

*The PPC is not our creation; that honor belongs to Jay and Acacia. Pokémon belongs to Satoshi Tajiri, Nintendo, and GameFreak. Doctor Who belongs to the BBC. Star Trek is the brainchild of Gene Roddenberry. Agents Zeb and the Aviator belong to Iximaz, and Dawn, T'Zar, Abaddon, and Jacques belong to Zingenmir.*

*Published: August 5, 2017.*

*Set: September 27, 2015.*

Zeb padded to the door, his soft paws making hardly any noise on the floor as he crept past his partner, who was passed out drunk on the couch. He must have done something to startle her—breathed too loudly, perhaps, or passed too close—because she sat up with a gasp, looking around wildly until she saw it was just him.

“Where’re you going?” she asked blearily, rubbing her eyes.

“To see Dawn,” Zeb said, hating that he felt guilty admitting to it. “She was going to introduce me to some of her friends.”

The Aviator lay back down, her back to him so he wouldn’t see her frown. “Yeah, sure, whatever. Have fun.”

“I will,” Zeb said softly. “Sleep well.”

All he got in response was a derisive snort. He hesitated, but continued on his way out the door. Once in the hall, he broke into an easy lope, humming the Champion battle music from *Pokémon Platinum* as he went, replaying his earlier battle with Cynthia in his head.

Thus sufficiently distracted, he arrived at Dawn’s RC in record time, and he rapped one claw on the door to announce his presence.

Dawn opened the door after a minute, looking frazzled. “Hiya,” she said. “Give me a minute, okay? The pov’s in higher spirits than usual.”

“Need some help?” Zeb offered.

“Sure.” Dawn opened the door wider and waved him in. “You hold the pov, I’ll—no, actually, I’ll hold the pov and you get the brush—no, wait, you’ve got paws. First plan. You hold the pov. Yeah?”

“On it.” Zeb padded into the RC and looked around; he spied the pov lurking near one of the table legs, snuffling at the floor. He bounded forward, scooped it up with one paw, and deposited

it on the table, standing on his back legs while he used his front paws to hold the pov in place. "No problem!"

Dawn grinned at him, shoving loose bits of her hair out of her face as she picked up the brush and approached. "You're the best. Okay, time to hold still and brush some dust out of your fur..." She began to croon at the pov, trying to keep it calm as she worked the soft brush through its fur.

"Why d'you brush it, anyway?" Zeb asked curiously. "Can't it groom itself?"

Dawn paused to pull dust and pov fur off the brush and set it aside to throw out later, and then raised an eyebrow. "Can *you* get every bit of dirt out of your fur by grooming? Also, it...doesn't seem to care too much, honestly. Not unless it's mud—don't ask. That made such a mess."

"Weird little critter," Zeb muttered.

Dawn grinned and brushed some of Zeb's fur down over his eye. "Says the partly-blue lion who hatched from an egg." She went back to brushing the pov, which *snrfed* long-sufferingly. "Not long, now, if you stay still," she told it, and moved on to its sides.

"Maybe it wouldn't give you so many problems if you stop putting ribbons in its fur," Zeb suggested.

"Aw, that's no fun." Dawn eyed him for a moment and then ran her fingers through the fur she'd brushed down, clearing it away from Zeb's eye. "And I don't put ribbons in *every* time. Just when I feel like it. Which is about half the time."

Zeb quickly backpedaled. "Nuh-uh, I can tell where this is going. You're not putting any ribbons in my fur again!"

"You were fine with it the first time," Dawn said innocently. "And practicing my braiding is fun. Besides, I let you play with my hair when it was down."

"Yeah, but I only asked because Rina never let me play with hers." Zeb watched Dawn impatiently while she finished grooming the pov. "When are we gonna go?"

Dawn laughed. "In a second, hold on—there we go." She put down the brush and picked up the pov, gently nudging Zeb's paws aside. She raised the pov to eye-level. "Well, ye wee little beastie? How d'you feel?"

"*Snrf*," replied the pov. It waved its stubby little legs at increasing speed. "*Snrf!*"

“Right you are,” Dawn agreed, and put it down on the floor. “Try not to get into anything sticky.” She straightened and grinned at Zeb. “*Now* we can go. Oh, wait.” She pulled the elastic from the bottom of her braid and began to unravel it. “Here, I can do this while we walk. Or *redo* it, rather.”

Zeb took this as his cue to move to the door. “So who’re you taking me to meet first?”

Dawn followed him, slipping the hair elastic onto her wrist. Her hair flowed around her back, halfway out of its braid. “T’Zar. She’s the...steadiest. She’s also the one who knew me first—back when I was in DOGA. *And* she’s pretty amazing, so I’d like you to meet her anyway, regardless of promises.”

“Sounds good,” Zeb said, nuzzling the back of Dawn’s hand.

Dawn smiled, and caught him up in a hug. “I’m glad. And it’s good to see you, Zeb. Thanks for helping with the pov grooming.”

“It was nothing,” Zeb said, blushing and glad it was hidden under all his fur. “Let’s just go, shall we?”

Dawn hugged him a little tighter and then stepped back, keeping one nail polish-less hand very loosely tangled in his mane. “Sure.”

They set off, chatting about various things like Zeb’s progress in his *Pokémon* games and Dawn’s latest reread of Tamora Pierce’s books. Dawn also finished redoing her braid. At last, they reached RC 7221. Dawn smiled at Zeb and then knocked on the door.

“Oh, hullo,” said the man who opened it. He was young, perhaps in his late twenties, and bore quite a striking resemblance to Matt Smith, albeit a blonder version.

Zeb couldn’t help recoiling in alarm. “Doctor?!”

The man blinked at him. “No,” he said after a moment. His accent, which had been Cockney to begin with, intensified as he continued. “I go by Abaddon. I suppose you’re Zeb, then?”

“Er, yes,” Zeb said, his ears flattening in embarrassment. “Sorry, I didn’t mean... You just... Sorry.”

Abaddon shrugged one t-shirt clad shoulder. “I get it a lot. It’s a bit impressive how little attention people pay to what you’re wearing.” He hooked a thumb in the pocket of his black jeans (which had silvery chains hanging off the belt loops) and looked over at Dawn for the first time since Zeb had spoken. “Dawn, good to see you again.”

“You too,” Dawn said. “T’Zar’s in, right?”

“Oh, I see how it is.” Abaddon pulled on a mildly offended look. “You’re only here for my partner. Why d’you never come to visit *me*, huh, Dawn?”

“I’ve known her longer,” Dawn replied, grinning. “So she is here, then?”

Abaddon’s expression cleared. “Yeah, she’s been staring at her PADD for the last half hour. C’mon.” He stood aside and waved them in.

Zeb gave Abaddon a somewhat-nervous smile and hurried inside, his tail held high. “Nice place you’ve got,” he said, ears flicking forward when he spotted the Vulcan woman sitting and staring intently at a clunky-looking PADD. “Hello!”

T’Zar looked up, brushing brown hair that had escaped its ponytail out of her face. She had brown eyes to match, and truly olive skin. “Hello,” she replied. “Zeb, I presume.” She nodded to Dawn, who nodded back with a smile.

“Yep!” he said. “And you must be T’Zar—Dawn’s been wanting me to meet you for a long time now.”

“Logical,” T’Zar said. “I was one of her longer-term partners, and we have been acquainted for six-point-two-five years.”

“Whoa,” Zeb said. “I’ve only known her for, um, a few weeks. But she’s really cool and speaks highly of you, so I’m sure you are, too.” He beamed, his tail swishing from side to side.

“Stick around, kid,” Dawn told him, grinning. “You’ll get old friends too. But yeah, she is awesome.” She turned the grin on T’Zar.

“How about me?” Abaddon had retrieved a half-full mug of coffee from the counter and was walking towards them. “I’m part of the cool club, right?”

“Er...” Zeb hesitated, shuffling his paws. “Actually, I haven’t... wait.” He squinted at Abaddon. “I think my partner’s brother mentioned you.”

Abaddon’s brow furrowed. “He did? I know someone’s brother?”

“Alex Dives?” Zeb prompted. “DoSAT, uh, about your height, blond hair, has a blue fire-lizard?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” the DOGA agent said breezily. “I don’t know too many people in DoSAT, though, it’s probably just a mistake.”

“Oh.” Zeb’s tail drooped. “Sorry. Uh, again...” He sighed and shuffled his paws, looking for all the world like he expected to be scolded. “Forget I said anything.”

“Done!” Abaddon said cheerfully. He took a gulp of coffee and glanced between his partner and the two assassins. “So, wasn’t this to be the meeting about character references?”

“Indeed,” T’Zar said.

“I’ll get out of it, then.” Abaddon hopped off the back of the small couch, where he had settled, and walked away towards the kitchenette. “You lot have fun.”

“I never said you couldn’t... oh, never mind,” Zeb mumbled. His tail drooped even further until it was dragging on the floor. A moment later, though, it was back in the air as he turned to T’Zar. “So, six-point-two-five years?”

“Yes,” T’Zar said. “Dawn and I were partnered in May of 2009. I trained her as a DOGA agent.”

“She taught me which way to point the flamethrower,” Dawn put in. She pulled over a chair and sat down facing the Vulcan. “*And* who to point it at. She’s very responsible.”

Zeb padded over to sit by Dawn’s feet. “It must’ve been nice having an experienced partner,” he said. “I just kinda got thrown into the field with a partner barely out of training, herself.”

“It’s definitely more interesting,” Dawn said. “I...actually, I think just about every permanent partner I’ve ever had in a new department was more experienced than I was. Huh.” She frowned. “That’s a bit of a weird pattern, now that I’m thinking about it...”

“How many partners have you had?” Zeb asked in mild alarm.

Dawn blinked down at him. “A...lot? I don’t know. Are we counting temporary partners in this?”

“I... I guess?” Zeb seemed at a loss. “I’ve only ever had two, if I count you. And I do,” he added quickly. “You’re awesome.”

“Aw.” Dawn smiled at him. “You’re pretty great too.” She sighed. “Uh, partners...well, I mean, I’ve been here for nine years and I’ve switched departments a lot. Uh, there was my first DMS partner, we did *not* agree on things, and then I got to the DMFF, which was a much better fit...I had one main partner there, but I definitely teamed up with some other people a few times, and there was this one set of missions when we were training a newbie...” She frowned into the distance, counting on her fingers. “And then...what then? Oh, Gog, the DBS. That was a really bad fit. I kind of had a partner for one training mission and then nothing, so I’m going to count that as a temporary one...seriously, that was not a fun time.”

“Wow,” Zeb said after a moment. “You really have been here a long time, haven’t you?” He glanced sidelong at T’Zar. “And, uh, you’ve really not had any problems with... you know. Going crazy?”

“I mean, this was just my first...three years, I think,” Dawn said quickly. “I settled down more as I got older. Right, T’Zar?”

“Indeed,” the Vulcan said calmly. “You have certainly switched departments far less frequently.” To Zeb, she added, “Dawn has used the appearance of insanity as a coping mechanism since before she and I were partnered. However, I have yet to find her to be more ‘insane’ than the average PPC agent.”

“And she’s touched my mind, so she’d know,” Dawn blurted. She’d begun to look uncomfortable at the words ‘coping mechanism,’ and looked even more uncomfortable now that she’d spoken. “I mean—”

“Look, it’s okay,” Zeb said, his ears flattening. “I’m sorry I asked, you don’t have to talk about it.”

“No, no.” Dawn shifted in her chair. T’Zar’s steady gaze wasn’t helping, but— “The whole point of this was, well, this. Except without my being weird about it. Go on.” She waved a hand.

“It’s just,” Zeb muttered, “now that Rin—my old partner is back, it’s not... as big an issue anymore...”

Dawn frowned. “Yeah, I guess,” she said after a moment. “Still, I promised. And I don’t want you worrying about me, even if we stop being partners soon.”

“Thanks, Dawn,” Zeb said, wrapping his tail around her ankles.

Dawn smoothed her hand over his shoulder in return. “So, uh, on to the next ex-partner, or do you want to stay with T’Zar for now?”

Zeb glanced at T’Zar’s passive face and got the distinct impression she would rather be left on her own. “I think it’s time for the next one,” he said.

Dawn looked at T’Zar as well, and shrugged at the tiny frown that hinted at the Vulcan’s worry. “Next one it is, then,” she said, and got up. “Thanks for talking with us, T’Zar.”

“You are welcome,” the Pyro said evenly, and got up as well to walk them to the door. “Who will you visit next?”

Dawn shrugged again. “Kozar, maybe? Or Jacques. They’re the other two I actually talked to about this, though we could probably track down someone else without too much trouble.”

Zeb made a face as he climbed to his paws. “Uh, maybe not Kozar? It’s just, he and the Aviator aren’t on very good terms.”

Dawn’s eyebrows went up, as did one of T’Zar’s. The Vulcan spoke first. “If you wish to avoid him, I would suggest leaving now. I am expecting a visit from him today.”

“Oh?” Dawn drew out the word, smiling slightly. “You two are still friends, then?”

“We meet to discuss weapons,” T’Zar said dryly. “If you would call that friendship—”

“Maybe we should get going,” Zeb interrupted.

“Going we are!” Dawn opened the door. “Okay, out we go...bye, T’Zar. Thanks again.”

“You are welcome,” the Vulcan repeated, hesitating momentarily before she spoke. “...Good luck.”

Dawn grinned. “Thanks. Bye, Abaddon!” she called. The response was muffled, but sounded something along the lines of “Bye yourself!”

Out in the hallway, Zeb glanced up at Dawn. “So, um, Jacques... he’s not as, um, cold as T’Zar, is he?” he asked softly. “She was kind of scary.”

“T’Zar’s cold?” Dawn said blankly. “I mean, she’s definitely not one for hugs, but she’s pretty caring. Great sense of humor, too, once you start recognizing it—it’s a little weird.”

“I thought Vulcans didn’t have—never mind,” Zeb said, feeling more confused than before. “Let’s just go see Jacques.”

“Right, yes,” Dawn said. “Good plan.” She hesitated, biting the inside of her lip, then asked, “Uh, Zeb...what exactly happened between Rina and Kozar? I don’t really see him that much, and I don’t want to ask *her*...”

“Just... a mission went bad, and words were exchanged,” he said evasively. “We should probably get going.”

“Okay.” Dawn sighed and flipped her braid over her shoulder. “Okay, then, don’t think about where we’re going. Actually, you don’t really *know* where we’re going, so that helps...”

“I guess that means I shouldn’t ask where we’re going?” Zeb teased.

Dawn put her nose in the air, grinning. “Definitely not. This RC number’s staying with me until we get there.”

Zeb shrugged and fell into step beside her. “I *am* glad I got to meet T’Zar,” he said. “Even if she is kind of scary. And cold,” he added, with a faint smile. “She does seem nice.”

“Oh, she is,” Dawn said. “I mean, I guess it’s a little harder to recognize, but—you do get used to it. Vulcans actually feel things more strongly than humans, you know? It’s why they’re so controlled—they decided at one point that logic was the way to go instead of letting their emotions rule them. You just have to know how to look for it—though T’Zar does sometimes talk about alien influence from living in the PPC for so long...”

“Now that, I can relate to,” Zeb said. “Like, the whole shaking hands thing? Totally didn’t know you were supposed to do that when meeting new people until my trainer taught me. And then it became second nature, and other trainers started exclaiming over what a good Shinx I was. It was kind of embarrassing,” he added as an afterthought.

“Shinx?”

“Oh, my first evolutionary form,” Zeb said. “Uh... kinda like how humans have babies. Only Pokémon don’t grow gradually, it happens in sudden jumps. I’ll have to show you sometime.”

Dawn gave him a puzzled sidelong look. “You...are going to—er, how exactly are you planning on showing me that?”

“Uh, with pictures,” Zeb said. “Isn’t that how everyone else does it?”

“You never know,” Dawn replied. “Hey, wait, does that mean I get to see pictures of a baby Zeb?” She grinned down at him. “Were you really, really fluffy? I feel like you were really fluffy.”

“I mean, I guess I was fluffy,” Zeb said. “But everyone says I’m already fluffy, so what do I know? Hey, is this us?” He nodded at the door they were about to pass.

Dawn stopped walking and turned, steadying herself briefly with a light touch to Zeb’s (fluffy) shoulder. “Uh...5242—yeah, that’s us. Well, that’s Jacques, which means that’s us. Ready to meet another former partner? Well, a temporary one, but still?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Zeb said, and tapped a claw against the door.

A tall brunet man opened the door, struggling to do up his black overshirt’s buttons one-handed. “Come on in,” he said, and then actually saw who was there. “Oh, hey,” he said to Dawn with a smile, and then looked down. “And you’re...Zeb, unless this is an unplanned visit...?” He looked up at Dawn again questioningly.



"No, this is Zeb," Dawn replied as Zeb bobbed his head in greeting. "Hey, did you know half your hair's sticking straight up and the rest is trying to cover your ears? It looks pretty weird."

"I'm in a rush," Jacques explained. He abandoned the last four buttons and the door, and ran the fingers of both hands through his hair until it was a little flatter and mostly going in one direction. "Just got back from Rudi's, and I have no clue when the next mission'll show up, so I've been trying to eat, sleep, and shower at the same time. Not a great plan. How's your day been?"

Dawn shrugged, ushering Zeb through the door. "I managed to groom the pov, and then Zeb showed up and we went to visit T'Zar. Pretty quiet sort of time, really." She waved a hand absently and then used it to shut the door.

Jacques frowned at it. "No glitter today?"

Dawn shrugged again, closing her fingers to hide the nails. "Haven't felt like it."

Zeb glanced at Dawn and bit his lip, but they were there for a reason. So he turned to Jacques and offered a paw. "It's nice to finally meet you, Jack. Jacques!" he hastily corrected himself. "Jacques. Sorry."

Jacques smiled and shook the paw. "I've heard *that* before. Don't worry, you'll get used to the differences. Eventually." He did up two more buttons and then led the other agents further into the RC. "Can I get you two anything? I definitely have water, and I might have—uh—well, I can see what's in the fridge, if you're thirsty..."

"Water's fine, thank you," Zeb said. "But could I have it in a bowl, please? Oh, uh, I could borrow the disguise generator? Human glasses are just too narrow for my muzzle."

"Whatever you'd rather," Jacques said. "I've got both."

"I'll just take a bowl, then," Zeb said.

"Bowl it is," Jacques said, and went to get one. "Dawn?"

"A glass is fine," Dawn said dryly. "I don't usually drink water out of bowls unless I'm in a more unusual disguise—hey, Zeb, do ponies drink from bowls, or troughs, or from glasses? We had a mission," she added to Jacques.

"I think glasses, usually," Zeb said. "Definitely not troughs, at least." He grinned at Jacques. "*My Little Pony*. You watch?"

“Not really my thing.” Jacques filled two glasses and a bowl with water, and carefully carried them out of the kitchenette into the small living space. “I’ve been watching *Galavant* recently, though—now *that’s* amusing. Have you seen it? Cheers,” he added, passing out the drinks.

Zeb’s ears perked up. “Isn’t that the show where they sing ‘Jackass in a Can’?” he asked. “I’ve never seen it but my partner’s brother loves it.”

“Your partner’s brother has good taste,” Jacques said. He paused. “Actually, if you could get me his ICEP address—”

“Oh, sure!” Zeb said. “He’s always complaining he doesn’t have many friends to talk to. I’m sure you two would get along great.”

“I’m sure we would,” Jacques said, grinning. “Don’t give me that look, Dawn.”

“What look?” Dawn retorted. “Who’s looking?” She took a sip of her water. “Certainly not the woman who’s told you again and again that ICEP isn’t meant to be a dating service—”

“Wait, who said anything about dating?” Zeb said in alarm. “Alex is fifteen! Which is really old by my standards but I’ve been told it’s pretty young for humans!”

“Yeah, a bit too young for me,” Jacques agreed with a sigh. “Oh well. Still, we could *just* talk about *Galavant*; I’ve run out of people who’ve seen it, and it’s too awesome not to talk about.”

Zeb paused. “I’ve never seen it before, but maybe I could give it a shot and we could talk about it then?”

“Sure thing,” was the ESAS agent’s reply. “You can talk about it with Dawn, too, if you can’t catch me—she’s seen at least a bit of it. What episode are you up to now?” he added.

“In the middle of whichever one has them singing about ‘comedy gold’,” Dawn said. “It’s a fun ride, I’ll give it that.”

“So, Jacques,” Zeb began, shuffling his paws, “how long have you been with the PPC? You were one of Dawn’s old partners, right?”

“Partners?” Jacques raised his eyebrows at Dawn, who shrugged. “Well, we’ve worked together a few times, sure...mostly last year. I was actually only recruited in 2013, around April or so. Late April, I think. So I’ve been here...wow, over two years. Doesn’t feel like that at *all*.”

“So you weren’t partners for long,” Zeb said, mostly to himself. A little louder, he asked, “How many partners *have* you had?”

Jacques hesitated. “Uh—I’ve had a number of temporary partners at the PPC. Nothing long-term yet, though.”

“Still, that’s a pretty good sample size to choose from, right?” Zeb said hopefully. “Did a lot of them end up in FicPsych?”

Jacques’ eyebrows went up. “FicPsych? Uh, no, not really. Some ended up in *Medical*, but FicPsych...not so much. Well, there was one, but that was mainly because he got possessed by a Sue and needed help regaining his personality. ESAS is kind of dangerous, you know.”

“Er, well, to be honest, I have a bit of a hard time imagining how much worse ESAS could possibly be compared to the DMS,” Zeb admitted.

“Zeb’s had two Legendaries,” Dawn put in. “He’s seen the rougher side of it.”

“Right, Rose Potter and that other one, wasn’t it?” Jacques nodded slowly. “Well, ESAS is pretty small as divisions go, so we don’t get *all* the more dangerous missions—there just aren’t enough of us to deal with them. So DMS agents do get a lot of borderline-ESAS missions, and even ones that probably should be ESAS but needed to go to *someone*. It’s mainly that in ESAS there’s hardly ever a chance to do easier missions—almost all of them are awful.”

“Does it at least come with a pay raise?” Zeb was only half-joking.

“A pair of ESAS agents made a useless map to the Fountain of Bleepka and gave everyone copies; does that count?”

“Er... not really, no.” Zeb scratched his ear with his hind paw. “ESAS sounds like it really sucks.” He looked up at Dawn. “Were you ever—?”

“What, an ESAS agent? In the Fountain of Bleepka? No and no,” Dawn said. “Thankfully. I don’t really drink that much, and ESAS...yeah, I can’t see it being a good fit, *ever*. No, I didn’t try out ESAS. Or Floaters, come to think of it, or Implausible Crossovers, or—actually, there’s quite a few I’ve never tried. Huh.”

Zeb stuck his tongue out at her. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking of transferring again!”

“Nope.” Dawn made a face at him and reached out to ruffle his fur with an effort. “Or not anytime soon, at least. I’m happy enough where I am now.”

“That’s good,” Zeb said, unable to hide the relief in his voice. “I’m glad you’ll be okay.”

Dawn smiled. “I’d like to think I’d be okay even if I switched again, but...well, like I told you earlier, I’ve settled a bit more as I got older. I mean, I’ve been in the DMS for three years now,

with no real intention of going anywhere else yet, and I was actually in DOGA with T'Zar for about the same amount of time—and that's where I transferred to the DMS *from*. I'll yell at badfics, sure, especially if I have someone with me to keep us safe, but I've honestly been a lot more settled since I was sixteen. It's just how it's worked out."

"That's good," Zeb repeated. "And what about you, Jacques? You... well, don't seem too happy with your current department."

Jacques smiled wryly. "You're catching me at the end of a long week. Besides—I'm the man who can't die. Where else would I fit?" He shook his head. "No, I'm pretty sure I'll be staying here for a while. I'm doing some good, and it's a lot more interesting than I've made it sound. I'll be alright."

"I mean, if it helps any, I've blown up twice and my partner's died twice as well," Zeb said, attempting to return the smile. It didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm sure the DMS would be more than happy to give you some non-awful jobs. Just some semi-awful ones."

There was an awful, awkward pause while Dawn bit her lip and Jacques looked from her to the Luxray, his expression frozen. Then he pulled on a smile of his own and spoke.

"Thanks, but I think I'll stay here. Like I said, it's interesting; and hey, if I'm dying here and there that means other people get to do it less, right?"

Zeb tilted his head to the side. "I guess I never really looked at it that way," he said. He met Jacques' eyes; something shone within Zeb's. "You should hold onto that." He covered one of Jacques' hands with his paws.

Dawn shifted, curling in on herself a little. "You could also just both try being really, really careful," she suggested softly. "I've been here nine years, just about, and I've avoided anything too major. You haven't even been here for three years yet. Zeb hasn't even been here for *half* a year. You need to be less reckless."

"Stuff happens, alright?" Zeb said defensively.

Dawn crossed her arms. "Stuff happens to me too. It just doesn't tend to be actual *death* or *blowing up*—"

"We work relatively dangerous jobs," Jacques pointed out. His voice was just the slightest bit gentle. "We don't always have good luck when it comes to getting out unscathed. Even you—I can think of at least a few things you've mentioned when it comes to being affected by missions."

"I've still never been blown up," Dawn said tightly. "Neither have most of the people I know."

“And I’m very glad you haven’t,” Zeb said, the slightest hint of irritation in his voice, “but not all of us are so lucky.” His ears flicked.

Dawn looked away, tense. Seconds later, the gold fire-lizard Gwilithiel appeared out of *between* and landed on her shoulder. Dawn twitched; the gold nudged forcefully at her face, chittering, until the woman uncrossed her arms and reached up to pet her neck.

Zeb sighed. “Change of subject?”

“Good idea,” Jacques said quickly. “Hey, have you ever been to the ice cream shop in New Caledonia? I stopped by there last...month, I think. It was pretty good.”

Zeb’s eyes went huge. “They have ice cream in World One?!”

“Yeah, pretty much everywhere,” Jacques replied. “Dawn, have you been?”

Dawn shrugged, and scritchd gently behind Gwilithiel’s ear holes. “Not for a couple weeks, but yeah, of course. I’ve lived here for *nine years*, Jacques—of course I’ve gone.” She smiled, and Gwilithiel crooned.

“You guys eat ice cream for fun?” Zeb said in bewilderment.

The two humans traded looks. “You eat it for something else?” Jacques asked slowly. “Can’t say I’ve run into that before, except once as part of a ritual.”

“Casteliacones are a very powerful medicine where I come from,” Zeb said. “They can cure any status condition—I kind of wish I’d had some while I was recovering from... from those burns.” He trailed off, looking at the ground.

Dawn blinked. “Ice cream—ice cream is *medicine* for you?”

“Well, we already know it cures all ills,” Jacques put in. “Does it come in different flavors?”

“Um, it tastes like a Casteliacone,” Zeb said, not understanding.

“So...no chocolate, then? Strawberry, caramel, cookie dough—anything?”

Zeb’s mouth fell open. “That’s a *thing*? Why didn’t anyone tell me about this before?”

Dawn spread her hands, a smile tugging at her mouth. “I haven’t felt like going for ice cream when you were around, so I didn’t think to bring it up. And anyway, I would’ve assumed you already knew or...well, I definitely didn’t think it’d be *medicine* in your world.”

"You already knew our berries worked differently," Zeb protested.

"Yeah, well, berries are fruit," Dawn said. "I mean, they can go well with ice cream, or in it, but they grow naturally. Ice cream is made. Also, why and how would I ever come up with the idea that sweet, frozen cream is *medicine*?"

"Well, what's it like in World One?" Zeb said defensively.

"Delicious, that's what," Dawn said. She was grinning by now. "And it comes in a *lot* of flavors. Like, just about anything you can imagine. Des told me about a grapefruit-basil version."

Jacques' eyebrows went up. "Really? That sounds disgusting."

Dawn shrugged. "According to him, it tastes great. I didn't get to try it, though."

"I'll have to try some later, then," Zeb said, perking up. "It sounds delicious."

"It's amazing," Jacques told him. "You'll love it." He hesitated a moment. "Hey, if you want company—I wouldn't mind going back to that place in New Cal."

"Yeah, I'd love that!"

"You just want to see his face when he tries everything," Dawn said.

Jacques crossed his arms. "Oh, like you don't—"

[BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!]

"Oh, come on." Jacques bolted out of the armchair and hit the accept mission button as Gwilithiel chittered. "That's better—oh, great. Arranged marriage nonsense in the Potterverse, *again*. Why me?"

"How bad does it look?" Zeb asked, tilting his head. "I mean, it can't be as bad as that one where Umbridge—"

"*Nope*," Dawn said loudly. "Nope, nope, nope. If you want to talk about that one, do it when I'm out of the room."

"This has a Dumbledore who's...been working with Umbridge and Snape to match up all the Hogwarts students for unexplained reasons while the house elves try to warn them?" Jacques made a face. "I swear, these just get better and better."

“Maybe we should leave you to it,” Zeb suggested, inching towards the door.

“Yeah, good plan.” Jacques turned around with a sigh. “So we’ll find a time to go introduce you to non-medicinal ice cream—ha, that sounds like—well, never mind. I can give you my ICEP address?”

“I don’t see why not,” Zeb said. “Ooh, I’ve never had a message from another agent before! We can be pen pals!”

Jacques grinned. “I had a pen pal once. Or, well, Jack did.” He sighed wistfully. “She taught me how to swear in three languages I’d never heard before, not to mention the time we finally met up...holovids just aren’t the same.”

“You mean you got close,” Dawn said dryly.

“...Meeting up in person tends to make people closer, yeah,” Zeb said slowly. He had the feeling he was missing something, as usual, but he couldn’t put his claw on what.

“Definitely,” Jacques said with a grin. He glanced at the console and grimaced. “You know, I think I might actually need my coat for this? Apparently there’s some sort of weird military scene...”

“And that’s our cue to leave.” Dawn got up, one hand resting on Gwilithiel’s tail, which the gold had draped over her shoulder. “Zeb? Or do you two want to make more concrete plans before Jacques heads into his mission?”

“My RC’s 3-Apple-14 if you ever want to come visit,” Zeb said. “And, uh, don’t mind my partner too much if she answers the door and is grumpy at you. She’s grumpy at everyone.”

“Got it.” Jacques gave Zeb a smile and hugged Dawn around the shoulders as he passed.

“Okay, where’d I put the wand...”

Zeb followed Dawn out of the RC. “He seems nice,” he said after the door had shut behind them.

“Yeah, he’s great,” Dawn said. “Don’t tell him I said that, though, he’s got enough of an ego that I save compliments for special occasions.” She smiled at Zeb.

“Haha, I won’t. Say... Want to come to my response center and hang out for a bit?” Zeb asked, his tail flicking. “Or... uh, maybe go to yours? I don’t think the Aviator wants visitors over right now...”

"Mine it is." Dawn tossed her braid over her shoulder. "Anything you'd like to do?" She paused, wrinkling her nose. "Brain, *why*."

"Why what?" Zeb asked curiously. "What is it?"

Dawn shook her head and reached out to ruffle his mane, smiling. "Don't worry about it. To the RC!"