

Academic Growth VI
Renard De Fleureaux III

So, I apologize in advance for opening with a pun, but I had a rude awakening. Literally. The night after making my deal with Zataan, I had another growth spurt. Yeah, I was *thrilled*. It actually happened when I was asleep- and to say it was an odd sensation would be an understatement. When I first suddenly developed three hundred and fifty pounds of muscle, it was an intensely painful experience. This growth, thankfully, was a bit easier on me, but no less disconcerting.

As it began when I was still asleep, I was first aware of it in my dreams- all I remember is this smothering, paralyzing sensation, a bit like if you wear too many layers of clothing to the point where you can't move around properly.

Then my bed broke. Apparently even re-enforced bed frames can only take so much.

I groaned loudly as I rolled off of the wreckage, still half asleep as I stood up, blindingly reaching for a light. I already felt heavier, my legs now so thick my thighs practically rolled off of each other. But it didn't really register when I stumbled over to the switch and turned on the light.

I'm not too proud to admit that I screamed.

I was *just* getting used to my unreasonable bulk as it was, and now, now, there was at least two hundreds extra pounds; my neck was almost completely gone, devoured by a huge, Appalachian shaped range of shoulders and traps that surged and swelled with size every time I turned my head. My torso was now so wide, so vast, my arms could no longer lay at their side, now propped up at a slight angle by a back that blossomed out like wings. My chest had developed to such a size, I could barely see past it, even when bending down- it was a solid, continental shelf of muscle, which could probably be used to describe pretty much all of me at this point. The only saving grace was that my boxers, by some miracle, managed to cling around my redwood trunk thighs and keep me decent.

"THEO!" I bellowed. I was out for blood, now.

The damned Cheshire cat suddenly appeared, "You rang, Mr. De Fle-" is all he got out. His green and blue color scheme was barely able to catch up with him before I tackled him, throwing myself at him like a wrecking ball and slamming both of us down with a resounding smack.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" I roared.

"...Do, Mr. De Fleureaux?" Theo asked calmly, grinning up at me.

"LOOK AT ME!"

“Mr. De Fleureaux, it would be loathe of me to reprimand a Residential Advisor, but it IS quiet hours, do remain calm.” Theo threw me that damnable grin as he evaporated out from under me, reappearing in front of me, hanging from the ceiling.

I grabbed him by the throat, yanking him off the ceiling with a mighty tug. “No more games, you size-hungry, voyeuristic pervert! Look at what you did!”

“My good man!” Theo choked, “I didn’t *do* anything!”

“Bullshit! Change me back, NOW. I’m done with this!”

“I *can*’t!” Theo disappeared out of my grasp again. “And I shan’t continue this conversation if you’re going to continue manhandling me.” Theo’s disembodied voice rang throughout my room.

“Theo, get back here. *Now*.” I ordered. Zataan had been good on his word- instantly, the blue and green cat reappeared, compelled to do as I say.

“Your servant, sir.” He said through a strained smile.

“You’ve got ten seconds, Theo. Start talking.” I crossed my arms, my chest, pressured as my bulging, melon sized biceps pressed down on it, spilled over my forearms and brushed against my chin.

“Mr. De Fleureaux, this isn’t *my* doing. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s yours.” Theo grinned his usual smile at me.

“That makes no sense. How could I even add *this* much muscle,” I flexed my arm, my hand now able to fully grasp my swollen bicep, “In one night?”

“Zataan.”

My eyes went wide, my arms dropping. No. I couldn’t be that stupid.

“I did try to warn you, Mr. De Fleureaux.” Theo’s grin grew wider.

Yep. I was.

“He needed five minutes of my time...” I muttered.

“And he used those five minutes to enhance you.” Theo purred, his claws scratching at one of my huge shoulders.

I shuttered, squirming out of his grasp. “Why?” I asked, making a face.

“Presumably because Zataan and I have similar tastes, Mr. De Fleureaux.”

“This can’t...no, I can’t do this. Look at my bed!” I turned at the broken mess of metal, mattress, and sheets.

Theo chuckled, “Please, that’s the easy part.” The Cheshire snapped his fingers, the bed quickly repairing itself, even my sheets re-fitting themselves.

“Theo, you’ve got to help me. I can’t live like this!” I was panicking, trying to maneuver around the huge bulges of muscle that was my arm to reach my head.

“Help you how, Mr. De Fleureaux?” Theo asked politely, grinning wide.

“ANYTHING!” I cried out.

“Have you considered consulting Zataan?” Theo asked.

“How likely do you think it is he’ll screw me over even more?”

Theo shrugged his wide shoulders, “As much a chance that the mome raths will be out gaped.”

I blinked. “That... I have no response to that. Look, it’s the best plan we’ve got, how do I get a hold of him?”

“Just call, naturally.” Theo said.

I gave him a dubious look, but cleared my throat, “...Zataan?”

A burst of confetti preceded him. In a flash, the much larger Cheshire cat appeared, dusting off some of the errant strands of confetti on his meticulously pressed tuxedo, tailored to accommodate his large, muscular build.

“Renard!” He stepped forward, shaking my hand vigorously. “You look well. Been working out?” He winked, elbowing me in the chest. Happy to say I didn’t even budge.

“Theo.” He nodded to his blue-green counterpart.

“Mr. Renatus, if you please.” Theo said shortly. He was still grinning, but his eyes were staring daggers at Zataan.

“Mm, I don’t, but thanks for asking.” Zataan grinned back. He turned back to me, “What can I do for you, Renard?”

I crossed my arms again, rolling my titanic shoulders in an effort to look bigger. I was already wider than both of the cats, but they BOTH were taller than me. Ugh. “Theo says you’re behind my sudden... enhancement.”

“Mhmmm?” Zataan suddenly materialized by my side, squeezing at my bicep. “Seems to be coming in nicely, too.”

“Look- I’m too big now, change me back. This isn’t what I agreed to.” I said, trying to shake off Zataan. The fact that they were both getting handsy was not okay.

“Oh, but you did! You said I could have five minutes of your time, and I used two of ‘em to give you... a little present for being so cooperative.” Zataan had already wrapped his arms- at least, as far as they could reach around my proverbial mountain range of shoulders. I tried shrugging him off, causing bulging muscles to press up against my cheeks.

“Wait... *two*?” I cricked my neck- or assortment of neck-shaped muscles- to look at him.

“Hah, you’re quick, Renard, I like that. Yes, I did this in two minutes. I told you I could do a better job than Theo.” Zataan patted my cheek with his free hand. Theo’s grin never faltered, but his flashing eyes told me he was fuming just beneath the surface. Zataan’s grip tightened, and he leaned in, whispering huskily into my ear, “Imagine what I could do with the other three.”

“No. No! No, thanks, but no thanks.” I shivered, wriggling free of the purple cat’s grip. “Look, I’m sure you think that’s doing me a favor, but if you make me any bigger, I won’t be able to move properly. I’m... not entirely sure I can *now*.” I said, trying to move my arms around- I still got decent reach and flexibility, but, well, try strapping on watermelons to your arms, legs, and chest, and you’ll be a little clumsy at first, too. “I’d much rather you, uhm. Let me return the present.”

Zataan blinked, his grin unerring. “I’m sorry Renard, can you say that again? I don’t think I heard you properly the first time.”

“Mr. De Fleureaux, might I suggest-” Theo didn’t get much farther, as Zataan snapped his fingers, and Theo’s mouth was literally fastened with a zipper that just suddenly *appeared* on his lips. I shuddered, more than a little disturbed at that.

“Now, now, Theo, don’t interrupt- what were you saying, Renard?” Zataan said, flashing me a predator’s grin.

I cleared my throat, getting nervous. “I’d like you to take back the extra... *this*.” I said, bouncing my pecs for emphasis, the two heaving slabs of muscle rising and falling dramatically.

“I *thought* that’s what you said...” Zataan sighed, “Frankly, Renard, I don’t know what to do! I mean, if you don’t like my present, obviously, I haven’t gone big *enough*. That’s easily remedied.” Zataan laid his hand on my bicep, and it started rapidly growing. I gasped, trying to jump back, but Zataan’s grip was *tight*. My arm’s muscles kept growing, larger, thicker, rounder, until I could barely bend it. I stumbled, the weight concentrated in my swollen arm throwing me off balance. “That big enough for you?” Zataan asked in a friendly tone, still grinning.

“No! NO! Please, the old size was fine, I promise!” I shouted out. I let out a sigh of relief as Zataan’s grip loosened, and instantly, my arm shrunk back to its previous, slightly less massive proportions.

Zataan chuckled, “Ah, see, I knew you’d like it!”

“Look... can we just... can we do something else with the three minutes you have left?”

“Mm, well, you gave me that time- it’s mine, now. No offence, Renard, but you can’t really tell a man what to do with his time, now can you?” Zataan grinned, patting my shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Renard. I’ll get to it- eventually.” As he winked, his body quickly disappeared.

“Ah, good riddance.” Theo said, free to talk again.

I was dumbstruck, however. I stared at the spot Zataan had been standing at just a moment ago before I sunk down, landing with an audible whump as I hit the floor. “So... that’s it then.” I rested my head on my arms, “I’m screwed.”

“Not necessarily. Mr. De Fleureaux, if I may be blunt?” Theo asked, coiling his long, thick tail until he was able to sit on it, crossing his leg.

“Go ahead.”

“I was doing this for a lark- so is Zataan. And I’d very much like to ruin his fun. I have the inklings of a plan that will make Zataan’s little game with you collapse on his head, and keep you mobile. Though you would, admittedly, look splendid with just a bit more in your chest and shoulders...” Theo’s hand was creeping closer, before I swatted it away.

“You had a point?” I asked bluntly.

“I can make this all go away- but you have to trust me, Mr. De Fleureaux.” Theo held out his hand.

“Do I look like I was dropped on my head? No. No, no, absolutely not- I trust you about as much as St. Peter would trust Judas trying to spot a twenty from him.” I huffed, turning my vastly wide back to Theo.

The cat chuckled, “Mr. De Fleureaux, what other choice do you have?”

I chewed on that. Damn it, he was right.

I turned back to face him, his hand out stretched. Hesitating for a moment, I took it, squeezing hard as I could. “I’m watching you.”

“I would think you a bit thick if you didn’t.” Theo said with aplomb. “Now, down to business- the scrapyard, with all that lovely workout equipment I set up for you. Remember how I said that you ‘inherited’ it from another client?”

“I’m going to take a stab in the dark and say that’s not entirely true.” I asked, cocking an eyebrow at Theo.

“How’d you guess?” Theo asked innocently.

“Call it intuition. What’s really going on, then?”

“The client’s still using it- actually, runs a shop there.”

I looked at Theo, “So, wait a minute, I’ve been trespassing all this time? Why would you have me do that?”

“Honestly, I was waiting to see if he’d ever catch you... the resulting confrontation would’ve been a positive gas.” Theo grinned.

“You’re kidding. You wanted us to fight?”

“It would’ve amused me.” Theo shrugged, “Two huge, muscular men slamming against each other, grappling each other, tearing off clothing...” The Cheshire sighed, “But I digress. You’re going to need help if you’re going to have any success against Zataan.”

“Look, can you just tell me what, exactly, you’re planning?” I asked.

Theo chuckled, “Why, Mr. De Fleureaux, you just need to leave the thinking to me. I’ll just need you and your new friend to do the hitting, when we get to that point.”

“Hitting?” I asked.

Theo patted my cheek, “Don’t worry about it for now, Mr. De Fleureaux, just play nice.” He said, and instantly, we were in the scrapyard Theo had made me familiar with. He had also gotten me into a pair of shorts and shoes that, by some miracle, fit. Give the devil his due, Theo was a snappy tailor- I recognized them as my usual work out shorts.

“You know, you and Zataan act almost *exactly* the same. I’m kind of surprised you two don’t get along.” I said, following Theo past the mounds of scrap metal and rusting machinery.

“A wonder, isn’t it?” Theo said over his shoulder. He led me to a clearing close to where I had been working out- I was a bit surprised I had never seen it before. Old cars, spare parts, and scrap metal were all sorted in comparatively neat piles around the area, a small, well maintained garage sitting in the center.

“Here we are, then.” Theo announced. “Just give me a moment, Mr. De Fleureaux- your new friend isn’t overly fond of unannounced visitors or strangers.”

“Great.” I muttered.

“Mr. Deighsen! I say, Mr. Deighsen! Are you about?”

“Shop’s closed. If you need me to fix something, come back tomorrow.” A big, booming voice called out from behind the garage.

“Mr. Deighsen, I’m afraid I have to insist...”

There was an audible huff, “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

I turned to see the metal rattle with each booming step. I, by virtue of legs so heavy with muscle they were like steel girders, stood firm, but whatever this guy was, he was *big*.

Oh, wow.

No, scratch that. He was huge.

I was looking up, straight up, at a tiger that positively dwarfed me. Not necessarily in terms of muscle density, I don’t think anyone could get much denser without collapsing in on themselves like a dying star, but he stood a good two feet taller than me- my head just brushed up under his chest, which was, live every part of him, extremely muscular. He only wore a pair

of oil-stained, faded jeans, the rest of his massive torso on display for all to see. He had shoulder length, bright red hair that he brushed out of his face to look at us properly.

“Theo. If I knew it was you, I’d’ve grabbed my gun.” He growled.

“Glad to see you make friends so easily.” I muttered to Theo.

“It’s a talent.” The cat grinned.

“Who’s the Double Wide, here? New toy, Theo?” the tiger gestured at me.

“He’s a lot of fun. Want to play with him?” Theo asked, draping his arms around my shoulders.

“Hey. Hey!” I said batting him off, “Could you keep your hands off me for like, ten minutes?” I stepped up to the tiger, holding out my hand. “I’m Renard.”

“Jaroq.” He supplied, gripping my hand hard. With a growl, he held my hand tight, grappling with my other arm and throwing all his weight against me.

“Woah, woah! What’re you doing?” I exclaimed, taking a few steps back as the giant tiger’s full weight was thrown against me. He was pushing *hard*, snarling as he forced me back a few steps. His whole body was tensed, over developed arms and chest surging, swelling in size as his thick, stone-like legs kept their slow, unrelenting march forward.

“It’s how he makes friends, Mr. De Fleureaux!” Theo shouted.

“I-I’m not okay with this!” I protested, as Jaroq started pinning me up against a pile of stacked car parts. Seeing that the tiger wouldn’t let up, I pushed *back*. I threw all my weight against *him*, now, and smirked a little with satisfaction as I felt the pressure give. My own arms, wider if shorter than his, were bulging as far as they could go, swollen chest and raised, surging shoulders pressing up against my face as I pushed Jaroq back to where we had started. The tiger roared, and I returned the roar, looking intently into the tiger’s challenging eyes. We found ourselves at a standstill, the immovable object and the unstoppable force.

“...Truce?” I grunted, sweat standing on my face and trickling down to the continental shelf of my chest.

“Nah. Where’s the fun in that?” Jaroq growled, side-stepping to throw his weight at a new angle. I countered his steps.

“Well, we came here to talk.” I said through gritted teeth.

“Then talk, big man.”

“Y-you’re not concerned about him?” I rolled my eyes over at Theo. The Cheshire cat was watching both of us intently, his iridescent eyes shimmering as his grin went wider than I’d ever seen them.

“Why? He’s not going to interrupt us.” Jaroq said, letting a smirk sneak its way into his snarl.

“Fine. Look, we’re- woah-” I almost slipped as me and the giant Jaroq began circling each other. “We’re here because I need help- this other Cheshire-”

“Wait,” Jaroq, out of surprise, let up, giving me an opening as I pushed him back a step. He growled, puffing up his wide chest and pushing us back to the status quo. “There’s more like *him*?” The tiger threw a look at the Cheshire, now floating on his back, watching us with his head turned upside down.

“Yeah. I had the same reaction.” I grunted, my arms starting to shake, but I wasn’t giving in. “Theo has a plan, but we need *your* help.”

Jaroq growled again, leaning in close. I raised my chin to meet him, but our pecs, bulged out as far as they’d go, met first and forever blocked us from ever going nose to nose. “Well, I’ll tell ya, Renard...”

“Yeah?” I said, not even daring to blink.

“Why the Hell not?” Jaroq let go, laughing as he stood back up to his full height. “ANYone who can go toe to toe with me like that has gotta be fun.”

“Uhm, thanks?” I was a bit confused- grateful, but confused.

“So, what do you need me to do, Theo?” Jaroq called over to the Cheshire, crossing his arms.

“I’ll tell you both in good time... I just need to thank both you gentlemen for the show.” He grinned, floating towards us.

“Come on, Theo. What’s the plan?” I demanded.

“Mm, but where’s the fun in that? If I told you, the surprise would be ruined. I’m just glad you two are getting together so well...”

“Theo, I swear to God-” I growled, winding up my fist.

“Save it.” Jaroq said, putting his hand down on my clenched fist, holding it in place. “He’s teasing you. Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

I sighed, “Fine. Can you at least tell us what we do now?” I looked around. No Theo.

“Goddamn it!” I shouted, kicking an errant tin can.

“I’m *really* surprised you’re not used to this by now, man.” Jaroq said, folding his arms.

“But- but this is Pittsburgh! My school- my HOME- is a thousand miles away!” I was panicking- I had forgotten to grab the charm Theo had given me to go between the scrapyard and my school when he brought me there.

Jaroq scoffed, “Pittsburgh? Did Theo tell you that? Naw, we’re down South.”

“What.”

Jaroq jerked his thumb up to one of the piles. “See for yourself.”

I gave the tiger a long look, but turned towards the metal pile. It was short and easy to get a footing, and somehow, I was able to pull all six hundred pounds of me up. From the vantage point, I saw the familiar skyline of downtown- I could even see, far off in the distance, the sign for my school.

“That son of a bitch.” I muttered, clambering down the pile. “One of these days, I swear, pow.” I said, punching the air.

Jaroq snorted a laugh, “Me first.”