

“Marked”



A single dim, yellow-stained light bulb illuminated the darkened room; a cold, damp concrete space no more than six foot squared. Wooden splinters from the chair Warren was bound to would jab into the backs of his legs whenever he moved. Warren tried to twist his head and neck, even though he knew the effort was fruitless; two adjustable straps secured to the wall were connected to the sides of the stained leather and wire muzzle-restraint by a pair of metal clips, making it near impossible to move his head side to side, only up and down. Time had drawn out to a maddening crawl. He had wanted to shout, yell, scream, anything to fill the overbearing silence, but the tight leather restraints around his muzzle kept him from making more than a whimper.

Something else did make a sound though, the steadily increasing noise of two pair of heavy boots, coming down the hall, and stopping outside the metal door to the room. The jiggle of iron keys, the metallic clank of the lock being disengaged, followed by the squeaking protest of the

metal door sliding open. Warren made the mistake of looking up to see who had opened the door, only to be blinded by the large flashlight shone directly into his eyes, making him cringe and avert his eyes. The large pair in the doorway only visible as dark shadows behind the intense beam of light.

“Think the whelp has learned his lesson yet?”

“I don't know, lets find out.”

Rough hands released the leather cuffs that kept his arms and legs secured to the chair, while another pair released the metal clips that kept his head secured to the wall.

“Get up,” one of the men said while pulling Warren to his feet, the hybrid's arms held tightly behind him. Looking up, Warren saw a coyote in front of him, his chiseled face scowling. “Lets have a review, just to be sure,” the coyote said as he swung a fist at Warren's face...

The quick jolt and sound of skidding tires was enough to jar Warren awake.

He looked uneasily around him, his mind still processing his current surroundings as he heard the pleasant voice of a flight attendant. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Tallahassee. Please remain in your seats with your seat belts fastened while the Captain taxis the airplane to the gate, and thank you for flying US AirFur.”

Warren looked out the small airplane window before glancing towards the older female Cheetah beside him. “Did I talk at all in my sleep?”

She shook her head. “You whimpered a couple times, but besides that, you didn't make any other noise.”

Warren nodded. “Thanks,” he told her as he pulled out his cellphone to check the weather, and also to send a quick text to his agent, Roland Dimitriou, to let him know he had arrived in Florida. Warren was thankful Roland had been able to secure a seat on a flight from Huntsville to Tallahassee on short notice following the Combine. He was also quietly glad that the Hydra had also got him a window seat in first class. Generally folks had the courtesy to mostly leave him alone and not ask rude and prying questions, but children sometimes just didn't know better.

The airplane soon pulled up to the gate and the passengers were allowed to depart, Warren grabbed his messenger bag, and exited quickly, heading off to baggage claim to grab the duffle bag he had brought with him.

Warren went over his mental checklist, as short as it was, he only had one more item to take care of, and that was picking up his rental car, and then he could be on his way to the Typhoons' stadium. Pulling the confirmation page from his messenger bag, Warren headed to the rental car agency desk, where a single employee, a female impala, stood watching a

computer screen. She seemed oblivious to Warren's approach and didn't notice him as he stood on the other side of the counter.

"Excuse me?" Warren asked the distracted employee. The female mule deer was startled as she looked up at Warren, looking at him blankly, then wide-eyed at his face. "Oh. Oh Yes, I'm sorry, ah, how can I assist you?" she asked, flustered.

Scowling, Warren handed the herbivore the rental confirmation page; the doe seemed just as eager as Warren was to be on his way. Thankfully it didn't take long for him to get the keys to the Camry, and just as quickly, Warren was driving away.

One thing Warren was thankful for was the GPS in the Camry, which helped considerably to navigate the unfamiliar roads to the Typhoons' practice stadium. He pulled into the stadium's lot and checked the clock as he found a space to park. Twenty minutes early to his meeting with Tallahassee Typhoons head coach, Hildegard Tetreault.

Hildegard waited outside the stadium like she did with most of the players that took her up on her offer. When Warren stepped out of the car, she was there to greet him, in her gruff way. She was an imposing figure, even if she was on the short side for a veteran player. "Joo are Herr Doyle, ja?"

Warren nodded as he approached the Typhoon's head coach, offering a paw as he got close enough. "Yes I am, pleasure to meet you Mrs. Tetreault," he replied, setting his sports duffle down for the moment.

Hildegard's crassness preceded her, though she took his handshake in turn. Seems like she lightened up with each new candidate. "Early. Ready to go." She looked him up and down like a prized dog. "Joo came all zhe vay to Florida to show me joor skills."

Warren released Hildegard's paw as he nodded again. "I've learned it usually pays to be early," he said as he watched her look him over. He had heard and read a bit of other draftee's encounters with Hildegard and had taken the time to look up some of her history. To say he wasn't wary of what she might have planned would have been a lie. "Certainly, and thought it would be a good opportunity to see what you or other head coaches are looking for. Definitely don't want to just wait and do nothing until draft night. I plan on going to Hawaii's and Alaska's co-hosted draft camp next."

Hildegard chuckled at the mention of the other team's names. "Zhey did vell. I vas as surprised at Hawaii as anyone else." She pointed to the door of the practice complex. "Some of my team is inside. Change and be on zhe court in fifteen minutes, ja?"

Warren reached down to grab his sports duffle, and sling it over a shoulder as he nodded to Hildegard. "Will do," he said simply as he checked the time on a small watch on a carabiner,

hooked to a belt loop on his shorts. "Be there in fifteen," he told her, before walking over to open the complex door, and then hold it open for Hildegard before heading inside.

She paid the gesture no mind. She picked out the difference between chivalry and politeness, but neither played a major role in her perceptions of others. She pointed down the hallway, which Warren was to assume meant that the locker room was in that direction.

Apart from him, she burst onto the floor, where a handful of her players were. "Danke for being here today. I don't want you pull any punches on zhis vun."

Warren had walked briskly down the hall to where the locker room was and headed inside. It didn't take long for him to find an empty spot to stash his stuff and get changed. He had made it out on the floor in thirteen minutes. The players were waiting for him, members of the Tallahassee Typhoons, and their feared coach.

Her arms were crossed. "Ready to begin?"

Warren nodded to Hildegard, looking over the other Typhoon players. "Yes I am. What we starting with?" he asked. While waiting for his flight, Warren had done some research on the Typhoons and learned that there were four players on the team roster that had one year left on their contract before they either got renewed or sent to the free agency. Warren had silently hoped for a one-on-one session with Hildegard, because knew that he'd be regarded as a possible threat to them, an outsider that could interrupt a player's career with the Typhoons. Regardless, Warren knew all he could do now was perform as well as possible.

"Drills." She pointed, and the team went at it. They began to warm-up, and Warren was expected to follow. Hildegard catered each experience to the individual, and for Warren, from the brief history she could dig up, she saw that he did not play well with others, especially under certain conditions. She turned to Warren. "Get out zhere! Joo're not useful injured!" She clapped her hand on his shoulder and shoved him onto the court. She was certainly not one to mince words. Today was going to be a rough day for him.

The shove was unexpected, but Warren managed to keep from stumbling as he jogged onto the court to follow the team drills. He had already been warned by Roland that Hildegard would try to press his buttons; and he also heard that eagle at the combine decry some of the rough treatment he got from the Typhoon's head coach.

"Biggest thing to remember is to not let them get under your skin, Hildegard especially. You can expect her to take a few digs at you, try and find a weak point before giving you a few jabs, just to see how you'll react." Warren recalled Roland telling him. "This isn't necessarily because she is cruel, but a coach needs to know how well their players will perform under stress and pressure. So whatever she might have planned for you, just endure it. Don't ruin your chances

'cause someone's pissed you off." The Hydra said before Warren had to board the plane from Huntsville to Tallahassee.

'Easier said than done,' Warren thought to himself. They were starting off with some layup drills. Player goes to make a layup, another player catches the rebound, then passes the ball to the next person in line. Easy stuff. But Warren knew that nothing about today was meant to be easy.

And then the drills kept going, and going, and going. For Warren, he was used to a quick warm up and then into skill building, but Hildegard was pushing his buttons as first in this way. Since starting her call for personal interviews with draftees, she'd gotten much better at doing her research. Among the other faults she saw in Warren, she believed that he had a bit of an inferiority complex, a need to prove himself and establish his worth as a ball player. She'd already made a stir from letting the details of her interviews get out, so she hoped Warren would have heard about this.

Thus the pointless drills. Even her own teammates wondered why she took this extended time to warm them up. Like Warren, they were ready for action long before this point. Yet, she persisted. An hour of drills, and her cross-armed, scowl-wearing figured didn't seem to let up. Hildegard gave no signals for the team to stop, so they went on.

And as the Typhoon players kept on with their drills, so did Warren. He did wonder why the drills kept going on repeatedly. After an hour, it had started to wear down on him a bit. He was certain that the continuing drills had something to do with him, but he wasn't about to ask Hildegard why they kept doing drills; Warren just hoped that the Typhoon players wouldn't hold that against him.

After more than hours worth of drills, Warren just had to ask something, at least to interrupt the monotony and maybe catch a break. He waited until the next set of drills had finished before jogging over towards Hildegard. "So Mrs. Tetreault, what's next on the agenda?" he asked, standing relaxed before her, hoping they'd move beyond just doing drills.

Hildegard scowled at his mere presence. "Zhis is not enough for joo?"

The smile on Warren's face faded, looking back at Hildegard impassively. "I don't think you had me come out here just to do drills all day. I've also heard about the other draft candidates you've hosted. You tested them."

This made her smirk. She was testing him, now more than ever. "Joo ssink joo are as gut as zhem?"

Warren's hands tightened around the ball as he took a slow breath, almost unnoticeable, and stared back at Hildegard. "Yes, I am. That's why I'm here. I wouldn't have traveled to Tallahassee if I thought I couldn't play at their level."

His response made Hildegard laugh. She leaned down and put a sharply painted, sharp claw to his chest. "I get zhe players I vant. As you've seen, I don't publicize zhe interviews. Zhey are for me, for me alone." She looked at her players, nodded, and only a few of the stars remained, three to be exact. "Ein on drei. Is zhat more to joor expectations?"

The claw to his chest earned Hildegard a scowl from Warren, and the Typhoon's Head Coach knew she had found a weak point she could exploit; and chip away at the Draftee's facade to see what really laid beneath Mr. Doyle's guarded and resilient exterior.

Warren nodded at her. "Sure, Lets get started" He said determinedly, and bounced the ball on the court floor, ready to go.

The three that walked forward were Russell Savoy, the balanced rookie, Mary Wooten, the cheery moderate, and Klaus Korber, the legendary veteran. Warren felt a pang of worry, seeing the Doberman stroll onto the floor. His confidence remained. He wasn't even sure if he expected himself to win, but those thoughts were unnecessary. He had to focus if he planned to impress.

Hildegard picked up a ball and tossed it to Korber. He coolly spun the ball on his finger, a requisite skill at their level, staring emotionlessly at the draft prospect. Warren couldn't read his expression. The two would do wonders playing poker.

The coach was far less unreadable, with a big grin, full of sharp teeth, plastered across her muzzle. "First to twenty. Take zhis velp out."

Whelp.

Just hearing that caused the bristles on the back of Warren's neck to stand up on edge as he looked back at Hildegard, a stony expression on his face with brooding anger in his eyes. "Someone already tried that once; they failed," he told her, looking back toward Korber and the other players. "Just like you will," he half-muttered under his breath, the anger in his eyes changing to cold, steely resolve.

The game felt like streetball, no refs or fans, no one cheering or jeering, nothing but the players and their resolve to win. Decidedly in the favor of Hildegard's players. Korber tossed him the ball without a word. As soon as Warren had the ball, the expressions of the Tallahassee players darkened to a practiced intensity. Even Mary Wooten, probably one of the most cheery players you could find, bucked up in the face of a challenge. Three players stood before Warren, all of

them having made basketball, more than their career, their lives, and here he was, putting himself to the same test, rising to the standards of veteran players, and questioning whether or not basketball meant as much to him as it did to them.

Warren caught the ball, quickly doing an assessment of those he was playing against and understood why Hildegard had picked them; the Typhoon's coach knew Warren had a cutter/slasher playing style with a talent for being an anklebreaker; and with Korber, Wooten and Savoy about his same height, it would be harder for him to trip them up. Korber was out front with the other two closer to the basket.

'Lets get started,' Warren thought to himself as he started dribbling the ball towards the basket, making a quick feint to the left and right, Warren moved left quickly towards the basket , evading Korber while Savoy and Wooten waited to cut Warren off. Seeing an opening, and with Korber on his heels, Warren faked a right before driving between Wooten and Savoy to make a layup and score the first basket.

With a slight grin, Warren bounced the ball to Korber, but the Draftee wouldn't be smiling for long. His elation fading from his surprise first basket, the three of them quickly returned the favor with three of their own, one each, quickly putting the draft prospect in his place. With such talent stacked against him, he hardened his demeanor and took his playing a little more seriously. He became conscious of every move he made, every breath, every dribble that put him closer to the basket. The trio and him traded points for a few shots, though they still retained their lead over him, unsurprisingly.

The closest Warren got was within 4 points of the three veteran Typhoon players after managing to steal the ball away from Wooten, then score after making a breakaway run to the basket. One thing Warren was successful with was reading the other players' movements then adapting his strategy to counter their defense to make those critical shots and layups when he could. It was much harder for him for him from keeping the trio of veteran players from scoring points of their own. Warren managed to block a couple shots, and his were blocked in turn. All-in-all, it was primarily Warren's ball-handling and shooting skills, quick-thinking, and agility that prevented the Typhoons from having a decidedly one-sided victory.

But a victory was certainly heavy in the Veteran's favor, with Warren outmanned and outgunned. With the game within one basket for the Typhoon's to win, Korber decided to end things with a three point basket. Final score, 21 to 12.

Warren panted; the three veterans make him work hard to earn each and every point, and despite the loss, he was proud of how he did against three players whose team had made the finals the previous season. Playing also had the added benefit of erasing any lingering anger he had from earlier.

“Good game,” Warren told the Trio before offering a handshake to Wooten, Savoy and Korber, which they returned, giving small congratulations to his playing. “And thanks for letting me play against you,” he told them before looking back towards where Hildegard waited.

Hildegard stood looking smug about her team’s performance, despite Warren’s effort, all in line with how the hyena-rabbit seemed to operate. She chatted with a janitor, an old tabby cat, leaning stereotypically against his broom. The two seemed to enjoy their conversation, but from across the court, Warren couldn’t hear what the two were saying. He took his leave and headed in her direction. Wondering what or if his next task would be, his ears slowly made out the gist of what they were saying.

“...potential, but I’m not so sure about--” Hildegard began.

Interrupting, the janitor interjected, “I know, I know, probably the muzzle thing, right? I mean, those scars gotta’ve come from summin’. Shame seein’ a dog bein’ put down like that.”

Warren slowed slightly in his approach, but didn’t stop as he walked towards Hildegard and the janitor. He didn’t like the little bit he heard from the janitor, but he wasn’t going to let that show. “Nobody got put down that I’m aware of.” Warren said, glancing momentarily towards the janitor, then back to Hildegard “Think I held my own well enough against three of your players.”

The janitor stepped in front of Hildegard and pointed at Warren. “Hey, kid, wassup with your face?” He laughed at his own observation. “Looks like you got messed up. What was it? Some girl get a little too rowdy? Couldn’t handle your bitch, could ya?”

Warren’s lips pulled back from a frown to a barely-restrained snarl. He wasn’t sure if the janitor was being rude at Hildegard’s direction, or if he was just naturally that much of a jerk; Either way, he was clearly hitting Warren’s buttons. “Hey guy, don’t you have some trash to take out or some floors to clean?” he replied curtly. There were some things he just wasn’t going to discuss, and certainly not with some crude janitor.

Warren and this janitor were clearly products of their environments. Warren, despite his upbringing, was somewhat calm, collected, all of the things that Hildegard did not assume of the canine. This janitor, however, was not so practiced in the art of control. He dropped his mop and took a few steps onto the court. “Sammatta, pup? Someone got you on a leash, boy? You know I was just jokin’ with ya, so don’t be such a bitch, huh?” The cat was clearly getting riled from what he assumed was an innocent comment. “We gotta put a muzzle on you, boy?”

The prospective draftee’s eyes narrowed, his lips curled back in a twisted snarl, as he fought back the surging wave of anger, hands clenched. “Did you ever finish high school? because most people that have know it’s not smart to poke a hornet’s nest with a stick” Warren replied, the snarl on his face turning into a slight grin as he turned and walked towards a nearby Alligator-aid cooler, using a paper cup to grab a drink; facing away from the janitor and Hildegard for the moment.

Hildegard kept her arms crossed and decided to let this play out. Depending on his reaction, she'd be willing to share that information. The cat crossed the court and removed his hat. Though he intended on apologizing, the first thing that he did was reach out with his free hand and cup Warren's shoulder, providing a little tug, perhaps more than he intended. Whether he knew it or not, as the Janitor soon discovered, this was a poor choice to make in this situation.

It was a scenario that had happened to Warren on more than one occasion. A tug on the shoulder, get spun around, then pain as a fist impacted his body. It was the only result he had experience with in that situation, and it was something he was not willing to let happen again. When the cat tugged on Warren's shoulder, he fully expected a blow to follow. The draftee spun around with the tug, using the momentum to give the cat a hard shove backwards with his free paw, creating more space between the two; Warren dropped the half-empty paper cup to the floor as he pulled into a defensive posture, clenched fists near his chest, nose wrinkled and teeth bared.

"Back off. Way off," Warren growled, watching the feline janitor.

The cat howled loudly as he was spun away. Gripping his hurt, but not injured, arm, he looked aghast as to what just happened. "The hell's the matter with you, boy?!" He hobbled backward and toward his cart. He pushed it hurriedly out of the door and out of sight.

Hildegard shook her head. She walked slowly onto the court, her displeasure displayed on her face, stopped in front of Warren, and recrossed her arms. Suddenly, she seemed much larger than Warren, not as physically imposing, given her height, but so much larger in spirit. Warren didn't expect any fanfare for defending himself. Her expression, however, that was expected in its severity.

Warren lowered his arms, hands unclenched, hanging listlessly by his sides and lightly shaking as he watched the Janitor leave, not noticing Hildegard's approach until she was a few feet from himself. The snarl on Warren's face quickly vanished as the hybrid looked disconcerted, glancing from Hildegard to the door which the janitor had exited. He also became aware of the intense silence in the practice arena.

"...I thought he was going to throw a punch." Warren said, more to himself than to Hildegard as he looked back at the Typhoon's head coach.

She shifted her arms from her chest to her waist, a hand readily available to dismiss her players from the court. Once they were gone, in spite of the consequences, she gripped him by the collar and pulled him closer to the chairs. Once there, she let him go and threw her own punch at a chair, denting its back. "How much could an old Katzchen do to joo?!" This was the famous anger that made Hildegard a known name in the league, and it was directed at Warren, as if he were one of her own players.

Warren had been taken off-guard as he grabbed by the collar of his jersey, and flinched as the Typhoon's head coach dented the chair. The momentary confusion was gone as he straightened himself out, looking back at Hildegard with quiet defiance. "I've been suckerpunched and attacked from behind more times than I care to count. So I don't know, I was just reacting to that situation" He responded, watching Hildegard quietly.

Unmoved, she reiterated the question she'd asked every recruit, "Vhy are joo here? Vhy zhe FBA?"

Warren blinked at the question, expecting another angry tirade, not a general question like that; But still, he was wary. "To play basketball with the best; and to prove not just to myself, but to others that despite rough upbringings, people can persevere over their problems and shouldn't be labeled as damaged goods; not worth helping and something that can be easily discarded." He told the Typhoon's head coach, looking at her directly. "And that hybrids are not second rate"

Rather than give a response to his last comment, she just leaned down and let him get a good look at her own form of hybridity, the colorings of a hyena, the out-of-place ears of a rabbit. A growl rose in her throat. "And how are joo goink to do any of zhose ssinks if joo are stuck on zhe bench!" She balled up her fist and put it right to his nose. "Zhat gets joo suspended! Vhat good are joo to me if joo are suspended?!" This hyena-rabbit was in a seemingly permanent bad mood, but her words made sense to Warren. "Joo can't show everyone zhat joo can play if joo don't play. Joo can't play if joo can't stay off of zhe bench because of joor temper. Zhe only vone zhat needs a temper is me!"

"You're right," Warren told Hildegard, looking back at her calmly, even with her fist close to his nose. "And I know you've looked through my playing record, so you already know that I don't get benched, and that I've never been suspended. Yes, I get fouls just like other players but I keep that and my temper in check. I'm not some mad dog you need to worry about biting people."

Hildegard pointed to the door that the janitor ran out of minutes before. "Really? Because I am goink to haff a complaint on my desk and someone breazhing down my neck in a couple of hours, all because joo can keep joor 'temper' in check." She removed her fist and straightened up. "Of course I know joor record, but up until zhis point, joo vere a nobody." She paused, as if contemplating her own words. "No vun looks at a nobody. If joo get into zhe FBA, zhen everyvun vill be lookink at joo. All of zhose stories joo don't vant to tell, somevun vill find zhem." She pointed at his muzzle, though far less threateningly than before. "Somevun vill ask about zhose scars."

Warren wanted to say something to defend himself regarding the janitor, but knew Hildegard would hear none of it; and that she was partly correct. However, he couldn't shake the sneaking suspicion that maybe the coach had put the janitor up to it, to test Warren like she had tested other draftees that dared to step onto Hildegard's court, but without any evidence, the suggestion would just anger the hybrid coach even further. So he stood silently, listening to Hildegard, watching her hand as she pointed at his face. She was also correct about those

scars, people would ask, the media & journalists would pry, players would want to know, and the likes of the FMZ would try digging in the gutters and trash for what they could about him, and the scars. Both the visible ones and the mental.

“....so what do you want to know about them?” Warren asked guardedly, it wasn’t a subject he was very open to speak of, but with the trouble with her player Otis Najac, Warren felt that she was someone that kept such information confidential.

Smirking, she lowered her hand. “I don’t want to know a goddamn ssink about joo zhat joo aren’t villink to share.” She put a hand on his shoulder, a firm pat but one with much more compassion than she often put into those gestures. “Vhat joo need to do is figure out how much joo want to share. Vhatever stays hidden, joo need to learn how to deal vihs it.” She started to lead him toward the locker rooms as they continued talking. “If joo don’t want to share, joo need to know how to act if and vhen zhat does come out. Me? Mein life is mein own. If zhe media gets vord of my past, I’ll deal vit it zhen.”

Warren passively followed alongside Hildegard quietly, considering what she said. The head coach was right, he would have to talk about it eventually, and not just to a select few. He had stopped walking before they reached the locker rooms, and instead steered over to a group of chairs; sitting down and gesturing for Hildegard to join him. Once the Typhoon’s coach sat beside him, Warren breathed in deeply, nervously rubbing his paws together before setting them to rest on his knees.

“My father, never planned on or wanted a hybrid kid. He made that clear early on and would constantly remind me of this fact.. He had hooked up with my mother, they stayed together a while, but when she had me, and their relationship soured from then onward. He was under the impression that hybrid kids aren’t common or easy to end up with, and blamed her for that. He resented having a ‘halfie’ for a kid, and also resented the love and attention my mother gave me.” Warren began, speaking quietly but clearly. “She died before she could finalize her divorce and get full custody of me. So I lived with him from then on. Even while I was young he’d still be antagonistic towards me, and him remarrying a coyote-lady didn’t improve things either. I was little more than a scapegoat, and a live-in housekeeper who should be grateful to have a bed to sleep in.”

Warren chuckled humorlessly at that, looking towards the basketball court. “Playing Basketball used to be just an escape from that, especially after the abuse went from verbal to physical. But kept going to practice and playing with the team; because it just wasn’t an escape, I found that I was pretty good at it.” The draftee was silent for a few moments, looking troubled but soon continued on.

“Things got much worse after I found the courage to actually fight back. He couldn’t stand that a ‘Halfie’ could stand up to him, let alone his own ‘Whelp.’” Warren told Hildegard, lowering his gaze to look at the floor by his feet. “For the next two years, I lived in a nightmare. On a daily

basis. I was in constant fear for my life. Anything I did, from talking when not spoken to, to just protecting myself were grounds to punish me in a number of ways. One of those was strapping me to a chair, and putting that muzzle restraint on me.”

The draftee’s hand was trembling as he spoke. Even years later it was incredibly difficult to speak of what happened. Other than his agent, and a few select others, Warren had only spoken to Aditya Anggun about some of what happened back then when they shared a room during the Combine. He finally seemed to notice his trembling hand, and clenched it tight to stop it. “But it was more than just a muzzle. It went around my throat in two places.” He traced a finger over the scars under his jaw, and around the base of his neck. “and was secured to the chair, to restrict me from barely moving my head.”

“Then came a day I was forced into that chair, had the muzzle put on, and was there for two days.” Warren said dryly, swallowing. “After a while I was panicking, trying to get out because I’d never been put in that thing for that long and had no food, no water.... the fur had already started to be rubbed down from being forced to wear the muzzle so often, but it was so tight that struggling was causing the leather to cut into my face and flesh. The worst part was not knowing if anyone was coming for me, when I might get let out, or if I was just left there to die.” He said to Hildegard, setting his elbow on his knee as Warren momentarily rested his forehead in the palm of his hand.

“I did get out eventually, but not before the damage was done. Someone did get me to a hospital, but by then, the cuts had gotten infected. Doctors had to surgically remove more tissue to keep the infection from spreading further or getting worse before antibiotics and other meds kicked in.” Warren said, slowly sitting back up straight. “There was a media storm about it, but because I was a juvenile, my name was kept out of the papers. But that didn’t stop some tabloid and freelance photographers from getting into my hospital room.” He shook his head, remembering the fear and confusion of awakening with strangers with cameras in his supposedly guarded hospital room.

Hildegard, in her youth, had run into a number of cases like his, albeit for different reasons, but Warren’s was certainly worse than many she’d come across. She felt sympathy for him, but she stayed on target. “And it seems joo haff made some peace vit zhat. But joo still haff a long vay to go.” She held her hand out to the floor. “Many nights, joo vill haff to stare at many, many faces. Some of zhem vill vant to know joor secret. Ozhers vill not. But joo,” as she pointed to his chest, “need to know vhat joo vant zhem to know. And no. More. Outbursts.” She faux glared, before cracking a smile. “Like I said, zhat is joor coach’s job.”

Warren’s eyes followed Hildegard’s hand as she pointed to him and nodded in agreement “...A long way for sure.” He said, there was plenty more Warren hadn’t mentioned or was going to, that was stuff for his therapist to deal with. But Hildegard was correct that there would be many people that would want to know everything they could about his history, secrets or skeletons in his closet they could discover. He’d just have to plan on how to deal with those issues as they came.

He slowly stood up and offered Hildegard a hand "Thanks for having me out here and for the advice. Hope I didn't cause too much trouble for you today. I'm sure I'll probably see you again if you're there for Draft night, have a good evening Miss Tetreault. " Warren told Hildegard, who gave a small smile as she shook his hand. With a final nod, the prospective draftee headed for the locker room. Hildegard let him depart and get changed on his own accord, but just before Warren entered the locker room, the draftee pulled off his practice jersey, momentarily revealing the scarring across his back before he disappeared from view.

Hildegard waited a few moments longer, to be sure Warren didn't need anything else. She never let any of her prospects know her opinions of them. She guaranteed nothing, except giving them a chance. She headed for her team's locker room and met those that were left. Mary Wooten stepped up to greet her.

"Should we have pushed him a bit harder, coach?"

She chuckled. "Nein. Vee can't let zhem get too big of an ego." She passed through and headed for her office. She had more interviews to entertain before the draft. So much to prepare. Draft night would be interesting, to be sure.

