

The winter celebration on Eternia had always been Polkuio's favorite. The air shimmered with bioluminescent glows from the great Tree of Life, its golden hues casting warmth against the island's perpetual night. Around the massive bonfires circling its base, Snugzi and Pompi gathered in harmony, sharing laughter, stories, and gifts with one another. Now more than ever, with little Bommies ducking around corners and finding new homes, the world should have felt so cheerful. Yet, this year, Polkuio couldn't shake the heaviness resting on their heart, like the endless frost blanketing the ground.

Polkuio tugged at the edge of their blanki, a soft patchwork of rustic oranges and frayed strings, in an attempt to shield their body further from the chill air. They stood at the edge of one of the smaller bonfires on the outskirts of the festival, clutching a bud of stuffing that had fallen from pompi wings—a perfect white Sylk puff ready for release. The tradition was supposed to bring peace, letting go of burdens and regrets, but Polkuio didn't feel much like their issues could be lifted with such a simple action.

"Well, I wasn't able to find anywhere giving out the lionseal marshmallows you were hoping for," William's gentle voice broke through the hum of crackling flames, the blue and brown pompi staggering a bit as he pushed past some of the other people heading towards the center circle. He carried dark brown clay mugs in one hand, and in the other lay a leather bundle that seemed to be wiggling. "But, low and behold, they did have normal marshmallow critters! Perfect for cocoa, if you only have one at a time. ...Right, Pol?" The pompi's butterfly-like wings twitched, glowing faintly with the blues and purples of the evening.

The other doesn't speak for a moment, just fidgeting with their hands, before eventually reaching out blindly in hopes to be given one of the mugs. "Right. Yeah, of course. Thank you. I would have gone to get it myself, but...you know." Polkuio gestures to their arms and legs for a moment, despite nothing visually being wrong with them. Their limbs trembled a bit in recognition. There was a pain deep within their fabric, still unexplained after having been seen by multiple doctors. It was like their body was turning against them slowly, and these past months it had made it difficult to do much of anything on their own, from walking to places to simply taking care of themselves. With a dejected noise, they turned, their eyes shimmering with worry. "Will... do you think I'll ever find something I'm good at? Something I can do without... without hurting all the time?" They tugged their blanki tighter, their stuffed seams trembling slightly.

William frowned and crouched beside them, dropping the leather pouch next to the log seat and handing "You're good at so many things, Polkuio. You create characters, make art. You're always trying to search around to help different creatures you find. And... well, even when those things do hurt you to do, you always make people feel safe and happy just by being around them."

"But what if it's not enough?" Polkuio whispered, staring at the Sylk puff in their free hand and pulling the mug near their chest. The warmth of the drink wafted towards their face. "I need to

find something that works for me. Something I can build a future on, to make a living and secure somewhere safe for us. I feel like I'm letting everyone down."

William's wings fluttered softly, his own darker speckled sylk floating delicately around him like snowflakes. "You're not letting anyone down, Polkuio. You're just... finding your way, like we all are. And it's okay to take your time. We're making it just fine for now with what we have."

Polkuio sighed, looking out at the flickering bonfires. The warm glow of the flames reflected the joy of those around them. People who could see their futures clearly. Who could keep their homes clean, who could ensure pets were given the best treatment possible, who could make food and do things they loved without fearing how badly it would hurt them moments later. They didn't have to rely on anyone to do everything for them, like Polkuio had been doing more and more with William-- he had to practically do everything for them, and more often than not, it took everything for Polkuio to even get up to lay down on the couch during the day. It felt like every single one of the other Eternians around them were moving, and they were being left behind. The thought of all of it made their liquid stomach churn.

As the Snugzi sat in thought, taking slow sips of the hot cocoa in their hands, William stood again. His expression brightened just a bit. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Reluctantly, Polkuio followed William through the crowd, their black tail trailing behind them. They stopped beneath the towering Tree of Life, where its bioluminescent light illuminated the ground in a kaleidoscope of colors. William gathered a handful of his Sylk and sprinkled it onto Polkuio's blanki.

"What are you doing?" Polkuio asked, tilting their head in confusion.

William grinned. "Just give me a second."

With a wave of his hand, William summoned a small burst of Pompei magic. The Sylk glowed and wove itself into Polkuio's blanki, temporarily igniting into small patterns. It sparkled faintly like frost catching the dawn. It was dazzling in the reflections of color that came off of the tree above them.

Polkuio gasped at the warmth, almost backing away for a moment as they tried to get a good look at what had changed. The sensation, while strange and tingling, was something of a distraction from the bitter pain that soaked their joints. It felt more numb than before. "William, it's... it's beautiful. But. You don't-- you should be saving that for Louis, shouldn't you? What if he needs it for repairs?"

"Louis will be okay. He's still away from Eternia, anyways-- when he returns, he can get all of the Sylk he wants. But I'm not just going to let it go to waste when it could be helping you. It'll go away on its own eventually, either way." William said, his smile kind and unwavering. "You see? Even when you feel like you're falling apart, you're still part of something greater. Your blanki

holds you together, and you hold other people together, too. You just can't see it from where you are because everything seems so big, but...You'll find your way, Pol, I know it."

Polkuio's eyes watered for a moment, but then they suddenly wrapped their friend in their arms, hugging him close.

As the final day of the festival neared its end, Polkuio and William joined the gathering at the base of the Tree of Life. All around them, Snugzi and Pompi stood side by side, releasing beams of magic into the dark sky. The explosions of color painted the heavens in radiant rainbows, a reminder of their unity and resilience.

Polkuio raised their blanki, feeling a spark of hope ignite within them. The future might still be uncertain, but tonight, they felt the warmth of their community and the kindness of someone who cares deeply for them. With a deep breath, Polkuio released their Sylk puff into the bonfire which had now gathered some of Will's Sylk and glittery markings on the edges from where he had sprinkled them. The flames crackled, and Polkuio stared up, watching as the remains of it swirled upward into the endless night.

"Thank you, Will," Polkuio said softly.

William wrapped an arm around Polkuio, his head wings brushing against their blanki. "Always, Polkuio. You're not alone."

As the sparks of magic faded into the sky, Polkuio felt a quiet certainty take root. They might not have all the answers yet, but surrounded by the love and light of those who reached out, they knew they'd find their path—one step at a time.