

I should probably explain why I don't have anything prepared for a second week in a row, but I'm not going to. It probably doesn't cause any weeping a gnashing of teeth anyway. I'll be caught up with things again by next week, then there'll be plenty of tears and grinding sounds. I'll also try to get back to posting Thursday night, Friday feels late and I want to get to my weekend instead of trying to think up snarky comments to you lot.

Wednesday was Jeremy's appointment with the doctor to remove some of the stitches from his arm. With his last module free and having told everyone to expect his absence for the tutoring hour he made his way to the clinic. He was forced to wait for almost an hour before being shown to a room. He was left to wait for several more minutes until the doctor came in.

She sat across from him and looked at the bandage on his arm. "You seem popular."

Jeremy shrugged as she took his arm and started unwinding the bandage. He doubted he needed to explain the tradition to her. The beaver lightly probed the wounds asking how much pain Jeremy felt. When he answered he only felt a dull ache any more she shook her head and muttered under her breath "Dominants."

"Sorry?"

She looked at him a second before picking up a small pair of scissors. "Oh, its just that I don't see too many dominants. I'm always underestimating how fast you tend to heal."

Jeremy hadn't heard anything about healing faster from either Zane or Alex. The thought left him as he watched her prepare to remove the first stitch from his arm. A little nervous that she hadn't done anything to deaden the pain he tensed expecting it to be painful as she slid the thin blade of the scissors under the thread. He clenched his teeth and she clipped it open. Taking the knotted end in a pair of tweezers she pulled the thread out. Jeremy shivered at the feeling of it being pulled out but there had been little pain.

The beaver glanced at him. "I think I can safely take all the stitches out today. You'll still need to take it easy for the rest of the week." she commented as she continued clipping and pulling the stitches.

Once Jeremy relaxed the feeling of the stitches being pulled almost felt pleasant. The threads being removed felt odd at first but once gone it was as though an unfelt pressure had been released. In minutes she was done with his arm. As she removed the stitches across the rest of his body Jeremy examined his arm. A few of the tiny holes the stitches had left behind bled slightly, but only enough to fill the hole. The doctor wrapped his arm in only two layers of bandage to cover his wound until the blood had dried. She told him to remove the bandage when he got home and leave it exposed. His fur would grow out to cover the scars in a few weeks time.

Back home Ian was again the first to see his arm free of the covering. His brother saw his bare arm and asked for a closer look. Jeremy's arm fur had only grown back to a faint fuzz around the fresh scar. Ian looked at the scar for a few seconds and said "Damn, not bad for the first of many."

The rest of the family had similar reactions although Eric seemed more focused with the definition of his exposed muscle. Jeremy's free time the next day at the academy was spent enduring the same interest in the shaved area of his arm. That evening he was back at the gym for the first time since the

fight. He expected to be a little out of condition and wasn't surprised at the level of difficulty he experienced. He did make it through the evening with only a little discomfort.

It felt odd working with his brother on the same shift. Eric had been working for a week while he had been out and was still in training himself. To Jeremy it was looking like his brother's focus was going to be on gaining muscle rather than the overall fitness he preferred. The sessions Eric participated in were geared in that direction and the majority of his free time was spent in the free weight area. At the end of the night Jeremy opened PATOMES and secretly added just a few units of muscle to his brother.

The next night they were again sharing a shift at the gym and Jeremy had thought about his actions the night before. Instead of waiting until the end of the night he added a few units to Eric at the beginning of the shift. He'd long ago figured out that the muscle added at the end of a training session was a missed opportunity. Adding mass before training gave him the chance to condition and strengthen the new muscle along with the rest.

Even though Jeremy couldn't ever tell his brother how he was helping he hoped he would be happy with the changes. The weekend had a full schedule for Jeremy but Eric was only in for half days. Again he added a single unit to his brother. He'd decided to also encourage his brother with a few random comments about how much effort he was putting into his work. By the end of Eric's shift Sunday night he was actually sharing a few smiles with his brother.

Everyone had Celebration Day off and the family enjoyed a rare day together. Jeremy brought out his gifts that morning only to find that not only his parents but Sam and Ian had also bought gifts. With both Eric and Jeremy in their final year, which was already paid for and all four brothers working the family finances were the best they'd been in years. Their parents had bought simple gifts much as Jeremy had but Sam surprised everyone.

He'd bought new phones for everyone and had even activated them. He explained his workplace had employee benefits that included discounts of cell phone plans. After everyone opened their gifts they spent another hour playing and setting up their new phones. The family was collectively one of the last in the neighborhood to have phones. They spent the rest of a rare day enjoying everyone's company. After the constant tension and stress of working through school it was a pleasant break from the routine.

The next day Jeremy was back to work. Through the rest of the week he watched his brother work the free weights even harder. He was surprised at how he was taking to the workouts. Eric had pretty much fallen in with the crowd that were largely focused on getting as large as they could. Jeremy figured that if it was what he wanted it wasn't for him to try and discourage him. He continued to add a unit at the beginning of each of his brother's sessions.

The next Monday it felt like a full return to normal. Candy Crowley was seen rolling through the halls of the academy by herself. Jeremy had asked Zane Rook about her and only got a response that she'd been handled. He stopped by the meeting room but it was empty once again. Zane had warned that it might happen once word got around that Jeremy already had a mentor. Jeremy thought word of his fight probably didn't help. The tutoring hour was back to normal after the undue interest in his bare arm from the previous week. Work at the gym had even found a routine.

The Saturday morning back at Alex's club was the first break in the routine.

Alex Elkins met Jeremy at his club that morning. From there the red panda drove him to Hollowbrook Sanitarium. As Elkins rang the bell at the front door Jeremy half suspected but asked anyway "Why are we here?"

"This is where they brought Samuel Addleson."

"Brought him here." Jeremy repeated, feeling dread that his trainer was going to insist he face the jaguar again.

"Yes, it's important you know the real consequences of your actions, however justified."

Jeremy nodded but couldn't look Elkins in the eye. The door was opened by a weasel dressed in white with a name badge that simply declared him as Stanford. He stepped aside after a second and let the red panda enter. Jeremy followed and heard the smaller weasel shut the door and lock the deadbolt from inside with a key.

The lobby was small and only one hallway allowed entry into the facility. Jeremy followed Alex thirty feet down the hallway before saying "He didn't even ask your name. How did he know who we were?"

"I spent a few years here after that incident you mentioned."

Jeremy stopped, his eyes looking at the red panda with concern. "You were here? Why?"

The red panda stopped and turned. After seeing Jeremy's upset he answered with a wry expression. "I was self committed, not because of the guilt of killing those predators but the tragedy that followed."

Jeremy had no knowledge of anything happening after Elkins had killed the pack of predators that had threatened him. Alex turned and resumed walking down the hall without explaining. Jeremy followed, still a bit cautious. He'd rather not spend a few years of his life cooped up eating soup through a straw because they didn't trust him with spoons like the feral Addleson had become.

They eventually came to a door with a small window covered by a sliding metal plate. Elkins reached up and slowly slid the plate to the side and motioned for Jeremy to look. He glanced at the red panda before stepping up and looking through the view window.

The jaguar was curled up in a corner. He appeared to be sleeping but his breathing was rapid as if he'd just run the hundred yard dash in ten seconds. Jeremy could see he had a thick leather collar around his neck with a chain that ran to a ring in the floor. The light at the middle of the ceiling was on. Leaning back and looking Jeremy could see no switch on the wall outside the cell. He could only assume the light stayed on.

"They won't even turn the light off for him?"

Elkins had stepped next to Jeremy and put his back against the wall next to Addleson's door. "It doesn't matter. You ruptured both of his eyes." He answered as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Jeremy closed his own eyes and leaned forward to rest his forehead against the door. "Ah, fuck." He forced himself to look again. Addleson, or what was left of him lay in a room with no facilities. His fur was matted and unkept. If he was sleeping whatever filled his dreams caused his tail tip to constantly twitch.

Elkins wrapped his knuckles on the door. Jeremy started looking away at the sound but still saw the cat's reaction from his peripheral vision.

Addleson leapt up and charged in the direction of the door. His screaming snarling charge ended at the wall a foot to the right of the door. Head first he rammed into the wall and bounced only to charge again. Before the overloud thump reverberated through the wall a second time several other cells became just as active. By his fifth attempt he had veered away from the door enough that the chain brought him up short before hitting the wall. The hallway filled with noise that made it seem they stood in a feral kennel. Addleson twisted and turned, snarling and biting at the chain that now tortured him.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Jeremy repeated as if a chant against the feral's limitless rage. It did nothing to block out the echoes of rage from the other cells answering Addleson's call of blind fury. The litany was useless in erasing the sight of Addleson's broken and splintered teeth gnawing at the chain that limited his movements. The plate slid shut blocking Jeremy from the sight of Addleson in his endless berserk frenzy. Jeremy turned to Elkins still chanting. "Fuck. What the fuck. How many are there in here?"

"I do not know. I only know of Addleson because I asked of him."

"What, what's going to happen to him?"

"He'll stay in there until he either dies or, less likely regains his mind."

"How is that right? He was a person, why is- He's chained up like an animal. Can't anybody." Jeremy stopped. His mind answered his own questions before he could finish them. "Shit."

The red panda with endless compassion in his eyes put a paw on Jeremy's shoulder. "You did not do this to him."

After a minute the cat inside settled enough to stop raging against his restraints but still snarled and spit his blind rage. Jeremy shook his head. "You're wrong, I did do that to him."

"No. What you did was leave him alive to be, that."

"There's little difference since the outcome's the same." Jeremy corrected. He was angry at Elkins. He felt empathy and regret for the male jaguar. He was angry at himself for making the wrong decision. He felt shame at the tears in his eyes in front of his mentor. Angry at Addleson for forcing him into choosing between two wrong decisions.

Shaking his head he asked "What was I supposed to do? You've told me I don't have the right to kill anyone. Now you show me this? Show me what Addleson has become as if I should have killed him to prevent this? This torture. What was I supposed to have done? How was I to know he'd end up like this. It is worse than death." Jeremy stated at last his voice losing its power.

"None of us can know that. The pain and hurt he feels now, can any of us say it is a better or worse fate than if you had killed him."

"I wouldn't want to end like that. I would rather have died." Jeremy said softly.

Elkins hummed. Jeremy looked at him. "What? You have a better answer? You think living as a rage filled animal chained up in a room for the rest of your life is a better alternative to death?"

"No. I'm saying you had, in the heat of battle an impossible choice. Once made, as in a coin flip, the ramification of that choice will come no matter which side you call. You can't foresee or control how events will unfold after that single moment of choice. As in battle, whether a simple coin toss or a life and death decision must be made in an instant. It is in that instant within which you have to make a choice, and you can only have the power to chose for yourself, and therefor must only to chose for yourself."

Turning back to Elkins he said firmly "That's fucking selfish."

The red panda's expression never changed. "Yes. That's life."

Jeremy knew Alex Elkins had made his point whether he intellectually agreed or not. He walked away retracing his steps to the front door. He waited for Stanford to come out from the enclosed office he

watched from and unlock the door. Alex had followed and walked out with him. Neither said a word as they got in Elkin's car.

At Alex's club Jeremy looked at his trainer. He had been turning over in his mind what had been said outside Addleson's cell. For all Jeremy's mental toil, his heart was settled. He was a survivor.

Jeremy cleared his throat before saying "I don't regret it. Even knowing what I know now, I'd do the same thing and leave Addleson in that cell. I'd let him live like that. I'd do it because in the end he was a predator. Is that wrong?"

Alex shrugged before replying. "For whatever reason, he made choices and judgement calls that led him where he is now. You had no part in any of his choices, only your own. There is no right or wrong in allowing a person's own Karma to manifest itself."

"Karma? I don't know if I fully buy into that."

"You said yourself he was a predator. By your own logic he had his fate coming to him. The fate he lives out now is of his own choosing, not yours even if you think you allowed it to manifest."

He could find nothing to say. Jeremy stared at the cement in front of Alex Elkins self defense club unbelieving as he reviewed Alex's talk about fate and Karma and the implied absence of responsibility in the choices of others. His head was spinning. "So, are you saying Addleson, by being the person he was, affected the choice I made, and sealed his own fate?"

"Not quite. His choices created and chose his Karma, and that selected his outcome of your choice."

"Excuse my language sir, but your'e really fucking with my head right now."

The red panda smiled. "I felt the same when I first tried to understand my own pinnacle moment. I have to confess, it doesn't get any easier."

"That's not exactly comforting." Jeremy replied, trying to smile and failing due to the nature of their conversation. "Just to be sure, and at the risk of sounding flippant, but thinking about all this isn't how you ended up self committing, is it?"

Alex laughed "No, actually its how I found my way out."

It was Jeremy's turn to hum his understanding. "It's a lot to take in and I still have my own doubts."

"We'll discuss this again another time. For now, understand that you chose to live for yourself, and you are both where you are because of that. There is neither right nor wrong in choosing for yourself to live."

"I think I've had enough for today. I can feel the headache on its way already."

Elkins held his paw out "Until next weekend."

"Next weekend, sir." Jeremy said as he took his trainer's arm.

Jeremy rode home still turning over what Elkins had said. It was seductive he admitted, but he felt there were moral vacancies in Elkins' thinking. He tended to think if one wasn't careful they could convince themselves into thinking predation was the fault of the victims. Jeremy knew he wasn't the best example, he was a killer too. At the same time he felt obligated to own up to that fact and not displace

blame onto those people he'd killed. Sure he'd killed them because they were predators and the last two had actively stalked and sought to kill him.

Once he killed those first three predators did that mean that he had been predetermined to continue do so by the predators that followed? And if so shouldn't then his guilt then be placed at their feet instead of his?

Jeremy shook his head. There had to be some moral underpinning in Elkins thinking he hadn't yet mentioned, otherwise such a rationale would seem to allow almost anything. To Jeremy such logic felt far too flexible. Once one could convince themselves to convolute their own morals and turn their ethics in a favorable direction it would make predation not only ethically permissible on technical grounds but also make the traditional morality of any society irrelevant. It seemed a tenuous moral ledge to be on for someone that also advocated against killing predators. Perhaps even worse for one that had actually killed others because they were predators.

From his understanding of Alex's comments he was forced to conclude that the red panda had a completely different world view than he did. If it was true that their points of view differed as far as the discussion indicated then Alex Elkins had disqualified himself as a moral authority.

The more he thought on the trip Jeremy felt as though he would have to find his own way through his own moral dilemma.

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So, one of my patrons caught an error in this one and earned a story for catching it and helping me look good to the rest of you. They also earned another story for also catching the intentional use of a character from another story. I always intend to reward patrons that essentially act as paying beta readers, so the continuation of Predation will eventually happen.

There was also some good questions asked that I briefly explained at the time. One was about Samuel's feral state and is now worth sharing the answer. Its hinted at here but I think it could also use a fuller explanation outside the story. Going 'feral' would be losing most of one's mentality to the point of something much like a trapped animal.

The physical toll was hinted at in an earlier chapter in regards to endorphins and adrenaline levels in Samuel's blood. With his blood constantly flooded with adrenaline his metabolism is set in its highest gear at all times. With his body burning itself out from within and also beating himself blindly against the walls at the slightest sound he's not likely to live for very long. I'm sure it sounds like a harsh fate, and its meant to. It is just one facet of a harsh world that Jeremy lives in. Remember, predation is also considered something that happens and is rarely investigated by the authorities.