

Jeremy arrived at the hotel ten minutes early. The lobby was typical for one in that part of the city, large and well furnished. In looking around he could see Allen had not yet arrived. Detectives Jenkins and Frick were both sitting at a far set of chairs with another person Jeremy hadn't met.

All three stood as he approached. Jeremy managed to smile as he stepped up and stopped just a pace from the three. He held out a paw and said "Good to see you again Detective Jenkins, you too Detective Frick." he added as he also touched pads with the hyena.

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Grey." Frick introduced the cougar. As Jeremy and the cougar touched pads he added "She's in charge of the investigation concerning Dominic."

"I'm honored to meet you Lieutenant." Jeremy said as she touched pads with him.

"Likewise, Sir." The female replied even as Jeremy added her profile to PATOMES.

"Damn, sir, you've gotten big since last time." The hyena said.

Jeremy smiled. He remembered the male's sense of humor from their first meeting. Jeremy stood a head taller than even the cougar. The ferret looked up at him from more than a two foot disadvantage.

"It happens, I guess." Jeremy said trying to sound disarming.

"How's the arm?" Jenkins asked looking curiously at Jeremy's forearm.

"Fine. It healed up with no trouble. You can't even see the scars under the fur." Jeremy answered holding out his arm for examination.

Lieutenant Grey motioned and said "Lets have a seat while we wait. Thanks for helping with the investigation Mister Dawn."

"Certainly. Allen came to me so I really haven't done all that much." Jeremy said as he sat in one of the five chairs arranged in a circle. "Are we meeting here, or is there a room upstairs reserved?"

"Yes, we'll go upstairs as soon as Mister Alversten arrives." Grey answered.

"This must be him now." Jenkins said as he stood looking toward the entrance.

Jeremy followed his gaze to see Allen. He'd stopped just inside the entry and was looking around. He was obviously nervous by the way his tail twitched and snapped about behind him. Jeremy saw he was carrying a small computer tablet in hand. He spotted the group and after a moments hesitation turned and approached. The cheetah joined them and Jeremy introduced him to the three officers.

After the introductions Allen took a deep breath and said "Thank you all for meeting me. Dominic scares the shit out of me. I just can't handle the pressure anymore." He moved to sit in the last chair as he spoke.

"Mister Alversten, we have a room ready upstairs if you wish to have more privacy."

The cat's eyes lit up and his tail stilled for just a moment at the announcement. "Oh, thats great. Thank you for the consideration, Lieutenant."

The cougar led the way. Jeremy and Detective Frick followed in the rear. The male looked up at him and as the elevator doors closed said. "So Jeremy, how much bigger are you going to get?"

The cougar muttered something Jeremy didn't catch and rolled her eyes. Jenkins just looked down and smiled while Allen also seemed interested in the answer.

Jeremy smiled. "I really don't know. I'm being told I might top seven feet."

Even the cougar looked stunned. Frick whistled. "Damn, sir. Glad you're a friend of the department."

Jeremy caught the warning look from the cougar aimed at the detective. The ferret's smile faded at the look. Jeremy watched the cougar and as she made eye contact he lifted his eye ridges questioningly. She gave him slight shake of her head and glanced meaningfully at Allen. The cheetah seemed to have not caught any of the silent exchange.

They made their way to the room. Once everyone was settled the Lieutenant started things by asking a few questions. Allen answered by giving a description of his first encounter with the rat. To Jeremy it didn't sound like he was embellishing anything. He even explained the importance of the tiny captives the rat had displayed to him. Allen came then to their second meeting.

Jeremy could see he was terrified by the way his paws trembled as he opened his tablet. He turned the screen to face the three detectives and played a video. Jeremy moved to see better and was not discouraged by any of the three officers.

It showed a crow standing on a nondescript table. Jeremy recognized Allen's voice asking questions. As the video played the crow's story came out. By pecking once for yes and twice for no Allen summarized how Dominic encountered the panther with his assistance as a crow.

It played for forty minutes. Far more than any parlor trick with a trained bird could have accomplished. Jeremy knew the one time panther's tale already but was still amazed at the retelling. Allen left nothing out, even incriminating himself by admitting to joining his friends in predation attacks. He could see the three detectives were also stunned. They all sat staring at the screen and sitting on the edge of their seats.

Once the video ended Allen produced a memory stick and handed it to the Lieutenant. "There's over a hundred more hours of video on this. It details everything I could get out of him. They were friends of mine, and Dominic toyed with them and then made me take care of him like some domesticated animal." He was almost in tears.

"Mister Alversten, I'm prepared to offer you protective custody right now, this moment." The cougar said as she pocketed the stick.

Allen looked down and actually sobbed. Jeremy thought it was with relief until the cheetah looked back up. "No. It won't matter where I am. He can reach me wherever I am. When you watch that, you'll understand."

She looked at the cheetah somewhat surprised and said "If you're sure."

"I've thought about it, I think I'd be safer maintaining my routine." he answered standing. He looked at Jeremy with a wane smile.

He stood next to Allen and said "I'll leave with you." He really wanted to stay and listen to the three detectives but felt the action he suggested more appropriate. The offer would seem an attempt at giving Allen cover of meeting a friend if they were seen leaving together.

"Thanks Jeremy, but no. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if he targeted you too."

"I have to agree with Mister Alversten, Sir. I suggest you stay here with us for a time."

Jeremy felt for the cheetah at the expression on his face. He was convinced he was alone, horribly exposed in the fight against a foe that could alter his very existence. He was moved by the male's courage.

Stepping closer he took the frightened cheetah in a hug. With Allen's head against his chest he declared. "You may not think much of yourself, but you're the bravest person I know."

When he stepped back Allen looked up at him with tears wetting the fur around his eyes. "Thanks, that means everything."

"Mister Alversten, if Dominic contacts you again contact us as soon as possible." Grey said.

He nodded as he wiped his muzzle with a paw. "Right. I should go now."

Detective Frick walked with Allen to the door and checked the hallway before stepping aside. He stood watching the cheetah a moment before closing the door and returning to the group. He sat and looked around at the others before saying "Poor bastard."

Jeremy cleared his throat and looked to the cougar. "What are the chances you'll catch this Dominic before he does anything to Allen?"

"That's hard to say. Honestly, we have very little on this person. It's as if he doesn't exist, which is extremely difficult to do these days."

"He's like a phantom." The ferret said, disgust and loathing in his voice. "He's even had the balls to assault at least two of our own."

Jenkins remarked "We're not even sure what we're dealing with. Until now we knew he could shrink people, but now, ferals? How can he do such things to people?"

"This is under the strictest of confidence of course, Mister Dawn." The Lieutenant said.

"Understood." Jeremy replied. He watched as the three cops regained their composure. After a time he asked "You mentioned earlier something about being a friend of the department. I take it from your reaction, Lieutenant, that that's not always the case?"

She sighed before answering. "Yes. Unfortunately some of the dominants in the city see us as rivals, or perhaps even as impediments to their desires. We're not well liked in some circles."

"I had no idea. The dominants mentoring me don't have anything against the police." Jeremy said.

The cougar smiled. "I could have guessed. Most people don't bother involving us as much as you and Mister Alversten have."

"Sorry to hear that." Jeremy apologized. His plans didn't involve working against the detectives. He was pleased to have gained an inside to the investigation but had no intention of hampering it. He stood saying. "It's getting late, besides I think Allen is clear of the building by now."

"Right." The Lieutenant said as she rose.

The others stood as well. Together they made their way to the lobby. They parted ways at the entrance with the three detectives waiting for their vehicle to be brought around. Jeremy walked toward the subway forcing himself to keep from glancing back.

Back in his apartment he found Sam's door closed. Since moving to the new apartment they were both comfortable leaving their doors open while out. It had become a signal of occupancy between them. Jeremy left the lights off and slipped outside to the deck. He cautiously crept to the middle of the deck to see his brother had also drawn the blinds.

Jeremy stood watching the skyline. He was tempted to try flying again but with his brother home didn't want to risk him seeing anything that would be impossible to explain. He thought over his plans for the Dominic persona for a time. There was no need to accelerate anything. He would have to work quickly to replenish the rest of his lost wardrobe for the rat. He would have to keep everything in the storage unit now that he'd started leaving his room open when he was out.

Jeremy considered a better solution for a time. He'd have to find a suitable place, an apartment with a balcony, even a small one and he could come and go as he pleased. He made more than enough that he could pay for a cheap one, and considering he didn't intend to actually live there that would be the only expense. He turned to his room with a smile on his face.

He woke the next morning and came out to the living area. For the first time Jeremy could remember his brother was still sleeping. He smiled and got a quick bite to eat and dressed to go downstairs to the gym. He'd once again resolved to make the time to start using the gym on a regular basis.

Two hours later he came back to find his brother up and in the kitchen. After showering he came out to sit at the island counter and watch his brother. Sitting on the barstool Jeremy observed "We need to get the right size stools, these are too tall for here."

Without turning Sam said "You've already said that." Glancing over at his brother he added "Maybe you should buy the new ones. Be sure to buy ones where we don't have to see your junk when you sit there in the fur."

Jeremy looked down at himself. Sure enough more than half his sheath stuck up above the level of the countertop. He slid off the stool and started heading for his room.

"No, that's fine." Sam said. "It's not like I haven't seen everything before."

Jeremy stopped suddenly undecided and turned to reply but paused. In looking back he finally noticed Sam was in nothing but his fur as well. Walking back to the kitchen island Jeremy leaned against the counter and rested his elbows on the surface.

Sam glanced over and with a smirk said "I should've kept my mouth shut."

Jeremy smirked back. "You have to admit, it is a bit more comfortable like this."

Sam glanced at him smiling affirmatively. His brother took a deep breath as he turned back to his cooking. Jeremy was impressed at the sight. He could clearly see the musculature of his brother's upper body. He may not be as thickly muscled as Eric tried to be but he was in far better shape. Even the small movements Sam was making as he worked showed off his well toned muscle.

"Don't take this the wrong way but, do you work out any?"

Sam's head came up before he looked over to his brother. "No, not really." he answered looking back at his work.

Jeremy hummed. "Must be an alpha thing then."

"How so?"

"Well, you may be shorter, but you're fitter than Eric ever was."

Sam paused to look down his front at himself. After a glance at his arm and the modest bulge from holding a pan a little higher than the flame he looked up to Jeremy. "You really think so?"

Jeremy nodded. His brother looked back to his cooking with a smile. Jeremy looked away after noticing his brother was having a physical reaction to his praise. "Be right back." he said as he made his way to his room. He came back out and set his work tablet on the counter and started on Bureau work. It wasn't long before Sam slid a plate next to his tablet.

"Did you really think I work out?"

Jeremy gave an absent minded reply as he slid the tablet aside. "Yes, you look pretty fit." The breakfast Sam had made smelled just as good as it looked. The first bite made him look at his brother in appreciation. "What?" he mumbled around a full mouthful.

"I don't think I'd be willing to spend two hours a day like you just to get a little fitter." Sam said.

Jeremy nodded around another mouthful before answering. "I'm not really doing that to get fitter. Its just that I've got so much extra energy right now I have to burn it off someway."

"So, what would you suggest for me?"

Jeremy set his fork down and looked at his brother. "I'd say, as you are now all I'd recommend is maybe half an hour every other day, tops. That's mostly a balance of maintaining your current fitness and enough to make slight improvements that'll allow you to gradually push harder." Jeremy watched his brother's reaction and asked "Why?"

"Some of the guys at The floor complemented me just like you did. Its got me wondering is all."

"Well, for what its worth, Eric was an idiot as far as physical training goes."

Sam laughed. "I could guess that from the way he looked. How he even had clients with that gut amazes me."

"Probably why he had to mooch off everyone so much." Jeremy responded.

Sam sighed and stared at the countertop.

"Don't. He's gone, out. Don't bother sparing a second thought for him."

Sam looked up at Jeremy. "I know. It just that even after everything he did, I still, he was our brother."

Jeremy sighed and said nothing more. He halfheartedly got back to eating his breakfast but it didn't taste as good as it had at first.

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For centuries Appalachia has been one of the powers of North America. Appalachia shares its border with Carolina to the north and east and continues up to meet Virginia until its border turns west. From there the Appalachian border draws a ragged line through what we know of as Kentucky until meeting the Mississippi. As the border heads south it winds to the east and west of the river depending on the history of the region.

As you can guess Appalachia encompasses what we know of as the southern half of Kentucky, all of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. There are also small sections along the Mississippi that falls within the border of Appalachia. Not satisfied with the huge swath of the southeastern section of the continent Appalachia also controls the island of Cuba, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Haiti, the dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

Not done yet, during the Continental wars they gained control of the Yucatan Peninsula as far west as a line drawn through the cities Villahermosa and Tuxtla Gutierrez, and east to include Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras.

With such vast holdings and access to both Pacific and Atlantic oceans they have become economic and military powerhouse. Only two other nations in the western hemisphere can even come close to competing with Appalachia economically. Militarily no other nation on the east coast of either North or South America can dare challenge their navy. Appalachia enjoys almost absolute control of passage through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean as well as the power to project through much of the eastern Atlantic.

More on the history of Appalachia next week.