

Academic Growth: Part II
By Renard De Fleureaux

So, have any of you gone through a dramatic change in your life? Of course you have, everyone has. Have any of you suddenly gained 350 pounds and ungodly strength at the hands of a magical trickster cat with a penchant for Regency Era clothing? No?

Well, that's why you're here, isn't it? This is the story of how I'm surviving college as a Titan of muscle.

The day after my transformation at the hands of a Cheshire cat by the name of Theodosius Renatus Sebastian Augustus, or Theo, was the hardest. Theo had been kind enough to supply with some clothes that were my size, but that was truly a small problem in the fact that now I have to explain to my friends, family, residents, coworkers, and professors that I look like I ate Hercules as an after workout snack. First problem was, I didn't get any sleep. As morning came, I had to tell someone, and I scanned my friends list for anyone that might be available.

The only response I got was my old workout partner, my friend Rehgan. We began trading messages online.

"Hey, Rehg, kind of an emergency. Can we talk?"

"Shoot. But I'm headed out for work in five!"

"I've sort of made some pretty dramatic gains in the gym."

"And? XD I thought you wanted to bulk up."

"This is different. Can we switch over to a video chat, please?"

"No, sorry. :(I'm really busy right now and heading out for work."

"Rehg, please. It's an emergency. I have to show you something."

"Fine, give me a minute."

I took a deep breath as I set up the video chat, sitting gingerly on a chair I didn't quite want to test the limits of just yet.

Rehgan's face soon came up- he was a tiger with a faux-hawk, an eyebrow piercing, and three earrings studded on to his left ear, things I really couldn't pull off, as proven from some unfortunate experimental phases. He'd been working out longer than me, and had seen a lot more progress than me; very well built, he had always been the biggest between the two of us.

The look on his face, though, when my camera was filled up with a portion of my chest alone, showed that he quickly grasped the gravity of the situation.

"Ren... if this is some kind of digital rigging or a joke, really well done, not a good time for it."

"Rehg..." I set myself down further, my chair groaning in protest. "I really wish it was."

“Jesus! Ren, you’re huge! How’d this happen? WHEN did this happen?” To be fair, he was taking it a lot better than I had.

“Look, you really, really wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Dude, that’s bullshit. You can’t just tell me that. How’d this happen?”

I took a deep breath, “A cheshire cat by the name of Theo gave me a magic potion tonight, saying it was a protein shake to use after my workout. I drank it all, and it suddenly caused me to grow more beef than a Cattle Farm. Theo appeared to me and said that it was supposed to do that, and that he’d be in contact soon.”

The sad part is, this isn’t the first time Rehgan’s looked at me like I was completely crazy. After a moment had passed, he rubbed his forehead. “That... is making an insane amount of sense to me.”

“You believe me?”

“I don’t really have a lot of other options.”

“So... what do I do?”

“You’re asking me? Look, Ren, you need to go see a doctor. They’ll find out what’s wrong with you, and maybe get you back to normal.”

I bit my lip as the thought of going back to normal hit me, and flexed my arm, making the muscle swell and push up against my massive shoulders. It wasn’t wholly unpleasant...

“Ren!”

“Huh- wha?”

Rehgan gave me a concerned look, “Go see a doctor. Okay? Look, I’ve got to get to work. Are you going to be okay? Do you need anything else from me right now?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I don’t think it’s deadly, whatever this is. Thanks.”

“’course, man. And keep me posted on this, alright?”

“I will.” I breathed out as I leaned back, only to fall on the floor as the back of the chair was forced to support the full weight of the vast topography of muscle that was now my back, and it immediately snapped as a result.

“Dammit!”

A familiar, blue-green hand materialized as I stared up at the ceiling, connected to a grinning cat that offered me his hand. “Lying on the job, Mr. De Fleureaux?” Theo said.

I took his head, grunting as I pulled myself up. Theo was a bit taller than me, but thanks to him, I was twice as wide. He was very muscular himself, his old-fashioned military jacket tailored to show up the v-shaped proportions of his wide back. He stroked his white-haired goatee as he looked me over, a glimmer in his iridescent eyes.

“You seem to have come across a bit of a Debbie Downer, Mr. De Fleureaux- ‘what’s wrong with you’- as if I had given you the common cold.” Theo said indignantly. Despite his tone, his grin never broke. Ugh.

“Hey, he’s my friend- and he knows a lot about health.”

“He doesn’t appreciate a work of art when he sees it, then.”

“He’s an artist!”

“Well, why not consult your friend Nocturne, Mr. De Fleureaux? I know he’d appreciate a good body when he sees one.” Theo’s grin widened.

“Look, I’ll ask him, just leave me alone for ten minutes.”

“Can’t leave when I’ve already left, Mr. De Fleureaux.” Theo’s now disembodied voice came. I pushed any creeped out notions of mine out of my head trying to get in touch with Nocturne. He and I’ve been close for a long time; we talked almost every day.

His face, I swear, was exactly like Rehgan’s when I dragged him on to video chat. He was a ramsky, all the adorableness and hyperactivity of a husky mixed with the horns of a ram. And a really snarky undercurrent that didn’t belong to either animal.

“So...uh. See the new workout paid off.”

“Noc.” I frowned, crossing my arms. Biceps mashed up against pecs, pecs tensed and flared out, began to spill over crossed forearms.

“Not gonna lie... that’s pretty hot.”

“Noc!”

He held up his hands in defense, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Look, besides showing me, what do you want to do about this? Do you want to... get bigger?”

“No!” I said, perhaps a trifle too quickly.

“Well... then what? Do you want to lose it?”

I bit my lip. “Uhm. Well, yes.”

“Well... you need to trim down, then, right? Lots of cardio, low carbs, that sort of thing?”

“I *hate* cardio.”

“Hun, I know, but if you really want to get rid of all that muscle...”

I huffed, “I know.”

“Can I just say? I think you look really good.” Noc smiled a puppy-eye smile. Bastard could be adorable.

“Thanks.”

“Look, uhm... why don’t you try something? If you got all... this at once, maybe it isn’t all muscle- maybe you’re not as strong, or maybe stronger, than you look. Why not go to the gym and find out?”

“And what would that accomplish?”

Noc pawed his nose, “Well, you could flex a bit, do some exercises, record it...”

“*Noc!*”

“Kidding, kidding. Just trying to lighten the mood. Look, seriously, experiment a bit. If you’re not too much stronger, maybe it’s only temporary, or some kind of side effect that’ll wear off.”

I sighed. “Yeah... guess I... better head out, then.”

“You gonna be okay, hon?”

“Yeah. I’ll talk to you later.”

“To the gym, then?” Theo said behind me, making my fur stand on end.

“Could you not? If I have to get dressed, I don’t want you hanging about.” I said, moving over to the collection of two or three outfits of oversized clothes Theo had provided for me.

“Of course, no gentleman ought to be holding conversation when he’s indecent.” And away he went.

You know that feeling as a teenager, when you always felt you had zero privacy at home because your parents could just barge on in anytime they wanted? Yeah, thought I had gotten away from that. It tends to linger when a magical entity can just literally pop on in anytime he pleases.

The shirts provided were two polos and a button down shirt. While Theo had admittedly nailed my usual fashion sense, none of them were good for the gym- and if I was stuck with them for the time being, I didn’t want to get them dirty. Or tear them, which was more likely. Shirtless it was, then. I forced some spandex shorts on that rode my thighs a bit tightly, but my thighs were the size of tree trunks with roughly the same solidity, so I’ll count my blessings.

I examined myself- well, as much as myself would fit in the mirror- before sighing heavily, making my chest expand and my pecs bounce as I breathed out. That, admittedly, wasn’t something I minded.

I stuck my head out the door- coast was clear. Thankfully, it was a long weekend, and most of the student population had fled campus like the plague had hit. That should make adjustments easier. I quietly crept my way down the Hall, until I hit my first witness. A tall, fairly well built bear, he was shirtless, too. His mouth dropped when he saw me.

“Woah! Dude, you’re huge. Friggin’ swole, man. You on the football team?” He held out his fist for a fist bump. Social tip: Fist bumps are not a substitute for a handshake.

I returned the gesture, anyways, and, well. I hit him.

It was an accident, I swear. If you had your arm suddenly replaced with a battering ram, you might make a mistake, too.

“Oh, shit! I’m really sorry.” I said, quickly offering a hand. “I… don’t really know my own strength, it was an accident. I’m sorry.”

I apologize a lot. Sorry.

“It’s like that, man? C’mon, bro, let’s go!” The bear said, jumping to his feet.

I stared at him for a moment, before crossing my arms again- rolling my manhole-sized shoulders for extra effect, making muscles I hadn’t yet observed ripple. We were about the same height, but I was still roughly three times his size. “Really?”

The bear gulped, before poking me in the chest, “Bro, you’re not even worth it. Fuck this. You don’t even have the balls to fight, huh? Yeah… yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He sauntered off, muttering “That’s what I thought” a few dozen more times.

Moments like that made me sincerely doubt the effectiveness of higher education in this country. My random encounter thus concluded, I made my way down to the gym. My school was set up oddly- it was built on two hills with a valley between them, the dorms on one Hill, and literally everything else on the other side. Whatever committee decided on a design like that is made up of sadists and they should feel awful about themselves.

The thing is, trudging across ungodly steep hills becomes a lot easier when your legs have as much horsepower as your standard hybrid car. Again, a small benefit I was admittedly happy for. Getting a bit adventurous as I bounded down the stairs, I jumped- and I swear, I *flew*. The concrete stairs leading down the hill are roughly thirty feet high, twenty feet long. From halfway down, I made the rest of the stairs in one leap. *That* was pretty damn cool. Now, if that was because I was just that strong or a little side effect from Theo is anyone’s guess- but I did it again heading up the other hill, too.

My luck ended when I hit the gym. It was packed. I pushed open the glass door, and everyone went dead silent, staring straight at me. The vixen behind the counter scanned my Student ID and did a double take when she saw the picture.

“Wait- you’re Renard? We had a Writing class last semester. Renard was a tall guy, but not…”

“I know. Yes. I’m him. Don’t you recognize the hair?” I said, pointing at my perfectly groomed, trademark hair. I was increasingly on edge with every damn eye in the building trained on me.

“Uhm… wow. Uh. You, uh… workout often?”

“No, as it turns out, my father is actually Zeus and I’ve been destined to become the strongest of mortals and the greatest hero of Greece. Can I go to the weight room now?”

I don’t know if she was just in shock or was mildly attracted, I wasn’t in the mood for questions like that. I just wanted to slink off to the weight room where I’d be at least within two hundred pounds or so of the regular clientele.

“You need a shirt on... gym rules.”

I sighed, leaning on the desk, “I know. Look... I don’t have anything that fits. It’s all... at the Laundromat. Can’t you make an exception? I- hey.”

She was staring at my chest!

“Miss? Eyes, up here. There we go. Look, just this once. I’ll have a shirt next time, promise.”

“Oh, uhm, that’s fine...”

Some people, right?

The Weight Room was filled with my absolute favorites- loud jocks, either just sitting around doing nothing but taking up space or preening and flexing in the mirror. Ugh. I approached the nearest weight bench, where two burly looking badgers, linbackers for the football team, were switching off with dumbbell presses.

“Hey, excuse me-”

They jumped when they saw me, dropping the weights. “Oh! Hey bro, we were all done.” Said one.

“Yeah- just finished our last rep, all yours, heh.” Said the other.

“Look, guys, I’m not asking you to stop on my account, I just wondered if those were the forty pounders you were using.” I’d be lying if a tiny part of me wasn’t enjoying this- I knew these two, they were total weight hogs- but I’m not a bully.

“Yeah! Yeah, all yours man.” They pushed the weight into my hand.

Just yesterday, the weight would’ve been profound. I often used forty pounds for my chest workouts. But now, they might as well have put a feather in my hand.

“Ah, no, no thanks guys.” I smiled, giving it back, “I was just a bit curious, heh.”

I heard them breathe a sigh of relief as I moved on, going over to the machines. Another big fellow, an alligator, judging by the reptilian snout, was pushing hard on the fly machine.

“Hey pal, are you-”

“Done? Yeah, yeah, last rep, haha.” His eyes were wide as he saw me.

“...nevermind.”

I don’t think I need to elaborate. When I hit the cable machine and got the same “Totes done, bro! All yours!” for the sixth time, I lost it.

“Okay, everyone, can I have your attention please? Oi!”

All eyes on me again.

"I'm not here to push anyone around, or take over, or fight for pack dominance or whatever. Just... act like I'm not here, okay? I'm just another guy trying to get in a workout, that's all. Now just... go back to your exercises."

They still stared at me.

"*Now!*"

Everyone returned to pumping weights with renewed vigor. I rolled my eyes, looking down the weight rack until I saw the biggest weights we had- a pair of huge dumbbells, a hundred pounds of pure iron each. Surely, they'd be heavy enough for me, right? I gripped each one tightly, and hefted them up with all my weight, and...

...disgusting. Absolutely disgusting. I rolled the weights in my hand, feeling *nothing*. I curled my arm, bicep surging as my Popeye forearm pressed up against it, but there was no strain, no challenge. What was this? What the *fuck* was this? Did someone hollow them out, replace them with balloons, what? I felt like someone had taken the five pound dumbbells and inflated them. I put them back, and stomped out of the weight room, and out the gym. I leaned against the gym wall, arms crossed and doing the manliest pout you've ever seen.

"Frustrated, are we, Mr. De Fleureaux?" Theo purred, running his hand up my engorged tricep.

"Fuck off, Theo." I was in no mood to entertain.

"Tut, tut, Mr. De Fleureaux, let's not speak out in anger. What's the matter?"

"The gym is *useless* to me, now. The biggest weights in the whole damn school, and they might as well be balloon animals to me. And I got everyone gawking at me now, too- I saw three of those guys record me with their phones. This whole thing's going to come popping out of the bloody woodwork." I wasn't even going to give the Cheshire the satisfaction of looking him in the eye- I already knew he was grinning ear to ear anyways.

"Oh, is *that* all? And here I thought there was a problem! Though, interesting you're looking for heavy weight... not looking to bulk up more, are we? Let's not be greedy, Mr. De Fleureaux." The Cheshire's long and bushy tail tickled my chin.

"No! It's not like that!" I was blushing, now. "Look. I just want to maintain, for now. I don't want to slim down if it means all this is going to go flabby." I bounced my pecs for emphasis, the two vast slabs of muscle rolling dramatically.

"Of course, Mr. De Fleureaux."

"I suppose you have some sort of solution, then?" I arched an eyebrow.

"I always do, Mr. De Fleureaux." He snapped his fingers, and instantly, the school was gone. A cheap, musty smell drifted in the air as I looked around, surrounded by mountains of junk- broken, rusted cars and appliances, scrap metal, stacked as high as it could go.

"A scrapyard. This is your brilliant plan, Theo. A scrapyard."

"Ah, not just any scrapyard! Come along," Theo led me into a small valley between two piles of junk, where I saw a weird site; exercise equipment. There was a weight bench, wider

than back at the school gym, reinforced with rusted-over girders. Instead of standard weights, steel girders, car engines, chains, and other makeshift equipment was stacked in neat piles.

“I... did you do this?”

“Mm, no, one of my other clients- but he’s since moved on to Greener Pastures, and I hate things going to waste. It’s all yours, now.” Theo’s tail coiled, and he sat with his leg-crossed.

“Where... where ARE we, even?”

“Somewhere outside of Pittsburgh.”

“*Pittsburgh?* My school’s in Florida! How am I going to get back?!”

“Oh, don’t fret, Mr. De Fleureaux, I shan’t leave you stranded.” Theo pulled a small talisman out of his pocket, a strange, ornate looking thing of gold with an emerald set on it. “This will take you to, from, and sideways your school and here. It can take you other places, too, but... we’ll touch on those later.”

I went to grab it, but Theo pulled back, “Ah, ah, ah, Mr. De Fleureaux. Not so fast. Before we go... I want to see how much you can lift. Lie down on the bench, like a good boy.”

I stamped my foot, “No! I’m not a Carnie putting on a sideshow, Theo. Just let me go home.”

“Oh, I’m not stopping you at all, Mr. De Fleureaux. Feel free to leave- I believe your school is 1,700 miles in a that way direction,” The Cheshire had his hands pointing opposite directions. “Stick to the state roads; it won’t get you there as fast as possible, but you shan’t get lost. Oh, and don’t hitchhike- you can’t trust anyone on the roads these days.” The cat smiled innocently.

“...Fine.” I set myself down on the bench.

“Excellent!” Theo snapped his fingers, and a goddamn *car* now sat on the place holders, the chassis less than a foot from my head.

“Woah, woah! Theo, get this thing down!”

“Why should I do it, Mr. De Fleureaux, when you are perfectly capable of doing it yourself?”

“I’m not *that* strong!”

“You’re so certain of something you were introduced to just yesterday... ah, typical college student.” Theo teased.

I grumbled to myself, gripping some of the piping that ran under the car. I took a deep breath. Then two. Then another.

I was nervous.

“Mr. De Fleureaux, please tell me you haven’t forgotten the simple mantra of ‘lift things up and put them down.’”

“Alright, *fine!*” I let out a roar- yes, a roar, I’m half lion, it’s in my genes- and threw all I had into the push up, my arms locked, muscles tensed, my pecs surging as they soon eclipsed my head, tilting my head at an angle as my arms began to shake. My shoulders locked, the thick mounds pressing up against my face as they tensed with the rest of my body. But it was up! A car, a several ton hunk of metal, was up, because of *me*. *That* was feeling pumped. My muscles strained, quavering as I held the car aloft. With all my might, and to show Theo *exactly* what I thought of his little game, I threw the car, the vehicle hurtling to the ground with an almighty crash!

“Ha! Yeah! *Yeah!* Theo, did you see that? You like that, huh?” I shouted out in triumph.

I felt a hand squeeze at my shoulder, claws tickling the mound of muscle. “Mm... I did.” Theo purred, “And how do we feel, Mr. De Fleureaux?”

“Uh... pumped!” It was exciting, and I really wasn’t paying attention to the Cheshire.

He patted my cheek, “I thought as much.” He chuckled, tossing me the talisman. “There you are, Mr. De Fleureaux, I tit for tat.”

I looked at the Talisman. The emerald shimmered in its socket, and just like that, the scrapyard melted away- I was back in my room. No Theo, just me, in shorts and shoes slightly dusty from the scrapyard, and the talisman. So, still feeling a little giddy, I did what any sensible, rational person would do after a day like that- I had a flex-off with my mirror.

I smirked at my reflection, hunching down for one of those most muscular poses, pecs, shoulders, and arms jockeying for room as muscles surged. I couldn’t see them all in the narrow mirror, *but I knew they were there*. My pecs forced my arms out a bit further, my engorged biceps grinding against them, as my bullneck tensed, pressed on both sides by my traps and shoulders.

Arnold Schwarzenegger? Amateur.

Lou Ferrigno? Shrimp.

Jay Cutler? Beanpole.

I want to stress that being this big isn’t all Mr. Olympia titles and actually decent-tasting Protein shakes; but this particular moment? This was pretty awesome.

I just bench-pressed a *motherfucking CAR*.