

To Natasha and Robert: Two fellow boxing tigers who refused to back down when things got tough.

"I've learned not to get my hopes up, okay?!"

Tanya knew her new-found friend was only trying to help ease her pain after a previous fight with her boyfriend. The tigress groaned as she eased herself back on the hospital bed when she felt her cracked ribs and bruised stomach flair up again. "As soon as I get outta here, I'm dumping that asshole," she spat between a swollen lip and a broken tooth. Her orange, black-striped tail dangled off the side of the bed, unmoving.

Nick flicked his forked tongue, tasting the staleness of the sterile air in the room as he shuffled his scaly claws in his lap. His thick, scaly tail was threaded through the opening in the back of the chair he sat upon, slumped against the cold, tiled floor. "I wish there was more I can do, Tanya." He kept his reassuring demeanor, despite that he spoke with a slight hiss and a lisp.

She looked to him and heaved slowly, followed by a sudden cough. "You got me here in a pinch..."

"You were nearly dead when I found you after you called; thank God all the lights were green on the way here."

Resting the back of her head against the pillow, she closed her one good eye and breathed quietly. "I guess that's one good thing that's happened to me..." She murmured to herself. As she opened her non-swollen eye, the nurse came in to check up on her. Her nurse was a short-haired breed of dog, young, and only a bitch in the literal sense. She wondered if the Dalmatian girl was a new recruit any time she would visit; Kim always appeared clean, well-groomed, naïve, completely unlike the disheveled veterans who have clearly been in this line of work far too long.

"Hey there," greeted the nurse in a cheery tone as she immediately began checking the beeping heart monitor, "How're we doing today?"

"Ugh...Still feel like shit..." Tanya groaned, her tail tip flicking some. She understood Kim wanted to keep an upbeat attitude with her sweet and bubbly personality, but it came off more annoying and patronizing to her.

She looked to her patient, noting the tigress did not look much different than when she was first admitted, and winced. "Oooo, yeah. Listen, I'm going to check your blood pressure really quick and get you some ice packs, okay?"

"Yeah." Tanya held out her right arm. Though neither of them could see her bruises, she

yowled whenever the Dalmatian pressed a little too hard on her bicep. "Geeze! You trying to hurt me more!?"

Kim pursed her lips a moment at Tanya's reaction. "Here." She put the blood pressure gauge back on the cart and gently placed both her white, spotty paws on Tanya's bicep. After letting her patient know what she was about to do, much to Tanya's annoyance, she pushed aside Tanya's fur along her arm, only finding the natural pink-colored skin and black stripes that matched her fur pattern. She couldn't find any discoloration anywhere, then began to squeeze as gently as she could, despite Tanya's hissing and complaining. After checking her right arm, she let go of her patient. "Hmmm...how's your left arm?"

Tanya gently moved her left arm around, rolling her shoulder and flexing any muscles she could. "A little stiff, but not too bad."

"Can you lay that arm across your chest as far as you can for me, please."

She did as she was told. "Ooooh, wow...ow." Ever since being admitted to the hospital the night before, she hardly moved her arms. She also got used to getting her blood pressure taken on her right arm, though by experienced nurses and not this new pup.

The nurse began to wrap the blood pressure gauge around Tanya's left arm, thankful that she heard no protest from her patient as she made sure it was tight. After some more of the usual patronizing, she carried on with the routine checkup.

It wasn't hard for Tanya to keep steady and quiet during this process; she didn't feel any pain in her left arm at all. What concerned her was that anytime her boyfriend would hit her, threw something at her, pulled her, shoved her, kicked her, he favored her left side as well as her face; she was never certain if he did that on purpose, or if it was all by coincidence. Either way, ever since the incident, it bothered her that her left side didn't hurt as much as her right, especially in the condition her boyfriend left her in before Nick rescued her.

Once the gauge fully decompressed around her arm, the nurse immediately began to take it off. "Okay. So, your blood pressure is a little high, but I'm sure that's due to stress."

"No? Really?" Tanya rolled her eyes as her tail tip flicked.

The Dalmatian stared for a moment before continuing. "Anyway, your vitals look good overall. Now where do you feel the most pain?"

"Here. Here. Here," she said, indicating to her right arm, her side, her swollen eye. "And...in here," she sighed as she pointed between her breasts.

"I see..." The Dalmatian's bubbly personality vanished along with her fake smile. "I'll get you iced up, okay?" As she left the room, the only noticeable sounds were the tapping of her nails on the tile and the beeping heart monitor.

"God, she's annoying."

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"You're looking much better today!" Nick exclaimed with a flick of his tongue as he entered Tanya's room. His tail dragged along the floor as he grabbed a nearby chair and pulled it over to his usual spot next to the bed.

"I sure as hell am!" While she recovered quite well, and able to see clearly out of both eyes now, the aches and stiffness throughout her body lingered. "Could've taken less than a week though," she groaned.

"It takes time, my friend."

Tanya sighed and tried to relax herself, but her tail indicated otherwise. "But once I get out of here...what about...Diego?"

The snake sighed, his hiss mixed in with it. "Right, right. You need to get out of there, bottom line. I will be more than happy to help you pack your things and let you stay with me."

The tigress thought about the offer, tail thumping against the side of the bed and brushing against the floor. Nick was her best bet out of this situation, and she didn't have any other friends nearby who would help.

But she had another idea.

"Nick. I will gladly let you help me get out of there and back on my feet...but I want revenge."

His eyes widened. "Tanya--"

"That loser's cheated on me, abused me, lied to me! Why the hell did I stay with him!?" She began to tear up and her chest heaved up and down. "This," she yelled as she pointed around the room, "Is the last straw. I'm...I'm done, Nick...I'm done with him." She sniffed and wiped her eyes with a paw.

Nick let out a soft hiss and gently took her paw with both claws. He wanted to comfort her in this moment but chose to wait until she let it all out.

"Not to mention all the debt I'm in now because of him," she sighed, "I can't believe I was so stupid to loan him so much, just so he can...piss it away on stupid crap!" The

paw between the snake's claws balled up as she remembered all the times Diego complained about their finances. "Lazy piece of shit couldn't be bothered to find a job either. And any time I reminded him to do that, he gets mad and then hurts me." Her golden eyes looked into the snake's as her tail thrashed about, whacking against anything in its path. "You remember why I was put here in the first place."

"You two...got into another argument and, well, beat you senseless, from what I gather." Nick rubbed Tanya's paw to try calming her down.

"Not just any argument," she murmured as her eyes lowered away from him, "I can't...I can't remember all the details...everything was such a blur. One moment we were yelling at each other, as usual. He started to hit me, as usual. And then..." she sighed with a shuddered breath, "He tried to kill me..."

Nick's eyes widened again. He felt his own heartbeat stop for a moment as his stomach sank after what he just heard. "Tanya..."

"Obviously I escaped. I hid, ran, blocked him off with whatever heavy furniture I could find and move on my own...and then bolted out the front door when I called you."

He kept one claw caressing her paw as he petted her arm. At this point, he didn't care if they sat in silence until a nurse or the doctor came in; he simply wanted to comfort her and show her that someone cares.

She continued. "Why didn't I fight back, Nick? Why?!" Her voiced rose as she spoke. "I could've at least *tried* to put him in his place, dish out what he's done to me. But no! I didn't! I defaulted to acting like a coward, as usual!"

He wanted to suggest something but held his tongue once Tanya caught her breath again from venting so much.

"I need to toughen up, Nick...I need to learn how to fight." She looked back into Nick's yellow eyes that shimmered against his dark green scales. He raised his eye ridges in concern as the tigress expressed a mix of fear, anger, determination, and rage, not once letting him react to her sudden change in emotions. "Do you happen to know anyone who can teach me," she commanded.

"Hmmm." He took the claw off her arm and scratched under his chin. "I do know a guy. Short fellow, but he knows his stuff. He's a trainer at an MMA gym nearby, if you want to--"

"What's his name?"

He breathed through his tiny nostrils when she cut him off. "Emilio Borges. Well known for his mastery in boxing and won several belts in his heyday."

"Good. I'd rather learn from someone who knows what they're doing."

"And I have no doubt you two will get along famously."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "What are you suggesting?" She hoped Nick wasn't trying to play matchmaker, even if she wasn't *technically* single yet.

"Now, Tanya," he warned as he gripped both claws around her paw again, "Please don't take this the wrong way, but the reason I say that is because Emilio enjoys training women more than men."

"Um...ookaayy?" She felt some distrust in whatever Nick's intentions are with this. "Is he a pervert or something, or..."

"I don't know for certain why," he stated, "All I know is...well, let's just say a man's past is his own business. However, by no means is he a pervert; Emilio has his reasons."

Tanya looked ahead for a moment, thinking about what her friend was suggesting. "I guess it's worth a shot," she sighed, glancing over at Nick. "You have a business card or a number I can reach him at?"

He patted around at all his pockets to find his wallet, but couldn't find any business cards after he pulled it out and opened it. He then reached for his phone and began searching in his contacts. "Sorry my friend, I thought I saved his number but...I guess not," he sighed, followed by a sad, soft hiss.

The tigress pursed her lips, her tail thumping against the floor and bed again. "Damn."

"Oh! I know!" He looked to his phone again. A few taps and a quick search later, he pulled up the phone number for the gym and sent it to her phone. "Okay. What I just sent to you was some contact info for the gym he teaches at, along with the address; I hope it helps."

Her phone immediately vibrated on the table next to the bed. She grabbed it, gave it a few taps, stared at the screen a moment, then set it back down as she gave a half smile. "Thanks Nick...I'm...I'm glad that you've been so helpful with this, even if we did meet about a month ago," she chuckled.

He beamed at her. For the first time ever since they met, he spoke clearly without any hint of a lisp. "When we first met, you seemed like someone who's been through so much and have been cheated on one too many times in an average person's lifetime. You've had to struggle just to survive another day. It seemed like you had no one to care for you and, well, I want to be that someone who does."

The room went silent, save for the steady beeps from the heart monitor and the low

hum of the florescent lights. Kim broke the silence with her usual, cheery presence when she entered. Once she left after performing another round of routine checkups, there was silence again. Tanya wanted to say something, but all she could do was shudder as the words caught in her throat.

Nick kept his gentle caress on her paw and continued, again, without any hint of a lisp. "I think you'll like Emilio. He likes when his students have that fighting spirit inside them, even if they're slow to learn or don't see it in themselves."

Tanya scoffed. "So long as I don't have to beat the snot out of him because he's being a perv."

He chuckled. "Once you meet him, you'll realize how respectable of a man he is." He glanced at the clock then at his phone before returning his attention to Tanya. "Listen, I have to go for now, but I will be back tomorrow. Give that number a call when you get the chance, okay?"

She nodded but tugged on his claw as he was about to stand. "One more thing before you go, but I need you to move a little closer."

He moved the chair as close as he could to the bed and leaned forward. "Sure. What--"

Out of nowhere, she gently licked his snout and grinned at him. Even though it wasn't visible, she felt her cheeks warm after that sudden affection.

He sat there, stunned for what felt like an hour before getting up and putting the chair back. All he could do was glance at her and wave as he left, but not without showing that he too was flustered. As he left, he tried to give a gentle pull on the door to close it, but slammed it shut by accident.

A storm of emotions began raging through her mind as she laid on the hospital bed after Nick left. She focused her attention on the monotonous beeps of the heart monitor, the hum from the lights above, and her own, heaving breaths to try and calm down. Yet what distracted her the most was a desire to spend her life with Nick and how, despite having those rough scales, his touch comforted her; she even toyed with the thought of how he would act in the bedroom. Sure, he spoke with a unique lisp, but most snakes and lizards spoke like that naturally; it's what he *says* that tells her Nick is trustworthy and completely unlike the stereotypes surrounding his species.

Sleep soon came over her as she meditated on a hopeful future starting tomorrow, both with Nick and this 'Emilio' fellow he mentioned.

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After a month of packing, sorting, avoiding any one-on-one confrontation of her now

ex-boyfriend during the move, all while pointlessly yelling at Nick from the stress, Tanya finally claimed sanctuary with her snake friend. Despite her desire to break up with Diego right to his face, she couldn't find the courage to do so; every time she wanted to get some things from his place, she asked Nick to tag along in case things went awry.

During that month, and during her recovery in the hospital, she grew a fondness for Nick. Interspecies relationships weren't common around these parts, but they weren't rare either. Too many times the tigress had to bite her tongue whenever he was around; she didn't want to risk losing their friendship over something as silly as a crush, nor did she want to seem desperate.

And she had to bite her tongue again before leaving his condo one morning to meet this 'Emilio' at the *Fighting Dog Gym*. Even though it was a Saturday, it was either luck or fate that allowed her to schedule a private lesson with him so soon, plus he was willing to train her even if she didn't own any boxing gear. All she brought with her was a small backpack with a set of workout clothes to change into, a water bottle, and a burning desire to learn.

The gym was on a corner of a strip mall. It was big enough that Tanya could read the large, red and black lettering that read '*Fighting Dog Gym*' next to its logo: a black circle with white, Gothic script lettering that displayed the name, with a snarling Pit Bull head in the middle. She parked her dark green, beat-up Honda Civic, a hand-me-down from Diego, and went inside.

Right before she crossed the road, however, she mewled as her fur stood on end when a large, bright red pickup truck stopped just short of where she was about to cross. The driver honked, startling her again. She picked up her pace and carried on, though glared at the driver inside as she passed the truck. Once she made it to the other side, she stood at the edge of the curb and looked back as the truck sped away, as if the driver was rudely interrupted by pedestrians.

"I hope that wasn't who I think it was," she murmured as it turned a corner. A close call like that didn't help calm her nerves at all; it only providing a shocking moment that distracted her mind for a moment.

She looked up at the logo of the gym, then looked towards the two glass doors and caught glimpses of those inside through the windows. "Ok...here I go. I can do this!" She sucked in a breath and slowly released it as she went inside.

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Several of the facility's patrons walked in and out of the locker rooms, many of whom appeared to have just finished training. Some hobbled, some appeared just fine, and a few had ice packs strapped against an arm or leg or shoulder.

Yet the first thing Tanya noticed upon entering was a leopard and a fox, both of whom were male, sparring in a roped-off ring just past the reception desk. A fit, white Pit Bull with a black patch marking over his eye observed as he stood ringside. She watched the two punch and kick and grapple each other for a while as she cleared any thoughts of heading right back out those glass doors behind her.

To her immediate left, a young, female Rottweiler stood up from her chair, but still attentive to whatever she was doing on the computer behind the desk. The Rottweiler wore a black t-shirt that blended in with her dark brown fur, save for the gym's name in the top-left corner of the front and the gym's logo that took up most of the back, both of which were white.

Tanya placed a paw on the desk. "Um, hi. Is Emilio around?" She hoped her voice didn't crack or stutter when she spoke.

The receptionist looked up. "Oh. Yes, hi." She looked back at what she was doing. "Just give me oooone second here..."

She nodded, drumming her fingers on the strap of her bag, then gripping it. *Something's gonna go wrong; I just know it.*

Soon, the receptionist began searching for something, both on the computer and while shuffling through some files behind the desk.

"So, you're looking for Emilio," she confirmed as she looked back to Tanya for a moment, "Private lesson?"

"Yeah, that's right," she said in a half-excited tone.

"Excellent!" The receptionist smiled. "Just sit tight a moment and I'll see if I can't find him!" She darted away from the computer and out from behind the desk before Tanya could react.

As she left the desk, Tanya noticed she was the only employee who wasn't wearing some pair of shorts, as far as she could tell; along with the shirt, she only wore a pair of tight jeans. The Rottweiler nudged the Pit Bull watching the spar in the ring to get his attention. After what must have been a brief conversation, she darted behind the ring and through another pair of windowed doors.

Tanya gripped the strap of her bag with both paws now, glancing around her immediate area. There was a small MMA shop that took up the entire corner behind the reception desk and was sectioned off by windows that reached from the floor to the ceiling, and a single, windowed door appeared to be the only way inside. However, it was completely dark within, save for one security light in the ceiling. From what she could see through the windows, they only sold fighting-themed apparel rather than

actual fighting gear.

She looked around some more, but no sight of Emilio or the Rottweiler. She watched the leopard and the fox some more, though the fox seemed to have the upper hand as he threw kick after kick against the leopard's side and leg. It was then she noticed the height difference between the two, even if they had the same, strong build. The leopard struggled with taking so many kicks and only tried to dodge them or punch back.

"C'mon man! He's practically *giving* that leg to you!" The Pit Bull yelled.

The leopard took the hint and grabbed for the fox's leg, making him hop on one foot for a second before he shoved him to the canvas and scrambled on top soon after.

"There you go!"

As Tanya watched the spar, the receptionist headed back behind the desk as a short, black and white ferret wearing dark blue shorts and a white undershirt walked up to her, holding out a paw and giving a welcoming smile. "You must be Tanya."

"I take it you must be Emilio, huh?" As she gingerly shook his paw, she noticed he was eye-level with the center of her chest and forced back a snarl. She also noticed the ferret had some greying fur around his snout, though it appeared to be just coming in.

"Yes ma'am!" He kept a hold of her paw, though not once did he look straight ahead at her breasts; after all, he didn't want to scare off a new student. Once he let go, he rested his paw on his hip while casually pointing towards the receptionist. "So, you spoke with Abby here about a couple weeks ago? Said a friend of yours referred you to me?"

Tanya caught herself getting distracted by the spar again. This time, the fox was on top of the leopard, but also got caught in a guillotine choke, frantically punching away at the leopard's head to break free. She blinked and shook her head, turning her attention back to Emilio, who looked at her quizzically. "Oh, yes, sorry."

He looked behind him a moment at the spar going on, then turned back to Tanya with a chuckle. "Kids these days. They'd rather just choke each other out to get it over with than have a good ol' fashion slug-fest; now *that's* a hell of a way to test your endurance, if you ask me." He looked back again a moment then snickered. "So, who referred ya to me, if I may ask?"

"Know any snakes named Nick?"

"Nick, Nick..." He murmured, thinking for a moment. His eyes opened wide once he figured it out. "Oh yeah! I remember him! Tried to get that scaly guy into boxing, naturally, but...he ain't much of a fighter and didn't seem all that interested." He shrugged.

"You're right about that," she chuckled. She tried not to blush at the sound of his name, remembering how sweet he was to her after the breakup and being hospitalized.

"So, want me to show you around then?"

Her tail swayed gently behind her as she nodded. "Yeah, if it's not too much trouble for ya; otherwise, I can wait."

He waved a paw at her. "Don't worry about it. I'm hardly busy to begin with and you're all I got for today." He turned and beckoned for her to follow, starting their tour at the sparring ring behind them.

The two combatants were still tied up on the ground when they arrived, the leopard kept a tight hold on the fox as he continued to punch his way out of the choke. The Pit Bull nearby watched intently, arms crossed, a flat expression on his face. He was dressed much like the rest of the employees and patrons in the gym: red shorts with two white stripes on each side, and a black t-shirt like the one the receptionist wore.

Tanya felt a lump in her throat seeing the Pit Bull's intimidating appearance, even if she was only an inch or two shorter than him. Meanwhile, Emilio walked right up to him and lightly punched the dog's muscular arm, even if he *was* clearly a foot shorter and not as built.

"Yo Tanner, got a minute?" The ferret asked.

The Pit Bull glanced downward towards Emilio and held up a finger. He quickly reached for a roll of cheap toilet paper that sat on the sparring ring's edge then hopped up, grabbing the top rope with his free paw to keep balance. "Alright boys! That's enough!" He barked.

The leopard immediately let go of the fox, who then quickly got off as soon as he was let go. They both panted hard and had noticeable scuff marks all over their bodies, and a thin, crimson line was just above the leopard's right eye, staining the fur around it.

Tanner smirked at his two students. "You boys rest for a bit. Jake," he said as he tossed the roll towards the leopard, who easily caught it, "Get that cleaned up as best you can, but don't use your saliva to clean it like you cats tend to do. Anyway, you're doing great so far, both of you." He hopped off the ring edge as the two combatants nodded, then turned his attention back to Emilio. He glanced at Tanya a moment before looking back down at the ferret, pointing a thumb at her. "What? you wanted to show off your new girlfriend?" He chuckled.

Tanya snarled once Tanner said that and wanted to spit back at him, but decided to keep quiet for now.

"Not every woman I teach is my girlfriend," Emilio hissed as he crossed his arms.

"Okay old timer," Tanner chuckled.

Emilio scoffed then relaxed himself, trying to ignore his teasing. "Anyway, this lovely lady, who is *not* my girlfriend, wanted me to train her in boxing. I figured I'd show her around a bit before we got started."

"Show her around a bit? Ah, I see what ya mean," Tanner teased with a wink.

Emilio growled before continuing, motioning towards Tanner with a paw and glancing towards Tanya. "So, this asshole here owns the place and is the head trainer around here; basically, he's my boss."

"But why did you jus--" Tanya started to ask.

"We understand each other," replied Emilio, cutting her off, "Let's just leave it at that."

She shook her head and blinked. "Okay..." She extended her right paw towards Tanner and tried to stay professional, though would rather punch him square in the jaw right then and there for being a creep. "Uh, yeah, hi, I'm Tanya."

He took her paw and gave it a firm shake, surprised at how firm she shook back. "Tanner. Well, you kinda knew that." He smiled and let go of her paw, pointing a thumb behind him towards the sparring ring. "Listen, I gotta get back to these boys; I need to push them for a tournament coming up. They're doing great but...I know they can do better." He spun around and hopped back on the ring edge, then glanced back at them. "You kids have fun. Tanya, we can deal with paperwork and payment stuff later if you decide on a membership here."

She chuckled and gave a half smile, her tail swaying gently behind her, both from being irritated with Tanner's teasing and from excitement for what will happen during her time here.

"Trust me, as much as I pick on that old ferret," he said, pointing at Emilio while gripping on the top rope, "He's a damn good boxer for his size and I respect him for that; you're in good paws." He smiled, turning his attention back towards the fox and leopard recovering in the ring. "Okay boys! Ready for another round?"

Emilio grinned and crossed his arms a moment, basking at what Tanner just said. He nodded towards the two glass doors just behind the sparring ring that lead into the rest of the gym. "Follow me. There's *a lot* more I need to show ya."

She did what he asked and entered through the glass doors that lead to the rest of the gym. What she found was a larger and more open space than in front; granted, she

knew they could only fit so much, as it was part of a strip mall, but they used their limited space well.

To her immediate right was a caged-off octagon, where a muscular lioness and a lithe white vixen were tangled up in an intense grapple on the canvas. To her immediate left, two long rows of heavy bags and speed bags were lined up with the wall; only two of the speed bags were being used, but most of the heavy bags were taking hard punches and kicks from those who used them.

Beyond that, there was a large, open area that took up most of the space in back; the floor and half-way up the walls were all padded, and several grappling circles were marked off with white tape. She noticed several trainees wrestling each other in this area, some in intense bouts, others trying to get the hang of different moves and transitions.

Just between the octagon and the grappling area, there was a small, open area filled with what anyone would typically find at a gym: various free weights, weight machines, cables, and cardio training machines.

The air throughout the gym felt dusty against her fur and skin, but the smell of the facility overall never bothered her; in fact, she couldn't detect much of the musky odors emanating from the trainees, even when she first walked through those front doors.

Emilio couldn't help but smile as his new student took everything in. He could tell Tanya was excited; her face didn't show it, but her tail swayed behind her and pointed upwards. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he enjoyed seeing the variety of combat styles MMA offered to those who practiced it, even if he was exclusive to boxing.

He cleared his throat, waving his paw around to focus her attention on each area. "So, um, as you can see there's a lot you can do here, as we offer a variety of ways for you to train. If you want to just stay in shape, we have a cardio and strength training area just behind the octagon over there, plus we have some heavy bags and speed bags along that wall across the way. If you're wanting to learn some self-defense or go competitive, obviously, there's the cage and the sparring ring up front, along with our grappling area way in the back there; however, those we require you take private lessons or be in a class with one of us trainers to use those areas." He chuckled. "We can't just let *anyone* use those, ya know?"

Tanya nodded. "Right, right." As she looked around and watched the intense workouts and spars from the trainees, she felt a pit form in her stomach as she struggled to take it all in. She inhaled a deep breath, then let it out slow. *I'm...I'm gonna do this...no turning back. No more being scared. Who knows? You might pick up boxing right away and come out as a damn good fighter. No, no, just...slow down girl; you're new to this. If Nick trusts Emilio, you*

should too. I mea--

"Hey," said the ferret as he tapped her on the arm, looking up at her, "You okay, kid?"

"H-Huh?" She muttered and shook her head, giving her attention to the ferret again. "Oh sorry," she stammered, "I just um...spaced out a bit is all."

"Well don't be spacing out during training or else I might have to knock your head a few times until you pay attention," he teased.

"But you're shorter than me..."

"Hey now!" He reached his arm up, a fist lined up square with her cheek, making Tanya's eyes go wide as she stared at the fist. "Never underestimate a four-time champion who's bested plenty of other guys taller than him." He then lowered his arm slowly, watching the tigress' wide eyes follow it downward. "Now," he continued in a friendlier tone, "Let me show you where the women's lockers are and I'll let you get changed. Savvy?"

Tanya nodded, silently following the ferret out of the main gym and back out front.

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Tanya looked herself over in the mirror after changing into her workout clothes. She smiled at how the maroon shorts that went half-way down her thighs combined with her light-blue sports bra showed off her white ventral fur and stripes, yet she frowned as soon as she put both paws over her belly and pinched it, despite her overall fit appearance. She growled as her ears splayed. *No! I'm not gonna stoop that low about myself! I look great already for God's sake!* Refusing to allow any more insecurities plague her mind, she darted away from the mirror, put on one of Diego's cutoff t-shirts he loaned her long ago, placed the rest of her belongings in her locker, grabbed her water bottle, and darted out of the locker room.

Emilio waited right outside, though was watching the next round of the spar between the leopard and the fox, both combatants having an intense back-and-forth bout.

She stood next to the ferret after filling her bottle, feeling both excited and fearful at what she saw.

As he watched the spar, he caught an orange and black figure that appeared next to him out of the corner of his eye, then turned his head to look at it fully. "Looking great kid," he commented with a nod, "And...that's all you brought with ya?"

"Hm? O-Oh yes," she stammered.

"I see...I know you mentioned to Abby over the phone that you didn't have any gear,

which is perfectly fine, but do you have a mouth guard by any chance?"

She thought for a second then slapped her forehead. "Dammit! I *just* realized I forgot that!"

"Ah don't worry about it," he said, waving a paw, "You won't need it for today, but be sure to bring it by next week. If you don't happen to have one, they're not hard to find and you can find a good one for about three or four bucks, at best."

"Thanks," she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Also, get some wraps for your paws too. You can get the straps, the ones where you actually wrap around your paws, or there are ones you just slip on, tighten up, and you're good to go." As he said this, he motioned through both methods with one paw around the other. "As for the rest of the gear, like gloves, trunks, equipment for training at home, higher quality mouth guard and wraps, all that stuff is on your own if you can hash it out. I can loan you the gym's boxing gear for today and going forward, but I want you to at least have your own mouth guard and wraps for next week and, eventually, have your own set of gear by the time we're about a month or so into your training regimen. Capiche?"

She nodded as he spoke, yet felt her stomach sink when he mentioned she will need her own full set of gear sooner than she thought. *Oi...I'm gonna need to hit the job search harder later today. I can't believe I haven't heard anything back yet, even if I did call those places numerous times.*

Emilio cocked his eyebrow, catching her staring off again. "Something wrong kiddo?"

She shook her head upon hearing her trainer. "Uh, nothing. Nothing." *Just...deal with it after this. No distractions.*

He clicked his teeth and shook his head. "You're lucky we haven't started yet."

"Ugh! Sorry! I don't know why I've been doing that a lot lately," she growled, her orange and black-striped tail lashing behind her.

"Well let's go then so you don't stare off into space again," he joked, motioning for her to follow. He headed towards the glass door to the other section again, but turned around on his heels as he kept walking backwards. "We may have to steal that ring from those boys at some point, but follow me first." He opened the door by putting his weight on the push bar with his back and leaned into the other area, spinning himself around so he wouldn't fall. He held the door open for his trainee as she made her way in.

"See all that cardio stuff just on the other side of the octagon?" He asked as he pointed. He didn't wait for her to answer when he continued. "I want you to either run, bike,

elliptical, whatever you feel comfortable doing for at least twenty minutes or so to get yourself warmed up before we get into the nitty gritty of things. I'll get us some stuff and steal a spot where we can move around and throw some punches." He threw a couple light punches towards her in a playful manner, though didn't make contact.

She flinched and stepped back, getting in the first stance she thought of as if she anticipated fighting Emilio right then and there.

"Heh. At least you have good reflexes," he chuckled, "Anyway, either I come grab ya or you come find me. Alright?"

Tanya relaxed herself. "Okay. I used to bike around town all the time before...life happened," she cleared her throat and headed over to the cardio area, "I'll, um, get warmed up then."

He waved at her as she went to go warm up, but sighed seeing her choke up like that. *I'll be damned if I didn't try to help you out with whatever it is you're going through, bud...* He went to go get their gear, trying not to dwell on what was bothering his newest student.

* * *

"One!"

Pap!

"Two!"

Pap!

"Two!"

Pap!

"One! Two!"

Pap pap!

"One! One! Two!"

Pap pap pap!

"Jab!"

"Gah..." *Pap!*

"Ooo, good counter."

Right from the get-go, Tanya felt exhilarated during training, even if Emilio drilled her through jabs, dodges, and counters for now. Her adrenaline rush went into overdrive. For once in her life, it wasn't because she was hiding or running away from an attacker, though her arms felt heavy from holding up the sparring gloves close to her face for so long, and her knees and abs ached from crouching so low.

Emilio had the training mitts on, calling out which jab or combo of jabs he wanted her to throw, occasionally throwing a slow one himself to keep her focused yet give her enough time to react for a dodge. When he did so, he encouraged her to counter and not to worry about hitting him in the face on accident.

Because Tanner seemed to monopolize the sparring ring out front with his pair of competitive students, and Susan had her all-female MMA class in the octagon today, Emilio had to settle for a corner of the grappling area. It was the only other open area suitable enough for him and Tanya to move around without bumping into anyone, and the padded wall provided at least one boundary.

He called out a few more jabs and combos before he put his mitted paws down.

Tanya followed suit with her gloves. She could feel her mouth dry as she let out panting breaths, thankful to finally have a chance to rest for a bit.

"Whew! You catch on pretty quick, kid!"

She took a moment to catch her breath, though grinned and huffed. "...Thanks."

"Almost gave *me* a workout," he chuckled, "But like I said before, while your ones and twos aren't difficult to throw, they're great for closing the gap between you and your opponent, plus you can get back in your stance quickly after throwing them." As he said this, he got in a boxing stance and slowly extended his arm as if he was throwing a straight jab, then snapped it back into its resting position. "See what I mean," he said as he repeated the motion with a cross jab and another straight.

She did the same thing, going through the two punches again, though picked up speed and varied which of the two she threw. Before she knew it, she shuffled closer and closer to Emilio, who managed to get his mitts up in time to block her punches.

"Woah! Woah! Easy there, tiger," he chuckled.

"Oh my God! I'm--I'm sorry, I just got so--"

"So into it you didn't want to stop?" He smirked and cocked an eyebrow.

She panted, though felt her face flush. She chuckled while aimlessly tapping her gloves together in response, not wanting to admit how much she's been enjoying this.

"Heh, don't think of it as a bad thing, Tanya; I want to see that fire in you burn wild."

"Trust me, I do have a lot of it in me after...well, what happened about a month ago."

Emilio pursed his lips as his ears flattened when he saw his trainee getting distracted again. Normally he would give a hard jab at his students when they did this or don't keep their gloves up, but Tanya was a different case. Instead, he nudged her chest with just enough force to get her attention, but nothing too hard. "Hey, we still have four more punches to get through today," he murmured, dropping his hard, gruff tone for a moment.

She jerked her head to attention and immediately got back in a loose stance. "Shit! Sorry. Sorry."

"Just one quick thing: *If* you want to, I'm willing to meet you somewhere after this if you want to talk about whatever it is that's been on your mind. I'm free the whole afternoon and evening."

She nodded, relaxing her stance some more. "I would like that..."

"We can make plans later. But first," he said as he raised both mitts with a grin, "One. One. Two."

Pap pap pap!

After drilling a few more jabs, Emilio then showed her how to throw hook shots and uppercuts, as well as aiding Tanya with her stance and form as necessary. They continued to drill through all six punches, occasionally working on dodging and countering maneuvers. Not surprisingly, they got to that point where they began to circle and move around a lot more, as if they were sparring rather than drilling. Thankfully they didn't bump into or trip over the grapplers training on the mats nearby and agreed on claiming the sparring ring or octagon next time, if possible.

Tanya felt every muscle in her body from this hell of a workout. Sometimes Emilio would call punches one at a time, sometimes combos of two or three, and other times he'd call them out rapid fire while also letting her know when to dodge or duck. With her trainer being so short, she had trouble keeping a good stance from having to adapt for the height difference, mainly on the hook shots and uppercuts. Her lungs heaved with every panting breath as every muscle in her body ached, yet the adrenaline rush pushed her to keep going.

After some more drills, Emilio took the mitts off. "So, you think you got all that down, kid?"

"I think so." She began to try taking her gloves off, but Emilio had to help her in the end.

She took the hand wraps off as well, flexing her fingers afterward. "Not surprised these feel a little stiff," she chuckled.

"You'll get used to it." He set all the gear off to the side. "Now, what I like to do after training are some push-up exercises and some ab exercises, then we can stretch out after that. Sound good?"

"Yep. Gonna feel all this once I sit down," she chuckled.

"It'll feel good; trust me," he said with a smile, "Now then, push-ups first."

Tanya struggled with the push-ups due to her lack of upper body strength and her sore arms from training, but Emilio encouraged her none the less; some of the common ab exercises, like crunches, weren't as difficult, but the Russian twists proved otherwise. He assured her as they cooled down and stretched out that she would get stronger and more dexterous if she kept this up, and if she was still willing to learn and have a desire to improve.

Tanya couldn't have asked for a better person to teach her how to fight. He worked her hard, even on the first day, but she could tell Emilio was the patient type. She doubted she would get the same treatment if she trained under Tanner; to her, the Pit Bull seemed interested in teaching others to fight strictly for competitive reasons rather than for fitness or self-defense. She brought this up as her and Emilio stretched and cooled down, and he confirmed her assumptions about the owner. They kept to small talk while they finished up, neither of them wanting to bring up her issues; it was as if they had a hive-mind to keep deep, personal conversation outside of the gym.

Tanya felt her whole body ache afterward, even as she helped Emilio put their gear away, but still felt that post-workout high. As they headed back to the lockers, she promised him she would try to get some of her own gear by next week. They were about to split off to their appropriate locker rooms when she gripped his shoulder.

"Hey, Emilio?"

He looked to her, unsure of what she was doing. "Yeah, kid?"

"T-Thanks," she shuddered as she looked to him for a moment. She quickly let him go and headed into the women's locker room, hoping she didn't just make things awkward between them right off the bat.

Emilio just shrugged and chuckled, heading into the men's locker room.

Anytime Tanya. Anytime.

* * *

She woke from a nap fifteen minutes before she was supposed to meet Emilio after training. Panicking, she changed into the first pair of shorts and whatever shirt she could find and tried not to floor it from Nick's place. When she arrived at the diner her and Emilio agreed to meet up at, Tanya almost forgot to lock her car after getting out and darting across the parking lot, which was also the lot for the Mexican restaurant next door.

But one thing stuck in her mind as her eyes darted about the half-full lot while she made her way inside: *Why did that red truck not follow me all the way here? I could've sworn that was the same one that almost hit me at the gym.*

She pulled on the door handle, a small chime rang from the bell hanging above the door frame in response. As she entered, she could smell all the scents of grilled, griddled, and fried foods in the diner's atmosphere. Its interior was a small and narrow space, yet just wide enough for the fat, old goat taking orders to comfortably fit through. One side was full of round bar stools, the other full of booths; the general appearance and decor was reminiscent of a classic 50's theme, though with a few pro wrestling photos hung up in various places on the walls.

She immediately scanned the near-empty diner and soon found a familiar, short, black and white ferret with a beige newsy cap sitting at the farthest booth from the entrance; he still wore that same white shirt and dark blue shorts from earlier today. He sipped on a hot beverage when he noticed her walk in, then flagged her down.

Without paying much attention to where she walked, she darted towards Emilio, though had to squeeze by the old goat while blurting several apologies to both him and the customers he was serving as she passed.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," she said as she sat down across from Emilio. Thankfully she didn't have to worry about bringing a purse or bag with her this time; it was then she thought about keeping a couple pairs of Nick's pants, only for the fact they have roomy pockets.

"This ain't training, Tanya, just a casual visit between a coach and his student; I'm just glad you made it."

"Thanks." She had her paws firm in her lap, noticing there were no menus at their table. The goat didn't seem to pay much attention to them either as he serviced other customers.

Emilio sipped on his drink, what she could now smell as tea, when he too noticed the goat wasn't paying much attention to the new customer that just arrived. "Here," he said to Tanya, "Let me handle this. Aaron tends to act...well, let's just say he tends to act old." He stood on the seat of the booth and called out to him. "Hey! Ya old Billy-goat!"

Aaron shot a look towards the voice, his brown, narrow-pupiled eyes glared at who just

called him that. But once he saw it was Emilio, his bushy eyebrows relaxed. "I'll be over there in a minute, shorty," he sighed. Turning back to the customers he was chatting with, he quickly gave them their bill and hobbled on over.

Tanya didn't want to show it, but she felt more and more intimidated as the goat lumbered closer to their table, his strides made a heavy *clop* with each step he took. Before she knew it, he was right in front of them, towering above the duo as the dirty apron that draped over his belly was just inches away from the edge of the table. His black, bushy eyebrows popped from his brown eyes and brown markings on his face. His markings covered his entire head, save for a thick, white stripe that ran down the middle of his face, ending in a white tuft of fur and the bottom of his chin. His horns on his head were long and curved back, though not in a full curl, yet they complimented his floppy ears quite well. The rest of his body that wasn't covered up by his dirty clothing was all pure, white fur.

The old goat looked at Emilio, then back at Tanya, raising a bushy eyebrow as he pulled out a pad of blank order tickets and a pen. He pointed to Tanya with it while looking at Emilio. "This another girlfriend of yours?"

"She's not my--ugh! Why does everyone assume that of me?"

"Because you're secretly an old pervert like me?" Aaron chuckled.

Tanya just groaned and rolled her eyes. *This again...*

Emilio eyed him up, turning his whole self towards him. "You damn well know that's not true. And if you call me that one more time, I *will* beat your ass right then and there; no matter the time or place."

"Alright alright...was just teasing is all." He put the pen to the pad. "Want anything else, Em?"

He relaxed himself before responding, though still gave Aaron the stink eye. "Nah...I think I'm good for now."

Without a word, he turned to Tanya. As soon as he did, he gave her a warm smile and was quiet for a short moment, as if he were drinking in her beauty right then and there. He cleared his throat as his short tail fluff flicked. "And what would you like, darlin'?"

Tanya felt as if Aaron's presence slowly pushed her further and further into her booth, and she felt her tail clam up as well, even if it was already crammed between her back and the booth. She was used to guys her age hitting on her all the time, but not older men who were, more than likely, married, or be called 'darlin'.' She straightened herself back up, but only half-glanced at Aaron when she spoke. "Um...d-do you have a menu I can look at by any chance?"

"Sure!" He turned around and pulled one from a rack on the bar behind him, tossing it in front of her. It was a simple, laminated, one-page menu printed on both sides, with the name '*Bockmann's Diner*' written on the top of the side listing all the entrees, weekly specials, and a few typical breakfast items. The other side listed sides, appetizers, and beverages. "You want one too, Em?"

He shrugged. "Why not. I don't think I've ever had any of your food here before, to be perfectly honest."

Aaron chuckled as he tossed another menu in front of Emilio. "No, but I swear you're gonna buy out all my tea soon enough."

He snickered back at the goat, glancing at the menu.

"I'll give you two a few minutes to decide." Aaron hobbled away from them and headed towards the back kitchen, bumping and almost knocking over everything on his way there while cussing up a storm and yelling at someone named 'Kevin.'

* * *

They waited for Aaron to return with their order, though Tanya could stay patient for so long. She looked behind her, specifically towards the kitchen; no sign of the old goat. She growled, feeling her tail thump in its cramped confines, but a part of her hoped Aaron wouldn't linger too long when he *does* give them their order. "Does it always take this long? I'm so hungry."

Emilio took the last sip of his tea; a disappointed look formed on his face when he saw his cup was nothing but leaf grinds. "Well, it's only Aaron, his wife, Liz, and their son, Kevin who run this joint. I don't understand why they never hire any help."

"That's one thing I never understood about small businesses. Like, how do they survive if they don't grow with their popularity?"

Emilio glanced around at some of the decor, specifically the pro wrestling paraphernalia and photos. "Guessing their nephew has something to do with that," he said, pointing at a photo near their table. Under it, a brass-plated plaque read '*Thank you for helping our little business when we struggled.*'

Tanya looked to where he pointed. Her cheeks warmed when she noticed how handsome the pro wrestling goat appeared.

The goat in the photo looked like a younger version of Aaron, though had yellow eyes instead of brown. He was more athletically built too, and only wore black briefs with a light-blue, silver-trimmed flame pattern, complimented with black wrist bands and kick pads with a light-blue trim. Everything about the photo made it clear he wasn't afraid to

show off his body and strength: the pose, the cocky grin on his face, and his revealing wrestling gear made it clear he wasn't one to back down from a fight.

Tanya caught herself staring at the photo, quickly averting herself from it. "Well, he um...looks...nice," she stammered.

Emilio chuckled. "You're not the first to think Jamie looks 'nice.'"

"Oh shut up." Her voice grew louder as she spoke. "It's not like I broke up with a guy recently and feeling like my life's falling apart or anything."

He went quiet, though panicked as he attempted to shush her when she raised her voice.

"Just had to get sucked into a lie. And what do I get? A two-week's stay in the hospital because I'm a coward!"

The few other guests peered over to them for a moment, then carried on with their business.

Emilio extended his paw to her. "Tanya, calm down, okay?"

"No, you don't understand, I--"

"Tanya!" He ordered with a slight hiss, slamming a fist on the table. "Please..." It was then he noticed Aaron returning with their food, to which he sat up straighter. "Our food's coming. I'll try to shoo Aaron away as quick as I can once he gets here so we can chat."

She exhaled deep through her nose, then murmured a hushed "Okay."

* * *

He kept quiet as he ate his pancakes, finishing off the last of them as Tanya finished her story about her history with Diego. She also mentioned the trip to the hospital, how she met Nick and her history with him, a previous boyfriend before Diego, and the suspicious red truck that might be stalking her. As she explained her situation, he was already putting the pieces together as to why she wanted to box; this wasn't his first rodeo with teaching a woman boxing, and it won't be the last. What *did* surprise him was how intense the abuse was, according to Tanya's perspective of her former relationship. He was used to hearing his female students share a history of getting slapped and shoved around by boyfriends, husbands, exes, and male family members, and that was the general extent of it; Tanya was a rare case.

He began his piece once he figured she was done with her story. "First off, keep that

snake fellow in your life. Nick's a great guy, as you have experienced."

She giggled and felt her cheeks flush at the mention of his name. As Emilio spoke, she took small bites of her breakfast platter, which was lukewarm by now.

He chuckled before continuing. "Now, about your dealings with that Diego fellow: I've heard all that before from other female students. Am I'm correct in assuming that's why you wanted to take up boxing?"

She nodded.

"Alright. Now, here's the real question: Did you want to take up boxing so you could get revenge? Or do you want to defend yourself, either from him or anyone else who attacks you?"

She paused her chewing when he asked that, then let the question sink in as she finished her bite. She put her paw to her chin and thought about it, staring blankly at another photo of Jamie performing a dropkick that happened to be in her view. Eventually she gave her response. "Do you want the honest answer or what you want to hear?"

"Honest answer." He folded his paws under his chin as he looked to her intently.

"Alright then...both," she sighed.

"Hmph. I thought as much, but I wasn't sure."

She looked at him quizzically. "Is that a problem?"

He let out a long sigh and rubbed his face, resting both arms on the table. He paused a moment to collect his thoughts. *Here we go again.*

"Tanya...if you wanted to learn how to box for self-defense, fitness, or, if it comes down to it, you want to go competitive, that's totally kosher with me. If, maybe, you want to expand on your skills and learn kickboxing or MMA from one of the other trainers, you can do that; I've found that many of my students learn boxing as a base before moving onto other martial arts." He jammed a finger at her, his voice becoming cold and scolding. "But I refuse to teach *anyone* who seeks revenge or just wants to hurt others for the fun of it outside of the ring. If I find out you attacked your ex-boyfriend out of spite, well, don't let the door hit your ass on the way out. Comprende?"

The tigress sulked in her booth as her ears and whiskers drooped. The few accidental hits she took during training earlier today, the beatings she took from Diego during their relationship, all those felt like gentle taps compared to the cold sting of her trainer's words. It didn't matter if he was shorter than her; she dared not look at him

because she knew he was right. This was an opportunity to better herself, to make herself stronger, and every part of her didn't want it thrown away because she couldn't let go of the past. She waited for Emilio to say more, clamming up in her booth and feeling ashamed.

He lowered his paw and his gaze once he noticed how Tanya reacted. He sighed deeply. *You are a complicated one, Tanya. I can't fix everything for you.* As he was about to get up to comfort her, he noticed Aaron lumber over to their table again, this time with their bill.

"Enjoyed everything you two--oh..." Aaron was taken aback once he noticed the cold atmosphere around them. He scrambled for their bill and set it on their table. "I'll just leave this here and you two can pay for it when you're ready."

Emilio took it, gave it a once-over, then set it back down. "Thanks my friend."

Aaron nodded and left, his lips pursed and his eyes wide once he turned around from the tense situation.

"I'll take care of lunch, okay Tanya?"

She half-looked at him and nodded, though turned her eyes away from him again.

"Look," he began, gentler this time, "I am serious about what I said: I refuse to teach anyone how to fight if they just want revenge or want to harm others. Who cares about Diego? That jerk's in the past and you're done with him. If you run into him one day and he decides to start trouble, by all means, kick his ass. But don't be on the offensive if you encounter him, alright?"

She looked towards him, slowly.

"Can you stay on the defensive for me? If Diego shows up?"

She half-smiled and nodded.

"Okay," he chuckled. "Well, same time next week, then?"

"Yeah," she replied, her voice soft and quiet.

"Good. Now, remember, I want you to at least get yourself a mouth guard and your own set of hand wraps. May have to look around, but you can find some good ones for cheap." He hopped out of his booth and grabbed the bill, heading for the register. Tanya stayed in tow until they exited the diner and parted ways.

* * *

Weeks passed, and training with Emilio became a part of Tanya's weekend routine. Sometimes they would meet at *Bockmann's Diner*, sometimes at a local bar and grill called *The Frozen Tide*, other times at a local coffee shop called *Badger Brothers*. Because he had so few trainees compared to the other trainers at the gym, Emilio could make the time to know his students on a personal level; that always made training more enjoyable and special for him. Tanya grew fond of the ferret because of these meets, not as a potential lover, but more as a father figure or older relative she could look up to.

As she trained, she noticed how toned her body became and how much her skills and endurance improved. While she had lots of fun sparring with Emilio, despite the height disadvantage, it was more fun sparring with other trainees who never learned strict boxing.

She also began to exercise at Nick's daily, however she could. Her anxieties haunted her less and less, and she noticed how less often she spaced out during training because of that.

After almost a year into her training, Emilio noticed her confidence improved as well, not only in her skills but in her general outlook on life. It was then he offered to have her train for competition, which she agreed to without question. Of course, with her being a novice in the amateur boxing scene, she knew she *needed* to put in a lot of work to have a shot at the championship. With that new outlook she's had on her life lately, she told herself she wouldn't let losing a match get to her head; it would only be an opportunity to see where she could improve.

Before long, it was the day before Tanya's first fight, which happened to fall on a Sunday; that made it perfect for her to train harder than ever at their last training session before the meet. Her and Emilio agreed to spend extra time at the gym on this day in particular, especially in the sparring ring out front; he made sure to put in a reservation request beyond the required one-month notice.

When she stepped into the sparring ring, memories of her first spar flooded her mind as she waited for Emilio to enter. It was the scariest moment she ever experienced: the ring's placement out front, close to the front door and locker rooms, and in full view for any passersby to watch her get knocked down over and over by an opponent half her height. But now, she reveled in it and got comfortable anytime she would step in that ring, and it didn't matter who was in the impromptu audience; all that mattered was her, her opponent, and whichever of the trainers were watching.

Once her and Emilio were both ready and gloved up, they went through the basics and, soon enough, they were both in an all-out spar; she even managed to knock him down a few times. Both of them were giving it their all, even making each other bleed a little with how hard they sparred. After what had to be their most intense sparring session yet, Tanner grabbed Emilio by the shoulder before he could enter the men's locker

room, though not before giving him a chance to exit the ring and clean up his bloody lip.

"Hey, Emilio. Can I talk to ya for a sec?"

He turned around, nudging the Pit Bull's paw off his shoulder, more in annoyance at the gesture and not towards Tanner himself.

"Go ahead."

"Listen, um..." Tanner crossed his arms, trying to look serious, yet unsure how to form his words. "Don't take this the wrong way but, um...if it weren't for Tanya, with how hard I've seen her train with you, and even giving *you* a run for your money...I, uh, I was debating on letting you go."

Emilio growled low, but tried his best to remain calm and hear his boss out.

"I know how much you need this job; that's why I kept you on. Sad to say, not many folks want to take up boxing nowadays, as you may know."

He crossed his arms as he looked up at his boss when he stated the obvious. "I have noticed, yes; personally, I'm happy with anyone who's willing to learn from me, then carry what I teach them into other martial arts. Seriously, you *really* gotta tell those boys to keep their arms up." He chuckled as he remembered the few times Tanya sparred with a few of Tanner's students.

Tanner growled as he glared at the ferret, but sighed. "Believe me, I tell them *constantly*, but they don't listen to me. I guess they enjoy getting punched in the face over and over."

Emilio grinned. "Send them my way sometime; I'll literally hammer that in if I have to."

"Well, if Tanya doesn't mind..."

"Oh, she'll enjoy it; trust me."

It was then Tanya walked out of the women's locker rooms, changed, showered, and ready to head out. She was about to speak with Emilio, though stayed back a few paces after she saw he was talking with Tanner.

He looked over Emilio's shoulder, noticing her aloofness. "Oh, it's cool, Tanya; we're just chatting."

She grinned and stood next to Emilio, leaning in when she spoke. "Hey, I'm gonna head out. Wanna meet somewhere to fuel up later?"

He grinned and looked to her. "You bet your ass, champ! I know for sure I'm gonna be feeling that all week...oi..." He rolled his shoulders and rubbed his back. "I'll call you later, alright?"

She beamed at him, gave him a quick hug, then darted out the door.

Tanner chuckled at what just happened. "You're such a lady's man, dude."

Emilio scowled when he said that. "Really."

"I'm serious! You work very well with women trainees and our female staff here. I know we still have more male members and staff, but...wow..." He looked to the side and murmured. "Why the hell was I thinking of firing you..." He shook his head. "Forget what I said. You go clean up, chat with Tanya, and tell her I wish her good luck at the competition." He gave a smile, though it came off more awkward than what he intended. He turned around and left to check in with the other trainers around the gym.

"You're...so weird to work for sometimes," he chuckled as he shook his head, finally able to enter the locker room after yet another odd conversation with his boss. *I'm just happy you're willing to keep me on...Thank you, Tanner.*

* * *

The skies were clear, and the morning sun shone bright behind her as she sped down the highway. To her surprise, traffic was minimal along the current stretch she was on, as she noticed only a few cars and two semi-trucks so far. Granted, it *was* an early Sunday morning and not a holiday weekend.

After training yesterday, Emilio mentioned she needed to be at the Heritage Arena hours early to get signed in and give the organizers enough time to do weigh-ins and medicals, regardless if she did that yesterday. But she knew they were both thinking the same thing after her and Emilio parted ways back at the gym: Yes, her confidence improved dramatically, yet her stomach churned as soon as she entered the locker room, and she felt her nerves creeping up on her ever since then.

At least for now, she took comfort knowing she would be on cruise control for a while. The radio in her car blared whatever hard rock music the DJ put on; his scruffy, manly voice and the tunes he played were the only company she had with her. Yet all of that wasn't enough to keep out her anxieties about the upcoming competition.

"Shoulda had Emilio come with me," she grumbled, "Ugh! Why do I have to be so stubborn!" She gave herself a moment to breath. "Ok...you got this, girl. You know your stuff. Whatever happens, just...enjoy the moment. You got this."

It was then she happened to glance in her rear-view mirror and noticed an eerie,

familiar sight.

"Are. You. Kidding me."

The same red truck that almost ran her over on her first day at the gym. The same red truck that just so happened to be in the parking lot next to *Bockmann's Diner*. The same red truck that followed her several times to work, training, and has passed by Nick's place on more than one occasion.

And it approached her fast, then began tailgating her.

She didn't slow down, nor did she want to decipher who the driver was through the glass. A quick glance at her navigation app on her phone indicated she had about 40 miles to go until her exit to Villa Park, giving her plenty of time to ditch the creep.

Taking a deep breath, she looked in her right mirror.

No one in the other lane or coming up past the truck.

She flicked on her blinker and merged, hoping the truck would speed past her.

It did, but just enough to match her speed, as if they were neck and neck in a race. She couldn't tell how long or how far they drove together in this way, and all she could hope for now is her upcoming exit.

She glanced over. What, or rather, who she saw made any exposed fur from her clothes stand on end. Her tail through the opening in the back of the seat thrashed about as she let out a low growl.

She slowed down after glancing back at her phone to check how close her exit was, letting out a deep breath to calm herself.

The truck sped on and right past her exit as she merged onto the off-ramp.

"Just let him go, Tanya," she sighed, relieved that Diego wouldn't be at the competition; yet, a part of her wished he would be, if only to prove to him she's no longer afraid.

* * *

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen to our fourth match of the evening! Our young talents tonight have shown a lot of fire, and I'm certain these next two will keep it burning."

A red fox sporting a dark-gray suit and a golden tie continued to shout into the microphone to butter up the crowd. He looked at the fight card in his paw to announce the next two combatants.

"In the red corner, hailing from the small town of Dekalb, Illinois, standing at five foot five and weighing 147 pounds, please welcome our first newcomer of the night: Tanya Smirnov!"

The crowd applauded and cheered in one, harmonious roar as soon as the fox announced the next combatant.

Tanya bounced on her toes, donning the standard gear for these amateur boxing matches: shiny trunks, a sleeveless shirt with her last name printed on the upper back, headgear, and gloves, all red with white and black accents and brand labels. She pounded her gloves and played with her mouth guard with her tongue as the fox announced her name. When he did, she looked around at the crowd and gave a fake smile, avoiding any direct eye contact with her opponent.

She remembered when her and Emilio first arrived. While they scrambled with the organizers to get her registered, weighed-in, matched-up, and her needing to calm down an angry ferret the whole time, they sized up the competition whenever they could. Some of the entrants were new to the competitive scene, like her, and some have done this time and time again; yet Emilio's efforts to get her matched up with another novice was all for naught after her would-be opponent dropped out at the last minute.

The fox's ears drooped as he read the fight card, but perked up again to keep his upbeat showmanship before he announced her opponent. "In the blue corner, hailing from Chicago, Illinois, standing at five foot seven and weighing at 151 pounds of pure, feline muscle, you all know her as 'Mama J,' please give it up for Monifa Jackson!"

The lioness in the opposite corner wore similar gear as Tanya, only blue with white and black. She jumped up and down on both feet, shadowboxing some as the announcer screamed her name in the microphone and as the crowd responded the same way as before. She was more built than Tanya, if her powerful, taught arms were any indication, the muscles bulging out through her golden fur. Monifa and her coach, a chubby yet muscular female badger standing ringside, grinned and stared down Tanya and Emilio as Monifa's tail flicked with anticipation for the fight ahead.

Meanwhile, Nick slithered through the officials and volunteers working and filming ringside to meet up with Emilio, his forked tongue flicking every so often as he tasted the warm, moist air of the arena. He showed his VIP badge to anyone that gave him suspicious looks, though he suspected security still didn't trust him regardless.

Emilio turned to Nick once he noticed the snake in his peripherals. "Hey man! Glad you could make it!"

Tanya glanced behind her at the commotion and smiled as best she could with the mouth guard and headgear. "Oh my God, Nick! I'm so glad you could make it!" She didn't know if he could hear her between the guard and the noise in the arena.

"Sorry I'm late," he said with his noticeable lisp and hiss, "Let's just say I'm not surprised no one here trusts snakes, so it took me some time to get my badge." He held up the VIP badge around his neck. "I hope I didn't miss anything."

"Fight's about to start," said Emilio as he looked ahead towards the ring. "Okay Tanya! Head in the game!"

"Right, right." She let out a breath and pounded her gloves again as the fox announced the referee for this match.

The tall buck wore a white polo shirt tucked into a pair of black dress pants. He stood in a neutral corner before heading to the center of the ring after the fox announced him, motioning for the combatants to join him.

As Tanya headed to the middle of the ring, the announcer stopped her a moment as he made his exit, putting his muzzle close to her ear. "Sorry about this kiddo," he murmured as he patted her shoulder. He stepped out of the ring as she continued forward, her nerves getting to her again.

The hell did he mean by that?

The referee put his hoofed hands on each of their backs, leaning in enough for them to hear but not risk poking either of them with his antlers. "Alright ladies, we'll have four rounds, two minutes each, one-minute rest period between rounds. Keep things above the belt and no dirty tricks. Good luck." He patted them on the back before stepping back some, lowering himself to keep a close eye on the fighters.

They both got in their stances and tapped gloves.

DING!

The fighters circled each other, dodging and weaving to try and fake each other out, seeing which of them would strike first. After a few seconds of this, Monifa aimed two left jabs to Tanya's face, darting forward as she did so to close the gap between them.

Tanya grimaced and put her arms up to block, but noticed how close together they were already. She kept up her defense as Monifa threw several combos of powerful jabs, dodging between each one to see if she would hit back. Ever so slowly, she was pushed back more and more as she growled.

"Find an opening! Find an opening!" Emilio yelled.

"You almost got her on the ropes, girl!" Yelled the badger.

C'mon! You got this! Tanya watched for Monifa's next throw and dodge it appropriately, countering with several combos of jabs of her own to try pushing back.

"There you go!" Emilio yelled.

Monifa only took a few of those hits and ducked under a jab, aiming several right hooks to Tanya's ribs.

She hissed at each of those rib shots, then suddenly side-stepped out of the way. She threw a few jabs to Monifa's face, though kept herself bobbing and weaving between each set.

Monifa got her arms up quickly, hardly flinching or backing up from the attacks as she stood her ground. Though Tanya couldn't push her back as much, she did feel power in those punches. She ducked under a jab, countering with one of her own, followed by another short combo, this time to Tanya's chest.

Tanya groaned and lowered herself to protect her chest from those punches, side-stepping out of the way again.

Monifa wanted to back her up more and more, gaining ground again as she kept her attack on Tanya.

She knew the ropes were just behind her, but stood her ground as best as she could. Every so often, she threw a jab back or went to dodge, but she needed to keep her ground for now.

Monifa didn't let up. Once she was close enough, she threw more jabs to Tanya's face, then two left hooks to her ribs, followed by a right uppercut to her solar plexus.

"Yeah! Give it to her good!" The badger yelled.

Tanya did not want to get backed up against the ropes, but was too busy blocking those jabs when she noticed a moment too late that her body was getting beat on. She breathed hard through her nose and threw a few, hard jabs right back at Monifa, if only to get the fight back to the center of the ring.

"Good job! Keep away from those ropes!"

Monifa grinned, getting her arms up as Tanya pummeled them, though the force of those jabs did make her back up. Once she figured they moved far enough away from the ropes, she side-stepped and weaved about, throwing a feigned jab every so often.

Tanya did the same once she managed to give herself some more room. She wanted to show this feline what she's got and threw several jabs while charging forward.

Her eyes widened as she blocked those jabs, yet was forced to step back again. Monifa had to admit it: this newbie's got guts and tenacity; a part of her wanted to give her this

round, at least.

Once she figured she was close enough, Tanya weaved a bit before slamming two right hooks for her opponent's ribs to even the score.

Emilio slammed his paws on the ring edge, even if he was about a head taller than the canvas. "Finish strong! Finish strong!"

Nick remained quiet, though a smile curled on his lips as he watched the fight.

She hissed at those rib shots, side-stepping out of the way right after. *I'll give ya that, cat!* She threw a few more jabs but immediately stopped once she heard the bell ring and felt the buck prying them apart.

Tanya kept her arms up, but saw Monifa stop her attacks once the bell rang. She kept her glare at the lioness as the referee shoved them apart and told them to go back to their respective corners.

Once she did so, Emilio immediately climbed up into the ring with a stool for her to rest on, grabbing a water bottle and cotton swabs from Nick. He knelt in front of her, taking out her mouth guard and squirting some water in her mouth. "How're ya feeling, kiddo?"

"Well...definitely not nervous anymore," she panted.

"Good! Rough start, but you pulled through near the end. Try and keep that up, okay?"

She nodded. Her mouth already felt dry, her heart raced, and everything ached; and she still had three more rounds to get through.

"You're gonna have to keep up that aggression; Monifa isn't one to back down easily and never lets up. I hoped to get you matched up with someone around the same skill level as you, but these things never turn out right half the time. Remember: look for an opening as soon as you can, then give her hell!" He squirted more water in her mouth, put her mouth guard back in, and patted her shoulder before exiting the ring.

She stood up and got her arms back up again to meet with Monifa and the referee in the middle. Both fighters pounded each other's gloves and hopped back in their stances.

DING!

They began to circle each other again. Tanya went on the offensive this time, opening with a quick jab combo and shuffling forward.

Monifa kept her arms up, but gave an audible mewl from Tanya's aggression as she was pushed back. She ducked under a right jab and popped back up with a left uppercut

aimed right for the jaw.

"That's it! Knock her up good!" Yelled the badger.

Her teeth clenched down on the mouth guard as her head jerked up from the punch, well before she had a chance to pull her arm back from the jab. Tanya steadied herself and made sure to close the gap quick, then got low and fired two more hook shots to Monifa's left side as soon as she found an opening.

"Good eye! Good eye!"

Damn! She's starting to show some fight now! I like that! Those hooks dug in good; for once, the tigress managed to make her stumble. She countered with repeated blows straight to Tanya's head, refusing to allow her opponent to stand back up after throwing those hooks.

Gah! What the hell! She doubted this was legal. Tanya could not stand back up while Monifa bashed her head in, but was thankful the headgear was there to cushion those blows. All she could think of was to punch upwards and break free when she could.

"C'mon! Really? Really!" Emilio threw his arms in the air, slamming them back down on the ring edge as he growled.

As soon as Monifa started her beatdown, the buck forced the two fighters apart, giving Tanya a chance to straighten herself back up.

She felt woozy after that possible foul, and standing up that fast didn't help either. Once she did, and when the referee allowed them to continue, she put her gloves up and gave a piercing glare at her opponent. She panted and crept closer, throwing a feint jab and faking a dodge before throwing a couple more jabs to back Monifa to the ropes.

Monifa didn't budge at first and mirrored Tanya's fake dodging, anticipating for the feint. But those couple jabs did force her back some, even if she did block them, and soon felt the tuft of her tail brush against the two bottom ropes. Panicked, she threw a jab combo of her own right back at Tanya to give herself some room.

"Don't let her get to you! Punch your way out!"

Tanya blocked one jab, then ducked and weaved under the next two, inching ever so closer until she found another opening. *Bingo!* She then threw a strong left hook to Monifa's face, followed up by a right uppercut to her chin.

Monifa's head snapped to the left, then upwards before she could recoil from her jabs. She felt herself start to sink into the ropes, but managed to stand back up fully, gloves up.

Tanya threw several left jabs to Monifa's face to break open those arms of hers.

"Almost outta time! Finish strong, tiger! You're gettin' it!"

She kept her arms up, closed and tight over her face, not wanting to risk giving Tanya another an opening. She growled low at the punches, and soon, Tanya's red and white glove was smacking her square in the muzzle. She sunk lower and lower against the ropes until she collapsed on the canvas.

The referee shoved Tanya back and directed her to go to the nearest neutral corner before beginning the ten-count.

Monifa remained on all fours three counts in, trying to comprehend what just happened. She shook her head and stood back up by the seven count, getting right back into her stance. It was then she noticed a hint of blood in her nose, just from the scent alone.

Tanya pounded her gloves together and got in her stance as well, heading right for Monifa when the referee allowed them to continue again.

Monifa shuffled forward as well and began to throw another jab combo when the bell rang, signaling the end of the second round.

Tanya growled once she heard that bell ring and felt the buck shove them apart again. The adrenaline rush flowed through her after she was just getting to know her opponent; but rules were rules, and she had to go back to her corner, where her corner boys waited eagerly.

Emilio hopped back in the ring again with the stool and his supplies, quickly giving his champ the care she needed. "I'm sure you're as frustrated as I am with that bell."

She nodded, swallowing whatever water got squirted into her mouth.

"How's your head from that bullshit she pulled on ya?"

She panted a bit before she spoke, though it was as if she heaved a breath between her words. "Woozy...but I think...I'll manage..."

"Alright. You seemed to piss that cat off well enough now, so you best watch yourself out there." He then gave Tanya some last-minute care before exiting the ring again.

She nodded and stood back up as soon as he left, getting her gloves up as she met with her opponent once again in the center.

The two fighters tapped gloves again, staring each other down for a moment before the start of the third round.

DING!

There was no dancing around the ring this time, as both fighters opened with a series of jabs as soon as the bell rang. Tanya wanted to get her fire going again from the last round, and Monifa wanted to get back at the tigress for drawing first blood.

"Don't underestimate her, girl!" Cried the badger.

Tanya was the first to back down, though refused to let Monifa push her back again. Her arms took a brutal beating from the jabs because of it.

Monifa got close. Very close. Close enough for her to send two left uppercuts to Tanya's belly, then went for a right hook to her ribs again.

Boom! Boom!

Pow!

"Oooooo!"

Anyone who stood ringside heard the impact of those body shots, clear as day.

Tanya felt the air rush out of her nose from those uppercuts and the fur on her stripy tail frizz for a moment upon impact. She could tell Monifa wasn't concerned with leaving herself open so easily anymore, so she threw another hard right to her opponent's cheek.

That staggered her some as her head snapped sideways and her arm dropped from another, attempted right hook. She readjusted her stance, though smelled more blood leaking from her nose.

Tanya wasn't letting up this time and threw a hard left to Monifa, followed by another jab combo to break open her defenses.

Monifa notice herself getting pushed back again as she kept her arms up but side-stepped away from Tanya. It pissed her off that *she* was forced on the defensive this time.

"Atta girl! You got her running!" Cried Emilio.

She made sure to keep up with Monifa, noticing that, despite her bulk, she was quick on her feet. But Tanya was done dancing around and shuffled towards her again as they circled each other, throwing several feints as she approached.

Flinching at the feints, Monifa kept her arms up and dodge appropriately. She noticed, yet again, her tail tuft brushed up against the ropes. The way this fight has gone so far

pissed her off, but she did *not* want to risk any more openings.

After tossing another feint jab, Tanya closed the gap and returned the favor with two uppercuts of her own to Monifa's belly.

Boom!

Boom!

"OOOOO!"

"Daaaammn!"

She was *not* prepared for that; those two punches sunk in deep and her eyes widened as air rushed from her bleeding nose. Monifa felt her butt press against the ropes on impact, and soon fell on all fours, holding her abs with a glove.

Everyone ringside reacted similarly as before from the first knockdown. Most winced at those last two punches, and some chuckled at Monifa's reaction or how Tanya dished out revenge.

The buck pushed Tanya back again and began the ten-count. As he did so, she backed into the nearest neutral corner.

Monifa hung her head, breathing hard through her nose as she struggled to stand up. *H-how...* She curled into a ball, holding her abs with both gloves and unable to get up as the referee counted down.

"Seven! Eight! Nine! Ten!"

DING! DING! DING!

Tanya leaned in the neutral corner, panting heavily as she felt Emilio and Nick help her get her gloves and headgear off after they climbed in the ring. Nick allowed her to lean on his shoulder, barely able to hear Emilio rambling and congratulating her from the roar in the arena. She couldn't hear or feel much after the fight: her head throbbed, her ears rang, her mouth felt dry, and her entire body ached. She glanced around at the crowd that watched her win her first bout, not realizing the vast number of people who show up to these competitions; it made her nervous, yet excited and encouraged.

The buck directed both fighters to join him in the center of the ring after they removed their gear and had a chance to recover, especially for Monifa's sake. He then held both their wrists in his hooves as the fox announcer came up behind him to hold the microphone close enough to his mouth to make the win official.

"The winner by knockout: Tanya Smirnov!" He then raised her right arm as the crowd

applauded after watching such an intense match.

She couldn't help but smile at the glow of her victory. Yet as she looked to the crowd again, her focus homed in on one individual as the commotion around her seemed to fade into a dull, soft, monotonous roar.

Mid-tier; immediately in front of her line of sight and behind the set of cameras that filmed the event.

A tiger just like her with slight differences in his cheek fur, white markings, and what visible stripe pattern he had. He was about the same build as her, though she figured he wasn't as fit anymore by now; she knew this tiger's strength came from pure testosterone. And when she stared into his eyes, piercing right through his, she couldn't help but soften her gaze after getting a good look at his face.

Diego had a look of fear and defeat as they locked eyes. He felt his stomach churn and his body droop after seeing how strong Tanya became. He was proud of her with seeing how far she has come when they first met years ago, but he knew all too well the real reason why she took up a fighting sport. He didn't applaud or cheer with the crowd, nor did he rush all the way down towards the ring to congratulate her; he simply stood up out of his seat and walked out.

I'm done, Tanya...for real this time.

* * *

After he and Emilio helped her out of the ring and into the locker room, Nick decided to wait outside to allow Tanya and her coach chat.

Emilio unwrapped her hand wraps after sitting her down on the bench near her locker; for once, he could look her in the eye without needing to crane his neck upward. "I know I've said this a million times already, but great job out there, champ!"

She smiled. "Thanks Emilio...I mean, if it weren't for you, well..."

He chuckled. "Hey! You've been a great student, and you've improved immensely," he said, rubbing her shoulder.

Despite all the aches and pains throughout her body, she still couldn't help but get flustered at her trainer's touch and care. After spending so much time together in and out of the gym, and after her first win, she wasn't sure if she could see Emilio as a coach anymore.

"I'm gonna go get some ice packs ready for ya, okay?" He didn't need to lean forward much to give her a quick hug before darting out of the locker room.

She kept up a smile until he left, then waited a few moments to make sure no one could hear her or come into the locker room, *especially* Monifa and her badger coach. It was then her ears perked at the soft footsteps of Nick coming into the locker room, smiling and flicking his tongue ever so often; yet he kept his arms locked to his side and in his pockets, as if he felt like he wasn't allowed to be back here, despite the VIP badge around his neck.

"O-Oh, hey Nick."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Yeah...it's fine," she said as she rubbed one of her ribs, hissing softly.

Nick sat next to her, rubbing her back gentle enough to not cause discomfort.

"You're...you're something, Tanya..." he uttered, feeling his cheeks warm.

"Thanks..." she chuckled.

"N-No, I mean...you...really are someone special. You've been through a lot and have managed to make it through just another day...and, well...I admire the strength you've shown this past year, and just now in that ring." He shuddered as his cheeks burned more and more, hoping they weren't turning a bright shade of red through his scales. His hand then rubbed her shoulder, but soon gently slid down her arm and over her paw.

Tanya let his hand sit there a moment, then slowly moved her paw out from underneath. She then rubbed her side again and smiled, even though she had a blank stare towards the floor in front of her.

Nick shot up off the bench after he recoiled his hand, though was now back in that nervous posture he had when he arrived. "I'll um...I'll just let you sort out your thoughts..." And with that, he shot out of the locker room and rounded the corner.

As soon as Nick left, she giggled at how cute he acted just now, yet tears began to roll down her orange cheeks, which soon became sobs. Her sore jaw and cheeks flared up as she cried, but she didn't care.

For the first time in her life, Tanya put all her effort into something and reaped the rewards.