

To Return
By: Michael Deltair

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

A large, black paw slammed down on the alarm clock, silencing it for another 9 minutes. The paw retracted back into the bed, under the deep brown sheets, back to the rest of the warm lump that was there.

A loud yawn came from the top of the bed, and was followed by two, smaller lumps, circling at the top of the sheets. The sheets were eventually tossed out, relieving a young panda, rubbing his eyes. He yawned out again, his white muzzle stretching out. He began to stretch the rest of his body under the covers, his white feet becoming shown.

"Burr... fuck... Dad must have cut the heat again..."

The panda reached for a black hoodie near his bed. He disappeared under the sheets again, fumbling with the thick piece of clothing. The movement came to a standstill, as the sheets were slowly cast aside. He let his feet drop to the side of the bed, touching the cold carpet of the room. He slowed himself up, the bed creaking as his size left it. His black, sweatpants dragged across the red carpet as he walked over to a handheld that was flashing red. He picked it up and looked at it, sighing hard at what he read.

"Ed... you need to take a look at the apartments today. I had to go oversee the plumbing in the other building this morning. I'll be expecting you home by 12 this afternoon. I have other things for you to do today..." The panda gripped the phone hard against his gut, parts of the plastic creaking from the grip.

"On the weekend... the week doesn't even end here..."

The panda walked to a mirror in his small room. He looked at himself, and pawed at his head fur.

"This is fine... just going to see if they wrecked the place before leaving... don't need to be in a suit," said Ed.

The panda grabbed the handheld and stuffed it in his pocket, then reached for his keys. He then reached for a smaller, more basic phone and put it in his pocket. As he pushed forward, he felt the first phone, and begin to beep and buzz. He groaned out and pulled it out, while moving to his sneakers, starting to slip them on.

"Fill up the gas tank for the other car. I emptied it last night."

Ed took a breath and let out a long sigh, his head down, an empty feeling filling his eyes.

"Why am I surprised... I just hope he left enough my in my back account for gas..."

He walked over to an old computer in his room and opened up a browser, going to his bank's website. He logged in and looked at the account information.

Posted Balance: \$803.52

Available Balance: \$49.78

The panda sighed again. He looked at the pending payments, trying to see why the account was in such shape.

Roy's PC Shop: \$750.39 Deposited 12/8

Sam's Pub: \$753.74 Deducted 12/8

"Probably wasted my gas at the bar again..."

Ed got up from the chair he sat in and walked to the door. He walked out of his small room and went toward the front door. He grabbed the keys by the door for the building he was to go see, and walked out the door. During the walk from his room to the front door, his eyes never left the floor, and his muzzle never changed, showing the same depressed look, up until the door closed behind him.

The panda walked though the decrepit neighborhood, head bowed still. His hands were shoved in his pockets, as he tried to keep as warm as possible while walking through the snowy sidewalk. He passed by beggars and others, all trying to keep warm.

'At least they didn't wreck the place. Don't need to do more than mop a little,' thought Ed. He took out the handheld and started to notify his father as he trekked to the car. He turned the key and opened the door. He walked into the car and sat down, turning it on, letting the heat wash over him as the car started. He sighed in relief as he rubbed his paws together, trying to generate more heat. His one white ear perked up, hearing his phone go off. He reach into his pocket and grabbed the old device, bringing it to his ear.

"Hello? Hey Rick. No... I don't think I can... Who else? Yea... the drunk... Now?" Ed looked at the other phone and saw the time.

"9... will I get home by 12? Alright then. I'll see you in 15 minutes."

He gripped the shift in the car and pulled out onto the street, driving out in the opposite way of where he went to sleep.

The car pulled up to a corner and parked in a free space. Once the engine came off, Ed stepped out, back into the cold. He gripped his arms, shivering outside. He looked around and saw one of the doors to the houses open up. A slight smile formed on his face as he saw a gray wolf walk out of the door.

"Ed! Get your ass in here! It's cold!"

The panda ran in agreement, trying his best not to slip on the snow. He ran up the stairs, into the warmth of the home, closing the door behind him.

"Hey dude. What did you want to see me about?" said Ed.

The wolf led him through the corridor of the apartment, bringing him to a computer and a wireless router.

"Someone messed with router last night. Can you take a look?" said the wolf. Ed took off his hoodie and tossed in on the chair in front of the PC. He leaned down and began to look at the router configuration.

"This is nothing Rick. It just needs to be restarted." The panda removed the plugs and let it sit for a minute, letting all the power drain out.

"Well, that wasn't all I wanted to see you about Ed," said Rick. Ed turned his head at the wolf, his hands already putting the plugs back.

"What else?" The panda saw the wolf come forward and place a paw on his shoulder.

"I'm worried about you. No one hears from you anymore. You're either working or being your Dad's lapdog." The panda turned his head back and stared at the computer desk. The sadness was welling up in his face. His movement stopped after the last plug had been put in.

"I... I know... what can I do... I don't have anyway to change things right now though..." He felt the wolf's grip tighten on his shoulder, his head never moving.

"Ed... this is all killing you. You couldn't go to college because he wouldn't let you. You're twenty-two, and everyone you know has already started their lives. You're stuck at a dead-end tech job, only to have him take the little bit of money you get. You have too much damn talent for this."

"I... don't have any talent... according to him..." Ed's head bowed more, his fist clenching up a bit. His body slowly began to curl forward, wanting to curl up completely for comfort. "I'm worthless... and I only exist to serve him... running his errands... taking care of his buildings... working just to feed his addiction..."

"Do you believe any of that?"

"I... don't know anymore Rick... I want to leave... to be free... I can hope and pray that something will work out... but I'm just tired now... his house... his rules... I don't matter... he has his noose around my neck... I can't break it..." Ed's eyes went open as he felt the handheld buzz and beep. He pulled away from his friend and the desk and looked at the phone.

"I... I need to go now..." The panda grabbed his hoodie and put it on, and started to the door.

"Ed wait!" shouted the wolf. The panda stopped in his tracks.

"Why do you have two phones? Tell me that at least. Your Dad got you a Blackberry, that he pays for. Why do you need another phone?" Ed pulled the small phone out of his pocket. He looked at it, rubbing it with his thumb.

"He got me that to keep tabs on me... so the tenants can e-mail me when they have issues. It's his phone, not mine. This one... it's old. It's beat up. It can't get texts, it can only call someone and get calls

back. The screen doesn't work, and only the number buttons do at this point."

"Then why do you have it?"

"Because Rick... it's mine. This is the only thing I own. Everything is his. The car, the house, the money, and accounts, everything is his. As crappy as this thing is... as little as I can use it cause it's a prepaid... it's mine. Just mine. No one else's..." The panda felt his friends arms wrap around him, and bring him close. Ed let his arms drop, a tear coming forward, falling off his fur, onto the floor.

"Yea... it's yours Ed... just remember to use it if you need me..." Ed gently pulled away and went to the door.

"Bye Rick... and thank you..." With that, he walked out of the door, back into the cold.

The panda walked back into the house, not much difference between the outside and the inside. Both were cold places to him. He put the keys back on the key rack on looked over, seeing his father on the chair in front of the T.V. There was a glass of liquor in his hand, as he watched some sports game.

"Hello sir..."

The old panda barely gave him any recognition. His black fur was graying in different places, and his gut stuck out largely. On top of it rested a bowl of chips, that he occasionally moved a paw to eat the chips. His appearance stood out against the rest of the room, and house in general. Everything was kept clean and orderly, and his looks were anything but that. His fur was a mess, there were drink stains all over his clothes, and he reeked of alcohol. He looked like a bum who stole a mansion, using what he pleased.

"So, the apartment is fine then," said the old panda. He leaned back in the chair and sipped at his drink, his eyes glazed over as he watched at the large T.V. mindlessly.

"Yes sir... they left it in good condition."

"Good. Go take out the garbage. I don't expect to see you again today unless I need you."

"Y... yes sir..." Ed walked into the kitchen and saw the garbage at capacity. He had cleaned the room previously, so the full trash stood out against everything else. Ed looked at the garbage, and an envelope caught his eye. It had a school insignia on it. He reached forward, and stuffed the opened, paper and its contents in his pocket. He picked the trash out of the can, and tied it up. He began to haul it outside, to the trashcans. He walked out into the snow-covered back of this father's house. He placed the trash in the outside bin, then reached for what he pulled from the trash.

From the desk of Maria Franks

Admission Director for Johnson and Wales University

Dear Mr. Johnson,

I am very pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into our Engineering program here at

Johnson and Wales. I was very impressed at your application, and feel that you will go far here on our campus.

I have looked at your school records, and the decision from financial Aid has been to give you a full scholarship, granted you maintain a 3.9 GPA every semester here. Call or visit me in at the campus, and we will arrange for you to start in the spring semester at our Rhode Island campus. Our offices are open Monday through Saturday, from 9am – 5pm during the week, and until 3pm on Saturday. I look forward to hearing from you.

*Sincerely,
Maria Franks*

Ed looked at the paper in shock. He folded it back up and put it in his pocket.

"Why... didn't I get this... why was it in the tr..." he panda stopped his words right there.

"I know why... but... how can I even go... I don't even have a way to get there..."

The panda felt a rope around his neck tighten. One paw rubbed his neck. There was no rope, but the tension was still there. It kept tightening, gripping him with fear.

"What... if he finds out... what will he do if I leave..."

He walked back to the house, and walked inside. He walked to his small room and looked at his PC. He opened up his music program, hitting the play button on whatever song appeared. He didn't care at this point. He felt trapped, alone, and scared of the future. As the song started, he fell on his bed, face down. He turned his head to the side as the tears streamed down his face.

*To return...
To the cold...
It isn't much...
Fun...
To touch the trees...
No one has known...
Go rest your head....
Cause you can't miss this*

Ed stared blankly at a wall. His mind reeling and absorbing everything in, everything he had gone through, everything he had to deal with. The invisible noose around his neck tightening more and more, pushing the streaming tears out of his eyes.

*Poor boy...
Became...
A slave...
To use...*

*Now despair...
Moves in so close...
Too many years...*

*Free at last...
He didn't know...
So learned to speak...
He clears his throat...
Cause you can't miss this*

*Poor boy...
Became...
A slave...
To use...
Rebuild...
What's left...
Of this child...
So weak...*

'Could I leave... just leave this place... make a new life... prove I'm not worthless... prove it to him... to myself?' thought Ed. The tears kept coming forth, but they slowly began to trickle off.

*Sorry..
Changes...
trample... the plan.
Death stores...
Victims...
Once more...
Keep on burnin' through the noose
Keep on burnin' through the noose
Keep on burnin' through the noose
Keep on burnin' through the noose
Keep on...*

Ed felt the tension on his neck stop as his tears came to a halt. He pulled the paper out of his pocket and stared at it. Doubt filled his mind. Fear gripped him. He gripped the paper tight as he stared at it., thinking about what he could gain, the hell he would be leaving behind.

*Poor boy...
Became...
A slave...
To use...
Rebuild...
What's left...
Of this child...
So weak...*

*To return...
To the cold...
It isn't much...
But I'm free at last*

Ed sat up, and got out of the bed. He wiped his face fur clean of tears as he moved to the door. He

locked it and sat back on his bed. The panda pulled out his old phone and began to dial a number. As it rang he looked around the room, and then back at the paper.

"Hello? Yes, this is Edward Johnson. I would like to talk to Miss Franks..."

Edited by darkbear