

Dew failed to stifle a belch as he slumped in his chair. Next to him, Den was snorting derisively, but Nogard had a hint of a chuckle on his lips.

"You fucking devoured that," Den shook his head in disbelief.

"Language, young man," Nogard sighed as he was on the last stretch of his own serving. "I take it you enjoyed it?"

"Loved it," Dew huffed as he licked his own lips. The taste of spiced meat mingled with exquisite tomato sauce lingered there as his eyes danced over the casserole, disappointingly empty. He was stuffed to the brim, but he wanted more.

"Your face's a mess," Den grunted, and suddenly Dew was being patted on the snout with a napkin, the younger dragon's attention fixed on him and only him. "Not that this'll help," Den added with growing amusement.

"Looks like a bloodbath," Nogard remarked. Dew closed his eyes with half a laugh as well, and let Den wipe away excess sauce. "Feel free to go wash your face."

"In a moment," Dew murmured as he leaned towards the younger dragon, enjoying the pats and strokes, coarse and rough as they were. Den shared the eagerness, a snicker in his throat after half a minute of stroking.

"Looks even worse now," Den remarked as he put the napkin on his plate.

"Reminds me of the operating table yesterday." Nogard rose from his chair, having finished his meal, and he began clearing the table. "Some help, Den?"

"Sure." Both Dew and Den began helping, but Nogard gave a soft *tut* in Dew's direction.

"You're our guest," Nogard said gently, gesturing him away. "Though I appreciate the thought. Go wash your face, little bear."

"He's not so little," Den remarked with a snort as he carried plates over to the sink, but Dew felt his spirits fall momentarily. He waddled out of the kitchen and over to the bathroom, eyes on his own belly, knowing that Den was right.

His face did look like a bloodbath, and in the aftermath of having rinsed his fur thrice, the sink looked like a murder scene. He lingered for longer than intended, cleaning up the mess, when there was a knock behind him.

"You showering in the sink?" Den asked, head tilted while surveying Dew. There was a content smile on his face. "Pops made dessert too."

"Was a right mess," Dew shrugged as he dried his face. "Didn't want to leave evidence."

Dessert consisted of brownies and little more, but Dew did not care; he ate with reckless abandon. "Easy there," Nogard said softly. "You don't have to eat it all right away."

"Can't help it," Dew grinned, licking some of the leftover chocolate off of his paws. "You make the best food."

"Thank you," the elder dragon replied with a small smile. "But I do think you should slow down a little."

"Let him eat," Den murmured, eyes on the bear. "Look how happy he is."

Dew huffed as he slumped in his seat, patting his stomach. It hit him hard how overly sated he was. "Think I'm feeling it now. Thanks for food."

"You're very welcome," Nogard nodded as he took another bite of his own. Both dragons were slower in their consumption, and neither ate half as much as he did.

"Ah... doc, I was wondering, you're a healer, right?" Dew arched his back as he looked towards Nogard. "Den mentioned you're a surgeon now. Why'd you go into medicine?"

Both dragons stirred. Nogard shifted from mellow to pensive as he closed his eyes; Den, on the other hand, looked irritable.

"Well... I awoke my healing when I live in Iberia with my mother. I was nine. I can mend wounds and repair bones – the latter, not perfectly, but well enough. Young and reckless we were, this opened up a new world of playing with my classmates. Cruel stick fighting on hillsides, dangerous dares, and a more physical outlet for aggression. It didn't matter if we slashed each other deep, or if it went far enough to break bones. I could fix it all."

The elder dragon sighed as he opened his eyes. Dew found it hard to imagine Nogard being wild or young. “Reckless behaviour leads to foolish decisions. There was a condemned building not far from our neighbourhood. Nasty place. If you were careless the ground could give way underneath your paws, not to mention the other hazards in there. It was a sunny day when a couple of cousins of a mate of mine came along to join. We were playing heroes versus villains that day. A confrontation went wrong on the second floor. One of the cousins, a lad called Filipe, had the floor collapse under him. He fell. Landed on his back and hit his head... but the nasty part...” The dragon trailed off for a moment.

“There was a spike where he landed. Went right through his thigh, slashed it open. We laughed about it at first. Once I healed it, no harm, no foul, right? Only... He was like you.” He looked at Dew with regret. “Void. I couldn't heal him. He was unconscious, everybody was looking at me, expecting me to fix it, but I couldn't. Nothing worked. Cheers went to panic. Most of them fled. This was before mobile phones. We were too slow in fetching help.”

“He died?” Dew asked, breathless.

“No. He had a mild concussion – sheer luck, the fall was horrendous – and his back was bruised – looked a mess, from what I hear – but the leg... If we'd gotten help earlier, they might have been able to do something, but we were too slow. They had to remove it. The damage was too severe.”

“There was outrage, of course. My mother and I received death threats. We moved shortly thereafter. She was furious with me. Don't think she ever truly forgave me for it...” Nogard shook his head. “When I failed to help Filipe, I, too, was helpless. I failed. Never again. I had to make amends... if not for him, for myself. If I couldn't help someone with magic, then I needed to know how to do it without.”

“That's why you went into medicine then?”

“Precisely. I received the gift of healing for a reason. I want to heal those in need. It never sat right with me that my magic is discriminatory. My calling is to heal, so it goes without saying that becoming a doctor was the path for me. As for becoming a surgeon...”

“I'm a Mender. That is to say, I mend wounds. I have a mild regenerative power too. But I can't Cure people – that is to say, I can't remove a disease from someone, or cure colds, destroy viruses, what have you. It's a simplified classification to be sure, but my magic lends itself perfectly to surgery. You can imagine, I'm sure. If the patient isn't Void, there's no risk of internal bleeding, a far greater margin for error – heavily discouraged, I assure you,” Nogard added defensively, “No scars in the aftermath...”

“What happened to Filipe?”

“I got in touch with him a couple of years ago. It... it wasn't easy. He had some mild memory issues, but a surprisingly sunny disposition. He had long since forgiven me for what had happened. He has a family now, and is a relatively successful accountant.”

Dew nodded and looked to Den... only the dragon wasn't there anymore. He hadn't noticed Den leaving at all.

“Den doesn't like hearing about my magic,” Nogard sighed softly, looking to the doorway. “It is a reminder that he has yet to awaken his own.”

“He said he probably never will,” Dew recalled; there was pity lined on the elder dragon's face, an awkward shudder accompanying it.

“He probably never will,” Nogard echoed bitterly. “And if he does, he'll likely be weak. It's rare amongst dragons... but we shouldn't talk about it. Not now. Go keep him company, little bear. I'll tidy up here.”

It took a moment for Dew to find Den's room in the massive house, and when he did, he knocked three times, reluctantly. It took a moment before a gruff voice responded. “Come in.”

Den was laying in bed, one arm wrapped tight around a blue plush toy, a likeness of a fox, surfing the internet on his phone with the other. “You still have Azrael?”

“Course,” Den grumbled, squeezing the plush. “Like I'd give up my favourite gift.”

"I didn't know he means that much to you."

"Everything you give me means a lot to me." It took a moment before Den caught up with his own words, and he buried his face in his paws. "I mean..."

Dew sat down at the edge of Den's bed, looking the dragon over. He looked as magnificent as always in his silver and cream, but the frustrated look in his face made him diminished too.

"What happened last night?" Den asked as he put down his phone and grasped Dew's paw. "You just bailed on all of us."

"Family emergency," Dew muttered, looking away. "Don't want to talk about it."

"Something happen to your pops?"

"Everything's fine," Dew sighed, repeating himself. "Don't want to talk about it."

Den looked insistent for a moment, but he let go and gave a soft nod.

"So..." Dew looked around. Den's room was bigger than Dew's, its walls decorated with posters of various duellists whose names were vaguely familiar: Raine, the Watercaller; Tremor, Earthcrusher; Prophet; Artful Dodger – and a single bending team: the Archons, the team from yesterday. There were scarves hanging above posters as well. School books littered the shelves with various older films and CDs from the music Den listened to half a decade ago. "This is your room."

"I don't usually let anyone in here." Den sat upright, his eyes fixed on Dew. His voice felt unusually weak when he continued, void of the boom that was all Den. "Dew, I..."

Dew tilted his head and looked the dragon in the eye. Den inhaled deeply and spoke slowly. "I want to be with you."

Dew looked at the dragon, the hopeful gaze, the tremble unbecoming of the confident Den he knew. "Den..."

"It's fate," Den continued eagerly, "It must be. Why else would we end up neighbours again like this? I really like you, Dew, I always have. Don't you agree?"

"Somebody else's already asked me out, Den."

All enthusiasm the dragon had faded. Den pulled away, his eyes wide at first, then they slowly narrowed with anger. "When did that happen? Who?"

"Last night," Dew replied with half a shrug. "After I left. A friend asked if I wanted to go watch a film, so I..."

"Friend? What friend?"

"A friend," Dew repeated. "Doesn't matter who it is."

"But who is it?" Den insisted, pain mingled in the rage that lined his snout and scales.

"Doesn't matter." Dew got up and shook his head. "I should get home. Got boxes."

Den said nothing, but the look he threw Dew when he exited the room was one betrayed. It irked Dew, who frowned, and he left the dragon there, one of his claws clutching Azrael around the neck.

He opened the front door when he heard Nogard behind him. "Leaving already?"

"Yeah," Dew grimaced. "Don't think Den wants me around anymore. Besides, got boxes."

"Did something happen?" Nogard's face sank with concern. Dew sighed and turned to the door. The elder dragon put a hand on his shoulder. "Wait, before you go, hold on."

Dew held on as Nogard walked into the kitchen, then returned with a small food container. Within it, Dew spotted the unmistakable tint of chocolate. "I made extra brownies for you. Don't eat it all in one go."

"Thanks." When Nogard handed it to him, he embraced Dew tight, and the bear leaned against the dragon's warm body, suddenly wistful. "I'll... I'll see you around."

"If you need anything, little bear, you know where to find me."