

The next few days saw everyone settle into a routine. By the time Jeremy's next dinner with Jackson came up the weather had surprised everyone with an early heat wave.

Even Jackson remarked at the vagaries of the weather midway through his evening with Jeremy. He was leaning against the side of his deck looking out on the view when he made the comment. Jeremy smiled and looked at the fox again.

Jackson was dressed uncharacteristically in just a shirt and shorts. At least from Jeremy's experience it seemed more casual attire than he had seen the fox wear. He could see that his mentor had stayed fit even with his age. Jeremy was sorely tempted to pull his shirt off from the heat.

"Hard to believe we were buried in snow just two weeks ago." He answered.

The fox nodded with a smile. "It'll probably be a great summer. I love the heat."

"I just like the changes of the seasons. I can take the heat and cold equally."

Jackson stayed silent as he watched a jet cross the sky leaving a contrail behind. "Going to be a busy summer." He said quietly.

Jeremy asked half jokingly "Is that the cue to ask about the Bureau?"

Jackson looked to him with a grin. "Might as well be."

Jeremy expected the fox to move inside. He waited for several long moments as Jackson stared at him. "Here?"

He shrugged and smiled. "All that's left is for you to decide when to pull the trigger."

Jeremy had thought over everything they'd discussed. Jackson had planned everything out in advance. He had literally everything covered. The people, and their salaries, the number of office spaces they'd need and calculated the prospective cost of everything. He was also prepared to underwrite the entire endeavor. All Jeremy would have to do would be follow the plan as his mentor had laid out well in advance.

He thought through it all one last time and after a moment said "We could save a lot of expense by continuing to work from home."

"I've thought about that. It would be convenient. However an actual office would lend the stamp of legitimacy you'd need right from the start."

Jeremy nodded. His mind went back to Jackson's plan and once again searched for weaknesses. He knew the fox had far more experience and had been working on it for decades but couldn't help himself from mentally poking at every aspect. He looked at the fox and as his head lowered said "Sorry, I don't mean to act insulting but this is a huge step. I don't mean to appear to distrust what you have planned, it's just that I can't help but work over everything to make sure we haven't forgotten anything."

Jackson laughed. "Are you kidding? I'd probably be upset if you were taking this lightly. In fact the more you try to find problems with the plan the more confidence I have in you."

Jeremy inexplicably felt his ears fold down over the praise. "Well, thank you, sir."

"And enough of this 'Sir' shit. If we're going to work as close as we will be, call me Jack."

"Yes, um Jack." Jeremy said ending with a smile.

"Good. You'll need to coordinate with Gakota on the specifics." Jackson said smiling at Jeremy's attempt at changing his habit.

"Just one last thing."

The fox looked at him with eye ridges raised.

Jeremy paused. The male's expression made him think his question was anticipated. "You know what I'm going to ask, don't you."

"Your position is going to be Chief Operating Officer, your salary has to be commensurate with other COO's."

"It's a six figure income." Jeremy replied.

"With a ten percent stake in the company, don't forget."

"I'm not even twenty yet. How can I justify that?"

"You don't have to. I expect you to earn it."

Jeremy took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. Jackson smiled. "Don't worry. I have every confidence in you. I know you'll make it work. I wouldn't invest millions in this if I didn't."

Jeremy crossed his arms across his chest. He knew belaboring the point would only irritate his mentor. He nodded and looked out at the view. "It's beautiful."

Jackson smiled and agreed. "Yes, it is."

They both looked down at Center Park watching the wind wash over the tops of the trees. The deciduous trees had started flowering and budding with new growth in response to the early heatwave. Even the few evergreens were showing splotches of the brighter green of new growth.

"So, where did you move into anyway?"

Jeremy turned his head and pointing said "The Horizon's, its the one with the scalloped decks on the top floors, there."

"I've heard of the owner." Jackson replied with a slight smile as he turned to Jeremy from looking at the building.

"What?" Jeremy asked unable to keep the grin from his face.

"Is it true he's collecting dominants like trading cards?" Jackson laughed.

Jeremy laughed with the fox. "It would seem. From what I heard he thinks it'll give him some kind of higher status among his peers."

"That's about as valuable as collecting dryer lint. If no one else values it, its worthless."

"Well, we got a huge discount because of his obsession."

"Get a good view?"

"It's not bad, nothing like this, obviously. It's a southeast view from the sixty first floor."

"Hey, that's not bad." Jackson said, his tone one of appreciation. "I'd like to see it someday."

Jeremy turned to him surprised. "Consider yourself invited. Open for dinner next Friday?"

Jackson grinned. "Sure. Seven?"

"Good. To be honest, I'm not much of a cook, so I'll be asking Sam to do the honors."

"I'll agree to that concession as long as I get to help."

"I'll let him know."

Jackson smiled and looked out on the view again. They discussed a few recent events until it grew dark. Back inside Jackson said his farewells to Jeremy.

When Jeremy got back to his apartment Sam was watching a cable movie. He sat next to his brother and turned to face Sam grinning at him.

"What did you do?"

"I kind of committed you to cooking dinner next Friday."

"Okay, that's not too...bad. Wait, tonight was your dinner with Jackson Buttons, is it for him?"

"Yes." Jeremy replied trying to grin again.

Sam got up and started pacing. "Shit, what am I supposed to make for someone like that?" He stopped and looked at Jeremy. "What did you have tonight?"

"We had lamb and this cauliflower, um puree I think it's called."

"What about before that. And the time before too. I can't serve something he's already made."

Jeremy listed the meals he'd had with the fox watching his brother's face fall. Sam sighed and rolled his eyes. "Okay, I can think of something."

"Sam, you'll do fine. Your cooking is just as good as his."

"Shit, Jeremy, I can't do a better job than him. And if I do too bad--"

"Sam," Jeremy interrupted "I've told him several times how good a cook you are. Just do your best. He'll appreciate the effort. You don't have to worry about showing him up, he's not that kind of person. Besides, he wants to be here early enough to help out."

"Oh fuck Jeremy. One of the most powerful people in the city and you invite him to make dinner with me?"

"Relax. Sam, he's no different than I am." He'd started to stand but thought better of it. It wouldn't do to make a statement like that only to look down on his flustered brother. A sudden thought struck him that he guessed would help calm his brother and he voiced it before thinking. "Would it help to invite mom and dad over too?"

"No! Are you kidding?" Sam almost shouted. He paused and after a second said "Actually, that's not a bad idea. They can run interference for me."

"That's not why I suggested it. I'm sure they'd support you but to use them like that may be going a bit too far."

"Not if I'm up front about it." Sam asserted with a smile.

"Forget it, forget I mentioned it."

"They've wanted to see our place too." Sam insisted. Jeremy knew the tone. He'd already gotten the idea in his head. There was now no way of getting him to change his mind.

Jeremy held his paws up. "Alright, it's your dinner. Just, please, don't stress too much about this. For all his reputation he's really a nice person."

"Okay." Sam promised but he had already changed his focus to his phone. He'd brought it out and as he sat back next to Jeremy he saw his brother was researching meal recipes.

The weekend went fairly quietly. Sam spent most of his free time looking through food recipes. Sunday night he did his first trial run for Friday's meal. Jeremy thought it was excellent but Sam wasn't satisfied. His brother spent the rest of the night researching for another meal.

Monday morning Jeremy went into Nicholson to meet with Gakota. The ocelot smiled at his entrance. They made a bit of small talk before the cat got to the point.

"I had a talk with Jackson over the weekend."

Jeremy nodded. "Then you know I had dinner with him Friday."

"Yes. We'll need to follow through with finding a space for the Bureau as soon as possible. Only once that's done should we move forward."

"I understand."

Gakota leaned back in his chair and taking a deep breath said. "I'll leave that with you then."

Jeremy replied "That only leaves the timing."

"To my mind we should make our move as soon as we have an office site selected." The ocelot said watching Jeremy.

"I can have that narrowed down to the top three for you by the end of the week." Jeremy answered knowing he already had a good idea on the frontrunners.

Gakota sat up and replied. "Good. We'll get together again Friday and make the final decision then. Sound good?"

"Yes, sir."

"Gakota, Jeremy, don't call me sir, okay?"

Jeremy smiled apologetically. "Gakota. Its a hard habit to break, ah, Gakota."

The ocelot grinned at him and waved him out of the office. For the rest of the workweek Jeremy focused on whittling the selections down to the top three. The duties of the Bureau were almost automatic to him. His Thirteenth Floor appointments were a pleasant break from the constant research into the selection process. Thursday night Jeremy felt he had everything ready for Gakota.

Sam made his final test for the next night. He had made a salmon dish that tasted wonderful to Jeremy. He listened to Sam's discourse on the meal. He really didn't think his brother needed to change anything but Sam was constantly talking about what he intended to do differently the next night.

"Honestly Sam, this is really the best you've done."

"Do you think its better than Mister Buttons' cooking?"

"Yeah, easily." Jeremy answered nodding enthusiastically. "What?"

"I can't outdo him. There's a fine line between giving him a good meal and insulting his own abilities."

"Where'd you get that idea?"

"From the books he recommended to you." Sam said more than a bit exasperated.

"Thats not him, he's never going to take offense to someone that can do something better than him."

Sam looked down at his own meal. "I've got to figure out how to cut that fine line."

Jeremy slapped his forehead and looking to the ceiling muttered "You're so stubborn sometimes."

"I'm working this hard on tomorrow's diner for your benefit. Do you really want to risk your relationship with Mister Buttons on a meal?"

"Our relationship isn't going to change over one meal." Jeremy answered back letting his exasperation filter into his voice.

"I'm not suggesting that he'd stop mentoring you over it but I don't want this to be something that causes him to think any less of you." Sam replied getting equally upset.

"If you're really that concerned just barbecue. Then nobody will have any expectations at all." Jeremy said becoming irritated at his brother's stubbornness.

Sam looked at him for a second before lifting his plate and turning to the sink dumped his meal in the trash. His brother left the kitchen and went to his room without as much as a glance in Jeremy's direction.

Jeremy's stomach had soured at his brother's reaction. He couldn't finish his portion of the meal even though it had been excellent. He dumped his meal on top of his brother's. He spent more than half an hour cleaning up the kitchen after his brother. He'd done the same all week. It had been the least he could do considering his brother's efforts. He made an extra effort to get everything clean in the kitchen and started with the living area.

By the time Jeremy had to leave for his appointments at The Floor, Sam had yet to come out of his room. He stood outside his brother's door for a few seconds with his paw raised about to knock. He hadn't intended to upset his brother. He wanted to apologize but he also didn't want to disturb him. In the end he left without speaking to him.

His appointment on The Floor was his first return client. The tiger stood and smiled as he entered the reception room. As Jeremy took her arm in his he asked "How have you been Miss Drake?"

"Good. Do you notice anything?"

Jeremy guided her through Backstage "I didn't want to mention it because its usually a sensitive subject, but you look like you've lost some weight."

She smiled at him. "Almost twenty pounds."

Jeremy closed the door to his studio behind himself and guided the tigress to the massage table. "You missed this the last time. Just lay down, I'll take care of everything from here."

"Okay, but I'm really here for another lesson."

Jeremy helped her get situated and asked how things had been going with their relationship. The female expounded in intimate detail of how she'd satisfied her husband. She had at first been met with resistance from him but she had eventually achieved just a small bit of success. As Jeremy was finishing her massage she confided that her husband hadn't mentioned her weight for almost an entire week.

"Thats good news." Jeremy commented as he stood straighter having just finished. "So, how can I help you this time?"

"Teach me more of how to really pleasure a male." She said looking up at him with longing.

"And after?" He asked trying to keep his expression neutral and demeanor professional.

Loretta Drake simply smiled.

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The history of Appalachia can be traced back nearly three millennia. Originally founded by otters as the first stable societies were invented it quickly grew to control much of eastern north America. As other species rose Appalachia gained a reputation of accepting the newcomers with an sense of equality that was rare for the time.

Over the corse of centuries the power Appalachia held rose and fell like any other nation. More recently they have sustained a gradual yet steady increase in power. With their extensive holdings throughout the region their power is only increasing still. Even though they have few that can compete against them Appalachia is still not aggressive toward their neighbors. They will however defend themselves as was evidenced during the wars.

Unlike many other nations, and much as in York dominants do not attempt to serve at the higher levels of government. Instead they fill several advisory roles, and even then on a limited basis. The government is headed by an elected Prime Minister that governs for a ten year period. Having found a

balance that has made them an amazing success Appalachia is also one of the more populous nations. Unfortunately for Jeremy he traveled through the area too rapidly to really see much of what it had to offer.