When he was younger, Deth had a strong affinity for his own fur: seeing the way that fields of blue mane pushed up through dark gray made him feel special and unique, and against a world that was so colorful, he thought the patch of gray that he added to whatever he was a part of was an essential part of the mix, rather than a dull spot in the rainbow.

That day, moving back home from perhaps the worst month of his college experience, he couldn’t tell the gray in his fur from the beige of the tiles on the floor, or the stale brown of the carpet in the living room.

**Everything** was a dull, boring gray, even when it was walking over to him on a pair of trembling, uneasy legs and leaning over to say hello.

There was only the subtlest hint of color breaking through the endless ocean of gray, and if it hadn’t been darting around so rapidly, like little bolts of purple electricity in a dull storm cloud, Deth might not have noticed it.

“Hey, w-we…we’ve just about finished loading up your stuff, Deth,” the jaguar whispered, not wanting to disturb the lion when he’d *finally* gotten his attention. “But if you need a little more time to hang out here, I don’t…I mean **we** don’t mind lingering a bit.”

It would have been a sincere problem if there wasn’t a small task force there to help keep Deth moving around the apartment: they had to be out so the summer semester kids could move in before the end of the weekend, and the amount of fines they would have wracked up was the least of their problems.

Having spoken to his parents about the matter, Red was convinced that Deth would have just stayed in his empty room and stared at the wall until he starved; there was no point in risking if that was a dramatic over exaggeration or not.

“You still there, dude?”

Deth had just enough effort left in his body to gaze up and see the little orbs of amethyst floating above his head, moving around with the burden of purpose in the sea of monochrome.

“…Do I know you?”

It was the first time Deth had said more than two words in a row in as long of a time as any of them could remember, but Dustan didn’t have the same level of understanding about the problem.

That lack of previous information left him wondering if there was something **more** to Deth’s issues, and with their only encounters coming when the lion was near his most vulnerable point, Dustan was getting a crash course on seeing his fellow feline at his unfortunate and unbridled **worst**.

“Yeah, we met at the party a month or so ago…or I guess, we kinda met, but I don’t think you really noticed me. I think we bumped into each other in the kitchen, maybe?” Dustan wasn’t trying to lie, but his own memories were a little foggy…

…And already, he was worried about making a good first impression, seeing the lion for the kind-hearted creature that he *could* have been, rather than the downtrodden wreck that he was.

“Don’t recall.”

Deth wasn’t lying, either: his memories of that last night with Zack were foggy enough that one would believe his drink was dosed, but it was pure, emotional turmoil that blurred the details and left him grasping at straws whenever the last month was brought up to him.

“O-oh! Well, that…that’s okay,” Dustan claimed, worrying that he was only making things worse by addressing the lion in the first place. “It’s great to finally meet you, then; Red has told me a lot about you.”

It didn’t matter that Dustan was taking immediate interest in the lion: Deth couldn’t manage a proper response, regardless of the kind of attention he was receiving.

It *would* have been a relief, not to have to deal with such social pressures anymore, but his expression was completely unchanged, and his eyes refused to lift any higher than they did. It wasn’t a cry for help any longer…that voice had burned away long before, and even trying to speak made the lion feel as though he was going to choke on his own tears.

Those emotions refused to pour over; whether that was a good thing or not was hard for him to tell, but something about Dustan’s presence, unbiased and genuinely kind, made him a lifeboat in the middle of a stormy, gray ocean.

At such a distance, shades of gray had a tendency to blur; the striking glow of his eyes might have been the only reason Deth knew anyone was talking to him.

“That’s good. Red’s nice.”

No matter how downtrodden he was, Deth couldn’t bring himself to talk down about his friends: some part of him, hiding beneath the wreckage of his depression, still knew that they were the only reason he’d survived that last month of school.

“He said you’re nice too, and any friend of his, w-well…I **hope** they’d be a friend of mine,” Dustan admitted, but he immediately dialed it back. “No pressure, though! I just…y-yeah. Sorry, I’m kind of terrible at first impressions.”

To know that someone else could be awkward, and yet, kind…

To know that they could be sweet, and yet, sincere…

These were the kinds of things that Zack stole away from Dustan, and even right then, he wasn’t sure he could trust the jaguar as far as he could throw him; in such a state, that was a truly short distance.

That there was any *hint* of a curl in Deth’s lips was, however, a greater step in the right direction than Dustan could properly appreciate.

“It’s okay. Me too.”

Though he was back to offering just one or two words at a time, there was an emotion other than despair creeping over Deth for the first time in two months…and with a whole summer ahead of him to recover, it wasn’t a moment too soon.

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Video games were a magical thing for Deth and company, growing up.

A few weeks into their summer back at home, Deth and Red were sitting alone for the first time in what felt like ages, but it wasn’t that they hadn’t spent plenty of time together in that stead.

It was the fact that Deth finally noticed something, giving credence to what a horrible trance he’d been in.

“…Don’t we usually play this with Flair and Nimbus?”

“We’ll just have to play with them online, I guess,” Red commented. “They stayed behind at the campus for the summer, remember?”

There was an immediate temptation in the other lion to make a point of how far gone Deth must have been, or how glad he was that Deth was finally starting to come back around…but he didn’t want the recovering feline to feel judged, nor did he want to put any undue pressure on what should have been a fun, casual afternoon.

With Red working a job at a local joint over the summer, he simply didn’t have the opportunity to check in on Deth as often as he should have, but whenever he could be, he was there, helping to keep his friend on the road to recovery.

“I…t-they did?”

He’d been so far in his own little world that he’d completely missed the discussions about the same.

In that moment, he put on a grateful face to his friends for making that sacrifice and hanging out with a pair of total strangers for the summer, but now that he was hearing about in retrospect, he didn’t remember a thing about it.

“I guess not,” Deth admitted, biting back on his depression the best that he could. “Feels like I lost a whole quarter of my life back there…”

Red wasn’t sure what to say. Asking the typical trope of if he regretted it or not wasn’t likely to help, but he didn’t want to let his friend sit and stew over the decisions he’d made.

“I’m sorry that it was so bad for you, but…there’s a song I used to listen to a few years back that I always think of in moments like this. Don’t remember the name, but there’s a line about not wasting your life trying to get back something that was taken from you…because it doesn’t make you any less of a person, or any less of who you really are inside.”

Coming up with profundity after a long day at work was difficult, as Red had come to learn…but Deth was back to his old self enough to at least appreciate the effort.

“I think that’s the problem…I really **thought** I knew who I was,” Deth admitted. “But just like that, everything I thought I knew was undone…like my brain was tugged out through my ear, little by little, and all I could do was just pick it all up and try to stuff it back in, and now, nothing fits…”

It was nothing new for Deth and Red to take some time and spill their feelings to each other. As friends that went so far back, however, Red was struggling to remember a time when it was so hard to find something comforting to say.

These were the kind of moments that nothing in life could prepare you for, and there was no section in the greeting card department for “Sorry that someone utterly destroyed you as a person.”

He knew that time would heal all wounds, but telling Deth that felt like telling him to give up on **trying** to get better, and that was the last message he wanted to convey.

“Maybe it’s not about forcing it,” Red theorized. “Maybe it’s just a bit more like a piece of art…it’s not a matter forcing the creative process out as *feeling* it out…and when something makes sense, you just roll with it?”

Deth knew that Red was trying his best; right then, the effort was all that mattered.

“I guess it could be.”

It wasn’t clear which way his emotions were taking him, but if he was going to experience such meager highs and such cavernous lows, he’d embrace what joy he could find in life, knowing that the rest of the time, it’d be a struggle to keep his head above water.

Someone else had seen him in that state, when he was at his worst…and the similarities between those cousins struck his mind as he pondered it.

“Your cousin seems like that kind of guy…was he…w-was he ever like this?”

Flair and Nimbus were still waiting for them to join the online lobby so they could start playing, but Red was texting them to let them know what was going on; he knew this was going to be a different kind of evening.

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Deth was **not** ready to date anyone again.

If not for how kindly Dustan had proven himself to be already, he wouldn’t have been ready to hang out with someone outside of his immediate circle of friends, but there were simply moments anymore when Deth wasn’t sure that he trusted himself to be alone, and his parents were as busy as ever.

When Red wasn’t able to hang out, and Nimbus and Flair were too busy to call, there was only one other person he’d even remotely considered talking to…and he made sure to be upfront before he sent any of the text messages to invite him out.

“Hey, is…is everything okay?”

It couldn’t be called a date: Deth was sitting at a stone table in the park, and the longer he gazed down at it, the less he noticed the shards of and bits of colorful rocks that were pulverized to make the concrete of the bench beneath him.

The invasive gray was spreading over his world again, but this time, he didn’t have an entire cavalcade of people to come and support him when he was feeling down.

He just went to a place where he thought he might find peace, and once more, he looked up at a sky that should have been deep, pure blue…and saw an ocean of gray, floating over his head.

“Deth?”

Memories of those brutal months were still creeping in: just hearing his name with a tone of curiosity made him wonder if Zack had somehow discovered his hometown and tracked him down, but just before darkness could force his chest to tighten any further, he saw those dots of amethyst in the distance, like the beacon of a lighthouse on the shore.

“…Dustan! Hey, I…I’m sorry…I didn’t mean to cause you any panic,” he claimed, but he was still panting quietly, as though he’d just finished jogging his way through the park.

Thanks to his own struggles with mental health, Dustan wasn’t fooled by the weak, half-hearted smile that Deth was forcing to the surface.

“I’m not panicked at all, but…” he paused and shook his head, not wanting to bring too much attention to the fact. “It’s okay. You know, for only having talked to you a couple of times, you apologize a lot for things that you don’t have to.”

Dustan was worried that pointing out a flaw might have added to Deth’s anxiety, but this was one that distracted him from what originally caused his panic.

It was *akin* to being attacked, but not in a way that insulted him…it just made him stop and think about his habits, and in doing so, it pulled a little more color into his world.

“I…I do?”

“Not that I have a big sample size to work with, but, yeah…in the few times I’ve talked to you, you’ve apologized for like…**a dozen** things,” Dustan recalled, “And none of them were things you needed to be sorry for…you’ve never done anything wrong.”

It didn’t matter that the last part of that statement was qualified by their previous and limited interactions: Deth **needed** to hear those words, right then.

“T…thanks, Dustan. Did you want to sit down with me?”

“Well, you are the one who invited me to come hang out here,” Dustan reminded him. He didn’t bother going back into the awkward typos that riddled the text message: he could already tell that Deth was struggling, but his lack of experience with the lion left him open to any method that might keep him from floundering. “But if you’d like me to sit in the dirt or something, I mean…there **is** a lot of nice dirt around here.”

Dustan was actually terrible with his puns and jokes, but his best attempt at humor was just enough to pull a smile through the cracks of Deth’s otherwise uncertain façade.

“…N-no, dude…please. Take a seat.”

Ears wilted just slightly as Dustan took the seat across from the lion. He didn’t want to reveal his emotions through a bodily signal, but he could tell that Deth was still struggling, and he felt immediately guilty for not being able to fix it all with a single quip.

He was about to apologize for that, but then, he’d seen a kindness in Deth that was locked away behind fear…and he would have found it hilarious if the lion told **him** not to apologize, after what he’d said moments ago.

“Thank you.”

Cautious even in the most docile reply, Dustan made sure that he wasn’t stepping on any toes or taking things too quickly. It was hard for him to tell if Deth was getting ready to hyperventilate or simply go mute, but whatever the case was, he knew he wanted to be of help, if he could.

Even if it meant just sitting there with him until Red or his parents were off work, which was very **nearly** the case, he would have been glad to do it…but still, it wasn’t a date.

The sunset framing the lion, the clouds taking on a hue of reddish-pink and the orange halo that wrapped around it all were lost elements of romanticism in a moment that saw two felines, each broken in their own way, sharing the silence of nature and expecting nothing more of each other than to keep breathing.

“Sorry that I…d-didn’t really have more to say.”

Kind as he was, Dustan had his own brand of social awkwardness to work through, and ultimately, he couldn’t help it manifesting in an apology that didn’t need to be said, and yet…

“Heh.”

“Hm?”

“Now who’s the one apologizing when they don’t need to?”

There was a look of exhaustion about Deth, as though he’d just come out of his room from a brutal and sleepless evening: his eyes were sunken in just slightly, and his disheveled mane was never so prominent as it was right then…but he looked **real** again, as if the gray that he saw in the world was being worn about him like a cloak.

When he could see the color in the world again, it felt like the world could do the same, but it meant that he couldn’t just keep running and hiding from his pain in plain sight any longer.

“I guess I couldn’t think of anything else to say…s-sor- …heh…and there I go again.”

Just seeing someone else let their guard down around him was enough to appeal to Deth’s sense of empathy, no matter how far buried it had become.

He wasn’t willing to give himself over to those feelings entirely just yet: he was gruff in his chuckling response, but there was something genuine at the heart of it all, and Dustan could **feel** that.

“Must be something about being a part of the generation we grew up in,” Deth suggested. “Always apologizing all the time because we’re afraid of hurting other people, or getting hurt for doing something wrong and not realizing that we had.”

“So…basically being riddled with anxiety over every decision ever?”

“That’s part of it.”

For a moment, they snickered, and their eyes met again; Dustan didn’t realize just how gray the world around him was until he saw the little bits of blue in Deth’s mane, illuminated from behind by the last golden beams of the sunset breaking through.

With the clouds losing their color, there were simply streaks of molten gold pouring through cracks in the slate…like a silent reminder from Mother Nature herself that there was beauty to be had in their flaws.

“Guess you haven’t figured out how to turn it off either, have you?” Dustan asked, but immediately, he shook his head. “N-no, sorry…**for real** this time. You called me here because you’re struggling.”

“Better to be floating on a door in the ocean **with** someone than alone, right?”

It was a macabre statement, but there was humor in that suggestion. Dustan was doing his best to grab onto that and roll with it; based on what he’d heard from Red, this was the most emotion that Deth had shown anyone in **months**.

“Guess it depends on how you think Titanic should have ended.”

Once more, a genuine laugh from the pair carried a profundity that they took for granted, but when they looked back on that moment, they still wouldn’t have called it a date, or anything of the sort.

They didn’t know what it was, nor did they care enough to put labels on it…but whatever it was, like so many other nameless moments in life, it was exactly what they needed at that moment in time.

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*You’re* ***never*** *going to be complete without me. Never going to be* ***whole*** *without me.*

The voice in the back of his head wasn’t quite so prominent as it was at the start of the summer, and in the middle of the heat, more often than not, Deth found himself laying on the flat of his bed, stripped to his skivvies and loving the subtle chops of wind that came to him from the ends of a gracious ceiling fan.

Those days when there was no one mowing the lawn, no video games to play, no work to be done, he used to find *something* to occupy his time, no matter how far down the list he had to go.

*Everyone can see the cracks, Deth. They can see everything I took from you…and they don’t care what you’ve lost.*

He didn’t feel like talking back to the whispers that Zack left behind, but what he found easier was picking up his smartphone and looking back through a series of text messages: none of them were terribly impactful on their own, but in the same way that a culmination of Zack’s abuse left behind a long and terrible symphony that refused to be silenced, each of those texts was creating an equal and opposite culmination.

Just seeing someone message him to tell him that they hoped he had a good day wasn’t quite like putting a bandage on a gaping wound, but it was somewhere closer to the middle…like an incomplete set of stitches, it’d keep him from bleeding out without permanently closing the wound.

“Can’t wait to see you back at campus,” he whispered, looking at a picture of Nimbus and Flair having a water fight just outside the deck of their apartment. “Hope you’re feeling better back at home…”

It wasn’t as simple as getting past the abuse that he’d suffered, and he knew that: it was a matter of getting over the guilt he felt for burdening the ones he loved, a matter of putting pieces back together that he didn’t know were missing, and a matter of rebuilding himself from what seemed to be scratch.

That guilt was the hardest part, as it encouraged him to further solitude, turning himself away from those people who could have offered a helping hand here and there…but no one was going to blame him for needing a little extra time to himself.

“And to think…I’m supposed to have a career figured out by this time next year,” he muttered. “Gonna have a degree in my hand and an absolutely blank roadmap…”

Once upon a time, he was genuinely excited about the concept of blazing his own trail, even in the metaphorical sense.

Those days, he was still fearful that all roads would end up taking him back toward something painful, as if **he** was the one responsible for the suffering he’d endured.

He still hadn’t figured out that the consequences of his decisions weren’t always his own fault.

“And a…text from Dustan. Huh.”

The words “Ice cream” were nearly a failsafe in the hottest months of the summer: Deth couldn’t imagine passing up an opportunity to go and get some, but nothing was stopping him from going out and getting it, himself.

He didn’t know he was waiting for an invitation until it arrived on his phone, but seeing it, he didn’t realize that he was smiling as much about the person that reached out to him as he was the dessert itself.

“Hey, Red?”

“Now there’s a welcome surprise,” Red answered the seemingly random call. “What’s going on, dude?”

“Did your cousin invite you out for ice cream, too?”

There was a brief, but knowing pause on the other end.

“Can’t say that he did,” Red replied. “Do you need me to come with? I’ll be getting off early today.”

Deth knew it was foolish to make a coincidence out of one or two passing conversations, but there were few comforts to be had in his life, anymore…and if time with Dustan was proving to be one of them, he wasn’t going to look that gift horse in the mouth.

He had to give the jaguar a genuine chance to prove himself as a nice guy, without any incentives…and that included the warm, fuzzy feeling that came from helping someone in a state of need.

“We’ll pick you up a pint,” Deth offered. “See you at your place in a few hours.”

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Leaving the house felt like a risky move for Deth, anymore.

He knew he was getting better, but it was such a slow and grinding process that he often wondered just how far he’d come, and when the entire world was bearing down on you, sometimes, you couldn’t tell one tree apart from another, even when they were literally miles apart.

“So…do you have a favorite?”

This time, Dustan was a bit more tense than the previous times they’d met, but he didn’t want Deth to know that it was Red who first pushed him into talking to the downtrodden lion.

He didn’t think there was anything inherently **wrong** with that fact, but he didn’t want Deth to think that their budding friendship was just Red trying to pass the buck of caring for him; that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“I’ve always liked cookie dough,” Deth thought it over for a minute, but the longer he did, the more he realized that there were other flavor combinations he was fond of, as if he was rediscovering how to *enjoy* things again without guilt. “With a caramel drizzle…and you can’t go wrong with peanut butter.”

“Just a total sugar bomb, then?” Dustan asked, and already, he was trying to be sneaky about fishing out his wallet: he intended to treat Deth, whether the lion was expecting it or not. “Not that I’ve got any problem with that!’

Deth was so unassuming and kindly to the world around him that he couldn’t imagine anyone being intimidated by him, but in some way, he seemed to be doing just that to Dustan, given how nervous he always was.

He didn’t know if it was simply a quirk of the jaguar’s personality, or if he’d done something to cause those nerves…but it was endearing in a way that Deth struggled to grasp.

“You know I’m not **that** fragile, right?” the lion asked, and only on saying the words did he think he had an inkling of why Dustan was being so cautious around him. “You…you haven’t been acting so nice to me this whole time because you’re afraid of hurting my feelings, have you?”

“No.”

It was a strange, succinct change from Dustan, who always seemed to have a little bit of a wobble to his voice; his expression showed the same stoic features to match.

“It’s not like Red didn’t tell me what happened, but…you’ve got a good group of friends that helped to carry you through a tough time, Dustan explained. “I don’t want you to think that I was just trying to sneak into that because you were vulnerable…and no, I didn’t want to hurt your feelings at all, but I know when someone’s been pushed to the brink, sometimes…even a little joke like ‘sugar bomb’ can be the final straw.”

Deth took a moment to consider those words. The speech was unexpected, and in such a public place, he didn’t think that Dustan would be willing to say something so earnest…but some part of the lion was glad to know that this new feline was able to let his guard down, even if it was only in bits and pieces.

He could do the same, he figured, if only to keep things even.

“Well, I meant it when I said I’m not that fragile, but I guess…I guess I really appreciate your consideration all the same,” Deth admitted. “But I don’t want you to feel like you’re walking around on broken glass every time you talk to me, either.”

“That’s the funny thing,” Dustan posited. “I never **do**. I’m just happy to make your acquaintance, but at the same time, knowing what you came from and what you’re trying to get past, I guess I’m worried about hurting you even more, because I…I don’t want to be the next person to do something like that to you.”

It was a poignant lesson: even if people didn’t mean to, others were going to hurt Deth here and there in the future, and living his entire life trying to avoid that pain was no way to live.

To have people who were willing to do the best they could **not** to hurt him was a blessing, but then again…he didn’t know if he was ready to start embracing the colors he was seeing in the world.

“Do you honestly think you *could* do that to me, Dustan?”

They were next in line at the pick-up window.

“I don’t think I could do what **he** did, but goodness knows I’m not perfect, Deth…and maybe being perfect wouldn’t be the right thing anyway.”

“I’d never ask for perfection from my friends, y’know. That’s not fair to them.”

Dustan never would have had the courage to admit that he **knew** he had more than a friendship in mind, and even if he did…it just didn’t feel like the right time, even when the universe dropped a small, cosmic hint to him in the form of their paws touching as they fished out their credit cards at the same time.

The jaguar pushed his forth and smiled warmly. “And they don’t expect perfection out of you, either, but they **do** expect you to let them help you out when you need it…and treat you to a little cookie dough ice cream every now and again.”

Their paws didn’t touch for a long time, but in that moment, there **was** a spark for Dustan…and he was terrified to ask if Deth felt the same, when his paw moved back into his pocket.

“Putting an awful lot of pressure on me with that kind of treatment,” Deth joked. “I’m not sure I can handle it if there isn’t a little caramel sauce on top of that sundae.”

“And for you, sir?”

The cashier was looking at Dustan with a half-lidded glare, wishing that he’d stop holding up the line…but even if it was only for a moment, it was the jaguar’s moment to enjoy, sharing a smile with the lion that felt like the first **real** one they’d shown each other.

“Just a scoop of vanilla bean,” he replied.

If he thought the cashier was annoyed, he was going to be in for quite the surprise when Red chewed his ear off back at home for forgetting to pick up his pint.