

Academic Growth: Part V
Renard De Fleureaux III

So I'm an underwear model now, apparently. Once my barndoor backside was plastered in advertisements, I really should've anticipated Nocturne giving me beef over it.

"Do he got the booty?" he asked, smirking mischievously over one of our videochats

"Noc. Don't."

"He doooooo!"

"I can just shut my laptop."

"Okay, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Nocturne grinned. The ramsky was one of my closest friends, and took it upon himself to encourage me to go even bigger. He had not yet succeeded. "But you're wearing them, still."

I looked over my shoulder- or, at least, well as could past the bulging mound of muscle, and across my wide back to see one of many TT Clothing Company's products as my boxers, the loud "Thunder Thighs" logo slapped across my butt.

"They're comfortable." I defended. "I also have, like, five sets of clothing that actually fit me. You'd do the same."

"Mm, I dunno, you'd look good in a jockstrap."

"Goodbye, Nocturne."

"Okay, okay, hon, don't go. I'm sorry, I won't tease you ever again, promise." He lied.

I rolled my eyes, "Yeah, and I'm going to become King of Narnia. I was actually serious though, I do have to go- gotta go work out."

"Alright! Have a good workout."

I threw on my workout shorts, stretching my arms over my head- though now, I had to tilt my head back to avoid my own flexed muscles hitting me in the cheek. collecting a small, green object from my desk. The infuriatingly enigmatic Theo had left me a little talisman that actually transported me to a scrapyard all the way in Pittsburgh, which so far, was the only place I could find weights heavy enough to get a decent pump from a workout anymore.

Turning the small trinket in my hand, I was instantly back in the scrapyard. Makeshift weight benches and exercise machines, laden with oversized weights, were strewn about the area. I soon got to work, doing what I apparently do best, now.

“Getting the exercise bug again, Mr. De Fleureaux?” Theo purred, the technicolor cat’s body a couple of seconds behind his voice. He was draped over the weight I was currently lifting on the bench press, which was, in fact, an old steel girder. I grunted as the extra two hundred pounds of cat were added, his thick and long tail swishing slowly back and forth over my abs, but I didn’t give him a response, finishing the set despite the protest of my arms and chest.

As I got up, Theo appeared at my side. “I think you might be getting bigger, Mr. De Fleureaux... on purpose, perhaps?”

“No.” I said flatly, not in the mood. Theo was at the same time the bane of my existence, and my biggest supporter since my little change- a change HE was responsible for. At the present moment, his charm was wearing thin. “Since I now have to be a model, I can’t afford to go flabby- and since they want me because I’m huge, I can’t lose mass, either.”

“I’m sure dancing to the tune of \$50,000 helps, does it not?” Theo purred, rubbing his hands over my mountainous shoulders.

I REALLY don’t like people touching me. I rolled his hands off by shrugging, and struck my elbow against the cat’s gut, the floating feline propelled back a ways.

“Now that wasn’t very nice, Mr. De Fleureaux.” He scolded, grinning wide as ever.

“YOU’RE not nice!”

“Not nice? Would a not-nice Cheshire go out of his way to represent you and double your pay for your little modeling job?” Theo’s grin took on an innocent quality.

“Look, you’re a good agent- but I’m still stuck because of *you*.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d use the word ‘stuck’...” Theo grinned wide, “Think of it as... an enhancement!”

“Enhancement? Like how my clothing bill has been ‘enhanced’? Or how attention from dumbshits on campus has ‘enhanced’?” I shot back.

“Well, no situation is perfect, Mr. De Fleureaux.” Theo’s grin faltered slightly, but came back full force.

“Theo! WHY did you even want to pick on me in the first place?”

The cat put on a show of mocked disbelief. “I’m startled, Mr. De Fleureaux!” he gasped. “Pick on you! I have ever been your friend and benefactor.”

I threw up my arms, “I give up. It’s like talking to a brick wall.”

“Well, a brick wall you could punch through, now.”

“Theo!”

He was gone. Frustrated, I dug the talisman out of my pocket, turning it once to go back to my room.

When I was back in my room, I fell into my desk chair- only for the back to fall off, and me to hit the floor hard, only protected by my own over developed muscle.

“God DAMN it!” I shouted. It was the third chair I’d gone through since my little growth spurt. I reached over my wide chest, rubbing my shoulder as I stood back up.

This was getting a bit out of hand. Sure, I could bench press cars, I saved people’s lives, but a thousand niggling irritations I didn’t have to put up with before were beginning to overpower every other sensation of this venture into hyper mesomorphism.

Hunching over my desk, I checked my e-mail. TT had kept in regular touch with me since I started modelling their underwear, and a new message had come in from the company account they had set up for me.

“Dear Mr. De Fleureaux,

Your time with TT Clothing Company has been invaluable, and to show our gratitude, Mr. Taylor has invited you to meet with the Chairman of TT Clothing Company’s Board of Directors, a Mr. Za-”

Theo’s hand materialized over my keyboard, closing the window.

“Hey!” I went to smash the hand, missed, and maybe severally damaged my keyboard. And my desk.

“What the Hell, Theo? I was reading an e-mail from TT.” I scowled at the cat as the rest of him came into view, Theo screwing his hand back on as if it were held together with screws.

“I know, Mr. De Fleureaux, and I already took care of it. We respectfully declined.” He grinned.

“I’m sorry, ‘we’?”

“Yes. And we quit.”

I nearly had a heart attack as I saw \$50,000 slip through my fingers. “WHAT?”

“We can do better, Mr. De Fleureaux.” Theo grinned reassuredly.

“NO WE CAN’T! You already turned down every offer when you signed me up with these people!” I was fuming, and took a swipe at Theo, only for my hand to pass through air.

“Mr. De Fleureaux, I’m only watching out for your well being... recent information has made me realize TT Clothing isn’t... reputable enough for someone of your temperament and caliber.” Theo seemed unphased that I just tried to hit him.

“Watching out for my well-being? Like Hell you are!” I said, quickly grabbing one of my shirts, squeezing into it. “I’m going down there right now, and beg for forgiveness over your bullshit!”

As I shoved Theo to the side, I opened up the door, I was met by a literal brick wall.

“THEO!” I roared, “Get this down. NOW!”

“I must insist, Mr. De Fleureaux.” Theo’s grin was growing nervous. “We’ll go to someone else- with better offers!”

“No! I’m going down there, right now. And unless you tell me why you’re doing this RIGHT NOW, get out of my way!” I crossed my arms, biceps pressing up against my chest as it threatened the integrity of my polo’s neckline.

“I... but shouldn’t my word be enough, Mr. De Fleureaux? Say what you will, but I have never *lied* to you.”

“Only everything but.” I began pressing against the brick wall.

“Mr. De Fleureaux... what... what are you doing?”

I grunted, slamming my boulder shoulders against the brickwork, the mortar starting to crack as four hundred pounds or so of muscle beat against it. “You said it yourself, Theo... I can punch through Brick walls.” With a final shove, it came toppling down.

“Mr. De Fleureaux... Mr. De Fleureaux! I must protest!” Theo called after me as I stepped over the rubble.

“Protest all you want, Theo. I’m going down there, right now.” I said, digging out my phone. My closest friend on campus, Tim, was always reliable for a ride.

“Mr. De Fleureaux- wait- Mr... RENARD!” Theo shouted.

I stopped. It was a bit shocking- Theo *never* called me by my first name.

I turned to face the cat, who was, of course, right behind me and grinning wide. “Alright. One shot, Theo. What’s the big deal?”

Theo's opalescent eye twitched as he hesitated. "Well... Mr. Taylor has called you in to meet a certain Head of the Board of the Directors... and this person, I don't particularly care for. He's a scoundrel and a cad, Mr. De Fleureaux, and I'd very rather you didn't meet with him."

"So... wait. This guy is someone you don't like?" I asked.

"Very much so. He has a way of... interfering with my activities."

"You don't say..." I stroked my chin. "Well, when you put it that way..." I smirked, and wrapped my arm around Theo, pulling him close and pressing him up against my chest. "Sounds like my kind of guy." I patted Theo's cheek. "Don't wait up for me."

"Wait- no! Mr. De Fleureaux! MR. DE FLEUREAUX!" The Cheshire shouted, as I shoved him back.

"Catch you later, Theo. I'm going to go make some new friends."

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"So... let me get this straight." Tim scratched his cheek as we headed downtown. "The guy that made you like... this is akin to a trickster God, and you're going to meet a person HE doesn't trust?"

"Well... when you put it like that..." I shrugged, trying to get comfortable. Tim's car was a sleek sportscar, which was very nice, but not built for the exceedingly large.

"I'm just saying... sounds like a dude that can do all kinds of nasty shit, man. Just be careful." Tim said, the rat pulling up to TT Clothing's office.

"Thanks." I said a bit drily as I exited Tim's car. I took a deep breath before heading inside.

The receptionist was familiar with me at this point, so I was quickly let inside. When I got to the usual studio where the photo shoots happened, it looked completely deserted. Some of the lights weren't on, leaving corners of the studio drenched in inky black shadows

"Uhm... hello?"

"Ah!" Came a voice, smooth, rich, and deep, "Renard, is it? I'll be with you in just a minute, my good man... why don't you change into your usual gear for these photo shoots? I want to see what my investment's working with."

I sighed, and took off my polo and pants, the Thunder Thighs Boxers still on. I padded towards the set, noticing someone sitting in the director's chair. His face was obscured by the shadows, but he was big- dressed in a Tuxedo, of all things.

"Are you the, uh. Chairman I was supposed to meet?"

“Why yes, I am. A pleasure, Renard.” Came that same rich voice. Then I saw it. The Chairman’s tail came into view, long, thick, and the fur light purple with purple stripes. Then I saw his eyes- one green, one scarred. And then a wide, shining grin.

Oh, Christ above, no. Not another one.

The Chairman stepped fully into the view; a purple Cheshire cat. He was actually as wide as me, his Tuxedo tailored to cater to a huge, V-shaped frame, and he appeared taller than Theo.

“I’m Zataan- I’ve been looking forward to meeting you for a long time, Renard.” He held out his hand, and I slowly took it- my mistake. As soon as we were shaking, Zataan draped his arm across my shoulder and pulled me close, squeezing slightly.

No. No, no. This was not happening. I couldn’t do this.

“Look, uh, Zataan, I think there’s been a mistake...”

“Oh, I can say there most certainly has. You’re still dealing with Theo.” He grinned down at me.

“I... what? What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Renard...” Zataan’s grip on me tightened, as the huge cat began walking me around the set. “There are two types of Cheshires; ones who actually take Alice through Wonderland, and ones who just want her to go mad as a Hatter. Can you guess which one Theo is?”

“I can take a good guess, yeah.” I muttered.

“Thought you could- you know, you’re a smart man, Renard. I can see that.”

“Uhm... thank you?”

Zataan chuckled, “I can fix that for you. You see... Theo’s a small time Cheshire, really. I’m a few steps ahead of him.” He paused, and flexed with his free arm. Zataan grunted until purple furred muscle split the sides of his Tuxedo’s sleeve, the bulging mound pressing up against his clenched fist- it was growing larger still, until he let his arm drop. “As you can see.”

I whistled low, “Yeah... yeah, I can see that.” I took a glance over- the tear in his sleeve was already gone.

“So, Renard, I want to make a little deal. We Cheshires like our deals, as I’m sure you’ve gathered. I can make Theo... answer to *you*.”

I frowned, “I don’t understand. Isn’t that what he does already?”

“No, not really... he can mess with you still, can't he? Pop in and out whenever he wants to? Annoy you? Rob you of your privacy? I can make it so that whatever you tell him, he *has* to do.” Zataan's grin grew impossibly wide.

“While that sounds nice... what do you need from me? This is a deal, right?”

“Ah, right on the nose- I like that, Renard.” He winked. He turned me around to a table, where a thick stack of paper sat. “I'm just going to need all of five minutes of your time.”

“Oh? Reading this?” I asked, flipping through the paper. It was in complete gibberish.

“Hm? Oh, no.” Zataan snapped his fingers, and the papers disappeared. “That was just a note for my lunch- I'm a very picky eater.” He sat me down at the table, “We're going to arm wrestle on it. Bit of a new spin on shaking hands, I thought.”

“So... wait. What about these five minutes?”

“I'm just going to need five minutes of your time. Not necessarily right now, but whenever I can get to it. Heck, you might even be asleep for it.” Zataan grinned, setting his arm on the table. “So, ready to wrestle on it?”

“You're serious about this, aren't you?” I asked, putting my hand forward and grasping his.

“Nope! But then, I'm not serious about anything.” He grinned and winked again, before throwing his prodigious strength into the arm wrestle.

I grunted, as he had me by surprise, but I returned with everything I could throw at him. My arm muscles bulged and tensed, bicep jostling my forearm and shoulder, all of them threatening my shirt sleeve.

“Theo did a good job on you, if you don't mind my saying, Renard.”

“Thanks.” I grunted, wanting to win. Unfortunately, we seemed pretty evenly matched.

“I could do better, you know.”

I looked up at him, and he used my surprise to slam my arm down.

“Ha! Good game. Now, that's all settled- you can go now. Don't worry, Renard. I guarantee you won't regret this. And remember; Theo will do *anything* you tell him.”

Zataan snapped his fingers, and he was gone. So was the studio- I was back in my dorm room, sitting on a repaired office chair. Zataan's compliments?

“Oh! Mr. De Fleureaux, there you are.” Theo’s grin was anxious. “I was... rather worried. Zataan can be frightfully unscrupulous.”

I had to test it out. “Get me a drink, Theo.”

“I... what?” Theo paused, twitching where he stood.

“Get. Me. A. Drink. Water, please.”

Theo’s grin strained, “Rrrrrright a-away, Mr. De Fleureaux,” He said, fighting every word. He looked at me, his eyes wide as he found himself floating towards my fridge. He pulled out a bottled water, handing it back to me.

I smirked, drinking all the water and smacking my lips. “Thanks.”

“Mr. De Fleureaux... please, what did you talk with Zataan about?” Theo asked, his grin wide as ever, but his tone panicking.

I stood up, and patted his cheek, “You know what, Theo? Don’t even worry about it. I’ll call if I need you.”

“Mr. De Fleureaux-”

I flopped down on my bed, stretching out my wide frame, “You’re dismissed, Theo.”

“I beg your pardon?” He asked flatly.

“I said, go.” I grinned, and winked at him. “I’ll call you when I need you, big guy.”

Theo was already beginning to fade away. “Of course, *sir*. ”

I chuckled as the rest of him disappeared. This, I could get used to. Whatever Zataan needed me for for five minutes, I was certain it was worth it.

I know better NOW, but hindsight is always 20/20.