

Starting off a new story arc. Also jumping ahead a bit in the story timeline.

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Jeremy looked up at the knock on his door. Zane Rook was leaning against the side of his office door smiling at him. He stood even as his mentor gestured for him to stay seated.

"I apologize for not calling more often, sir," Jeremy said as he stood from his desk. His mentor pushed away from the doorframe and walked toward his desk. He knew Zane would dismiss any seeming need for an apology but he still felt he could have done better. Even after the pangolin waved away his apology Jeremy's mind aligned everything that had been happening since their last time together.

Even after months at his new position at The Bureau Jeremy's schedule was still less than settled. The press for time was somewhat similar to his final years at the academy. The large difference was that now he had the benefit of being monetarily rewarded for his efforts. It took only seconds but his mind had reviewed everything that had happened over the past few months and was ready to discuss with the pangolin.

As before his days started at Alex's club. He had for some time now been at the point where he could almost see improvement on a weekly basis. Alex too seemed pleased with his rapid improvement. After years of almost constant instruction Jeremy had progressed enough to now see the gains he'd desired for years. His training in his dominant talent also continued with much less success. He doubted Zane would want to discuss that aspect of his training with Alex. He was sure Alex and Zane were in better contact about his dominant talent than Jeremy was.

His training of his dominant talent was far more interesting as a conversation topic. His thoughts focused on it for a brief moment anyway.

They'd tried to find a way for Jeremy to adjust the apparent ratio of subjective time with no success. After months of trying Alex concluded it was an all or nothing shift. Still, Jeremy was doing well in learning to use small bursts to reflect on Alex's fighting strategy in training. He only used his talent when Alex knew he was doing so. He'd understood for some time not to try to shortcut his training. It was to him a pleasant realization that using his talent was also speeding up his progress in his self defense training.

His work at the Bureau was also coming along well. The idea that had been trying to surface from the depths of his imagination had burst up and now had everyone interested. In hindsight he wondered that it had taken so long to come to him, it was so simple. In sounding out Gakota on the idea the ocelot was more than enthusiastic.

Jeremy had gathered Sahar, Makannish, Nederrian a cougar that had been in the bureau as long as Gakota, and Arc. Together they created an outline for the first syllabus to take to an academy as a lesson plan. The course title was Common Sense. It would fit in with much of the schedule of most learning centers, many of the modules Jeremy had taken had been presented by freelance instructors. It was intended to fill in the gaps where the existing curricula failed to point out several necessary skills needed to succeed. It was also going to be a recruitment tool for the Bureau. It had already been accepted on a one time trial basis by Jeremy's graduating academy.

A second training course was also in the works. This second would take a good deal longer as it was going to be a training course for those already in the business world. This they would offer to companies in their capacity as consultants. They would attempt to train corporate employees at the managerial level. It was agreed with very little discussion that they'd need another for the executive level employees. They'd get to work on that as soon as the second was nearing completion.

Jeremy's time at the Thirteenth Floor was also progressing. He still worked evenings and most weekends, scheduling two to three clients a day. His technique and stamina had increased dramatically. Even though he had just started his final five years of maturing as a dominant he could easily outlast any female that wasn't a dominant. He seriously doubted Zane would be interested in that aspect of his life though.

Zane sat across from him and asked "How's life been for you?"

Jeremy smiled and replied "Good, busy but good."

Coughing and clearing his throat to give himself an extra second to consider where to start his mind traveled an unwanted mental road. He no longer thought very often about his Dominic persona. Even though he'd never be able to explain his involvement to any of his mentors he also reviewed the ripple effects of his activities as Dominic.

While there were still the occasional protest by rats in the city they were nothing compared to other cities. Boston had suffered three days of out of control demonstrators. Thousands of rats had started demonstrating and within a day counterdemonstrations had sprung up as well. Tens of thousands had taken to the streets and had been less than subtle in forcing their opinion on the rats. By the time order had been restored more than three city blocks were left smoldering ruins. No one was talking about the death tool. It was another obvious but to most nearly invisible sign of discrimination against rats.

Even though most cities now made efforts to quickly shut down any demonstrations the occasional riot still broke out. Worse yet was that things were still spreading in scope, cities across the continent were seeing rats rise up with demands. What had started as a simple alias for Jeremy had inadvertently sparked an underground movement that he had no hope of bringing back under control. He'd eliminated any possible contacts with the rat's leadership that might still be in York by turning them into the authorities.

Zane nodded his head before Jeremy was able to add anything and said "I'm here to pass on a request for help from one of my friends."

"Is this a personal request or one for the Bureau?"

"This would be for the Bureau. The request is also confidential."

Jeremy reached over and slid his phone closer as a signal. "We should include Gakota."

Zane nodded. "I didn't see him in his office."

Jeremy sent a quick text to the cat and putting his phone back on the desk smiled at his mentor. "I'm sorry I haven't called, its just that time seems to be getting away from me a little. It is good to see you again."

Zane grinned. "You don't have to apologize. Well, more than once, which you've already done. Besides, as a part owner of the Bureau I know what you're up to anyway."

Jeremy grinned at his mentor's humor. He was enjoying his changed relationship with the pangolin. Zane had recently started treating him as an equal, or nearly so.

They both turned at the knock as Gakota walked in. Jeremy stood again as the ocelot said "Good to see you again Mister Rook." and offered his paw in greeting.

Once they were settled again Zane started by saying "I have a business colleague that has passed on a request. Its not quite an open call for help as it involves a less than open government. What they need is someone to liaison between a state bureaucracy and the company of my colleague."

Gakota looked from Zane to Jeremy and back. "Is that all you can tell us?"

"For now, yes. My colleague can tell you the specifics, but only once you agree to meet with him. I'm sure he'd require nondisclosures before even discussing anything with you. Things are a bit delicate at this stage."

Jeremy and Gakota shared a look and the cat said "We can at least hear them out."

Zane smiled and replied "Good. I'll set up a meeting. Are you both open for lunch?"

They sat watching the pangolin send a text on his phone for a few seconds. As he finished Jeremy said "You didn't come all the way here just for that, did you?"

"No. I also wanted to see how everything here is coming along." He answered as his smile reappeared.

Gakota spent almost half an hour briefing the pangolin with the progress they'd made. They were already halfway back to the amount of calls they'd had prior to splitting with Nicholson. With the increasing number of clients they were going to be pressed to add to the staff before too long.

Zane smiled clearly pleased and said "Great work. It's almost time for that lunch, what say we head out?"

Both Jeremy and Gakota agreed and together they started out. Zane led the way to the front of the building where he gave a valet his parking slip. As they waited Jeremy again considered buying a vehicle for himself. Ever since the subway ride with the group of students he'd grown self conscious when wandering around the city. At his size he was drawing stares and furtive glances that had become impossible to ignore.

Zane's car turned out to be a large SUV. Jeremy found that there was plenty of room inside for even a dominant. It was nice to have enough headroom but even better was the ability to fully extend his legs even sitting behind Gakota. The ocelot wasn't exactly small for a normal. He listened to Gakota and Zane chat while looking around the back of the vehicle. By the time Zane pulled into the garage at their destination Jeremy felt a new desire for his own vehicle.

From the garage they traveled up to the offices of Humbolt Inc. Jeremy had only ever heard of the company before arriving in their offices. They were met in the reception area by a dominant otter Zane introduced as Mitchell Boagard. Jeremy shared the greeting of equals with the otter smiling as he listened to Zane's introduction. He was actually a few inches taller than the otter dominant. Mitchell was the owner and CEO of the company.

"I thought we could grab something for lunch and then meet in the conference room down the hall." The otter explained as he led the way past conference rooms to a corner room set up as a cafe. Mitchell paused at the entrance and gestured for them to enter first. Jeremy followed Zane into the cafe and

glancing around appreciated the view. At the short buffet they each selected a few items from the display. Nicholson had had a similar lunchroom set up but had expected employee's to pay for themselves.

Jeremy shared a look with Gakota once they'd both selected enough for lunch and stood next to the ocelot waiting for the others to finish. Together they followed Mitchell to a conference room and took seats. The otter started making small talk as they started on their meals. He wasn't making it obvious but he was subtly focusing half his questions at Jeremy. As they came close to finishing lunch the otter began filling in everyone on some of the basics of his company's needs. Jeremy found the information strangely vague until Mitchell asked him his opinion.

"To be honest, Mister Boagard, you haven't exactly defined what services it is you need from us."

The otter stared a second before replying. "I was led to expect you'd be able to figure that out for yourself." The challenge was implicit in his tone.

"We're not in the business of guessing. What we do is collect as much information we can and from there find answers and solutions no one else sees." Jeremy smiled and continued. "Having said that, if I had to guess I'd say you're in dispute with Madagascar."

Mitchel blinked a few times and asked "How did you come up with that?"

"Only the Madagascar government has the kind of reputation to make everyone involved with them as secretive as they are reputed to be. I assume they've put a stop order on your operations and are now being more than a bit reluctant to compromise."

The otter nodded. "Doesn't seem so hard when explained like that. Anyway, yes, we've been shut out of our own plants and offices in Madagascar for the last three weeks now. The usual negotiations have come to nothing, so we're not sure what else we can do at this point."

"I'm sure it doesn't help that they limit access into the country." Gakota said.

"Yes, thats perhaps the worst part of this. Most know they limit entry but even more so in our case. Our personnel have been held in three hotels ever since this began. We can't even bring our staff home until we find a solution or unless we surrender our rights to our own holdings."

Gakota leaned back in his chair. "So, whoever goes to negotiate will be in the same boat as your people. Stuck there until they find a way out."

The otter gave a tightlipped frown. "Exactly. To put even more complications into the situation they've said they will now only talk with dominants."

"That's likely meant to pull you into their control." Jeremy said. "I'd recommend you staying put in the strongest possible terms."

"In that we are in total agreement." Gakota added and looked to Jeremy.

He could tell by the set of the ocelot's ears he was leaving the decision to him. "I'd need to know everything about your interests there before I commit to anything."

"Thats as expected. After signing nondisclosures we could give you access to everything you need."

"It would take me a day to adjust my schedule."

The otter smiled. "That's sooner than I had hoped."

"I would also have to have full authority to make whatever deal necessary, whether it's in the full interests of your company or not it would have to be binding."

"Only as to the assets in country, that's as far as your authority can go. At this point it could be sold at discount and just getting our staff back home could be presented to our stockholders as a victory."

Jeremy looked at Gakota, who had sat back and was looking back at him with a smile. Zane too was sitting relaxed and staring back at him with a pleased expression.

"Tomorrow night good? Say around midnight to satisfy the confidentiality of things?"

Mitchell stood and offered his arm. As Jeremy clasped his forearm the otter said "Tomorrow. I'll have our jet ready to take you to a rendezvous. The government still doesn't allow outside aircraft entry. I could also accompany you that far."

"Sounds good." Jeremy said releasing the otter's arm. He watched as the otter pulled his phone out of a pocket.

"I'll get the necessary documents and access started now."

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Staying with Jeremy's road trip just north of the Colombia river is the nation of Grant. It's another small remnant of the former nation Olympia as well as the numerous nations to the north. What we know as Washington State and southern British Columbia is a collection of relatively tiny nations that are little bigger than counties. As the years passed after the wars there was less and less interest shown in the area by the powers that had once fought over the territories.

They are still individually small but have over time and negotiated treaties become a coalition of nations calling themselves The United Northwest States. While they are not a strong enough military presence to match Mexico or others on the other side of the Pacific they are at a level to make any aggression less than desirable. Economically the UNS is somewhat reliant on tourism. The area boasts some of the largest untouched forests and mountains on the continent.