

Friday

The end of the first day pressed down on Dew as he closed the door to the classroom. It wasn't an unfamiliar feeling, but he did not relish it either. The day was at an end, and it had brought the din of a fleeing crowd, of fellow students eager to get out into the warmth of the autumn sun – the weekend was here at last. He stifled a yawn as he checked his watch – half three – though his body insisted it was already midnight. Dew adjusted his backpack as he turned to the exit, only to jump when somebody tugged at his shirt.

“What'd the teacher want with you?”

A hard voice came from below; Dew glanced down to see an otter scrutinising his face behind rimless glasses, clutching to a book bag slung over his shoulder. The otter wore a pair of bland shorts and a cyan t-shirt underneath a thin white spring jacket, though his expression was hard, perpetual anger lined in his brow. Dew felt afraid for a moment, and in response the otter's apparent frustration softened slowly. Blinking, Dew tilted his head as the hazel eyes roused his memories.

“Tom?” Dew said softly as his ears perked, wagging his stump. “Tom, is that you?”

“So it *is* you,” the otter replied, his voice a grunt of annoyance. Tom folded his arms and grimaced. “I thought you looked familiar.”

“Jegus, it's been, what, nine years?” Dew exclaimed as he squatted down to be levelled with the otter, so close their noses almost touched. Tom took a step back with soft curses under his breath; Dew caught “what the fuck are you doing” and “oh god don't let anybody see that” amidst the profanity. Dew observed the passersby, though only a few returned the curiosity, and he grinned. Slowly, Tom regained his composure while adjusting his glasses.

“Well, yeah, probably, something like that,” the otter said grimly. Dew's grin died slowly, and he slumped his shoulders; when their eyes met, the otter turned away and mumbled under his breath, “Sorry, shit day.”

“Tell me about it,” Dew nodded as he rose to stand; he heaved for air as he shook his left foot, and then his right, doing what he could to display nonchalance. His grin was fixed when he looked down at the otter.

“You have an accent now,” Tom said, frowning. “Did you always?”

“Lived in Scotia for a couple of years,” Dew replied dubiously as he caught his own words for a moment, trying to alter his enunciation. “And some other places. Is it that noticeable?”

“Just tinges of it,” Tom tilted his head, but his face was still lined in that angry frown. “You basically just dropped it, though.” He peered at Dew a little longer. “You got big,” Tom remarked casually, fiddling with the straps of his book bag. Dew's grin grew even more fixed as his ears twitched; he clenched his teeth as his eyes danced down to his belly for a moment. He tried to draw all attention away from his midriff with his arms, as he mumbled, “I'm not that big.”

“I-I didn't mean,” Tom stammered, his eyes wide and apologetic. As Dew's demeanour didn't calm down, the otter continued to make various unintelligible noises for a while. By the time Tom had gone quiet, the hallways had emptied almost completely. Dew looked around only to jump when Tom tugged on his shirt again. The otter's paw was precariously close to his stomach, and Dew pulled instinctively away. Their eyes met momentarily, before a crestfallen Tom turned away. “I meant you're all... fluffy and stuff.”

“Is that a good thing?” Dew asked uncertainly. The otter rolled his eyes, then the hazel eyes turned to Dew.

“Of course it is,” Tom grumbled, adding “you idiot” under his breath, more to himself than anyone else. Dew frowned and turned away with a sigh. With the hallways all but empty, he began to move towards the exit – his advance became a jump when Tom tugged on his shirt – again – and the otter looked up at him with a hopeless expression. “I'm sorry, I... I didn't mean to be so...”

“It's a *really* shitty day?” Dew suggested softly, with a small smile. Tom nodded and turned his attention to the exit as well. Dew's stomach audibly rumbled, and the fatigue of hunger struck him. “You know of a good place to eat?”

"There's a kebab shop next to the hobby store," the otter mumbled, and his expression darkened. With a heavy groan, he tugged Dew's sleeve, "Let's just get going and get this over with."

"Get what over with? Tom?"

With no response, Dew clutched his rucksack and trailed after the otter. When the doors slid open, a waft of fresh air caressed his face, followed by the harsh autumn sunlight. Dew shielded his eyes, accompanying the otter's forced march through squinted eyes. The day was cool and bright, the trees by the parking lot ruffled with ochre and amber and crimson leaves. Tom glanced around, a wariness in his advance, as they reached the outskirts of the school grounds.

"Oy, Fran! Where you think you're going?"

The timing, Dew thought, bordered on impeccable, the call coming from a small crowd that stood at the end of the parking lot. A wolf in a brown leather jacket and denim trousers, one ear tattered with piercings; a bear wearing a red polo shirt and knee-length shorts, who stood at the forefront of the pack; another bear with spectacles, a purple polo and slightly longer shorts, undoubtedly a relative of the pack's leader; a cheetah in a tank top; and a Rottweiler in a plaid vest, with thick spiked leather cuffs; they made a pack, and gathered around Tom like he was prey. Tom's face became hard and flushed as the otter upped his pace, though the gang left no opening the otter could force his way through. Dew narrowed his eyes as the bear gave Tom a shove.

"You're not Fran," the bear said, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"You couldn't tell?" the wolf replied dryly. "She's not that ugly."

"Fuck off!" Tom snapped, as he tried to push the bear away – to no avail. "What the fuck is your problem!?"

"Ooh, angry already?" the bear snickered as he gave Tom a pat on the shoulder; Tom slapped his hand away and withdrew, only to stumble right into the Rottweiler. The dog glared down at Tom.

"Could you leave him alone?" Dew called out. The pack turned to him, eyes filled with cold spite.

"What, you his boyfriend?" the bear smirked. Dew clenched his fists as he felt his blood heating up.

"Like this faggot could get a boyfriend," the cheetah rolled his eyes. The dog laughed out loud, but Dew scowled at the sight of Tom's face: the otter's increasingly flustered demeanour didn't go unnoticed.

"Holy shit, look how worked up he is," the bear sneered; there was something glittering alongside the glee in his eyes. Dew strode towards the otter and pulled him away, careful to put himself between Tom and the pack.

"What if I am?" Dew interrupted coldly; the pack glanced at each other and the bear put on an apologetic smile.

"Ah, in that case, I apologise," the bear said softly, and he threw Tom a sideways look. "I didn't mean to insinuate there's anything wrong with being gay. I mean, considering how tight he is-"

"I am not gay! Fuck off!" Tom snarled, trying to rush past Dew. The white bear held him back still; despite his fury, Tom was not strong. The pack was.

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that," the bear laughed as he turned to his mates. He offered Dew a left-handed salute, and gave a biting purr, "We'll leave you lovebirds alone. Nice meeting you, fatso."

"You fucker, James!" Tom yelled at the backs of the pack; engrossed in newfound conversation – the topic speculation about Dew – they ignored the otter's expletives. Dew trembled where he stood, his fingers twitching, his knuckles hot, before he sighed heavily and patted his belly with reluctance. He caught a glimpse of the bear looking over his shoulder, his eyes glittering as they did before. When Tom started angrily punching Dew's rear, the bear grumbled and turned around.

"Fuck them." Dew grimaced as he patted Tom on the shoulder; the otter shied away, his eyes averted, curses muttered under his breath.

"Yeah," Tom replied, his voice shaking. "Fuck all of them. I fucking hate them!"

"I don't blame you." Dew looked around, the anger dispersing slowly. "Let's get out of here. You mentioned a kebab shop?"

"Yeah, just... fuck them!" Tom kicked the ground – he staggered forward in pain, crumbling to the ground, only for Dew to grab him mid-fall.

"Don't," Dew muttered, fighting the urge to mimic the otter. "They're not worth it. Please. Let's just... let's just get out of here."

Begrudgingly, Tom agreed, and he tugged on Dew's sleeve – Dew obeyed, and followed wordlessly as the otter led him to a park.

"Dew?" Tom muttered as they trot over the lush autumn grass. Dew gave a soft rumble in response, trying to keep his mind off the bear's last remark. "Could you not tell anyone about the..."

"The...?" Dew inquired as the otter went quiet.

"I didn't mean to get all bothered about the... the whole..." Tom mumbled, though he failed to finish his sentence. Dew tilted his head with questions in his throat, yet when Tom looked up at him the ache in his face washed all queries away. "Could you just not tell anybody?"

"You mean the boyfriend remark?" Tom nodded weakly, and he looked away with splayed ears.

"Please, can we just never talk about it? Ever?" The otter's eyes were everywhere else. Dew's nod went unnoticed.

"Talk about what?" Dew replied softly. The otter looked up at him with gratitude, though as he led the way, the mood remained the same, accompanied by dreary quiet and harsh autumn winds. Silently, Dew envied the cheers of those lounging in the park, and he wondered if his first day could possibly get worse. He felt cold.

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"You okay?"

Tom looked up, wiping dressing off his chin and whiskers. His mood refused to brighten, even when he gazed into the white bear's red eyes; the way Dew's whiskers quivered with worry strengthened his anguish. "Yeah, no, I'm just out of it."

"Does it happen a lot?" Dew had finished his kebab already; Tom still had half of his left, though the events of the day had taken away his hunger.

"Yeah," Tom resentfully replied. He wanted to forget. "Twice a week. It's eerily fucking technical. Tuesdays and Fridays are the only days I get out of school after them, and for some fucking reason they keep sticking around just to be cunts."

Tom glared at his food, grinding his teeth. When he caught a glimpse of Dew's astonished face, he tried to soften his expression. He failed miserably at this. "What?"

"You just don't seem the type for that kind of language," Dew snorted; Tom flushed and squirmed awkwardly in his seat. He adjusted his glasses and tapped the rim of them, trying – still failing – to recompose.

"Point is, yes, it happens a lot, I don't know why, they're cunts, and let's talk about something else," he grumbled, pushing away his food.

"So... why here?" Dew gestured towards the streets, visible through dirtied windows that desperately required a wash. Tom raised his brows, and Dew added, "I mean, why here specifically? Is this just your favourite joint, or?"

"Told you, it's next to the hobby store," the otter replied. "FNM tonight. Friday Night Magic," he added, before Dew could ask. "Y'know, the card game?"

"I know what Magic is," Dew said stubbornly, as he slipped off his stool. "I've been at one or two of those. Went with a friend of mine, three years ago or so."

"Only two times?" Tom leapt off his seat as well. He snatched his book bag and brushed dust off of it.

"Yeah. He only started going to them two months before he moved away, and da wouldn't let

me go alone into the city.” Tom glanced across the kebab shop and out the windows; the shop itself was almost empty but for a boar gazing blankly into nothingness; the streets were packed as they always were, especially at the hour. He waddled past the white bear and gave his shirt a tug – Dew jumped in response, which Tom found more and more amusing – as he exited into the cool autumn day.

“Which city?” Tom asked as Dew closed the door behind him. He pointed across the road to an unassuming store, but for the large sign above which read *Celephaïs Underworld Gaming*.

“Atlanta,” Dew said absently as he followed Tom over the street. The bear pointed at the sign. “Where have I seen that name before?”

“How should I know?” Tom shrugged, as he pushed the door open. “Come on.”

Display cabinets showcased various paraphernalia of the dorkier variety – replica swords, outfits, trinkets and curios from various anime and manga, fantasy books and sci-fi shows, of RPGs, boardgames, and card games. A life-size cardboard cut-out of Commander Shepard stood in a corner next to a shelf lined with various plushies; several rows were dedicated to literature, all marked with different genres; the next row were all rulebooks of various systems; the row after, albeit small, was full of spellbooks, wands and foci. Next to the counter stood a walrus – engrossed in his 3DS – engaged in unenthusiastic conversation with an Arctic fox who manned the till. When the fox spotted the pair, he waved and proclaimed, “Afternoon, Tom.”

“Yeah, hey,” Tom replied indifferently. The walrus didn't look up at all, but the fox leaned over the counter as Tom and Dew approached closer. “Dew, this is the owner, Gavin.”

“Nice to meet you,” Gavin chuckled as he offered his hand. “You joining FNM tonight?”

“Ah, no,” Dew replied awkwardly. “I'm just with Tom today.”

“Right, right. You paying right now?” the fox nodded to Tom, and the otter responded by finding his wallet.

“Anyone else arrived?” Tom inquired as he pulled out several bills.

“The usuals, of course,” Gavin chuckled, working the till, though Dew thought there was something behind those eyes. “They're in the back.”

“Okay, great.” When Gavin handed Tom his change, he dragged Dew into the depths of the store, oblivious to any protests that might be uttered. Dew muttered under his breath as they went past books and games, several titles whispered in a mixture of awe and disbelief. Many of the titles were outlandish – *Philosophies of the Elements – a History* ; *The Shapeshifter's Spells and Spellcrafts* ; *Working Your Wand – a Sultry Guide to Stir the Stick*. When Tom tugged on Dew's sleeve again, the bear squealed again. With a chuckle, Tom pointed at the door in front of them: a great symbol in black-and-sepia, five jagged digits stretching forward to five distinct paths; above the door was a sign which read *Abode of the Planeswalkers*.

“Fancy,” the bear said softly. Tom snorted, and pulled open the door.

Dew did not expect a café.

Rosewood and auburn made a cosy atmosphere, with brown- and black- and maroon-coloured couches accompanied by homemade wooden tables the primary décor; a stairwell led down to the lower plateau, where chairs and tables made their home alongside patrons enjoying simple meals. A bend made up the counter, behind which a wolf waitress had an idle chat with the deer barista, and beyond the bend were more tables, a chain that went beyond Dew's line of sight. “Jegus.”

“Impressive, yeah?” Tom snickered. The otter's mood seemed somewhat better, Dew thought, as the otter tugged on him again. He'd managed to suppress the instinct to leap and squeal whenever touched, though Dew wasn't comfortable with it still. He let the otter drag him past the nest of couches, over to the stairwell, only instead of going downstairs, they followed the rails to a space behind the nest, overlooking the lower plateau. The space was formidable: the walls were lined with *Magic: the Gathering* posters and framed paintings; there were three rows of tables with seating for thirty in the middle, a desk in the back with two seats, and the occasional stray piece of furniture. Seven were there before their arrival: two of them exchanged binders almost bursting at the seams, trying to compromise on some sort of trade; a trio duelled it out in strained silence; and

at the far end of the farthest row, a series of curses followed a loud boom of a laugh. Tom made his way towards the booming laughter, and Dew, with ears perked, trailed after.

"You are the top decking king." Dew's eyes fell on a panda, maybe only a few years older than Dew, who gathered his cards in exasperation. The panda tugged on the collar of his *Muse* t-shirt and muttered more under his breath; his opponent's laugh didn't die down.

"Control still?" Tom asked as he took a chair.

"You know it! Who's your friend?"

Dew's attention shifted over to the panda's opponent, and his eyes widened. Amber eyes stared back at him, a hard draconic face with soft scales, with ridges along the snout and slits for nostrils, feathery tufts under the chin, a thick neck, thicker shoulders, all in cream and pale silver. Dew opened his mouth as he grabbed the back of Tom's chair.

"This is-" Tom began, but the dragon cut him off.

"Dew?" The dragon's voice was astonished and soft, yet it had that boisterous edge in spite of the quiet.

"Den!" Dew burst out, his face split into a grin. He tugged on Tom's chair, who swore in frustration as he clung to his seat.

"You two know each other?" Tom asked incredulously; the panda shared his look of surprise.

"No, I'm psychic," Dew replied dryly as he hurriedly stepped around the table to grab the dragon by the shoulder. "You're here! What are you doing here?"

"Was going to ask you the same! Hey, careful..." Den winched, as he smiled up at the bear. "Pop got a job offer here, putting an end to his *world tour*," Den rolled his eyes. "Been here for two years now. When'd you get here?"

"Two days ago," Dew heaved, bouncing on his toes. "Da was tired of all the relocating, so we returned here."

"You've been here before?" Den tilted his head as he started to pile his cards.

"I grew up here," Dew explained, as he stared at the dragon's face. The snout was wider and the scales larger, which made him seem older than he was. The eyes were still the same – playful and confident – as was the grin, cocky and toothy still. Den's tail was larger now too, slowly brushing against the cool wooden floor. It was no mistake – Den was as giddy as Dew was – yet there was something off about the dragon's physique. "Lived here until... well."

"Huh." The momentary silence was broken by hard, rapid riffing. It was a habit of Den's, as the dragon did it deftly, mindlessly – but the panda did it too. "Still! Must be fate!"

"I know, right?" Dew looked around for a chair. There was a tug on his sleeve, and he jumped – to his left stood an ermine, abashed and awkward, dragging a chair appropriate for Dew's size over to him. "Ah, I... thanks."

"You're welcome," the ermine replied softly. Dew dumped his rucksack next to the chair, and turned to introduce himself, yet when he looked closely at the ermine, she had already stepped away to talk to two other ermines – their ages suggested they were her parents.

"Dew?" Den said loudly, poking the bear in the side. Dew yelped and returned his attention to the table; the riffle-shuffles had ended and they had already started a new round. "Still skittish, huh."

"Yeah," Dew grumbled, the frustration directed more at himself than the dragon; Den chuckled as he cut the panda's deck.

"You want to start, Bo?" Den addressed the panda, who nodded with determination. His jaw was clenched and his ears tense as he drew his starting hand... and with glee announced he'd keep. Dew followed the game with mild interest as people slowly poured into the venue – they went from seven to twelve, to sixteen, to twenty-five; Dew kept count until the panda stood up violently and slammed his fist into the table. Dice flew everywhere, scattered across the floor.. The soft murmur of the crowd – casual conversations and enthused musings of an upcoming weekend – died momentarily.

Tom's casual glance and sigh told Dew everything; Den grimaced in disgust, watching as the

panda heaved for air, clutching his head, eyes fixed on the table. A murmur swept over the crowd as it parted to make way for the store owner; Gavin was livid as he gestured violently at Tom, and Den, and Dew. Tom made his way over to Dew and dragged him towards the other end of the room.

"Not the first time," Tom muttered quietly, not looking at the scene. "Fucking idiot. Temper's too big."

"This has happened before?" Dew whispered as he watched the fox do all but yell at the panda – it was clear Gavin attempted to keep it quiet, but it was a feeble try. Even from the furthest corner the scolding was audible; from the others were mocking murmurs and exasperated sighs. As the fox's tirade came to an end, the panda had already packed his stuff, and he left in silence, his head hung in shame. Still fuming, the fox brought all attention to him as he announced the evening's Magic schedule.

"I should probably get home," Dew said quietly to Tom, "What bus do I have to take?"

"I don't even know where you live, how the fuck should I know?" Tom grunted as he itched to get back to his belongings.

"The same house," Dew sighed as his eagerness was aimed at the exit. "Just up the street from where you live."

"Right, route 6, 14 or 27. Remember the shop right down the road, Lawson's? It got bought out and turned into an Extra, just get off there. Right, got to get to my seat, talk to you later."

"Wait, I..." But Tom had already hurried away. Dew watched both the dragon and otter get seated, talking to their friends and peers in a mood largely set by the previous spectacle. "Tell Den..."

Nobody looked at Dew twice when he left the enclosure; he found the exit thanks to the barista, who at least had the courtesy to wish him a good weekend. When he stepped out into the fresh autumn air, he found he stood in an alleyway, unremarkable yet tidy. After a moment of confusion, he left the alleyway, noting that the entrance was in such an obscure place he'd never find it if not for the hobby shop.

His attention returned to the main streets, where buses seemed aplenty. He took a right and headed towards the nearest bus stop, only a stone's throw away. The streets weren't empty – far from it – yet the shelter was mostly unoccupied, but for the panda who sat sulking and tugging on one of his ears. Inside the enclosure was an electronic sign, which Dew immediately went to study – though he threw the occasional glance at the panda, whose mood seemed to darken when he realised he wasn't alone.

"You okay?"

"Piss off," the panda snarled, glowering. "None of your damn business."

Dew felt a cold chill run through him as he stared back wordlessly. The tension rose. The bear clenched his fists; the panda planted his feet on the ground, as though to pounce and tackle. All the disdain and frustration and fatigue welled inside Dew, a teetered rage accompanied with the vague realisation of what he felt, and that he hated the feeling, but it was too late to back down. Then the panda took a heavy breath – Dew steeled himself – and splayed his ears in submission.

"Sorry," his voice was laced with exasperation. "It's nothing you did. No, I'm not okay."

"It didn't look too good back there..." Dew replied, the emotional uprising at an abrupt halt. "What happened?"

"I lost my temper. That dragon basically only plays these control decks and he kept ruining my plays," the panda grumbled. "I get all heated up and competitive. Sometimes I just end up...exploding."

"Exploding?" Dew repeated cautiously. The panda looked up with hard golden eyes.

"Yeah. I can't always contain it. I was lucky today. Heh." The panda shook his head, crestfallen. "Lucky. Got kicked out of the hobby shop. Like all the other ones."

Dew surveyed the panda, growing increasingly puzzled. The panda looked up with calm veneer, meeting the bear's eyes. "I'm an elemental," the panda said sadly. He held out his closed fist, and then opened it violently with a snap of his fingers. A small flame, tawny and thick, danced in the palm of the panda's hand. Dew stared, his mouth slightly open, until the panda extinguished it

with a sigh. “A fire mage with a bad temper. So yeah. I was lucky. You're free to never talk to me again,” he added bitterly.

“I'm Dew,” Dew replied, offering his hand. It was the panda's turn to stare at the bear's paw, as though it too, somehow, was magic.

“What are you doing?”

“Introducing myself,” the bear said softly. The realisation that it wasn't a prank slowly sunk in, and the panda grasped Dew's paw hurriedly.

“I'm Bo,” the panda replied jovially, his handshake lingering. “Most people tend to go away when I show them.”

“Is it their business?” Dew asked awkwardly. Bo strained a smile and looked away.

“When I risk burning them? Yeah, it kinda is. You'd think Voids wouldn't mind, but they're either envious or disgusted when I tell them.” Dew grimaced and nodded.

“It's not like you can help it,” Dew said softly, but Bo's expression darkened significantly.

“I can't control it. It doesn't listen to reason, more like it...it wants to get free and burn everything.” He scowled angrily at his surroundings, folding his arms. His glower's intensity was fleeting, however, and he solemnly added as an afterthought, “Wonder what that says about me.”

Before Dew could respond, Bo stood abruptly, much so that Dew took a step back. The panda sniffed, his ear twitched, and he nodded to the horizon, “That's my bus.”

The bus had just turned the corner, flashing *41 – Eldhills* over the front window. Bo grabbed his back and grinned. “Well... thanks. It was nice meeting you.”

“Yeah, you too,” Dew smiled back, his ears twitching as the bus screeched to a halt. “See you around, I guess.”

“Doubt it,” Bo replied sadly as the doors slid open. “Not like I'm going back to the shop, being banned and all.”

“Oh. Right.” They exchanged a last look as the doors swung shut, and the bus drove off without any hesitation. With a heavy sigh Dew flopped down on the bench the panda had just vacated, gazing at the noise barrier across the road, behind which were a couple of houses.

He couldn't get the fire out of his head. How Bo had done that, he didn't know – it should've frightened him, and in hindsight he questioned how close he had come to being burnt – yet the panda's excitement and the fervent handshake...

“Heeey!”

Dew looked up, befuddled, looking for the shout. Bo ran towards him with a curious expression and a massive grin. Dew got up to greet him, grasping for words. “Bo, why...what?”

“Fucking hells I'm out of shape,” the panda panted as he came to a halt; he staggered and clutched his side with a snort. “I want to see you again. After today, I mean. A cup of coffee. Or a beer. Or a film.”

Dew wagged his white-tufted stump as he put his rucksack on the ground to rummage through it. The panda straightened up and came closer; Dew pulled out a pen and a notebook, and started scribbling. “Phone number and...and other contact infos,” he said softly, more to himself but loud enough for Bo to hear, and he tore the page out. “Here.”

“That was quick,” Bo replied warmly as he read through the list.

“I want to see you again too, Bo,” Dew said hastily; the panda looked up with astonished gratitude, stumbling for words.

“That's great! Wow. I... when should I call?”

“I'll be busy tonight and tomorrow... so Sunday?” Bo opened his mouth to reply, but his whiskers twitched and his ears perked. Dew looked over his shoulder to see another bus rolling down the street – *14 – Forsythe* – and he hurriedly shoved his notebook back into his bag. “Ah, that's my bus...”

“Sunday, then!” Bo boomed, reminding Dew of somebody else; Dew nodded and grinned as the bus eased up against the pavement. “Talk to you soon!”

Dew cursed the RNG-gods loudly as he put his Vita on the kitchen table in favour of emptying the box of dishes. Somehow the kitchen was slowly shaping up; two boxes had to be emptied, a quick sweep over the counters with a cloth, and the boxes out of the room, and it could pass for lived-in.

The stack of boxes inside the living room and the hallway shattered the dreams of that delusion.

Still cursing quietly under his breath, Dew checked his wrist for the time – almost midnight – and weariness had settled in over him a good while ago. His eyes stung too, having pressed his nose against the screen of his Vita for three hours, and it was reluctantly he put the handheld in sleep mode. From his current box he snatched a handful of cutlery; when he'd placed them in the appropriate drawer, he sighed at the unsorted cluster of forks, spoons and knives.

It brought him back. The entire fucking house did.

The doorbell rang. Dew froze momentarily as he gazed at the kitchen window. From where he stood he couldn't see anything but the street light and a vague shadow. Then he went to check – and on his doorstep stood the dragon.

“Den!” Dew opened the window; the dragon barely had time to react before Dew opened the front door. Den looked into the kitchen, and then the bear; blinking, he pointed one claw at the window.

“What was the point of that?”

“What wasn't the point of it?” Dew snorted, as he swayed on the balls of his feet. “It's midnight, what are you doing here?”

“Just got home,” Den grinned, as he made a gesture. “Mind if I?”

“Of course not. Place's a royal mess, just... well. You'll see.”

Dew introduced him to the stack of boxes in the hallway; then to the lone pair in the kitchen; and then the cluster in the living room. The path to the sofa was open, at least, and he took a seat in one of the corners. Den stole the other half, and leaned back – and with a wince sat upright again. He grimaced and reached over his shoulder to pat his back – causing him to wince again.

“You okay?”

“Don't mind that,” Den grumbled. “Where's your old man?”

“He's out of town,” Dew sighed. “We landed on Wednesday evening, overslept on Thursday, barely managed to fix paperwork for school, and then he left last night. Project work. He'll be back on Tuesday – or so he says – so I've got all this shit to set up.” Dew tapped the nearest box, and added with a bitter afterthought, “On my own.” He faked a grin. “What about your da?”

“He's asleep, I reckon,” Den shrugged with a grimace of disinterest. “He wakes up at six in the morning and gets home at nine in the evening. If he's not working, he's sleeping. Good thing he loves his job, I guess.”

“Is he still a physician?”

“Surgeon now. That's how we landed here, actually. Boring story.” Den glanced around the room. There was a set of recliners next to a small round table in a corner, an empty bookcase, an empty TV stand, a commode, lifeless with uncurtained windows and barren chestnut walls. “Was this place already furnished when you got here, or...?”

“No.” Dew looked at the dragon, whose eyes glittered with fatigue and curiosity. “When my da sold ten years ago, he didn't want to give up the furniture. He borrowed his brother's storage unit, shoved it all in there, and refused to sell it. I think he always wanted to return here, to be honest.”

“Wait, you lived *in this house*?”

“Yeah...” Dew sighed wistfully, as he set his gaze to the ceiling. “Grew up here. Same furniture and all. Movers were really helpful, actually, didn't charge too much extra to fetch all of it and get it into the house, right storeys and everything.”

Dew stifled a yawn as he folded his paws on his belly. He leaned back in quiet contemplation, eventually looking Den's way.

“Is it tough?” Den asked softly.

"It's *strange*," Dew replied uncertainly. "It's the same house – same rooms and same floors. I mean, yeah, okay, there's been some renovation, but the creaks and the scent? It's like home."

"But?"

"Just overwhelmed by memories. Thought I'd forgotten." Dew failed to keep the yawns away; he stretched and leaned forward. "Jegus, I'm tired. Don't really want to sleep, though."

From the corner of his eye, Den grinned; the dragon pushed himself out of the couch. "I know that feeling. I should get home, I'm tired too. That, and the pain's growing worse, not to mention the itching."

"Itching?" Dew tilted his head, and Den gave him a look of exasperated incredulity. Blinking, Dew analysed the dragon carefully – something was off – and when his jaw fell by its own volition he rubbed his eyes. "Where are your wings?"

"Now you notice," Den rolled his eyes. "What kind of best friend are you?"

"Sorry, okay? I just haven't had time for *anything*, I didn't expect I'd meet anyone I know here, let alone you," Dew grumbled through gritted teeth. "I don't need this right now."

"I'm just joking," Den replied hurriedly, though not without a hint of annoyance. They glared at each other, into one another's eyes, patiently waiting for the other one to balk. Dew's whiskers quivered as he bared his fangs; Den's nostrils flared, his ears upright with not a twitch, his brows lowering steadily until only slits of amber remained.

"Do you even see anything?" Dew growled, his lip quivering.

"Nope," Den hissed back, craning his neck.

"Couldn't your da just..." Dew waved his hands in the air, humming softly. The dragon burst out laughing. "I thought your da could heal?"

"You're a dork. And yeah, he's a healer, only he can't heal me," Den sighed, his voice a little heavier. "I'm resistant. They said it's a genetic mutation? I don't know. Was disappointed to find out, to be honest." He slumped his shoulders – and winced in pain.

"Why disappointed?"

"Means I likely won't get magic on my own," Den huffed. Dew got up wordlessly, laying a paw on Den's shoulder. The dragon shuddered, and Dew muttered apologies. "It's okay, you doofus, I'll be fine. You doing anything tomorrow?"

"Groceries," Dew shrugged, as they made their way past boxes out into the entrance hall.

"Boxes. Housekeeping, really. Why?"

"The pro-bending season starts tomorrow. You should come over for dinner and we'll watch it together."

"I'm not that big a fan of..."

"Ah, come on, Dew, you and me, pizza and beer, what's the worst that could happen?"

There was a mischievous glint in the dragon's eye that alarmed Dew, though he pushed those thoughts aside in lieu of the offer. "Yeah, okay. Already sick of the boxes anyway."

"It's a date, then," the dragon winked. Dew waved the dragon goodnight as the shape disappeared into the darkness; then he closed the door to the night and, with a heavy sigh, returned to his boxes.