

Saturday

“Oh, fuck off,” Dew grumbled as he rubbed his eyes. Hefty revving of some neighbour's car followed by screeching tires had startled the bear awake. The sheets shivered with him as he sat upright, and as he leaned on the windowsill he took a look at his childhood street in scarce daylight. Half of the street corresponded to how he remembered, only older – the rest had been restored or rebuilt. The neighbouring house – Den's home – was different, though. It was newer than the neighbourhood suggested, and larger too – a den of luxury. A dragon's den. The fence was more akin a wall, and there wasn't much of a garden to speak of either – a couple of trees and some bushes. Dew was about to lay down for more shuteye when he saw the front door open.

Den inherited some of his handsomeness from his father, who outdid him magnificently without even trying. Even from a distance, Dew saw that Doctor Longtail was still taller than his son. He shared his son's silver scales, and the tips of his wings and his claws were a distinct and deep ruby colour, visible even in the pale morning. The dragon wore little but a black bodysuit, a bag and briefcase keeping his hands occupied, his folded wings poking out from the back of the suit. Dew could not help but stare in admiration when Doctor Longtail spread his wings to fly. As he watched Longtail grow more and more distant, he felt a small joy, a minuscule urge to call out in excitement.

Then he remembered he wasn't six anymore.

He'd kept his childhood bedroom, though the bed itself had been sized up. Much like the rest of the house in its current state, of course, the bedroom was more of a box storage. Dew yawned as he laid down again, closing his eyes.

The sun would not let him sleep. Harsh light washed over his face, and he groaned sleepily, shielding his eyes. It was a frustrating reminder to fix the curtains – he did not enjoy this particular method of awakening.

Water surged, warm and steaming, as he soaked his washcloth to scrub his face. Dew's habit of drooling hadn't vanished last night either, he sighed, scrubbing the sides of his muzzle as well as his cheeks. He wrung the cloth while he leaned closer to the mirror, to gaze at his own eyes.

They were red today. Red with a splash of green.

Chagrined, he left the cloth in the sink as he returned to his room. He'd been careless – yesterday, everything had been fine, at least when he'd left home. Blue, the way they were supposed to be. He kicked away the irrelevant boxes, ripped open the one he searched for, and rummaged in them until he found his lens case.

Dew was careful to insert them. It had become habit, but his eyes remained irritable for a quarter afterwards, and it would show at times. An inspection in the mirror showed they did their duty – the red-and-green was now bright blue – just like his father's.

With another heavy sigh, he stifled a yawn. His stomach rumbled – reminding him he needed to fix groceries as well.

The weather was ideal for an end-of-autumn Saturday. Trees stood still, their leaves dying beautifully, the lawn riddled with yellow and red and purple. He could already hear his father admonish him for neglecting the yard – not that they had a rake.

Dew vaguely remembered *Lawson's* at the end of his street – it was the local store for groceries – though he'd only glanced at its successor after getting off the bus yesterday. As the building came into view, it hadn't so much changed as being demolished. The new Extra had its great yellow-and-red sign hanging above the door, its opening hours proudly displayed. The early morning hour still saw its fair share of customers, though he didn't expect a queue – the size of the shop reminded him vaguely of the stores in Atlanta.

It was cool and soothing inside, and quiet too but for the hum of the AC. Grabbing a trolley, he wandered the aisles with mild curiosity. After his world ventures, all the different brands once familiar seemed as alien as his first couple of days in Aberdeen. He read instructions and ingredients of various foodstuffs, with vague recollections of what he had once had ten years ago. He picked out fresh bread, chocolate spread, some milk and meat, vegetables, noodles, rice, olive

oils, newspapers (for his da), some brand of crisps and sweets oozing' of nostalgia, detergents, soaps and shampoos...

When he came to the cashier, his trolley was full with everything he'd need for the house. The cashier – a young fox with a morning grin – raised an eyebrow as she started scanning the goods. “Morning!”

“Morning,” Dew replied, idly emptying the trolley by putting the contents on the belt.

“Blimey, not a small purchase you're aiming for, is it?” the fox remarked, beeps following her every gestures.

“Ah... well, just moved back home up the street,” Dew huffed as he dug for the last of his wares – shampoo bottles – and threw them onto the counter. “Couple of bags as well, please.”

“Just moved, eh?”

“Yeah,” Dew fumbled a bit as he paid with his card.

“S'cold here. Appropriate for your kind up here, though, innit?”

“Lived there before,” the bear muttered idly. The cashier snorted as she handed him the receipt. He took a second glance at the total sum – grumbling a little to himself – as he started bagging his wares. “Well, thanks. Have a good weekend.”

“You too,” the fox winked, gazing at him as he carefully waddled out of the shop. Dew reckoned he looked like an idiot, precariously balancing six overfilled grocery bags in his arms, but the promise of breakfast kept his pace steady. Saturday morning meant little traffic, and fewer folks on the streets. He was halfway on the journey home when someone ran past him from behind – a startled Dew staggered to the sides as the hooded figure frantically dashed ahead. Almost losing his wares, Dew felt a surge of anger and a heat in his fingertips, his thought on raising his voice – but his anger subsided as quickly, the figure already far away, a spotted tail whipping in the wind. Halfway content having avoided a grocery disaster, Dew turned back to home.

“Morning! Sleep well? Let me help you with that.”

Still befuddled, Dew found himself face-to-face with Den, who all but snatched half of the bags from his hand – immediately followed by a grunt and another near-disaster. “Fuck me, how much did you buy?”

“You're up early,” Dew remarked nonchalantly, mildly amused.

“Well, yeah, that bloody car always makes a shitton of noise, and I saw you leave the house, so I figured I might as well keep you company. Thought I'd surprise you at the shops.”

“Thanks,” Dew smiled as he yawned. The sun grew hotter by the minute, and it burnt while they chatted idly of music and TV shows.

“Shame I didn't catch you in time,” Den sighed as Dew unlocked the front door. “Needed to buy beer.”

“Got you covered,” Dew tapped one of the bags. Den's eyes lit up.

“What brand?”

“Alchemist's,” Dew replied with a grin. “You liked them in Atlanta.”

“Still my favourite. Thanks!” They unloaded the goods and stuffed the cupboards and fridge – as much as they could, though there remained a tremendous amount of space in just about every compartment. “So, what's on the agenda?”

“I told you yesterday, I'm unboxing today.”

“Yes, and I'm helping. You don't think I'm going to leave you to die with all those boxes, do you?”

Dew snorted as he pointed to a small pile of boxes close to the kitchen door. “Them first then. They've what belongs to the kitchen.”

“Is it too early to pop a beer?” Den groaned as he landed face-first in the couch, twitching with ache. Dew checked his watch.

“It's not even noon.”

“Fuck,” the dragon grumbled as he flopped to his side – and winced. “How much is left?”

“Well, we did the kitchen, so... Everything else.” He let out a chuckle as Den buried his face in his paws.

“Jegus, you got more in your bloody kitchen than we had combined when we moved in.”

“You're exaggerating.” Dew emptied a box full of old VHS cassettes – most of them older than he was.

“Still...” Den looked up and snorted. “You still have those?”

“*Da* still has those,” Dew corrected him indignantly as he looked at the covers of old films in all their awkward glory. “Some of these aren't half-bad. *Moonstruck*, *Neverending Story*, *Raging Bull*, *Ghostbusters*, *Hannah Fucks Her Sist...*”

“What was that last one?” Den looked up at Dew with raised eyebrows. The white bear put the case away frantically. “Is there *porn* in there?”

“This is all my da's,” Dew muttered rapidly, shoving the cassettes back into the box, and he swore under his breath. “I won't ever get the image out of my head.”

“Come on, give it here, I want to see.”

“No, this is the work of pure evil,” Dew said flatly. Den reached for the box, undeterred by Dew pushing his grubbing claws away.

“Aren't you curious about what got people off in the 80s?”

“I will have nightmares for the rest of my life,” Dew gloomed as he kicked the box away.

“Woes, Dew has awakened to melodrama. The world is indeed doomed,” Den rolled his eyes as he got up from the couch. “You should just put all of that on display. Imagine the look on his face!”

“I'd rather just burn it.” Dew felt heat rush up his right arm as he looked to the box. Momentarily, it felt like his fur might explode into flames.

“Right, okay, Dew, I get that it's awkward and all, but you're overreacting.” Den put an arm on Dew's shoulder. “Not just a little either.”

“I...” Dew took a deep breath as the flame in his bones turned to a brief tremor. “Sorry. I'm...”

“Overwhelmed, yeah, I get it. Pretty irresponsible of your da to just leave you to do everything. It sucks.”

“Yeah.” Dew reached for the potted plant he'd put on the corner table yesterday evening – a plastic poinsettia – and put it on top of the box. “I'd rather not do it now.”

“You should just wait for him to get back so he can help you with it.”

“He'll get mad.” Dew sighed, leaning against the dragon. Den said nothing, nuzzling the back of Dew's head.

“Well, we have other boxes!” Den threw his other arm around the room, indeed showcasing all the other boxes that remained. “Boxes that need to be unpacked. Non-porn boxes! ... I hope.”

Dew snorted as he gave Den a thankful pat on the back. “Well, this one's got all our ornamental crockery. *Da* wanted those in the cabinet over there.”

“Great! Let's do this!” Den boomed, pumping his fist. “Let's decorate the shit out of this place!”

“We could make an evening out of this.”

Dew blinked as he looked to the dragon. His eyes were on everything but his draconic friend. They had just entered Den's dwelling, and the sheer size of the place had him speechless. The interior was monochrome almost to a fault. The walls were either white or black; the furniture followed suit, zigzagging on whether to accompany their adjacent walls or contrast them. Decorations were scarce, though what did hang on the walls were exemplary homages to dragonkind through statuettes in noble colours, portraits of Den's ancestors, with exception of one or two monochrome abstracts.

What really got to Dew was the sense of *scale*. He had visited Den and Dr. Longtail when they lived abroad, though they lived in apartments to accommodate the larger races, but now he

stood in a dragon's lair – and even as large as he was, even taller than Den, the necessary size to accommodate a *dragon* overwhelmed him.

“You could fit a car through some of these doorways,” Dew muttered as he looked into the living room. “You could stuff that couch into my bedroom and it wouldn't fit.”

“It's excessive, isn't it?” Den chuckled. “It's got pops all calm, though... He stopped complaining about not being able to stretch his wings indoors.” He gestured to the couch, at which Dew was staring. “If you think the couch is large, you should see his bed.”

“No, that's fine, I believe you.” He surveyed Dew. “When do dragons stop growing?”

“Fifty or sixty-ish?” Den shrugged. “I mean, around twenty-five, that's when we're mature. Some never stop growing.”

Dew nodded along as Den took his bag'o'beer. “Anyway, I could invite some friends if you'd like. Have a housewarming party.”

“This isn't my house.”

“Bah, details,” Den waved Dew's concerns away. “Neighbour-warming party, does that sound better?”

“It really doesn't,” Dew snorted. “Sounds like fun.”

“It'll be! You knew Tom beforehand, right? He's got a pair of friends around, and there's Brian and Wally, haven't seen Wally in ages though...” The dragon hummed to himself. “I *could* invite Tenzin, but... parents might not approve of the beer, and Ten's underage, who else... Ah, Kato!”

“What about the panda from yesterday?” Dew suggested. Den's chipper mood faded momentarily.

“Ugh, no,” he spat. “Don't like him. He's too angry.”

Dew studied Den as the dragon rummaged the kitchen, and felt a pang of disappointment. The dragon found his phone and sent numerous texts at speed that Dew couldn't cope with. Less than five minutes later, while he had prepared crisps and other snacks, he received a slew of responses. “Right, Tom's coming with Sam and Scott, Brian and Wally declined, Tenzin declined, which is a shame, Kato's joining, and Cecil said probably. So we'll be seven, maybe eight.”

“I only bought beer for two,” Dew pointed out. Den brushed it off.

“It'll be fine. Told them to bring their own.”

“What about pizza?”

“Oh, right, thanks for reminding me.” Den slid out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down, eyes fixed on his phone for a moment. “What toppings don't you like again?”

“No pineapple,” Dew said adamantly as he took a seat next to Den. The chairs were rather oversized, even for him. “And don't overload the pizza with all the toppings you can find.”

“Don't worry. I've got it covered. It'll be here in time for the game.” He put the phone aside and leaned back. “It really is strange, though...”

“Hm?”

“We're neighbours. Again. If that isn't fate, I don't know what is.” He looked at Dew for a long time, smiling all the same.

“I'm just glad to have a friend here,” Dew replied with a shrug. “Figured I'd be lonely..”

“Well, I'm not going anywhere.” Den laid a hand on Dew's shoulder. “I'm here for you.”

“Thanks.” Dew smiled up at the dragon, who looked at him without his mischievous grin momentarily... before fangs and all broke out into the toothy visage that Dew knew was Den, through and through.

Den predicted that Tom would show up first. The otter's face rested in its usual scowl, dressed plainly for the occasion, as though being here was a hassle, but he bounced on his toes and waddled into the living room with eager haste all the same. Sam, a muscular bull who was immodest in his choice of attire, white sleeveless shirt to expose his arms and short shorts to reveal the bulky legs underneath, gave Den a fistbump – and a bag of beer – before he joined Tom in the next room.

"Thanks for having us over." Scott looked around the house with fascination – it wasn't his first time, but like Dew, the size had the wolf awestruck still.

"No probs! Good to have you over."

"Who else is joining?"

"Kato and Cecil are on their way. Not sure if they'll arrive at the same time. Oh, and a friend of mine's here too, just moved here. Or moved back, more like."

"Tom mentioned," Scott said, looking around. "I don't really remember him much. He moved about half a year after we moved here."

"Well, he's in the living room if you'd like to say hi. Going to stuff this in the fridge, be right with you."

He deposited the beer in the fridge before he joined the others. Sam had already claimed a bowl of crisps for himself, splayed in the corner of one of the two couches, already reminiscing about their childhood, or what little time they spent together back then.

"Shame you moved," Sam said, mouth stuffed with crisps. "I remember we had a lot of fun on the playgrounds."

"I... guess." Dew frowned a bit as he glanced at Tom.

"You certainly did," Tom rolled his eyes. "You used to bully him."

"I did?" Sam raised an eyebrow. "I don't remember."

"Well, I do," Tom glared, folding his arms. "He was clumsy and awkward, and you kept beelining for him. Or pushed him around."

"Okay, that's enough of that," Dew interjected, though he looked a little uneasy. Den settled down in a recliner, watching the reunion.

"Why'd you move anyway?" Sam asked, looking curious. Den found himself intrigued as well. Tom, however, had a solemn grimace on his face.

"Because reasons," Tom snapped, glancing at Dew with a sympathetic look in his eyes. Dew shifted awkwardly, though his appreciation for the otter was clear.

"Yeah," Scott nodded, flopping down next to Sam and leaning against the bull. Sam gave the wolf an occasional crisp to chew on. "I'm sure we can find better subjects to discuss."

"I'm curious," Den said as he walked around the couch, behind the bear.

"I don't want to talk about it," Dew grumbled. Den opened his mouth, but was interrupted by the doorbell.

"What do you think of the bending season starting again?"

Scott had a penchant for diverging conversations, Den had noticed, as he made his way to the entrance. Dew had never talked about *why* he moved, though whatever it was had brought him to Den, and for that he was grateful.

"Kato! Cecil!"

"Yo." Cecil gave Den a high-five as he strode into the house as though he owned it. The white rabbit was dressed lightly, as usual. "Got some sweets too, you got a bowl?"

"Corner cupboard in the kitchen," Den nodded. "Don't break anything."

"Don't worry, I'm not Kato. Or Sam."

"Rude." Kato, a fox with a lustre pelt, looking its finest now as winter was soon setting in, sighed as he closed the door behind him. "I didn't bring anything. Sorry."

"S'fine," Den patted him on the back. "So how are you doing?"

"Better. I guess." Kato shook his head, however, his voice sombre. "Thanks for inviting me."

"Looking forward to the season start?"

"Yeah, definitely." It was one of Kato's passions, Den knew, especially since Kato had Awakened very recently. It made Den envious, sure, but when Kato had found out it was the happiest he had ever seen the fox – and that made him happy too. "I'm looking forward to the opening match too."

"I heard it's going to be special?"

"Absolutely." Kato greeted the others as he claimed one of the lounge seats around the telly.

"The Archons versus the Belladonnas. I think the Belladonnas are going to cause an upset tonight. You're new!"

"How so?" Scott asked, getting cosy next to Sam as the fox waved at the white bear, who introduced himself in kind. Dew had claimed a corner of the couch, Tom the second lounge chair.

"Aren't the Belladonnas from the second division?" Sam added with a derisive chuckle.

"They were, but they revamped their team mid-season," Kato continued eagerly, "Got an up-and-comer – Elsa Earthpaw, she's a really good zoner – and," the fox reached for his breath, "The Empress."

"The Empress?" Tom replied, a little confused. "Wait, as in..."

"*The* Empress!"

"Who?"

The room turned to Dew, whose look of utter bewilderment had the others in disbelief.

"The Empress?" Kato asked, his voice faltering. "From the Duello?"

"I have no idea who that is."

"What rock have you been living under?" Cecil strode in and stole the third lounge chair – not that Den minded. He was perfectly fine sharing a seat with Dew, and he joined the bear in the couch.

"Abroad. In Atlanta."

"Atlanta, Atlantis?" Cecil raised his eyebrows as Dew nodded. "You lived in Atlanta and don't know anything?"

"Yes," Dew insisted, looking uneasy. "Because--"

"Reasons," Den echoed. "Let's not get into it. This isn't an interrogation." Dew gave him a thankful smile and Den gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"Well, long story short, the Empress is, like, the best duellist the Duello has ever seen in the last twenty or so years!" Kato continued rambling on. "She sorta just came from nowhere, about seven or eight years ago. She's a water elemental! Started out slow by the looks of it, but less than half a year after her debut, she started an immense winning streak and she's still undefeated!"

"I... see. And she's now going into bending?" Dew said with a hint of forced curiosity.

"Yeah!"

"I'm sure they'll ham it up for all it's worth," Sam shrugged. "She's famous, at least here in the country. How come this is the first I've heard of this, though?"

"I dunno," Kato tapped his fingertips together. "Either way, I'm really looking forward to this!"

"We can tell," Tom said dryly, reclining as he checked his phone, tapping the sides of his glasses. "It's about to start, so maybe get it on the screen?"

"Already on it." The TV was embedded in the wall, while the sound of some advert filled the room from all sides. He switched to the relevant canal as everybody held their focus on the screen.

"So have you seen a bending match?" Cecil asked Dew as the pre-show discussion had begun. Den lowered the volume so he could pay attention.

"I've seen clips of it," Dew admitted, "But never a whole match. It never really interested me."

"It's alright," Tom shrugged, glancing every now and then at the group from behind his spectacles. Den knew Tom was into it, though – he'd always pester Den about Saturday gatherings.

"It's wonderful," Kato murmured, eyes peeled on the screen. "Look! They're introducing the teams!"

It was the same spectacle as always. Den raised the volume as the announcer's voice boomed, the bending stage set. As the names of the players were called out, they came onto the stage in their team colours. "Last year's champions! You know them! You love them! Come forth, Tristane! Emerson! Quillwane! Levi! Aaaaand Pluto!"

The Archons looked as dominant as always. All male, all buff – Den grinned at this – all canines of various sizes and colours, blunt muzzles, sharp ones, floppy ears, pointed noses. A

diverse group, united by their gold-and-black colours. The stadium was alight, a cacophony of applause and cheers, sharp whistling and thunderous stomping.

“And facing the Archons tonight...!” Silence fell momentarily. “The all-female squad from the second division who ploughed through the opposition and took the first place with style! The old melded with the new, joining forces with a face that all of you should recognise! Tonight, they debut at the top of the pyramid! Today, history is born! Let us welcome, the Belladonnas! Earthpaw! Ivellios! Korfax! Amelié! And... You know her from the Duello! A prodigy of water, the child of Aqua, the champion of champions, make some noise for *The Empress*! Lynwood!”

The stadium could as well have exploded. Den hastily muted the TV for a moment as a grey-brown bear in the purple colours of the Belladonnas joined her team: a fox, an otter, a rhinoceros and a monkey. The camera shifted to the commentators momentarily – two grey wolves. “The Empress herself! A noble title, but will she live up to the hype?”

“I believe she will, Josh,” the other commentator nodded enthusiastically. “I’ve seen her in action, both in the Duello and during a scrim, she definitely knows how to handle the offensive role.”

“As to be expected. As the players take to the stage and we prepare the opening heat of the pro-bending season, we held an interview with the team captains, so let’s hear what they’ve got to say.”

The show cut to a darker stage, two comfortable chairs and a table, a glass of water with a more intimate lighting than the bright spectacle of the stadium, as a reporter – a white fox – sat down opposite the the Empress.

“Hello, and welcome!” The Empress nodded, looking stern. “You’ve made quite a reputation for yourself in the Duello circles. Your record is impressive! What prompted the move to bending?”

“Curiosity,” the Empress replied. “It’s different from the Duello, and it is prudent to remain challenged, so as to not grow complacent.”

“You’ve managed to keep your involvement with bending hidden since you joined the Belladonnas-”

Dew rose abruptly, phone in hand. Den blinked up at the bear. “Dew?”

“I...” Dew shook his head. “Sorry, I’ve got to go.”

“Wait, what’s wrong-”

But Dew strode out of the room with haste, and before Den had a chance to get up, the front door slammed shut.

“Well, that’s rude,” Sam grunted, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t understand...” Den looked longingly towards the entrance.

“I think we should leave him alone,” Scott said, rather sharply.

“Why?” Den asked, defiantly yet confused.

“I’m guessing it’s personal,” Tom said with a shrug. Den surveyed both the otter and the wolf, and got a vague inkling that they knew more than they let on.

“It’s starting!” Kato burst excitedly – the fox was so enamoured, he hadn’t noticed anything. Den looked to the screen as the interview was cut short, the players taking their positions, the judge striding into the middle of the court. Den looked to the door again as he pulled out his phone from his pocket. He started typing furiously when a thought struck him hard and fast:

He didn’t have Dew’s phone number.

Dew found himself in front of the fridge, rummaging for something – anything – to eat. At first he found it hard to breathe, his throat burned, his eyes stung. Then the shock swung into anger, and the fire left him aching. He grabbed the flask of iced tea that he had bought earlier and took a hefty chug, trying to quench the tremor in him, but it did little.

He hadn’t seen her in ten years.

Slamming shut the refrigerator door, he heaved for air as he leaned over the table. He was angry. Afraid. Confused. Stunned. His legs shook, his eyes watered, his fingertips burnt. A breeze tickled his neck from the window. Momentarily, he thought he heard rain outside, rattling against

the window, but it was the evening sun in cloudless skies that peered back.

He stumbled into the living room. He needed to lay down.

He toppled over on the couch, feeling his heartbeat play like a drum, a harsh and erratic melody that ached in his bones.

He felt alone.

Right, okay, Dew, you're overreacting.

Den's voice was in his head now. Dew thought they would be alone, but Den instead invited all his friends. It was nice seeing Tom again, and he vaguely remembered Sam and Scott, but he didn't know them. Any of them. They weren't *his* friends.

His phone buzzed. He felt a pang of fear. It was probably his da. He looked at the screen, which illuminated the dark living room.

It was Bo.

"Hello?"

"Oh! It's Bo. I know you said you'd be busy, I just wanted to see if... if the number worked."

Dew said nothing. The panda's voice was excited, with a touch of relief.

"Well, since it works and all... You said you were busy, so I'll call later."

"Do you want to do something right now?" Dew blurted out desperately. "I... I'm not busy after all."

"Oh. Oh! Yes! Let's!"

With a pang of dread, Dew wondered momentarily if Bo would suggest watching the bending opener.

"How about a film? There's one I'd like to see. *Flowers' Life*."

"Yes," Dew replied, thankfully, though he furrowed his brow. "What sort of film is that, though? I'm not too keen on romance or-"

"It's not that," Bo assured him. His voice was overjoyed. "It's... well, you'll see."

"Where should I meet you?"

"How about the bus stop? The one where we exchanged numbers, I mean. The transit lines don't stop until midnight, so there should be a bus passing by every ten minutes."

"Sounds good." Dew sat up. He felt calmer. "Should I bring anything?"

"Nah. You'll be enough." There was a moment of awkward silence as the panda scrambled for words. "I mean, it's not... I... I'll meet you there."

Darkness had come, the sun long since withdrawn beyond the horizon. Dew had barely stepped off the bus when he spotted Bo, dressed light for the eve in the same shirt as yesterday, giddily bouncing at the sight of him, and he offered a half-hearted wave. His thoughts kept derailing to places he didn't want to go; even Bo's enthusiasm did nothing to quench the flux of memories.

"I'm glad," were Bo's first words as they came within hearing distance of one another. "I mean... With you not being busy. I didn't interrupt anything, did I?"

"No," Dew replied with a faint smile. "Well, yes, you did, but in a good way."

"Phew." Bo reached for Dew's hand – both of them caught it at the same time, and the motion became a stilted pat on the back as Bo led the way. "The cinema's not too far from here."

The walk was quiet between them. The streets were abuzz with partygoers and barhoppers, crowds of three and fours discussing everything under the sun. Dew caught wind of college students discussing conquests; a rambling argument about why Chelsea was the best football team, continually interrupted by swift chugs of a beer can; a discussion of which knitting pattern would be best to seduce a boy; the closer they got to the cinema, the harder it was to catch anything coherent within the babble of the increasing crowd.

"It's not going to be full of drunks, is it?"

"Nah," Bo grinned as he pushed through the crowd with Dew in tow. "They don't allow alcohol here, and if somebody's too drunk they're asked to leave."

Dew nodded as they entered the main building. Large posters of various new hits draped the walls – Dew hardly had time to pay attention to the latest releases – and amongst them he spotted

Bo's *Flowers' Life* suggestion: the main heroine was a bobcat wielding a massive hammer, her fur turquoise, with a variety of suggested antagonists surrounding her; in the back was a red panda tied up and hovering helplessly above ground, the damsel in distress. Dew studied the poster, finding its characters vaguely familiar, yet he couldn't put his digit on who they were.

There was a queue by the box office, though it shrunk swiftly. Bo grinned and fidgeted as they got further in line; Dew found that he enjoyed Bo's speechless excitement.

"Next." They arrived at the countertop, their cashier a weary-eyed weasel who nonetheless smiled at their arrival.

"Two for *Flowers' Life*," Bo nodded eagerly.

"Of course. Any seating preferences?"

"Top row, in the middle sound good to you?" Bo asked Dew, who simply nodded in agreement.

"Okay. How will you be paying?"

Bo reached for his pocket. The grin faded as he searched his pockets. "No, no, no, I forgot my wallet at home, no...!"

"I'll pay," Dew gave Bo a pat on the shoulder, though at the touch he felt intense heat prickling against his skin. "It's okay, Bo. I don't mind."

"But..."

Dew gave Bo a pat on the shoulder as he approached the cashier, his own wallet in hand. "That's what friends do. Don't worry about it."

The light in the panda's eyes reignited with a slowly widening and innocent smile, a soft sigh of relief on his lips, and after Dew paid, they made their way to the auditorium.

Dew could barely breathe.

Bo supported him on their way out of the cinema, the film finished, as Dew howled with undying laughter. Eyes were all on the two of them. Bo was mildly embarrassed but he let Dew lean on him all the same. He was good at keeping his composure... sometimes, at least.

"That," Dew managed to utter, burying his face in his paw. "Was the best... holy shit..."

"I thought you'd like it," Bo grinned. Dew almost lost his balance as they stepped out into the chilly night, his laughter boisterous as it echoed against the buildings. "I'm surprised we didn't get kicked out."

"Thanks," Dew snorted as his amusement slowly quenched with the catch of fresh air. "I really needed that."

Dew straightened up as he found his own footing. Bo was tempted to lean on him, to maybe break out into crippling laughter as well, but instead his feet began moving instinctively. Dew walked alongside him, no questions asked. He watched the bear take in the chill of night. "You must be comfortable in the cold."

"Yeah, it's nice," Dew nodded as he stifled a little yawn. "Though I'm accustomed to just about every climate at this rate. Guess that's the advantage of moving all over the world."

"I heard you and the dragon talk about that," Bo nodded. *The dragon*, Bo thought to himself bitterly. It had been the same story all over again.

"Yeah..." the bear smiled. "When we lived in Scotia, it rained all the time. Pretty damp and humid. I learned to appreciate rain rather quickly." Dew looked up to the sky, wistful. "Hemelsweg was like this too, except with greater altitudes, though the temperature could get really moody. Atlantis... well, with all the ambient magic there, the weather could get catastrophic if the weather wizards didn't keep it in check. On the other hand, the weather reports were pretty much spot on all the time."

"You've been to Atlantis?" Bo asked in wonder.

"Lived there for two and a half years. Just moved from there, actually." Dew shrugged indifferently. "It wasn't much different from this, to be honest." He looked around. "At least not where I lived. I did some sightseeing." Dew frowned. "Behind da's back."

"Why'd you..." Bo began, looking at the bear in awe.

"Da hates magic. No fucking idea what made him move to Atlantis, of all places." Dew rolled his eyes. "Must've been paid a lot for that. He's a teacher," Dew explained. Bo frowned at the matter-of-fact tone Dew held. "He's got PhDs in sociology and anthropology, and he's a leading researcher in..." Dew sighed. "He does some sort of pointless bollocks, honestly, it doesn't matter."

"Still, it must be nice getting to see the world like that. I feel stuck here," Bo said, a note of disappointment in his voice.

"It's lonely," Dew said after a while. "I was barely able to make any friends because I came along as a foreigner, and once the ice had been broken, da dragged me off to another country. Atlantis was okay though. Had good friends until..."

The bear's voice trailed off.

"Maybe you could tell me about it later?" Bo asked hopefully. Dew nodded with an appreciative smile.

"Where are we going?"

They both looked around. They had left the city proper, and were on the roads to the outside suburbs, the hustle and bustle of city nightlife far behind. "Ah... I usually walk home after films, I didn't mean to..."

"No, it's fine," Dew said, stretching his arms far above his head. "It's not like anybody's waiting for me at home."

Bo looked at the bear as they walked in and out of illumination, street lights bright as the stars above. The easy smile and the worldliness that Bo found alluring was tinged by something familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on what. Their walk became as the one to the cinema, one of comfortable silence. There was no need to speak, or so the panda felt.

"Ah... that's my house," Bo broke the silence as he stopped at the base of a stone-walled plot, which surrounded a steep hill. A single-storey house with no lights on stood at the very top, with a beaten old car right outside the entrance, and a small wooden shack a stone's throw away.

"Doesn't look too bad," Dew commented as he surveyed the house in the little light available. "You won't wake your parents, will you?"

"No," Bo shook his head as he pointed to the small shack. "I live there, see."

Dew raised his eyebrows. "In the shack?"

"Parents won't let me into the main house. They're afraid I'll burn it down." Bo looked at the ground, guiltily adding, "Again. So I live in that shack. Easy to rebuild. Only burnt it down twice in the last two years, and it's got stone foundation, so it... I mean, I'm okay with it, I know I'm... too dangerous."

Dew looked at him differently now. Bo felt a pang of regret and anger. He should have known. If others didn't abandon him when they found out about his pyromancy, they certainly did when they found out about this. He gritted his teeth, burning inside, angry because he shouldn't have told Dew-

"Your parents sound awful," Dew said simply, frowning up at the main house. Bo looked up at him blinking, and his anger switched in a different direction.

"They're not," he replied angrily, voice raised, as the blaze rushed through his body. "I have a place to sleep, and they give me food! I don't want to put my brothers and sisters in danger! What's wrong with that!?"

Dew didn't say anything, though he scowled, not at the panda, but at his parents' house, and Bo could swear still heat that emanated from the bear. "Are you happy?"

"Yeah, I..." Bo trembled, but Dew looked at him again, looked through him, and the anger seemed to fade with the wind. His muscles loosened, his fingers dangled, and he suddenly felt very cold. "Of course I..."

"Sorry," Dew shook his head, grimacing. "I was wrong to insult your family."

Bo nodded, lethargy crawling up his skin. "It... it definitely could be better." He buried his face in his paws. "It's pretty late, I should probably get some sleep. Thanks for... for everything."

"You make it sound like this was a one-time thing."

Bo looked up. Dew's face was genuinely confused. "It isn't?"

"We're friends, aren't we?" Dew's puzzlement led to a smile, and in that instant, Bo felt heat refill his body, his thoughts racing in all directions before it clicked.

"Could the next time be a date?"

As the words left Bo's lips, the panda caught up to what he had just said, and he clasped his muzzle shut with his paws. "I'm sorry," he muttered apologetically, voice muffled, "I didn't..."

"Sure." Dew laughed softly. "Sorry, it's just your face right now, should've had a mirror."

"You're serious?" Bo asked breathlessly. Dew's laugh died down into a true smile.

"Yeah? I mean, I can't promise that it'll lead to anything more than a date, but I do like you. How's Tuesday?"

"Tuesday sounds perfect," Bo nodded fervently, losing a bit of his ardour as reality hit him in the face. "Except I don't have a lot of money, though, or fancy clothes, or... I've never been on a date, what do I-"

Dew's lips pressed against Bo's, silencing him immediately. He heaved for air, but momentarily he could not breathe. It was only an instant as Dew ended the kiss and looked him straight in the eyes. "Let's say Tuesday's our second date then. You don't have to do anything differently, okay? We'll grab a meal and get to know each other some more."

Bo could only mumble incoherently in response.

"I guess I'll have to call a cab to get home," Dew smiled with a hefty yawn. "What's the address here?"

"14th, Nordumberland," Bo managed to utter, his face afire.

"Sorry if I was too forward," Dew chuckled, smiling broadly as he put the phone to his ear. "Ah, hello, could I get a cab at 14th Nordumberland? Ten minutes? Thanks." He pocketed his phone. "It's a good way to break the ice," Dew explained. "If it doesn't feel right, then there's no point in continuing."

The panda splayed his ears, and Dew tilted his head – all of Bo's careful composure had disappeared. Dew came closer again and touched his nose against Bo's, lips brushing against one another, and then Bo felt his mouth open, the bear's warm lips on his face. He liked the taste, let Dew take the lead, felt his body quiver as the bear brushed his chin with a finger. "It feels right to me, Bo, so stop worrying so much."

"Okay," Bo croaked as he looked into Dew's blue eyes. "Okay."

Dew took a step back and gazed up to the sky, laughing half-heartedly. "Man, I did not think I'd get to dating this soon."

"You've dated before?" Bo asked quietly, hoping for a no – though he knew this wasn't Dew's first waltz.

"Yeah. Twice. In Atlanta." Dew shook his head. "It's not important right now. I think that's my cab."

Bo was disappointed when Dew's assessment turned out correct. The white bear waved in the cab as it came closer.

"When on Tuesday?" Bo asked as Dew opened the cab door.

"Seven-ish?" Dew suggested. "I can call you tomorrow or on Monday and we can figure it out in detail then."

"That sounds good." Bo waved weakly. "Dew?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks..."

Dew thanked the driver as he stepped out into the night. The street was dark and uninviting. A house somewhere down the road was the only one still awake, though Dew kept his eyes mostly on Den's home.

Part of him wished he'd never moved here in the first place.

Part of him loathed that he'd just run out on his only friend.

He wondered if Den might have stayed awake to greet Dew as he got home. Dew halfway expected Den to burst out into the night, though with worry or anger he couldn't be certain.

A shadow flew over him. Dew looked up.

Great wings on a greater body descended, and the earth trembled as the dragon landed a couple of metres away from him. Golden eyes gleamed in the dark as they turned to Dew, at first with indifference, before they widened. "Dew, is that you?"

"Hey doc," Dew replied wearily as he took a step towards Dr. Longtail.

"Blimey. Come here," the dragon murmured and Dew found himself embraced, which he reciprocated without any second thought. "Neighbours again. Den'll be happy. I saw some movers, but I didn't think..." Dew splayed his ears as the dragon let go of him. "No matter. How have you been, little bear?"

Dew did not feel little at all, but he smiled up at the dragon, craning his neck. "Been okay. Got here on Wednesday. I'm unpacking things while da's away."

"Ah." Longtail shook his head. "Your father... it's a sad story that keeps repeating for you. Where is Charlie?"

"Atlanta. He flew back on Thursday. Double-booking or emergency lecture, I have no idea."

"You seem wistful." Dew lowered his head as the dragon put a hand on his shoulder. "More so than usual. Den mentioned something about a get-together. He didn't mention you, but I assume for your sake. I'm guessing that didn't go so well?"

"No," Dew admitted. "He wanted to watch the pro-bending opener with his mates. I'm not that into it."

"Understandable." The dragon pulled him into a hug again. "I'm sorry little bear, but I am exhausted after work today – emergency after emergency – so I really do need some sleep." The dragon gave Dew a soft nuzzle between the ears. "If you ever need anyone to talk to, I'm here for you. I can't be there all the time, regrettably – I'm sure Den's already complained to you about that, he does little but remind me every day – but I do have some days off, and I usually am home early in the mornings or late in the night."

"Thanks, doc."

"Nogard, little bear," the dragon sighed with a small playful shake of his head. "Goodness me, I do need time to not always be Doctor Longtail."

"Okay." Dew felt a yawn in his throat as he separated again from Nogard.

"I have tomorrow off, actually. You should come by. Are meatballs still your favourite?"

"Yeah," Dew nodded vigorously. "Yours are."

"Then that's settled. I'll send Den to fetch you when it's time. Sleep well, little bear."