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CHAPTER THREE: GOTTA STOMP FOR THE LAST ONE

When Dino awoke, the first thing he saw was Lysozyme sprawled out a short distance away. "Ugrrrrhhnnn...Lyso, Lyso are you awake?" he muttered.

Lyso stirred a bit, raising himself up on his arms. "Ugh, I am now. What happened?"

Dino looked up and around. "Well, gee, what a surprise, we shrunk." Sure enough, as Lyso looked upwards as well, they saw they were in the flat bottom of a glass jar that had a clear top with small holes. Looking outside their glass prison, they saw a pencil nearby, and Dino muttered, "We're about an inch tall. And...*shit*, I don't have my Lens ring anymore."

Lysozyme stood up and shook the grogginess out of his head. "Well, I'd have no trouble scaling this glass...but there's no way I'm gonna be able to get that lid off."

When Sabrewing went to check on his two captives later that morning, he saw that both had their butt-cheeks pressed up against the glass at him. "My, my...such boldness from such little, unimportant creatures. I do hope you realize that you have no role to play in the future, and that I'm only keeping you around until the Project Engineer arrives so he can dispose of you personally."

As Dino and Lyso turned to face their captor, Sabrewing continued and held up a clawhand. "Looking for this?" Sabrewing was wearing two rings on his right hand...and one was definitely Dino's Lens ring. "My master will be very interested indeed in acquiring yet *another* ring."

Sabrewing heard some squeaking coming through the holes in the top of the jar, but paid little attention to it. "Oh, squeak squeakity squeak to you, too," he snickered. "Enjoy breathing whilst you can, fools...for we are but a short time from the arrival of the almighty *Project Engineer!*"

"Khith!"

Khith powered up, his eyes spinning erratically a few moments. "Huh?"

Jenn prodded him a few more times. "Khith, it's eleven in the morning. Dino never came home last night. Do you have any idea where he may have gone?"

As Khith began to get up, Elena was beginning to stir in the garage as well. Khith looked over at Elena, then back at Jenn. "No, no I haven't spoken to Dino in a long time."

Jenn studied Elena briefly before sighing. "He must've gotten himself into trouble. I have enough on my plate trying to keep the town from lynching us for that road construction fiasco, and now he's gone off and tried to be a hero and fix it all himself, and screwed it up, of course. Do you have any clues as to who's behind all the road construction?"

Maybe it was because it had been a whole 7.4521338 hours since he was fooling around with Elena, and his processor was able to actually *think* for a change, but he seemed to *finally* put two and two together. *The road construction...*

However, it took Khith only three seconds to respond to Jenn. "No. I don't have any idea."

Jenn sighed again. "Well, I'm going back to the office. See what you can do around here, I guess." With that, she closed the garage door and left for downtown as Khith watched through a window.

He had lied to Jenn, because he suddenly realized that *he* had somehow gotten himself involved in the very evil that was threatening Lava Dome Five. Elena had tricked him into working against himself, in essence, and he wanted to find out what was going on. He calculated that if he could get into trouble by himself, then he could get himself out.

Khith turned to look at Elena, who was only shifting slightly on the cool cement garage floor. He began to curse himself for being so foolish. Here he had been doing whatever Elena wanted of him, without question, simply because of his fascination with her. Her synthetic nature...so much like his own, yet so different. She was but an automaton, doing what her *master* bid of her...

Before he started to get a cyber-woody again, Khith quickly trotted over to Elena, grabbed her firmly around the neck, and twisted.

"Zilla, my darling..."

"Yes, Yume, my sweet?"

"The little one has little time left, I fear. A great evil will soon enter our world. Can't this dragon fly any faster?"

"Oh, I think with a few pokes in the proper location..."

Khith must have jumped back four feet when he saw Elena's eyes suddenly snap open. Even from that distance, he could hear the solenoids and motors whirring inside her head.

"Khith, what is happening?" the head spoke.

Elena's head was propped up against a paint can in the garage, on a workbench. Gold-plated connectors and fiber optic cabling dangled a few inches across the tabletop from her neck. *She must have a backup power supply inside her head*, Khith thought to himself.

"Um...it's just a routine checkup, Elena. Company rules," Khith replied. Below the workbench where Khith had propped Elena's disconnected head temporarily was a PC and a monitor. The PC was connected to Elena's standing, upright body through a series of flat ribbon cables. Elena's body remained motionless, but her head was rocking back and forth from the movement of her jaw.

"My head has been separated from its body," Elena remarked calmly. "I am unable to access my primary data core."

"That's right, Elena. Your head had to be separated so that I could access it for maintenance," Khith replied, almost circling Elena's body like a vulture. He snuffled at the exposed neck...the smell of ozone, electronics, lubricants...

"But I miss my primary data core," Elena remarked again.

"What?" Khith stood upright instantly.

"I miss my primary data core. Please, I don't feel right without it."

What on Earth? thought Khith. *How can Elena be showing emotions? I've got her primary computer systems disconnected from her head. Is it some sort of backup programming...synthetic emotions designed to get her reassembled in the event of an accident?*

"It's...it's okay, Elena. Your primary data core is right here. I promise, as soon as the maintenance is done, you'll be back together," Khith found himself saying in a reassuring tone. In reality, he was decrypting and downloading all he could from Elena's memory core into his PC, hoping to make some sense out of Elena's motivations, if not the identity of her *true* master.

The head quivered a bit. "Hold me, Khith."

Well, once again, round about this time, Khith's processor was all cyberhormones. He started to caress Elena's body with his thin arms, delicately tracing patterns over the rubbery flesh with his talons. The body had more give to it now, as the hydraulic pressure systems were offline, giving Elena's headless body a gaunt, emaciated appearance. Khith could feel past the skin to the superstructure beneath, his sensitive fingertips following and documenting every cable, every joint, every...

"No, Khith...hold *me*," Elena repeated.

Khith blinked a few times and looked over at Elena's head. If he didn't know better, he thought he saw sorrow in her eyes. He caressed Elena's sides once more before trotting over to the table and gently picking up her head between his hands. "Don't be scared, Elena. You know I would never do anything to hurt you."

Elena's head closed its eyes, and she smiled slightly. He nibbled gently across the synthetic raptor head's lips, when his olfactory sensors picked up something unusual for a robot. Gently turning Elena's head, he saw something quite interesting inside, and quickly powered on his soldering iron.

Lights and indicators started to flash and buzz inside Sabrewing's office, as the tiny Dino and Lyso were startled from their nap. Sabrewing appeared from an adjacent room, ignoring his wee captives, and pressed on some controls. "The time has come at last," he muttered to himself.

Striding over to a large lever on a wall, he slowly pulled down on the arm, and the wall began to ripple as if it were suddenly liquefied. The wooden surface of the wall seemed to then dissolve away, as if it were only a waxy film, and the wall became a boiling vertical sea of bright red lava.

Sabrewing knelt before the pool of fire. "I welcome you to Earth, my master," he bellowed as a hunter green draconian stepped through and out of the liquid, unfazed by the portal or his servant.

"Arise, my servant," the tall morphic dragon stated, looking down at Sabrewing.

Sabrewing stood, and smiled greedily at the Project Engineer. He was an impressive figure to behold...a very muscular dragon, with an impressive and regal cloak. His heavy claws clenched and almost penetrated the floor beneath him. Sabrewing approached him, bearing a palm to him. "Behold, master...I have the Dinosorceror's Lens ring in my possession, and I have saved him for your judgment as well."

"Excellent, young apprentice," the Project Engineer replied. "Call forth my robotic minions and bring them to me. As soon as they arrive, the ceremony will begin. Soon, I will be one step closer to a full Ascension."

Sabrewing nodded, and led the Project Engineer into a different room, as Lyso climbed up and stuck his head out an air hole, because Dino had really let one rip.

"My bad!" Dino squeaked.

Khith had no sooner fastened the last optical connector between Elena's head and body, when Elena jerked to life. "Come on, Khith. I have to go downtown right now, or I will be late!"

Khith held Elena in place. "You'll just have to wait a few minutes, Elena...I'm not done sealing up your neck seam. You'll get dirt in there!"

Elena fidgeted in every way possible until Khith finished. Elena said nothing to Khith...she simply turned and trotted out the door. Khith smiled to himself.

There was a definite shift in the mood on the twenty-third floor of the Lava Dome Five Enterprises building downtown. It had seemed to be an elegant wood-paneled corporate office, but now...with the torches, pools of simmering liquid, and strange otherworldly portals...it was more like a bad sorcery movie.

The Dinosorceror and Lysozyme had been removed from their glassy jar prison and instead languished on a plate of sticky goo on some sort of central altar.

Lysozyme commented to Dino, "Why do I have the feeling our situation has not improved?"

"Why sure it has, Lyso!" Dino beamed. "See, as long as our backs are stuck in this gooey stuff, you can't smell any more of my farts!"

"Can you tell me *again* why it was a good idea to get involved with you?" Lyso sighed.

"Why, soitanly!" Dino chuckled. "Y'see, I'm really wee, and --"

"**SILENCE!**" boomed a voice from above them. It was Sabrewing, who was now dressed in regal robes of his own. "The squeaky chatter ends *now*. Behold, the Project Engineer!"

The dark green visage of the Project Engineer now stood before the altar as well. What Dino and Lyso couldn't see was that there were scores of robotic raptors filling the room behind them, including Elena.

"Your ilk have been a thorn in my side for far too long, Dinosorcerer. Your world shall be crushed, like the worlds of so many before you. I shall display your insignificant carcass as the fallen idol of a pathetic ideal!" the Project Engineer rumbled, and the robotic raptors began to click their jaws. "Sabrewing, the ring!" the Engineer commanded.

Sabrewing handed the Project Engineer the ring he had taken from Dino, the Lens ring, the ring that gave him the power to control size. The Engineer took the ring delicately and placed it on his finger, beside a similar ring that looked a lot like Dino's...or, at least, Dino would've noticed, if he hadn't been asking Lysozyme if he thought the goo they were ensnared in smelled like strawberries.

The Engineer's eyes flared and seemed to glow. "At last, the power of the Lens ring is MINE!" he thundered as Sabrewing took a few steps back.

"That's what you think!" Khith shouted as he leaped at the Project Engineer from where he had been playing along as one of the mindless robotic drones beside Elena. The rings on the Engineer's hand glowed in unison as he held his hand aloft, and Khith found himself wriggling and struggling in midair.

"Pathetic creature! How intelligent can a robot be that chooses to *destroy* itself?" the Engineer chuckled and sneered to himself. "Come to me, Elena. Come and finish off this worthless rabble," the Engineer commanded.

Elena stepped forward and observed Khith coldly as the Engineer continued to pontificate. "You see, Khith, Elena has been working for *me* the whole time. Can your feeble, synthetic mind comprehend that? Here I almost thought you were a more intelligent machine than it is. Or should I say it was? You see, it also has a small thermonuclear device inside it that I believe I shall detonate now."

Sabrewing was agape. "But master! What about us?"

The Project Engineer sent out a concentrated beam of power from his other hand that enveloped all of Sabrewing, but then concentrated on his arm, then hand, then finger. Almost effortlessly, the Engineer removed the ring that had been on Sabrewing's hand and it shot across the room and slipped onto another of his fingers, joining the other two rings already on his clawed hand. "There is no us, Sabrewing. There is only ME. I alone am destined to rule the cosmos!" he bellowed, his voice getting lower. "I can survive such a pitiful display of nuclear power! However, this world will now quake with it as I watch amused!"

There were a few awkward moments of silence.

"Sorry to disappoint you, loser, but I took the liberty of examining Elena and I found out all about your bomb. Elena, why don't you show the Engineer how much you love him?" Khith shouted as he squirmed in midair, trying to reach behind himself for a pulse discharge device he had planted under a back plate.

Elena ran over to the Engineer and began to purr and caress his muscular legs. "Get away from me, you stupid tool!" he bellowed, kicking Elena roughly, snapping a few internal mechanisms. Elena slid for a moment, then lay motionless in a corner.

"**NO!**" Khith shouted, and fired the device at the Project Engineer. A burst of electrical energy from a highly charged capacitor shot through the Engineer's body, and he roared in anger, but lost concentration on his powers. Khith dropped to the floor, and Sabrewing ran up to his side, helping him up. "I think we're on the same team now," Sabrewing said, and Khith nodded.

"What a pathetic display," the Engineer sneered as he stood upright again. "Do you not realize how pathetic you both are? Destroy them, my raptors!" he shouted, but before any of the robots could take a step, the doors to the room splintered as if they had exploded. The bulky form of a Tri-Star Godzilla lumbered into the room, followed by the demure form of a blue dragonness in silk robes.

"Your rule of terror shall never come to pass," Yume stated softly. "Zilla, you know what to do."

"You betcha," he said, cracking his knuckles. In an instant, Zilla was upon the pack of robotic raptors while Yume approached Khith and Sabrewing.

"I don't know who you are, mortal, but you **dare** not interrupt my Ascension!" the Engineer roared. Tired of the incessant delays, he held his hand aloft and the three rings on it glowed brightly.

Khith and Sabrewing, having little to no real power to do *anything* at this point, basically watched as Yume sweetly took a few steps forward and blasted a gy-normous wave of yellow energy towards the Engineer's upheld hand. The power crackled between the Engineer's spread fingers, and they curled slightly in response. The Engineer, in retaliation, began to feed in a dark, obsidian wave of energy himself, and as the powers fought, one of the rings...Sabrewing's...shattered. The explosion blew Dino's Lens ring right off the Engineer's hand, and it bounced around the room towards Zilla, who was happily bashing robotic raptors to pieces.

"Love, the Lens ring! Get it!" Yume shouted, her brow beginning to furrow from the effort of pouring energy towards the Engineer and his remaining ring. Zilla thudded around for a few steps before spying the ring on the ground and picking it up, three raptors hanging off his back, only two of which had lower legs. "I got it...now what?" Zilla asked.

"I sense the little one is on the altar...use the Ring to restore his size!" Yume murmured, her gaze locked on the Engineer, the altar lying between them. Khith and Sabrewing watched, almost amused at this point, as Zilla fumbled with the ring a bit, slipping it on a clawtip, while idly beating hissing robo-raptors away and crushing them underfoot. He held his hand out and pointed at the altar. "Like this?"

A thin beam of energy hit the altar, and in an instant...Lysozyme was sitting on it, back to normal size!

The Project Engineer, Yume, Khith and Zilla all paused for a moment to stare at Lysozyme. "Um..." was all Yume could say to break the silence.

Lyso looked at Yume, smiled, then turned to face the Engineer. "I think it's lights out time, *buddy*," he said cheerfully, and spun around and kicked the Project Engineer square in the jaw, knocking him out cold.

Yume quickly trotted over and, using a beam of magic, removed the ring from the Project Engineer's finger. The Engineer's body started to hiss, and eerie black vapors seemed to leave the pores of the green dragon.

Meanwhile, Zilla was gnawing on the last of the robotic raptors as it sparked in his mouth. Spitting the remains out, he growled, "Did I do good, honey?"

Yume eyed the ring as it hovered over the altar. "You did indeed, Zilla," she smiled, and sighed with a bit of exhaustion, straightening her silk robes.

Lysozyme did a little dance around the Project Engineer, who was beginning to stir. "C'mon, ya big loudmouth, I dare you to fight me again!" he spat down at the dragon.

Khith trotted over to Elena, and saw that she wasn't damaged too badly. "I'll have you fixed up in no time, my love. You won't be under his evil control any longer..."

Jenn, Helvetica Bold and Logarithm Cox ran into the room a few moments later. "What on Earth is going on up here?" Cox stated, surveying the damage.

Yume helped the Project Engineer to his feet. "I believe this gentlesaur is the one best suited to answer *that* particular question."

"Well, until he gets to his senses, I'll fill you all in," Sabrewing said, clearing his throat. "I had been sent here as an agent of that man, the Project Engineer. He's your usual evil megalomaniac type bent on universal domination. He had me search this world for the Dinosorceror, and using robotic minions to aid me, we finally located him. The whole road construction thing was just something to get the Dinosorceror to come to us."

"Except that you were double-crossed," Khith added. "He destroyed your magic ring."

"Yes," Yume nodded. "And I believe you'll find that the so-called Project Engineer is no more."

"Hi, my name's Denare," the Project Engineer stated plainly. "Can someone tell me what the hell's going on here?"

Sabrewing squinted at Denare. "You mean, you don't *remember* all that you just *did*?"

"Nope, the last thing I remember is putting on a ring in a pawn shop...*that* ring," Denare said, pointing to the ring that was levitating above the altar. "Boy, whatever has been happening, I feel a lot more buff than I was before! I hope these muscles don't wear off..."

"So did the same thing happen to you?" Cox asked, looking at Sabrewing as Denare flexed and posed. "Did you come across an evil, possessed ring?"

Sabrewing shrugged and shook his head. "Nope. I was in it for the whole power and domination thing. Do you know how *hard* it is to get *full dental benefits*? Man, it was a sweet package, lemme tell you," he sighed. "I guess I gotta get a real job now."

Zilla scraped off the remains of a synthetic raptor from his clawfoot and stepped forward. "So, do we just destroy this ring now or what?"

Yume turned to face the levitating ring. "It must be destroyed in the place whence it was forged. It contains a strong, powerful, *evil* magic."

"Oy, epics, oy," Jenn muffled, covering her face.

"But...wait a minute. Where's Dino?" Khith said, hauling Elena on his back.

Everyone kind of looked around, down at the floor, spun around...

Cox finally noticed, and pointed at Lysozyme. "Umm, what's that plate stuck to your butt?"

A few embarrassing moments later, Dino was standing with the rest of them, slipping the Lens ring back on his finger. "So it was a case of a really evil ring, hmm? Can we flush it?" Dino reached for the levitating ring as everyone gasped...

Dino's fingers touched the ring...

A flash of brownish orange, tipped with ivory...

Dino blinked and stepped back. "Whoa, that was freaky. I saw...I saw...a *claw!*"

Nearly everyone sighed and rolled their eyes. Yume stepped forward to the altar. "This ring is filled with the evil of its creator. It must not be worn or touched." Looking around and not seeing anything suitable, she removed a satin slipper from a footclaw and folded it around the ring, handing it to Dino.

"Ahem, is it possible we could wrap it in something he's *not* going to fondle?" Jenn sighed.

Dino grabbed the slipper anyway with a "Yoink! Don't listen to her, toots. *I'm the man with the plan!*" Dino chuckled.

"So...what now?" Sabrewing asked. "Can I have a job?"

"Are you kidding? I want *ALL* of you to come work at Lava Dome Five! We're one big happy dysfunctional family," Dino stated, ogling the slipper. "I think it's only fair to hire deserving, hard-working, decent folk here at the Dome."

"Don't we need a resume? References? Qualifications?" Zilla asked.

Helvetica whispered over to Zilla, "I believe you're standing on them." Zilla simply scratched his head.

"Besides, once I take off on a big heroic quest to destroy this ring or find the maker or twirl the magic cheese or whatever to get a bunch of gold and experience points, we'll need people here to mind the fort," Dino beamed, walking out of the charred room.

One by one, they followed, Lysozyme being the last to leave. "Y'know, I already have a job, you dimwit..."

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(און אַזוי אַז אַלע אַסאָך פּאַנעלן זענען דאָ און אַזוי אַז אַלע אַסאָך פּאַנעלן זענען דאָ)