed to be the next one in the Pretty Life spin-off. But I got a little..."

"Tired of it?" The white dragoness asked, making the bear shake his head.

"Not tired, but... Self-conscious of it. I mentioned a few times, once earlier," He gestured to the hexaped. "That I think I like Transformation for the wrong reasons. I don't like humans, for most people who know me that is Truism. But I suppose most people who like TF [Transformation], they want the ability to revert back to human...? That apparently that's the 'Good Ending'? Not everyone, of course, but it's just something that baffles me personally. And I... Don't really know what I want to say with Pretty Life act 4, AKA: Find Yourself." Bartan overlooked Gavin for a moment. "Hence the reason why I never got everything done in his design. I want to work on it, but at the same time... What do I want to say? What story should I tell, or want to tell...?"

Jyrn and Gavin nodded sadly, while Travv'esa just stared at the furball, unimpressed. "Bartan, when has that ever stopped you?"

"Well, with this story it has-"

"You almost Never know what kind of story you're going to tell when you start writing. You barely have an idea of it when you're more than halfway through it!" Those four ears fell at the copper wyrm's sass. "But you do make good tales that just somehow (usually) make sense by the end. I don't think there has been a point where a story is exactly how you pictured it from start to finish, they all change in some way, yes?"

"...I suppose, yeah." The white bear mumbled sadly. "But I..."

"You work best when you're able to create things on the fly: starting with an idea and adding onto it bit by bit. Sometimes needing to brainstorm and talk about these things once in a while to fish for ideas and opinions."

"Even though you reject a good 65% of them-" Jyrn added.

"-Hush." Bartan grumbled at her. "I'm picky about ideas, I know. Everyone knows that."

"Definitely." Gavin remarked, getting the bear to point at him.

"You don't even have a proper color picked out yet, no retorts for you."

"Who's fault is that?" The hexaped snorted.

"What's wrong with having no color? He could just be set in a Monochrome story." Travv quipped, actually getting Bartan to cover his eyes but smile.

"...I can't even be mad at that. It's absurd." The white furball lightly shook his head and took a few bites to eat.

"Do..." The white dragoness started. "Do you think you'll ever get back to us? Resound?" Bartan slowed to a stop, finishing his bite and sighing.

"I want to. I really really want to. But the issue with it is that... What I have planned is like a 6-act epic. And I'm not certain if it got the greatest of starts." The bear admitted. "I like it, personally. But it's going to be a massive amount of work to try to finish a large story nobody seems to be invested in. And I only really have enough energy for one."

"One story...?" The copper one questioned.

"One story that nobody is invested in. Afterlife." An exhale through that furred muzzle. "I write a piece of it every two years (save for 2020), no matter how long or small it is. And well... Okay, I can't say 'No One is reading it', there's been a few that have read parts... I think. But I don't believe anyone has read the full thing yet. And nobody has talked to me about the last two acts, so..." Another bite off his meal. "I kinda take that as 'nobody really cared'. It's a song and dance I've been through a dozen times over the years, but that doesn't make it any less hard to stay motivated due to that. Yet, I wonder if I put Afterlife down... Would it just fade into the background like these other stories? After all the work and effort I put into this clean series... It's disheartening to see it go."

"Especially when it's been with you since your first year." Jyrn mumbled.

"It was the second story I ever started, but it's also one that just never got finished. I read it from time to time too, I really enjoy it. But oi... All that energy poured into making an act, only for it to be met

with silence time and time again. I keep thinking to myself 'it's just not Afterlife's time yet', but when will it be? And am I wasting my time with it-?"

"No." Gavin answered surprisingly fast. "You just said you enjoyed it. That makes it worth it, doesn't it?" Bartan's face soured as he half tilted his head in a shrug. Taking a deep breath and scanning his card before making his food disappear from the table.

"I'll finish this later. It was nice seeing you guys."

"Here's hoping we get cleared for an Act 2." The white dragoness waved her goodbyes, getting a nod from the bear as he got up and started to leave.

"So... Gavin." Travv started in a sultry vocal. "I imagine the bear finished designing what's... Below on you, yes~?" A series of shy and embarrassed whimpers from the hexaped while that dye-less tail wagged a bit. Making Bartan chuckle as Jyrn was heard whimpering as well.

The bear moved on towards the next hallway, spotting another living room of sorts with a small drinking bar. Feeling the warm comfort of a fireplace- only to realize it wasn't actually real. Just an illusion of the flames dancing over some wood that looked a little off, causing Bartan to be more curious as some chuckles were heard from within. Peering inside more and instantly spotting the large copper wyrm lounging with a black gryphon and another large beast of sorts: a Blazeowl Noct from Palworld.

"But what is a Pal?" The curious dragon asked, causing the two darker ones to look at each other in question before all three of them looked at the furball making his way inside. Soon noticing the coyote at the bar and Bartan gave a large nod; knowing that she wouldn't be too far from Phraxxis. "Is it like a species?"

"It's, uh..." The gryphon started to answer, but never really could come up with a definition, even when the flaming beast attempted to help.

"Probably some word they use for Non-Humans." Dawn, the coyote, half grumbled. Taking another large swig of a bottle and emptying it, then grabbing another.

"Actually, you can even capture humans in it, and I believe they're considered Pals at that point." The bear corrected, joining the group of larger ones. "I suppose it has something to do with the unique energies of the place or islands. That's how I see it anyways." Bartan shrugged.

"Neato!" The large copper wyrm nearly chirped, looking at Dawn. "Isn't that neat, Dawn?" But didn't really get any response from her. However, Phraxxis took no ill will towards it and returned his attention to the other two. "So! This is your first year, yes?"

"Yes, it's been quite exciting so far." Noct answered. "We never even heard of such a holiday before today."

"It probably looks like a chaotic mess to every culture outside of this one."

"But it's a lot of fun!" The wyrm took a sip out of his chocolate. "How long have you been a couple?" The dark two sharply whimpered and blushed heavily, the Blazeowl's fire turning a purple and pink.

"W-well..." The gryphon whined as the two looked at each other.

"W-we haven't erm..."

"Phraxxis." The coyote spoke, maybe with like 5% scolding in her voice.

"I'm just curious is all. But that's what you are, isn't it?"

"I-I mean... I really like 495, b-but..."

"A-and I really like Noct... J-just..." The bird answered, the two looking over at the bear who was staring at the menu. Eventually double taking at the three, then looking at Dawn- who didn't even look back at them.

"They'll shag eventually, if that's what you mean." A very sharp whimper from the pair as more blushing came from them. Adding to the heat of the room as the Blazeowl became the main source of it. "But you're jumping the gun a tad. I was hoping to space it out a bit more in their story."

"What do you mean?" The wyrm asked, curiously looking at the furball.

"Well, if anyone's ever read any of my more... *Romantic* stories, the characters in question tend to move stupid fast." Bartan started, using the machine in the center of the table to order something and soon got a single scoop of green mint ice cream in a small bowl. Sprinkles with some fancy looking marshmallows around it. "I'm talking *Days* here. Sometimes hours. They go from 'Hi there, I'm Blank' to 'You wanna get frisky?'."

"All of them?" Phraxxis tilted his head.

"Definitely not all, no. One of my longest was rather undetermined in terms of length: Light Escapes. But to be fair, Sarious really didn't think she'd be able to do anything within the game they were in. It was still months of her and Endzeit knowing each other though... Which some would argue-"

"That's still kinda fast." Dawn spoke up, getting the attention of the copper one as he chuckled.

"It is, yeah. The other I can kinda pass off is For Those Who Wait. There was a muzzlejob in like 10 hours of meeting, yes, but there was another suggestion/reason for that." The bear took a small bit of his ice cream. "And no, it's not what you guys think."

"It wasn't to get an adhesive?" Noct asked, getting Bartan and the griffon to double take.

"...Okay, it is what you thought." The four chuckled. "But after that it was three years. However... Not three years of getting to know each other. So I'm not really certain on it's credibility." Another little bite of the ice cream. "I think the problem I have is that I worry about the attention spans of readers. I could probably make a story or series that really took its time to develop a relationship between characters, but at some point people are going to get bored. One of the main principles of my writing is to 'not waste the reader's time', and it's a little hard to do that without a lot of time-jumps."

"I-is that what you're trying with D-I-E?" The gryphon shyly asked.

"Yeah, kinda. But there's also more of an excuse about it as a whole:" The bear looked at Noct who only whimpered shyly. "Dark Pals are Lonely. And well... I don't want to spoil anything just yet, since I am planning to do an act two for D-I-E. Even started it and have been itching to get around to writing it for a while, despite being out of the game for over half a year." A sad look from the two black Pals. "Not what you think: no ill will towards the game. I honestly really liked it, I just... Play toooo many survival games back to back: revisiting Valheim, then trying Conan Exiles, a bit of 7 Days to Die, then Palworld- keep in mind that some of those had over 100 hours put into them."

"So, you just overdid it?" 495 asked.

"Yeah, but they were all quite different from each other, and Palworld being the most unique out of them all. It's also the 'Pokemon' game I've wanted for ages. I never really cared for monster tamer games because it felt so much like Cockfighting to me."

"W-what?" The blazehowl blushed heavily, his mane once again flaring pink and purple colors.

"You send in a creature to do the fighting for you while you sit back and watch. Sure, the 'gameplay' is you commanding it, but it's not active enough to keep me interested. When I was younger? Sure. I had my Pokemon phase back on the Gameboy days in the 90s. But never really played the series since. The gameplay never evolved past that." Bartan half grumbled, getting a bit of his ice cream. "Palworld though? You can fight like that, sure, but you're likely going to be fighting with your Pals. You're not carrying the team along your belt like objects, you Are part of the Team. The most important part of the team. You might not do all the damage, you might not take all the aggro. But you're in the thick of it with them, and that... That's what I wanted Pokemon to be." The anthro fox from earlier passes by the doorway, dressed in some SFW Xmas attire. "I wanted to fight beside my Ninetails, not just watch it from the rear." Kindle pauses for a moment, then backsteps and looks inside the room, getting

the shy attention of the other two while the bear takes another bite of ice cream. Not noticing their gaze. "No matter how nice that tail end is."

"You like my tail end, huh~?" A sharp whimper left the white male's maw mid-bite, making those four ears blush and lower a bit as she came in and rubbed the back of his neck. "I thought you were more of a chest-guy, bear."

"W-well, you see, uh..."

"We're talking about Pokemon!" Phraxxis chirped, getting her to chuckle. "Though yes, you do have a nice butt too. Kinda like Dawn's!" He looked over at the coyote to see if that got any reaction, but nope. Not a thing. "Awwh."

"If only her personality was as smooth as her figure, yeah." The fox's remark did get a slight head turn from the brown one, but Dawn just went back to drinking. "Alilllmost, but don't let it get you down, Phraxxy."

"Phraxxis." The copper wyrm corrected her, getting a stare and a smirk from Kindle. "...Oh! You knew that-"

"And I was just being cute with you, yes." A shy chuckle from the large dragon, unable to keep his tail from wagging as the 'ninetails' chuckled. "Adorable. Alright, I got stuffs to do." Kindle and the bear shared a nuzzle and a small smooch. "I'll find you later, furball- Oh, did you ever find your bells?" A sudden sharp whimper from the white male as those ears blushed heavily. "No? Don't worry, I'll sniff them out for you."

"O-okay." The group watched her leave, even getting a side-eye from Dawn before going back to drinking. Eventually Bartan cleared his throat. "Where was I?"

"I think we were talking about D-I-E." Noct said, trying to calm himself. "It still... Seems surreal, honestly."

"What does?"

"The fact that it exists. Especially since you don't really like the other one."

"You mean Pokemon?" The beast nodded at the bear, getting a shrug in return. "The world, or worlds, of Pokemon are so... Centered around the 'sport' of combat that they instantly drive me away from it. The sport is boring to me, the competitive nature of the series doesn't appeal. I kinda get it, but I don't like it. Palworld? You're trying to survive, and the best way to do that is to not do it alone. That's much more interesting to me than some silly competition to... Prove you're the best? Even though your creatures did everything for you- Pokemon is weird. But there's a big difference there, and it's very likely that I am never going to do a story about Pokemon."

"Push aside the fact that you find the world boring, any chance?" Phraxxis asked, getting a slow shrug and a head shake from the bear.

"If I ever got into one of the games again, maybe, but very unlikely. D-I-E would be the closest thing to it anyway, so take what you can get. The story so far has gotten some attention and interest, so I'm happy with that. More than some other ones." Bartan gestured to the dragon. "I don't *expect* it to get more views, but..." He lifted the spoon with the last of his ice cream as if to say Here's Hoping. "I should move on. Any other questions before I head out?"

Noct and 495 looked at each other, looking like they wanted to ask something but both agreed not to with a head shake. "Maybe later." Noct answered. "But right now I think we're okay with how things are." The polar bear nodded in response, putting his ice cream away on his 'card' and getting up to stretch. Bunting the dragon just as Phraxxis came down for a nuzzle and into a full hug.

"Oh geez, you're really soft." The wyrm purred, making Bartan faintly chuckle before moving to the coyote and giving her a hug from behind. Instantly getting a growl from her mid-drink and lightly spilling some of it.

"For what it's worth, Dawn..." Bartan started. "I really liked Memory's Fragment. And your close-quarters fight scene is probably one of my top favorites." No response and no struggle to get out of the embrace. "I would've loved to see you and Gnargwrist really fight, but I don't know if I could probably write such a thing."

"Is that what scares you from properly writing a sequel?" Dawn barely asked between swigs.

"...No. It was the sheer fact that what we planned was to introduce another character that somehow had a worse personality than you." The male half joked, once again not getting a response from her.

"A more grumpy person than Dawn?" The copper wyrm nearly purred in curiosity, seeing the furball shrug.

"Arguably. Nothing was written in stone, but it was supposed to be Deaneil. Those who have read through Wrong Side Of Heaven (specifically act 4) may remember Stratacast talking about her to a young Dia'vidd. Explaining what he was, and who she was." Bartan took a breath, still holding onto the yote. "The problem is, she isn't a good person, and she's a little too powerful to really be put into a story as a protagonist."

"And I'm not?" Dawn half grumbled mid-drink.

"Well, you kinda need Outbreaks in order to reach her level, that's the thing. And those can't be easily used outside Veritas without reality caving in around you." The bear explained, noticing a large mirror behind the bar of the other three males just staring blankly at him. Double taking towards them

all and pausing in confusion for a moment. "...Right, I keep forgetting how little I talk about those things."

"A-an outbreak of what?" The gryphon whispered.

"Is Dawn infected by something?" Phraxxis whimpered, slightly leaning back away from her.

"N-nevermind. Think of the term of less 'contagious' and more 'breaking out of your own boundaries'." Another set of blank looks and the bear sighs. "Think 'Devil Trigger'. It's a unique state that gives you different abilities, both in and outside of it. And there are many many many different ones that a lot of these people possess."

"Doesn't Xion have like 13?" The coyote bluntly stated.

"...Something like that. Over a dozen, to be sure." Bartan shrugged again, resting his head against her back and nuzzling. Shifting his arms a bit to feel her chest rest on them.

"Off." Dawn demanded.

"You're quite firm, even through the leather."

"Off."

"Not to mention very plump in the-" With her free hand the yote pulled a revolver out of thin air, aimed against the furball's side, and shot. A large gust of wind came from the barrel and blowing Bartan into tumbles out to the hallway, but otherwise unharmed. "I deserve that."

The furball got himself up and shook the impact off, once again thankful for his extra padding as well as the home's rather... Tough but soft walls. Walls that lead down towards the end of the hallway, into a very large room at balcony level. A large guardrail, all wrapped in shiny decor and Xmas stockings with names stitched onto them, certain longer ones just abbreviated instead. Or slightly altered, like spotting a pair of Bartan's, just with an added number on it to tell the difference.

It was a very cute sight, honestly, and made the bear smile at it for a few moments before his ears caught voices above on the next level of said balcony. Looking up and double taking at just how high

the ceiling was: nearly 100m+. "You should try it though." A deeper vocal nearly purred, getting nervous noises of denial in response. "Alkar~"

"Z-Zarj, I'm not nearly as insulated as you are." The other spoke as Bartan climbed up the stairway to spot a red wyrm and a golden eastern dragon sitting at a large table. "I'll catch my death out there."

"There are ways to keep warm, how do you think the children are doing it?" Zarj teased, then out a slightly disappointed sigh at the noodle's faint chuckle. "I called them children again, I know."

"Old habits do die hard, that's for sure." The two shared a chuckle, then noticed the bear coming around. "Oh, come join us! Please."

"And spare you the joy of sledding?" Bartan teased him. "But there are plenty of ways to keep warm outside, Alkardoc. And it is quite a fun event."

"See? The host agrees with me." The red one completely missed the double take from Bartan.

"H-host? No no no, I'm not the host, I just look like a smaller version of him." The two looked at Bartan rather puzzled. "It's complicated, but I do have the same name... Which probably doesn't help either-"

"It really doesn't." The wyrm chuckled. "So, you're the writer?"

"I am, yes."

"Well, thank you for giving us another chance." Alkardoc leaned over and gave the bear a hug. "Oh, you're very soft. Come closer so Zarj can feel you too." A whimper from the white one, but hobbled over with the serpent's pull. Getting squeezed between the two dragons in a hug.

"Oh, that is quite plush." Those large claws combed through the white coat. "Supernaturally soft, even. But yes, thank you for giving us another chance."

"Y-you're welcome. It was half my mistake anyway." A couple of purrs in question from the larger two. "I feel like I've told this story a hundred times by now, but The Thread Of Dawn was written by both me and Tissthalliss. We did two acts, each being posted by both of us, and when the second act was released, my side didn't get hardly anything for attention. Comments, favs, views, you name it."

"But Tissthalliss' did?"

"It did, Zarj, yes." Bartan took a breath, his body lightly shuttering at the combing and rubbing in the double embrace. "But I didn't check it for years, just plain forgot about it honestly. But last year when I suddenly remembered about Tissthalliss' post and checked it, a couple of people were wondering if the series was going to continue, with rather acceptance that it was not. So I left a few messages there

explaining myself, wrote up Eastside, and posted it on my end." Bartan shrugged. "It got a lot more attention this time around, so much so that I even wrote another act for it and nearly had it ready by summer. However, I'm trying to get Tissthalliss to come back in but he's been having troubles getting into the groove of writing again. I asked him to take some time and give it another shot later, and if that doesn't work I'll write this one myself. That's where the series is at right now."

"So it is almost done?" The wyrm asked.

"Well, act 4, yes. The series as a whole? Probably not. I've got enough content for maybe 3 acts right now planned, some specific story beats and such. Nothing on the ending yet, going to wait until I get more done before that." A sudden grumble from the furball as he covered his eyes for a moment with a paw, puzzling the other two. "As... Absolutely cheesy as it is going to sound, I do look forward to writing more of it. I just don't want to get ahead of myself."

"That's understandable, dear." The golden noodle gave the smaller one a nuzzle before giving one to Zarj. "Were there any other stories you were working on?"

"Hmm... Once in a while I keep coming back to the idea of a second act for Crownless."

"Oh, that's the..." The red one tapped his claws while thinking. "Rat Ninja one?"

"Yep. But I feel like it ended very well- to those who were paying attention to a certain part of the story. Some part of me wants to go back and make it a little bit more noticeable, because people might not understand what happened at the end. The sequel was supposed to be about that; a Revenge story of sorts. Buuuut going into detail about that will spoil things for the current novel, so."

"I did have another idea that I wanted to make for Halloween, one I hinted at with the title: Ballet Of The Headless Horseman."

"Ohhh, I've heard of that legend before!" Alkar's face lit up, while the red dragon remained puzzled. "Think of it as a knight or horse rider."

"T-that has been... Decapitated?"

"That is correct, yes."

"You sound way too happy about that." Zarj half whimpered, getting the eastern dragon to chuckle.

"I wasn't going to fully use the legend though. The setting was supposed to be more of an American 1890s or such, when cars were very luxurious and people were still relying a lot of horses. There was a civil war going on in the other side of the country, but the story takes place in a rural area outside of a small town. Due to that war, so many horses have been drafted and a sergeant is sent out to investigate reports of one that was still around, working on a farm." The bear explained, pausing when

the noodle got a little excited and apologized. "The owners of the farm say they don't own the horse, it just arrives every morning and works on the farm for food. But due to them giving up all the other horses for the war, they cannot survive without it."

"U-uh bear?" The wyrm started, but it didn't stop Bartan from continuing.

"Despite their attempts to capture this horse and take it away, not to mention overstaying their welcome within the town, the soldiers begin to take out their failures on the town. One night soon afterwards, while driving around after drinking, some of them begin to see a strange glow in the woods and sometimes on the roads. Eventually encountering a man in an old full plate armor riding on the back of a nightmare: a flaming horse."

"Bear?"

"It begins chasing the soldiers, and during the scuffle they do get a lucky shot on the rider's head. Knocking the helmet off and revealing-"

"B-Bartan, dear. What are you doing?" Alkardoc politely interrupted.

"I'm... Telling you what happens." Confused looks all around. "Guys... Every time I've tried to write something clean, it's never gone well. It turned out to be a waste of my time and energy, I'm not going to write this story. Do I want to? Kinda. But I realize that it is a lost cause right from the gate." The white one explained.

"So...?"

"I'm just throwing the idea out there in case someone else wants to try it. Because I like the idea of the horse being the 'headless horseman'-"

"Wait, what?" Both dragons curled their necks.

"Yeah. The idea was it was the horse that was manipulating the suit of armor, possibly throwing his voice into the hollow shell to give out a monstrous vocal, and trying to scare off the soldiers." Blank looks from the two larger ones. "I loooooove Nightmares. They need to be in more media, and my plan was to basically use Artheas for this role." The dragons blinked at him blankly. "...The horse from Red Hypergiant." They looked at each other then back at the bear, seeing those four ears spade. "Thais? Snow Leopard? Cyborg? Walking around with a bigass rifle that weighs as much as a small car?"

"No idea."

"Never heard of it, sorry." Alkar mumbled, seeing a disappointed sigh from the bear. "I'm guessing...?"

"Another clean story, yes. But..." Bartan looked over the railing and pointed down at the main floor; set up with many lounging furniture and cozy fireplaces that were getting more and more guests by the hour. Spotting a brown (feral) horse, and eventually an anthro snow leopard from afar; though with a mechanical tail. "Those two."

"Ooooooh." The two larger ones softly confirmed in unison.

"You've probably seen them around, but never knew what they were from." The furball exhaled. "My point is, clean stories do not sell. They rarely get seen, they barely get noticed. And there's an even less chance they will be engaged with. Since things are getting harder for me to keep up, I need to put some story ideas in the bin before I even get the title written out. The only real exception to this is Afterlife, and that's because I've been working on it for the past 10 years and I really should see it through."

"I see." Alkardoc mumbled a bit sadly, getting a tap from the furball.

"It's not all bad. Over the years I have gotten spotted and some stories have been read. Even on your guys' act 3; I've had people say that they don't care if the rest of the series doesn't have any sexual content, they just want to see what happens." That made the two dragons smile, then brighter when looking at each other. "I mean, there *will* be more scenes, but now I don't feel like I have to add one every act. I feel like that'll make things better, honestly."

"That is good news." Zarj added, getting a few pats from Bartan as the smaller one squeezed out.

"Alright, hug it out." A chuckle from the two and they did so; the noodle dragon coiling around the larger wyrm. "Zarj, now's your chance to take him sledding."

"W-what!?"

"Will do!"

"-No!" The golden thread yelped loudly as Zarj held the serpent tightly and hobbled down the large stairs, spotting a large door to the backyard from above. Leaving the bear to chuckle until a heavy creak of material was heard on the floor above. Perking his ears, he took the stairs up to see two large feral behemoths of sorts, arm wrestling on a large blanketed table: one red with a white mane, the other deep purple with a golden mane. Very similar in size and physique; heavily built up and with arm muscles bulging as they struggled to overpower the other, yet they had the grin of competitive admiration sparkle in their eyes.

A sharp whimper nearby got Bartan's attention: a navy feathered raptor of sorts watching the sport from a distance wrapped in a large blanket of sorts. Almost 1/3rd of the size of the polar bear and blushing intensely at such a show of strength. "Y-you doing okay?" Bartan asked, getting a rapid nod while covering themselves as the furball sat beside the feathered one. Watching the result that went on for dozens of seconds. Almost an entire minute with very little change in the stalemate before the table

under their arms eventually shattered. Leaving the two beasts to chuckle loudly and use their already prepped arms to shake in the tie. "M-maybe you guys shouldn't use wooden tables for that."

"I-it wasn't wood." Jaxi whined, flustered.

"Metal?" The dino shook their head.

"O-obsidian." That even got the bear to blush while the two behemoths moved back towards them. Resting at the new table with the two smaller ones.

"Looks like we'll have to compare our strength in another way." The purple one playfully grumbled, but smirked at the feathered dinosaur's whimper. Leaning towards them with that large snout with a nuzzle and getting welcomed into the large blanket- though not without a yelp in surprise and shyness. One that was clearly over the red one's head. "I'm not used to you being so big. I kind of like it."

"D-Drygg'makarr..." Jaxi huffed, making the others chuckle.

"Relax, I won't do anything that'll get you found out. But it's a good thing you had that blanket." The purple beast purred, sharing a tender moment with the smallest one while Bartan and the red behemoth caught eyes. Still nearly hypnotized by the Render's strange black gaze with pupils of white lights constantly moving around depending on what light entered it.

"It has been a while, bear."

"Y-yes it has, Karmu. How've you been?"

"Quite well. Just stress testing the new meat this year." He expected the challenging side-eye of the purple one, the two beasts smirking in response. "You?"

"Been... Good overall. Just exhausted. I've been somewhat sick for a lot of time this year, which is unusual for me and has slowed me down a lot." The red one nodded slowly while the purple raised an eyebrow. "Both in fatigue and difficulties concentrating. I feel like every year I've been slowing down to 3/4's speed as the previous one, and it's really adding up."

"Have you gone to a doctor about it?" Jaxi asked.

"I have yes, and have gotten some tests done. As of now I haven't heard back from them, so I suppose that means they haven't found anything of note. So I don't know, maybe it's just me getting older."

"Or you need to change your habits a little." Karmu suggested, getting a nod from the bear.

"It's very possible what I've been eating and drinking have been catching up to me, any possible treats I've had over the years. I've been changing things up though and I think it's starting to get better,

but only time will tell." The white one took a breath. "But I haven't been nearly as hard on myself for getting things done. Though next year... I might need to slow down on a few things."

"Like what?" Drygg led him to continue.

"Birthday gifts. Holy fish... I swear my first half of the year feels like gift after gift after gift, be it a story, animation, though a few people have asked for money instead and that does give me a break. However..." A defeated sigh from Bartan.

"Money... Is getting tight?" The raptor whimpered.

"It has. And it's going to get worse in the next four years. Likely longer too. So I may have to really pick and choose what I do, which is never easy." The bear flopped his head on the table and exhaled. "And going the cheap way out (AKA: writing stories) never feels like enough unless it's like 70 pages."

"Nonsense, they're great gifts." The dino again, reaching over to give the furball a pat.

"They really don't feel like it to me. It feels like I'm strong-arming them into reading my boring ideas out of courtesy. All I can think of when I'm writing it is 'God damn, this is awful. Why would I do this to someone I care about? Why would I waste both their time and mine? Oh, right. Because I can't afford a \$300 commission to show how much they mean to me.' -and I knooooow." The bear lifted a paw up to stop the three from interrupting. "I knoooooooow that's not what people feel like to receive these things. But that's just how I feel about my own work."

"Have more confidence in your work, Bartan." Karmu 'stated' (more like a command, to be honest). "People care about you, and to receive something you've created is a good gift." A faint grumble in response from the furball, narrowing the red one's gaze. "If I have to, I will get Naught out here."

"Naught?" Jaxi asked.

"His emotional support raptor. Kind of like..." Bartan stared into space for a moment before slowly looking over at the purple Behemoth; very similar to the red Render. Then to the small feathered Archaeopteryx before whimpering loudly and covering his own eyes with large white paws. "God Damnit..."

"What is it?" Drygg tilted his head, looking to Karmu for an answer.

"I think he just realized how similar your Fearless story is to our 1989."

"I swear I'm not a one-trick pony." Bartan whined.

"Of course not, you're a bear." Both beasts stated in unison, double taking at each other before the purple one looked the furball over.

"...He is a bear, right?"

"That's what everyone calls him, yes." Karmu confirmed, the two watching him as Jaxi leaned over and gave the furball another set of pats.

"I-it was a figure of speech." The navy raptor spoke, hearing a whimper in confirmation from the fluffy one. "There, there. I believe the similarities end with that, does it not?"

"There might be a few more, but the major one is that." Bartan grumbled heavily, uncovering himself and exhaling in frustration. "I don't know why I repeat myself so damn much. The Thread Of Dawn and For Those Who Wait are basically the same premise as well: two unlikely people stuck sheltering from a storm. Sure, they go different ways, but ugh... And then me constantly using the Gun With A Soul trope."

"Gun with a...?" Karmu and the others looked at the white one strangely.

"Sometimes associated with the movie The Iron Giant; where the premise was 'What if a Gun had a soul, and didn't want to be a Gun.' Living weapons, or people who were given/created with a lot of immense power, but do not want to use it for violence. Dia from Destruction Preventer, you could argue his father Haytre from Wrong Side Of Heaven (but it really isn't quite it). Zhoja from Crownless, 495 from D-I-E, Kassel from Hollow Bodies, both of you guys." Bartan gestured the two behemoths. "Sometimes I swear I have Mad Cow Disease." The three stared at the bear with rather confused looks. "...A symptom of it is that you repeat yourself a lot. Double Double Cheese Cheese Burger Burger."

"I have never heard of that before." Karmu stated bluntly.

"It was a big thing going around in the early 2000s Canada." Bartan grumbled, then spoke quietly to himself. "Can I even joke about that anymore? Has it been long enough? I donno." The white one then looked over at Jaxi. "So, how does it feel to be my first non-binary character?"

"I-I am?" Bartan shrugged and nodded at the raptor.

"If I did it correctly, yes. I tried anyway."

"W-well... There were a few mistakes here and there." Jaxi mumbled, blushing shyly as the others overlooked them.

"I wouldn't put it past me to miss one or two. It was difficult to train my brain to do it, but I tried."

"Most of the mistakes were with the soldiers and guards saying it."

"That's because they didn't respect you." Drygg half grumbled, getting a nod from the furball in confirmation.

"That is correct, and a bit of a hidden tell: those who use the correct pronouns of They/Them respected you. Those who used He/Him did not. That bit was intentional." Bartan lifted his head/front half off the table and shook his coat. "I like to do little things like that to see if people catch on. Another recent one that I've mentioned before was the yawning thing."

"The empathy test?" The red beast asked, getting the attention of the three. "Naught talked about it once."

"Yes, yawns are very contagious to those who have a lot of empathy. It's not a sure-fire thing, but it was a tell of change within Psychopath." Just from thinking about it, Jaxi yawned and soon did the bear. Half cursing under his breath. The two looked at the behemoths who resisted for quite some time before yawning themselves. "I wonder how many people reading this just did that too."

The vocals downstairs started to get more common as people arrived, causing the four to look down and gaze at almost a flood of people. Most coming in from the fun outside to warm up, others coming in for snacks and socializing in front of a cozy fire. "It's starting to get dark out." Karmu half mumbled in a deep voice, getting the attention of the others.

"I-it's only afternoon here, isn't it?" The navy raptor asked, their magenta eyes gazing between the two behemoths. "Why would it...?"

"It gets dark very early this time of year. Sometimes around 5pm." Bartan informed the three, the red beast nodding in confirmation. "It happens. But if you want to go outside for some winter fun, best to do it while there's still natural light out. There will be 'street' lights if you're out too late though-" Some grumbling in the smallest one's middle caught the three's attention for a moment, making them whimper.

"Let's get you something to eat first." Drygg gave the feathered dino a nuzzle and let them lead the way downstairs.

"Ooo, I heard they have a Sadifruit Salad! We should definitely try some Drygg'makarr." Before completely disappearing out of sight, the two paused to look and wave at the furball. "It was nice to meet you, Bartan." The furball gave a solid nod and a wave back with a smile. Waiting until they were well down the stairs before the furball exhaled and looked over the edge.

"Are you doing okay?" Karmu asked after a moment, getting a nod in response but not quite as solid. "It's... Hard sometimes, y'know? Living, especially for a long time."

"Yeah..."

"You see how much the world changes, and not always for the better. But that doesn't mean..."

"It'll stay bad?" The red one nodded. "I... I can't say I know, but I certainly hope it won't. However, it does make the future bleak, like seeing a tornado on the horizon not moving." Those strange eyes stared at the smaller one. "If it doesn't look like it's moving to you..."

"It's coming towards you."

"Or in this case, the people I care about." A loud exhale, one in half frustration. "It feels like just a few years ago I accepted the fact that I cannot save people from themselves, and I need to stop trying to."

"But it doesn't make it easier to be stuck watching." The render mumbled, looking over the edge with the white one. "No wonder you like power and power fantasy; you often feel like you lack it."

"I often feel like I lack any sense of control with my life. I often just want to help, but there's nothing I can do."

"And when you do help, you feel like it's not enough." Those brown eyes met those strange black ones. "Naught and I talked a lot about you. He has... A tremendous amount of insight."

"I imagine."

"But most importantly: Optimism. And if he isn't worried..." Karmu trailed off, making the furball sigh.

"Then I shouldn't be either. That, or he knows something I don't." A grumble from the white one as they remained silent for a few moments. Then a large hand gently (and awkwardly) started to pet the bear- and I mean borderline Nervously tried to. "You okay?"

"Just... Worried about breaking you, is all." The behemoth admitted.

"Well, don't be. Seriously, you've arm-wrestled Beo, right?"

"The brass dragon?"

"Yeah. I may not be able to completely handle one of his tight hugs, but I can manage. A small pet isn't going to do anything bad." A nervous grumble left that red throat as the render began to stroke the bear's back harder, eventually getting Bartan to purr a bit as Karmu got more comfortable. Digging those claws deep into the fluff.

"You are... Incredibly soft-" Only for the railing to actually break and the furball to yelp loudly before falling down. His hind paw slipping right through the red grasp as Bartan zipped past the other two balconies, one of which someone else attempted to reach over and grab. Pawing at the air, he barely caught eye of something large and black on the ground before impacting-!

Landing on something very large and plushy, like that of a giant air mattress made of latex. Completely breaking his fall but making him bounce a little before two paws grabbed a hold of Bartan's form and kept him in place. "Why...?" The furball half panted and whined. "Why do I keep going to high places?" A familiar chuckle perked his four ears, then letting out a heavy sigh of relief. "Thank you, Jinx."

"A-anytime."

"I'm surprised you blew yourself up that fast to rescue me."

"Rescue?" The black dragon's blunt question made Bartan look at the 'G-Rex's' gray eyes, then around to find a large table that was covered in prepped foods. Only about 1/8th of which was eaten so far, causing those brown eyes to shift between the table and the belly he was resting on.

"...How does this even-?"

"Don't think about it too hard." The black theropod stated, giving the furball a hug while the bear gave one back.

"W-well, thanks for breaking my fall."

"You're welcome~" One last squeeze before letting Bartan slip off. Now realizing Jinx was eating at a table made for larger creatures like wyrms or behemoths. Causing the bear to flop on the ground a bit heavily with a padded fwoomp before shaking it off. Walking nearly right into a group that arrived and looked over the decorated room, a few he recognized and they greeted while passing by.

The bear slipped through the arriving crowd and tried to move into an unoccupied space along the wall. Many fireplaces crackling with light and comforting warmth as people got to their tables, while some were just ordering things from a buffet table and taking it to a lounging area. Though someone did catch his eye, a certain brown Charr; a large cat with horns and four ears, a strange mix of both feral and anthro. Carrying three plates, two dinner and one treat as she tried to weave through the area where people were being seated. "H-here, I've got you." Bartan said when she came close to him, causing the large feline to stop as he took one of the plates for her.

"Oh, thank you." She released a sigh of relief. "I was trying to get it all in one trip, but."

"Was there not a device at your table?"

"It wasn't reading our cards." Kyella led the way to where a wyrm was resting, gold scales and blue fur along its underside. "I did mention it to Linet though earlier, so hopefully it's fixed before someone else takes the spot when we're done." A noise in confirmation from the bear as he focused heavily on keeping balance and not dropping the plate of snacks. "I still find it really... Strange."

"Find what strange?"

"To see Linet like... That." Those white ears perked and tilted a bit. "Short? Quadruped? ...Not-Charr?" The brown feline awkwardly mumbled.

"Right, because the first time you met Linet was in Waiting For Tonight."

"Yeah..." Kyella sat one plate down before moving the other one to the large wyrm, watching his head raise and almost perk up, licking the charr's neck while she placed the tray of food in front of the dragon. Giving that bearded muzzle a few pets. "Why is that, anyway?"

"Why is what?" Bartan asked, bringing the brown one's mealtray to her after placing down the snack one. Letting the feline get into position where she uses the dragon's body as a backrest and getting that plate on her lap.

"That Linet is...?" The furball tried his card on the reader, and it gave him some kind of error. Half grunting at it before moving down to the next one. "I tried all of them nearby, so it might be an issue with this one area."

"Okay." Bartan rested on a long-couch near her in the meantime. "Well, back when I was first starting Guild Wars 2, I knew who I was going to make first thing: Eman Ssel. I was a huge Pyre Fierceshot fan from the first one, so I knew I was going to make a ranger as well. Of course though, I played around with the character creator and spotted the white coat with black spots. Though it wasn't one for one, it reminded me of Linet."

"So you made her next?"

"Close, I think I made my Elementalist next, using the norn race." Both the charr and dragon double taked at him mid-bite. "I was interested in how the shapeshifting thing would work out, and since Monk was annihilated because 'Nobody liked playing healers', Ele was my next best choice."

"I'm just..."

"Surprised I took a human-looking class? Yeah. Different time back then. Had more tolerance than I do now. But I believe my third was Linet in the form of a Necro." Bartan half chuckled. "I really really liked how she turned out, and way back when, Shroud Form was so overpowered. Able to save yourself from instant death, including from falling at any height so long as you were in it."

"Definitely a long time ago."

"Yeah... In GW1, I moved around with a lot of characters, so many of them were good. But the one I tended to try to get the most titles for was Necro. It half became my main when I got Legendary Survivor: reaching max level without dying once- and this was back when you only had one try for it. If you died, that title opportunity was lost and you needed to remake the character if you wanted to try again. I got somewhat close with a ranger once, but my bad internet screwed me over by disconnecting mid-fight. Poor River."

"Ouch."

"Happens. But I really enjoyed Necro, and it was a bit dangerous to play as in the first game whereas your minions would constantly degenerate their health. You needed to raise them from fresh corpses, so it wasn't easy to just replace them when needed. You wanted to keep them alive, and one of the easiest ways to do that was with Blood Of The Master: A skill that would take 5% of your max hp, with an additional 2% for every allied minion in range. Yours or not. So once you start getting an army behind you, healing them will start to take a chunk out of your life- but it's much easier on your monk to heal one person rather than an entire army." The charr just stared at him blankly. "GW1 was a much different game compared to 2."

"I-I'll say. But why use Linet for...?"

"The story?" Bartan shyly looked around, blushing a bit. "I... Had the crush on Beaker for quite some time. For a while I just used Anton from Destruction Preventer to get my gryphon allure out, but it wasn't enough. I thought 'What the hell? Why not.' and pitched the idea to Linet because... In my fantasies, it was always the Charr version of her and back then I was expecting an 'I'd rather not' for an answer."

"Wait, why?"

"Because Linet was too shy about being in stories. Adult rated or not, she... Had confidence issues, and Kindle (the white anthro fox that you see around here) has been trying to build up that confidence. So imagine my surprise when Linet's response was 'Just the Charr version, right?' I mean, Linet was doing the dialogue for her anyway, so." The bear shrugged. "After a good reaction to the story, I wanted to try different ones and Linet was fine for using a Charr version of herself as 'testing the waters' so to speak. After Beaker, it was Ari (the raptor), and the suggestion of going through all the Mounts in the game was an idea but it felt too... Basic, in my opinion. While playing with a few friends, one of them suggested turning the Pack-Raptors in the game into a weapon. Specifically launching them via a cannon/catapult of sorts, and I thought the idea was amusing."

"Which led to act 3." Kyella said a bit shyly.

"Your first step into the spotlight." Bartan half smiled. "Which led to one of the best decisions I made in the series, honestly." A blushing double take from the charr. "Turning act 4 about you instead of them felt like the best thing I could've done with it. It would've been so easy to make you the antagonist using the law within the Black Citadel to get those two separated. Something you would see in a typical porn story for some drama, but I just... Didn't want that. I don't enjoy drama like that: people being on power trips and stepping on others- whether they deserve it or not. So instead..."

"You made... Me."

"I made someone who was missing something in their life and needed some step in the right direction. I made someone who finally saw a glimpse of what they could have and gathered the courage

to ask for it, without the threats of violence or strong-arming... Even if it kinda looked that way because of 'Charr'." A breath from Bartan. "It's my favorite act in the series, and it's one reason why I wanted to branch off to Butterfly. Because I didn't want you to feel like you were stealing or replacing Linet in her own story."

"That makes sense."

"Which really worked out, because though I could not ask for a better ending in Waiting For Tonight, I felt like I wasn't done. It just... Took a while to get back around to..." The furball gestured towards both the large feline and the still eating dragon. "Almost two years ago, which seems impossible when looking back on it."

"Is that why we're invited?"

"I mean, everyone is here. But last year... I didn't have the energy to do a big scene like this. Hell, I don't really feel like it this year, but I at least had a good head start on my rest. Allowing me to get a lot done before working on my Halloween stuff, and getting my thoughts together. But it also meant that a lot of people didn't get their yearly visit/talk with me. Zhaixha being one of them- the hyena from Psychopath." The bear suddenly interrupted her. "Nobody seems to remember that story nor that main character."

"Does that mean you're... Going to stop doing these?" The charr asked after a bite, making the bear exhale for a moment.

"Unlikely that I'll stop. These things tire me out, that's for sure. Fictional or not, I'm not a big fan of large parties. Writing a Meta like this is like hosting one: There's a lot of work and upkeep involved, and I constantly worry that my guests are left bored. Because really, all the entertainment is hearing me ramble about stuff."

"But it's nice to see a glimpse inside the mind of the creator. That's the entire point, if I'm not mistaken." A worried look from the furball. "That's the purpose of these Metas, yes? That's what makes it interesting, to see your thoughts about the creations you make."

"Is it interesting, though? I mean, it's nice to see some more of people's favorite characters, but I'm the one yapping my muzzle off the entire time. They're just responding-"

"Because they've already spoken their piece in their story, this is your time. That's the point." The furball looked away for a moment in shyness. "If they want more of the character, they know enough to get it from those stories. This is your time, because you're not in a whole lot-"

"I beg to differ with all the Drunken Lullabies and random things-"

"That you can speak your piece. Your own thoughts about things, you can't do that in a DL without it breaking the mood." The furball sighed in response as Kyella continued. "People read these things for you, not for us."

"...I suppose." Bartan grumbled. "I just feel so... Boring compared to everyone else." Both the wyrm and the charr stared at him for a moment. "...I said *compared* to everyone else." The bear snorted. "No one should be listening to the ramblings of an old furball."

"Well, we do. And the people want to as well." A snout toss from that white muzzle. "But alright, we'll change the subject. What's next for the WFT/Butterfly series?"

"An act 3." Another look from the two, but then a bit of worry when Bartan didn't continue. "That is literally all I got: I want to do an act 3, and will probably work on it. However, I've got Nothing Else Planned. I'm assuming it's going to involve you two, maybe finally get some language developed, but I do like the idea that the Skyscale never speaks... However, a proper name for him might be in order."

"I'm surprised you made it this far without giving him one."

"It was more interesting and organic to leave it blank. To give him a name is like to say 'You're Mine Now owo' and everything is sunshine and rainbows." Those brown ears perked and Kyella's head tilted at the 'owo' part, trying to sound it out silently. "Nevermind. My point is... It would be rushing things too fast- and I know you guys already had sex like 3 times. The hypocrisy is real, and people are horny. I gotta keep their attention somehow, and that's usually with hot Charr action." She chuckled at that, lightly blushing but then her expression became visibly puzzled. "Uh oh."

"Have you ever-?"

"Dragons, gryphons, not too many dinosaurs-"

"Done it with Charr?" That left the bear interrupted with his maw open, stuck in thought for a few moments. Then closed it while he pondered more... And more... And more. "For a person that really loves them, I'm surprised that-"

"I've never mounted a Charr, wow..." Bartan blushed, still searching through his thoughts. "...WOW..."

"And how many times have you done Banshees?"

"S-shhhh!"

"And dinosaurs?"

"Well, there was that gray raptor at that New Year's party." The furball shyly whimpered. "A couple of otters, myself: either a voodoo doll or a portal toy of sorts-"

"And that time you did your female self." A complete standstill from the furball before a long and shy whine. "It's a wonder that it didn't happen sooner, honestly-"

"T-t-that was a dream I had that I wrote into a DL!" He whispered loudly, covering his eyes with both forepaws. His tail wagged with excitement recalling the event. "I-I completely forgot about that one...!"

"It was definitely something, that's for sure." Kyella chuckled as the fluffy one whined. "So, bear X charr when?"

"S-sometime soon, yes. I'll... I'll have to think of the details later, but I'll... Keep it in mind." He took a few breaths to calm himself down a bit... Until those ears perked up and he whimpered loudly again.

"What? They're just bells." Kyella bluntly stated as she spotted the white fox move towards and behind the bear. Resting what looked to be belled red riding tack onto his back and giving the overly excited tail a few pats.

"Look what I fouuunnnd." Kindle half purred, unable to keep herself from chuckling at his long long whimper as that entire bear muzzle tinted with blush. Vaulting over the couch back and sitting on his fluffy form didn't seem to bother him any, as she spoke to the feline. "Got him all worked up, did you?"

"I'm surprised how shy he is talking about adult content, considering what he's written."

"All the weird stuff too, yeah." The fox replied, getting a whimper from the bear as she petted his neck. "Like getting stuck on breeding mounts, attacked by post-it notes, all the jazz from this Halloween's story." A higher pitched whine, and a few more pats. "There, there. You just love playing with your toys~"

"P-please don't say it like that." Bartan huffed.

"Did you know that he's never played with Charr yet?" Kyella asked, hearing the furball whine while Kindle playfully gasped.

"Nor did he fool around with Kveldulves, like he was planning." A puzzled look from the brown one, causing the fox to return the look. "I thought they were in Guild Wars."

"G-GW1, yes. But sadly not 2." Bartan answered through his fluster.

"Which one was in both then?" Kindle rubbed his fluff.

"A-Aatxe is probably the one you were thinking of."

"Something else you haven't played around with~" A whine that morphed into a frustrated huff. "Like Behemoths."

"Behemoths...?" Kyella questioned. "Plated Behemoths-?"

"Probably not the ones you're thinking of." Kindle mentioned, pointing in a direction without looking at the red Render now with a rather colorful raptor. Causing the theropod to give a questionable double take but wave happily, and Kindle did the same.

"Oh my..." The Charr said bashfully under her breath, then kinda looked at the size difference between such a beast and Bartan. To the point where her golden dragon 'seat' grumbled after finishing his meal, nudging at her a little bit and her flustered scent.

"I think someone's getting a little jealous." The fox chuckled, giving the bear a few taps. "Come, let's leave them alone for a bit." A huff from the bear and he stepped off the couch; anthro still on his back and riding.

"E-enjoy your holiday, you two." Bartan excused himself with a nod and got one from Kyella in return. Still feeling her eyes on his lower half- though realizing that the furball was censored. The charr was just trying to imagine what they would look like for a moment before the dragon acting as her seat growled again for her attention.

The two white ones walked and greeted a few more passing by before heading up to another elevated deck of sorts. Unoccupied but furnished as he found another couch that looked over the area. Feeling the fox adjust on his back to hug that fluffy neck from behind while also looking in the same direction. Taking a few moments to enjoy the view as more and more people came through. Some were new, while others were ones he met along the way here. Almost everyone from that basement could be seen though, socializing with others new and old. Making the bear smile... Sadly. "Whatcha thinking about?"

"...I donno." Bartan took a breath. "I feel... I feel like I'm at a funeral." He gestured to the people, but she knew which he was talking about. "Their funeral."

"Why do you say that?"

"...Because I'll never finish their stories." A few pets as she let him talk. "I wish I knew what to say to them, to give them some peace of mind. But I... I don't know what the future holds. It's just so damn murky with health issues, world events, and my fatigue. Even the stories I hope for; Butterfly, The Thread Of Dawn, I want to get them done, but I really can't say for certain."

"No one can."

"I know, but..."

"I know what you mean." Kindle stroked those ears gently. "Hey." She got the attention of those brown eyes for a moment. "You'll figure it out. Sometimes it does take a while."

"...Maybe."

"Remember Red Hypergiant?" A whine from him. "And that damn masterpiece that came after it?"

"I-I wouldn't call From The Wilderness a masterpiece."

"You still gush to us about it, and it's, like... Never been read by anyone. Yet, never before has a story made you so conflicted in feelings than that one." A sour look from the bear. "It's a true sci-fi, which is what you wanted."

"A conflict within oneself: the nature of one's biology and biotech trapped in a single body." The furball sighed. "Maybe I just grew too attached to it. I often question if it's even as good as I think it is, which is why..."

"You dislike 'selling' your stories, even though they're free." The bear nodded.

"It is costing people their time, and sometimes-" A few taps on that high-bridged polar snout.

"No thinking like that." A grumble in response. "Especially on a holiday. You'll figure something out, even if it's slowly chipping away at these stories 5 years apart." Another grumble. "For now, do what you want. Work on what you enjoy, and take the time off you need." A deep breath and exhale from the bear as the people down below began to cheer: spotting the brass wyrm and the six legged white host enter the room. "Looks like the party's about to start then."

"Didn't it start like two hours ago?"

"The prep did, yes. But now the main event." A double take and worried whimper from the male. "...No, it's not an orgy." A sigh of relief- "Something much worse." A sharper whine as he could feel a lot of eyes focused on him and Kindle. Then a large banner came down with more decorations, stating 'Happy 10 Years Of Writing!' with the number actually being patched with an 11 instead.

"O-oh no..." Bartan whined. "Y-you guys didn't..."

"You were too tired last year to do a celebration, so we're doing it this year." Kindle gave him a smooch while the room cheered. A whine from the bear as he covered his eyes with a paw. "Wait until you see the cake."

"It better not be Red Velvet." He grumbled.

"Nah, Tomato Soup Cake, Jack & Jill, and the classics: Chocolate, Vanilla, and Marble." The male perked his ears and tilted his head at her. "There are a looooot of layers." A slight whine in response. "Happy 11th year, bear."

"H-Happy 11th year, Arson. And Thank You, for everything you do." They kissed, hearing the riding tack still loosely on the male's fluffy back jingle a bit. "...Please don't tell me we have to 'P-Perform' in front of them." Kindle just smirked at him.

"I'll think about it~"

***Merry Xmas, Guys <3
And Good Luck In 2025***