

Tuesday

Dew let the autumn wind dry the rest of his fur as he walked to the *Celephaïs*. It was six in the evening. The sun shone down the main street, already making its way down the horizon. It painted the city in a warm and cosy light. The sign of the hobby store stood as usual. The streets were buzzing with people of all ages, conversations light and heavy alike. Dew remembered what had happened in the shop last Friday vividly, and he wondered if meeting outside the *Celephaïs* place would lessen Bo's resolve, yet his heart eased when he saw the panda coming towards him from the other end of the street.

"Nice shirt," Dew commented when the panda was within earshot – which happened quickly as Bo dashed to him, only stopping half a metre away. Bo glanced at his shirt with a grin, patting it.

"I wore it on Friday," Bo replied eagerly. "When we met." Dew raised his brow, and realised that was true: Bo did indeed wear the same Muse shirt from last Friday, accompanied with simple dark shorts. The panda shifted, suddenly nervous. "So..."

"Tasted the kebab here?" Dew gestured to the *Celephaïs's* neighbour.

"No," the panda shook his head. "Is it good?"

"I think it is." Dew laid a paw on Bo's shoulder and gave him a quick nuzzle on the cheek. Bo stiffened and looked away awkwardly, his lips dancing with a smile. "Let's go inside."

The shop had its fair share of customers, which left a strong aroma of spiced meat in lingering in the air. Dew already felt his mouth watering as he surveyed the menu with Bo. "Want to eat in here, or should we eat outside?"

"There's a park not too far from here. We could eat there," Bo replied, looking a little nervous.

"Park it is, then," Dew grinned as he licked his lips. His belly rumbled as he fidgeted impatiently, gazing over the counter and catching glimpses of the cooking process. The panda shifted as he looked around the shop, though his gaze always returned to Dew.

They found a bench next to an ash tree, its leaves a canvas of yellow and orange and crimson. With every gust, leaves fluttered and soared through the air; one even flew right into Dew's face, which left the panda giggling. Chuckling with Bo, Dew plucked the leaf off of his face, and then leaned back, draping an arm across the bench.

"So what do you like?" Bo asked as he wiped away dressing from his chin. Dew took a sip of his drink.

"RPGs," Dew shrugged. "Rock and indie. Hellenian food. Viteliun food. Fucking."

Bo coughed and there was a hint of a flush in his face as he stared at Dew, who chuckled and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "I haven't had the pleasure of... of that," Bo replied awkwardly.

"You should," Dew grinned. "Pleasure's definitely the right word."

"I think that'd be a bad idea." Bo sighed heavily. When he saw Dew's expression – brows raised curiously, bewildered – he continued, "Whenever I get riled up, I risk..." He sighed. "I might explode."

Dew frowned as he tilted his head. "I assume you mean that literally?"

"Yeah. Fiery fur, glowing eyes, self-immolation, and then everything else burns." He averted his eyes, his voice tapering off.

"It sounds cool when you put it like that," Dew remarked with a sad smile, "But it's not, is it?"

"It's harrowing. I lose control. I've hurt others." Bo looked at his paws. "My parents and siblings. Burnt down the house, and shops, and..." Bo lowered his gaze to the ground, shaking his head, as his face twisted in a rough and remorseful grimace.

"Can't you do anything about it?" Dew asked as he leaned forward, surveying his face.

"No... My parents were told it was hopeless," Bo muttered bitterly, clenching his fists. "I'm stuck like this. I'm surprised they even let me live on their property."

Dew frowned as he touched Bo's cheek. The panda wasn't fazed at all. "You didn't meet with

a specialist or something to get evaluated?"

"Wouldn't help," Bo sat up and looked to the sky. He trembled, looking angry – or sad, Dew couldn't tell. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"How often do you Expel?" Dew asked. The frown Bo had shifted to one of confusion.

"Expel?" Bo replied with uncertainty.

Dew tried to look the panda in the eyes. "You haven't been evaluated or taught Expulsion? You should go and get checked out."

"I said I don't want to talk about it," Bo pulled away, his voice rising abruptly, drastically, and Dew stumbled back, startled. The cool wind suddenly grew harsher and warmer.

"But," Dew began, but Bo's glare was undiluted rage.

"I said," Bo began, but his fur took on a red tinge. Behind his golden eyes, a light emerged, an intense display that only empowered the sudden fear that welled up in Dew's chest. Bo rose, eyes set on Dew, as his presence grew bigger, the air around the panda shimmering. Dew stumbled back on the bench, watching as the panda's fists burst out in flame. "I don't want to talk about it!"

"Bo," Dew whimpered, Bo's rage washing over Dew like scalding water. "You're scaring me-" His voice cut off. He heaved for air, he winced in pain, and in desperation as he tried to distance himself, fell off the bench, onto his back. He covered his face with his hands and yelped, "Bo, stop! Please! It hurts..."

The flames withered away abruptly. The heat subsided slowly, though Dew felt his fur afire still, the smell filling his nostrils and making him queasy. He caught the look on Bo's face, which sunk into undiluted fear, and the panda took a step backwards. "No! I... *Dein*, I didn't mean to..."

There was a shout in the distance. The panda's ears perked as he turned to the voice, and Bo immediately set off running in the other direction. Dew reached out to Bo, but the panda didn't notice him at all. "Wait," Dew whispered as he struggled to get up, his voice caught in his throat. He began to follow Bo, but tripped over his own legs, eyes watering, throat sore, head dizzy, and he collapsed face-first onto the park path. He twitched as rapid footsteps came up to him.

"Bloody hells, are you okay?"

Dew flinched as somebody touched his arm. He turned his head to see a russet-coloured degu with black eyes standing over him, worry lined on his face, while running after Bo was a female white mouse, ears small and dark eyes, a severe frown on her face.

"Yeah," Dew replied quietly, gritting his teeth. "Just peachy."

The degu reached for his pocket. "Should we call anyone? Ambulance? Police? You don't look well at all."

"No," Dew grunted as he tried – unsuccessfully – to get back up. His hands dug into the dirt and gravel, and they both trembled. "I'm... I'm fine."

"I'm calling the police," the mouse said as she returned, looking through her purse, her teeth flashing angrily. "Seriously, people like him shouldn't be allowed out in public."

"Don't," Dew said a little louder, trying to get up again. "I... I'm fine, there's no... No harm..."

His arm wobbled under his weight, and then it gave in. He braced himself for the fall, twisting his face in pre-emptive fear. Momentarily confused, Dew looked to the degu, who was supporting his weight with one hand.

"Don't be so proud," the degu said, frowning. He did not let go of Dew's arm, and gently pushed him onto his rump. Dew hid his face with his other paw as the ache suddenly hit him again. "You could've been burnt to death."

"It was an accident," Dew replied through sharp breaths. "He... He didn't..."

The degu sighed. "Accident or not, it has to be reported."

"But..."

"Sorry," The degu shook his head, his face part frown, part concern. "I get that he's your friend and all, but if we don't report it, somebody else might be hurt. Or worse."

Dew didn't know how long he sat there with his face in his paws. He barely caught the

mouse's phone call – a furious conversation at that – while the degu squatted down next to Dew, consoling him with slow pats on the shoulder. The mouse sighed heavily as she fretted over the time.

“We should've been at the venue fifteen minutes ago,” she grumbled, swearing under her breath. “Come on, let's go, Rolf.”

The degu nodded as he stood upright, and he softly tugged on Dew's shoulder.

“Augmenter, right?” Dew asked quietly as Rolf pulled him up to his feet. The degu raised his brows in mild surprise and gave a smile and nod. The degu barely reached up to Dew's belly once he stood upright.

“Yeah. Suppose it's obvious, considering your size.”

Dew muttered under his breath, looking away. “Knew one a while ago. Wasn't too obvious with him though.”

The degu patted his arm – Dew's shoulder well out of reach – and he smiled.

“Take care of yourself, okay? Might want to get your fur trimmed, you look like a burnt panda.” Dew grimaced, but nodded meekly along. “Name's Rolf, by the way.”

“Dew.” The degu grasped Dew's hand and gave it a quick shake. Rolf did a quick wave as he hurried after the mouse, who had impatiently moved away from the two of them.

“Take care, Dew.”

Rolf and the mouse immediately chatted up a storm between them. Dew focused on his surroundings. The grass around the bench was barely singed, the bench itself with mild burns. Dew had suffered the brunt of it: his clothes had scorch marks, the chest burnt through; the fur on his arms and exposed legs had gone crispy and black. He touched his face and found the flesh tender underneath his charred pelt, which stung in the aftermath too. He gazed into nothingness for a while before he found his phone. It was barely half seven – he'd expected more, better, less violent events for their planned eve – yet late enough that most shops were closing down. With a heavy sigh, gloom sinking into his chest, he called a cab, and returned home.