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The scream that escaped from the human's throat was incredibly short-lived as Ari's jaw unhinged for a moment before snapping back down on the face and head of the doctor that he held, feeling him squirm in the grasp of his freed hands before he twisted his own head sideways and allowed his teeth to rend through whatever it happened to catch upon. The act was as swift as it was brutal and as he felt blood dripping down his jaw that for once was someone else's. Once he had swallowed what he had caught in his maw he focused back on his transformation, panting heavily as every muscle in his body felt like it was alive. He had already managed to snap the restraints that were on his left arm but instead of using his new sharpened claws to slice through the restraints he very much wanted to feel the strength in his thobbing muscles grow and pop them just like he had when he flexed his bicep.

Ari didn't have to wait long for that to happen and as he puffed out his chest he could feel the metal and leather give to his new body. This was power... and with each breath he took it felt like he was drawing in more that was helping to convert his body. He could feel the main source of it flowing from the glove though that had caught his tormentor and as he took the time to slowly acclimate to his new form and pop the rest of the restraints he could feel the table he was attached to starting to buckle under his newfound weight. But as his feet stretched and grew and his tail lengthened he found that the darkness had not receded; the only reason he had caught Dr. Hertz was hearing him turn to run and as he began to slide off of the buckling examination table he realized that Shockwave's hit to his head had completely knocked his sense of sight out while he could feel himself blinking his eyes.

That simply would not do... and with his blood still pumping in his veins he lowered his head and pressed his gloved hand against his face. Become the predator, sow the seeds of destruction, as he continued to think those words he let out a hiss as he could feel something happening to his face. While it burned it was with pure power and his entire body shuddered as he reshaped himself, feeling the flesh near his eyes slowly sink and reform into what he needed. The process took a bit and his body trembled a few times from the exertion, but when he slowly pulled his hand away from his face the snarl on his muzzle was accompanied by a second set of eyes that opened over the first, the red leeching into him and leaving the original pair a cloudy yellow as though a reminder of his past weakness and what he needed to overcome it.

Once his self-transfiguration was complete he started to get up again, only to feel another cramping sensation shoot through his back and cause him to fall back on his knee while catching himself. Had he overdone it? No... that was impossible, not with this much power flowing through him, there was no way such weakness would be in this new body. His breath caught in his throat and both sets of his eyes squeezed shut as he felt that same essence coalesce into his back, flooding into his shoulder blades to manifest one last gift for his new body.

Ari arched back and let out a roar as a pair of wings emerged from the fur of his back, his arms stretched out to the heavens as the tattered membranes formed from the sinew of the new appendages that had formed. Once they had emerged he curled back on himself as he felt his spine pushing out between these new wings, his breath catching in his throat for each spike that pushed its way out from the top of his head cascading down to the tip of his tail. With each one he felt another surge of pure carnal rage, a testament to his primal nature that he had allowed inside of him. When the spikes finally reached down to his tail it caused him to thrash about and dig them into the nearby metal cabinets, piercing them and rending the doors off of its hinges as the changes settled within his new body.

No going back, Ari thought to himself as he slowly got back up, this time rolling his shoulders to feel the new features he had gained, no more hiding. This body would not be hidden like he had done so many times before as he took the shredded shirt on his body and pulled it off of him. As his old costume lay in tatters on the ground he stepped over the body of his first kill and found it ironic that it was the one that had given him this form and shown him the light in the first place. His new eyes glanced around the room and took in all manner of new information while his ears perks with the sounds of those that were outside the area, his senses honed like he had used his glove in order to sharpen them while he began to walk towards the door.

His glove... as he looked down at his hand he saw that it was still there, the leather conforming to his hands and allowing the spikes that had formed on his knuckles to push out of it. Though he was curious if it was still the same as before it was not the time for it. He needed to stretch his new muscles and sink his claws and fangs into something. Fortunately there was an abundance of prey that he could sense and with every ounce of strength he had he ripped the metal door off and tossed it aside. That startled the man that had just walked by but before he could react the clawed hands of the creature within grabbed him and dragged him into the room, the only sound coming from it a loud snarl and the sound of bones snapping before there was a loud thud.

Meanwhile elsewhere in the facility Ka was tied up in a chair, his body leaning forward while he tried to concentrate on the knots that held his wrists together behind him. Two guys had been trying to get him to talk but other than a little roughing up they hadn't put the screws to him yet. He guessed because he was just the one in the van that they didn't want to go too hard in case they had accidentally caught someone that was just in the wrong place in the wrong time, but it won't be long before they try and find out who he is and come up with nothing. Given the group that he worked with his face and fingerprints weren't registered anywhere, and while that kept him from being known as an asset it also rose red flags into anyone looking into him when he didn't have some sort of backstory fabricated.

The main worry he had though was Ari; ever since they had knocked him unconscious with some sort of chemical agent he guessed that they had probably done something similar with his partner, and if he had been captured inside the facility they were probably torturing him for information. While he knew that the hybrid was rather stalwart and not so easily persuaded to give up information that could be to his detriment; there was nothing to say these people wouldn't kill them both for the convenience, maybe even using it to their advantage if they continued their track record of framing heroes for their acts of terrorism. Perhaps they would even try to market him as some sort of villain, though if they can't identify him then it was more likely they'll either just drug him and let him go or more likely kill him.

As he started to get close to undoing the knot however Ka gasped as he felt a wave of heat radiate through his entire body and catch him completely off guard. It had caused his breath to catch in his throat and for a moment he was completely stunned as his mind struggled to comprehend where that had suddenly come from. There was no one currently in the room with him and nothing that he could see that would cause such a thing, yet he felt a thrumming in his mind and body that definitely hadn't been there before. As he tried to regain his composure he realized that it reminded him a bit of when Ari used his power on him, and as he began to pant heavily he wondered if maybe the hybrid had somehow keyed into him and was helping his escape.

Ka could feel himself starting to sweat heavily as his fingers began to slip on the knots he had been working on, suddenly feeling the digits become clumsy while trying not to shake from the strange sensations he was experiencing. Just as he felt his chest starting to heave and felt the ropes tightening slightly on him there was a loud bang at the door, causing him to look up and see the two men that had been asking him questions rush in before slamming it behind them. One of them had his face and clothing splattered with blood while the other quickly popped the clip out of his handgun and inserted the fresh one. Ka could see their faces were pale and they both shook in terror at whatever had been chasing them, which he had a guess on what that might be as they looked around the room frantically before settling on his spot.

Before Ka could say or do anything the one that didn't have blood over him practically ran up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders. "What the fuck is your friend?!" the man shouted, the anger in his eyes tinted with absolute fear while he looked straight him. "Tell him to back off, now!"

"I don't know who you're... whoa..." As Ka was about to deny knowing the one chasing them, whom he guessed was either Ari given the amount of blood on the one guy, he suddenly got a sense of vertigo that caused his head to roll back. Something was definitely happening to him and as he let out a sudden snort he felt his face twitching, the heat pooling around there as his nose became itchy. "I feel... really strange..."

The man that had been shaking him took a step back as Ka groaned and his entire body jolted forward, which caused one of the ropes around his chest to snap as the muscle around it thickened to the point where they were practically digging into him. "Holy shit, you're just like him!" his interrogator shouted as he stood back up and pointed his gun straight at the changing human. "Tell us what's going on or you're going to get plugged!"

Ka was in no shape to talk as his entire body twisted around while it grew bigger, his ears stretching out and his feet swelling to the point it caused his shoes to burst. As the initial shock of starting to transform fell away he realized that he had taken this form before, or at least a similar one as another heavy breath he took caused the shirt that was straining against his chest to rip down the collar and reveal more hair. With his jaw already stretching and his tongue pushing past his lips while it grew bigger than his mouth it was impossible for him to speak and he feared that the man would shoot him in his panic before he had a chance to respond. As the quivering barrel pointed straight at his head though there was a loud crack of metal breaking and a shout that was cut short.

With the threat no longer being the transforming human in front of him the other man quickly turned his gun towards the door, which continued to swing back and forth slightly as though disturbed. Despite having reacted quickly to the noise he didn't see anything over there and especially not his partner that he had left there to try and brace the opening. Ka watched as best he could while still feeling his blood pounding in his body that was growing bigger by the second as the one kept his gun up and moved slowly to the entrance of the room. When he got there the only thing he found was a busted door handle and streak of blood that went from the doorframe all the way to the opposite corner of the room where several crates of supplies were stacked up.

With how tall the boxes were it cast a shadow in that corner, though enough ambient light was around it that he could see two shapes moving around in it. It almost looked like they were kissing or something but as he carefully moved closer he saw that one of them was holding the other's limp form as a pool of blood could be seen expanding into the lighted areas of the floor. When he saw one of the shadow's head fall clean off it caused the other hardened criminal to gasp, which prompted the head of the other creature to dart up and look straight at him with shining red and yellow eyes. He managed to pull the trigger of his gun several times but that didn't stop the monster that lurked in the darkness from springing forward and slamming him against the wall.

Ka had only seen part of that exchange but when Ari suddenly emerged from behind the boxes and sank his teeth into the throat of the guy he quickly looked away. It was not something he wanted to see and while he didn't want to hear it either he unfortunately hadn't snapped the restraints around his wrists yet. By the time he did he had heard the screams turn to gurgles and the sound of eating, but not of a normal person. It was something out of one of those documentaries where the lion or hyena was devouring its prey and by the time Ka had managed to free himself Ari had seemed to finish and allowed the

mutilated corpse to slide down onto the floor while turning to him.

This was not the Ari that Ka remembered, and as Ari someone recognized Ka he was the same way. The human's nose was at least several feet long and drooping past his lips, which were being pushed out by two large teeth that could only be described as tusks while his frame popped and grew even larger. He was turning into a beast, and though it reminded him of Campbell and Lavender he couldn't help but smile at it. He knew that Ka always wanted to be a more integrated part of the team and as he went over to help up the other man he watched those thick, fur-covered fingers wrap around his own scaly digits.

"Ari?" Ka asked, the monstrous creature in front of him simply nodding his head. "What... happened to you..." As he tried to take a step forward he had to get caught as he nearly fell over as his rib cage expanded once more and his spine extended with added length to start growing his new tail. "What's happening to me..."

"I'm not exactly sure about you," Ari growled, his voice so deep and fierce just hearing it caused Ka to tremble slightly. "But I have been purged of the weakness that has held me back all this time. Perhaps the same is happening to you, but now is not the time to discuss it. We need to leave now."

Ka just nodded in response and with one meaty arm wrapped around the scaly neck of his savior he began to limp his way towards the door while still getting used to his growing feet. "Ari, I'm not sure how much help I'll be in a fight," Ka admitted. "If the others heard that shot they might come here."

"Oh, there will be no others," Ari replied simply as he simply stared ahead. "I already took care of them all become coming to save you."

The words lingered in the air like a thick smoke and as they walked out of the room and into the hallway Ka immediately found what Ari was talking about. They passed by at least ten dead guards on their way to the door; most of them were killed with either a slash to the neck or chest while others looked like acid had spread through their bodies and partially melted them. The most gruesome of deaths were closest to where Ari had been kept with several having limbs or other areas stripped of flesh and meat. If he didn't know any better he would have thought that a pack of wild wolves or other carnivorous beasts had torn through here, and the fact that it was all caused by the one man carrying him out made it somehow a more terrifying scenario.

When they finally got up the stairs and outside the two found that they were standing on the deck of a ship that was just outside of the harbor itself. It was moored to a commercial dock and given its size was either an old fishing trawler or small coastal cargo ship, either way it was the tomb of all those that were inside of it as they made their way to the dock and towards a nearby motel. With Ka continuing to change and with morning about to break there was no way they were getting back to the apartment even if they were nice enough to leave the van with them, which meant that they would have to hunker down for the day and hope that they could call out in order to contact Lavender and Campbell to get them a ride. It might also give them a shot to try and surveil the ship itself once he was done changing, though as Ari kicked open the door and tossed him on the bed he could see a look in his eyes that would indicate other activities he had on his mind.

The transformation had already caused most of his clothing to be destroyed, and as he fell back on the bed he found the claws of the creature taking care of the rest after Ari had closed the door as best he could behind them. "Ari, we should talk," Ka said, though it was hard to focus with such an intimidating creature stripping him down and causing his body to be fully revealed. "There is... definitely something going on with you, that body..."

"Was hoping you'd like it," Ari replied simply as he tossed the last of the shreds of clothing to the side and pounced upon the creature. The somewhat small man had grown huge during their escape from the boat and as his muscles continued to tremble and twitch with new growth the fur that was on his body had spread over most of his smooth flesh. His face had also grown in and while it was a familiar elephantine shape there were a few differences to it, which combined with the shaggy body that he had gained made him think of something else. None of that mattered to Ari at the moment as he let his lustful instincts run wild, wanting to explore every aspect of his new man in front of him and savor the primal changes that were happening while sliding down his body.

Though Ka knew deep down he should tell Ari to stop so that they could get help the combination of the intense sensations that were coming from his transforming body and the added lust that was being heaped on by the exploring fingers and tongue made it hard to process anything else going on. Ari had become some sort of monster and had not only taken out over a dozen men by himself in that ship but had also become some sort of almost demonic-looking monster, but it seemed that the other creature knew exactly how to keep his mind off such things as he got to the thick, heavily padded feet that wiggled on the edge of the bed. "You're revealing your truest self," Ari cooed while brushing his fingers against the leathery bottoms of his sole, which as he had expected caused the thickening cock that rested on his hairy thighs to immediately start to stiffen. "Just give in, we can embrace being animals together."

It was very hard for Ka to protest that and his trunk grew out longer the more Ari tickled against his feet, which also caused his cock to elongate as well while throbbing hard. He was fully erect by this point and with the hair only thickening more across his body what little remained of his old form was quickly disappearing underneath it. The former human snorted through his new nostrils as he could feel a particularly potent inflation in his balls just underneath his growing cock and with his legs becoming

thick trunks of muscle covered in fur he was practically pushing Ari backwards. The beast at his feet decided it was time to take it to the next level and as he crawled up those heavy limbs, which were still inflating somehow with new muscle, he was about to tease his nearly foot and a half long cock before he noticed something about his heavily swollen sack.

"What do we have here," Ari teased as he leaned down, looking at the massive set of four balls that had grown in underneath the shaft of the new creature. "Someone is quite the kinky bastard, surprised this didn't come out in therapy." With his stomach being so swollen and his head still not quite grown out completely Ka had no idea what he meant, at least not until he reached down and squeezed one of the teats that hung from where his balls resided. The shock of pleasure was so intense he bucked up and nearly threw Ari off of his legs, though the demonic creature was quick to respond and grapple his legs to hold himself in place.

Seeing how sensitive he was Ari began to lick and flick them with his engorged tongue, his lust-fueled mind wanting Ka to be as primal as he felt. This was how they were supposed to be, his mind told him as he could see each pull from his prehensile tongue nearly causing the huge elephantine man to cum, a bunch of beasts ready to take the world by the udderballs like he had gotten. When he was done playing with them he moved past the shaft and grabbed the other man by the hips before flipping him over. That mammoth shaft would have to wait until he showed him who the dominant one was, and as Ari thought that while looking at the thick furry butt that Ka had gained he realized that was what he was becoming, a massively muscled wholly mammoth.

That knowledge mattered very little to him at the moment however as Ari pounced on top of him, Ka feeling the fingers running down past his sides and squeezing his inflated pectorals getting more passionate by the second. Having already been on the receiving end of one of Ari's ravishings he knew that doing anything to try and get back on top would just result in them vying for dominance and even though he was almost bigger than him and with more meat on his bones he relinquished to the other man. More than once though he had to adjust himself as his body was still getting bigger, adjusting his head as his tusks grew out more while his cock was practically pushing down into the mattress. Even as the bed threatened to give way underneath their combined weight Ari didn't stop squeezing his pecs and eventually his nipples while managing to shove both heads of his cocks into his new tailhole.

A trumpeting blast of sound came from Ka as he was penetrated by both at the same time, feeling something spurt from his nipples and the strange new additions to his balls. As the milky substance soaked into the sheets Ari just sank inch after inch of the two grey shafts into the other man, the flared heads rubbing thoroughly against the tight inner walls the squeezed against it. This would be no restrained, gentle mating that Ka was used to getting from Ari; with his new body a powerhouse of muscle he could hear a hiss of pure pleasure come from the mutated kangaroo cobra above him while bracing himself and pushing down hard to get more of himself into the wholly mammoth beneath him. The thick fingers of Ka practically tore into the bed beneath him as the creature above him was relentless, even when he got as deep inside as he could go he immediately started to rut into a frenzy and plowed his cocks into that tight tailhole.

The headboard of the bed began to rattle as Ari let out a howl that would likely have told anyone that didn't know they were there yet of their location, but it was clear that the hybrid was in no right state of mind to think about the consequences of his actions. Ka wasn't too far behind as he began to make some low, guttural noises of his own while his trunk flailed about in the air. With his skull finishing being reshaped into the visage of an elephant it was hard to focus on anything other than being stretched open to the limit or the wild creature that was on top of him. Despite him being so lustfully ravenous there was never a moment where he believed his life to be in danger, even as those claws went down to the eight-pack that his belly had become and reached past to grip against his huge cock.

It didn't take very long for Ari to orgasm, pushing the hips of the new man beneath him to get as deep as possible. As Ka also felt himself reaching the end of his transformation and getting to his own climax the bed suddenly shook when he felt a heavy weight fall right on top of him. At first he thought that the ceiling had somehow fallen down on the two of them but as he started to regain his senses after soaking the mattress beneath him with his cum among other fluids he realized it was Ari pressed against the thick fur of his body. With him being much bigger than his human form he was able to slowly try and roll over to get Ari to slide off, only to find that between his claws dug into his fur and the two cocks still fully erect inside of him that he was well and truly embedded on top of him.

Ka took a second to regain his breathing, trying to get used to doing it through his new nose as well as his wider mouth while attempting to wake Ari. There was no response however and he quickly went from frustrated to worried as he realized that he had gone through some sort of ordeal and had no idea what it was, only that it had turned him into a monster before fucking him and doing the same. "Well... this is going to be highly embarrassing," Ka said to himself, shaking a bit in shock from the sound of his own deeper voice as he spotted the phone that sat on the nightstand. "But I suppose the others have been in similar."

As Ka tried to reach out to grab the phone he guessed somewhere in their frantic rutting that they had knocked the nightstand beyond his reach, even with sliding the bed while trying not to have the guy on top of him rip out his new fur from falling away from him. More than once he swiped his thick fingers down at it only to miss, and when his frustration grew and he willed it to come towards him into his reach he let out a yelp when the furniture slid towards him. There was a pause as he looked down and around the area to see if there was something that had done it and when there was no root cause he once more looked at the phone and nightstand before wishing it to come closer once more. After focusing on it a bit he saw the piece of cheap furniture wiggle and buck around a bit before doing what he had thought and eventually lifting it on the ground before it came crashing down next to him.

Once more there was no response from Ari as Ka found his new trunk was rather prehensile and able to wrap around the receiver while he dialed in the number for Campbell. After the first ring he immediately heard the concerned voice of the sabertooth tiger ask him a million questions concerning where they had gone off too. "Campbell, hold on, you need to slow down and listen to me," Ka said as he was almost able to hear the shock in the other man at hearing him for the first time. "Now I'm with Ari and we're both... relatively fine, but you're going to need to find a cargo van or a pick-up truck and meet us at the hotel at this address, and make sure you get here as fast as you can before the cops do."

Chapter 21:

About twenty minutes later Campbell got to the motel in question with the delivery truck they had managed to borrow from someone moving into the building a few doors down, tires squealing in the parking lot as they stopped right in front of the hotel room that Ka had given them. Lavender was in the passenger seat staring intently at his computer, subverting signals to the cops and other organizations at the disturbance that had been caused in this place. There were several people that were out and about on the balcony or sidewalk that had heard the noises coming from the room they were in front of and as Campbell got out of the car he set his arms on fire and said that the hero guild was here in order to take care of things and to get back inside their respective rooms. Fortunately no one knew that he was a former hero, or just didn't care, and as they all walked back in he could see several peeking out from their curtains as he extinguished his flames and walked into the room.

"Oh! Uh... wow..." Campbell said as soon as he stepped foot inside the door, almost stepping right back out as he saw the huge naked wholly mammoth man on bed far too small for him with an equally naked demonic kangaroo-snake on top of him. "Ka, is that really you? I knew your voice was different but didn't expect that much of a change."

"Yeah, it's been a day," Ka replied with a sigh before wiggling his hindquarters. "Could you please get him off of me?"

Campbell nodded and went over to him, his nose crinkling at the heavy smell of sex and musk as he looked at where Ari's hands had tangled into the fur. "Wow, he is in deep," Campbell observed, glancing down at the mammoth as he realized what he had just said. "I mean, his claws, of course. He is still alive, right?"

"Yeah, I can feel his chest rising and falling against my back," Ka replied as Campbell made his finger glow and pressed it against the knots to burn them away. "Plus I can feel him throbbing away in my hole despite being unconscious." Campbell had to stifle a snort at that as he made his way all around the back of the mammoth and continued to get Ari's digits out of the incredibly thick fur of the one beneath him. While he had initially been shocked the first time as the sabertooth tiger made his way around he began to process that something had definitely happened to them both, especially as he saw the second pair of eyes on Ari's head that were both closed and the new attributes to his body.

By the time Lavender came inside and warned them that they probably had about twenty minutes until the cops show up Campbell had finished untangling the two, Ari sliding off and falling to the ground with a loud thud while another loud trumpet came from Ka as the two cocks finally slid out of his tailhole. Once they had gotten the two apart the sabertooth tiger checked Ari for vitals and found them, and though they were stronger than ever he still no signs of activity while Lavender stared at the other behemoth that was brushing himself off. "So, a wholly mammoth, huh?" Lavender asked as they waited for Campbell to finish.

"It appears so..." Ka said as he looked at his arms that were swollen with muscle, giving a flex that had it bulging out the thick fur that covered it. "I'm huge too, I think I might even be bigger than you. It's amazing, I still feel like me and yet I am a totally different creature, is that what you two went through with him?"

"Close enough I suppose," Lavender replied as he crossed his own thick arms over his chest, his muzzle twitching at the comment Ka had made about being bigger than him. "Between you and Campbell you could open your own exhibit on the Ice Age in the museum, or maybe star in a children's moving with the right third character."

"Guys, bigger picture," Campbell interjected as he stood up. "Put those muscles of yours to work and wrap up Ari before tossing him in the back of the moving van, I'll try and get it as close to the door as possible. I want both of you riding with him while you each put in a call to your respective companies, I think we're going to have to update the higher-ups on what just happened."

As Lavender nodded and tore the wet comforter off the bed Ka suddenly went up to Campbell. "Wait, there's a boat in the harbor nearby that Ari and I were kept in after being kidnapped," Ka said as he pointed out the door. "We need to get in there and get as much evidence as possible before we leave, this was a big move the group made and we can't let it slip through our fingers."

"First of all, we're going to have a little talk when we get back to the apartment about indulging in Ari's whims," Campbell said

sternly. "Second of all there's no boat in the harbor, at least not one that I saw when we pulled up here."

Ka's eyes widened and despite Campbell telling him to stop the wholly mammoth squeezed through the door and raced out into the nearby embankment to confirm what he was told was true. It didn't take him long to see the harbor that Ari had taken him from and that the boat was missing, the dock empty like it had never been there in the first place. All that evidence gone... not to mention the story of what happened to Ari on there and all the bodies. They must have realized that something had gone wrong and taken it out of there before they could regroup, Ka speculated, but as he stood there naked he heard Campbell shouting to get back there and at least cover himself up so he wouldn't catch an indecency charge.

Once he was back it was easy for him and Campbell to wrap up Ari and put him in the back of the empty truck after Campbell had backed it practically inside the hotel room. The explanation for the break-in and damage would have to come later as they needed to get the hybrid emergency medical attention without going to the hospital. Fortunately the two riding in the back with him were already making calls, the wolf getting in contact with Mr. Stevens while Ka called Sam in order to update both sides on the situation. It didn't take much explaining before both men were told to stop talking and that they would be getting personally debriefed while providing whatever was needed to the transformed creature...

Several hours later the three were back in their apartment, all of them on their feet and walking around as they waited for the prognosis that would come from the doctors that were in the room with Ari. Both Mr. Stevens and Sam had shown up along with a small team of medical professionals and equipment in order to set up the hybrid and get an idea of what his condition was. While that happened the three had been debriefed by both sides of the fence in this regard with Ka taking the longest while trying not to be bashful as he still was completely naked save for a towel wrapped around his waist. To his surprise he was actually still smaller than Lavender but bigger than Campbell, which meant that he was in a weird situation where none of their clothing really fit him and they couldn't exactly go out and find something in his size.

Eventually they managed to find something of the wolf's that wouldn't fall off of his body and once they had finished with their interviews they were told to wait while they figured out what was going on with Ari. Campbell was practically pacing back and forth and even though he said he was fine when asked several times the other two could see that he was starting to burn paw-shaped scorch marks into the floor wherever he went. Lavender had gone back to work but since he didn't need to sit down he was also getting rid of the nervous energy that had accumulated, feeling sorry in particular for the sabertooth tiger that was once more going through the potential loss of his lover. For Ka he was standing because he knew if he sat down he would fall asleep due to being up all night and from his transformation and subsequent sexual escapades from Ari.

Finally all their heads looked up as the door to the bedroom opened, standing there and watching the medical technicians file out of the bedroom with Mr. Stevens and Sam being the last to do so. While the doctors went to the elevators the lion and human made their way to the three that immediately walked up to them and was about to ask what was wrong before Sam raised his hands to stop them. "First off, it looks like Ari is fine physically," Sam informed them. "He is in a coma though, but the doctors say that it's probably psychosomatic or related to the transformation that he underwent after being tortured."

"Torture?" Campbell asked.

"Yes, they found signs of repeated torture even with his body having regenerated," Sam said. "They're guessing that whatever caused him to turn into that had left its marks on him beforehand, so it's unlikely those scars will go away at any time. More importantly however between Ka's testimony to his state of mind before and after this impromptu mission as well as the brainwave readings that the doctors got there's no way that we're going to be able to keep you guys on this mission."

The three looked at each other with varying levels of surprise and disgust before they all started to talk at once, arguing with the human before he once more put up his hands. "Look, I don't like this either, but what can I do?" Sam exclaimed. "Coast guard found the ship that Ka was talking about floating in the nearby harbor with a dozen dead bodies on it and tapes showing Ari murdering them all!"

"That's a frame job and you know it Sam," Lavender interjected.

"Of course it's a frame, my blind grandmother could see that and she's been dead for five years," Sam replied in an exasperated tone while pulling out a cigar. "But he definitely killed those people and the news got a hold of it and if Ari's connection to us gets figured out then all hell is going to break loose, not to mention he's being tied to the anti-hero militia and touted as the villain. The best thing we can do right now is disconnect and let things blow over before we make our next move."

A hush fell over the group as Campbell's jaw hung open while Lavender shook his head. "Wait, when you say disconnect you don't just mean from the mission," Ka explained as he pointed a finger. "You're cutting him from the CIA completely, aren't you?"

Suddenly all three pairs of eyes were on Sam again who just sighed and shook his head. "Higher-ups can't have a psychopath working with us, at least not one as unstable as he is," Sam confessed, causing all three to react angrily. "Ka, you're lucky you even have a job yourself after the shit you just pulled, and for the time being the three of you are on hold until further notice."

Now if Ari wakes up and we can get his side of the story then perhaps we can look at something else pending a mental competency test, but until that happens you three are to remain here on lockdown until we can make proper arrangements to transport all four of you back on-site."

While all three were fuming at the order they saw the look in Sam's eye and knew that was the final straw of it all, Sam patting them each on the shoulder before heading to the elevator as he lit his cigar. There was a sour atmosphere that lingered after their handler for the CIA left and with Mr. Stevens merely giving them a nod before following behind showed them that not even the Company was going to back them up on this. With the hero guild no longer feeding them information and all the evidence with them there was literally nothing they could do, they were left in the cold so that even if they wanted to try and complete the mission the only things they had were the gear currently on them and whatever information was inside their heads. The one person that could help the most with that was currently in a coma with no indicator of when he would wake up, Campbell going in to check on Ari while the other two discussed their current options after this sudden change of events.

Eventually Ari blinked both sets of eyes, hearing the beeping sound of machines that were around him as his vision quickly cleared to give him a familiar view of the ceiling that was his room. As the numbness in his body slowly abated he realized that he had several needles in his skin and a breathing tube down his throat where he could feel the breath being forced into his lungs by the machine on his left. A coma... it wasn't the first time he had woken up this hooked-up before, but unlike last time he was more than ready to shake it off and get back to work. As he reached up and quickly pulled the tube out of his mouth he looked over at the diagnostic machine and saw that it had been four days since the ship, or around it at the very least as he tossed the breathing tube aside and worked on the others that were attached to his body.

For once he hadn't been plagued by nightmares, no disembodied voices calling him pathetic or weak, and a sense of purpose that had been ingrained in his psyche. What he had been experiencing while in his coma was images of the hunt, of being various creatures roaming free and wild doing whatever they wanted. It was an exhilarating experience and finally for the first time in weeks he awoke feeling refreshed. Nothing like a four day nap to get back to rights, Ari thought to himself as the machines began to beep angrily from his disconnections, and as he remembered what his current target would be it put a smile of anticipation on his face when he thought about how he would make sure that Janette would suffer for what she did to him... and probably Ka too.

When he got out of his bed and on his feet he felt a bounce to his step that wasn't there before, feeling the balance of his body on his new feet while shifting his body about. Four days in the bed hadn't affected him much it seemed and as he got up onto a handstand and did several push-ups he heard something on the other side of the door that caused him to flip back around again. He had been so absorbed in his new form with a clearer head that he hadn't even taken a chance to assess his surroundings. While waking up in his own bed was a good start he didn't know what happened in four days, especially if they found out about where he or Ka resided and had set this all up.

After cracking his neck Ari reached into his nightstand and found the pistol that he stored there was gone, which was another red flag as he felt his instincts rising up once more. Had they brought him here to resuscitate them back to health only to potentially torture him some more? Were there some that he hadn't killed that somehow found him and Ka and imprisoned him in a different setting to try and get his guard down? Though his senses seemed as sharp as ever he could be drugged and not even know it, and while he felt his gloved hand thrumming with power he didn't want to use it quite yet until he took stock of the situation.

His paranoia proved to be unneeded as he opened the door and found Campbell sleeping on the couch, a stack of pizza boxes and other take-out containers scattered around him as well as on the table and countertop while Lavender and Ka poured over the screen in front of them. Neither of the three even noticed that his machines were chirping or that he was awake until he stepped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Almost immediately the wolf and the mammoth glanced up from the computer and Campbell awoke with a snort and nearly fell off the couch at hearing Ka say Ari's name. Though the three looked at him with relief Ari could sense there was something else there already, though at the moment he was merely glad to see that they were all glad as Ka came stomping up to him.

It wasn't until he got up close that Ari realized that it wasn't gratitude or joy that was on the face of the mammoth, his eyes widening as a huge furry fist came hurtling through the air and caught him square on the jaw with enough force to knock him over the nearby reclining chair and onto the floor while upside down. "That's for not telling me you were up for four days straight before going on that mission!" Ka bellowed, Lavender and Campbell both quickly getting up to restrain the big guy as Ari scrambled to his feet. "You got us all fired you son of a bitch!"

"Whoa, isn't there something in the doctor's rule book about not doing harm?" Ari retorted as he rubbed his sore jaw and wiped the blood from his nose. "Especially on someone that's been in a coma?" Neither of the others responded to that, instead telling Ka to calm down and that they went over this when he woke up as the words that he said sank in. "Wait, what do you mean fired?"

Campbell left Ka to Lavender to hold back while he went over to Ari. The sabertooth tiger gave him the quick version of what had happened when he had fallen into a coma, that Sam had released him from service due to his mental instability and that

they were all temporarily suspended while waiting for a new mission. "Wait, they can't fucking do that!" Ari said angrily, Campbell putting his hands on Ari's chest to keep him calm while he snarled loudly. "I just found out that the leader of the anti-hero militia is that bitch Janette from the shipping company, we take her down and the whole thing should fall around her like a deck of cards!"

The news that Ari had dropped on them had not had the expected effect on them however, Ka stopping his struggles and both him and Lavender looking at Campbell. Ari felt his eye twitch as he could tell there was something else that they were not saying and as he stood there waiting Campbell eventually went over and got a newspaper that was on the windowsill before handing it to him. "We know about Janette," Campbell said as Ari saw the picture of the woman that was burned into his memory on the front page... as part of an obituary. "She killed herself two days ago, in her suicide note she told everyone that she was the one that formed the militia to try and stop the heroes after they had accidentally killed her parents five years ago."

Ari found both sets of his eyes blinking as he read the story, his pulse pounding in his head as he struggled to comprehend what he was reading. After all that work, all that misery, she punches her own ticket instead of him? As he scanned down the story it appeared the reason for it was the day after they had gotten kidnapped there was an attempt to bomb the building that was the headquarters for the Company, only to have failed thanks to the newly formed security team that Rayarti had put together. From the note she had written the intention was to get the heroes to all hunker down while the militia appeared to target them, then take them all down at once... but after almost a dozen members got captured trying to place the charges to bring down the building she knew it was only a matter of time before she had gotten caught and tried for the deaths of those at the chemical factory and rail station.

It was over... everything wrapped up while he slept, the mission completed by some random guards while he had to endure weeks of nightmarish waiting and torture at the hands of someone that took themselves out instead of facing him. The sound of paper tearing could be heard as Ari's claws dug into the newspaper, eventually ripping it apart and tossing the shredded remains on the ground. All this time, all this pain, everything to become what he could be to protect everyone, and it was all for nothing. Less than nothing, since he had gotten fired from the CIA while it sounded like his team still had a chance to remain active.

The anger inside Ari was so intense that it started to make him swoon, Campbell seeing him stumble and grabbing onto his arm to keep him upright and guide him over to one of the chairs. Even with them being modified they creaked slightly under the weight of his new form as he found a glass of water being set down in front of him as well as what he guessed was a cold piece of pizza. "She's dead... it's over..." Ari managed to say as his lips curled into a snarl. "It can't be, there has to be someone to hunt, someone to kill..."

Ari could feel his wings flutter slightly behind him and he noticed that Campbell had taken a step back while the other two had stopped struggling against one another. "Ari, you're getting a little intense," Campbell stated, pointing to the table where Ari had dug his claws into the wood to the point they were nearly piercing through. "We know that you're probably upset that the one that tortured you is dead, but we want to make sure that we can trust you not to fly off the handle, we can trust you to do that right?"

"Speak for yourself," Lavender said bluntly. "I could hardly trust the old Ari, now we have murder demon Ari here and I'm starting to wonder if I can sleep here at night."

"Lavender!" Campbell shouted, turning back to him as the wolf just shrugged his shoulders before he went back to Ari. "Listen, Ari, we're just a little tense, we saw the video about what you did on the ship and we think that you might have gone a bit, well..."

"Overboard?" Ari joked, though he could see that the usual jokes were not landing quite as well as both Ka and Lavender just shook their heads while Campbell sighed. It caused the nostrils of the hybrid to twitch at seeing those looks, the ones that had caused him to push back his fully realized self all this time. "You don't know what they did to me in there, or anywhere, you think that I got these holes in my hood because I wanted to wear fucking piercings?!"

The chair slid back as Ari bolted back up, but before any of them could say anything he let out an angry hiss and bared his fangs. "I fucking died!" Ari shouted. "They tortured me TO DEATH in that place, and then I'm supposed to show them MERCY?! Ka comes out of that as a hulking mammoth and no one seems to bat an eye, but I get an upgrade and suddenly I have to be the one that was supposed to tone it down? I may have been a little crazy when I came back to life but I would gladly rip them limb from limb again if I could have a chance!"

A deathly silence followed after Ari's outburst, the only sound being the heavy breath that came from him as his eyes flickered from each one while waiting for a response. Even though the three continued to stand there he could see what they were feeling, what emotion they were hiding underneath their stoic demeanor... fear. After having drank it in on that ship it became a bitter drink when served by those he cared about, those that he wanted to become this to sacrifice for, and after everything he had just learned it was not something he could stand. With no one saying anything Ari began to make his way towards the door and when Campbell tried to reach out to grab his arm he shook it off and grabbed the jacket that hung there before heading out.

Though it would be far too small and cramp his wings the jacket had his cigarettes in it and after a few minutes he was down in

the underground parking structure, looking outside at the rain that was pouring down while having his first smoke since being tortured. He went from waking up from a dream to finding out the real world had become the nightmare; a team that clearly couldn't trust him, a company that no longer wanted to have him, and potentially multiple murder charges if they decided to throw him to the wolves. Considering they hadn't locked him down it was unlikely that they would do that, not to mention he had enough information to make them both look bad while waiting for his trial, but the fact that his life was in shambles after finally aligning with things had put him in a real piss poor mood.

"Ah, least ya got yer health."

Ari's eyes shot open at hearing the voice before turning and punching his gloved fist into the concrete column, causing his spiked knuckles to embed into it and also a jolt of pain to go through his hands as he could feel the bones cracking. "...you already know that doesn't work," the voice of the glove said as Ari shook his hand and looked at the marks on the wall. "I'm a glove, I can't feel nothin."

"Still made me feel better," Ari replied as he turned back and rested his back as best he could against the column while avoiding the wings and spikes.

"Well, I wouldn't go punchin random things if you want to try and get rid of da whole Angry Ari thing you got workin for ya," the glove advised. "I'm not sure if ya lookin in a mirror lately, but you've gotten a bit more intimidatin then last time they saw yas."

Ari blew the smoke out of his nose and then threw the spent cigarette in the corner before looking at his glove angrily. "What was this point of all this?" Ari asked. "Why have me embrace this beast and then immediately have the whole world shit on me for it?"

"Ay, you think dat kind of power doesn't come with it's own responsibilities an consequences?" the glove replied in a more stern tone as Ari held onto the pillar, his eyes watering from more than just punching it earlier as a different sort of emotion swept over him. "Look at ya, yer fuckin terrifyin, and that's because people know that you could rip em in half if ya had the mind to. That's da easy part, no one goes up ta a snarlin wild animal that can do that to them, not one they don't trust not to bite der arm off."

"So what do I do then?" Ari said in a more whispered tone as he looked down at the pillar. "Wander the world alone once more? Become the death dealing mercenary that everyone expects of me?"

"Nah man, just show em ya won't bite der arm off," the glove replied. "Fuck mate, ya go dark way too fuckin quick. Just show em ya can be trusted to know who ya friend and who's ya enemy."

Ari just rolled both sets of eyes at that, shaking his head and taking another cigarette out of his pack before putting it in his mouth. "Yeah, you happen to have a way to prove that before they ship off somewhere without me?" Ari asked as he lit the cigarette, only to hear no response nor feel the presence of the glove in his mind anymore. "Hey, you're leaving now? What happened to this sage advisor shtick that you were on about a few seconds ago?"

When there was still no response he slapped the palm of his gloved hand with the other one, but the only result form what was reminding himself that he had just punched a pillar with it while he looked back out at the rain. Prove they can trust him... hadn't he already done that? What was all that time they spent together then if not showing that he was going to be there for him?

As he let the ash fall from his cigarette onto the puddle that was forming he happened to catch his reflection in it. The four-eyed kangaroo-cobra that looked back at him was probably a little more daunting then he had originally thought, leaning down and looking at himself. When he saw his longer fangs and opened his mouth to examine his sharper teeth he started to see the point of his glove... as much as he hated to admit it. It probably didn't help that he flew off the handle the second he woke up, and the fact that he had killed all those people beforehand and then immediately had gone and had sex with Ka while he was transforming and spouting a bunch of stuff in the moment.

When he got to the last of his cigarette and was considering heading back up he heard his pocket buzzing, prompting him to fish through his jacket until he found his phone. He was grateful that he didn't bring it with him on the last mission as he looked on the screen and saw that it was Rayarti calling him. From the glance on the screen it wasn't the first time he had tried to ring him as he answered it this time.

"Ah, Ari, I was wondering if I was going to get in contact with you or if you had blocked my number," Rayarti said on the other side of the line. "I was told that you had suffered an accident on another mission, are you alright?"

"Uh, yeah, I suppose that would be one way to say it," Ari said as he decided to smoke again, only to frown as he found the pack only for it to be empty. "I hear that your group was the hero of the hour, congratulations."

"Thank you very much," Rayarti replied while Ari crumpled the pack and tossed it aside. "It's a real shame that you couldn't be persuaded to join me, we'd probably have caught wind of the plan the day before and caught them before they could lay down a single bomb. Hard to believe that Janette was involved in all that nasty business, especially since I paid you to bring her back like that, but I suppose all's well that ends well."

"Right, yeah, crazy," Ari stated, trying to hide his anger at being reminded of his failure. "Is there a particular reason that you're calling me, because I'm quite busy with... things."

"Ah, straight to the point, always like that," Rayarti replied. "After saving the hero guild I've been given quite a few contracts and find myself coming up short with staff, I'm just calling and hoping that perhaps I might be able to persuade you to come and work for me instead of your current employer. I promise you that I can make quite the offer."

As Ari was about to decline he found himself pausing, his words catching as he remembered that not more than a few minutes ago he had just been informed that he had been essentially fired from his former position with the CIA. The man on the other end of the line had clearly caught his hesitation and coughed to interrupt anything he had to say before continuing on. "Why don't we meet and I can give you my private pitch on how Rayarti Security and Intelligence could be the perfect fit for you," Rayarti stated. "Just let me send you a car to pick you up tomorrow afternoon, you can listen to me ramble on for an hour or so and if you don't like what you have to say then I'll at least make it worth your while for hearing me out."

Ari found himself clenching his fist while looking out at the rain, finally closing his eyes before sighing and nodding slowly to himself. "Alright, yeah, I'll take the meeting," Ari replied. "I'll text you the coordinates of where the car can pick me up, just give me a time."

"Excellent, you won't regret this," Rayarti replied before immediately hanging up. Ari found himself staring at the screen for a while longer even when the call disconnected, rubbing his clawed finger against it for a while as he thought about what just happened. Tortured, killed, exiled, and now... becoming a security guard? While he was sure there was more to it than that it was hard to think of a predator like him behind a desk checking people into a building or guarding an armored truck.

Not to mention he would probably scare the piss out of anyone he met that way, Ari thought to himself with a slight chuckle as he saw that the rain was lightening up. Perhaps it was time to go out and get himself another pack... Ari slowly stepping out to see that the clouds were breaking up and the sun was starting to shine through them. He knew that anyone who saw him would see only a monster, but perhaps that was something that he needed to get used to. As he was about to step over the threshold onto the sidewalk however he quickly walked back in when he realized that there might be a different reason that people would look at him as he quickly wrapped his jacket around his midsection, forming an impromptu loincloth while darting back upstairs in order to raid Lavender's closet for some proper clothing if it fit him.

Ari made his way back up the stairs and was about to turn the doorknob before he hesitated, pulling his clawed hand back. He wasn't quite ready to face them yet and they were potentially still salty at the way he had left things to go down and smoke. Since he hadn't seen them leave he knew they were still in the building, but with him being essentially naked he couldn't go out without being on the news for a completely different reason. Plus if that video was still floating around it would be best to disguise himself and with his costume shredded in a boat that had been impounded by the police the only alternate option was on the other side of the door.

But... since he wasn't planning on being on a mission anytime soon Ari thought of another way to get through the apartment without being noticed...

Meanwhile inside the apartment the three were sitting in front of the television watching a movie, something they had been doing quite a bit while they had waited for Ari to wake up or for news from their handlers on what would happen to them. While their eyes stayed glued to the screen the front door behind them slowly opened, then closed again without so much as a sound. A few moments later one of the chairs next to the table got bumped, then moved back quickly in the otherwise silent kitchen area. The noise was enough for Campbell to turn his head back, but when he didn't see anything he just turned back towards the movie and continued to eat the popcorn he had popped with his power. Several moments later the glass of water that had been left on the table suddenly slid off of it, only to suddenly start floating in mid-air for a few seconds before being put back on the table.

About a minute later the door to the room Lavender shared with Ka opened just as quietly as the front, then closed again. Inside the room Ari once more made himself visible and he just shook his head as he went to the closet. "What sort of power is making yourself invisible to everything including yourself," Ari muttered as he went to Lavender's closet and started to rummage through it. With him being the biggest of the group aside from him it was the best chance to grab anything that would fit, especially since most of Ka's stuff was still clothing from his human form.

Though a lot of it wasn't made for someone with wings or spikes he found something that could potentially work, the long black rain poncho rather loose fitting and could act as a cloak to hide his features. As he put it over himself though he found that there was a problem once more raising up his head as he tried to pull it down to use the hood and finding it getting caught, eventually pulling it down and hearing a loud tearing sound as his spikes tore through the fabric and pushed out on the other

side. "Fuck." Ari said after waiting for a few seconds to make sure no one heard that, going over to the mirror and seeing that he had perforated it all the way down his back with his wings still pressing against it. "Well, it is already ruined..."

Half an hour, a few modifications, and a second round of his invisibility power later Ari was walking down the wet street towards the corner store, keeping his hood up to try and hide his head and face as best he could. He had also got a pair of shorts and shirt that were baggy enough and already modified for a tail that he took from Lavender's closet as well, though as he had expected the fact that his huge reptilian feet sticking out the bottom and the spikes poking out had caused several to turn heads. While Campbell had explained to him that he wasn't on the hook anymore for the murders on the ship, the company claiming self-defense, the fact he was out in public like this was still daunting and made him wonder when the cops or heroes were going to show up. But if he was going to start this new life potentially without his lovers he was going to learn to be self-sufficient, which meant he would need to fend for himself in the city.

As he walked inside Ari was immediately aware of several sets of eyes that were on him, feeling their stares as he had his hood loosened slightly while he walked to the back in order to get something to drink as well. Out of his peripheral vision he could see that those who had seen him had dropped their purchases and left with only a few remaining that immediately went up to the front counter. While he knew that was not exactly flattering he couldn't help but find a small smile creeping across his lips, the fear reaction causing his blood to heighten and his senses to sharpen. Though it didn't provoke the same reaction like what was on the ship he could feel it, the beast that he had become manifesting just from seeing people run.

It was almost disturbing how intoxicating it was, but just as soon as he had gotten it he was alone and his senses settled once more. It was a bit of a confusing set of emotions but it was his first day after all, he mused as he grabbed several beverages to have, there was probably a learning curve. As he also snagged a few bags of chips he started to come back towards the counter when he heard the door open and suddenly found himself once more confronted with that same look from the cashier, that same palatable fear, but his head tilted as it wasn't directed towards him. All he had to do was take one more step and he got the view of a shotgun pointed at the man as well as the hooded individual that held it while demanding money.

Ari's eyes squeezed shut and when they opened again his pupils had become pinpricks, his heart pounding in his chest as he took another step forward. The sound of the man still demanding money, the stammering of the cashier as he rifled around the register, it was all being absorbed in his mind like it was happening in slow motion. His arms released the drinks he had been holding and as he took another step closer he could see everything, including the fact that the one with the gun was about to kill this man. He could see it, the murderous intent, it swept over him like a blood-drenched aura that only he could smell as he finally got close enough that the armed gunman had noticed his approach.

But it was already far too late for him.

By the time the cashier had come back up the gun that had been pointed at his face was replaced with a spray of blood as the robber was pulled down out of sight, the sound of screams mingled with a deep growling and hissing. He found himself taking a step back as a bladed tail was suddenly seen raising up in the air, only to strike down several times with each one wetter than the last until finally there was nothing but the sound of silence. For a few tense moments there was nothing, but just as he started to get the courage to look over the edge of the counter a creature popped up that caused him to fall back against the cigarettes and lottery tickets that made up the back all. The hybrid seemed to stare at him for a few seconds before reaching up and cracking his own neck, then silently going back to where he had dropped everything and gathered it up before putting it back on the counter.

"Number four," Ari told the trembling cashier, blood still dripping from his jaws as he waited for a response.

"Wh-what?" The cashier asked. "Please don't kill me..."

Ari's nostrils flared and he used his blood-soaked tail to reach across the counter and point at the pack of cigarettes marked with a four underneath. "Two packs," Ari clarified before gesturing to the sodas and chips. "All this too."

It took more than a second for the human to understand what was happening and as soon as he did he immediately went to grab the packs, ringing up everything after he gave the cigarettes to the hybrid who immediately took one out while he waited for him to finish. Once he got the total from the trembling man Ari went to reach for his wallet, only to remember that he had left it in his jacket. After patting his pockets for a few seconds he looked down to the side and raised a clawed finger to hold for a second before bending down out of site. After a few seconds Ari came back up and put the shotgun onto the counter before opening a wallet and rummaging through it and pulling out two twenty dollar bills.

"Keep the change," Ari said as he handed them over to the cashier before grabbing the rest and stuffing it in his pocket and tossing the empty wallet on top of its owner. As he left the corner store he took a second to light his cigarette in the wind break of the door and was pretty sure he heard the guy pass out. That just gave him a few more minutes to get out of there as he wiped his tail off on the remaining dry patch of the robber's hoodie before letting the door close and walking towards the center of town.

Ari hadn't been sure of where he would be going after running his errand, still not wanting to go back to the apartment but not wanting to just wander around the city even if the reactions he got were growing on him. His wanderings in the city were the first that he had done since he had truly gotten there and there was so much that came with it; before this point he had just been whisked from place to place in a van with the only exception when he had met Treeborn for their first meeting. As he thought about the druidic deer he thought perhaps that might be something, but other than the cryptic phone number he had first used to contact him and him having moved after being attacked he had no idea which tree or forest he was hiding out in. With that not being an option he found himself heading towards the one place where he had really bonded with Campbell and Lavender, or at least he thought he had as he walked past the heroes guild and into the building next to it.

Half an hour later Ari sat on a ratty couch looking up at the ceiling, cigarette still in his mouth despite the building being a non-smoking establishment. Considering he had already modified the area turning off the smoke detectors was easy enough as he stuck his hand into the nearby chip bag and shoved several into his mouth after grabbing his cigarette. Though there was still the television there he didn't want to be distracted as he reminisced about the last time he was in this place. It had been so much simpler back then; just heroes being dicks, deities trying to enslave humanity, anthro haters, and some douchebag at the top trying to grab power.

As he finished off the first bag of chips and popped open the second however he stopped when he heard something that he had not expected. As part of his security the only time he heard the elevator was when it was set to come to his floor, and that was exactly what was happening as he sat up from the couch. Every muscle burned with energy as he skulked his way towards the door while hearing the numbers continuing to go up. He found himself digging his claws into the concrete as he watched them eventually reach the floor he was on, tail ready to make the first strike before he dug in with his claws...

"Oh, it's you," Ari said with a sigh, immediately relaxing when he saw the purple and white furred muscle wolf standing there holding a screen.

"Nice to see you too," Lavender shot back as he walked in, looking around at the mostly empty floor. "This brings back memories, they still haven't sold this place?"

"I have it rented for the next twenty years," Ari explained as he watched Lavender walk in and head towards the windows facing the Company building. "How the hell did you even know I was here, I made sure to avoid surveillance cameras specifically so you couldn't track me." As Lavender looked out the window he merely held up the screen attached to his wrist, which pinged with a red dot along with the coordinates they were standing at. "You lo-jacked your clothing?"

"I started after you and Ka disappeared and almost got yourselves killed," Lavender replied.

Ari scoffed at that and walked away from the window, heading over to a chair he had used during his scouting missions to spy on the building that Lavender was staring at. "So why are you here anyway?" Ari asked as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Needed to track me down to give me even more bad news, are we wanted criminals again and have to hide out up here?"

"No, not your antics are helping with that," Lavender said as he tapped on his screen twice, the map disappearing and showing the surveillance footage from the convenience store with him right in the middle of the frame. "You're lucky that the heroes are all in such disarray otherwise they'd be drawing straws to see which one would have the pleasure of bringing you in or putting you in the ground. If I didn't have web crawlers on the police band listening to keywords that related to you then I wouldn't have found this in time and you'd probably have a manhunt after you."

Ari scoffed at that and rolled his eyes, though as Lavender sighed and went back to the window he found his ears twitching. "Out of curiosity," Ari stated. "What words are you searching for?"

"Hybrid, snake-cobra, murder, brutal, and monster," Lavender replied simply. "That last one I added just recently."

Ari found the smirk he had been holding fall away and finally show the sneer that was behind it, getting up and throwing the chair to the side of the room where it shattered while the wolf remained still. "What the fuck do you want Lavender?!" Ari shouted, his voice echoing off the empty walls as Lavender remained silent in the face of his storming anger. "Come to tell me to get out of here, to leave you and Ka and Campbell alone? Did you intercept my call too and find out I'm getting another job and wanted to wish me a fond farewell? I'm surprised you're even in the same room with me alone after that crap you said in the apartment!"

As the words faded Ari found himself panting heavily, but even as he stood there Lavender merely stood at the window and continued to look out. The hybrid wasn't quite sure where to go anymore and with nothing left to throw or destroy he just shouted at the wolf again to answer him. "You're still held up about what I said on not trusting you?" Lavender said in a slow, measured tone as he finally turned around to reveal the sadness in his eyes. "You really think that any of us should, after you lie, and lie, and lie to all of us? Ka just got his first taste of it when he followed you to that mission but it's the same meal that

you've given me and Campbell since we stood on this very spot and before... so excuse me for not taking you at your word when you feed us another plate of your bullshit."

The words cut Ari to the core, sharper than any knife that had done the same to his body as he could feel the bite of them on his very psyche. He knew this pain before, seen it and experienced it when he first betrayed Campbell on the docks all those years ago, then felt the wounds it caused finally start to heal in this very spot. Perhaps that was the reason he had come to this place, to try and find the soothing balm that came when they worked together in order to stop the plans of something bigger than them. When Ari had no response to what Lavender said the wolf sighed and made his way back towards the elevator while passing by him.

"I'll tell Campbell the news that you've found new employment," Lavender said as he walked by, giving him only a cursory glance. "I'm sure he'll be devastated, but considering its you I'm sure he's at least gotten used to it by now. Good luck Ari."

As Lavender got to the elevator and was about to press the button he suddenly felt a hand grab him by the back of his head and push him forward, smashing his head against the metal door of the elevator as Ari let out a growl behind him. The hybrid was quivering with pure rage and after he had slammed him into the door he pulled him back and tossed him backwards to have him fall against the concrete hard. Though the wolf was dazed he quickly got back up on his feet, wiping the blood from the cut on his cheek as he saw Ari standing there with claws bared and his tail poised and ready to strike. Lavender quickly reached into the jacket he was wearing and pulled out two metal spheres that he tossed in the air, the objects moving a few feet before they hung there hovering a few feet off the ground.

"Finally," Lavender said as their eyes locked on each other. "Let's see those true colors, monster."

"The only color you're gonna see is red..." Ari replied as he started to circle around, taking the cloak he was wearing and pulling it off before tossing it to the side. The metal spheres that Lavender had thrown continued to hover as they shifted in position with the wolf while they squared off. After a few seconds Ari snarled and rushed forward, quickly closing the distance between the two of them.

Lavender made a gesture with his hand and the spheres popped open, both of them firing pitons into the hybrid as he jumped over them. At first there wasn't even any pain but right as he was about to pounce on the wolf he snapped his fingers and suddenly his muscles locked as thousands of volts flooded into his system. Though it wasn't enough to incapacitate him he did land short and as his feet hit the ground Lavender jumped back and threw four more orbs into the air, but Ari hadn't even noticed as every fiber in his body tensed at once. Flashes of memory on the ship combined with the sensation of electrocution caused the demonic kangaroo-snake to roar before lunging forward again while his mind could only think of one thing.

Kill... destroy... devour...

This time the wolf was once more prepared though as this time the snap of his fingers came with the orbs exploding into smoke and filling a significant section of the skyscraper with the thick fog that it created. As Ari slashed in the air he felt the start of another jolt from the two orbs that were connected to him but he quickly smashed both with precise hits of his tail before looking for his prey once more. His nostrils huffed in the air as he knew the odor of the wolf all too well, knowing everything about it from all the times they were together. This time more flashes of memory, but these were not needed in his pursuit of his prey as he got a whiff of the wolf passing by his spot.

With a flash of his tail he heard Lavender cry out, but before Ari could follow up with it he felt a pair of hands grab onto it and pull. He had forgotten how strong the wolf technomancer was but he was happy to remind him as he swung him around once before slamming Ari into the nearby structural support beam. The blow had caught him right in the stomach and he nearly doubled over around the beam before he was pulled back again. As Lavender was set to do it again to a different one Ari caught the concrete and managed to wrench his tail out of the grip of the other man, then get another quick slash in with his tail before flipping his body around and landing on his feet a few meters away.

As Ari turned back around he saw Lavender standing there clutching a wound in his side, but he was smirking as he wagged his finger before pointing down. Just as he looked down and saw a metal sphere right at his feet it exploded in a flash of light and sound, causing his ears to ring loudly and painfully while experiencing blindness with all four of his eyes. With his senses removed he found himself staggering and swiping in the air while the wolf watched as he got into position. As Lavender grabbed a nearby strand of copper wires and went for the throat of the hybrid he look of determination suddenly turned to shock as he found himself stopping dead in his tracks, looking down to see the white fur of his stomach turning red from the tail blade embedded inside of it.

"H-how..." Lavender gasped as he fell down onto his knees after the tail blade was ripped from him, his body stiffening as he clutched his midsection.

"You forget how big you are," Ari replied as he shook his head to clear his ears and eyes of the remainder of the flashbang, tapping the concrete with his toe claws. "And how sensitive my feet are."

To Ari's mild surprise Lavender just laughed at that, at least as best as he could with the punctured lung he had gotten while blood trickled from his jaws. "I'm not much of a fighter," Lavender lamented, his head being tilted up as the tail blade tilted his head up so they could look eye to eye. "You really are a monster..."

"I know," Ari replied simply.

"Well... I just have... one request then," Lavender said between staggered gasps. "When you lie about how I died to Campbell... at least... make it something cool... that happened to me..." As Lavender continued to stare up at Ari the wolf could see the murder in his eyes, the red irises shining down on him like a demon as the tail blade pressed closer to his throat. Not wanting to see his own death coming he closed his eyes and swallowed hard, feeling his neck against the blade as he waited for the final blow from his executioner...

Instead what he found was the blade pulling back and a hand besides his own being placed on his midsection, his ragged breathing suddenly turning to loud gasps as he felt his lungs reinflate and the paralytic in his system being cleansed. When he opened his eyes again he found Ari still staring at him, only this time they were only inches apart with his gloved hand pressed against him while glowing with a green light. With having only used one power to sneak in and out of the apartment it was easy to pour his healing ability into the wolf even with the damage he had taken, Lavender wincing as the wound in his side and even the cut on his face stitched together until it disappeared. Ari had also used the same thing to mend the internal bleeding he was pretty sure he had gotten and when he finished it left the two of them facing each other until eventually Lavender finally leaned forward and wrapped his arms around the kangaroo-cobra's shoulders.

The outpouring of emotion was not what Ari had expected from the stalwart wolf, though as he found himself awkwardly patting Lavender on the back he suspected it was more than just almost getting killed that was coming out. "You're a big fucking idiot, you know that?" Ari said as he continued to let Lavender cry on his shoulder. "Why would you provoke me, especially now of all times?"

"I had to know... for Campbell..." Lavender managed to reply after a bit more bawling, twisting his arm around so that Ari could see that the screen was showing them from multiple angles that he tracked as the smoke spheres that were still hovering in the air as well as two other feeds that were dead. "If you had killed me... this feed would get sent... to him..."

Ari's jaw dropped slightly at Lavender's confession as he had to catch his balance from nearly getting pushed onto his butt by the one hugging him. He was so concerned that Ari would fly off the handle and kill one of them that he had put himself in the firing line to prove whether or not he was really the monster he had called him earlier. It appeared that his brush with actual death was a little more harrowing than he had prepared for, but he did appreciate the balls that this technomancer had... even if this was quite possibly one of the stupidest fucking stunts he had ever seen in his entire life. But as Ari looked around the empty floor and remembered what they had done in this place he guessed that love will make one do stupid fucking things in order to protect it, including during themselves into a monster just so they could survive and protect them.

"Alright, that's enough, get off," Ari said as he tried to move, only for Lavender to squeeze tighter still. "I SAID OFF!" Ari roared, causing the wolf to fall back and away from the hybrid while he coughed to regain his composure. "Next time let's go ahead and leave the suicidal plans to me, alright?"

Lavender coughed a few times and nodded his head, but as Ari was about to get up the wolf grabbed him by the shoulders and pressed his forehead against his own. "Please, Ari, I don't care if you are this beast or whatever," Lavender said in a slightly calmer, more measured tone. "But if you want to really build back our trust I want you to promise that you at least won't look at us like you did here. That we'll never see you regard us as..."

"Prey?" Ari filled in.

"Yeah, that," Lavender said. "You'll never see us as prey, right?"

"I suppose as long as you don't shock my nipples like you did with those taser orbs of yours again," Ari started to joke, only to see Lavender glance back up at him. Realizing this was finally the chance to potentially mend the relationship he had damaged with Lavender he grabbed the back of the wolf's head and slowly nodded his head while pressing hard against it. "I promise you that you and Campbell and Ka will never be seen by me as anything other than what you are, my lovers. I know you can't trust me completely yet but if this has taught you anything then I'll never be monstrous enough to kill you, and regardless of my anger I will not harm you or the others."

Lavender just let out a sigh and once Ari let go of him the two got up together, the air around them no longer as stifling as it had been and especially as of recent. "I was wrong, you are not a monster," Lavender said simply as they went over to grab the stuff that Ari had brought up so he could come back to the apartment. "You are a beast, and a sexy one at that, but while you may not harm us I'm still worried from your experience at the corner store that you might get a little too... cavalier with your new instincts."

"Mmmm... you may have a point there," Ari said as he pushed the button on the elevator, both men ignoring the dent that in the doors while he contemplated. "I think I may have an idea of how to help curb it though, but I'm going to need you to use those tech skills of yours to find someone. Your best bet is to scour the areas near any forest you can think of..."

Chapter 21:

The next morning Ari woke up in bed, yawning and stretching after the first real sleep he's had since he had come to this city. No nightmares, no stuffed jackal bartenders, no strange mind games... and as he shifted his position he could feel the muzzle of the wolf pressing against his side. After coming back to the apartment Ari had sat Campbell and Ka down and told them the same thing that he had done with Lavender. Fortunately they didn't have to have a brush with death by his hand in order for them to believe him and once they were done with that the conversation turned to the job meeting that he had with Rayarti. Since the militia had collapsed and there was no more mission for them anymore it was possible that he could join the security company, especially since it wasn't looking good that the CIA would reinstate any of them much less Ari.

They had talked about all manner of scenarios between staying in the city and also joining the security team, having Ari stay with them and just not be an active CIA asset, and other options such as finding other work with another organization that doesn't mind one of them having... unconventional means of dispatching people. One thing that Ari had been adamant about was that he didn't want to have to hide his true nature anymore, not when doing so almost cost his life and the life of Ka. As the attention turned to the wholly mammoth he had mostly been sitting there quietly the whole time and merely mentioned at once point that apparently he had telekinesis powers now too, something that Ari thought all psychologists had before it was explained to him what it actually was.

The four talked long into the night and when it was time for them to head to bed Ari found that Lavender had wanted to sleep with him that night, but not in any sort of sexual way and instead as a means to help with the trust issues that he still had lingering in his mind. Though it still stung the hybrid to hear how he had harbored such feelings after all the evidence for why the surveillance obsessed wolf would be wary of him it sort of made sense. He had even caught Ari talking to his glove several times and had included that in why he thought that the hybrid had gone off the deep end and should have been with Ka and exploring that warehouse in the first place. Ari just hoped that it would be water under the bridge soon as they had cuddled together with Ari curling his tail around the wolf while pressing against his muscular form.

With the morning now upon him Ari took a few minutes to look through his phone while Lavender continued to sleep on top of him, the day almost feeling normal as he scrolled through the various news feeds and other alerts he had gotten during the night. The story about the anti-hero militia and the suicide of their leader had already been pushed down by the deterioration of the Company, heroes abandoning the guild saying that they could no longer protect them even from civilian threats. It caused him to scoff loud enough to wake the wolf, seeing the company he hated so much getting taken down because of one attempted attack after nearly causing the end of the world by Anubis. Maybe this time it will stay down, Ari thought to himself as he slowly got up since Lavender had awoken.

When they walked out of the bedroom they found a rather large breakfast cooked by Campbell waiting for them. Even though they were still technically on a CIA budget they didn't want to overstretch the generosity, especially if three of them could potentially get back into the company. While Ari would still be benched Sam had mentioned that there might be a means for him to get back in if he passed some sort of test, but the hybrid wouldn't hold his breath as he took a handful of sausage and scarfed it down. He wanted to make sure he was ready to talk to Rayarti and see what he wanted to do, perhaps if he thought about aggressive expansion or ties with the CIA he could still work with the others as an independent contractor.

Other than getting an additional set of clothing from Lavender's closet to replace the ones he had torn during the fight Ari just had to wait for the time, though as he continued to watch the clock he found himself pacing back and forth. He had never been a fan of the lulls between the action but this seemed to be particularly irritating for him as he wanted to just get this interview done and do something more exciting. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the others were still giving him a bit of a berth as his tail whipped around but he knew that they were still getting acclimated to his new form, remembering that he had to be the one to show that he wouldn't rip off their arms. It was a hard time for all but Ari knew that he could control himself and tried to ignore the fear that he could still clearly see in them.

"So, do you really think you're going to take this job if Rayarti offers it?" Ka asked as the time got closer to when he had to leave the interview. "We were investigating pretty hard into him for being the leader of this cult or militia, I feel like that would get pretty awkward."

"Wouldn't be the worst job that I've taken like that," Ari replied nonchalantly.

"I think maybe it'll be a good change of pace for him," Campbell replied. "I know that Sam was a pretty decent guy but the CIA had us go on some pretty dark missions, not to mention that some of them were in the same style as what you used to do for mercenary work Ari. The only thing I'm worried about is controlling yourself in situations like that, even when you were in the heroes guild you had a hard time following direction."

Ari scoffed at that and looked out the window, though he was glad that they were providing him conversation as a means to distract him from what he was about to do. In truth he wondered what Rayarti had planned for him, but more so there was something that was itching the back of his mind that he couldn't quite scratch. It had taken him a while after he woke up from his coma but he remembered that he had encountered Mesmer and Shockwave in that trap, which he had previously seen talking to Rayarti at that meeting before everything went to hell. It may have been possible that he was just looking to recruit the two to his new security team and they already had an alliance with the militia, the two switching allegiances not exactly shocking to anyone that knew them, but at the very least if they were on Rayarti's payroll then he had to tell him about it to make things right.

Not to mention he wouldn't mind making things square with the two over what they did to him as he let out a low growl.

When the time came for this meeting to happen Ari was wished good luck by the others and made his way out of the apartment and towards the location he had told Rayarti to pick him up. Whether out of habit or an abundance of caution he had the car pick him up from several blocks away in front of a completely different building and as he got in the car he noticed that the windows were heavily tinted. The driver seemed nice enough and while once more Ari could pick up the scent of this man's fear he remained the consummate professional and even got the door for him. While the town car was a bit cramped for a ten-foot tall hybrid and he could feel his spikes poking into the upholstery Ari made himself as comfortable as possible as he was driven to this new mystery destination that Rayarti had in store for him.

After nearly an hour of trying to essentially lay on his stomach while in the car it eventually came to a stop, causing Ari to fall forward and tear into the back of the front seats as he heard the driver talking to someone that was outside of it. With being partially wedged between the seats and the tint of the window it was impossible for him to figure out what was going on or what was being said, all he knew as he managed to pop himself out from between the leather was that they started moving again. When Ari looked up through the window he found himself looking out at a rather opulent front yard complete with statues and hedges, something that one might see in a movie before they moved on to the house itself.

With the lawn being as nice it was Ari had an idea of what the house would look like, only to realize that it was even bigger than he had realized. It was more like a mansion than anything and as they drove up the lawn they had to circle around a fountain before finally arriving at the front door. This would not be some restaurant or hotel rendezvous, Ari realized as the car came to a stop, this was something far more serious. As he waited for the driver to open the door for him he saw the slashes in the leather of the car and let out a hiss of disapproval before trying to tuck in the flaps to make them less noticeable.

Ari's plan did not work and as the door opened he quickly rolled out and popped up on his feet, thanking the driver and closing the door behind him before making his way inside. While it was unlikely that it would make a difference having torn up the back seat of the car that he was delivered in probably wasn't the best first impression to make, though it did show how dangerous he was as he met another man in a suit that was at the door. The one that Ari assumed was the butler prompted him to follow and led the hybrid inside the manor while stating that Rayarti would be waiting for him inside. The entire time that they made their way through the estate Ari couldn't help but look around, not because he was really into that sort of materialistic endeavor but because everything was so technology based that it was a stark contrast to the older facade the mansion presented.

It was clear what this man was into and as they got into the room that Rayarti was occupying he was in a chair with some sort of headset that was on him. At the announcement of the butler the man quickly took it off and did a double take as he saw Ari standing there head and shoulders above the other man that was next to him. "Ari, you've... certainly changed since I last saw you," Rayarti said once he had quickly regained his composure, standing up and going over to shake his head. "I just bought this piece of tech a few weeks ago, supposed to be a fully interactive simulation experience, want to give it a try?"

"I think if I tried to put that thing on my head I'd break it," Ari replied as he gestured towards his cobra hood and new spikes. "I'm glad to see that my appearance hadn't set you back too much, I thought that perhaps you would be put off by it."

"On the contrary," Rayarti replied with a smile as he patted the hybrid on the back. "Why don't you come with me, I think I have something that you will enjoy and ever since I did it myself it's the only way I conduct business now." Ari nodded and once more found himself being led, though as he did he had a somewhat perplexed look on his face. No fear... Rayarti only flinched for a second and after that managed to maintain himself better than his driver and even his butler that had scurried away the second they had made contact. It was almost unnerving, like someone at a animal performance smiling wide while sticking their head in the jaws of a crocodile.

...Ari definitely didn't like that as he frowned slightly.

But as a guest in this man's house and potential employer Ari made himself as congenial as possible while they made their way down to a lower level of the mansion. When they got down a few flights of stairs Ari found himself standing in an underwater grotto; several pools were in the stylized concrete that had both hot and cold varieties that were all lit by LED lights at the bottom. It was quite the sight and to his surprise he found that there were others in the room besides him, though he didn't recognize any of them as they continued past the spa area and went into another room near the back. The second the door opened Ari found himself greeted by a cloud of steam that hit him in the face as he saw the dome room completely surrounded by tile that was fashioned in mosaics of mythical creatures.

As Ari was about to ask what this was place was all about he found himself being brought over to an area with steel lockers that looked out of place in the otherwise more naturalistic area. "Put anything you don't want to get ruined by the steam in here," Rayarti explained as he began to do so himself, putting away his phone, wallet, and watch inside before starting to take off his clothing. "There's a fresh towel in there if you'd like to cover up, and just to be aware the tiling on this room is quite expensive but also sturdy."

Ari once more thought back to the car that he had partially destroyed and nodded, taking off his clothes and putting them in as well while keep the towel inside of the drawer. As the steam began to cling to his scales and fur the hybrid could take a guess on why he enjoyed these kinds of meetings; it wasn't the first time that he had done business in nothing but a towel or less, the steam made it impossible for recording devices and this far deep there would be no one that could hear or try to tap into what he was saying. This man was definitely careful with how he dealt with people, though the only drawback to a meeting like this was that there was nothing that stood between the two of them if he had a mind to end Rayarti's life. Yet once more he found it strange that there wasn't even the flicker of hesitation at seeing every inch of his form and merely asking the predator he had put himself in a room with if he wanted something to drink.

Unlike Ari who sat there bare on one of the benches Rayarti had opted for the towel, the two of them sitting there in the steam that surrounded the two while Ari clinked the ice in the glass of the drink he had been handed. "So, I know for a fact that you didn't just invite me here for a steam," Ari said as he leaned back. "You mentioned something about a job offer and all things considered I'm curious to see what you'd be interested in."

"Ah, not beating around the bush, always an admirable trait in you Ari," Rayarti said as he leaned back. "Rayarti Security and Intelligence has been rather well received by the city, and as I said on the phone I'm going to need people to help ride this wave in a rather aggressive expansion. We already got several contracts from the city to do extraneous work that has been dropped by our dear heroes, and once we show what we can do I imagine other major cities that are tired of relying on super-powered people in their guilds are going to want the same."

"Makes sense I suppose," Ari replied after taking a drink from his glass. "But aren't you kind of forming the same thing? I know I'm no hero but you'd be hiring a super on your payroll, not to mention Mesmer and Shockwave... which, by the way, I need to tell-

"Mesmer and Shockwave aren't on my payroll," Rayarti replied, interrupting Ari and causing him to sit up a bit straighter. "They declined my offer when I made it to them, though I'm curious on how you knew that I was trying to court them."

Ari felt his ears burn as he realized he was caught with knowledge that he wasn't supposed to have, remembering that he had snuck in while invisible in order to see the them having their meeting. "Oh, you know, you hear things on the grapevine when you're settling in a city," Ari quickly covered. "It wouldn't be too smart of me to let those that are potentially my enemies running about without keeping tabs on them, wouldn't last long as a mercenary if didn't."

"Exactly, which is the reason why I wanted to bring you in and work for me in the first place," Rayarti stated. "Other than the fact that this city and the world owes you a debt that they all seem hesitant to repay, but I'm more than willing to foot the bill if it means having you on my team. I need someone with a killer instinct and head for mercenary work that can help me establish roots in that particular field, someone that not only can go out and get their hands dirty but can teach others to do the same."

Ari found himself at a loss as Rayarti began to explain his plan for expansion and utilizing the criminal element for his own gain. While it wasn't rare that someone actually wanted to use him for wetwork and other nasty jobs like that it was the first time that he was looked at as more than just some tool or asset. Training others to be predators like him... it actually sounded as much fun as getting out there on the hunt again, and there was something so right about the idea that it caused him to nod his head without even thinking about it. Fortunately Rayarti was so deep in his own pitch that he didn't seem to notice as he went over the benefits of being in his new security team, including having his pay be above board or under the table like last time.

A mercenary under the flag of a security company was definitely a tempting offer, Ari mused as he took a second to just feel the steam on his body, but it made him wonder if it would fit in with his new nature. Already he was starting to get anxious even with the relaxing environment and found himself needing to do something while squirming a bit on the seat. "Now, I know I just threw a lot at you and you might need some time to process," Rayarti said as he got up. "But while I wanted to bring you up here for business it's not the only thing that we should do, and like I said someone of your stature deserves to have some time to actually enjoy the fruits of their labor."

"I can certainly get behind that," Ari replied as he watched the other man get up, though when he was about to do the same Rayarti waved him to sit back down. "What have you got in store next?"

"Well since you're fidgeting quite a bit I thought that we could take break from all the monotonous talk of your potential contract and do something a little more stimulating," Rayarti said as he grabbed his things from the metal locker. "But before that I've heard about your proclivities and now seeing them in real life I have prepared a treat for you while you're down here. You can accept or deny if it you'd like but feel free to take as much time as you like while I check to see if my lawyers have readied all the

legalese that comes with your job offer."

Ari tilted his head in curiosity at what Rayarti meant by that, only to have him leave the sauna and close the door behind him. It seemed like he was giving him time to relax and think about his offer but he wasn't sure what he meant by the gift that he was supposed to receive. Having dealt with these types for so long it could be anything that they think will entice him into doing what they wanted as he leaned carefully back against the wall while breathing out heavily. It didn't take long before he heard the door open again and as he opened his eyes to ask Rayarti if he had forgotten something he was greeted with a much different sight.

It was the men that were in the pool; all of them standing there looking at him while wearing absolutely nothing at all. "As his thanks for hearing him out Mr. Rayarti would allow you to choose up to three of us to help you relax," the shark man in front said as his finned tail wagged about behind him. "After you have made your selection we are to aid in your relaxation however you'd like, most of us our master masseurs and talented in many methods of meditation and alternative relaxation methods."

Alternative methods indeed, Ari thought to himself as he found his tongue flicking over his lips. He wondered if Rayarti hadn't taken some cues from the Shadow Broker as he slowly got up and went over to the group of seven that were waiting for his selection. Since he wasn't one to let a gift go to waste he looked over all of them carefully before making a decision, starting with the shark that was ready and eager to go. He liked that energy for sure, and once he had selected someone to satisfy him in that way he looked over the rest to see if they could satiate his other desires in a similar fashion.

Though he sighed up the two humans that were included with the group he decided on a lean snake man, a boa constrictor from what he could gather, and a similarly twink cheetah that had been near the back. As the others left he could see that there was a mixture of both disappointment and also relief in their eyes, particularly in the humans that he had towered over and caused to practically shake where they stood. While he had picked the other two for the fear he sensed in them he didn't want it to be so bad that they wouldn't be able to perform, this was supposed to be fun after all.

"Good choices," the shark said with a grin as he shook Ari's hand. "Name's Mako, which is a stage name of course. The snake over there is Coils and the cheetah is Spots if you need a way to reference us."

"Pleasure to meet you all," Ari replied as his grin widened. "I like you Mako, you got a boldness that I can really appreciate, we're going to be having some fun together in a little bit." The shark nodded and went over to get a drink at Ari's behest while he turned to the two smaller men. "Now, as for you two, are you afraid of me?"

Both the cheetah and the snake man had a hard time looking him in the eyes but it didn't take long before both of them nodded their heads in response. Ari just let out a chuckle and reached down to grab them both by their cocks, both of which were rather sizable as he got them to both look in his eyes. "That's good," Ari said with a gleam in his eyes as he stared at them both as their mouths dropped in shock. "Don't worry, I'm not actually going to hurt you, but I don't get to experience fear when I'm with my lovers, so you two will have to do. Now... which one of you am I going to pounce on first?"

Chapter 22:

About two hours later Ari emerged from the sauna after untangling himself from the muscular shark man and gathering his stuff from the metal locker. Both the cheetah and snake were lying on the benches with their butts in their air and their tails flopped around them, both getting a shaft each from the male that was ravishing them. While he could tell they were terrified of what a creature such as him would do they remained professional about it, and to his extend Ari made sure that he didn't get too carried away so that they would enjoy being on the receiving end of a predator such as himself. After slaking his lusts that way he went to the shark for a bit of fun in the other direction, having someone else with that same tenacity and ferocity as him take him by his own tailhole along with his pussy from his twin shafts.

The result was a very exhausted but pleased Ari as he got dressed and made his way out to find Rayarti. If this was the kind of benefits he would be getting from joining his security team he was tempted to say yes right then and there, but the hybrid quickly reined himself in and remembered to think about Campbell and the others. If they were going to get back in with the CIA he wanted something where he could go and travel with them, maybe even do some of that training that he was talking about to teach others the way of the mercenary. Really though the one thing he wanted to make sure more than anything was that he could still be what he truly was, a beast that was unleashed to hunt and kill any prey that was in his way.

While the sex was fun and they did act as good stand-ins it would never be the same as actually getting his fangs into the throat of someone who deserved it, Ari feeling a shudder of desire go down his spine as he walked through the empty grotto towards the stairs. Before he could actually take a step up however he found that the butler was waiting for him and ready to navigate him to the next place where Rayarti would be waiting for him. Ari just nodded and told him to lead the way before following the man up the stairs, heading back to the ground floor and going deeper into the mansion. While getting led around all the time was a little weird he suspected that if he had just been told the instructions on how to get there he probably would have gotten lost and never been found again in this huge place.

After a few minutes Rayarti was found again, this time in a huge room that was styled like a midway or arcade. Ari's jaw dropped slightly as he saw games that were stories tall in the room as the human approached him. "What do you think?" Rayarti said as he led Ari over to a snack bar. "Some people aren't a fan of technology, this area is a little more old-school."

"I think that you could probably open this place and sell tickets," Ari commented as he ordered several things from the menu as he was feeling particularly famished. "You know most rich people that I've interacted with build basketball courts or buy yachts, not games."

"What can I say, I've always been a gamer at heart," Rayarti admitted. "Now this is just to hold you over until dinner, but once you've eaten I want to show you what being under my umbrella can get you if you work hard enough."

Ari just nodded and as he ate the foot-long hot dog he had gotten Rayarti showed him a few pages of the contract that he would sign if he wanted to get hired on. This guy definitely knew what he wanted and went to great lengths to get it, Ari thought to himself as he watched the tablet screen changing with bemused interest, from getting him hired to all this stuff there was a certain tenacity there that he could respect. It was hard to believe that not too long ago they suspected this guy of leading an anti-hero militia against the city, and the more he thought about it the more it was a bit absurd that he would go about it that way. This guy could have bought and sold whatever he wanted, if he really wanted to go after the heroes he could have spend some real money and got actual mercenaries to do the job for him.

Mercenaries like the ones that he had fought after the rail station job...

It was an idle thought he had but one that he quickly dismissed from his head as Rayarti showed him things like a non-disclosure agreement and exclusivity clauses. It seemed that he wanted him all to himself, Ari mused as he quickly wolfed down the hot dog and got to work on the next item, and while that wouldn't be too bad he wondered if that interfered with the others and their CIA gig. Perhaps it was something to ask Sam... if he would even still talk to him. Ari frowned slightly as he thought about the man that had taken him in and given him a purpose after the whole thing in this city with Anubis, feeling a slight sense like he was betraying the one that had gotten him back on his feet along with the others.

But, Ari rehashed, they didn't want someone mentally unstable like him, and he was free to pursue other opportunities at this time. Once he had finished with everything and licked the powdered sugar off his claws Rayarti brought him to the arcade area and told him that he could play any game he wanted before giving him a cloth bag. It jingled as Ari grabbed onto it and when he opened it up he found that there were a number of tokens in it, which Rayarti explained were his own custom tokens and was how he played all the games. As Ari pulled one of the coins out he moved it between his fingers while realizing that they looked very familiar.

It couldn't be... Ari found himself frowning for a second before remembering that Rayarti was right in front of him. He put on a smile and said that he will have to look around first before he decided to play anything and when he had a second by himself he quickly texted Campbell to text him a picture of the coin. While he waited for the response he decided to indulge in a little fun, though there was a question now that was stuck in his mind. It wasn't until he got a text back and he saw a picture of a furry hand holding the exact same coin in his palm that caused Ari to nearly drop his phone.

This meant that there was someone from the anti-hero militia that was at that chemical plant that had been to this place, Ari mused, or met someone who had. Though it was a rather thin thread the fact that there was someone here and at a militia attack was disconcerting, plus there was that guy Chet that seemed to know Rayarti as well. It was very flimsy though and he wasn't even supposed to be on this mission anymore anyway, but if he had a nickle each time some warlord or criminal used a fall guy for their enterprise he'd have at least fifty cents. It didn't sound like much as he thought about in retrospect but the fact that he was able to have any change in the first place would probably be concerning.

A voice next to him prompted Ari to return back to the present, his senses returning as he looked at Rayarti who asked him where he wanted to start. He suddenly remember that this one had a lot of power and influence to the point where they had been trying to push him into this very situation in the first place. For the rest of the time Ari attempted to put the thought out of his head but it continued to nibble away at him as he was shown around all the various games. While they played he snuck a coin into his pocket just so that they could confirm that it was the same one once he got back to the apartment.

Once they were done with that Rayarti treated Ari to a rather large dinner, and once they were finished with that and on dessert he leaned forward. "So, I think you know everything that I have to offer," Rayarti stated over the cheesecake he had gotten from his chef. "What do you say Ari, ready to embrace your future?"

"I... have to admit that it's a rather tempting offer that you've laid out in front of me," Ari replied, thinking hard about what to do next. With being accompanied every minute he was at the mansion the only thing that he saw was what Rayarti showed him, though perhaps if he had a means to perhaps split their attention they might have a better chance of it. "Actually, I work with a small team sometimes, Campbell you've obviously met, and I was wondering if perhaps I could bring them in since you need many more to expand?"

"Ohh, I was wondering if you were going to bring our feline friend in on this deal," Rayarti replied. "If you think that you can sell

the opportunity to them then I would be fine with extending to Campbell and anyone else that you wish for vouch for. Of course if they say no I still want you to join me Ari, they may be powerful like you but you have the experience and killer instinct I need in order to get done what I need."

Ari just nodded and finished up the meal and small talk with Rayarti before excusing himself. Though he would have liked to take the paperwork home that the man was hoping he would sign before the day was out Rayarti told him that he needed to keep the records all together. Normally he wouldn't care about such a stimulation, any contract that a mercenary signs is based off of good intentions and isn't really all that enforceable, but he wanted to know what he was in for before the hybrid got escorted back to the front of the house. Just like before he wasn't left alone for a second and when he got to the driveway he found himself smirking as he saw that the car that he had been in before was replaced with a much larger SUV that had room even for a creature like him.

Just before he was driven out though Rayarti came up to the car and prompted him to roll down the window. Shit, Ari thought as his mercenary mind kicked in while he slowly went for the button to buy himself as much time as possible, did he already know that he had taken one of the tokens? Or was their footage of it from a camera that he hadn't spotted and was about to be confronted about his sudden change of demeanor after seeing it?

Instead Rayarti just gave him a slip of paper and told him that he had come up with an offer for both him and his team if they wished to come in, something that they could discuss and potentially negotiate on at a later date. Ari thanked him and rolled the window back up, waiting until they had left the gate and the property itself before the grin fell away from his face. He thought he just had to deal with this new mentality and body he had gained, but as he looked out the window and saw his own monstrous reflection in the window he could sense that his job wasn't quite done yet. But before he could finish it he had to know what it was, and for that he needed a bunch of people far smarter and more clear-headed in these endeavors than he was.

Once he had gotten dropped off at the same location as before Ari waited a bit and walked down a different street to make sure that he wouldn't be followed by a tail car. With what he had just found his paranoia had crept back into his mind and more than once he thought that he had seen the same car turning down the street several times before it finally went off in a different direction. In his efforts to disguise his intentions he even went into the corner store in order to buy something and try to tag anyone that would park and wait for him. While he walked by the cashier stand he heard a thud and looked over to see that it was the same cashier as before who had passed out, which caused Ari to roll both sets of eyes and pick out a few things before tossing a few bills on top of the fainted man before leaving.

When Ari finally got back to the apartment he had finished the snacks he had been eating and had already tossed the bags in the nearby trash before heading down into the underground parking structure. After having walked outside for a bit he had admitted to himself that he was getting used to the new reactions he was getting, people trying not to make eye contact with him, some crossing the street, and others just straight up turning and going the other direction. It was an unusual feeling being so feared for something other than his reputation, and just like when he had gained it in the first place he found himself enjoying it. But as he had promised Lavender he quickly put such desires aside when he got to the apartment and found someone waiting for him inside.

"So, how did the interview go?" Campbell asked as he got up from the chair he had brought down with him. "Also since you insist on continuing to smoke I thought you may as well be comfortable, so I brought that for you."

"Awww, you're too sweet to me," Ari replied as he leaned in and kissed the sabertooth tiger on the forehead, causing Campbell to grin sheepishly and blush slightly at the attention. "Mind if I light up right now?"

"Yeah, go ahead," Campbell replied, Ari going over to the chair and sitting down on it as he took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. "So what was up with that text, wanting to see that coin that we found?"

As Ari fished out his lighter he also reached in and grabbed the coin he had stashed away, tossing it to Campbell before lighting up. "If my eyes don't deceive me that is the same type of coin like the one we found in the chemical plant," Ari stated as Campbell put the shiny metal disc up to the light and examined it. "If that's the case then we have a problem, because from what the Company said they were shutting the book on the whole thing and stated specifically that Rayarti was no longer a suspect. What was the official story that they had on him again?"

"That Janette tricked him into investing resources so that she could fund her little army," Campbell explained. "They both had been affected by deaths related to heroes and bonded over mutual meetings to get over to it, so when she stated that she was starting a charity for it he donated heavily into it thinking, according to his words, that he was supporting relief to families affected by hero involvement in the city. Considering it was his team that stopped the plot to blow up the hero guild headquarters they didn't take another look at him for being involved in the mission."

"That's rather nice for him," Ari scoffed after taking a drag. "The whole militia thing goes tits up and he doesn't have a drop of blood on him for the trouble. For once I almost wish I hadn't killed Chet, if he was working for Rayarti and Janette we might have been able to beat it out of him."

Campbell just nodded for a bit as he flipped the coin back to Ari, though as the hybrid caught it he could see that the feline suddenly had an epiphany. "What if we're the reason why this all happened in the first place?" Campbell mused, Ari watching him start to pace back and forth. "Think about it, after you killed Chet you made it look like there was someone that was after the militia that might not be the hero guild or various villains. If that's the case then when we continued to escalate the situation what if it got to the point where Rayarti or whomever is actually in charge decided that it was time to cut their losses, blame the whole thing on the one that was leading the militia, and then get out before the connection got back to them?"

That was a hell of a theory, Ari thought to himself as he contemplated the scenario that was presented to him, and one that wasn't exactly far-fetched. He had seen warlords blow up entire city blocks just to keep something secret, some of which he had his own hand in, but the only thing he wondered was what the motivation was for Rayarti in the first place. While Janette was clearly distraught and out for revenge he had never really heard that same inclination from the man. Sure he hated heroes, but unlike the woman that was a low-level office worker that had the good fortune of access to a shipping area Rayarti had both the means to wage this war on his own and also the most to lose should he have been implicated in all this.

It was a riddle that they weren't going to solve sitting in the parking garage of their apartment building while he smoked, and while he relayed with Campbell that he might be onto something there was always the consideration that he was letting his paranoia get the better of him. While Rayarti said he had gotten the tokens for himself it didn't mean that they weren't mass produced, though the coincidence would have been a little much for him they had already tried to go after him before and ended up with nothing. They also had to be far more careful since they were no longer with the CIA at the moment, Ari especially, and that meant if they made the wrong move in this that they would be sought after personally. It was a dangerous place to be in but the thought of it actually caused the hybrid to shudder in delight, his longer tongue licking his muzzle as they went up the elevator to talk to the rest of the group.

As had been expected they were all less than enthused about taking on a billionaire with only what little resources and time they had left, especially since Ka had informed them that Sam had called and they would be expected to have to move out pretty soon. That meant that the rest of their support would follow the same route, and while that didn't necessarily mean that they had to leave the city they were still expected to lie low until they had their fates determined. With only a few guaranteed days left where they would still even remotely have access to CIA resources Ka began to go into his little black book of favors to find the means to keep them connected while Lavender started to reroute potential connection points to use in a pinch. One thing they did still have full access too was the company card and considering they were about to work as hard as they could to keep up a base of operations they decided to go a little beyond their usual allotted food budget.

While waiting for food to arrive Ari had also shared with them the majority of the interview and how Rayarti was really chomping at the bit to get him on his team, the hybrid scowling something when Lavender mentioned that he sounded a little like Anubis before quickly shutting his mouth about it. Though Ari had seen the parallel himself the fact is that they weren't going after some sort of deity that was threatening the world itself, they were trying to figure out what someone was trying to do in a city that had caused the deaths of several people. It was admittedly much lower stakes and especially with the new body and abilities that Ari had it almost felt like a waste. But whomever was involved had also attempted to kill Treeborn, and that alone was enough to get up his ire along with the fact that he had yet to kill someone to pay back for the torture and near-death experience he had.

There was more discussion between the four as they passed around the slip of paper, Ka commenting it was more than he made while the others either shook their head or went wide-eyed at the number of zeros that were on the sheet. "Hey, why is number for all four of us not just Ari's pay times four?" Lavender said as he got the piece of paper. "If the math is right on this one we each get like a third of what he would be getting if he just went it alone."

"Because he just wants me for some reason," Ari replied. "But that's not the point, the only reason we're even considering his offer is so that we can get the three of you in the building as well as myself and try to sniff out whatever he's hiding in there. There has got to be something that is pointing to his plans and if I have to rip that place apart to find it I will."

"Well... we appreciate you looking into the more subtle route first," Ka exclaimed after he had devoured the two slices of piece he had stacked on top of one another. "Really shows your growth, I would have thought that you would just do that instead of bringing us along for the ride."

"Yeah, well, Rayarti isn't as clever as he thinks when it comes to his invisible security force," Ari explained. "In the grotto I clocked three people that weren't presenting themselves to me, I'm guessing that they were a security team that was ready to blow my head off if Rayarti gave them the signal. They also had cameras everywhere and I noticed a few staff that were clearly packing heat while pretending to do stuff around us. I couldn't tell you for certain but I'm guessing he has a small army in that house and the technology to defend it, which means this man is not prey... he's the predator in that house."

The others nodded with that assessment even with the way that Ari said it, though as the hybrid could see them tense up a bit at the way he described Rayarti he quickly reminded himself to cool down and not let those types of words slip out. His anxiety to suppress wasn't lost on the others and as Ari was about to down several breadsticks all at once he saw Ka motioning for him to get up and follow him to the office. The hybrid had a guess on what they were about to do and stuffed them into his maw anyway before getting up and following the wholly mammoth into the other room. Since both of them had grown considerably since the last time they were in there it was almost comical as Ari's feet hung way over the edge of the couch while he could see

the chair Ka sat on struggling to maintain while supporting that new amount of fur and muscle.

"Ari, you know we love you, right?" Ka asked, Ari putting his hand over his head but nodding still. "We appreciate what you're doing but while we are in this period of transition you have to let yourself be comfortable around us while we do the same to you. Suppressing your instincts may placate us for a while but in the end it will potentially have the opposite effect, especially if we happen to be out in the field and you enter into this feral rage of yours."

Ari found himself sighing once he had swallowed the last of his breadsticks and turned his head to look at Ka, whom despite his new body managed to somehow still look like a psychologist sitting there. "I take it that Lavender has told you about the little scuffle we had in my old base of operations?" Ari said, Ka nodding simply in response. "He was right though, I do need to figure my shit out if I want to make sure that I don't catch you guys in any flak from this. Last thing I need to do is get you all involved in something that could have been avoided because I decided to keep my mouth shut or didn't work on something."

"While that may be true there is one thing that I think you need to work on more than just those new instincts of yours," Ka advised as he stood back up. "You have got to start trusting us, we shouldn't have to fight you in one of your old hide-outs because you don't know how to tell us how you're feeling. I know that technically I'm not your psychiatrist anymore but I do hope that you can keep talking to me."

Ka let out a slight chuckle at that but as he minced the words in his mind there was suddenly a thought that came to him, one that had him bemused as he realized that he had a solution to their problem of losing the apartment this entire time. He quickly got up and practically ran to the door instead of answering Ka, but as he threw his hands up in the air in frustration the hybrid quickly grabbed him by the arm and nearly yanked him off of the chair to join him in his announcement. It did involve every one of them, Ka thought as he told the others including the one he was holding of the new plan, which turned out to be a very old plan that was about to be reskinned...

Chapter 23:

Over the night the crew had quickly and quietly packed up any equipment that they knew they could get away with not turning back in before loading up the van and heading deeper into the heart of the city. As Ari watched the buildings pass by while Campbell drove he found the sense of déjà vu that he got from this plan to be both ironic and disturbing, especially since they were right next to the Company and they weren't their main target this time. They didn't know who it was in reality, speculating that it was Rayarti solely based on several loose connections and a coin that was found in the destruction of their first target. He was still not sure of how everything tied into one another and if there was one thing that Ari hated more than most was when a mission didn't have a clear cut objective to it.

Technically this wasn't even a mission though, especially since they had told the CIA that they were merely staying in a hotel that was nearby in order to relax and have Ari recuperate from his ordeals. Considering they had already marked him down as a loon it didn't need much to convince them to keep the other three on paid leave and to look into their suspensions at a later date. Between what they were still getting from the company, the gold that Rayarti had given them for the last mission, and a few of Ari's stashes that they drained along the way the four had more than enough to get equipment and gear of their own and to bring supplies up into the mostly empty office floor to get to work. With no Company or CIA to look over them Ari felt freer than he had in a long time, and while it reminded him a bit wearily of his mercenary life he enjoyed the fact that the four were making their own calls without the need to run it by someone.

Of course that meant if they were wrong about all this and turned the entire thing into an incident that there would be nothing between them and whatever wrath would be brought down on them. They may have a little leeway with the heroes in the guild but after the embarrassment they suffered at almost being blown up right under their noses it was unlikely they would be much help at the moment. That just left the cops that were no longer being influenced to let them go should they get put into custody nor the legal tribunal should they do anything that would land them in a civil matter. Maybe the next person they should get on their team should be a lawyer, Ari thought to himself as they built out the bedroom that would separate anyone that needed to sleep, or do anything else that may require a bed.

As he finished the last of the walls he heard Lavender pull out a number of cords near him and mention that this was just like riding a bike as he patched himself back into the main communications truck of the building as well as power and utilities. They would have this building under their control once more but as Ari got ready to move onto the next construction project he was stopped by the wolf who waved him down while holding onto a tablet. Since they had already gone over the electrical needs of the floor he wasn't quite sure what he could do to help the technology expert but as they went over to the newly upgraded break room he saw that the tablet was showing a forest. At first it only looked familiar to Ari but as Lavender zoomed out he saw exactly what it was that caused his eyes to widen slightly.

"Looks like you weren't the only one that was feeling nostalgic," Lavender said as he brushed past the destroyed hydroelectric dam that was there and instead moved it to a small patch of trees further up the hill. "It took me a while and a few satellites that I wasn't supposed to have access too but I found Treeborn, or at least the general area he's in."

Ari took the tablet and looked at the features of the forest that the enigmatic druid was supposed to be in. "That's a lot of real estate," Ari said with a slight hiss. "We're already on the clock with Rayarti to get back to him about his offer, don't think a hike is in the cards for me."

"I'm sure if you go up there looking for him you can find out where he is," Lavender said as he took the tablet back. "Or more likely he'll find you, though with your new form he might do a double take. Either way I know you wanted his location, it's up to you on what to do with it."

Ari found himself looking at the coordinates that were on the tablet and made a mental note of them while considering his options. They had just started to move into this new base of operations and things would set up a lot faster if he was around, plus he was the primary lease holder in case anyone asked questions, but Treeborn potentially had the means to tame this wild side of him enough that he could indulge without getting too deep into the bloodlust. While it hadn't happened yet he didn't want any of his lovers and partners to be there in the event it did and having a fail-safe was something that he was very interested in. Since it was only a few hours away and it was the middle of the night he decided to take the risk and informed the others that he was off to have himself a spirit journey before heading to the elevator.

Just as it reached his floor however Ari heard someone coming up behind him, glancing back to see that Campbell was also going to join him this time while joking that if he knows about it he won't set him or Treeborn on fire accidentally. Though Ari felt that his presence would be better spent here he knew that Lavender was taking care of the technical side of things while Ka continued to try and set them up various lifelines for supplies and information, which meant other than hauling things and building stuff up he wasn't mission critical. He also thought it was a bad idea that anyone join him while trying to figure this new side of him out, but with Treeborn there he was at least safer than just alone. In the end the fact that it was a long drive and Campbell fit better in the driver's seat pushed him to bring the feline along as they road down together to the parking structure.

Once they got into the van they began the long trek up into the outskirts, Ari watching out the window while he let Campbell pick the music. Though he tried to not show it the fact that he saw the destroyed plant and also taking up residence in his old stronghold it was bringing back memories, ones that he didn't particularly care to think about. Instead he talked to Campbell to reminisce about happier times and after a quick stop to get as many snacks as possible for the journey despite it being a few hours they turned the road trip into talking about the fun they had. For once Ari was thankful that he was wrong about bringing Campbell along, though as he thought back on it he was often wrong when it came to things that the sabertooth tiger suggested that were good for him.

With Campbell driving they made good time and could see the moon just starting to set as they made their way through the woods towards the area that Lavender had showed him. Fortunately they would not be heading towards the power plant, instead the two needed to go further up the mountain towards an old nature preserve station that had long since been shut down. It would be a great place for someone that had innate naturalistic abilities who still wanted a roof over his head. There were several that could fit that bill but from what Lavender had said this one had a heat signature and also a lot of wild plant growth in the last few days.

It was something that they were starting to see after they had parked the van and started to walk into the woods. Even without using his glove he could sense the magic that was suffused in this area, a defensive perimeter made to obfuscate and confuse. This was definitely Treeborn's work and he guessed that if it wasn't for the fact that the deer probably knew that they were coming they'd probably find themselves facing a wall of plants. The fact that the path was made for them also lend that they were being guided to their destination and it didn't take long before they found it.

The building that they came across used to have a parking lot attached to it but was completely choked out to the point the asphalt was broken up. Vines also covered every aspect of the building itself and Ari had to take a guess that it was on purpose so that he couldn't be found after what happened to him at the rail station. Being reclusive was Treeborn's specialty and as they began to walk towards the building they could start to see lights that were on inside the vine-covered windows. No doubt the infrastructure was still intact and as they peeked through a gap they could see the deer sitting in the middle of the candlelit room in a meditative pose.

Ari could smell incense burning as they made their way to the only opening that was in the building and as they slithered their way in they could hear music being played as well. Seems that Treeborn wasn't entirely naturalistic as he saw the streaming service on the television playing nature sounds. "It helps when nature doesn't feel the need to be particularly loud to provide its own background music," Treeborn said, not moving an inch as the two got into the main room.

"Don't need to explain anything to me," Ari replied as eventually the deer looked up at him. "How are you doing Treeborn?"

"As good as can be expected I suppose," Treeborn replied while he stood up, the nude deer stretching his body before looking over at Campbell. "Ah, Campbell, it's nice to see you when you aren't trying to set me on fire."

Ari chuckled at that while Campbell just huffed and as they moved into another room that had couches for them to sit on he explained what had happened to him and what he was hoping their meeting could accomplish. "I did happen to sense a shift in you even before you set foot in my new forest," Treeborn explained while serving them a cup of tea. "Seeing you here now I

can tell that the inner beast you had was far more literal than most of the times I've coaxed such things out of others. That being said I can tell that your aura had grown unstable in its power and is stained even more crimson than usual, my only question to you is what you would like me to help you out with exactly."

"I need to make sure that even if I go absolutely feral I don't harm anyone that doesn't deserve it," Ari explained, Treeborn nodding while taking a sip before motioning for him to explain further. "After the last few days I see everyone as prey, and though so far it's only been to people who deserve it I don't want to go into red out and kill someone just because my beast couldn't tell what they were. I know that this is a strange ask but I'm not looking to bind it or hide it..."

"You're looking to dominate it," Treeborn finished, Ari's jaw dropping in slight shock before tapping his nose and nodding. "You remind me of someone that had powers akin to a werewolf, he wanted to make sure that his fury was used for good but he had trouble differentiating such while in that state. It's much like working with dynamite or explosive; it can be unpredictable and dangerous, but with the right precautions and checks it is an extraordinarily useful tool."

"So you have dealt with this before," Campbell chimed in while Ari sipped his tea, though the hybrid made a face and quickly spit it back out into the cup and set it back on the table.

"Indeed I have, and if we're going to be looking for measures to make sure he doesn't fly off the handle then it's a good thing that you're here Campbell," Treeborn explained. "Since you two work closely together it's likely you'll be around when Ari goes full beast mode, so you can be the one that makes sure that he stays on the right path to channel that rage."

"Like a leash?" Ari asked.

"More like a spotter for a sniper," Treeborn rebuffed. "If your beast mode is anything like how you act in real life Ari then no one is going to restrain you completely, but this is just to nudge you back on the path if you start to stray into an unwanted area of savagery. From the sound of it you've already embraced your inner beast so there should be little in the way of training you to work with this new primal nature, so instead we're going to give Campbell the tools of the trade to ensure that you don't regret your decision to do so."

As the three discussed exactly how this training was going to go Ari found him internally breathing a sigh of relief at what Treeborn had already told him. The one thing he had hoped was that the deer didn't try and convince him to restrain his new self or attempt to put the beast back inside of the box. Even with the catharsis he had reached with Lavender it still felt like he was trying to hold back his primal nature from them and it was starting to grow weary on all those involved. If Campbell and the others had the means to make sure that he didn't target them or anyone else that might get in their way then he would feel much better about finally acting the way he truly felt while they knew that they would have nothing to fear from him.

That relief was tempered as Ari had to explain to Treeborn what had happened in order to cause this beast to manifest, something that he had yet to fully share with anyone including Ka up until this point. While they knew he had been tortured he had not given the details on what or who did it to him nor explained the dreamscape where he had met the enigmatic entity that had created the glove he wore on his hand. He could see Campbell's jaw drop more than once as the druidic deer told him that he had to go into specifics so that he could tailor the training properly and as Ari went into greater detail he found his jaws clenching and his fingers balling up into his fists. Though the sabertooth tiger looked at him wearily at seeing his body shaking slightly it seemed that was exactly what Treeborn needed as he motioned for the two of them to get up.

Once that was over Ari finally felt his muscles unclench while he and Campbell made their way out of the station and into the backyard that was still relatively cleared of plans. He could feel the gaze of the feline on him and knew that he would have some more explaining to do about what he saw when he was dying, but to his partner's credit he didn't ask him at that moment and instead focused on the training they were about to receive. As soon as they got into the middle of the large field the deer held out his hand and the two saw a large ring of mushrooms grow in a perimeter that surrounded them. Treeborn explained that this was traditionally called a fairy ring and that for the purposes of their training Campbell would have to keep Ari in the circle at all times.

Treeborn also had the two strip naked so that they didn't ruin their clothing, something that caused Ari to smirk as he was fairly certain that the deer just wanted to see them as naked as he was while they did this training. Once they were done with that the huge hybrid was guided to the middle of the circle and as he stood there in the grass he could feel the familiar sensation of the ground shifting underneath the soles of his feet. In the next few seconds a number of vines rose up from the ground and wrapped around his ankles and shins, keeping the huge paws down in the dirt to the point where he couldn't lift them up even with his augmented strength. As he saw more come up and latch around his wrists and forearms Campbell was brought to a position about six feet away from him standing so that they were face to face as Ari squirmed about slightly.

Though his instincts did not like being held down like this the fact he was among friends and that the vines felt good coiling up his limbs made it easy for Ari to maintain his composure while they finished getting set up. "Alright, now it's time to really rile the beast up," Treeborn exclaimed as he turned to Campbell. "You still got those electric powers of yours?"

"I do," Campbell replied in slight confusion. "Why?"

"I want you to shock Ari," Treeborn explained, causing Campbell to gasp and Ari to growl slightly despite himself. "Given the trauma he's gone through it's the quickest and frankly safest way to get him to the state we need to control and if we try using alternative measures then it may result in feeding into a different aspect of his primal nature. While I'm sure we all would enjoy that I don't want the training to only affect Ari while he's horny, that sort of defeats the purpose."

Campbell just shook his head and took a step away. "No way, I'm not going to put Ari through that again," Campbell said. "We'll try and find another way-"

"Do it Campbell," Ari growled, flexing his muscle as several more vines wrapped around his thighs and waist. As Campbell shook his head again Ari let out a snarl that caused them both to jump. "I can already feel myself slipping, if my encounter with Lavender is any indicator I need to make sure me getting electrocuted somehow doesn't turn into a death sentence for the rest of you. Now suck it up and shock me!"

While Campbell snarled a bit at being told to do such a thing he began to gather up his power, the flames that surrounded his body shifting from orange to blue before starting to crackle. His electricity powers were always a sight to behold and as Ari watched he could feel his tail flick back and forth in anticipation. Even just hearing it was causing his teeth to bare and his claws to flex, but the vines kept him in place so that he didn't react before it was time. Considering his reaction just with the sound Ari found himself thankful that they were doing this in case there was a time when they were fighting together and he had to use this ability.

Ari didn't have long to think about it though as Campbell let out a shout and tossed the small bolt of lightning straight into his chest. The demonic kangaroo-cobra let out a cry of pain and his entire body shuddered as the electricity passed through him, causing him to fall to his knees while his muscles tensed from the shock. Though the sabertooth tiger almost immediately made a move to run towards him Treeborn quickly put up an arm to stop him and shook his head as Ari panted heavily. The two watched as the creature let out a hiss and remained on his knees while the vines that had slackened from his fall immediately tightened around his arms again.

"Oh come the fuck on," Ari hissed as he shook the last of the tingling from his body. "I know you can hit harder than that Campbell."

Campbell sighed and shook his head while Treeborn smirked, then motioned for Campbell to try again. While it was not what Ari wanted he only felt a slight rise in his need to go feral, possibly because of the environment that he was in. He was not going to give up just because he was comfortable around the two and gritted his teeth as he saw the feline's fur stand on end from him charging up again. This time the vines were wrapped around his calves as well to keep him kneeling while his clawed toes dug into the ground in order to brace himself for this next attack.

The second time the lightning hit him in the abdomen and the shock nearly caused Ari to black out, especially as this one was more sustained than the first. Almost immediately his mind flashed back to that ship, to the torture that man put him through, and this time he could feel that unnatural predatory instinct bubble to the surface. While it hurt like hell Campbell was an expert in his power and hadn't done anything to cause lasting damage, which allowed Ari to try and lunge forward at the source of his pain. The roar that escaped from his mouth caused both men that stood there to take a step back as Treeborn summoned more vines to wrap around the enraged Ari, keeping everything from his hands to his tail locked down so it couldn't lash out at them.

"That did it," Treeborn said as he patted Campbell on the back. "Alright, now it's time for you to really get in there and get down to business."

"Wait, what?" Campbell asked in shock.

"I'm going to be manipulating his mood and senses while you go up there and find the means to make sure that he's listening to you," Treeborn explained as they heard Ari snapping his teeth and trying to snap the vines, only for more of them to grow in their place and hold the snarling creature down.

"You didn't divulge that part!" Campbell shouted. "What the hell am I supposed to say to him to make him listen to me in that state?"

"Speak from the heart," Treeborn suggested with a shrug before smacking Campbell on the rear to usher him forward. "Hurry up now, don't want him to calm down and we have to shock him again!" Campbell found himself swallowing hard as he found himself taking another step forward, and while Ari hadn't really changed much physically his demeanor was so fearsome that it was almost demonic and feral in nature as Treeborn shouted something else. "Oh, and no hanky panky, that defeats the purpose!"

Campbell tried not to show it but his face flashed in frustration as that had been his initial plan. While he wasn't sure that Ari even comprehended the concept of lust while in that state he was pretty sure that with the proper prompting he would be mounted in an instant. With that off the table the only thing he could think of was what to do if those vines broke as he took a few more steps forward. The creature that was Ari growled at him with slavering jaws and as soon as he entered into his field of vision the thrashing hybrid stopped and looked straight at him.

"Campbell," Ari growled, his voice deep and throaty as those red eyes shined bright at him.

"Ari," Campbell replied. "Seems you can still talk."

"Fuck you," Ari snarled.

"Well this is going great," Campbell said with a sigh, taking another step back as Ari snarled and snapped at him. "Are you going to listen to me if you get like this?"

To Campbell's surprise Ari just let out a laugh, though it sounded more like a bark than anything. "I'm stronger," Ari said simply, his claws digging into the ground and his muscles flexing as though to show it.

Campbell sighed and scratched his head at what to do. He could already tell that Ari was starting to come down from this state with no external stimulation and the last thing he wanted to do was shock him all day until they found out a way to make this version of him listen to what he had to say. Trying to fight him for domination also wasn't an option because they were trying to find ways around needing to do that and while he could just grab his foot that probably fell under the stimulation that Treeborn warned about. If there was a way to make him seem more threatening perhaps Ari would listen to him, but the only thing he could think of in that regard is to use his flame powers in order to do so.

As Campbell looked back to Treeborn the deer just gave him a thumbs up before quickly returning his attention back to Ari, using more vines to tie down the arm that had broken free and almost clawed at the sabertooth tiger. He just rolled his eyes and tried to concentrate on his powers to produce the flames needed in order to potentially scare a predator that could easily kill him several different ways if those vines no longer held. When he set his hand on fire to start the process though he suddenly caught himself from going any further when he noticed that the eyes that had been boring into his very soul were no longer on him, at least not directly. The flicker of the flames had caught Ari's attention and as the monstrous creature watched them his tongue flicked in and out of his mouth in a more passive manner.

The flames... unlike the electricity that they had used initially Campbell knew that he had never really used his fire on him in a negative fashion, in fact it's benefited them more than most times aside from the little incident that involved Treeborn and him. At first he thought that it had snapped Ari completely out of it but when he snuffed the fire out in his palm it only took a second before the hybrid was hissing at him once more. When he grabbed a nearby stick and lit that on fire he saw that once more he had grabbed the beast's attention, only for him to lose it as soon as he tossed it to the side.

"I don't get it," Campbell said as he looked back to Treeborn after lighting his hand on fire and once more catching Ari's attention. "Why is certain types of fire working and others not?"

"Probably because like me he can sense where those flames originated from," Treeborn said with a smirk. "Ari's senses are probably so heightened he can tell the difference, and the flames that you produce are connected to you, his lover. You have something there, keep going with it."

So his normal voice and demeanor doesn't work but his flames do, Campbell mused as he began to dance the fire between his fingers to see the kangaroo-cobra continuing to follow them while his head almost swayed back and forth. As he thought about it he could only guess that while Ari saw all flesh and blood creatures as prey while in that state the fire was something unique to him, something that was linked to his perception of the feline. If that was the case then as long as he had fire associated with him then he could be the beacon that kept Ari's attention in case he went off the rails, though that only worked if he actually listened to him. It was also possible that his more primal instincts had bubbled to the surface and just the way he manipulated the flames had put the hybrid in a type of trance that could also potentially work in a pinch.

Campbell could hardly believe the words that were coming out of his own muzzle as he told Treeborn to let Ari go while completely engulfing himself in the fires of his own creation. To his surprise the deer didn't even hesitate for a second and as his hands dropped the sounds of the vines snapping echoed in the small clearing while the flaming sabertooth tiger stood there. The sudden lack of restraint prompted Ari to rip free of his bindings in order to be free, but as soon as he did his head whipped back around and looked at the fiery creature that stood before him. As his huffing nostrils slowly leaned forward Campbell found himself swallowing hard as he could see that predatory gleam in those eyes, that feral intent that had shed so much blood already.

Despite his heart pounding hard in his chest Campbell wanted to believe that he had made the right choice in his assertion of

the situation, though the closer Ari got to him the more that belief began to falter slightly. There were so many different ways that this creature could kill him before Treeborn could properly intervene, from the fangs that were still dripping with saliva to the blade on his tail that could slash his throat. To try and take an aggressive stance at this point would be moot and the sabertooth tiger merely continued to manipulate the flames on his body in order to keep to a pattern that he believed Ari would find pleasing. After a few gut wrenching moments Campbell found himself face to face with Ari, his head craning up a bit in order to look eye to eyes with the other creature that towered over him.

"You're... beautiful..." Ari finally said, Campbell breathing a sigh of relief as he manipulated the flames so that when the hybrid stroked his cheek it didn't burn him at all.

"So that's it?" Campbell asked once he had regained his composure. "You'll listen to me if I show you the pretty flames?"

"Yeah, sure..." Ari replied, his voice less gravely as he began to lean in for a kiss. As Campbell was about to reciprocate he suddenly saw the eyes of the other man flutter before falling straight for him. With him being as big as he was the sabertooth tiger had to dodge out of the way to avoid being flattened, but as he did he found more plants rising up from the ground to keep the hybrid suspended in the air while his body hung limply from his new bindings.

"Not a bad start," Treeborn said as he walked back up to Campbell, picking up Ari's head and opening his eye to see the red iris twitching before letting it snap closed again.

"Did you know that the fire would work?" Campbell asked.

"I only knew that you would figure out something to help guide the beast," Treeborn said. "But he only scratched the surface of his feral nature and with my pollen in the air helping the situation this was merely the first level, if you truly want to get through to him in this state you're going to need a lot more training to make sure that the beast not only recognizes you but can actually listen to what you're saying while he's in a state of bloodlust."

"I don't think I can keep shocking him like that," Campbell admitted while Treeborn laid Ari down on the ground.

"We can find other ways to induce the feral rage," Treeborn said. "Although that depends on how much time you have to spend up here in order to train with me."

Campbell scratched the back of his head and looked out towards the city, which from their vantage point he could only see the tops of the tallest buildings above the tree canopy. "We can't just stay up here, not when there's something going on in the city that we need to figure out," Campbell stated before glancing back at the partially destroyed shelter. "However... we do happen to have moved to a place with a lot more floor space, and I think that it could use some sprucing up from someone with a green thumb..."

Chapter 24:

Though it took the two a bit of convincing after Ari had woken back up after a few hours they were driving back down the hill with Treeborn in tow along with a few of his things from the shelter. While the idea of being in the middle of the city in a high-rise so far from nature wasn't appealing to him both Ari and Campbell knew that if he didn't come along they would have to abandon the training that they had just started on. Not only that but having four supers around offered protection that turned out to be the main motivator in their argument. While he insisted on bringing some plants to spread that was just fine with them, if they had their way they wouldn't be staying in Ari's old hideout for very long as they got back into the city just as night started to fall again.

After they had parked inside the nearby parking structure and made their way Ari leaned against the elevator door as it made its way up to their floor. He was exhausted; not only had he not slept on purpose now for the entire day but Treeborn wanted to get some extra practice in before they left for the night, which resulted in Ari having stiff joints and sore muscles from the electrocution and being pushed into predator mode so much. In the end though they were starting to make some significant progress in keeping his other side reigned in, or at least that was what he had been told since his memory was a bit hazy after the initial surge. In the end he trusted them that they knew what they were doing and with Treeborn around they at least had an expert on supers with primal power draws to continue to help Ari out.

It was that aid that had also caused Campbell to have a smile on his face the entire trip back, something that Ari had noticed and asked about while Treeborn snoozed in the far back seat of their van. The sabertooth tiger had told him that he was proud that he had gone to look for help instead of just trying to deal with these new instincts on their own and that he would have never done that when he was a mercenary. Though at first he was about to dismiss it he realized that the other man was kind of right, which made him wonder if this new beast of his was making him need less subterfuge in his life... or perhaps it was just

rendering him incapable of it. That last thought caused him to shake his head though as a predator's greatest strength can be his stealthiness when taking down prey, a mentality that he was a bit locked in at the moment after their training session.

As soon as they got to Ari's floor the elevator door opened and they found themselves looking at an archway, one that was recently constructed and had a fitting for a large door on the other side of it. This must be their security checkpoint, the group mused as they walked inside, and while the main defense of the door wasn't on yet Ari looked around the other side as soon as they walked through and saw that they had put the steel plating on the drywall to reinforce it like he had asked. When they walked further in they found that the two had been busy during their absence and not only had a headquarters set up complete with large view screen and desks but also their living quarters, which the two were currently sleeping on while Lavender had a power drill hanging out of his hand.

The three just walked inside and continued to look around, though as Ari got to the headquarters section he noticed something that caused him to grin. While he didn't have the same technology based powers that Lavender had he knew what wiring went to when he saw it, and as he traced the line and found where the two open ends were still exposed he tapped them together and caused the alarm they were connected with to go off briefly. Almost immediately they heard the power tool fall to the ground with a loud thud as the two immediately scrambled to attention while still half-asleep. The power tool only stayed on the ground for a brief second though as Ka reached out with his hand and the device suddenly levitated in the air before shooting in Ari's direction.

though he was surprised Ari still caught it and put it down on the nearby desk as the two quickly gathered what had happened and regained their composure, both scowling at Ari as he chuckled while approaching them. "That's an interesting power that you've manifested," Ari said as he went over to the wholly mammoth. "How long have you been able to do telekinesis?"

"Since you transformed me," Ka replied. "Though I haven't had a lot of time to practice with it."

"Hey, hate to interrupt, but we have ourselves a little conundrum that we need to talk about," Lavender said, not only getting Ka and Ari's attention but also Campbell and Treeborn as they walked over towards the huge wolf. "While I was setting up communication lines in case the CIA cuts our feeds we had Ari getting called by Rayarti, my guess to see if he was going to take the deal and whether or not we're going to join him."

"Yeah, we sort of expected that he would do something like that," Campbell said. "He should still be on the hook, one day of a missed phone call isn't going to stop him from getting his prize."

"That's not where the problem lies," Lavender said. "Here, I set up the command center here for a reason, let me show you what's currently going on." The others just looked at each other in question as Lavender led them towards the computer area, turning on the main screen with a wave of his hand to show a wire frame map of the world. As the group watched they could see all different numbers of colored lines bouncing back and forth and as Lavender gave another snap of his fingers only the blue lines remained in a spider web pattern that all seemed to have one point of origin.

"Rayarti has decided that bringing in a team means that he needed to do a little more due diligence on who Ari works with," Lavender continued on as he waved his hand and papers showed up all around the map. "All those lines you see on the map are inquiries that my web crawlers flagged as either having to do with Ari or anything in relation to us, and as you can tell he's rather thorough with his investigation. Most of the information that you see on the sides is what he has already dug up and fortunately most of it is our time in the Company, which the heroes guild had already marked us as being ex-heroes. The problem is that with his surface investigation he not only dug up Campbell and myself but Ka too, either that or we suddenly became the persons of interest for a lot of organizations with a lot of power."

"What about the CIA?" Campbell asked, a slightly worried tone in his voice.

"Seems he has tapped a few sources there too," Lavender said as he zoomed in one area in particular where they knew the headquarters was of their particular branch. "Now fortunately Ka still had some juice in the organization and we also dropped a line to Sam who said that so far our sealed files have not been touched, which means whomever he tapped there probably had no idea we even existed. With this being a black box team our exposure is limited, but there is exposure out there and all he needs to do is land on the right person with the right information and this whole non-mission is compromised."

As Lavender continued to go over the specifics of the information net that Rayarti attempted to cast over all of them Ari found himself tuning out, but not because he didn't find what was being said as not useful or boring. All this showed was that he was a careful guy, he mused, and just like before the whole militia thing went bust there was no real tie-in to what was going on in the city. The only reason they were even up here was because of his paranoia and a single flimsy link that they had along with a whole lot of assumptions. The real problem he was having was a question that he kept finding himself going back to time and time again...

What was the motive?

Why go after the heroes and then suddenly pull back, exposing what he had probably taken ages to set up when he was on the cusp of dealing a massive blow to the Company?

Why have Janette look like she killed herself if she could have just gone down as a scapegoat?

"Janette..." Ari whispered, grabbing onto his head as the others suddenly turned to him in question. "Of course! Once again we're staring at Ari like looking at the sun, we should be looking at someone we already know is linked to the militia!"

"Yeah... that would be great, but Janette is dead," Ka clarified. "So unless you have a power in that glove that can talk to corpses I think that lead is a literal dead end."

Ari suddenly got up and waved his hand as his head continued to try and put all the thoughts jumbled around in there together. "Janette may be dead, but it's only been like a week, her stuff should still be in her home while they wait for the investigation to finish," Ari explained. "If that's the case we just need to break into her house and snoop around, there's no way that Rayarti could have sanitized the area and not left some clue behind that the four of us couldn't sniff out. All we need is one link between Janette and Rayarti that proves they were more than just friends and then we can kill-"

"Arrest." Campbell interrupted.

"Right, arrest this fucker finally!" Ari continued on exuberantly. "Come on, we've been doing this the Company's way and the CIA's way, now it's time to finally do this our way and put our collective foot in his ass!"

Though the others didn't have the same excited look that Ari had as he breathed heavily they did glance about before finally speaking up. "No one really looked into her after she committed suicide," Ka stated. "It's also very possible that if Rayarti was involved in it then he would have potentially left some sort of link behind."

"She was incredibly meticulous too," Campbell chimed in.

"Yeah... and if that's the case then it's possible she might have something that Rayarti didn't know about just in case," Lavender said, letting out a small chuckle as he shook his head. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think Ari's got the best plan of attack here."

"Hey, I always have the best plan of attack," Ari said as he began pointing to the others. "Lavender, I want you to dig up everything you can on Janette and see if we can find out anything about where she lives, who she might have lived with, and just how much police involvement there is with her stuff. Ka is going to check the broadband to make sure they're not still staking out their place and see if we can get any Company support in case things go sideways. As for Campbell and I, we're going to keep training to make sure that this beast knows his bounds just in case we need me to come out and play hard."

The others nodded and quickly broke to do what they were told, Ari feeling his chest swell with pride at seeing the team working together like that. Though they hadn't had much in the way of friction aside from the unfortunate incident with Lavender in this spot, the blood stain covered up by a plant, they also hadn't really had a chance to come together since they kidnapped Janette in the first place. This time she was involved once more, or rather her stuff was, and once they had gotten everyone squared away Ari took Campbell and Treeborn to the arboretum where the deer had an in with the staff that they could get some alone time in a more naturalistic place. As much as he would have loved to do it in their base it probably would have been distracting to the others and with Rayarti's net starting to close in they needed every minute utilized.

Ari found it jarring that the smells of oil, dirt, and rust that were prevalent in the city were suddenly shifted to something fresh and clean as they entered the spherical dome of the arboretum. While there were some parks that were in the area they paled in comparison to what they had created in this area, something that Treeborn stated he had a hand in creating while he was still with the Company. The deer didn't go too much further than that though and instead said that they needed to focus on Campbell getting through to Ari in any kind of situation, and since they had to make sure that they didn't hurt themselves too much there was a different way they would be approaching the training. With everyone that wasn't them out of the large space they had the privacy and resources in order to enact the deer's plan as he told the two of them to strip.

"I thought we weren't supposed to be engaging in carnal activities while doing this," Campbell remarked.

"No, I just didn't want you to rely on carnal activities to get Ari's attention," Treeborn clarified. "Hunger and defense aren't the only things that spur on the primal urges inside a predator, as I'm sure you've seen back when he was just toying around with the idea. Since you two are going to be on a rather big mission tonight I want to give you both a chance to do something that won't put either of you in harm's way, plus once you're done the hope is you'll both be satiated enough to take a nap."

They had been going all night and day, Ari realized, but having some training happen while sleep-deprived was something that

he didn't mind doing. The last thing he wanted was to be in another situation where his lack of focus or concentration allowed something like that to happen. While he had been getting much better sleep after finally relinquishing the last of his resistance he felt more energetic than ever at the moment and wanted to keep pushing himself and Campbell. Plus the idea of having this be a far more enticing training session had already gotten both his cocks completely rock hard and already starting to slip into a far more familiar mindset.

As he began to approach Campbell the sabertooth tiger was blushing almost as much as he had when they first decided to be together like this. "I can't tell if you're on fire or yet the way you're blushing," Ari pointed, ruffling his fur as he let out a growl. "Kitty not sure he's going to get through and have me stop?"

"It's more because we have someone actively spectating," Campbell replied while gesturing at Treeborn.

"You've had the others watching while in far more compromising situations," Ari said, though his words were getting fuzzy as he was finding himself admiring the handsome creature more and more. With their minds turned to lust and the green light given to completely succumb to them his entire body was trembling with pure desire the longer he circled around the other man. "Not to mention you found me hilt deep and found it to be quite the experience once it was merely our passions that were inflamed."

Though Treeborn was there to help in case it was needed the deer was mainly there just as an observer, someone to make sure that Ari's wild side stayed within the bounds of both creatures, he was also enjoying the show as Ari reached forward and rubbed a hand against Campbell's chest. He was still finding himself getting riled up but there was no prey here, at least not in the traditional sense, and as he looked to see what his partner would do next he suddenly found the feline wreathed in flames once more. Ari was still only lightly in his primal state but the fires were enough to distract him, causing him to forget the ravishing he was about to do and focus completely on him instead. He was still hard as a rock though and with the fire eliciting the concentration of the beast it was also causing him to sink deeper into the mindset.

"Alright, you beast," Campbell said as he continued to hold his power steady, seeing the eyes and fingers of the predator he held in his grasp twitching in response to being called such a thing. "Since we're not really worried about me or Treeborn being mauled in this state why don't we try something else to see how well you're going to listen while in that state. Just keep following the flames and lie down... on your back, legs spread out for me."

Ari found a growl escaping his lips as he comprehended what Campbell was trying to get him to do, to be the submissive one in this particular roll in the grasp. Though initially he wanted to pounce him and show him how a real dominant creature did it he knew in the back of his mind that this was part of the training, especially in a less stressful state that didn't involve him getting shocked in the chest by his power. He could feel his nostrils twitch and though he wanted nothing more than to ignore what he said and bring him to the ground with a powerful, passionate kiss the flames had given him enough of his rationality to do what was being said. Plus he knew as they got into it that it was only going to get harder to resist from there and he had to show Campbell that he was on the right path, even if it was something his bestial brain didn't quite want at the moment.

Campbell's face lit up more than when the flames had encircled around it as he saw Ari slowly lower himself down onto the grass, the spikes on his back digging into the dirt and tearing up the grass slightly while he made sure his wings are in a comfortable position. While he still felt a bit of trepidation and not pouncing and ravishing the handsome tiger he could feel that this was something that he needed to do. It also didn't hurt that even with his legs spread and the feline taking control that he was still going to get a lot of pleasure out of this, especially since the other man started by going down to his feet and started to stroke them. Campbell was going to make sure that Ari was good and properly riled up for this so that they could be sure that he was in that primal state.

The second that they touched the sensitive pads of his feet Ari nearly bucked upwards, a snarl of pure pleasure escaping from his lips at the feeling. That thought of trying to be cooperative was quickly fading from his mind as his need to breed this studly creature grew quickly, but when he tried to get up he felt something loop around his neck and pull him back to the ground. He let out a slight gagging noise as the vines wrapped around his neck and shoulders while he glanced over and saw Treeborn smirking. Looked like the deer was getting involved after all, Ari thought as Campbell continued to lick and tease his feet.

It only took a few minutes of foreplay before Ari was a quivering, drooling mess. His cocks were completely erect and vines had squeezed around the base of it in order to help stimulate him while his hips and wrists were wrapped around and pinned to the ground. The only thing he could do was quiver as the bindings around him were less for restraint and more for stimulation, and to keep him from thrashing about while still being able to be broken if he really tried. As his humping up into the air began to become more insistent and he started to cause his limbs to writhe he suddenly found Campbell leaning up to him and holding his palm in front of his hand.

When the fire sprung up Ari's primal nature was tempered, especially as Campbell whispered for him to relax. While this was mostly just for fun they were still training and as the sabertooth tiger continued to manipulate the flames he could see those red eyes fixate on them. As his hips calmed down it also allowed him to take complete control of the situation and push forward, rubbing his hand against the swollen sack, throbbing cock, and pussy of the creature underneath him. With him fully stimulated it didn't take too much to get him to raise up his legs a little more and start to push his own tip between those thick cheeks.

"Now this is certainly fun," Campbell said with a grin as he leaned down and licked the muzzle of the kangaroo-cobra. "I can't

remember the last time that I've been on top like this when you're in one of your ruts. Perhaps we should get Treeborn involved more often."

"Always up for an invite," Treeborn replied with a chuckle. "But I would pay attention if I was you, those vines are mostly for show."

Campbell looked over at the deer in confusion, but before he could say anything he heard a snapping of the vines on one of Ari's arms and suddenly felt a clawed hand press against the back of his head. At that point he realized that he had left the flames falter and pushed the hybrid back to his full feral dominant nature, pushing their muzzles together and sliding his cock tongue into his maw. Though it was a minor slip of power it was enough for the sabertooth tiger to get his muzzle stuffed with the throbbing flesh. He still managed to keep his own maleness in the tailhole of the creature underneath him.

With Ari feeling his insides get spread open it had tempered that dominance that had been surging through him, plus the fact that the one on top of him was one of his closest and longest lovers the lustful desires are easy and natural. It would be something different if they were in a dangerous situation but there was a reason why Treeborn was unnecessary up until that point. At this moment they were just having a bit of fun before the real work began, a chance to really reconnect with the man on top of him. Even though he would normally have the sabertooth tiger on his back and railing into him but with the primal instincts flowing through him there was a deeper level of intimacy.

It seemed that it was infectious too as he felt a muffled growl come from the sabertooth tiger as Campbell pinned the hand that he had freed back to the ground, all the while pumping his hips down and sliding deeper into the hybrid beneath him. Ari could sense it and it was getting him even more riled up, and though he was more focused with jamming his cock tongue as deep into the other man's throat as possible a small part of him wondered if there was something there. Treeborn had mentioned that there was an inner beast inside of all of them, and with everyone he had really connected to becoming heavily muscled animal men maybe there was something there.

But the thought was immediately pushed aside by Campbell pushing into him, his nostrils huffing as he breathed through them while actively sucking his cock tongue while thrusting deep into his tailhole. The training had become forgotten as the pretense while the two started to get more and more active while tearing up the grass underneath them with their claws. Treeborn smirked at that and as he used his fingers to manipulate the vines so that they wrapped around not only Ari but Campbell as well. The restraints sliding between the both of them really brought out their bestial sides and both anthro men were starting to strain against them while still maintaining their rutting rhythm.

Though Ari was completely lost in the haze of pleasure Campbell had far more control of his faculties, which he used as sparks of fire began to flit across his fur. Before Treeborn realized what was going on he had wreathed his body completely in flames and burned away the vines. The deer let out a slight gasp of shock as he lost control of the plants he had been using to restrain both of them, taking a step back as he saw the predatory glint in both of their eyes as they turned to him. He suddenly felt himself stepping back as he saw the flames around Campbell's body coalesce around his hand that he put in front of Ari's face.

"I think the deer's been having too much fun at our expense," Campbell said as he used the fire to keep the actual beast's attention. "While don't we have a little hunt of our own?"

Chapter 25:

After having a nap in the arboretum Ari awoke to a call that was coming from his pants that were somewhere in the area. It took him a while to hunt them down after he had managed to untangle himself from Campbell and Treeborn that had started to stir as well from their training session. Though the deer mentioned something about this not being part of the plan he had a big grin on his face that was mirrored by the other two as he pulled away from them to find where they had started. Fortunately with Ari's senses it allowed him to zoom in on the phone call and was able to answer it to find that Lavender was calling.

When he answered the phone the excited wolf had stated that he was able to not only find where Janette actually lived but had also found that there was an area somewhat close to it where her phone had been pinged several times. As Ari scratched his chin he mused that would be the more likely place where they would find something, from what he remembered about the obituary they had found her dead in her home and not in some random location. With that being the case whoever killed her either did so there and potentially didn't know about the safehouse or had killed her in that place and moved her body. Considering the map that he had been shown having the street be relatively open it was unlikely that a killer would risk the exposure if they were making it look like a suicide, even that did mean they got to discover this potential stash house.

Ari told him to take Ka and meet them at this new address, wanting to explore that area first before they went to the house. He also reminded Lavender to make sure that their digital footprint was scrubbed before hanging up. At this point it was more than likely that if Rayarti was more heavily involved then they had originally thought then it would mean by this point he would definitely be attempting to track them. Fortunately the technomancer wolf had already spoofed their location to several different areas in case someone tried to follow that trail, though as he put the phone away and got dressed he hoped that someone

hadn't done the same to them with this new data.

Though Treeborn was given the invitation to go with them and help investigate the deer declined, instead saying that he will spend a while in the arboretum in order to help with their training. While Ari could have appreciated the extra set of powers he could understand that he was still processing what happened to him, having gone through a similar ordeal he was surprised that he was somehow up and running. If it weren't for the powers that he had he probably would still be in a catatonic state instead of being about to break into a potential stronghold for the anti-hero militia. It was what they had been looking for the entire time they had been there and considering Janette had been written off as a suspect they might have never found it, especially if she hadn't been so sloppy the last few days before she died.

Or perhaps she had wanted someone to find her, Ari mused to himself as they made their way to the destination. If she had failed and let Ari go after an entire ship full of people were slaughtered it was possible Rayarti, or whoever was calling the shots, might have decided that she needed to be taught a lesson... or become a lesson for anyone that might fail in the future. It wouldn't be the first time that someone he had worked for or was planning to kill had attempted to get caught by the authorities in order to avoid a worse fate, though it usually didn't end well for them. Regardless whether intentional or not she had left a trail of breadcrumbs to the location, and if they could find this then anyone else that was keeping an eye on things probably could as well.

"Seems she wasn't as strong as she thought," the voice of the glove said, prompting Ari to sit up. Though he and Campbell were the only ones in the car he opted for the back since it better fit his somewhat large frame, which allowed him to also duck behind the seats.

"What the hell do you want?" Ari hissed as quietly as he could. "In case you couldn't tell we're about to do something that could put an end to this before it gets out of hand."

"Ya know that we can talk mentally, right?" The glove replied. "Or perhaps if ya still got a drive ta go we could speak more face ta face then face ta glove."

Though Ari scowled slightly at that, having not been back to the place that came to mind as he looked out at the front of the vehicle, he knew that the glove wouldn't be talking to him without a reason and it had been one of the key players in saving his life. With there still being at least ten minutes until they arrived he knew that there would be more time in his headspace and laid back as best he could. To his surprise as soon as he closed his eyes he found himself falling asleep, drifting off into the darkness rather quickly as the sounds of the city died out around him...

When Ari opened his eyes again the noise he heard was that of a cocktail shaker, the leather jackal standing behind the bar he was sitting at giving him a grin before pouring him a drink. "I see you're playing the bartender again," Ari said as he looked around. "Don't have to worry about monster version of myself lurking in the darkness and waiting to pop out and strangle me, do I?"

"Have ya looked in the mirror lately?" the jackal scoffed, the hybrid rolling his eyes as he took a sip of the drink. "This is your realm now Ari, yer the monsta dat lurks in da shadows. As for the whole bartender roll, I think it's because you see me as your helper, facilitator, maybe even confidant if I may be so bold."

"Say whatever you want, doesn't make it true," Ari shot back before looking around. "This place... feels different, is it really my realm?"

"You're no longer using it to cage your bestial spirit," the jackal explained as he leaned forward. "And the creator of me and by extension you is pleased with your embracing of it, so I suppose this headspace is yours now. No more nightmares, at least not anything from our particular enlightenment, so you can probably come in and start decorating if that's yer thing... just keep the bar, please."

"Not really in the mood for interior decorating," Ari said with a slight growl as he turned back to the jackal. "Why the sudden urge to talk? Why bring up Janette's suicide?"

"Because she was someone that either cracked under the pressure or had someone do the crackin for her," the jackal explained. "While Treeborn is doin a great job with yer instincts and the guidin of your beast there is more to being the apex predator then just bein the most powerful creature in the room. There's responsibility that comes with that, and people that are gonna want to try and get in on that power like a certain rich human."

Ari found himself tapping his claws on the bartop as the jackal mocked wiping it down after he had finished with his drink. "Rayarti has not obfuscated the fact that he wants me," Ari said as he looked at himself in the mirror. "He didn't even flinch when he saw my new form, and that in itself is something that is concerning."

"A predator doesn't make a sign of weakness to another predator," the jackal mused as he manifested a cigarette for Ari to have, which even though he knew it was fake like the drink he took anyway. "But you know that even if this turns out to be true and you kill him there are going to be other Rayarti's in the world that will want to take advantage of you, just like there will be other Sams, or other Mr. Stevens, it will be a never-ending procession of people lookin to kiss yer ass or stab yer back just to get a taste of our power."

Though Ari found himself gritting his teeth around his cigarette he said nothing, mostly due to knowing that the jackal that represented his glove was correct. He knew that it was no hand of fate that had gotten him in contact with Sam after the Company had fallen apart around them, and Rayarti was just someone else that wanted to give him money in exchange for doing his dirty work. It had really been the story of his life and other than the lovers that he had surrounded himself with he knew that anyone that talked to him was likely looking for a favor or job for him to do. The glove was right... he needed to start steeling himself against the people that would no doubt see something like the footage of him killing those people on the boat and see it as an opportunity to get a mass murderer to help them do something similar.

As the jackal leaned forward and lit his cigarette he began to flick the metal container open and shut, doing it in a way that caused Ari to look at it in question. When he looked up at the bartender he just smirked and gave him a little wave, and in the next second his eyes opened and he found his head jammed against the armrest of the back seat. He quickly got up and saw that they were pulling into a parking structure that was near the building, hearing the turn signal clicking before it was finally shut off. When he moved about Campbell looked back at him and said that they were almost there and Lavender had already called him to confirm that they were there and ready to meet.

Once the two had parked somewhere with relatively easy and somewhat hidden access the two got out of the car and got on their gear. With Ari's costume having been shredded during his torture and subsequent transformation he had been utilizing whatever he could as far as clothing, especially since he had been kicked out of the CIA while still in a coma. The result was Lavender's partially shredded clothing he had used previously covering him along with a mask that they had made out of a knitted hat. As soon as they started moving though Ari found himself partially blinded and removed it before hopping over the side of the parking garage.

"What are you doing?" Campbell asked as he adjusted his own mask.

"I can't see in that damn thing," Ari growled. "Plus anyone worth their salt is going to see right through that and know its me. Better to have Lavender just spoof the footage."

Campbell looked like he was about to say something, but considering that his own saberteeth were practically poking out from the mask he seemed to think better of it and just pulled his own mask off. That was something that perhaps they were going to have to work on later, Ari thought to himself, but at the moment he had something better to help them escape detection. The two made their way through the back alleys before finally reaching a small parking lot that only had one functional light where the other two sat and waited. Ari mentioned that it looked like they were part of some sort of anthro crime gang that was about to do a drug deal or something that caused the others to chuckle.

The building that they were about to break into is an old shopping complex that was shut down temporarily for renovations, which would make sense that they might stage something there because people who went in and out would be thought of as workers with equipment. The area they were in was the small overflow lot that was near the back of it and as they took one more look around the area Lavender was already doing his work. His eyes were glowing bright and as they waited they could hear him rattling off the systems he found on the inside and the fact that they were all deactivated for the moment. While the wolf made sure there weren't any cameras in the area that could see them digitally there was always the possibility of errant eyes or potentially ones that were more deliberate, which was why they were all standing together as Ari clutched the fingers of his gloved hand.

Less than a minute later the four anthros had disappeared from view, but they were still very much there as they could see each other just fine. Though it was a bit risky to use a power this intensive this early Ari felt invigorated and had been wanting to use his glove for something since he had gotten his new form. When the other three looked at each other they could see that their bodies were slightly translucent when it came to one another just as a means of understanding that their power worked, though when Ka tried to pass his arm through Lavender it just caused him to bump against the wolf's shoulder and gave him a dirty look while Campbell giggled. Ari just rolled his eyes and said that this power affects sight only and that he can still be touched and heard before directing everyone to get moving so that he can conserve his strength.

The three nodded almost in unison before they started to make their way through the small overflow lot towards the back of the mall. Since there was construction that was going on they didn't even need to lockpick or get through the door, the four of them crawling through a partially destroyed wall that was covered just by a tarp. The four of them had to be careful about moving the plastic since there wasn't much of a breeze but as Ari made his way to the other side he saw that there was no one there to look at them. Even though he didn't sense anything he kept up the invisibility as the rest of them made their way through the hole to get to the other side.

The four kept their silence as they made their way through the back rooms of the mall, which was more like a few stores connected to an internal courtyard, and once they were inside they found that while there was construction equipment around

there was nothing torn up inside of the mall itself. Looked like they hadn't found the time to get things done, Ari thought to himself as they looked through the stores that were on the first floor, and if this was a staging ground for an anti-hero militia it made sense. Once they were done with this the hybrid reminded himself mentally to see if they could figure out who owned this place as they searched the end of the first floor and made their way up to the second.

As Ari got up and looked to the left at a shoe store that was empty he felt a tap on his shoulder and looked to see Campbell pointing to a different area of the mall. Across the balcony he could see that there was a rather large store that was actually some time of restaurant, one that he could see actually had a number of tables that were still in it. It would be the perfect place for someone to hold meetings with people and not have to haul in a number of fixtures that could cause attention to be brought to them. Ari nodded and motioned for Campbell and the other two to head over there while he covered them with his rifle.

The four made it hastily towards the cafe, trying to make sure that they cover each other and give Lavender a chance to scan the area. Though they were trying to make it easy on Ari he was still feeling fine with only a slight twinge in his eye that indicated that he had one currently active. By the time they reached the small eatery there Lavender mentioned that there was nothing that he could sense that would be alarmed. While that was a relief it meant that it was possible that someone had gotten there before them, or that there was nothing there to begin with.

When they got inside the wolf gave one more scan of the area to make sure there were no booby traps or surveillance devices while the other three made sure that there wasn't anyone lingering. Ari made sure to sweep the small kitchen that the cafe had utilized and when he looked back at the freezer he already made the first discovery of note. The thick metal box contained not only a number of weapons but also what appeared to be a small server in there that was currently powered off. They had made a semblance of a Faraday cage and the only access to it was a few wires that were sticking out of it, which was likely why Lavender hadn't sensed it even while they were moving their way up to the cafe.

Once they made sure that everything was cleared Ari made his way back towards the front of the cafe. The others had already started to search the place and after hearing the hybrid's discovery it informed them that they were in the right spot. Unfortunately other than the weapons and computer they had not found much, other than a few bottles of booze and a couple scraps of paper that indicated someone even lived there. While it wasn't sanitized or anything like that there was definitely nothing left in the cafe area that would have indicated much more than people hung out here, which had them all move their way back to the kitchen area.

"Oh ho, what's this?" Lavender said as he was guided towards the computer server that was in the freezer. "Maybe we'll finally get some answers out of this, though if we-"

Everyone stopped when they heard a click that not only caused Lavender to stop talking but everyone to stop breathing as well. A mechanical trap... Ari knew it when he heard it and as he screamed for everyone to get out he had heard the gas pipes behind the equipment rupture and pop. It wasn't just the freezer that was about to turn into a burn room but as he reached to try and pull the wolf out of there he saw that the walls suddenly alight with fire. Though he could sense Campbell about to use his powers in order to try and control the flames there was no way he would be able to stop the gas from igniting and in the few seconds they had all Ari could do was rip Lavender out and drop on top of him.

As Ari braced himself for an explosion he began to reach into his glove's power in order to potentially try to get some sort of shield around him and Lavender he suddenly felt a burst of cold fly across his back. It was enough that nearly caused him to shudder and when he looked back at the freezer he found it more like its namesake with icicles that were jutting out of it. Both Lavender and Ari looked back in shock and even Campbell was standing there with his arms still raised as they all stared at where the ice had come from. The wholly mammoth also seemed stunned at what they had just done and as they looked at their hands Ari suddenly felt the wolf slide out from under him and with Campbell they managed to find the cutoff for the still leaking gas and turned it off.

Once the immediate danger had passed the four of them went up to the freezer where they saw the computer encased completely in ice. "Well that's not good," Campbell said with a frown. "That was our best shot at trying to get something on this anti-hero militia group."

"It still is," Lavender said as his eyes trailed down to the exposed wires before glancing back at Ka. "You think you can keep that Ice Age from melting?"

"I... don't know how I did it in the first place," Ka replied. "But I can try, why though?"

"If we're lucky the ice is staying solid and will act just like a coolant," Lavender said as he went down to the wires. "The problem is going to be when this melts and fries every piece of equipment that has electricity running through it. If Ka can keep his Ice Age the way it is I can try and access as much information off of it as possible and maybe salvage this particular operation so we don't have to break into a dead woman's house."

"Fair enough," Ari said. "Lavender will try and access the files while Ka keeps things chill. Why don't you come with me

Campbell and we can make sure that we don't get interrupted."

The others nodded and Ari had Campbell follow him outside, not only because the two of them would just be in the way unless he wanted to use one of his glove powers but also because he had heard something that had caused his ears to twitch. It was the sound of a vehicle that should not have been anywhere near the mall and when the two of them went to the window that the cafe had they could see that there were several pairs of headlights that were coming up. It caused Ari to frown when he saw them stop and several men both human and anthro get out of the car.

"Damn, did Lavender miss an alarm?" Campbell whispered as they made sure not to be seen, both of them on either side of the window as both of them watch the group prepare themselves. "Or did we trip something with that switch in the freezer?"

Ari continued to watch them and as he did he shook his head. "No, not the way they're moving," Ari stated. "My guess it's a recovery crew, someone that's here to do the same thing that we are except we happened to get here first. From what I see there's about a dozen people, all of them trained but not in the military."

"So like security guards?" Campbell said, Ari's eyes narrowing as he the sabertooth tiger said that as the feline also caught on. "Wait, do you think this is Rayarti security?"

"If it is then we have a potential link as well as a problem," Ari said as he put his head back. "We could easily kill them, I could easily kill them, and I really want to Campbell. It would be so easy, they could make for such delightful prey..."

As Ari began to growl in the thought of hunting down and killing these creatures he suddenly saw a flicker of light and his gaze shifted to the fire that Campbell had formed in the palm of his hand. "Focus Ari," Campbell said. "If you go on the warpath again whether caught on camera or not they're going to crucify you."

"Yeah, I'm aware," Ari said as the primal urge abated, taking out a cigarette and using Campbell's palm flame to light it before putting it in his mouth. "There's also no way we're going to completely hide our involvement here, so now we've got to make sure that we leave before they catch on to what we're doing here. Even with them not moving particularly fast I expect they're going to breach in about ten minutes and be up here in another five if they know where they're going."

The two watched as they quickly started to get into formation to go through the front doors of the mall, and that was enough for Ari to see before gesturing for Campbell to follow. They made their way back into the kitchen and as the sabertooth tiger locked the doors to give them a few seconds of extra time while the hybrid went over to see how the other two are doing. Lavender was on his knees with one hand on the stripped wires while the other was holding onto a personal computer as Ka kept his hands against the block of ice that had encased the hard drive. When Ari asked how long Lavender had he shushed him and said he needed at least thirty minutes to do the download safely, and when he asked the wolf how fast if he did it unsafely he was told twelve minutes.

Twelve minutes... it wasn't just their lives that Ari was worried about as he looked at his watch, it was the lives of all those that were out there outside the mall. He knew that he could easily protect the three that were there with him but in slaughtering twelve people in security gear he would not only give up the ghost on what they were doing but also would likely make the news. If they break into the kitchen though there would be no way of stopping him, even with the flames of Campbell trying to stop him the beast knew that it would be a bloodbath. But as he saw the lights blinking in the freezer and saw Lavender's nose starting to bleed from supplying power and downloading data there was another potential problem if the wolf passes out.

But with only a few minutes until breach Ari's mind focused on their escape. As soon as they found the frozen block of ice that was the server all hell would probably break loose and while he could just invisible them on the way out any footage will probably show them hustling away from the area. With Lavender likely down for the count when he gets done with the download they wouldn't be able to rely on them to cover his digital tracks, so they needed to find an alternate route to get them out of there that wouldn't cross paths with the incursion team. He still had two slots left in his glove though and was more than eager to use a second one as he pressed his hand against the floor while concentrating.

While it was by no means silent Ari let out a snarl as he poured his power into the floor, feeling the metal and ceramic start to melt and yield underneath his will. As the floor sagged it looked like it was about to collapse but the tendrils of energy that slithered through kept everything together enough for it to be remolded into something even as it dropped down. Not only was he creating an opening for the four of them but also a way to do it safely, creating a sudo slide for them to get through. As the last of his energy locked everything down to the first floor there was a loud bang and Ari realized that they had just breached.

Five minutes... if this really was a security team that Rayarti had employed to do a sweep of the building then that was the minimum amount of time that they had left. There were a number of other mitigating factors as well but as Campbell continued to listen at the door he could hear them starting to already make their way up. As Ari finished he looked over and saw both men doing the download starting to struggle and as with one power left he had to figure out a way to destroy the evidence of their involvement. It didn't have to be perfect; they just had to figure out a way of making it hard to know that they were there since the group would know that someone was there, and as he looked between Campbell and the freezer he got an idea that caused

a smirk to spread across his muzzle.

Approximately five minutes later the group of security personnel made their way into the cafe, the group fanning out and making sure that there wasn't someone else in there. As they made their way through one person commented that there was cigarette smoke that they could smell while another stated that all he could smell was dust and mildew. For those that were making their way to the kitchen they missed one very particular odor due to the fact that something had been shoved underneath the cracks to block it from coming out. With the doors also being locked the team made their way up to prepare a breach, getting in all positions while the one in front got ready to kick down the door.

The sound of wood smashing was exactly what Ari was waiting for and as Campbell and Ka dragged a bloodied Lavender towards the exit the hybrid just stood there with his mostly spent cigarette in his hand. "Fucking amateurs," Ari snarled as he flicked the lit end back up into the kitchen. "You're all fired."

By the time those at the door were greeted with a wall of natural gas Ari was already running in the opposite direction and the cigarette was already engulfed in flames that blossomed out from it like a deadly fire. In a matter of seconds it had ignited the gas that had built up in the kitchen that originally was intended for them. While he didn't stick around long enough for the aftermath of the explosion as he caught up to the other three they all ducked when the ceiling above them rattled and debris started to fall down around them. "I don't know why I couldn't have just used my powers," Campbell stated while Ari helped the semi-conscious Lavender to the exit they had taken.

"It's one of my little pleasures," Ari replied with a smirk. "Plus think of it as a consolation prize for not getting to hunt them down in a place like this. A bunch of heavily armed but somewhat inexperienced men in a place like this... it would have been glorious."

Ari just smirked and rolled his eyes as they all made it out of the mall, Lavender stumbling on his own feet before getting enough composure back in him to realize where he was. As he wiped the blood from his face and ears he showed the others the hard drive, which was just as translucent as the rest of them while the hybrid activated his invisibility power in order to make sure their escape wasn't seen by any lookouts. By the time they crossed through the parking lot and were heading back to the garage where their respective cars were parked they could hear the sounds of fire engines heading their way as flames licked out of the window that he and Campbell had just stood at a few minutes ago. While he was sure that he probably didn't kill them all or even most of them it would certainly cause the security team to rethink their occupation.

The two split up once more and they managed to get out before the police and fire department managed to section off the area. A fire at a mall under construction in the middle of the night would likely not bring down hero involvement, especially if the men that were there were Rayarti's security forces. It was unlikely that those who were there would admit it, Ari mused while being driven back to their safe house, or it was possible that they would spin it as some sort of security mission gone wrong. Either way they had gotten what they had come for, or at least hopefully they did as they hadn't had a chance to communicate with Lavender about the information he had pulled from the frozen hard drive.

This had better be worth it, Ari grumbled as they heard another secondary explosion while driving away...

Chapter 26:

It had taken Lavender nearly the entire day in order to recover enough for him to start working through the data on the server, which he said as they sat in the high rise looking out over the city that it would probably take him at least another day in order to decrypt and extract anything useful out of it. Even with his technomancer abilities it was possible that the extracted data had been corrupted or there was some sort of defensive mechanism on the programs, either way he said he had to take to it with more care than he pulled it out if they wanted anything. It felt like they were up against the wall and it was only exacerbated by the fact that Rayarti had sent several messages to him asking about him and his teammates potentially joining with his security company.

Though he was dodging his calls for the moment Ari knew that if he waited too long then he would either think something was up or just rescind his offer. With Lavender still in recovery there wasn't much they could do but wait for him and as they watched the news about the freak gas leak that had caused an explosion in a local mall the hybrid once more got something from Rayarti, this time a phone call instead of a text message. "Mr. Rayarti," Ari answered after moving to the balcony. "Sorry to not have gotten back to you, I'm still discussing with my team and they are intrigued with the offer but not sure."

"Don't worry Ari," Rayarti replied, Ari catching a tone that he hadn't really heard before. "In fact it might be a blessing in disguise, I would like to meet with your team to discuss a job that would be off the record. Could you meet me at the same restaurant that we had first met at to discuss a similar job?"

An interesting proposition... as Ari thought about it the fact he was moving from his personal estate to a public place meant a lot

of potential variables have changed. Either he had lost trust in Ari himself, didn't trust the others he was with, or something had happened that had caused him to tighten his security... like his team getting blown up at an abandoned mall. "I think we could arrange that," Ari stated after giving it a thought, a public place being safe for them as much as it would be for him. "Just give me a time, but I will need a few hours to probably gather everyone up."

Once they had finished ironing out the details Ari sighed after hanging up the phone. Another social situation, and ever since he had embraced his wild side they had become even more unbearable to go through. While he knew it was part of the job he just wanted to sink his teeth into something, then get back and rut one or more of his lovers to celebrate a successful hunt. All this subterfuge belonged to the others, but considering that Rayarti wanted him specifically he would have to put himself out there to keep him interested while they finished up with this investigation.

Though Lavender lamented being pulled away from the task of getting through the data on the server the four knew that this was the potential to get everyone on the radar of Rayarti. It was a lot of exposure for the group and while they were putting themselves at risk it was necessary to try and expedite this situation. With the anti-hero militia already dismantled and things going back to normal it wouldn't be long before people forgot about it and evidence would be hard to get by. They were on the clock and it was time to push forward with seeing what Rayarti's involvement was with the militia and Janette, plus it would be good to have Campbell and the others there in case he finds himself flaring up in his instincts.

Leaving the data for later the four instead turned to how they were going to try and deal with Rayarti. While the shift in his demeanor was interesting it wasn't enough to consider that he just wanted to have a meal and talk about some new deal. Considering he had just potentially lost a few men in the explosion it likely put him on tilt and perhaps he was looking for some outside help with whatever was happening. He remembered that they had been trying to get the anti-hero militia to think that there was another group that was after them, perhaps if Rayarti was linked to all this perhaps that same stress had been rekindled with this latest set-back that he had.

Or... perhaps there was something there that had indicated that Ari had not seen before. Even with all their preparations it was possible that they had been seen breaking into the mall, or more likely when they were extracting to the garage when they blew the area up. If that was the case though then they wouldn't be having dinner, Ari mused, they would probably have to meet at some abandoned warehouse. Warehouse... suddenly Ari felt himself bristle at remembering his last encounter at a warehouse, Mesmer and Shockwave still on his mind while the others looked between them at seeing him starting to froth at the mouth just at the thought.

Any situation that would involve reintroducing his new claws and fangs to the two would be desired, but as he took a breath and dragged his claws into the wood he allowed himself to calm down. That was rage that would be placed at someone else that he was wasting here as they eventually got to the hour in which they would be getting dinner. By that point they still had not much in the way of planning other than getting close enough to Rayarti in order to try and scan his phone and see if they could get any addresses or contacts. If that wasn't the case there was still the hard drive and just in case this was some sort of lure to get them out and get back the information they had stolen Lavender made sure it would be safe with the small vault that had been created in a renovated column that they made a cavity in.

With the information secure and the time upon them there was just one last question of who they were going to involve. Ari frowned as they knew that other than Campbell they would need to bring Lavender for his power, but did they want to leave Ka behind or bring him with? Since he was a wholly mammoth there was no way for anyone spying on them to discern his identity since anyone that may have known about his transformation was either in the room with him or dead. After a bit of back and forth and considering what they saw in Rayarti's search it wouldn't matter much if they tried to keep Ka secret.

"Looks like we'll be putting the elephant, or wholly mammoth, in the room out in the open," Ari said, causing the others to groan.

"So he's a bestial, predatory killing machine that still make puns and bad jokes?" Lavender said as the others began to gear up, Ari just huffing as the others chuckled. "Lord help us all..."

The drive down to the restaurant was rather uneventful but there was still an atmosphere of anxiety that filled the van. It wasn't just the fact that they were trying to make a big push towards finding out whether Rayarti was involved or they were barking up the wrong tree, but that they were about to expose themselves not only as a group but in their true anthro natures. The demonic kangaroo-cobra especially had just been skulking around in the hoodie and pants he had borrowed from Lavender and this time he had wore the best clothing he could still fit in, which involved Campbell and Lavender having to go out and find something for him to wear. It was a bit of a stretch even by anthro standards but they had managed to find a suit that somewhat fit him even with the wings and spikes, though as he stepped out of the van in front of the rather fancy establishment he could sense all eyes on him and not because he was a snappy dresser.

"I don't think I'm going to get used to this," Ka said as he tried not to shift about in his own makeshift suit that had been gotten for him as well. "How do you guys stand the stares?"

"Try not to go outside," Lavender stated, though as he caught eyes of a few men that were staring at him with clear desire he flexed his muscular arm at them. "Well, other than the gym, or possibly in a nice beach. What was that last one where we had

half the tourists passing by us multiple times while we were at the nude one?"

Ari couldn't help but roll his eyes as well at the wolf as Campbell chimed in. "Focus guys, we're running out of time and if we want to even remotely try to keep our jobs at the CIA while getting to the bottom of this we need to get some concrete proof," Campbell reminded them. "If we really are just harassing this guy then forget our jobs, Rayarti will have us working for free to work off the debt when he sues us, or have us in jail. We're out on our own."

The others nodded and as they walked up into the restaurant Ari found that it was a stark contrast in reception to what he had gotten before. Those that had merely looked at him in interest were actively avoiding the dual gaze of the monster that had walked into their ranks, most focusing intently on their food or some other spot in the wall. Others didn't even have the tact for that and were staring both at the demonic scarred kangaroo-snake and the crew of heavily muscled anthros that served as his entourage. Ari almost stopped in his tracks as he was hit with a heady sensation, a powerful mix of distaste and fear that was like a sweet, playful scent to his nostrils. He could kill everyone in here... all these powerful people succumbing to him just because they were in proximity to an apex predator...

There was a snapping of fingers and Ari found himself shaking his head as he got the pounding of the blood in his ears to settle, taking a few deep breaths and wiping his muzzle when he realized he was drooling. This whole integration into society was going to be harder than he thought, Ari thought to himself as he snapped out of the haze of primal desire and kept himself focused on the mission. This was his chance to show that they could trust him and as the four made their way to the VIP section of the club they were let in and guided to the same balcony like area that he had been to before.

Once more Rayarti was sitting at his usual table, but there was something else there Ari quickly clocked that hadn't been the same. Instead of people that were dressed in the similar fancy clothing that he had seen before there were people in suits, but they were of a far more insidious nature. They didn't even need that or the guns that pushed a vague outline from their shoulders he knew that these men were part of a covert security team. So much for trust, Ari thought to himself as he found that the table that they were sitting at was bigger and had enough chairs for each of them.

"Gentlemen," Rayarti stated as he reached out and shook each of their hands, and as Ari focused all his senses in on him he found that while they had certainly surprised him with the make up of his team there was still no fear that was there. Why all the extra security then, Ari wondered as the others introduced themselves before they all sat down. "I have to say that I am both surprised and impressed to see such a varied group that runs with Ari, more than just Campbell too as I believe that you used to be a hero as well Lavender?"

"That had been my previous occupation," Lavender said as he picked up the menu, Ari seeing the look on his face that he knew was him trying to concentrate on his power. "I work exclusively with Ari now."

"As do we all," Ka said with a smile as he leaned to Rayarti. Just like with Lavender he had a purpose as well; he would be trying to work a profile up on Rayarti to see if he really was some sort of narcissistic megalomaniac or if he was just an over-exuberant businessman looking to get someone he believed to be a hero on his payroll. Either way it would be his and Campbell's task in order to talk about anything else in order to keep the man occupied as the two kept on their work.

"Well I'm glad that you all came here on such short notice," Rayarti explained as he sat back in the chair. "I know that you are still considering my offer and like I told Ari this isn't the purpose of this meeting. I believe I have a competitor that is trying to harm my business, attempting to kill my men in an effort to make my new security business fail."

So this probably was about the mall, Ari mused as they took a break from talking when the waiter came over to get their order. Ari could already tell that between the security and the fact that he wanted all of them to be in this meeting meant that if this was not a trap then he wanted them for something big. For normal clients of the hybrid by this point he imagined that they were afraid for their life and wanted them to kill their enemies for their survival, and while he still wasn't getting that same feeling of terror Ari guessed that it was along the same line of thought. This wasn't going to be a rescue mission this time; even before Rayarti got started talking the predator in him knew that this was a call to hunt, but just like previous mission there was a common enemy...

...they were going to be hunting themselves.

If they weren't sitting right in front of the one that they were going to fool it would have caused Ari to snicker to find himself in this predicament again. Even as Rayarti talked about the fact that he needed someone to investigate the bombing that happened in the mall, hearing the contempt that was in his voice as he talked. He had recognized it as the same type of malice when he talked about the heroes guild and he was curious on what motivated this man as Campbell took over with the negotiations of being hired independently. As he glanced over at Lavender he could see that he was still concentrating but from the frown on his face that the use of his power wasn't going well.

"So, Ari," Rayarti stated, bringing Ari's attention back to the conversation at hand as he saw the human looking at him. "Your team sounds more than capable for the task and I think that you will find yourself more than compensated for your efforts as I

have laid out. Do you think that you and your team would be up to the task of smoking out this nuisance?"

"Oh, of course, I think that we can make it work," Ari replied casually, looking down to find that the rare steak he had ordered had arrived. He found himself growling slightly and salivating despite himself as the others start to eat as well. "If you think this group is out there targeting you then we should really get an inside look on this new security company of yours, see who is on the payroll since this sounds a bit like an inside job. Do you have a headquarters that we can look at?"

"I assure you I can give you and your team all the information that you could possibly need," Rayarti said, causing Ari's slight smirk to fall away to a frown.

"We can see things that you and your team won't," Ari pushed. "Not to mention that if you're courting supers like myself and my team then one of them could see you as a detriment to the guild and be attempting to sabotage. At the very least we need to know which heroes you were in contact with and which ones actually decided to take you up on your offer."

There was a pause between the conversation and as Campbell and Ka looked at one another their gaze went from Ari to Rayarti, feeling the tension of the atmosphere starting to rise. "Well, I appreciate the gumption and motivation that you are showing I simply can't just reveal all the inner workings of my businesses to you," Rayarti replied. "Now perhaps if we are partners and you agree to work for me then we can do something about that, but as independent contractors I can't just show you all my secrets."

"You mean like you did with Janette?" Ari stated as his ire rose up, his anger starting to bubble to the surface despite himself as his eyes locked onto Rayarti. "Great friends you keep, by the way, paying to have the leader of the anti-hero militia get rescued just so that her and her goons could ambush me. Had I not evolved to what I am today then we wouldn't be sitting here talking right now."

"Yes, I understand that what you went through was a terrible thing," Rayarti replied as Ari cut through the last of his steak. "Janette was not the friend I thought she was and she tricked a lot of people, though given what I saw on the ship you should be thanking Janette and Shockwave for torturing you and unlocking whatever this new power of yours is. Sometimes it takes a lot of pain to get what you want."

As Campbell was about to respond in order to try and bring about a different topic the group suddenly stopped when they heard the sound of something breaking. All of them quickly turned to Ari who had brought his knife down hard enough to cause the plate the remainder of his steak was on to split in half as he looked up at the human with red eyes shining. "I never told you about that," Ari growled as his empty hand dug into the wood of the table beneath.

"Never told him about... what?" Ka asked, though he and the rest of his partners grew concerned at his sudden shift in demeanor.

"About who had been there torturing me," Ari said as he could feel his muscles tense, which caused the atmosphere in the area to radically shift. "How did you know specifically that it was Shockwave that had come to help with the torture?"

"Ari, perhaps you should-" Campbell started to say before Ari's snarl interrupted him.

"Answer me Rayarti!" Ari growled, slamming his fist down on the table and causing those that he had already marked as security get up. "The only ones that knew Shockwave was there had to know about Janette's plans! You're involved in this all along, just fucking admit it!"

Ari was practically hyperventilating at this point as the others at the table quickly took stock of the rapidly deteriorating situation, several of the private security team drawing guns while Rayarti merely sat there and dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "A shame, I thought once Janette was gone we could have worked past this," Rayarti said. "Perhaps once you cool down you can see reason."

There was a roar that rattled the walls as Ari grabbed the edge of the table and flipped it up, eliminating the obstacle between him and his prey as he activated a power on his glove. In the next second the sounds of gunfire could be heard but the kinetic shield he had put up around them would make sure that they would not have to worry for a little bit as he focused on his target. Everything felt as though it was happening in slow motion as the table finished flipping around and with Ari pulling his gun he directed it right where the human would be sitting. Except... he wasn't there, the shock of not seeing the man sitting there enough to briefly snap him out of his bloodlust as he looked in shock.

But with Rayarti gone there was still the problem of his security team, though between the four of them they became a force to be reckoned with. With Ari's shield keeping the bullets from hitting them Campbell immediately fired several arcs of electricity that caused them to fall to the ground while writhing in agony. Lavender could sense that they were about to call in for back-up

and made sure they couldn't, sending an ear-piercing screech through their commlink in order to not only sever the connection but also stun them with the intense noise like a flashbang. That just left Ka to use his telekinesis to help with the bullet deflection and to rip weapons away from the guards, often using them to hit the ones that had been holding them and knock them out.

Though the others worked to be as non-lethal as possible with their means of taking out the security team Ari was less than gentle with them; once he had made sure that he couldn't sense Rayarti anymore he immediately vented his frustrations out on the first guard he found, slashing his throat out while his tail blade slammed into the neck of the one next to him. As the second guard cried out in pain the hybrid could see that what he had pumped into the man was not the standard knock-out venom that he normally produced and just like with the mercenary he had first used it on he could see their veins turning black and the skin around the wound melt. Acid... a far deadlier venom for a deadlier creature as he finished off the two he had first attacked and hopped on the table in order to dispatch the next.

Between the four of them they were able to clear out the entire security team without getting too injured in the process. Ka had managed to take a knife wound to the upper arm when one of the security team charged him but before it could go too deep the human suddenly froze in place, both figuratively and literally. As the two mopped up the floor with the last of them Ari began to sniff the air looking for the man that had eluded him, his ears twitching for any sight or sound that might indicate where he was. When he spotted movement out of the corner of his eye he immediately jumped the railing that separated the VIP section from the rest of the restaurant, his red eyes shining as he landed on the table of the two frightened creatures and got a deep whiff of their intoxicating fear.

Though it was such an enticing aroma it was not what he was looking for. Ari knew deep down that Rayarti would have no such delicious terror that he could feed off of, but he would be fine settling with ripping apart the man that had tortured him. Though they hadn't gotten the definitive link to the anti-hero militia it was good enough for the hybrid to finally do what he had intended on since he had landed in this forsaken city, and once he had killed the man then he could finally move on. But that man wasn't in the restaurant anymore and as he saw a flash of fire in the VIP section he could see Campbell telling him that they needed to get out of there.

With his primal rage broken Ari suddenly became aware of the plethora of sirens that were heading speedily in their direction. He snarled at the two that had been enjoying their dinner until the fighting started and leapt back off, causing the table to splinter and fall to the ground before bouncing back to where the other three were. Both Ka and Lavender had been stripping the bodies of anything worthwhile as fast as they could and by the time Ari got back to them Campbell was pushing them all to leave. Though there was so much prey in this room it was easy for Ari to follow the lead of his partner as they rushed out of the area and made their way towards the parking garage.

There was no doubt that even if Lavender scrubbed the cameras that the four of them would be identified as the ones that had caused the mayhem in the restaurant that left several dead bodies and many more injured, so the wolf didn't even bother as they hoofed it through the street. From what Ari could discern from the sirens and his augmented senses they were probably less than a few blocks away by this point, but between them having to establish a perimeter and storm the restaurant itself they had more than enough time to get in the van and get out of there. Unlike the last place Lavender took the time to scrub the footage from the cameras in the garage to ensure that no one could tag their license plate and follow them back to the apartment. Even with their expedited getaway both Ari and Campbell had to duck their heads down from the police cars that raced by them as they carefully and methodically left the area.

After nearly an hour of taking back streets and using tunnels to mask their presence the van made its way into the parking lot nearest to the high-rise that served as their base of operations. Even though they were nowhere near the restaurant from their downtown location they could still hear the sirens and see the chaos that was unfolding at the place they had left, Ari keeping the hood up as they made their way inside through the entrance that he had arranged for a long time ago. As soon as they got up to his floor Lavender went to the command center in order to try and see if they could get a bead on what was happening while Campbell and Ka turned to the more traditional method of their phones and the television. It didn't take them long before they had keyed in on several news agencies that were covering the story and everyone found themselves either rubbing their foreheads or shaking their heads as they saw a video feed of Ari snarling at patrons of the restaurant while the rest continued to fight in the background.

"Well, I think that Rayarti knows that we're the ones that have been messing with him," Campbell said with a sigh as he watched the news while having a hand on his furry cheek. "And apparently so does the rest of the city. They're basically making us look like unhinged mercenaries that just tried to kill the man that saved the heroes guild and tasked with protecting the city."

"To be fair an unhinged mercenary did just try to kill the man," Lavender replied as information continued to flash on the screen. "It's not just the attack either; from what I'm tracing Rayarti just did a full scorched earth trace of us, and from the looks of it he figured out that we were working for the CIA. I know I really don't have to say it at this point but I'm pretty sure our cover is blown." As the wolf was about to speak further all their cell phones went off at once and Lavender sighed as he rubbed his head. "Speaking of which, that's Sam now, who wants to be told that we're all definitely fired?"

"I can do it," Ka said as he went off to the other room that had been created for the purposes of a private office. "Maybe being the one directly fired from the CIA will help ease the blow, though I had the feeling as soon as they saw my transformation I was

likely not in their good graces. Let's just hope they're not using this to see where we are and send in the team to come collect us."

Ari found himself smirking and muttering that he would like to see them try to get him out of this place alive, to which the others just gave him a glare. Though he had felt the rush of indulging in his beast it was bittersweet, not only did he let Rayarti get away somehow but he had also gotten everyone that was around him in trouble. It was something that he had hoped he would never do in the effort to get them to trust this new primal version of him, but even though he hadn't killed anyone innocent he had let the monster out while in full view of everyone. It would cause a backlash that he hadn't thought about and as he remembered what his glove said about being terrifying and taking responsibility for it he found that it was happening right this moment while watching the television.

As the news unfolded their situation only went from bad to worse as the ship killings that Ari was a part of came back up again. This time the District Attorney came on after it and told them all what they were fairly certain was going to happen; that they had issued a warrant for the arrest not only of the hybrid but his accomplices as well, tying their entire group not only to the restaurant attack but the ship as well. That meant multiple charges of murder and as they rattled them off both Campbell and Lavender were holding their head and pacing while Ari looked on. A wanted fugitive... it wouldn't be the first time that they had been in this position, but for Ka he was about to see what it was like not only not getting supported by the law or the Company but having them work actively against them.

"Yeah, I already got the confirmation that they just filed," Lavender said from the command center. "Seems like someone was greasing the wheels to make sure that it happened as soon as possible, and given the contact tree that I managed to pilfer I can give you a guess on who the DA's best friend is."

"Rayarti..." Ari said with a snarl as he clutched his gloved hand to the point he could feel the leather practically creaking under his fingers from the mere pressure. "He's had his claws in this situation the entire time, probably was keeping the ship situation at bay until he got an answer for me to use it as leverage. Now that he knows what we are he's going to want to smoke us out of the city or get us captured as soon as possible so we don't kill him."

"Yeah, it's even worse than that," Ka said as he came back into the room while still holding onto his phone. "Not only is Sam saying that the higher ups are blowing a gasket but they're willing to work with Rayarti to make sure that our use as operatives doesn't see the light of day. They're going to offer him a full immunity deal so even if we do collect anything off that hard drive that connects him to the anti-hero militia it will mean even less than before, plus it's likely that we're all getting pulled back to headquarters as a means of containment... that means you too Ari."

The others gave each other a worried look as they found out just how deep the situation was getting; between the city calling for their heads on the request of Rayarti and the CIA's insistence to cater to him it meant that they no longer had a leg to stand on, even if somehow they could find evidence of whatever the man was planning there would be no one inside the city or out that would listen to them. For the moment Ari knew that they were safe in this place as long as no one saw them but with a manhunt underway it wouldn't be long before they would get caught while trying to get food or other supplies. From what they had in stock between them they had maybe a week that they could hole up, and if they didn't find them by that point the heat might cool off enough to give them some wiggle room if it wasn't for the CIA that would likely find them even faster than the city police.

With nothing else that they could think of doing at the moment Lavender told the others to go and get some sleep while he assessed the damage and also got to work decrypting the hard drive data they had downloaded. When Ka asked if he had gotten anything from sitting next to Rayarti at dinner the wolf shook his head and said the man didn't have his cell phone active and no other electronics that he could sense. By the time he had shifted his priority to the guards behind them Ari had flipped the table and was about to shoot the man, which prompted him to switch to attack mode. Ari found himself frowning again as he was brought up in relevance to the fact that the entire mission was in jeopardy and went to the opposite corner of the building in order to smoke.

Once he had lit up Ari found his mind racing with questions that were in his head. Though he knew that the fight and subsequent call for his arrest was bad enough he wondered how Rayarti could have possibly escaped from his clutches. There was no way a normal human could have moved fast enough for him to lose track, not to mention the only way he wouldn't have seen him is if he went invisible. That drew Ari to only one conclusion... either Rayarti himself was a super, or more likely he had one working closely with him in order to keep him safe.

Chapter 25:

The next morning Ari awoke with a snort to Campbell practically bouncing on him, telling him that Lavender had found something and he wanted them all to get into the command center as soon as possible. When the hybrid looked at his watch, none of them bothering to power on or use their cell phones due to their ability to be tracked, he found that it coincided with the fact that the sun had just rose above the buildings of the city. He followed the eager sabertooth tiger out from the bedroom into the command center where Lavender and Ka were already waiting for him. It seemed that they were all already awake and ready to go and as Ari slumped down on his seat he found a very large cup of coffee being put in front of him.

"So I managed to decrypt most of the data during the night," Lavender explained as the others sat down in their respective chairs while the very haggard looking wolf remained standing. "While most of it was things relating to anti-hero propaganda and plans that they had to protest we did manage to find a few things that were very interesting. Most of them actually come from a personal log that Janette had made while she was in charge of the militia."

"So she really was in charge," Ari stated after gulping down the coffee and pointing at the empty mug.

"Yes, it does look like the anti-hero militia was her idea," Ka chimed in as Campbell moved over to pour him a second round. "From what I had managed to dig up on her it seems that the trauma of losing her parents in a botched hero mission had manifested in a deep-seated hatred and belief that they were the cause of the city's problems instead of the solution. Now normally a wound like that festers on its own but from what Lavender found it seemed that someone was not only feeding her anger but also the means to get her revenge."

"Enter Rayarti," Lavender said as he snapped his fingers and the images on the board changed, this time showing Rayarti along with a number of pieces of paper that appeared. "while Janette thought that Rayarti was a kindred soul in her hatred of the heroes and had the means to fund her plan it turns out that most of what he had projected to the world is actually a falsehood. He had never been involved in any super related accident and the one story he does use to paint himself as a victim was actually doctored and was a sole tragedy that never even affected him."

"What few sources in the CIA that still want to talk to me have said that given the way he was able to smash through their covert intelligence defenses and still remain off their radar means that he likely has a few people in his pocket," Ka chimed in this time. "Not just in the CIA either but everywhere in the world; when he went scorched earth in order to find any and all information about us he gave away the extent of his network and all I can say is that his reach is... slightly terrifying. It was no wonder that our organization had such trouble with finding anything to help the heroes guild with, likely whomever he has working for him was protecting him and hamstringing our investigation without even realizing that we were on the case until the breach."

Ari found himself shaking his head after finishing off the second cup of coffee he had been given, this time instead of more he was given a donut that he was happy to munch on. "So Rayarti has a lot of pull and was manipulating Janette," Ari summarized between bites. "Why go through all that just to try and destroy the Company when he doesn't even care about it?"

"Because he does care, but not in the way we were thinking," Lavender resumed talking, using a laser pointer to highlight several documents. "It turns out that what we thought was a plot for revenge is something far simpler; Rayarti's security company has already secured a number of city contracts after saving the heroes guild, and with confidence already wavering in what used to be the first line of defense in any city we believe he decided to put more pressure on the Company in order to see if it would break. We also think that he was using the anti-hero militia as a means to train his new security agents so that when the time did come he could utilize them to take swift action and take over where the heroes had fallen."

As Lavender continued to show the corporate structures of the security company and everything that Rayarti had purchased, which they had found now that they knew where they were looking, Ari found himself shaking his head. Fortunately Campbell had come up behind him and was starting to massage his shoulders while they continued to explain how Rayarti had quickly set himself up to be one of the most powerful security agencies in not only the city but the world and would likely attempt to assimilate the fallen Company heroes into the fold to drive up his strength even more. Though he was incredibly relaxed by this point it didn't stop him from snarling when it dawned on him what was really going on here and that this whole charade and all the lives lost because of it was because of a proof of concept and weakening of the Company. Once they had finished their little presentation though Ari felt like they had more to say and as he looked between the three it began to dawn on him that they had been tending to him ever since he woke up.

"So... I'm guessing that there's a next move here?" Ari asked. "As nice as it was to ascertain why Rayarti is an asshole it doesn't matter; there's nothing that we can really do about this information, even if he didn't have the pull he did there's no way that our superiors would believe us. Plus it sounds like he inherited the anti-hero militia and just turned it into his private army."

Before any of the others could explain there was a new voice that spoke up, Ari spinning around to see that somehow he had missed the enigmatic lion sitting in one of the chairs near the back while smoking a pipe. "Indeed he did, even bailed out the ones that were taken for the plot to blow up the Company building and folded them in without blinking an eye," Mr. Stevens said. "But there is still one resource that he has yet to adequately tap, which is the supers that he had been so actively against."

"You mean you still aren't going to his company even though he basically took all your contracts?" Ari asked.

"I mean that he never even reached out to the heroes of the guild or the Company itself," Mr. Stevens clarified. "It's the same for those that are villains; whatever he's planning doesn't involve the use of poaching the supers we have, which all things considered after what happened with Anubis he could have had his pick of those that were dissuaded by what happened. It seemed like he didn't want to get involved with those that would potentially provide a headache for him with old allegiances... save for one."

Ari suddenly felt the hands of the sabertooth tiger tense a bit while still rubbing his shoulders and the hybrid felt himself get turned back towards the center screen. "Rayarti does have the employ of two supers that he keeps strictly off the books," Lavender explained, and though Ari was still listening he was already getting an idea of who it was before he saw the minotaur and kitsune flash on the screen. "From what I gathered on the server Shockwave and Mesmer originally were working with Janette in order to take down the heroes guild after being snubbed by them, and Rayarti inherited them and seems to have inherited them from the collapse of the anti-hero militia as his personal thugs."

Lavender paused as he waited to see if Ari had anything to say about that, which the others had also turned to see how the hybrid would react towards the news that the ones that tortured and essentially killed him were responsible for Rayarti's private security. For a few moments the hybrid didn't say anything but everyone could hear the sounds of claws digging into leather as he visibly grew more tense by the second. Just as Ari was about to lunge forward Campbell seemed to anticipate the reaction and slid his hands down to wrap his arms around the chest of the raging creature. Both Lavender and Ka found themselves taking a step back as the thrashing creature screamed all manner of expletives and death threats against not only the two heroes but the mastermind behind it all as well.

With Campbell holding him and the initial relaxation techniques they had deployed on Ka's directive Ari calmed down rather quickly, eventually slumping back in his chair and wiggling slightly before stating that he was fine. The sabertooth tiger smiled and kissed the hybrid on the top of the head before moving to his own seat once more that was next to him while also rubbing his heavy paws over the scaly ones of the other creature. With the stimulation being carefully controlled they could see that he was in a better mood by the time everything was said and done and as soon as he stopped squirming about he was given a pizza. Ari's eyes lid up at the food and as he began to chow down Campbell nodded to Lavender to continue on with what he was doing.

"So I think that everyone is in agreement that if we don't stop Rayarti now we're going to have ourselves a major headache at worst and a catastrophe at best," Lavender said. "We don't know how many other supers that were not part of the heroes guild are in his employ and from the way he was trying to recruit Ari my guess was he was planning on trying to get his contacts or possible connections to clients in order to further this goal of total security domination. Either way the fact that Ari still has that leverage over him means that we may have a playing card in this hand that we can still use, though my guess the fact that he tried to kill him in the dining room means that he probably won't be getting any invitations to his estate."

"How do we know that he's not going to uproot and move out of here?" Ka asked.

"Because all his city contracts are still here and require enforcement," Mr. Stevens spoke up this time. "I did the research you asked about and he needs to maintain a certain record for the next year, or else everything reverts back to the Company. I doubt he would go this far just to give up because Ari scared him."

Ari nodded and before Lavender could continue on he stood up and got the rest of the group's attention. "I know you guys don't usually take to my plans," Ari said. "But I think that if we're going to stop Rayarti once and for all we're going to have to kill him as well as Mesmer and Shockwave... in fact, especially Mesmer and Shockwave."

As Ari waited for the usual rebuttal that came with such an idea he was surprised to see that those in the room were stoically nodding their heads. "That's what I was about to get to," Lavender said. "Rayarti has the unparalleled means to reach us anywhere we go, and as long as we're still alive he's going to consider us a threat. At this point... it's him or us, what do you think Ari?"

Though once more there were no words coming out of the hybrid's mouth they could see the gleam in his eye as his lips pulled back to a feral grin that showed his fangs. "I think I've never been more happy to hear anything in my life," Ari said as he jumped out of his chair. "What are we waiting for? Let's go fucking kill them!"

"Whoa, easy tiger," Ka said.

"What about Campbell?" Ari replied before suddenly wheezing from a punch delivered to his solar plexus from the feline next to him that caused him to collapse to the floor, mostly from the shock.

"What Ka was about to say is that with you all being wanted for murder among other crimes the last thing that you should be doing is running about town trying to find a group of people that likely have redoubled their efforts to make sure they can't be found," Mr. Stevens said as he got up. "However due to our aligned natures the resources of the Company are more than willing to check up on a few errant former heroes to see where they might have gone to, if they're doing Rayarti's dirty work then it's likely that they're still out in the city somewhere. Naturally the Company will have no idea that this is going on or even that I'm here and I would behoove you to think of some better disguises than looking like you just stumbled out of an outlet store at the mall."

All four of them looked down at each other and the clothes they were wearing, or lack thereof in Ari's case, which prompted the lion to scoff and tell them that he would be in touch before heading towards the elevator. Even though they would once more be

waiting for the go ahead from the Company, which despite Ari never wanting to have to be in that position found himself eagerly awaiting as the group discussed what was about to happen and how to prepare for it. Though Ari was more than willing to go and take care of the three along the rest of his team was far beyond sitting at the sidelines while watching him do all the work. Though the scene at the restaurant was a slight set-back in the progress Ari was making at showing that he could handle this new beast side of him in this instance it was the perfect weapon to try and finally end this once and for all.

But as Mr. Stevens had pointed out they needed to get some gear first as well as something tactical for them to wear. While it was a bit of risk Ari knew that there was someone that he could turn to that would hopefully still have the ability to provide them with what they need since their connection with the CIA was cut off. That would involve a call from a secure line to the burner that had been provided though and there was only one place that he could do that where he would be sure that it couldn't be intercepted. Fortunately Lavender had already done most of the work for it but given the nature of the switchboard it had to go down to the basement in order to make the call.

Since the elevator they used went directly to the basement though there was at least no need to go to the lobby or cross paths with people except for potentially the phone utility guy, though as he went to the elevator he found that Mr. Stevens was still waiting for it to arrive. "I see we're still naked," Mr. Stevens replied. "Are we going to put on pants before we go and save the city from a megalomaniac?"

"Pretty sure I can save the city without the need for pants," Ari shot back, a smirk on his face as Mr. Stevens just rolled his eyes and shook his head. When the elevator got to their floor both of them stepped onto it, and while there was a moment of pause that the two of them together might set off the weight sensor the doors closed and allowed them to ride down. Since the lion would be using the same passageway into the building that they used the two were heading to the basement together, and since neither of them were using phones to occupy themselves due to the potential of being tracked they merely stood together in silence while the numbers went down.

Finally the silence was too much for Ari and he found himself facing Mr. Stevens with a few floors to go. "I have to ask about the suit, since we're on the topic of clothing," Ari said as Mr. Stevens merely gave him a side glance. "Did you have them all tailored to your new body, or are these just new suits you went out and bought as a lion? Because they are a really good fit."

"I had to get new suits," Mr. Stevens replied, smacking Ari's hand away from touching the jacket as they got closer to the lobby level. "It seems that when you transform people you tend to have a penchant for the muscular physique." When the hybrid just looked at him confused Mr. Stevens smirked a little at that and leaned in towards him to explain. "You like turning guys into muscle studs, it seems."

"It appears so," Ari replied, and as he heard the elevator go past the lobby and make the short descent down into the basement his gaze traveled down towards the lion's feet. Like him and most anthros he didn't have any shoes on, and as Mr. Stevens said that he typically made men that were more brawny in nature he found his thoughts starting to connect to something else. "I wonder..."

As the elevator car reached its destination Mr. Stevens was about to ask what Ari was going on about, only to drop his briefcase and pipe and cling against the wall as the scaled foot reached over and clamped against his furry one. The effect was immediate as it was intense with the stunned lion suddenly breathing heavily, chuffing loudly as the claws stroked over the leathery pads underneath. "Well, there's something else we seem to have in common," Ari said with his smirk growing wider at seeing the the lion in pleased distress, especially seeing the bulge that was forming in his otherwise well-fitted suit. "Why don't you come with me to the utility room, I could use your... help."

Though the lion looked like he wanted to say something it merely took another squeeze of the dexterous footpaw that was still clamped around his own that caused him to merely nod his head. From the looks of it Mr. Stevens had never really had anyone discover this little secret of his, Ari mused as he watched the lion lean down and grab his stuff so it wouldn't be left on the elevator, and that was something he wanted to rectify immediately. If he was going to be a part of the team then he would need a proper initiation, and while he also wanted to do the same with Ka when he wasn't in his primal state this was far too much fun of information to let it go to waste. Between his natural agility, wings, and tail Ari was able to hop backwards and still keep a death grip on the lion who stumbled forward as was led into the utility room.

The second the large metal door was open the sounds of running machinery could be heard echoing through the hallway. The room was designed specifically to be soundproof and Ari was ready to take full advantage of that fact, getting Mr. Stevens inside before slamming the door behind him. Though their time was limited due to the severity of the situation they were in the last thing Ari needed was for one of his team to be tense as he brought the other man over to the small office that was nestled in the corner. It was currently unoccupied and as soon as the hybrid hopped in with his feline captive he told him to strip out of anything that he didn't want shredded off of him, rubbing the flat of his tail blade against the chest of the lion to show how serious he was.

Though Ari was becoming more riled up by the second he had the patience to let Mr. Stevens remove his clothing, letting out a whistle as he saw what was underneath. Since he was usually their handler or point of contact he normally ignored what the other man looked like but he could see that his powers had gifted him just like the others, especially in the maleness department as he pulled down his pants and his cock was practically poking out of the bottom of his shorts. It was almost as large as Ari's

and he was certainly going to have to try it himself, but as his own twin shafts pushed their way out and throbbed in the air there was one thing he knew, that this kitty was getting fucked silly by him. Though he was a little hesitant at first he combination of the foot paw massage and seeing Ari aroused had clearly had an effect on the other man as his muscular body shined in the light above.

Mr. Stevens wouldn't be on his feet long though as Ari practically pounced upon him with a hiss, causing both of them to stumble backwards until they fell back against the tile floor. They had missed the chair and the small couch that was in the room but considering their size and weight they would have easily broken either one as the lion found himself on his back with the cobra-kangaroo on top of him. Both pairs of eyes were staring directly into his and once more that wicked grin crossed Ari's muzzle while he grabbed one of the ankles of Mr. Stevens. Though he could feel strength in the lion's body it was no match for his own and this time instead of paw on paw the hybrid gave a long, slow, sensual lick to the pads of his feet that caused the other man to writhe.

It was a position that Ari was more than familiar with before, but there was something about the way the lion squirmed and moved beneath him that really stoked his primal fire. There was none of the seasoned moves that his other lovers had gained when they were in bed with him and from the way Mr. Stevens was already throbbing between his legs it was unlikely he did this very often. Though he was more than content to tease his prey the sight of the well-muscled but more toned body of the feline beneath him caused his need to rise to a point where even his tongue was already erect as it slid across those clawed toes. From the way that the lion moaned Ari knew that he could probably get him to orgasm just from licking the heavy paw pads this was too much of a novel experience to waste on just a paw job.

With his legs already in the air from Ari licking him Mr. Stevens was bent even further up so that his tailhole was exposed, the hybrid growling in appreciation at the furred rear that was on display before him. "All this time with you over me," Ari mused as he slithered forward, one of his shafts already being held as the other arm kept his feet in the air. "This time I get to be over you, and you're going to enjoy every minute of it, right kitten?"

Though Ari could see the stoic demeanor was still on the face of the other man the cracks were already starting to show, his resolve breaking under the weight of the other man on top of him and the lust that was being shared between the two. He could feel the feline squirming a bit underneath him though and as Ari was about to push forward he realized that given the need to wait for the Company to give them information, something that took a while even when it was needed in an expedited manner, he could show him the pleasures that were wrought from his glove. With a slight twist of his fingers Ari leaned forward and put the lion's hands against the floor, pinning him down as the shadows of the area began to move and twist despite the means for them to do so.

It wasn't long until Ari pulled back and as Mr. Stevens tried to sit back up he let out a gasp as he found the shadow tentacles coiled around his wrists keeping him down. "Really Ari?" Mr. Stevens said. "Do you think now is the time for this when our mmmpphff!"

Ari smirked as another, more phallic shaped tentacle snaked around the lion's neck and pushed into his mouth to form into a gag. "Now is the perfect time to indulge in our lusts," Ari said as he leaned back and ran his claws fingers down the thick mane of fur of Mr. Steven's chest until reaching his pecs. "Just enjoy yourself, I promise that you're going to like this."

The hybrid continued to smirk as he watched the lion squirm, but this time it was in pleasure as more shadow tentacles held him down and wrapped around his limbs. With his power he was able to keep the other man's legs up in the air and spread for him, leaving his own hands to tease and please Mr. Stevens however he wished. He continued to play with the nipples of the lion and found that they both had another thing in common, seeing the milky droplets forming on the tips before leaning in and sucking on one of his pecs. The shadow gag continued to stretch open the feline's maw and even pushed into his throat to keep his groans muffled as well as preventing him from speaking, the time for talking was over and he would finally get the experience that the others have had and enjoyed.

The shadow tentacles wrapping around Mr. Steven's body had caused his erection to deflate somewhat but Ari was ready to revitalize it, using his own prehensile cock tongue to wrap around it and slide along the sensitive flesh. He could already feel the lion tensing from the pleasure the hybrid was giving him but before he could get off the kangaroo-cobra pulled away and got ready for the main event. His body trembled in excitement and as his wings flared out he took one of his cocks and pushed it against the exposed puckered hole of the lion. Up until that point Mr. Steven's had been teased in the area with a tentacle to loosen him up a bit, but nothing prepared him for the powerful sensations that came from the flared head starting to push into him.

Since one power had already been used for the day Ari decided to indulge and activated a second that would allow for their orifices to be stretchier than normal, a fan favorite among his lovers and would allow him to indulge in his bestial lusts without worrying to much about hurting the man beneath him. Almost directly in response the shadow tentacle that had been in the mouth of the lion slid in even deeper and caused his back to arch while the first cock inside him spread apart his inner walls. Ari watched as he slowly pushed in deeper as the other man's entire body was trembling from the act, his fingers and toes twitching as the hybrid continued to keep him at the bring of pure pleasure. He knew that Mr. Stevens wouldn't last long... although with the power he currently had in play it was possible that he could stall it just a little bit longer.

With one cock already mostly inside of Mr. Stevens the lion felt like he was on a hair trigger, especially as the shiny grey flesh

rubbed up against his prostate. He was sure that only a few thrusts would push him over the edge but as he felt his body get pulled up slightly he saw Ari practically double over on himself so that his serpentine muzzle was right in front of his cock once more. With the power of flexibility allowing him to contort more than even his augmented body he grabbed onto the throbbing shaft and pressed his lips against it while still having half of his own inside the lion. As he held the feline cock steady he began to slide his muzzle down over it, but as he did his tongue began to press against the tip that caused the eyes of Mr. Stevens to nearly cross.

Seemed the power did work on making everything extra stretchy, Ari mused as he could see the restrained creature practically flex against his ethereal restraints while he bulged out the flesh of his maleness. With having something inside it meant that he would only cum when the hybrid wanted and there was no way he would let him go first while he was still as horny as ever. As his maw slowly continued to slide down over his sizable member the bulge of his tongue could be seen just ahead of his lips, sliding down as deep as it could while feeling every muscle of the other man tense. Once he was fully inside he kept his head there with only a little movement to keep things stimulated while thrusting his hips into his tight hole. Since the power made loosening him up unnecessary it wasn't long until Ari pulled back enough to reach down and grip his shafts together to show Mr. Stevens what a true double penetration felt like.

Ari could only imagine the noises that the lion would be making if he hadn't been gagged and continued on with the torturous pleasure for a while longer before his own lusts started to get the better of him. With both shafts deep inside the other man his already riled up state had been pushed to the limit and he needed to orgasm, and since he had intended on having them climax at the same time it was time to release the beast. As Ari pulled back on both his own mouth and the shadow tentacle cock that was inside of the lion Mr. Stevens let out a roar that shook the glass of the office as he came, the first blast hitting the hybrid right in his nose while he drove both of his shafts to the hilt. Though the lion was a big man Ari's heavy sack unloaded completely in the feline to the point his furry washboard abs that he had been stroking on started to push out a bit, becoming less defined by the seed being pumped into him while his own splatted against the wall opposite of them.

The two breathed heavily as they remained locked together for what felt like ages, both quivering at the slightest movement that the other man gave. With those tight walls still clamped around his dual shafts it took Ari more than a couple seconds to slowly slide out of the one beneath him as the shadow tentacles disappeared just like the gag had. "Now that was a wild ride," Ari panted once his flared heads popped out of the hole, which as he did he ended the stretching power and had his fluids sealed up inside the other man. "Don't you agree?"

With Mr. Stevens still panting heavily the lion merely nodded his head as he laid there for a while longer until he took the hand Ari offered to help him to his feet. As soon as he did the hybrid was sent reeling back by a punch to his face, the strength of the lion underestimated as he went over to his clothes while the hybrid staggered against the control panel. "I'll be keeping in touch with you about the progress that the Company makes," Mr. Stevens said in a professional tone as he uses his underwear to clean his fur up as best he can before tossing them aside and putting on the rest of his suit.

"Worth it..." Ari muttered as he held onto his bloody nose, watching the lion just smirk at him before leaving the office and heading to the parking lot. For Ari he knew that he would have to make that phone call, but as soon as he was done he would be putting the powers he had just activated to good use on the rest of his team as he grabbed the discarded underwear and brought them with to the switchboard...

Chapter 26:

Over the next few days the crew had been preparing for the word that they would go, but while Mr. Stevens did keep in contact with them, rather frequently, about where they were in the investigation it appeared that Rayarti was throwing up all manner of roadblocks to keep them from being effective. After losing their city contacts the Company was also having a hard time keeping the lights on to the point where several supers were going out and attempting to try and find funding in order to keep things alive. From what Lavender had found on the internet they were getting quite desperate indeed and it was only a matter of time before the entire guild collapsed and gave their enemy his biggest victory yet.

As day turned to night once more Campbell had finished preparing food and went over to Ari to give him his plate, chuckling and smiling a little as he saw the hybrid staring intently out the window at the building that contained the Company. "You think you're going to see something if you stare at it long enough?" Campbell asked, Ari's eyes glancing at him before looking back through the window. "You know what they say about a watched pot."

"At this point I think I'm going to be the one that's boiling," Ari said as he took the plate and moved over on the couch he had dragged over so the sabertooth tiger could sit down next to him. "Hard to believe that only a few years ago we used my powers to go from this place to theirs, do you think that they ever figured out how we broke in?"

"I imagine that they have an idea," Campbell replied as he twirled the spaghetti on his fork before slurping it up. "Plus if you're thinking what I think you're thinking then you can forget it, Mr. Stevens will let us know as soon as they have something."

Ari groaned and leaned back against the couch while kicking the footstool he had been resting on and causing it to crack in

half. While the police had yet to even look around this building none of the group could go out, which meant that even if he wanted to go and try to find the two for himself he would risk exposing them all and potentially getting hauled off to prison if the CIA didn't snatch them up first. "Honestly, how hard is it to find a big bull dude and his fox girlfriend?" Ari grumbled. "I'm starting to think that the lion is doing this in retaliation."

"Retaliation for what?" Campbell asked.

"...nothing," Ari replied, the sabertooth tiger looking at him in confusion before he quickly changed the subject. "So have you decided on what we're going to do once this is all over?"

Campbell looked back out the window and sighed at the question. "I doubt that the CIA is going to want us back after we do what we're about to do," Campbell confessed. "Maybe the Company will give us some leeway considering we're about to save their butts, but somehow I doubt that they'll welcome us back with open arms either. I guess we'll have to see where that road takes us when we get to it and for the moment just concentrate on nailing Rayarti and finishing this once and for all."

Ari just nodded and started to scarf down his own pasta while he thought about his own question. The group was essentially burned from the CIA and left them out in the cold, and while he was appreciative that they didn't put them up somewhere like Miami it meant that even after this mission was done they were on their own. No doubt there would be blow back from removing a man like Rayarti out of play too and while there will be probably quite a few people celebrating others will curse their name instead. It was a lot to think about concerning the killing of one man, but Ari was not going to run his entire life from a man the likes of Rayarti as he found himself snarling slightly at the thought.

As he merely continued stuffing his own face the two heard the elevator alarm ding that informed them someone was coming to this floor. Campbell and Ari looked at each other before they quickly put down their plates and got into a defensive formation. As Ari got behind one of the columns and readied the shotgun that was behind it he could see Lavender and Ka quickly coming from the command center where they had been working and readying their own weapons. Since it was still a public elevator and any modifications would have stood out they couldn't put any cameras in it, which meant that they had to get ready as the car came to a stop and the doors opened.

Almost immediately Ari pointed the gun away from the elevator and told the others to do the same, the dragoness that was on the other side smirking a bit at seeing the four quickly disarm. "If I had known it was a party I would have brought my own favors," Dalia said with a chuckle. "Oh wait, I did." The four watched as she pulled a rather large cart behind her, the markings on it giving the impression that it was the sound equipment for some band. "There are three others that are waiting to be brought up as well, considering that I was considerate enough to get them to the spot would one of you strapping men go down and retrieve the rest for me?"

"I'm surprised you don't have your entourage doing that for you," Ari said as he went over, the dragoness looking at his new form in surprise.

"Well, you did kill the last group that worked for me," Dalia replied as she went over and pressed her fingers against the scars of the demonic kangaroo-cobra. "I see that you've changed quite a bit since the last time we met, definitely something different about you."

"New haircut," Ari joked as he gestured for Dalia to join him in their main living space while the others went to get the rest of her gear. "I know that you're in the middle of starting your new life but I didn't know who else to turn to that wouldn't show up on Rayarti's radar. Since for all intents and purposes you're dead you were the perfect ghost to resurrect for supplies."

Dalia nodded and as the two caught up about how her new cover identity was working and how she was already rebuilding her business contacts the others came in huffing and puffing with various dollies, crates, and trunks in tow. It was a significant amount of gear and when Campbell asked what was in all this stuff she just smiled at him and said that it was everything the discerning super would need in order to go on whatever clandestine mission they needed. When she started to unpack the largest of the cases however Lavender was quick to state that she had basically brought a 3D printer with her, which as she put together Ari found his eyes rising more than once. She had told him that the dragoness would be able to help with some new threads, he just didn't realize how literal that was as she asked Campbell to help put the spools on the side.

From there came a few computers, though the dragoness was also keen to utilize the setup that Lavender had created for himself. With no word yet on the movement of the two they were tracking the four were able to set up everything and get an explanation of how to utilize the printer to make any garment they wanted from the specialized thread. Ari found himself at a loss; he had been dealing with the fact that his death had caused his costume to get wrecked by both the torture and transformation, which was one of the reasons that he had been so pissed off that he could pay Janette back for doing that to him. But he supposed he would have to settle for disemboweling Rayarti as he and Campbell looked at the setup.

"Is that latex?" Campbell asked as Lavender booted the program.

"It's a similar synthetic compound that has a lot more stretch to it," Dalia explained. "Some of my friends at a Company across the sea was developing it as a means to develop superhero attire on the cheap but his lab got shut down. Fortunately I was there with a stack of cash and a willingness to pick up the pieces, as well as the storage space for it."

"Interesting," Campbell replied as he rubbed his fingers against the shiny material before going to a more translucent one. "And what's that?"

"That is a crystalline lattice weave," Dalia stated. "I know this is going to sound a little out there but they believe it can absorb the energy produced when people use their powers, either amplifying or deflecting it so that they can be protected. That was what they got shut down for, by the way, but if you want to incorporate it I got quite a few spools they created."

As the others gathered around and began to discuss what they should do Dalia got Ari's attention and moved him to another case, this one she popped open to reveal the variety of guns that were inside. "Now that is what I'm talking about," Ari said as he took out one of the rifles, looking down the scope that was on it. "This is some pretty heavy firepower."

"It's what happens when you run a business that doesn't take credit cards," Dalia replied with a chuckle before looking at Ari. "Ari, I know that you have a beef with this Rayarti that you're going after, and I'm more than happy to do this as a favor to you in exchange for saving my life, but just from what little I know about the guy in passing you'll be kicking quite the hornet's nest."

"I know you can't hear the buzzing, but the nest has already been kicked," Ari replied as he moved on to the shotguns and looked them over. "There will be no safe harbor for us if we don't take him out now."

While Ari checked out the magazine of a pistol he felt a hand press against his arm, glancing over to see Dalia looking at him with her usual business demeanor softened to a point he had never seen before. "You could always join me in my new enterprise," Dalia offered. "Benefits aren't great but the pay is good, plus you can still see the world. If you're under the umbrella of the new Shadow Broker then you and your partners here could get some pretty hefty jobs just on your rep alone."

"As much clout as you have I don't think you want to spend the rest of your days trying to protect us," Ari stated with a sigh as he gripped the sides of the box. "The hunt has started and the beast has the scent, there will be no standing in the way between me and Rayarti's blood on my fangs. Now... should we survive and succeed in our little mission perhaps we can have dinner somewhere and talk."

"As long as it has a better outcome then the last time you apparently had a business dinner with someone," Dalia said as her bemused expression returned. Though Ari could tell that she was disappointed that he wouldn't take her offer he truthfully was done getting offers for work. Aside from the fact that he still had more than enough money stashed around even after draining his reserves in the city there was no way he would put the blood that was about to drip from his maw and claws to fall on her or the others. He wasn't sure how he would do it but he would finally get to be the monster that this glove had shaped him as and there would be no one to stand in the way of what or who he wanted.

By the time he had finished browsing the selection of firearms that were on offer he had picked out several that he wanted and set them aside. Even though they were four supers with a variety of powers at their disposal a gun didn't deplete their stamina and was good for those like the ones they had dispatched at the restaurant. Even Shockwave and Mesmer would have to think twice about charging right at them if they had to content with a hail of gunfire, though the drawback was it would attract the police and other interested parties like flies to honey. It was a trade-off though and considering who they were going to face he would rather go in heavily armed then rely solely on his powers and get screwed around with by Mesmer.

As they continued to play around with the printer and the design program that Dalia had brought with Lavender suddenly perked up and turned around to the command center. He had been monitoring things in case the Company got back to them and as his powers pinged he got everyone's attention and turned to the big screen. It was a single message from Mr. Stevens that had been sent through the line they had secured and it told them that there was unusual seismic activity close to the quarry that was a few miles out of town. Normally one might think that it was just the heavy machinery that they used but as Mr. Stevens continued to bring up more pictures they could see that the entire quarry had been shut down ages ago due to the failure of the business.

Someone wanted something that was in that area, Ari mused, and if it was Shockwave and Mesmer down there his guess was that Rayarti was looking for untraceable explosives that might still be in the area or something along that line. Most of the weapons and bombs he had made throughout his career had come from work sites, demolition areas, and places like mines and quarries were they ordered that stuff in bulk and by the time they noticed a stick or two it would be far too late. Whether that was the case or not the last thing Ari wanted was something that Rayarti could get his hands on that would further his plans in the city, and after Mr. Stevens had confirmed to them that the resulting shakes in the ground was caused by a super he could feel his nostrils starting to flare up.

The problem was that they had just started getting everything together; even if they had the designs for their outfits done it would take a couple hours for it to print, and there was no way that Ari would let such an opportunity to pay the two back for everything they've done slip through his fingers. Dalia held up a finger to get their attention and after Campbell snapped a tongue of fire in front of Ari's face to also get him to pay attention they were led towards one of the remaining crates that hadn't

been opened yet. She explained that the technology was rather experimental for the garment printer and in case it broke she had brought back-ups, which as Ari reached in and pulled one out it looked like a baggy neoprene body suit.

"We're supposed to go out in these?" Ka asked as he found a particularly large one that would potentially fit him, though it looked more like a trashbag than anything.

"In a pinch," Dalia said, frowning slightly and putting her hands on her hips as the others chuckled. "You realize that I've technically been dead for the last few months, this is everything that I could gather up and ship to the city on short notice."

"It's very much appreciated Dalia," Campbell said as he shot the others a look. "While I'm sure Ari wouldn't mind doing this naked I think we would all prefer having something covering us. Now let's get loaded up and ready to go, last thing we need to do is stick out our necks and find out that we were a few minutes late because we were jawing at each other about our outfits."

The others nodded in agreement and all took a suit, pulling it over their heads much like one would with a wetsuit. While it was easy for Lavender and Campbell to do so even with their fur Ari in particular was having a hard time of it, a huff snorting out of his nostrils as his huge claws slid down the shiny fabric before pushing through the leg holes. Despite the nature of the suits the hybrid at least appreciated that they were resilient to his claws and probably spines. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to get his wings through before Dalia said that there were special ones for winged creatures, which as he looked back at the one that he had managed to get in he groaned at seeing that it wasn't one.

Once Ari had gotten a proper suit on just like the others they still found themselves standing there with what looked like baggy scuba suits at best and trash bags at worst. Dalia just chuckled and told them that they would eventually fit and to get the rest of the gear ready so that they could go and get Shockwave and Mesmer. Since there was little time to waste the four just went with it, and as Ari got the straps and holsters in order to keep his weapons he found that with the latex-like material warming up it was starting to shrink. It was quickly dawning on him why the size of the suit didn't matter as long as it covered their body as he could see that the others were becoming aware of the shrinkage as well, though instead of wrinkling or clinging to their forms it smoothed over and continued to remain a tight piece of fabric.

Dalia explained that they were quicksuits, for those who had transformative tendencies or powers that may cause them to ruin normal versions. Ari found himself snickering when they were told that he was actually one of the main reasons that they had gone into development, though in reality it had been the transformation of so many into anthros that made others believe that it was needed. Though it was only a one-time change Ari knew that he had personally affected a lot of people that had gone from human men to animal creatures, which had him wondering where they were at this point and what they were doing. At this point the only ones that he knew of besides his own crew were Mr. Stevens, Treeborn, and the two that they were about to kill.

Once they had loaded everything up and the suits had conformed completely to their bodies, Ari pausing in order to get his demonic wings pushed through before they were trapped inside, the two were given one last gift in the form of a vehicle that looked like a van but was built to be more like an armored transport carrier. With weapons in tow the group was given each a balaclava that was made out of the same material as their suits, which as it conformed to their muzzles it had a radio already wired in that they controlled through the pressing of their throat. It almost felt like a real CIA mission, Ari thought to himself as the four made their way down to the parking garage, except there was no way that anyone would sanction what they were about to do as a smile came to his muzzle that stretched the fabric pressed against it...

Chapter 27:

It took them almost an hour to reach the quarry site that Mr. Stevens had given them the address of, but as they looked out the windows while they drove by they saw that they had not missed the party in the slightest. Just like before the men that they saw out front and the vans were all unmarked, probably gear taken from the anti-hero militia, but it was likely to be Rayarti's security forces protecting Mesmer and Shockwave. While there was a question at what the two were even doing in a place like this other than potentially luring them into a trap Ari could care less, he was ready to finally put an end to this squabble that he had with the two since their involvement with Anubis. The only thing he regretted was that he didn't put them in the ground when he first had the chance.

Lavender drove the van around to another part of the quarry that was home to the defunct construction company that likely relied on it, turning off the headlights and coasting in before coming to a stop hidden from sight. "Alright, so just from the looks of it we have a team that is more well-armed than what was encountered in the mall," Campbell said as they huddled up in the back. "How are we going to play this?"

"I say we go slow and silent," Ari said. "Kill as many of them as we can while they aren't aware of our intrusion and then be deep inside when it finally comes time to go loud. I'm hoping that this time we're not going to have any objections to killing?"

"Seems like we really don't have a choice in the matter," Ka stated. "They may be glorified civilians but they signed up to

protect this man just like any other warlord or criminal that we've taken down. I'm sure if the CIA still backed us they'd give us authorization."

"Ain't no authorization out here but our own," Ari said with a laugh, his blood pumping as he got ready to finally stretch his legs. "Campbell and I will take point, tip of the spear, and Ka will protect Lavender as he gets through any electronic defenses. If you hear a gunshot assume that the Campbell's out of the bag and push forward until we find Mesmer and Shockwave. They. Do. Not. Leave. Here. Alive. You all got that?"

Though they all gave an enthusiastic round of approval at the plan Ari could sense their trepidation and fear at facing another super. While it was four against two when it came to that they had no idea if there was another out there that was potentially waiting in the wings or if they had gotten upgrades since the last time they fought each other. Either way all Ari was concerned about was that the two would be buried in this quarry and from the sentiment he gotten from the others they were more than ready to extract some revenge for what they had done to him. Shockwave had been responsible for his death, Ari thought to himself as they quickly piled out of the van, he was ready to return the favor to him and his lover.

As soon as their feet hit the ground the four immediately switched into mission mode, the chatter and banter that they usually had between one another ceasing as they made their way from the construction company towards the quarry itself. With as many potential hostiles that they had around they knew that any errant word or sound that came from them would potentially result in giving themselves away, and they wanted to get as close as they could to the mission objective before something like that happened. Ari in particular remained low to the ground with the shadows absorbing into the quicksuit that had even suctioned around his spines while his wings remained pressed against his back. Though Mr. Stevens had managed to get them some semblance of a layout thanks to satellite imagery it was still essentially a giant hole in the ground that they were about to step into as they got to the chain link fence that separated the two properties.

Campbell took his finger and began to create a hole, his glowing digit cutting through the metal like melted butter until they had a sizable entrance that they could sneak into and out of. Though it was unlikely that they were going to make it through entirely while still holding their stealth it was always good to have in case the police showed up and a quick getaway was needed. Considering the dilapidated nature of the entire area there was no need to obfuscate the hole as they made their way towards the edge of the quarry. Fortunately there was enough vegetation that they were able to keep themselves somewhat hidden but as they got to the steep cliff edge of the cut stone they found their luck pretty much ending there.

While the rest of the crew drew out their scopes and binoculars Ari just peered down into the quarry itself where he saw a number of people moving around. It looked like they were excavating something, but he wasn't sure what it was since the whole they were in extended past the surface. Whatever it was they were keen on getting it out without being disturbed as he noticed several men with high-caliber guns arranged in a loose perimeter around the dig site, then a number of ones roaming around looking for anyone that didn't belong. With how flat the quarry was and the sheer walls that surrounded it they would be lucky to get down to the ground without being seen, then there was the long stretch of flat ground that went from the wall to the central area of the excavation.

"What are we thinking?" Campbell said once they had gotten their fill of security sightseeing. "Invisibility?"

"I'm guessing Rayarti probably is already onto that particular trick," Ari grumbled as he saw several guards pass by their wall on patrol. "Not to mention once we get fighting with Shockwave and Mesmer it's going to draw everyone else to that location. We need something that's going to get rid of a whole lot of people quietly, and those two things usually don't mix very well."

The rest of the group was silent as they contemplated what to do. There was no easy way for them to get to the location where they were digging and they weren't even sure that Shockwave was down there, at least until a rumble swept through the area that radiated from the hole in the stone that caused the buildings and machinery to rattle. With at least one of their targets confirmed Ari found himself at a rare loss for what to do. It would be easy just to slide down there and kill a few people while they were taken by surprise, but after that it was going to be a hard gunfight all the way to the bitter end and that was if the two supers didn't intervene until the very end.

As Ari continued to think he suddenly heard a sigh from behind him, the three looking back at Ka as he rubbed his temples. "... I think I know what to do," Ka said as he looked back down in the quarry. "It would only take one of Ari's powers to do it, but I think he's going to be the only one that likes it."

"If it involves me not getting shot then i'm up for anything," Lavender said as he smacked Ka in his furry flank. "Out with it, what's the plan?"

"Well, the quarry is going to act like a giant bowl and keep anything contained within it," Ka said as everyone could see he was uncomfortable just talking about it. "I know that water would definitely not work, but what about some kind of air effect that would settle in there?"

It was a question that Ari had to contemplate for a few moments, thinking about times when he had used things like smoke or

fog to ofuscate his presence and how much he was able to produce. "I suppose I could probaby at least fill it up to the point that the guys standing in the middle there would have it licking at their legs while completely covering those that are in the lower cuts," Ari explained as he pointed out the raised nature of the quarry in the middle. "Anything more then that and I'll probably burst a blood vessel, but if I fill the area with fog I doubt that it won't raise their suspicions."

"I'm not talking about fog," Ka replied, and as it quickly dawned on Ari what he was talking about the muzzle of the hybrid curled into a devious smile.

"Oh... I like that," Ari stated as he could see the others looking at Ka in slight shock. "Very impressive, a truly monstrous decision."

"Shut up Ari," Ka huffed. "Can you do it or not?"

"Yeah, I have just the super whose power I can mimic," Ari explained before looking back down at the quarry. "I can't do it from here though, it's going to originate with me and seeing it waterfall down the hill might give up the ghost." As the hybrid looked around he saw that there was an area where they had broken through to the water table, his augmented vision seeing that it was quite a bit deep and probably the reason the entire area shut down. "That'll work though, if we can make sure that there's a distraction that won't have any guards looking that way."

A few minutes later Ari had managed to get to the edge of the cliff that was next to the water pool in the corner of the quarry. Though he was certain that he wouldn't break his neck when he dived down into it he found himself actually being a little nervous, something that the predator hadn't experienced in a while. There was a certain thrill to it though and he didn't want to waste a power ensuring that he got down there safely, plus if it was a little shallower than expected or he happened to miss there was always the healing ability he had. Of course if he broke his neck on the quarry wall while diving down it would be a little harder, but he was more than confident in his abilities as he waited for the others to create the distraction that would allow him to make the jump.

Ari didn't have to wait long as there was a loud pop that came from the transformer that was on the other side of the quarry, causing the lights in that area to go completely dark. Lavender had mentioned that they were already overloading the small generator due to the amount of juice they had jury-rigged to get out of it, and it appeared that the small nudge from the technomancer wolf was all it took to make it overload. It was something that could have happened normally instead of sabotage and as everyone looked over to see those closest to the transformer try to put out the fire he took a breath and leapt into the air. Though he was already risking it with not knowing exactly how deep the pool was he needed to make as little of a splash as possible to keep those that were closest to it from noticing, which meant head first with arms in front of him and no other gear.

With how high up he was from the pool the trip down felt surprisingly short to Ari, the wind rushing past his hood as he got ready to hit the water. He would have no way of knowing if he alerted the guards or not until he got up so he tried to take as deep a breath as he could in order to stay down as long as possible once he hit the surface. As the still blue surface came rushing up to meet him there was still one last chance to use a power to halt his progress or make it possible to survive the fall, but instead he just got ready to maneuver once he was in the water.

His hands sliced through the water followed by the rest of his body, which the second he felt his feet get wet he adjusted his body so that it would arrest his downward momentum. As he did he saw the stony bottom of the pool rushing up to meet him and even with his superior agility he nearly scraped the bottom of it with his body while he curled up and nearly shot back to the surface. Any shallower and he would have had a chance of meeting Miguel again sooner than anticipated, but with his dive completed he held his breath and treaded water while watching the surface intently. With the water being as clear as it was he was able to see the beam of a flashlight slowly sweep over the pool, which caused Ari to smirk at the rookie mistake as it essentially turned the surface into a giant mirror and hid his presence.

Ari remained submerged for a few more minutes to make sure that anyone looking back at the pool who might have heard him had gotten bored and wandered off. As his lungs started to burn he decided it was now or never and slowly made his way back to the surface. He took great care in breaking the water with as little noise as possible, as well as making sure his breath was quiet while he got up and looked around. The blown transformer had still not gotten fixed and had shrouded nearly half the quarry in darkness, which made their plan even more viable. As he thought about getting up and finding a place to hide he realized that the pool would be the perfect place for him to hide, and though he lamented not being able to skulk through the shadows and hunt these creatures down one by one there would be a certain satisfaction to his act as he focused his power and began to breathe out a plume of bright green smoke...

For those that were at the center of the dig site they had been watching the transformer situation with vested interest. Even though their technicians said it was an overload, something they had warned the others about, it had caused all those that were guarding the area to be alert to any potential problems. Though their employer didn't specifically say anything was amiss the fact that they were posted in a quarry in the middle of the night while a few supers broke through the ground had caused their nerves to be frazzled. As the mintues went on though they were once more told that it had fried due to too many lights and after a while they had gotten a back-up generator going that caused the bulbs in the area to flicker before glowing once more.

With their ability to see the entirety of the area restored the men on the central hill breathed a sigh of relief, only to stop when

they saw what had been going on while their attention had been diverted. It looked like a fog was rolling in through the cuts and pathways that were in the quarry, the thick haze flowing around the stones they were on as they watched other less attentive guards get completely enveloped by it. While that had been unnerving enough they suddenly began to hear loud thuds come from the smoke, like someone was dropping sacks of potatoes on the ground. It wasn't until one of the men that had been caught up in the thick green fog had burst out from it, causing those that were on top to take a step back in shock and horror.

The man that had managed to crawl up on the rocks was reaching out to them as his skin blistered, foam spreading from his mouth while his eyes became red. "Please... help..." the man managed to gasp out before collapsing on the rock, the red tinted liquid leaking out of every orifice of his face that had begun to blacken. The guard that was closest to him kicked the body back into the fog and everyone immediately put on the gas masks that had been hanging from their belts while the one closest to the hole tried to radio that they were under attack.

"Sir, comms are down!" the radio officer stated after getting nothing but static.

"It's a kill team!" The muscular man that had kicked the other soldier said. "Prepare for contact with supers!"

As the men quickly got into a more rigorous formation, closing up the gaps between them with everyone facing out towards the quarry, Ari could tell that he had pretty much saturated the area with the toxic gas he had created. It wasn't enough to kill everyone but he could tell that those that were on the ground level with the pool had succumbed before they even knew what was going on. After radioing to move onto the next phase of the plan he swam back a bit from the water's edge and ducked back down below the surface. While cloud that completely enveloped the quarry was toxic there was also another important quality to the gas that they were ready to take advantage of...

It was also quite flammable.

With a snap of Campbell's fingers the spark he had created within the cloud ignited, causing the entire quarry to briefly erupt into flames that lit up the entire area. Though it wouldn't affect the ones that were still on the central stone it would temporarily blind them, not to mention the blast would disorient them enough for the sabertooth tiger to rappel down into the quarry itself with Ka and Lavender right behind. Once the fireball had passed over the pool Ari knew that it was time to begin the main assault and strode forward, water cascading down his body as took the rifle he was holding and aimed it straight at one of the floundering men. It was almost too easy of prey, Ari thought to himself as he fired, only to look in dismay as the shot that should have downed the man was reflected off of something that he couldn't see.

Ari squeezed off several more shots and as he saw flashes of gunfire from across the way he knew the others were firing into the group too, yet even in their disoriented state he could see that none of them were landing. His gaze quickly scanned the area and he saw the one that had been on the radio had his hands out and he looked like he was in fierce concentration which caused Ari's jaw to drop. He didn't have much time to observe it though as one of the men had recovered and threw something at him, the hybrid ducking back just in time to see a kunai smash through the stone he was using as cover like it had been a cannon ball. Ari quickly turned and fired back on the guy but found he was within whatever was protecting them as he quickly pressed his fingers to his throat.

"They're supers," Ari informed the others, once more being pushed back as this time someone levitated a rock and nearly crushed him with it.

"Which ones?" Campbell's voice came over on the radio.

"Assume all of them!" Ari shouted as the two that had honed in on his location continued to keep the pressure on their attack. "Guy in the middle is the shield, but the rest I can't clock other than the two throwing shit at me."

"How can they all be supers?" Lavender's voice spoke up. "They don't even have that many in the Company, much less those who are willing to work with Rayarti."

Ari was about to speak when another kunai came through the rock he was using as cover, slicing through his hood and cheek that caused his entire body to suddenly go still. "I don't know," Ari replied with a deadly calm as he cracked his neck, his nostrils twitching and his lips pulling back to bear his fangs that had started to lengthen. "Let me go ask..."

Aside from the powers that were being used the dozen men were also firing on the locations that the gunshots were coming from as the one keeping them safe remained in the middle. "I... don't know how much more... I can take..." the radio officer said as blood began to drip from his nose. "It hurts..."

"You are going to keep that shield up for as long as it takes!" the commanding officer said as he ripped off his gas mask before pointing to a group of four. "You start pushing against the ones that are firing on the northern face! You three keep peppering

the one that is near the quarry pool!"

Though the ones that had targeted the demonic creature in the shadows nodded their heads they were also starting to sweat profusely, the one wielding kunai trying to not let his bleeding hands tremble as he gripped another one to throw at the pinned creature. As he threw it at the same time as the one wielding rock telekinetically it caused the already peppered stone block to crumble, which as it did it revealed that the creature they were attempting to kill was no longer there. The two looked at each other wearily as the third that had come to back them up moved to the edge and asked where the target was. As soon as the words left his mouth he found something else occupying it, gurgles coming from his throat as the tailblade that had pierced through his skull pulled back and allowed the dead man to drop to the stone.

Ari had felt a tingle go through his body as he was able to pass through the kinetic barrier, which was what he had suspected was being used as his thicker muscles grew taut before launching him at the one that had been tossing kunai at him. He hit the man right in the chest and as he grabbed two from the guy's belt he tilted his head to the side to avoid the rock that had been thrown at his head. After jamming the pilfered weapons into the eyes of the guy beneath him Ari looked at the rock thrower and decided he needed a toss, letting out a snarl and reaching forward with inhuman speed to grab him by the ankle and spin him around.

By this point the rest of the group that was standing guard knew of Ari's appearance, especially as one of their own went flying past them and struck the radio officer. As several raised their guns to shoot the roaring monster one of them suddenly fell to the side with bullets ripping through his body, the two on the ridge firing into the unprotected group. Several still managed to get a shot off and as Ari felt their shots hitting into his thick hide they were mere mosquito bites as he lunged forward once again and dug his claws into the two he could reach. Though they were more disciplined than the last group they had faced seeing several of their men get brutally killed by this creature before them had caused the ranks to break down and several of them to panic.

As Ari finished with the two he had eviscerated he had got up and suddenly found a knife buried in his shoulder by one of the men, letting out a hiss of pain as he flicked his tail around to slice at him only for the guard to disappear and reappear a few feet from him. A teleporter... as he pulled the knife out of his shoulder and threw it at him once more the man flitted in and out of existence a few feet away. The annoyed predator kicked up a rock and launched it at him, then lunged forward himself when the man reappeared to get out of the way of the projectile. Though he managed to just get his teeth into him it wasn't enough to inject his acidic venom as he received a blow to the back of his head that caused him to stagger forward.

Ari quickly whipped around in order to face the man and growled at seeing him smirk, though much to the guard's confusion he found the hybrid suddenly grinning from ear to ear as he stood up. The guard looked at him in confusion until he suddenly saw several sparks appear around him, then his entire body erupted into flames that caused him to cry out. As the hybrid recovered from the kick he saw the man attempt to teleport several times but still remain on fire until he finally fell to the ground. The light from the flames illuminated the sabertooth tiger as he fired a bolt of electricity into another man, blowing him back into the nearby stones where he landed with a sickening crunch.

With the number of men dropping like flies and the shots being fired going wild Ari decided to focus his attention on the hole that contained Shockwave and Mesmer, or at least he hoped it still did. His instincts were running hot though and it allowed him to see the fist that had come barreling towards his face moments before it made impact. The guard commander nearly fell over the top of him as his swing went wide and as Ari reciprocated with a slash to his stomach it felt like he had just clawed the stone that he was fighting on. Enhanced resilience... it was a rather reliable power when in the field and as Campbell sent a bolt of fire his way it merely singed the man's arm hair and mustache.

Ari let out a snarl and made a lunge right for the man's throat, fangs bared and ready to rip flesh rather augmented or not. The commander was fast though and definitely more skilled than the others that were getting killed by the flames and bullets that were flying around them. Even as the human caught a shot to his bicep he still swung around and caught Ari on the side with enough force that the hybrid had to claw the ground to keep himself steady. When he went for a haymaker Ari flapped his wings and pushed himself backwards while also sending a cloud of dust up into the face of the one attacking him. Though the beast would have loved to play around with this one the seconds were ticking by and this wasn't his primary objective, the more energy he wasted fighting him the less he would have for the two that were far more developed with their powers than this man was.

But Ari wasn't one to be defeated and as he did a quick lash at the man's feet he waited for him to duck back before striking out with his tail, only to have it get deflected and avoid a punch that was heading towards his own face. The two traded blows a few more times and eventually Ari caught a hit in the head that caused his ears to ring while he staggered backwards. As he heard Ka's voice on his radio he slowly maneuvered himself to the edge of the stony plateau that was closer to the pool of water while still avoiding several more punches and lashing out with his own claws. They traded another set of strikes and as Ari stumbled backwards the commander paused as well while wiping the blood from the claw marks on his face.

With the hybrid taking a moment to catch his breath the commander took the opportunity to grab for his bowie knife, then make a charge for Ari while letting out a shout. With Campbell wiping up the last of the men that were resisting his fire and electric attacks he wouldn't be able to help, but that wasn't the one that he was waiting for. Once more he heard Ka's voice in his earpiece and a rush of cold air against his back that prompted him to quickly step to the side as fast as he could. While it had

put him off-balance it allowed the large spinning icicle to fly past him and impale the commander right in the stomach, the bloody tip piercing through the flesh of his back as the man looked at it in shock.

"Resistance only works so far," Ari growled as the man gurgled and staggered, eventually falling forward that only drove the icicle deeper through him. "It was ice to fight you, but I think Ka here is the one that earned the point in that fight. Get it, because you're impaled on the pointy end of an icicle."

"I'm pretty sure he's dead already Ari," Lavender said as he climbed up the small hill as well as Ka. "If it wasn't the icicle that did it then your joke probably finished him off. Anyway, let's-"

Lavender suddenly stopped as the group turned to see one of the men slowly getting up, Ari recognizing him as the radio officer that he had thrown someone into. He started to get to his feet but as he turned his head and saw the four latex-clad super anthros staring at him they could see him swallowing hard and starting to lay back down again. "Ohhh, you got me..." the human said as he slowly laid back down. "I'm dying over here."

"Awefully chatty for a dying man," Ka mused as the guy let out a groan while pushing his gun away from him.

"Cheeky too," Ari stated with a smirk before nodding his head towards him. "Go tie his ass up, if he wants to surrender there's no need to kill him... yet." Ka nodded and went over with a length of rope he picked up from one of the other dead men, hoisting up back up into a sitting position and stripping him of his radio and other equipment while Ari walked up to the man. "Shockwave and Mesmer, they down in that hole?"

The restrained man quickly nodded his head, and as Ka wiped the blood that was dripping from his face from the overuse of his power Ari found his gaze looking right at the hole. As far as he knew they were trapped like rats but considering the combination of their abilities it would be just as easy for them to find any manner of way to sneak out. Plus the hole was rather small, it would fit him uncomfortably by himself so going in as a group was not an option. He looked up at the others that were cleaning up the scene and they all gave him a nod, knowing that the beast was out and that if anyone was going to hunt those two it would be him.

The red eyes of the demonic hybrid shined as he folded his wings against himself and jumped into the hole, sliding down the first few feet before grabbing onto the rope that was anchored there. He only used it for a bit of resistance and while he found the passage to be much deeper than he thought he eventually found himself hitting solid ground again. When he did even his primal instincts were momentarily shocked as he found that he had just slid into some sort of natural cave, and inside this cave were spirals of glittering crystal that jutted out from the walls, floor, and even the ceiling. At first he thought it was quartz but as he saw the stacks vibrating slightly he realized he had seen it before and that it definitely wasn't a natural gemstone, though before he could investigate he sensed the presence of someone right behind him and felt a finger tap against the back of his head.

A giggle, a feeling of fur against his back, and suddenly everything went dark...

Chapter 27:

The darkness that Ari had found himself in quickly receded and as he blinked his eyes he suddenly found himself in an apartment, one that he recognized intimately as the one that he had first shared with Campbell during his folliest days as a superhero. The mere image of this place felt like it was burning his brain from the emotions tied to it but when he tried to let out a snarl of rage to steady himself he got a noise that was almost pathetic in nature. He quickly realized this setting wasn't the only thing that had been dug up from the past and as he pressed his hands against his face he found himself horrified at feeling human skin. As soon as he realized what he had become it was as if everything about his frail form crashed down on him, causing him to fall to his knees as a crushing weight was felt on his chest.

The primal urges, the bestial instincts, the power and strength, it was all... gone, not even his anthro form was present as he slowly tried to regain his composure. It was all a dream, an illusion... but no matter how hard he tried to snap himself from whatever hold was placed on him all he could do was hit the wood of the floor and feel his weak human flesh split from the force of it. "How does it feel, little Ari?" a feminine voice goaded, Ari recognizing it as Mesmer instantly as he saw the vixen come out the door. "Back in familiar settings?"

"What the hell did you do to me?!" Ari shouted as he found his anger rising, fueling him enough to get back up onto his feet.

"I merely looked through your memories to find one that would be suitable for us having a little chat," Mesmer replied as she motioned to the table. "Now you could try and fight me here, but considering I'm the mentalist and you're the dumb brute that just happened to get lucky with finding a powerful artifact that gives him access to whatever you want."

Though Ari could feel himself moving freely he knew that Mesmer was in her element, likely able to manipulate the area however she wished as he sat down. "So, what's the point of all this then?" Ari asked as Mesmer sat down opposite him. "Shockwave going to put a bullet in my head while you keep me occupied? Or are you going to do the dirty work yourself right here?"

"Oh, as much as I would love to torture you to death, something that Shockwave brags about rather often, by the way, our employer has other intentions for you," Mesmer replied while conjuring a bottle of sake and two cups. "See, right now in the real world Shockwave is preparing the hole in the ground that we made for you and some very lovely chains that were forged specifically for the purpose of a wild card such as yourself. Once he's in place I will unfreeze us just in time for you to experience him wrapping them around your neck and pulling you into the cage at the bottom of the hole where you will live out the rest of your life."

Ari felt his blood run cold as one of the sake cups was filled and offered to him, his mind racing as he tried to figure out what to do. At the moment he was stuck in a mental prison while her partner was getting ready to bury him alive for however long they decided, and while he knew that when it came to mental manipulations there was time dilation it wouldn't be forever. It was more time that he had that he could try and defeat the kitsune but even as he tried to reach out a tendril to his glove he could sense that she was watching his every move. Was it like a cat toying with the mouse it was about to eat, Ari wondered as he quickly pulled back, or was she trying to do something else?

"That sounds like a rather brutal punishment," Ari replied as he took the sake and swirled around the liquid. "Considering it was your involvement that almost killed me I would think that if anyone should end up in a hole underneath a quarry it should be you two. Do you really hate me that much?"

"You mean other than the fact that you ruined our lives?" Mesmer asked.

"You two had sided with a world enslaving psychopath hell bent on ruling everything with an iron fist," Ari retorted as he leaned back in the chair. "And considering who you're working for now it seems your tastes in employers haven't changed. Is that why I'm being buried down here then, because we slighted your boss?"

"Mesmer just smirked and got up after finishing her cup of sake. "While it is our employer that wants you down here it's not from you rejecting his offer and attempting to kill him," Mesmer explained, the fox just shaking her head as she walked over towards him. "But you should have taken his deal, then you could have been his pampered little pet instead of winding up down in the darkness with your life slowly being extinguished. Of course he never really wanted you... he wanted that power you wielded so flippantly, and considering he had us lure you here to get it you have have a lot of it."

His power... Ari's eyes narrowed as he felt like he had just been handed a piece of the puzzle that he had been trying to solve for the last few months while in this city. Ari wanted his power, but if he could get it at any time he would have just gotten it during his torturing on the boat, instead they had to lure him to this place with these strange crystals. Wait... the crystals, they were the same as the one that they had found at the first accident site, not to mention Dalia had brought in something that looked similar but woven into thread. Holy shit, Ari thought, if he was starting to get the picture then he might have just figured out a big piece of Rayarti's plan!

Which would be great if he wasn't stuck in his human body in a mindscape that was controlled by the heinous bitch mocking him every second they were together. He needed to find a way to escape this place, but more importantly he needed to do so in a way that would keep Mesmer from knowing what was going on and ideally taking her out at the same time. As he ran his hands along the wood of the table he could feel the familiar grain of it and wondered if he should make a run for it, though where would he go? Also how did she know so much about this place, from the look of it she only had limited access to his mind and up until he had first transformed they hadn't really met each other.

Unless...

Ari suddenly got up from his seat and made his way over towards the bedroom door, startling the fox who had been ready to press a hand against his shoulder. Whatever she was about to say was lost as he opened the door and looked inside; almost immediately he caught the waft of blood in the air as he saw the dead body of Campbell there, his human form sprawled out in a manner similar to how he remembered it. She wasn't replicating information she had found in his head, he realized as he slammed the door shut, she was taking actual memories from his mind in order to trap him there. With that in mind and knowing where this went he thought as hard as he could on pushing forward this particular nightmare to what happened next...

There was the sudden shattering of glass as Company troopers came bursting through the windows before Mesmer had a chance to reassert control of the situation, and as they came in Ari pointed to the fox and said that she was the one that killed Campbell. Originally he had been in his other form when this happened but the fox wanted to make sure that he was at his weakest so that he could be manipulated, but that just allowed him to push the narrative of the nightmare in a different direction. A strange anthro super would be the primary suspect in the death of a hero, he reasoned, and his mind seemed to take that logic to its natural conclusion as she was pounced upon and restrained before she could step away. Just like that Ari

felt the hold on his mind slip slightly and while it wasn't enough to get back into the real world there was one thing he could think of that might help in this situation before everything started to dissolve around them...

In the next instance Ari found himself in a familiar black space, pushing his mental limit to guide them as he saw the pool and bar form that he had left there previously as Mesmer sprang back up. "You think you're fucking clever," Mesmer swore. "I thought I would make your final moments not buried in a hole at least somewhat pleasant, but if you think that you can run this show you have another thing coming."

"You think you're the first one to fuck with me in my own head?" Ari shot back, his tone taking her by surprise as he took a step towards her. With the memory shattered he could feel his strength filtering back into him, feeling his claws and teeth starting to grow out while keeping the pressure on the mentalist. "You forgot that an entity far greater than yourself tried and failed, and as you can see there have been quite a few changes since that time. What was your next plan to keep me pacified, bring up Miguel and kill him in front of me or something?"

"Like I would give you the brief joy of showing you your old boyfriend again," Mesmer replied as she steadied herself on the bar. "And just because you can shift your thoughts around you think you have any more power over me, because if I wanted I could turn your mind into mush right now. I don't even care if Rayarti fires me, you keep acting out like this and I'll have you bleeding out your ears before you even know that your dead."

"Already tried the death thing once," Ari replied as his spine popped, his human body warping as his power was slowly flowing back into him. He could tell that she knew she was starting to lose her grip on what many would consider to be a rather unstable mental state, which in this case was working to his advantage. "It didn't take, so if you want to try again you can but just remember that you're in my mind."

"If you think you have the home field advantage then try and kill me," Mesmer replied with a snarl. "I'll make you wish you were dead."

Ari could see something happening that was distorting the area and he quickly held his hands up, which had started to grow out his claws as he kept the fox's attention on him. "How about this, instead of us running around my mindscape that will likely scar you for life why don't you and Shockwave just give up and tell us everything you know about Rayarti and his operations?" Ari suggested, watching Mesmer smirk as he walked over towards the bar and had a bottle of scotch manifest there. "Otherwise I think you'll find that you will be the one tortured and killed and then once I break free here I'll kill your partner here and end the blight that you've stained this world with once and for all."

"I think we're going to pass," Mesmer replied with a cruel smirk on her face. "Maybe when we bury you alive we won't piss on your cage before we do."

"Charming, but can't say that I didn't try," Ari stated with a shrug as he downed the glass he poured for himself. "Last call then I suppose, can the bartender interest you in a bottle of scotch?"

As Mesmer looked at him in question she suddenly had a bottle get swung down on her head, smashing the glass and causing her to crumple to the ground as the plush jackal that held the broken end laughed. "Aye, been wantin to get involved directly fer ages!" the jackal said as the fox staggered back, holding her head as booze and blood ran down in equal measure. "How's that fer mental manipulatin?"

"Impossible..." Mesmer managed to say, though as Ari was ready to follow it up with the barstool he had grabbed he could already see her fading out of existence.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?!" Ari snarled, this time in a much deeper tone as his fangs pushed past his lips.

"You really do have an alter," Mesmer continued to mutter as he could see her becoming more translucent while the wounds she had sustained started to disappear. "Rayarti was right... it's not just you." When Ari made a swing with the barstool it just passed through her and landed in the pool, causing him to slam his fist down on the bar and causing all the glassware to rattle.

"She's pullin away from this space," the jackal told him. "I think if we drive a mental wedge hard enough we can sever the connection she has on ya."

"No!" Ari shouted, causing the manifestation of his glove to jump slightly as he tapped a clawed finger on the bar. "We do not let her escape from my mind! Do whatever it takes to keep her here and occupied, and connect me to my powers as soon as you can."

"Wait, boss, you wanna keep her here?" the jackal asked in shock. "We got a big bull dude bout ready ta throw us in the ground

for a permanent dirt nap!"

"SHE. DOESN'T. LEAVE." Ari growled with even more intensity, the water of the pool starting to boil.

"The jackal sighed and shook his head, then tossed the broken bottle he had been holding to the side before opening a new one. "Yer the boss," the jackal said before taking a big swig. "How do ya reckon that we keep her ere and still get you access to da power she's blockin?"

"Simple enough, we give her something else to focus on," Ari said as he began to concentrate, his backside shaking as his tail finally burst out of his back while scales ran up his spine. "She wanted to plumb the depths of my mind, that's exactly what she gets. Time for her to see what a true nightmare is like..."

When Mesmer reappeared she found herself not in the space she had been expecting. After being routed by a creature that she was not expecting in Ari's mind she found herself pulling back from the mental landscape that they had been pushed to, only to find herself in the middle of some sort of burned out building. It was something she didn't recognize and since she had an edetic memory it meant she was in Ari's headspace still. It meant that the link that was keeping them there was still intact, but as she tried to get up she suddenly heard a bomb go off that caused her to duck back down.

"This was a few years ago while I was still a mercenary," Ari said as he suddenly appeared next to her, causing her to yip slightly as several gunshots went through the wall. "Some little war in some little shithole that you never heard about. Normally I didn't take jobs like these but the pay was excellent and I needed the money."

"Spare me the commentary," Mesmer said as she got up again. "Trying to terrorize me? You know I can't be killed in a dream."

As a loud, bloodcurdling howl could be heard Ari just smirked and suddenly appeared right next to her. "There are worse things than death," Ari whispered into her ear, causing her to swing at him but finding nothing but air as he appeared a few feet away. "I learned that first hand a number of times, like how they were creating genetic mutations in feral wolves and damaging their brains to become mindless beasts... like them."

Ari stepped to the side as the window behind him shattered, the one that caused it leaping inside and let out a bloodthirsty snarl. Death wolves... he had been there in order to try and stop the villain that was behind them from being created, which was the only reason he had taken the job. Even as he looked into those soleless eyes and saw the electrodes sticking out of their head it caused him pain to see such a magnificent beast treated in that way. But as he saw the wet bones spikes and jagged teeth of the creatures he knew that they were good at their purpose, especially as he saw the fox slowly backing away from them as they started to huddle around her.

There were one or two that would glance over in his direction but he already knew how to keep them from attacking, staying perfectly still since the treatments that created them had basically damaged their visual cortex. It was a piece of information that clearly the fox hadn't gleaned from him as she was still moving back and finally attempting to run when they went after her. Before they had a chance to bite down on her though the scared look she had put on turned to a smirk and she held up her hands, a wave of psionic energy flowing out and causing the animals to drop where they were. She made a comment about braindead wolves being easy to control for a reason and as she lifted up her hand she caused them to rise once more and turn towards Ari.

With the fox controlling them it was unlikely that they would suffer from their visual imperment, though there was still one more trick up his sleeve even as thick fur began to grow down his thickening arms. As she got them ready to attack he put his tongue to his teeth and attempted to whistle, and even with them being different then when he had done on this mission he could see when he hit the right pitch as they began to twitch and froth at the mouth. He had also discovered that much like dog whistles the wolves reacted to different sounds, except instead of whining in pain it drove them in a fearful rage and went after anyone that was close to them. It had been very satisfying watching the villain getting ripped apart by his own creations and he hoped that he would get an encore performance at that moment.

But instead he heard the jackal in his head warn that Mesmer was attempting to pull out of his headspace completely, and as he checked he was still not close enough to the power of his glove to activate what he wanted. It was time to switch the scene and as Mesmer jumped away to avoid being mauled by the wolves she suddenly found herself in the pool of the place that Ari had hidden out in before his encounter with Anubis. "Ahhh... this brings back memories," Ari said as he watched Mesmer go up to the side of the pool and gasp for air. "Your boss nearly drowned me here just to prove a point; your old boss, not this new one that would probably do the same if he could."

When Mesmer attempted to respond he darted forward and pushed her underneath the water, feeling her thrash around in his grasp. By this point he had mostly reverted back to his old self as he felt his hood flaring out from his neck and his ears migrating to the top of his head. It was clear what he was doing was causing the mentalist to lose her grasp on the scenario that she had him trapped in, and though she knew she wouldn't die from drowning he knew from first-hand experience that it felt real enough. As Ari could feel her thrashing he knew not to overdo it though and pulled her back up, letting her gasp and spit

out the water that she had swallowed.

"Why are you doing this..." Mesmer said with a scowl on her face. "Trying to get sympathy so that we'll spare you?"

"Would it work?" Ari asked.

"Of course not," Mesmer spat.

"Then of course I'm not doing it for sympathy," Ari replied. "But perhaps I'm just trying to reach some sort of catharsis, and taking you along for the ride so that you know what it was like. Speaking of which..."

Once more Ari shoved Mesmer underneath the water, but as he did the water suddenly disappeared from the pool and the wet fox slid to the bottom of it. Though it meant that he couldn't do that to her anymore the use of that power had jostled a little more control away from her, especially when she manifested it back into a geyser that smashed into Ari and pushed him through the sliding glass and into several rooms before finally coming to a stop. Definitely a feisty one, Ari thought to himself as he got up, shaking his body as he could feel his second pair of eyes manifest while the first pair turned a bright red. But with Mesmer getting more riled up and time in the real world running out he needed to lay on the pressure even more, this time with him pushing into another nightmare that he had gotten more recently.

As Mesmer stood there in the empty pool she was just about to wring out her komono when she found herself standing in the middle of a dirt road. Smoke and blood filled the air and as she looked around she saw that there were dead bodies that she didn't recognize sprawled around the burning wreckage of a vehicle that had clearly been part of some sort of explosion. She wasn't quite sure what Ari even wanted her to see in this but as she looked to the van itself she did see a familiar form sitting there gasping for air while holding onto a massive chest wound. The bull was definitely not part of Ari's original nightmare but it was the most fitting one he had for her as Mesmer walked towards the severely injured Shockwave.

Even though she continued to put on a stoic face Ari could tell that this one had gotten to her, his smirk widening as he shifted about while his predatory form continued to manifest itself. By this point he could have had her running in the woods while he gave chase like a true predator after his prey, but he didn't want to do anything that would push her to withdraw the connection they had. "I'm guessing this is because of the joke I made about your dead boyfriend?" Mesmer commented as she leaned down to kneel beside the man that was gasping out her name.

"Among other things," Ari replied, the voice of the glove telling him that he was almost there with the connection. "Having taken the accelerated course down the path of your life I can tell you that this is where it ends, even if you two are looking out for one another. There's still a chance that you could alter it though; since I'm not in my right mind right now if you promise me that you and Shockwave will help us take down Rayarti and tell me everything you can have a chance to avoid this fate for the two of you."

"Just like that, you think showing me my partner in this state like I've done to so many others will convince me to, what, suddenly change my life and be the good little hero that you're pretending to be," Mesmer replied as she waved her hand and caused the dying Shockwave to disappear. "You have no hold over our fate and I can be damn sure that I will never be put in that position where I'm watching him die."

"I never said you would be the one watching him die," Ari retorted as he could feel the rush of power that came with the full connection to his glove. "I said that the fate of one of you watching the other die could be avoided. Unfortunately for you Mesmer you already gave away too critical pieces of information, the first is that in order to maintain this connect we have that we would both be frozen in place?"

Mesmer couldn't hide the sudden anxiety that was on her face, nor the fear that Ari could sense that he had been waiting for all this time to get from one of them. "Alright, I'll bite," Mesmer asked. "What's the second piece?"

"The second is that before you locked us into place you brushed against my back and giggled," Ari replied as his smirk widened. "Which means I know for a fact exactly where you are standing behind me."

Before Mesmer could say anything her eyes suddenly went wide and her entire body convulsed like she had just touched a live wire, causing her to fall to the ground as the scene around them dissolved away. As the fox continued to cough and sputter on the ground they found themselves in a featureless space, the white light that illuminated them surrounded by darkness that was slowly starting to encroach. "Ah, I remember this," Ari said as he quivered, not from the remembrance but the last of the changes back to his predator form. "The last light of life leaving one's consciousness, the brain struggling to stay awake even after everything had shut down, the proverbial last stop of this little tour."

"You're showing me the memories of your death?" Mesmer asked, still struggling to breathe as she managed to get on all fours.

"These aren't memories," Ari replied simply as he watched the darkness continue to move, the fox huddling up on the floor as the shadows closed in around them. "And this is not my death, we are no longer in my mind... we're in yours."

Though Mesmer's teeth gritted there were no words of denial, as a mentalist she knew when she was in her own head and when she was in someone else's. "How..." Mesmer said as she attempted to get up once more, only to fall back to her knees as Ari approached. "You can't... kill me... in this place."

"I know, I killed you out in the real world," Ari explained with a smirk as he watched her eyes widen in shock. "What you are experiencing are the last moments of your consciousness seeping out into the beyond, and given how fast the shadows are coming I imagine you don't have long. Perhaps any last minute begging that I might somehow spare your life?"

"Why, does it matter if I do?" Mesmer replied, her face sinking as she slowly began to lower herself down on the floor.

Ari chuckled at that and shook his head. "Of course not," Ari replied. "The only solace that I can leave you with is that Shockwave will be soon behind you on whatever the next stage of life is, and that you won't have to watch him die. Other than that, well, I honestly don't give a shit what you want or do because I am glad that you're dead and will be too busy reveling in the extreme satisfaction of watching this last light leave your eyes to do any last requests. Oh, and killing your boyfriend, that's next."

"You really are an asshole Ari," Mesmer said, curling up on herself as even the light that still exposed the two of them as she wrapped her arms around herself. "So cold... to think that you somehow got a second chance at life, it's not fair. That power should have been ours... instead it still belongs to a selfish, self-serving predator."

"Takes one to know one," Ari shot back as he began to walk into the darkness. "Good bye Mesmer, it'll be nice never meeting you again."

As Ari hung back in the shadows he could feel the mental space collapsing, only her power keeping it still up for as long as it had as he looked at the fox curled up on the last remaining patch of light. If he didn't know what he was really looking at he might have thought this a tragedy as he heard her breathing become short and ragged, but she knew the bed she was making with her partner and that someday she would have to sleep in it. It was a fate that no doubt awaited him but no longer one he wished to rush to anymore and one that he hoped perhaps he could stay with his actions... though he doubted it. There was always a bigger predator though and as he felt himself getting pulled back into his own headspace there was only one thought in his mind.

One down, one to go.

Chapter 27:

When Ari's eyes snapped open he found himself letting out a gasp, stumbling forward slightly as he broke through the mental barriers that had been keeping him in the dreamscape. As his chest heaved up and down he looked around and saw that Shockwave was approaching him while dragging huge chains that clinked together while he moved. By this point he was already almost on him and had seen him awaken, causing him to look in confusion.

"How the hell did you get out early?" Shockwave asked. "Mesmer, what's going on?"

With how big Ari was he had completely hid the fox behind him, but as he continued to regain his composure he stepped aside to show the minotaur the results of his efforts in the mental realm. For a moment his foot paw almost slipped in the pool of blood that was growing around his feet as Shockwave dropped the chains at his, his jaw dropped and his eyes wide in shock. The kitsune's entire body had gone limp by that point, but it was still completely upright from the stone spike Ari had created underneath her feet that impaled her from feet to head. Her white fur was stained with red as more blood dripped from her feet and tail that were suspended off the ground, her eyes and fingers twitching slightly even with the spike having gone through her skull right between her pointed ears.

"Mesmer... gods... no..." Shockwave stammered as he stumbled forward, Ari getting knocked off his feet from the hoof beats of the creature as he stomped up towards her. The vibrations had caused the somewhat thin stone spire to break apart and as she dropped down he managed to catch her body as he dropped to his knees. "FUCK! GODS DAMN IT!"

"Gods aren't going to save her," Ari muttered as he shook the last of the mental ropes off his mind, getting back up to his feet and stretching out his sore muscles. "Nor you." As Ari tapped into his power to create another stone spike however he

suddenly saw the bull's head snap towards him, the look of anguish on his face quickly sublimating to pure rage fast enough to catch the hybrid by surprise. "Oh shit."

Almost immediately Shockwave began to charge towards him and it immediately caused Ari to change his tactics, instead throwing up a wall of rock between him in the raging bull. Between his power and his strength though the bull quickly bashed through it and continue to push forward until he had knocked him off his feet once more and practically threw him against the wall. Once more he threw up a bunch of rocks but with a curve to them to soften the kinetic energy as he slid down to the ground. As he quickly scrambled back to his feet he could see steam practically shooting out of the nostrils of the minotaur as every stamp of his hoof caused the stone around him to shake.

"Yep, he's pissed..." Ari said as he quickly tried to figure out a battle plan. His stone spikes were too slow and inaccurate to hit for the amount of power it took, the only reason he got one off on Mesmer was because she was standing still as he held up his hands to Shockwave. "Truce?"

"I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!" Shockwave roared as he once more charged, this time Ari having enough foresight to dodge out of the way and avoid being caught by his hooves kicking out. Just as soon as he did though the bull stamped down hard enough on the stone to bury his hoof in it and it caused a ripple of rock to throw the hybrid off of his feet. Not only was he pushed back by that but as he got close to the crystals that were jutting out from the rocks he felt a wave of kinetic energy shove him off to the left too and caused him tumbling head over heels.

As Ari got back up to his feet he heard a squelching noise in his ear and spat out the blood from his mouth as he squared up with Shockwave once more. "It sounds like it's going well down there," Ari heard Campbell said. "You've made contact with Shockwave and Mesmer?"

"Yeah, Mesmer's down," Ari replied back as he brought his hands several times to put a number of stone barriers between him and the bull. "Shockwave is seeing red and there's something going on with these crystals. You all stay up there until I can figure out what is going on."

Ari hardly had time to finish his sentence before the stone wall exploded outwards and knocked him back, followed by Shockwave moving through the debris and ramming into him. Using stoneshape was the one power he didn't want to use despite his location, knowing that the minotaur could break through anything he created, but it was the only one that could reliably take care of Mesmer. It put him at a disadvantage though as he was slammed back into the wall with enough force that even his hardened hide couldn't stop his ribs from breaking with the force. In response Ari slashed down with his claws and managed to jab Shockwave in the side with his tail, causing the bull to pull back enough while howling in pain to let the hybrid get back on his feet.

As Ari clutched his stomach he saw the acidic venom doing its work, but unlike most humans and even other supers the resilience of the minotaur was on display as the veins only blackened up to his thigh before stopping. Unnatural resilience... it was what that commander had, and given the conversation he had just gone through it was making more sense what happened here at the quarry. It also gave him concern as he could see that the crystals in the area were practically vibrating as Shockwave picked himself up. Though his back was bloodied Ari had done little to slow him down, and with his stone walls being practically useless against the bull's power he needed to try something else.

When Shockwave began to charge towards him again to try and impale him with his horns Ari attempted to use his rock shaping ability on the nearby crystalline rod, only to find that his power didn't seem to affect it. He quickly had a plan B though and instead formed a stone spear that he jammed into it with a quick motion up with his hands. It wasn't even close to hitting the bull but as the tip smashed into the vibrating crystal all the kinetic energy it had was released in a concussion wave that knocked the bull off of his hooves and sent him flying into the opposite wall while also knocking Ari backwards despite how far he was from it. These crystals really do absorb power, Ari thought to himself in shock, and given how long Shockwave had been stomping around and their current fight it quickly dawned on him just how perilous of a position they were in.

"Guys, get out of here," Ari said as he used the other features of his stoneshaping power, feeling against the wall he had been put up again. "This whole quarry is seconds away from becoming a crater."

"What?!" Campbell shouted into the radio, Ari's gaze still on the man that was ready to kill him as he continued to sense through the stone. "How?"

"Explain later," Ari said through gritted teeth. "Gather your shit and get out of here, I don't know how long this place is going to last." Though he knew the others wouldn't like the order he hoped they would trust him enough to know when he meant for them to leave. The crystals that vibrated could set each other off at any time, and if that happened there was no telling how big the concussion blast would be from the energy it absorbed. Perhaps that had been the plan all along... but if it was Shockwave was not in the mood to talk about it as he got back on his feet and shook the last of the stunning blow from his head.

Fortunately Ari had found another way out through a nearby tunnel that was close to this cave, though the problem was that it

was all the way on the other side of the cave behind several feet of solid rock. He couldn't find Shockwave and use his power to open a passage at the same time which meant that he would have to focus on one or the other. Given every time the minotaur stamped his hooves there was a little more power than went into these already excited crystals he only had one option as loathe as it was to his predatory nature. But even an apex predator knew when he had to pull back and regroup, that's how they became such as he made a run for it through the crystalline forest.

Shockwave wasn't far behind though and given the concentration that it would take he would catch up to Ari almost immediately. While he wasn't sure what would happen with the crystals and their amplification ability he had to go for broke and inhaled sharply before breathing out a cloud of toxic gas. Much like his venom it will have far less of an affect on the bull than those that were mulling about in the quarry but as it curled around the crystals he found it getting much thicker. For a moment Ari thought he had messed up and set the crystals off but for the moment the only thing he heard was the sound of Shockwave coughing and swearing that he would get him along with many colorful expletives.

That was just fine for Ari as he got to the wall and put his hands on it, feeling the stone melt away from him as he carved a path through the wall towards the cavern that he had sensed on the other side. He could hear the sound of the minotaur's hacking and coughing growing closer and knew that through his powers he had a means of seismic sensing of his own, but fortunately the gas was keeping him disoriented enough as the Ari made enough of a tunnel so that he could squeeze through. He just needed to get away from those crystals... and as he felt air on the other side he pushed forward as hard as he could while feeling the vibrations of the approaching minotaur on the other side.

As Ari popped out of the makeshift tunnel he found himself in a loading tunnel, one that had trucks driving through various parts of the quarry's underbelly where there were other stones that it mined for. He found himself on his head with his tail practically draped over him as he put his hand on the wall, sealing it back up before Shockwave could get to him. It also sealed up the gas that was potentially still pouring out of those crystals and hopefully killing the bull in the process, though as he got back onto his feet he could feel vibrations in the ground that were definitely not him. The hybrid spun around just in time to see the entire stone wall cracking from the rhythmic pounding and he just managed to jump out of the way as the rocks exploded outwards and gas came flooding out of the opening along with the spitting and hacking minotaur.

"ARI!" Shockwave bellowed, turning when he could feel the hybrid getting to his feet. "Stop running and face me like a man! I'll break that scrawny neck of yours in half!"

"Still angry..." Ari coughed as he quickly moved his way up the paved ramp towards the quarry. He needed to get Shockwave out in the open so that he could deal with him there, the tunnels were too much his playground and even though it looked like the gas blinded him he was also standing next to dozens of charged crystals ready to go off at any moment. The bull once more sensed his movement and in a blind rage stamped his hoof down as hard as he could, causing the nearby stone to practically shatter and rain down on them as the pavement buckled underneath his power. Ari managed to jump and avoid it but as it traveled upwards he saw that it had hit a huge dumpster truck and caused it to fall forward.

As Ari saw the truck careening towards him the hybrid brought up both hands and caused the broken ground to rise up, causing it to jump over his head and smash down towards the bull. He continued to make his way up as the vehicle fell to its side and slid to Shockwave but he also ducked to the side and continued to charge his way up the even steeper incline towards his target. As Ari looked back to see where his opponent was he looked past him and saw that as the partially destroyed vehicle slid it was kicking up sparks while it slid right next to the opening that had been created. Even Shockwave in his enraged state could see the look on the hybrid's face and he turned back around just in time to see the sparks turn to flames that were immediately sucked into the cavern full of heavily volatile crystals.

The next time the ground rumbled it was from the explosion that blew out the wall even more, the stone cracking heavily all the way up towards where Ari had gotten up to. Shockwave dug in his hooves and even while partially blinded from the gas managed to stomp his way past Ari and up to the surface of the quarry. It appeared that self-preservation had finally kicked in and the bull was making a run for it, but that was not going to happen as Ari found his own instincts kicking in. If the minotaur managed to escape in the chaos of the exploding quarry then he could regroup underneath Rayarti's protection and come after him again, this time with a thirst for vengeance for the one that killed his partner.

As the quarry continued to shake and rumble Ari got on all fours and chased after the minotaur, pouring his strength into his limbs to propel him further. When he got close enough he leapt into the air and as he pounced on Shockwave he also swept his arm in front of him and caused a barrier of stone to rise up to box him in. Though it had caused the other man to shift and turn he managed to catch him, clamping down with his teeth right into the meaty calf and ankle of the minotaur. Shockwave bellowed in pain and fell forward, but in his state to try and keep him from running Ari had also put himself in poor position as the other hoof sailed right into his face.

Even with the disadvantageous position and lack of bracing Ari found himself seeing stars and his ears rang while he was pushed back towards the tunnel that had started to collapse. He was pretty sure he had just lost several teeth and a fang in the process along with his nose being busted and his skull cracked. As his vision swam he thought for a second that the minotaur had managed to make him blind in both sets of eyes, but as another rumble went through the stone and a massive crack could be heard from it splitting he managed to clear his head enough to see again. As he got back up and spat out even more blood from his muzzle along with his nose he saw Shockwave crawling up the scaffolding of an old truck stone loader, which was

close to one of the sides of the otherwise steep quarry wall that penned them in.

Though Ari was still shaking off the massive blow he could see that his attack had slowed down the minotaur as well, watching him limp across the heavy steel bars that made up the framework of the truck loader. The hybrid ran as fast as he could with his beast instincts turned up into overdrive at the thought of his prey escaping him and when he got to the base of the structure he leapt up as far as he could and grabbed onto the girder. As he swung himself up he had to grip himself onto it as the entire building rattled, which at first he thought was because of Shockwave only to look up and see that he was holding on to the column a few stories above him. There was another intense quake and when Ari looked back down he could see that the area where the hole of the quarry was had started to cave.

"Ari, the quarry is shaking like jello and the entire city police switchboard just lit up like a damn christmas tree!" Lavender shouted over the radio as Ari clawed into the metal and pulled up the rest of the way before getting ready to jump again. "If that thing is really going to explode then you need to get out of there now!"

"He's not getting away!" Ari shouted over the radio as he jumped, grabbing onto the next metal beam with his feet dangling down as his body started to shift in direction from the building tilting. "This ends now!"

Though the others were still shouting something at him Ari could no longer hear him, not with the blood of battle rushing in his ears. Even with the pain that was coursing through his head he still found himself dead focused on the injured prey that was before him. With the structure starting to sway and multiple geysers of dust or water spraying up from the crystals detonating underneath it had slowed Shockwave down enough that he was getting close to him. With one more powerful leap Ari had gotten to the stop of the structure, which was little more than a number of metal beams that were criss-crossed over one another, he looked around to see where the bull had ran off to.

Instead of heading towards the side of the quarry wall however the bull had shifted to the left, Ari turning just in time to see him wielding something. Shockwave fired the weapon, which turned out to be a rivet spike gun, and nearly caused the hybrid to fall backwards as he dodged it. Two more were fired at him and though he also dodged the first one the second hit him right in his right pectoral that caused the beast to screech in pain. The scorching hot metal seared into his lung and as he could feel his blood dripping into it he saw Shockwave drop the gun and slam his hoof down on the metal beam that he stood on.

Almost immediately the thick steel warped and split, sheering off and falling down while Ari attempted to jump off of it. He managed to get back to the column and hold onto it but it gave Shockwave time to make a run for it, heading to the other side of the building in an attempt to make a leap over to the quarry ledge that was just a couple feet away from it. As his instincts burned and his need to chase continued to push him it was hindered by the pain in his chest, enough so that he grabbed the rivet spike and pulled it out of him before continuing. Neither he nor Shockwave got very far though as the middle of the quarry suddenly exploded upwards in a mushroom cloud of dust that caused the entire floor including the supports of the building to collapse downward.

Ari was seeing red at this point and with the bloody spike clattering to the ground he let out a roar and spread out his wings. "Shockwave!" Ari shouted, the minotaur getting back onto his feet looking back at the demonic creature that had the exploding dust cloud behind him. "Who's the coward now? Get back here and fight me, or do you not care that you'll let the one who killed your partner go free!?"

Though he was fully in his feral mindset Ari still knew how to push buttons as he could see the nostrils of the minotaur snort. Two bestial creatures ready to fight to the death, it was exactly what the demonic hybrid wanted as he could see him start to charge towards him. With the structure they were on starting to collapse and several more areas of the quarry imploding it was likely that they were both going to fall to their deaths, but that didn't stop him from pushing on the column and flinging himself forward with wings stretched. Even with the chest wound and head injury Ari still knew how to fight and as the fist of the other man swung down towards him he dodged to the side and caught the bull right in his side.

The force of his thrust had caused Ari to fall to the girder and as he landed on his back Shockwave spun around and got ready to stomp him in the chest, only for both of them to fall back as the support columns closest to the crater that was forming in the quarry had caused them to buckle. As the building heaved up into the air both men had to grip onto the metal in order to avoid falling into the roiling stone that continued to erupt from the crystals exploding underneath, turning the split and broken rocks into a grinder that had already pulled in several smaller structures and lights that were crunched and pulled down. Despite the perilous situation Shockwave dug his hooves into the steel and pushed himself up towards Ari again, only to get kicked in the face as the hybrid allowed himself to slide down to meet him. Both men hit the column that was now at the forty-five degree angle and as Ari rolled to the side they were both wheezing heavily.

"Sounds like... you're out of juice," Ari said as he leaned against the twisted girder that he was on.

"So are you," Shockwave grumbled back as he slowly braced himself and put the palm of his hand to his shoulder before popping it back into place with a grimace. "Looks like we're both dying here."

"Speak for yourself," Ari huffed as he got back to his feet. "Let's finish this, I have your boss to kill yet."

Shockwave just snorted and groaned as he stepped out onto the damaged girder as well, both of them going into an attack stance. With their powers drained and the structure already about to completely fall into the grinding pit the quarry had become they were ready to finish this with their fists. Ari could feel the blood that was filling his lung spilling out from his jaw but with seeing similar leaking out of the bull's ears he knew they were both a few good blows from finishing one another off. He was running purely on adrenaline at this point but was ready to finish this as the two charged one another once again.

Ari grimaced as he was hit several times and delivered a few blows of his own, the two grunting and groaning as they grappled against one another. Both were trying to push the other off the beam or land the killing blow but with the quarry rapidly deteriorating they were more often than not steadying themselves to keep from falling off. After one particularly long grapple though the two stopped as they both heard a very loud groaning of metal and machinery over the explosions still happening. The two both had their arms practically around one another's necks but as they looked up their jaws dropped and eyes widened when they saw one of the huge cranes falling straight towards the both of them. In a moment of self preservation the two pushed apart from one another and managed to back up to separate areas of the building just as the huge framework crashed down onto the beam they were fighting.

The crashing of metal against metal was deafening and as they braced against the column Ari found himself hanging from what used to be a support column, his body dangling hundreds of feet above the reverberating crystals that he could feel the shockwaves of even from there. He grimaced and panted as he slowly managed to pull himself back up and though his vision was startint to swim he could see his target starting to climb back up the scaffolding that was more like a ladder at this point then a framework. As Ari was about to jump up after him to give chase he felt something bump against his foot, looking down and seeing a familiar piece of equipment still hanging there by its safety harness. As he glanced between it and the bull he found his smirk returning, exposing his bloodied fangs as he snapped the safety harness and slung the machine against his back before hopping up on the collapsed crane neck...

Shockwave had started to get close to the twisted beams of metal that still hung somewhat close to the edge of the quarry even as the building continued to slide towards the exploding pit. Every time it shook and shuddered he had stop though, and when he did the last time he looked back to see where Ari was in chasing him. To his surprise he didn't see the hybrid on the roof scaffolding at all, just the churning rocks and exploding gysers that this building and all the others in the area were slowly being pulled to. It caused him to take a moment to catch his breath as he hoped that the insufferable hybrid had met his end, but as he reached up to pull himself onto the next beam he suddenly found a shadow befalling him. Ari's wings fluttered as he glided down from the head of the crane, using the metal rope of the which to guide himself down and land right on top of where Shockwave was about to pull himself up to and drove a stake rivet through his hand.

"There you go, don't want you to fall," Ari said sadistically as Shockwave howled in pain, slipping and dangling by the arm before Ari darted down and grabbed him by the other wrist. "Here, let me help you up." Though the minotaur tried to pull away the hybrid had the upper hand and soon also had the bull's against the metal, holding it down with his foot by the wrist before punching another rivet stake through it.

"Gaahhh fuck you Ari!" Shockwave spat, huffing loudly as he tried to pull away but could only dangle there.

"I have enough lovers, thank you," Ari replied as he knelt down, driving another rivet into each of the muscular forearms of the bull before tossing the gun aside. "Now, tell me what Rayarti was planning with all this or I'm going to leave you to slowly get churned up by the grinder of your own creation. Also I think a bit of toxic gas is down there too, I can see it flare up every once in a while."

Though Ari sat on girder with his claws dug into the painted metal to keep from falling he continued to nudge Shockwave to make sure he wasn't going into shock, only to hear him let out a defeated chuckle. "You think I gave two shits on what Rayarti had planned," Shockwave replied. "That stupid security company of his is just a means to an end, a way to further his own designs. I told him when he wanted to bring you in that you'd be the end of him just like you're the harbinger of destruction for everything else, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"Mmmm, sound advice," Ari said, catching himself as the building upheaved itself even more so that it was practically parallel with the ground like a sinking ship. "If it makes you feel any better you were absolutely right. But our time here is short and I have things to do, so if you have nothing else for me I think it's time to part ways."

The minotaur just smirked and spat blood, Ari seeing that he was starting to contemplate his own demise even as he wiggled there while pinned to the metal beam. Or perhaps he was thinking of a way to escape from his fate, and even though he was absolutely exhausted it was possible that he would be able to get out before he met his end at the pit he had created... which was something that the hybrid would not have. "H-hey, what do you think you're doing?" Shockwave asked as Ari took the metal cable that he had continued to hold onto and looped it around his neck before drawing more slack. "What the hell is this?!"

Ari smirked as he tested the line and saw that there was probably just enough left on the winch before it locked to enact his plan, taking the hook of it and looping his toe around it to draw it taut against the bull's neck before grabbing onto the line a few

feet above that. "We really will need to hang out again shortly," Ari joked as the minotaur's face suddenly became twisted in both rage and shock. "I'll be dropping in real soon, don't worry, and do make sure to say hi to Mesmer for me."

Before Shockwave could say another word Ari let himself fall from the beam, hearing Shockwave choke as he tried to pull himself away from the metal he was riveted too while he fell downward. There was no intention of strangling him, Ari thought to himself as he continued to drop down between the destroyed columns of the structure, he didn't want the bull's regeneration to potentially save him right at the end. But given the weight he was putting on the cable and the relatively thin nature of it he was sure he wouldn't have to worry about it very soon as the winch it was spooled on quickly ran out. The hybrid held tight and braced himself as they hit the anchor of the cable, all that inertia and force being focused on a few inches of flesh and bone as he looked up just in time to see the loop he had created go taut.

The cries of rage that had come above him were cut short as the minotaur's neck was sliced clean through, Ari swaying back and forth as the head of his nemesis bounced on a couple of beams before finally hitting the ground with a wet splat. "That might have been more satisfying than sex," Ari said to himself as he grabbed a cigarette from his pack and went to light it, only to stop short as both his lighter and the cigarette, along with his body, was doused with the blood that came down from the limp creature above that caused him to sigh. "Just had to go and ruin things for me one last time Shockwave, eh?"

Ari flicked the ruined cigarette into the pit and used the last power he had in reserve to heal himself as best he could, though with what little energy he had left it was enough to close his chest wound and fix his head so he wouldn't drown in his own blood or slip into a coma. Everything else he would just have to relegate as cool new scars to add to the old ones as he slowly swung himself back and forth to get over to the more stable section of the building, showering himself every time he went underneath Shockwave before he had enough momentum to use his wings and glide towards the edge of the quarry. As he landed on the solid stone he could feel it with his active power that the whole place was on the verge of collapse, the crystals creating a cavity even bigger than the one he had been in that everything was falling into. Even as he limped his way towards the back wall and called on the others to get him out of there he turned back in time to see the rock loader building and the destroyed crane sink below the horizon of the quarry floor with water shooting up from the pool flooding it.

It didn't take too long before the other three had gotten to the edge that Ari had told them to go, pulling up the ropes they had dropped down while huffing heavily. "Fuck he's heavy," Lavender stated as he and Campbell pulled while Ka provided the anchor point. "Should have gotten a helicopter to pull his ass out."

"You do know you're still on comms, right?" Ari commented through the radio.

"Yes," Lavender replied simply. "What's your point?"

"Helicopter wouldn't make a difference anyway," Campbell replied as he continued to hoist up the hybrid going hand over hand. "I don't know if you can feel it but the collapsing of the quarry is causing negative air pressure over the area, anything flying over there is liable to get sucked in just like the buildings are."

"Hopefully the cops know that then," Lavender replied. "Considering they're sending everyone out here I don't want to be blamed for them crashing. Speaking of we have... maybe five minutes to make a clean getaway out of here before the hammer drops on us."

"Then less talking, more pulling," Ari said over the radio. "I'm almost there."

Ari winced every time they moved him, which was a lot considering how tall the wall is that he was being hoisted up on, but eventually he saw the edge and helped pull himself over as they practically dragged his body over the stone and into the grass. Once he was past the edge of the cliff Ari just gave them a thumbs-up and laid there on his back, wheezing a bit as he went and put a cigarette in his mouth. "No time for that," Campbell said as he pulled it out of his muzzle and flicked it over the edge, causing Ari to bring up his hands in frustration before they came back down on the stone. "You heard the wolf, five minutes, any healing left in you?"

"Already used for the worst of it," Ari explained, letting out a snarl of pain as Campbell and Ka reached down and hoisted him up onto his feet. "No way I'm... making it back to the van... in five minutes..."

"We got you covered," Campbell replied before nodding to Ka. "Time to go Hannibal mode!" Before Ari could even ask what the hell that meant the sabertooth tiger was practically tossed onto the back of the wholly mammoth, Ka grabbing his ankles and holding his legs to his sides while Lavender helped secure his arms around the neck of the larger creature.

With Ari riding on Ka's back the four ran back towards the construction company that hid their vehicle, the entire time feeling the ground shaking and rumbling underneath their feet. More than once they had to stop for a second as a new section of the quarry collapsed in on itself and by the time they got back to the hole they had made in the fence several more dust clouds were sent up into the air. The hybrid was having a hard time staying conscious through any of it and even before he was pulled

through the fence he had begun to black out. The last thing he could focus on was hearing the sound of sirens in the distance and the cracking of stone before he finally allowed the darkness to overtake him...

Chapter 28:

"Ell of a thing ya did there, boss," Ari heard as he came too, finding himself sitting at a bar with his upper body sprawled out on top of it. When he looked to his side the stuffed jackal stood there with a wry grin on his face while polishing a glass. "Two sups without breakin a sweat, knew ya could do it."

"Fuckin hell," Ari replied with a groan as he slowly sat up. "I suppose seeing you means I'm not dead, or at least I hope not if it meant spending my afterlife stuck here with you."

"Got some benefits to it," the jackal said as Ari patted his upper body only to see the other man holding what he was looking for, taking the cigarette and lighter provided. "Joke's aside that was one of yer more harrowin experiences, escaped by the skin of yer teeth."

Ari leaned back and took a deep inhale, the soreness in his chest from being impaled by a rivet spike blissfully absent in this realm as he breathed the thick plume of smoke out through his nostrils. "Figures I get a new lease on life and almost end up in a situation where it would end," Ari finally replied as the jackal poured him a drink. "Good riddance to them though, considering how those two were like a bad penny it was worth almost dying just to wipe them from the face of the earth."

"Salutations to that then, my friend," the jackal replied as he leaned against the bar, watching Ari down the glass. "Also your team came through in a pinch, eh? Nice to be workin with them instead of tryin to always be out in front a them."

As Ari took the last swallow and put the cup back down on the bar he realized his glove was right; normally he would opt to go in alone and try to take out everyone, and while he had still done that with Mesmer and Shockwave due to the circumstances the fact they were out there and had his back not only was reassuring but had kept the beast in check. Sure he went a little crazy there in the end, Ari mused as he pointed for his leather-clad bartender to pour him another, but when he saw the mindless actions of Shockwave after losing Memser he realized just how far he had been from the mindless, raving beast that would have kept slashing and hacking until they probably both had died down in that crystalline catacomb. As he was about to down the second glass his eyes widened as he realized he had information that was important to relay to the rest of the group, something he couldn't do while he was hanging around this place.

"Shit, I need to tell the others about those crystals," Ari said as he looked around. "How the hell do you get out of this place anyway?"

"You always have the means to get out of here," the jackal replied with a chuckle. "You know that already, this is your head. If anything Mesmer showed you the door and you have the keys, now go on and get outta here, it's time fer me ta close up shop anyway ya lush."

The jackal tossed the cloth he had been using into the hybrid's face, and as Ari pulled it off of him he realized that he was actually pulling away the sheets of his bed from his muzzle. He found himself looking up at the ceiling of their hideout in the sleeping quarters they had built, or as Ka liked to call it the recovery room for how hard they had been working. The name was even more apt as he slowly tried to sit up and let out a huff of pain from feeling it all return to him. As he pulled the covers aside he saw that he had more bandages than skin showing, the superficial wounds he had been unable to heal with his power wrapped up and treated.

Though it was never accurate he could sense his glove had recharged, which meant he was out for about ten to twelve hours as he looked around the darkened room. Considering he was back in the high-rise they must have gotten away from the police, a potentially harrowing chase that he hadn't been conscious for, and gotten reestablished up in their little makeshift headquarters. The only thing that was on the nightstand was a glass of water and a couple of pills that had probably come from what remained of Ka's stash, eagerly taking them both in lieu of something stronger while also seeing if he could find his phone. Before he had a chance to get out of the bed and do a proper search however the door opened and Campbell walked in holding a tray.

"Looks like someone finally got enough rest," Campbell said as he went over and put the tray that contained a bowl of soup on the nightstand. "Wasn't sure how well you'd be feeling after taking the pummeling by Shockwave so we decided liquids might be best for you to start off with. And no, for the purpose of your rehabilitation alcohol is not considered one of those liquids."

Ari chuckled at that and grabbed at the bowl, the hunger that came from such extensive use of not only his powers but his physical capabilities coming back to him just like the pain had to remind him that he was running on fumes. He tossed the spoon to the side and brought the bowl right up to his lips, chugging it down in a matter of minutes including the noodles and

vegetables that were in it before tossing the empty vessel aside. "Not bad, though we're going to be ordering out to celebrate after this," Ari said excitedly. "They're dead Campbell, I finally killed the fucking bastards like they deserved the first time."

Campbell smiled and sat down on the bed with him, carefully taking off the bandages while he nodded his head. As Ari continued to tell the sabertooth tiger about his exploits down in the crystalline cave and then the rock loader bay he had to pause occasionally as he felt a twinge come from his body. When he looked down he saw that some of the wounds on his body were not as superficial as he had thought with some of them even being stitched up. It was too late to use his healing ability to speed them along, or rather it would mostly be a waste, and it seemed like the feline was fond of taking care of him as he felt Campbell's fingers go from one of the fresher wounds to one of his scars.

There was another twitch that went through Ari's body as he felt it get touched, this time the pain that was caused was not physical as he looked down to see Campbell studying the healed over gash in his side. "From a villa that exploded while I was on the job," Ari said as he leaned back against the bedframe, Campbell looking up at him while he spoke. "Took a piece of shrapnel to the side and nearly bled out, doctor said if it had gone in an inch deeper or to the left it would have nicked my liver and that would have been it for me."

"Sounds like you often wake up like this, bandaged in a bed," Campbell replied, the slight chuckle hiding the clear distress at thinking about him in the field like that as he traced over the mark in his ab scales and began to trail his fingers upwards. "You never really told me anything about these scars, now that I think about it, you just often showed up at my doorstep bloodied and beaten and I'd treat you and then that would be the end of it. I suppose in hindsight I never really asked..."

"These scars are connected to a part of me that I wanted to put back in the past," Ari explained as he ran his hands through the headfur of Campbell who had gone up to a set of deep claw marks in his left pectoral. "As I have found through my nightmares though those experiences eventually shaped me to what I am, the crucible to which the beast was created. By the way those claw marks are from a particularly nasty feral tiger that I had to fight off, got caught up in a mission with a particularly deranged villain doing animal experimentation..."

As Ari continued to sit back in the bed he found himself opening up to Campbell more and more, describing how he got each of the many scars that littered his body while the other man got more shocked with each story. He could tell when he got to some of his more brutal anecdotes that involved him being particularly restless that the sabertooth tiger was gritting his teeth, which was the reaction that he had been trying to avoid by keeping this all to himself. After his encounter with Shockwave and Mesmer though he felt the need to share, to finally let the one that he loved into his life that he had kept so guarded under the guise of keeping him safe. Though he should have seen this conclusion after the stories he told Ari was rather surprised when he looked down after regaling him with the tale of the bullet holes in his cobra hood to see that there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Hey, those times are past me now," Ari reassured as he brought up the other man into a tight hug. "You don't have to worry about me getting in situations like that... too much at least."

"It's not the fact that you put yourself in those types of dangers that bothers me," Campbell replied. "I know you Ari, you're going to keep pushing the limits, especially with this new form that you have adopted. What angers and saddens me was all those times you were bleeding out or shot up I wasn't there to help you, and I wonder how many of these scars I could have prevented if I had just taken you up on your offer on the docks that day."

Ari found himself at a loss for words at that, even pausing the stroking down the red fur of the sabertooth tiger's back. While they had always joked before about him choosing a different path and coming with him to the mercenary life it was really the first time he had ever heard him lament not doing so. He had wondered himself what would have happened if Campbell had been there to reign in his more self-destructive instincts when they were together, would he have have the same number of scars? Or would have things gotten worse with the presence of the one he loved being there before he had the capacity to truly realize what he had in his claws?

Not to mention everything he had done had shaped him to be the way he was, which had given Ari the strength to stand up to Anubis and now these new pricks that he had to deal with. Would he have been as hardened if Campbell was there... it was something that was not for them to dwell on, something that he told Campbell as such as he patted him on the head. From the lesson he had learned through being shown those nightmares what he did would always be a part of him and it was only the future that he could shape into something different, though admittedly having a stud of a tiger pressing against his naked body wasn't too bad of a present. Though he was pretty sure that he still had multiple broken ribs and stitched up wounds it didn't stop him from alleviating the seriousness of the situation by grabbing the tiger's rear and pushing him upwards so that their muzzles met in a kiss.

Though Campbell made mention that having any kind of vigorous activity might be counterintuitive to the healing process once they had broken the kiss Ari just smirked and slid his finger between the furry globes of his butt while nuzzling down and licking on his nipple. He could feel the feline purr in pure pleasure from the stimulation and as the sabertooth tiger leaned back the hybrid thought that perhaps he would insist on them stopping due to his injuries, only to find that there was a mischievous grin on his muzzle. Though he continued to remain gentle as he worked his way up and down the thick chest muscles underneath those scales he could sense that the other man was feeling him out, figuring out just how much pressure kept things pleasurable

without aggravating his injuries while sliding up on top of him. Soon it became clear that Campbell was taking advantage of his current state in order to run the show.

Considering it was the first time that Ari had shown any vulnerability and was being taken advantage of he found it to be ironic, Campbell just sticking out his tongue at him as he got into position as best he could without hurting him. In his current state even if he wanted to do something he would risk further hurting himself and was told that it was just part of the training to help that beast of his while simultaneously reaching back and stroking on his half-hard member. This was quite the method of rehab that he could get behind and he couldn't think of anyone else he would want to take the lead then his little kitten. Though he had to be careful about it he reached up and massaged against the pectorals of the sabertooth tiger while he got into position with the head of his now throbbing member pressed up against the tailhole of the other creature.

While normally he enjoyed the fierce mating that came with his lovers the fact that he had to take it slow was rather endearing to Ari, especially letting Campbell take the lead even if he was the one being penetrated. He had the feeling if he was a little better he'd be the one on his stomach or with his arms in the air and was thankful that the tiger kept his lusts in check not to take full advantage of his vulnerable form. It was still hard for Ari to not try and thrust upwards and take control, but having the pain in his chest come from him trying was certainly helping keep things in check. That just left Campbell to keep going with slow, smooth movements as he let gravity slowly lower him down on that throbbing shaft while guiding it inside of him.

Campbell grasped and growled before mentioning that they may have unlocked a new kink in slow, sensual lovemaking, though Ari shot back that he just enjoyed being able to ravish him without reciprocation. The sabertooth tiger laughed at that and then looked down at the hybrid with his usual bedroom eyes, the warmth of his fur heating up as the lust and desire shared between the two was riling up the fire-user's power. It wasn't enough to burn or even catch flames but having a visceral reaction to sliding up and down on his cock was causing him to get even hornier, something that was further pushed as the feline leaned down and kissed him once more. This time the cock tongue of the hybrid pushed deep into the maw of his lover to give the horny predator some sense of control to satisfy his needs as they began a slow, steady rhythm that caused the bed underneath to creak.

It was the culmination and manifestation of victory that Ari felt, his lover on top of him and his needs momentarily satiated after killing his prey. He had gotten some semblance of this before but this is the first time that it was so visceral. The slowness and sensuality of it all made it easier for him to focus on having such a desirable mate on top of him riding his cock and as his hands trailed down he eventually got to the one that was sliding against his stomach scales and began to stroke it. Even with the extra stimulation though it was Ari who came first, pumping up his hips with a mixture of moans and yelps as he couldn't help but push deep into that tight tailhole and causing Campbell to climax a short while later.

"Fuck, that was nice," Ari said as he tried to control his breathing as best he could, the tiger remaining on his knees spread out on his sides to keep from pressing against the chest of the hybrid. While they remained like that for a while with Ari still inside his partner they heard a call from the others telling them to stop fucking and get inside so they could get Ari's debriefing. The two laughed at that and with a little help Ari managed to get to his feet, his enhanced healing already making it easier for him to move around now that he was awake as they went out into the control center.

Once there, the two still reeking of sex, Ari told them about everything he had encountered in his battle with Mesmer and Shockwave and the information he had managed to glean. Of particular interest to those in attendance was the crystal that was growing down there, reacting to their powers much like the one that they had found at the first accident site that the Company had investigated. As the group speculated on what it could be used for Ari reminded them of the printer that Dalia had brought and the crystalline fiber, of which the dragoness had already been contacted and was on her way from the safe house in the city. The hybrid asked if they had checked out the bodies of those that they had taken out if there was anything like that on them, and while they had been mostly concerned with covering Ari's foray deeper into the quarry Ka did mention that there was still the guy that they could check out.

When Ari raised an eyebrow and asked what guy the others just grinned sheepishly and asked him if he remembered the one that surrendered that they had tied up, and when he nodded Campbell explained that since everything was exploding they couldn't just leave him there and he was potentially a good source of information if he just murdered Shockwave and Mesmer. Since that was basically what happened he was thankful that they had done that, though he wasn't sure just how wise having one of Rayarti's men in their headquarters was. Lavender already waved his hand dismissively and said he had checked for any signals or trackers and couldn't find anything, which if they had managed to sneak something through after that they deserved to get caught. While the hybrid didn't exactly share that same sentiment he was eager to see if they could get anything out of him and asked where he was located.

Campbell told the others he could handle it and as Ka and Lavender went back to work with the new information Ari had given them, combined with the data on the hard drive that was completely decrypted, the sabertooth tiger walked Ari over to the other side of the building. They went up to what was essentially a steel box that they were turning into an armory and burn vault for any sensitive files but never got around to completing and as the door opened they saw the guard sitting on a chair that he was tied to. "I was sort of wondering what happened to you," Ari said with a smirk as the guard looked up at the both of them with a somewhat relaxed expression, the fear that he had smelled to readily on him in the quarry not nearly as present. "I'm glad to see that you survived the quarry."

"That makes two of us," the soldier said.

"His name's Kahl," Campbell explained. "We've already talked to him for a bit but other than being a hired hand he doesn't know much, Ka says that he was likely one of the men hired on outside of the anti-hero militia that Rayarti had built up. Doesn't seem to possess any strong loyalties to anything and is very... monetarily motivated."

"Look, I don't even really need money if it means getting out of here alive," Kahl explained. "I can tell you with a hundred percent certainty that there's no way I'm going back to work for that psychopath after this mission, even with what he promised. Though I won't say no to a few extra bucks for the information I have I can assure you that I will keep my mouth shut."

"Oh, I know you will," Ari replied. "Because if you don't then I will find great pleasure in hunting you down and ripping you limb from limb, preferably while loved ones watch in horror. Since you seem to be a reasonable fellow I can give you a bit of cash for the trouble, though you will have to tell me what Rayarti promised you that put you in this line of work in the first place."

"He said that we would have the chance to become supers," Kahl confessed, blushing slightly at the mention of what brought him there that caused the two actual super creatures to look at one another. "I know it sounds stupid but he was showing off these powers that other people had and said that if we stuck with him then we could all get some sort of manifestation just like you guys. I almost didn't believe it myself but he said that anyone that didn't get powers would get ten grand and be sent on their way, instead I got shields that you guys beat on like a car in a hailstorm."

Though Ari smirked at that he found that what the man was saying was concurrent to why they wanted to bury Ari in a box around all those crystals and their reaction to Shockwave's power being used to dig through the stone. If these crystals were really capable of absorbing the power of supers then it was likely that with the right training they could be utilized, and given he had used a similar kinetic barrier while fighting Rayarti's men he wondered just how much of this crystal he had on him to absorb latent super energy. But at the moment he only had the word of a man that was attempting to save his own skin, however there was one other thing that they could check to make sure. If this crystalline material was really being used to confer powers then it would be in the man's armor, which was still on him since the three didn't want to remove it until Ari was awake.

Ari told Kahl to remain still and walked up to him before sliding a claw into the material just above his collarbone. Though the armor was rather durable he managed to slice through it and see what was inside. "Figures that he would have the same technology that Dalia does," Ari said as he tore open the armor more and saw the glittering crystal thread inside, though as he looked down at the man once more he found himself doing a double take. "What the hell?"

Both Campbell and Mikael also looked at where Ari was staring and as Campbell's head tilted in confusion the human's eyes went wide and he started to back up as though that would somehow get him away from the deep blue scales that were on his chest. "What the hell is that?!" Kahl shouted, prompting Campbell to go up and try to calm him down as Ari just ripped more of the armor away to reveal other patches of scales. "That wasn't part of the deal, he didn't say we'd turn into anything!"

"I doubt he would make mention of that," Ari replied, though as he thought about it he looked over to Campbell. "Did any of the dead guys have any sort of mutations, anthro or otherwise? Something like this with a clearly foreign change on them?"

"Uhh, I don't think they did," Campbell replied, scratching his head in confusion until a sudden look of realization came to his face. "Wait, you don't think..."

"Yeah, it's just like with you or Campbell or especially Ka," Ari stated as he tossed the ruined armor aside, watching the man huff and try not to hyperventilate even as they could see that the scales were spreading over his human flesh. "Coming in contact with my power still has the same corruptive element that it did before dealing with Anubis, so when we were fighting it absorbed my power that's been seeping into him the last half a day."

"Holy hell, if that was the case and Rayarti was going to use your power to charge these things then he'd be making more than just supers," Campbell said in shock. "Do you think he knows that would happen?"

Ari just shrugged his shoulders and told Campbell to get Kahl some water and food to help ease in the transition should it continue to manifest, though it looked like with the armor off the changes were starting to slow down. "What's... what's going to happen to me?" Kahl asked as Ari went down and undid the chains that were binding him to the chair. "What am I becoming?"

"Mmmm... some sort of lizard, maybe a snake?" Ari mused, causing the man to cry out in anguish before the hybrid quickly got his attention again and calmed him down. "Relax, you're going to be an anthro version of whatever it is, and probably get very sensitive feet at a minimum. Before we let you go though we're going to need to run you through a few tests just to see what we're up against, which I promise I will compensate you for your efforts."

Though Kahl didn't seem keen on becoming a snake anthro his body did perk up at the mention of being rewarded, especially when he was let go and shown a stack of cash that Ari gave him just for the information he had already provided. Once they

had gotten him more comfortable and allowed him to calm down from the discovery they had him move over to a relatively empty part of the floor in order to see if he could manifest the kinetic shield again. Though they could tell that he tried to get it to work there was only a flicker of it in the beginning before nothing happened, not even when Ari took the bottle of water and whipped it at his head. As the mostly human soldier laid on the ground with a lump on his head they determined that the power stayed with the vest, though whether it needed to be recharged or just worn remained to be seen.

The guy had gone through enough though in their opinion and once Dalia had arrived in order to get them their new uniforms printed off she agreed that she would babysit Kahl while they finished off Rayarti. As the four designed their new looks for the final seige to end the man once and for all Ari found himself unusually pensive as he stared at the screen. With Shockwave and Mesmer gone it felt like a giant weight had been taken off his chest, one that he was sure would be shared by Treeborn once he went over to share the news. As he thought about how they were going to kill Rayarti and finally be done with the city however there was an incoming call that caused Lavender's eyes to widen.

"Oh hell... it's Sam," Lavender said. "And he's currently pinging in the city..."

Chapter 29:

After a bit of heated deliberation the group decided that with the heat still on them, especially since they were also being blamed for the lives lost at the quarry, the group decided that they had to risk bringing Sam into their base of operations. Even crossing the street to go into the offices of the Company was too risky and the last thing they needed was to get pulled over while trying to meet up with a contact that might be betraying them to the CIA they used to work for anyway. There was one thing that they could do to mitigate their exposure and that was to use the sky lobby that was at the top of the building, reserving the entire space for a private function through the lobby with a sizable payment made to ensure that they would not be disturbed. Even so as the group of four rode up the elevator, two at a time to keep the weight sensor from pinging, they all shared a collective sense of unease at a meeting so close to when they were about to do something off the books and incredibly illegal.

Ari was the only one with any semblance of calm as he treated it like any other mercenary meeting, just one that happened to be with his old boss that deemed him too mentally unstable for a job at the CIA. No pressure, he thought to himself as they waited at the sky lobby while looking out the windows at the city below. At the moment none of them saw any semblance of road blocks or evacuations that would come with high-priority extractions and Lavender stated that so far the police bands he was monitoring were all clear. Sam knew what the wolf was capable of though and they were communicating it would be on something that he couldn't detect or would even potentially feed him false information. The only one that he didn't know about was the fact that Ka had manifested powers, though he had told them that he turned into a wholly mammoth anthro because it was a rather hard thing to hide.

As the four shared a round of drinks from the bar that they had the use of the elevator doors suddenly dinged and slowly opened to reveal a familiar grizzled man in the same colorful shirt and shorts that Ari remembered him sporting when they had first met. Before any of them could say anything, which they all tried to start up at once, the man just put up a hand that demanded their silence before sitting down at the bar and pointing in front of him. They had enough meetings with him to know what that meant and after ducking down to see what was on stock Ari took a beer from the cooler and popped the cap off with his tail blade before setting it down in front him. Once more Ka started to talk but the human man just held up a finger and proceeded to drink down the entire bottle before setting it on the counter completely dry.

"Good to see you too Sam," Ari said as he put a second beer that he had already gotten ready on the bar next to the first one.

"Shut up Ari," Sam replied after letting out a belch. "You should be lucky I didn't use your coordinates for a cruise missile to flatten the entire building with you in it."

"Considering how expensive those are I would consider that a compliment," Ari replied with a smirk.

"Anyway," Ka quickly interjected. "We can see that you're not happy to be here, so why did you arrange this meeting?"

Once more they found themselves having to wait as Sam drained the second bottle, putting the empty one on the bar just as Ari set another full one next to it. "Aside from the fact they pulled me out of my very lovely vacation that was paid for with my administrative leave with benefits," Sam explained as he grabbed onto the third. "I get to see the merry band that put me in that state and deliver a message that they are probably not going to listen to and I'm going to get in trouble for again."

"Let me guess," Ari said with a growl. "Stay away from Rayarti?"

"Score one for the demon," Sam replied before taking another swig, this time only taking a little bit before sitting it back down and wiping his mouth. "Nice look, by the way, pictures don't do it justice. Same for you Ka, definitely put on a bit more muscle

since the last time I saw you."

Ari chuckled at that as Ka blushed a bit, putting his hands against his face before Sam continued on. "But as Ari said the higher ups have made a deal with Rayarti and it specifically involves us telling you to back off of him and his operations," Sam informed them. "The official channels state that if you go after Rayarti and are caught that we are to take you all in to our finest of luxury hole in the grounds and leave you there for the rest of your days."

"Official channels..." Ka stated, the other three looking at him as Sam took another swig in the pause. "What are the unofficial channels stating?"

"That Rayarti is a major pain in the ass," Sam replied. "And that if Rayarti were to get killed its unlikely that anyone would really persue those that did it, especally if they turned out to be four muscled up anthros whom already dispatched two notorious supers that had been causing trouble everyone involved already. Of course officially the punishment would have to be severe, but unofficially they would throw those involved a ticker tape parade and give them a piece of chocolate cake for thier efforts."

Ari just smirked at that and shook his head as Sam continued to stress the importance of them actually getting the job done if someone were so inclined to go after Rayarti and that the CIA would absolutely, publicly condone the actions of anyone thinking to do so. It was the organization covering their own ass as usual while still wanting to get something removed, leaning on them to do the removal. This wasn't just a black box job though, the fact that they were operating even outside the normal channels of the CIA meant that that Sam could get in trouble just for talking to them and hinting about going against the official message that had been brought to them. After several more beers and the explicit location of the mansion that they weren't supposed to go to being given to them he took the fourth beer he had been working on and left them to their own devices.

After their rather informative meeting where Sam definitely didn't help him as he reiterated to the group several times they let the CIA operative head down from the lobby first before heading to their own headquarters. It was clear that the agency knew exactly what they were up to and had given them a very shadowy green light on what they were doing with the caveat that if they failed they would be left out in the cold. Considering the pull that Rayarti had and the fact he just killed the only supers that he trusted they could already feel the targets on their backs, if they made an attempt on his life and failed then they would probably spend the rest of their lives either running or dodging the full force of what he could bring down upon them. To Ari it was... incredibly thrilling, and he found his heart pumping in anticipation to finally have a decent hunt like he wanted.

As they got down onto their floor Ari reminded the others that hunting down Rayarti and killing him had been his plan all along, though Campbell shot back that more than once they didn't think he was involved. Just because he happened to be right didn't mean that it was a good idea to start, the sabertooth tiger explained, but that just caused the predatory hybrid to snicker as they settled into the command center. From what limited, veiled information they had gotten from the human they knew where the location of the manor was and as far as the satellite telemetry told them there was no movement after he had holed himself up in there. As the group brought up whatever information they could find on it though the group quickly ascertained that Rayarti's reach extended to the planning department of the city.

"You call these blueprints?" Lavender exclaimed angrily as they brought up the document onto the main screen, which featured mostly just the outline of the mansion with no interneal schematics. "I've seen children's map placements that have had more detail then this!"

"Clearly he didn't want anyone knowing what went on in this place," Ka said. "From what I was able to disern from him during our dinner he has charity narcissitic and megalomaniac personalities in kind, which means he wants everyone to love him but also needs to be in total control and craves power. In his mind he believes that he is the ruler of the world and no one else knows it, which means this mansion is his palace for him to be king of. His need for control can also be seen in the way he gives these super powers to his men; instead of just imbuing them with abilities and having them manifest like with happened to me he laces it in his armor so that those powers can be taken away if needed."

"An army of pseudo-supers that he can control at his whim," Campbell sighed as he rubbed his head. "At least we're not going in by surprise, but damn if we didn't have troubles with that one squad after Ari took out the rest. It doesn't help we can't even navigate a path or know where he's most likely to hole up."

As the three continued to talk about the plan Ari continued to sit there in condemnation, their voices mixing with the printer that was currently making up their new outfits that they had designed. His thoughts drifted over to them and while he lamented losing his outfit it didn't fit him anyway, he mused, and the last thing he needed was to keep borrowing Lavender's clothes and never hear the end of it while also giving the wolf the ability to track him... "Hey, wait a second," Ari said as he sat up, causing the others that had been talking about potential means of incursion to stop and look at him. "Lavender, are those tracker bugs of yours in our clothes always active and gathering data or do you have to actually activate them?"

Both Ka and Campbell turn their heads to the wolf at hearing about having the devices planted on them, causing Lavender to grin sheepishly at being revealed before pointing his hand at Ari. "It was because of him, you know this already," Lavender replied, prompting both to just shrug and nod their heads. "And to answer your question it's a passive GPS sensor so I can access the data at... ah, yes, I see."

"Yeah, you're picking up what I'm putting down," Ari said as he gestured to the blueprint on the screen. "You use the tracking data and I'll try and tell you as best I can what I saw on the way. I didn't get to see the entire estate but I know enough to get us started."

Lavender sat down at the keyboard and brought up the data for the day that Ari had gone to the mansion, using the telemetry that they were given as well as what the hybrid stated while he thought back to the mini-tour he had been given. After a few hours the two had managed to sketch out a basic working blueprint of the inner walls that Ari explored including the entrance to the basement grotto pool and the arcade. While there was still a large amount of real estate that remained unknown to them it was better than going in completely blind, plus it gave them a means of egress other than the front door or trying to find a way in. Though it would limit their point of entry to those areas Ari knew a number of balconies and the doors that they could use to get in.

There was a little more talk between the four and finally they decided that they had prepared enough, opting for a nighttime incursion that would allow them for the maximum cover on their approach. There was a lot of ground to cover between the gate and the mansion itself and considering that time wasn't on their side they knew Rayarti's security would be on high alert. They had a few hours to kill before sundown when they would leave on what Ari hoped was their final sojourn through the city, vowing not to end until he had the human's blood on his claws and teeth. He wasn't sure what pissed him off more, the fact that this man continued to try and outmaneuver him or that he wasn't even decent enough to be afraid of his presence.

Ari had sojourned to the smoking corner in order to give himself one last cigarette before going out on the mission. As he slowly breathed out the last of the smoke and let the wisps curl around his muzzle he heard the door open, looking over to see Ka standing there. "I thought that perhaps you might one more session," Ka offered. "Since we haven't really spoken much in that sense since everything happened with your death."

"To be fair we've been rather busy," Ari replied with a slight chuckle. "You know you don't have to be concerned about me in that regard anymore, you're not a part of the CIA for the moment and myself on a more permanent basis."

"Just because I'm not paid for it anymore doesn't mean that I don't care for you," Ka rebutted. "In fact ever since you transformed me back in that hotel room the connection I felt with you and the others had only gotten stronger. I didn't want to say anything about it before but being the only non-super, non-anthro guy in the entire party made me feel a little bit like an outsider."

"Aw, we never intended that," Ari stated. "In fact, we all tried to make you feel at home."

"I know, it's mostly my own insecurity," Ka explained as they sat down on the couch that had used to be one of the only pieces of furniture on the floor until they had moved in all new stuff.

Ari nodded as he finished off his cigarette, putting the butt out on the couch and flicking it. He had always wondered if Ka felt strange about being the odd man out, even when they did start having sex with him, and to hear that it was true to some extent was slightly disheartening. All that time he had been afraid to use his power on him in case he started transforming from human when it turned out that was secretly what he wanted all along. It was certainly something to think about and as the two men continued to talk he found that the huge, powerful body of the wholly mammoth was something that he had certainly come to appreciate over the human's previous form.

"So, now that you've had a chance to recover," Ka continued once they had gotten past Ka explaining what it felt like in his new form compared to being human. "How are you feeling about your changes? Everyone's been sort of shell shocked by the new body that I don't think any of us really asked what's like to be so... beastly, I suppose would be the best way to say it."

"Or monstrous, as others have said," Ari replied, causing Ka to grin sheepishly as Ari sat back on the couch. "The instincts were really strong for those days after the ship, but as things have progressed and we've been dealing more and more I feel like things have balanced a little bit. No more nightmares now, which is nice, but it is a bit annoying to have to tip-toe through social situations when I know I can just rip them all apart."

"I suppose we all have our weaknesses," Ka said with a chuckle before his face got a little more serious. "I remember that you were getting a little anxious when it came to us and with what happened to Lavender we know that things got a little tense, but while I know that you've been working hard in making us comfortable we've been doing the same in order to keep your... predatory instincts indulged."

Ari's ears perked up and as he looked down he saw that the thick fingers of the other man had pressed against his own thigh, both of them naked since there was really no reason to put on clothing with how high up they were. While that allowed them to remain comfortable it allowed easy access for other activities as well as they began to lean in towards each other. The hybrid let out a soft growl as he could feel his lusts rising the second that the other man had started to press against him. While he normally didn't engage in something like this so close to a mission, often saving those powerful emotions for game time and the

celebrations afterwards, there was more than enough passion for him to fuck this wholly mammoth and also eviscerate Rayarti.

As their lips meet in a slow kiss Ari's hands slid down the incredibly thick fur of his washboard abs and continue down lower, eventually sliding around the thick cock of the elephantine creature before giving it a stroke. He could feel the other man do the same to him but was letting Ari take the lead, especially when he got to a rather unique part of his anatomy that he had yet to explore up until that point. As his fingers squeezed against one of the teats of the utterballs that the wholly mammoth had gotten he saw his entire body go rigid from the pleasure that came from it. Much like his own nipples, which Ka slid up in order to squeeze, he saw a bit of milk drip out of it... or was it something else that it was leaking.

With both men getting more amorous by the second Ari decided he would figure it out for himself as he lowered himself down, nuzzling down his sides and against his throbbing half-hard member before pushing against the pulsating sack. Like himself the wholly mammoth had four balls with a teat that he wondered if it corresponded to each one. With his body mostly recovered by this point and his earlier encounter with Campbell making him desire dominance even more. Even though he was one of the bigger men in this group Ari knew that would make his submission even more pleasing for him as he licked and suckled against one of the teats. The heavy shaft pressed against the top of his head and he could already feel it throbbing with arousal from his ministrations.

Both groaned loudly and as Ari continued to lick against the teat he could feel the hands of the other man starting to rub down his hood and along his ears. Just the feeling of how riled up Ka was getting made him hard as a rock and he knew that he had already had the wholly mammoth becoming putty in his paws. Even with him kneeling down and pleasing Ka he was the one that was in control as he rubbed his clawed fingers along those thick inner thighs while going from the utterballs up to his cock. With one smooth motion he had already slipped the head into his maw and quickly worked his way down the shaft, quickly feeding it down into his throat as they got closer to the main event.

Ari knew that he wanted to get to the main event but have Ka quivering on the couch while it happened, and as his primal lusts took over it was getting harder and harder to keep his focus on anything but the thick cock sliding in and out of his maw. He could hear the man groaning and tensing his hardened muscles from the pleasure that he was getting and sensed that he was already starting to get close with each bob of his head. That was not going to happen so easily however and Ari pulled off of him with a loud slurp and a pop from his lips before getting the wholly mammoth on his back. Though the couch groaned slightly it was able to maintain both their weights as the demonic hybrid got on top of him and brought his legs up in the air.

Though they had a lot of prep work to do for the mission Ari had no compulsion to go fast, not when he was bringing another of his lovers properly into the fold. He wanted to make sure that Ka knew how much he belonged to this group and with his new augmented body there was no more reason to hold back on him. Once he had gotten the other man into position he took his twin shafts and immediately began to push them in at the same time, letting out a snarl of pure bliss at feeling the dual heads slide past the ring of muscle and begin to spread the other man open. Ka's hands clutched against his shoulders as Ari moved forward once he had secured several inches of his maleness inside, pushing his hips forward while looking right into the icy blue eyes of the anthro beneath him.

"You are one of us," Ari growled, his primal needs to plow into this creature momentarily abated by his desire to make sure that Ka knew where he stood as he stroked down his cheek. "You better not have any thoughts of being an outsider after this, because I'm going to make you mine right now, you got that?"

Even with the fur Ari could sense that Ka was blushing underneath him while still gasping out occasionally from feeling those twin shafts throb hard inside of him. "Y-yes," Ka stammered slightly. "Thank you Ari, for bringing me into this."

"No thanks required," Ari replied as he brushed down the thick fur of Ka's head, his gaze fixated as their muscular formed rubbed together. "You more than earned your place here, and while this was always the case you are seen as our equals. Now brace yourself, because I don't have to hold back my rut like I had with that human body of yours."

Though Ka had already gotten a taste of what Ari was like when he had been transformed the first time as the hybrid gripped onto his hips and began to pound hard into him it caused the wholly mammoth to writhe and moan. It didn't take long for the demonic creature to live up to his namesake and was causing the couch to shake with how lustfully ravenous he had gotten, each stroke powerful but also smooth as he got deeper with every roll forward of his hips. Once he had gotten to the hilt the sound of their furry groins slapping against each other filled their air while his own overstuffed sack pushed against the taint of the wholly mammoth.

Ari wasn't sure how long they were locked in the carnal embrace but it was long enough for the sun to start setting as he finally howled in climax, Ka letting out a bellowing trumpet of his trunk as he did the same. The hybrid gripped the legs of the other man and kept himself in as deep as possible while he came, wanting to make sure Ka could feel himself being marked by his seed being inside of him. There would be no doubt ever where his place was within the group and as both men rested on the couch breathing heavily Ari believed he got the point across. Every so often he could feel Ka shake and shudder but that was from the love bites that he had given his neck and shoulder while they had sex, tiny bits of his paralysis venom getting into the wholly mammoth's system that only heightened his arousal.

But while he was glad that he had made sure Ka felt like he was really a part of the team and one of his lovers night was falling

and Ka could feel a different mentally already starting to surface. It was the need to hunt, to kill... and with his lusts satiated on one of his partners there would be nothing to distract him from the mission at hand. Once they had gotten cleaned up they went back to the command center to find that they hadn't been the only ones to let loose before they had to go out as Campbell had Lavender bent over one of the tables will sliding in and out of him. Though it was tempting for the two to join in, their stamina and libidos already starting to recharge just from the few minutes they had been apart, they waited until the other two were finished before they moved on to the plan.

Once they had everything they needed the only thing left was to done their new hero outfits. Utilizing the smart fabric of the printer that Dalia had brought they had opted for quite a few features, one of them being the color-shifting properties that would allow them to switch from the stealthy black that enveloped their forms to the pattern that they had each picked. It also had the same contour fitting that the quick suits had which allowed them to get the gear on easily while still having it form fit to their bodies, quite the feat considering how bulky some of them were as Ari managed to slip his own over his wings and spines easily. Though he had plenty of choices he had opted for a similar style to his old costume with the new upgrades as the inside of the hoodie shrank enough to not move around him and hinder his movement.

As the others got into their costumes he saw that Campbell had shifted his pattern to have stripes similar to his own body, the fabric a bright red that shimmered with iridescence before he switched it to stealth mode as well. He also had kept the boots and gloves that he could channel his power through and as he made the final adjustments the wolf next to him had just finished. Like Ari's new suit Lavender had opted for the more rebellious look, lines of circuitry growing on the long jacket that he wore as he swept it back to load up his weapons. At this point Ka had never had a suit before and as Ari watched him finish up he had went with the more typical bodysuit like their feline companion with icy blue highlights to mark his new powers as it conformed to every inch of his heavily muscled form.

Once they had finished getting dressed the four rode down the elevator and used the passage to get to their van, ready to drive into the setting sun in order to finish their mission...

Chapter 28:

The group drove in silence towards their destination, everyone focused straight ahead on the incursion they were about to undertake. They had already prepped everything and had the details of the mission down as far as they could with the idea to improvise once they managed to get inside. There was only one goal, and that was to make sure that Rayarti didn't see another sunrise. There was only acres of land, a huge mansion, and whatever tricks the human had up his sleeve in order to stop them from completely finishing their mission. There would be no tricks nor ploys this time to try and get what they want, it was time for the hunt to begin as Ari put the half-mask over his face that left only his two sets of eyes and his fangs exposed.

They decided to park as far away as they could while not being obnoxiously away in case they had to do a quick extraction. There was a small car port that was about five miles from their destination that they decided was good enough and once Campbell had parked they all immediately filed out with guns at the ready. Though they couldn't even see the mansion from where they were Ari knew creatures like Rayarti enough that they would attempt to have everything covered as best as they could when it came to their own safety. It was no different then some dictator or warlord that he had been sent to dispatch, in the end they would dig themselves into their bunkers like ticks in an effort to stay alive.

In the end though Ari would always burn them out, sometimes literally.

But for the moment Ari was in full predator mode as he stalked his way through the fields that surrounded the Rayarti estate. It was a bit more open then he would have liked but the only woods that he had that they could have utilized would have meant that they were probably hiking ten or more miles before they could have come up on the wrong side of his estate. Instead they would have to deal with stalking low as they can in the fields of grass and wheat while keeping an eye out on danger. Between their equipment and augmented sight there was no need for them to use any sort of lights, especially with the full moon hanging over their heads as they finally got to the last hill before they reached the mansion.

The second they got there the four took a second to observe their surroundings and catch their breath, save for Ari as he was heaving in anticipation for what was about to happen next. Unless Rayarti had somehow managed to slip the net that the CIA had over him watching his every move he was somewhere inside that mansion waiting for them. As he waited for Lavender to try and scan the area to figure out if there were any electronic defenses on this side of the fence that they had to worry about Ari found himself ruminating on what he was about to do. The last time they had a mission like this in the city it was to take down Anubis, and while they wouldn't be saving the world this time there was something much more satisfying on the line...

...revenge.

Rayati was the last of those that were responsible for his death and subsequent transformation.

He would be repaid in kind...

Once Lavender had finished with his scan he had the other three huddle around him and give them the news, which turned out to be all bad. Aside from the cameras that were dotted all over the area and on a closed circuit system he couldn't access there were also drones buzzing around the area, which made the one he had brought to see if he could scout the area essentially useless. While they knew it was unlikely given the tight security of the area that they were going to get in completely quiet they at least wanted to get inside the perimeter before all hell broke loose. Even with Lavender blocking signals, something that was low priority given what the wolf would probably need to do deeper inside, the police would probably rather quick with the response time of the one that they found was their greatest benefactor.

Though as they started to make their way down towards the fence that served as the perimeter of the estate Ari wondered if he would call the police considering what might dwell within those walls. He had been so closely escorted around when he visited the area that it was possible everything damning the man evidence-wise was there, though it didn't really matter to him since they were not bringing him to trial. If that was the case though it was possible once they had cut through his security that there would be nothing left between them and their target. That was his castle after all, Ari mused as they got to the metal bars, and considering the king was still inside it was unlikely that he would run even with death staring him in the face like he intended on doing.

"This is another problem," Campbell whispered as he took a look at the metal. "These bars are tempered and reinforced with some type of heat-resistant plating. I can try and melt through them but it's going to cause the entire section to glow like a Christmas tree."

"That is a problem," Ka said as he looked about wearily. "Could we use one of Ari's powers to get over, like some sort of flight? Or maybe dig underneath so he doesn't see us coming."

"I'm trying to save my slots for whatever is waiting for us inside," Ari replied as he tentatively touched the bars and found that they were not electrified like he had imagined. "If we can't go through the bars we'll just have to go over them. Between the four of us I think we can get over these things even with the anti-scaling measures."

"What about your wings?" Lavender asked. "Couldn't you just carry us over?"

"They can hardly support my weight and are mostly for gliding," Ari explained as he got ready to climb. "I could potentially use the hill we were on to get over but there's no way I'm bringing any of you three with me. Just get your climbing gloves on and get ready to go after me."

The others just nodded even as they looked at one another wearily while waiting to see if the hybrid could do it first. After a running start Ari hopped up and grabbed onto the bars, letting out a hiss of pain at feeling the metal bite into his skin. Though his thick scaly palms prevented a lot of the metal splinters from penetrating into his skin he could still feel them poking past occasionally while he quickly scaled up the fence. As he reached near the top and scanned the area however he let go of the fence just as Campbell was about to jump up to follow him, the three looking at the hybrid in confusion as he used his wings to soften his landing.

"Sniper nests," Ari stated. "They're covering all four walls, I just managed to drop before they saw me."

"There's no way all four of us will be able to time the climbing of that wall without them seeing us," Lavender stated.

"Gets worse," Ari said as he shook his hands. "He's got a convoy of vehicles parked in that driveway of his, my guess is that he's planning on packing up and moving shop very quickly."

"Damn it," Campbell said as he looked back at the mansion. "Could we intercept the convoy? Maybe take him out while he's on the road?"

"I doubt he's traveling with it," Ari replied as he looked at the night sky, concentrating on the wind blowing past his body. "Yeah... my guess is we're probably going to see a helicopter tonight, maybe tomorrow if we were lucky. Once he's up in the air we will probably lose him for good, there's no way the CIA is going to throw us a bone big enough to keep everyone off our backs while we try to hunt him down again."

The four backed away from the fence as they saw a light flashing towards their general direction and as they made it back to the hill they knew that they had to do something quick. Even if they did have until tomorrow if the stuff on those trucks were Rayarti's critical equipment then there would be no reason for him not to call the cops or even flee if they bust in. Whatever was in those trucks was valuable enough that Rayarti stayed in the mansion with it in order to oversee its safety, and Ari was ready to potentially take advantage of it. On that thought he had an idea that would be loud but get them into the compound at least, as he told the others the plan the only thing he hoped was that any of those trucks were potentially self-driving...

At the front of the Rayarti estate a bull with a clipboard watched as his men continued to haul in one piece of wrapped equipment after the other, all of it completely painted black so that there was no way to see what was inside. From the looks of frustration that were on their faces they were starting to get tired of having to lift and haul everything by hand and using a specific path through the mansion, but considering what they were getting paid the bovine manager was ready to make sure no one complained. They were already three trucks in and as the night wore on, which was specifically when they were told to load everything, he looked at his watch before staring at the schedule he had been given. Even though it was unlikely they would make the deadline that had been given to him he was going to try as he told the driver of the fully loaded car to go to the staging area and get the fourth one ready after the last worker had left.

Suddenly as the bull was checking off another truck from his list he heard a crackling on his radio earpiece, causing him to wince slightly before hearing the voice of Rayarti on it. "How is the moving going?" Rayarti asked from inside the estate somewhere. "I trust that you've been keeping things efficient."

"Hey, yeah, we're moving as fast as we can on this order but you got a lot of ju-stuff that we're moving," the bull explained as the third truck pulled away. "I'm not saying we can't get it done but this would be something that would be far better being moved in stages, we wouldn't even trouble you for the extra day fee considering how much you're paying to get this done."

"I'm paying as much as I'm paying because I need to get this done as soon as possible and all at once," Rayarti replied. "Keep your men moving, and don't forget if they break anything then it's your butt on the line. I trust that you'll get it done."

The bull grumbled underneath his breath but responded that they would get the job done before hearing nothing but static. He sighed and began to shake his head while he looked at his check sheet only to hear a yell that caused him to look back up. The driver of the car was lying there on the pavement looking up at a truck that was quickly starting to pick up speed towards the main gate of the house. His jaw dropped as he heard the driver shouting there was no one driving and that prompted the bull and all those that were outside waiting for the new truck to drop what they were doing and run after it despite knowing that no one was going to catch it.

They made it about halfway down the rather expansive driveway before they all heard a crash, the bull putting his hand to his head as he saw the smoke come up from where the van had rammed right into the gate. Almost immediately lights came to life and they could see people from all over start to come towards them as the bull heard a ping on his earpiece. "What the hell was that?!" Rayarti practically shouted, causing the bovine manager to flinch slightly.

"One of the trucks just hit the gate," the bull admitted, looking around until he saw the driver and practically sprinting over towards him. "The the hell just happened? Also you're fired!"

"It wasn't my fault!" the driver, a snow leopard that was still brushing himself off, shouted as he pointed to the crashed vehicle. "Someone had put the self-driving function on, I didn't even get a chance to get inside before the thing activated and nearly ran my ass over!"

"What is all that shouting?" Rayarti asked.

"It's the driver," the bull said in a slightly more controlled tone. "He's claiming someone else activated the autodrive protocols, probably some sort of malfunction when he tried to move it. Don't worry, your stuff wasn't inside of it, and we're going to make sure everything is going to be set back to right."

To the bull's surprise there was only silence on the other end of the line for the longest time before an exasperated sigh. "My men are going to come to secure the area," Rayarti said. "Keep out of their way and if you see anything tell them immediately."

Though the bull was a bit taken aback by the sudden calmness in the voice of his employer he shook it off, instead focusing on the fact that they had probably just turned a lucrative job into a loss for the company. At the moment he just needed to see the extent of the damage and hope that there really was some sort of glitch in the system that they could blame the accident on as they got to the front gate. When he and his workers got to the gate he saw that the vehicle had wedged itself right in between the two doors, the vehicle smoking as the entire front end was completely obliterated. Though the front entrance was still relatively intact there was a huge space where the wheel was stuck in the metal bars that had caused the vehicle to be propped up.

The bull tossed his clipboard on the ground in frustration as he saw the extent of the damage. There was no way the van was drivable after that and he wasn't even sure that he could get the gate open with how badly it was stuck in there, though that quickly became the least of his problem as he suddenly felt something cold and metallic press against the side of his head. "Talk and you're dead," Ari growled as the other three emerged from the nearby bushes as well, causing the workers they had

surrounded to put their hands in the air. "Tell your men to put their hands down and make their way back up to the driveway immediately, and if you do anything to signal to the assholes coming down the way that we're here you'll have a bullet in your head before you finish the sentence."

The bull knew better than to argue with a man that had a gun, especially since he could see the hybrid clearly now and the murderous gleam in his eyes. He gestured for the others to quickly lower their hands and make their way back to the loading area while Ari and the others watched while moving forward. With eyes on the group heading back to the front doors it gave them a little more leeway to get through the nearby courtyard, though the area was swarming with Rayarti's security that were locking down the crash site. They didn't know that they had snuck in the second the van that Lavender controlled hit the gate but he guessed that the man probably was getting the idea something was up. Ari knew that the clock was quickly ticking down to zero hour and as he passed by one of the fountains his tail slit the throat of the one that had walked by to cause him to fall into the pool with a splash.

The four managed to make it halfway past the meticulously maintained gardens before they encountered a group of patrolling guards that was too far from them to stealthily kill, though Ari and Campbell both managed to throw knives into the two that killed them quickly. Ka had missed the sweet spot with his and caused the man to cry out in pain and fire his gun. Though the bullets were nowhere near close enough to them it had set off a chain reaction as they could hear shouting all around them. Combined with the van crashing into the gate they knew what little of uscation they had was one, though they could still use the shadows to their advantage as they pushed their way forward. With the need for stealth gone the group immediately began to fire at anyone that moved who was wearing Rayarti's security outfit, dropping several that had come to investigate the noise before they could even get a shot off.

Just as they got a small statuary park that was right in front of the main building Ari was about to move forward when he heard a loud crack that caused him to step back, the sniper round that had been aimed at his head digging into the manicured lawn after slicing through the arm of the statue he had been next to. Ari let out a snarl and whipped his head around towards the one that had shot him, but as he was about to lunge forward to climb the tower and kill the guy he found a ball of fire in front of him as Campbell stepped forward. "I got this one," Campbell said as he grew his power to the point it light up the entire area. "No sense in you having all the fun, especially when those towers are made of wood."

With having seen the trajectory of the bullet Ari could see the sniper from their cover readying another shot, only to no doubt get a flash of light in his lens that was the fireball being formed by the sabertooth tiger. The demonic hybrid grinned as he could see the look of revelation followed by horror on his face as Campbell's power came streaking towards him and before he could jump out of the way the entire top of the nest erupted into flame. The entire top half of the sniper tower was engulfed and as it lit up the night sky the four could hear other alarms going off elsewhere in the mansion. If they didn't know they were coming before they definitely did now, Ari mused as they made their way to the point of entry closest to them, and he was just glad that he could finally unleash himself to the fullest as he quickly bound forward.

With the fire of the sniper tower still illuminating the night sky behind them it cast a terrifying light on the four as Ari kicked open the heavy wooden door, causing it to fall inwards and allowing them access inside. Almost immediately after walking inside though they had to duck to the sides as a barrage of rifle fire was shot at them, the arcade machines that were next to them getting riddled with bullet holes as they ducked behind them for cover. The arcade was one of the more open areas of the mansion and the closest to the areas that he had been denied, which was where they were guessing Rayarti would be. Considering the number of transport vans that were in the front whatever he had was substantial, Ari just hoped they weren't too late as he returned fire and managed to get three rounds into the badger that was firing at them.

Unfortunately the arcade was quickly swarming with other security agents and as they made their way down the rows it was more than bullets being shot at them. More than once Ari was nearly blown off his feet from some sort of air ability while another managed to nearly twist the metal from one of the machines to try and encase him in it. There were several booms as Campbell let loose a few lightning bolts, the games lighting up briefly as he electrocuted a few of them while Ka used his telekineses to throw everything from skeeballs to game parts to knock them off kilter.

This was taking too long, Ari thought to himself as he continued to hide behind one of the midway games that he had played not too long before. As he expended the last of the clip on his rifle he tossed it to the side and cracked his neck, focusing inward while letting out a snarl. Whether these creatures had abilities or not it didn't matter, he said that nothing was going to stand in his way and he was about to make good on his promise. He breathed in and out a few times before finally letting out a roar and turning to stand in the middle of the pathway between the games where several of Rayarti's security had attempted to move on him.

That was a mistake and as Ari rushed forward they began to shoot at him, only to find themselves up close and personal with the monster they had been told to watch out for. The first man that had taken point suddenly found himself lifted off his feet and thrown to the side, gun clattering to the ground as he gave him a dose of venom before throwing him into the basketball game where his head went into the hoop. The next two were dispatched in a more conventional manner as one attempted to set him on fire with a power similar to Campbell it ended just with getting his arm singed, prompting Ari to rip off his in response. As the man screamed in horror he clawed into both of them and dropped both before grabbing the shotgun one of them had and blew the last guy in the chest.

With that squad dispatched Ari continued to move forward, his predatory will completely in control and his focus deadset on

moving forward. The others were quick to form up behind him and lend support, shooting those that were too far away from his claws or teeth as the demonic hybrid pounced upon those that were unfortunate enough to be in range. More than once the others had to look away as he sank his teeth into the flesh of the guards and chowed down, his hunger rising along with his feral rage. At this point he was seeing red and even when he did feel a bullet or some power hit him it hardly phased the creature.

When the group got out of the arcade they had left it a destroyed mess; most of the games were either smashed or riddled with bullet holes, something that caused Ari to smirk. He could only imagine that Rayarti was watching them destroy what he loved in his manor with nothing that he could do about it. As he got into a rather spacious living room he knew that they were getting close to the section that he had been restricted from going to. As he did he smelled the air and could smell something coming from that direction. It was the smell of antiseptic, and as they moved through the halls Lavender announced that he could sense a large amount of electricity that was running further inside.

More than once Ari had to duck to the side as they pushed forward, the wall getting blasted as one of Rayarti's security forces came up on them. Between the four of them they were able to dispatch the ones that were coming towards them brazenly. From what the wolf was detecting however they were also starting to form up a perimeter outside of the manor, regrouping in order to rush in all at once and take them down in a hail of gunfire. They needed to find Rayarti before that happened... while they were good even a dozen of the crystal-enhanced security personnel would be hard to fight against, especially since they were running low on ammo and starting to get fatigued.

"Ari, stop," Campbell said as they were about to head through a metal door that had more security on it.

"We're not letting him get away," Ari growled as he slashed his claws against the door, scratching deep furrows into it as he snarled. As he was about to strike again he saw Campbell hurl a mote of fire in front of him and then pull him back.

"Lavender is going to hack the door for us," Campbell said as he guided Ari down towards one of the chairs. "I think before we continue too far we need to work on that wound of yours." Ari wasn't sure what the sabertooth tiger meant but as he looked down he saw that his suit had managed to get pierced, the normally bulletproof material torn and blood seeping out from a lucky shot. As Ka iced down the door to keep people from entering Campbell looked at the wound and asked how many powers he had used, his eyes widening in slight surprise when the hybrid told him none.

"Not even your berserker augment?" Campbell asked.

"No, why?" Ari replied, still growling but this time in pain as the adrenaline was abating for the moment and allowing him to feel it.

"Just... you have grown significantly," Campbell replied as he put his hands over the claws of Ari, which as the haze of bloodlust had started to fade he noticed had gotten a big longer. He saw spikes on his arms too that hadn't been there before as he flexed his thicker bicep.

"It appears that I have," Ari replied with a smirk. "Must be a perk of this new power."

"Well, just don't go losing yourself completely on us," Campbell said with a smile. "But this wound is a little deep for me to help you with other than patching it up, perhaps you should use your healing ability in order to get yourself topped off? Maybe a few of us could also use a bit of it too if you can."

Ari looked down at Campbell as he said that and realized that there were streaks of crimson within his red fur. He had not been the only one that took damage, just the brunt of it as he noticed that Ka and Lavender were also sporting such wounds. While the suits that Dalia had provided had been doing well with keeping them safe he could see where they had been hit and it got through the armor. This wouldn't do at all... and considering he hadn't used any real powers yet he found himself channeling his ability to heal.

Deep in his mind he could hear the voice of the glove tell him that he did good as the wound that Campbell had been nursing closed up along with the gashes that the sabertooth tiger had suffered. As he looked to the others he made sure to extend it out to them as well and as he let out a small huff of exertion he managed to get everyone back to healthy. He realized as he did so that he had never really used this power with them before, often going on missions either by himself or at least doing the dangerous parts alone. He could have never done this himself without using his powers at this point and he wondered if part of the strength he was supposed to be getting was from his team.

The monstrous creature shook his head as he didn't have time to be learning life lessons at this moment, not when they still had someone that needed to die. Though they didn't know how long until they did the full-scale breach on their position the security door opened with a loud hiss. "Looks like we're ready to go," Lavender said as he took a step back while Ari got up, letting the hybrid make his way forward as the wolf patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks for healing me by the way, much appreciated."

"No problem," Ari said as he got in front of them while everyone else reloaded their weapons. "Everyone get ready, it's time to finish this." The others nodded and they got in position, though as Ari flexed his claws and charged through the door he only got a couple feet before he skidded to a stop with the others doing the same as they looked about in shock. "What... the fuck..."

Chapter 28:

The group continued to stand there in silence as they looked at the room, which on first blush looked like some sort of research laboratory. While Ari had suspected that he would find something like this where he experimented on the crystals it only made up one section of the room, the rest had various pictures and diagrams that were all centered around... him. Most of the machinery was gone but as Lavender went over to see if he could pull anything from the computer systems the others looked at the information that was on display. Campbell more than once put his hand to his muzzle as they saw anthros and humans alike that were twisted and deformed, all of them having the same type of mutations that made them look slightly like Ari.

"He was trying to make versions of you?" Ka asked in shock, looking close to see what was in the pictures while Ari found his mind locked. "I can see little pieces of crystal that are inside of them... he was probably using members of the anti-hero militia to continue his experimentations, not just to give them powers but to make them like our fearless leader here. No wonder he wanted to keep this hidden, if anyone found out he was doing this then he would lose a lot more than just his company."

"I'm starting to think this guy might be worse than Anubis," Campbell commented as he looked over at Lavender. "Anything from the systems?"

"Wiped clean," Lavender reported. "But it looks like Rayarti transferred everything to a central server, something that is probably still online."

"Still doesn't explain what he's trying to do here," Ka said as he gestured around. "We thought he's just trying to make super soldiers, so why specifically target Ari?"

As the group began to reconvene near the empty middle of the room they suddenly heard the door on the other side of the room open, the four of them immediately bringing up their guns as a single man walked inside. "Because of what Ari is," the human said, though as he said they could see something was happening to him... the skin of his face was waxy and glistened and they could see that his nails were darkened. "A creature that can mimic any power that he comes in contact with, if Rayarti couldn't have the original then he attempted to make one of his own."

"He was trying to replicate-" Campbell started to say before Ari quickly gave him a look that caused him to stop talking. There had been a theory Ari had for a while now about the glove, since Shockwave nor Janette had done anything to take it off he guessed that it was somehow protecting itself from being seen by others. There were other potential reasons but it was the one that stuck out to him and since the only ones that knew where his power derived from were his lovers and the Company, and considering Rayarti wasn't on good terms with them he wouldn't know how he derived his powers.

"You could have had everything you wanted Ari," the creature said, his breathing becoming more ragged as they could see his body jerking and convulsing slightly from his twitching muscles. "All you needed to do was go with Rayarti and he would have been fine; the second that he heard you were back in the city and back on the grid he could also see his plans coming to fruition. He tried to expose the crystalline weave to you and got mixed results, but if you had joined forces you could have had an entire army at your beck and call."

Ari could see the anger rising in the human as it looked like he was in pain as he continued to grow bigger, anything else he might have said being cut short as he coughed and sputtered. The four looked at one another in question but as they saw the man's face starting to push out and fangs growing out past his teeth they realized what was happening. It was just like with the guard they had taken from the quarry... whatever crystals Rayarti had implanted inside of him was starting to absorb the power that came from his glove. It had been the plan all along and the reason why the man they were trying to kill didn't want to bother with the supers; why have one power that comes from one super that would probably not consent to such a thing when there was a super out there that had access to them all?

As the transforming creature let out a screech the four immediately brought up their weapons and began to fire at it, only for the bullets to bounce off the mostly invisible force field that was in front of him. He was absorbing more of their power than even the ones they had cut down outside the room, and if that was the case they needed to dispatch this creature on the quick. When it was clear that bullets weren't going to be working for this one they tossed down their weapons and began to fan out along the room, everyone getting into position as the creature continued to morph and grow. While not nearly the same as the demonic hybrid the kangaroo-cobra that the human was becoming was undergoing other mutations as it let out a roar while a pair of heavy horns grew from his head and a pair of tentacles emerged from his back.

Lavender mentioned something about being suddenly glad for the course that Ari had taken as Campbell released a stream of

flame, only for it to be counteracted as the fake Ari brought up a shimmering wall of ice that deflected it. "The crystals aren't just absorbing my power," Ari said to the others as Campbell had to dodge an icicle shot straight at him. "It's absorbing all of ours!"

"I got this then," Lavender said as he cracked his neck. "What the hell is he going to do with tech powers to fight us?" Though Ari was about to refute that he found himself nodding after thinking about it for a second. Lavender's strength was a result of his transformation, not any power that he had, so there shouldn't be anything to leech other than his ability to hack computers as the wolf charged forward to attack.

It was also a boon that Lavender had trained with Ari as he dodged the two claw swipes that came at him before punching the creature right in the solar plexus, causing him to stagger slightly. Ka moved forward as well and made the metal behind the creature frosted with ice but as soon as he stepped on it he only slipped for a second before he regained his composure and counterattacked. The wolf managed to sidestep the first tail but as he stepped to the side he was caught by surprised from a second one that had grown out from him, one of the tentacles wrapping around his throat as the blade jabbed into his side. Campbell and Ari both moved forward to try and help but while the hybrid managed to duck down in time Campbell was thrown backwards as Lavender was thrown into him.

The laugh that came from the creature was becoming more manic, more distorted by the second as his fangs grew bigger and a liquid dripped from them that caused the metal floor to sizzle. He was mutating more by the second and as Ari whipped around and stabbed his tail into the shoulder of the other man he could feel how thick his hide was becoming. This creature would quickly become a problem for them and the use of their powers was only causing his absorption to grow even more. Ari couldn't even think about what would happen if he had taken the deal and created a legion of these monsters, though as he thought about how to dispatch the one before him there was an idea he had that caused him to smirk.

Ari was suddenly pulled back to the present as the creature darted forward to attack him, only to have Lavender step in and try to land a claw attack. He had managed to dig his claws into the bicep of the entity he could see hardly any wound coming from it and only resulted in his arm being grabbed and twisted to the point where everyone could hear the snap of bone. Ari quickly rushed forward and aimed for the throat to get the creature to withdraw from Lavender, which he did with a push that sent the wolf flying before trying to slash at the hybrid. He pulled back and swept his wings to knock the still growing creature and took a deep breath before pushing power into his glove for a power that he had rarely used but felt fitting in this instance.

The monstrous version of him just gave him a wicked smile as he flexed his growing arms, muscles popping before he charged at the demonic version of him that just stood there smirking. Ari waited until he got close until he brought his hand up, then slammed it down on the floor as he waved the others back. The second his scaly paws hit the ground the rubber rippled and waved from the concussive power that came out from his toes. The powerful wave caught the still mutating creature by surprise and blew him all the way back into the metal wall opposite him, hitting it hard enough to leave an indentation as the others were still knocked off their feet from the force.

Ari's smirked widened as the soldier picked himself back up rather quickly, his entire body shuddering as he could hear the other man's entire back cracking as his body started to stretch out to be even taller. "You are a fool," the creature said in an impossibly deep tone. "Your power is now my power, you already know that."

"Technically it's not your power," Ari said as he raised up his foot again and sent another shockwave towards the creature, this time the other version of him resisting it and keeping up on his feet. "None of this is your power, you're just leeching off of real supers, just like that form of yours belongs to me." Ari could see the creature's already distorted muzzle twist into a look of pure rage as he could see him getting ready to use the shockwave ability he had absorbed on him, only to be surprised by a rush attack from the the hybrid while shouting for the others to do the same.

Even with Campbell's broken arm and Campbell's cracked ribs the three moved in as well in order to fight the cornered creature, and as they started to throw punches and kicks at them the soldier proved to be even more exceptionally nimble than before. The two tentacles on his back served like another pair of arms and pulled the sabertooth tiger in the air while he punched Ari in the face and stomped down on Ka's kneecap. Even with four being seasoned fighters they were losing ground to this one creature that was only swelling and growing bigger, especially when Ari would step back and toss another wave of force at him. When Campbell cried out to fall back as he caught a set of claws in his chest the hybrid told them to keep pushing, even as he had to duck again as Ka was the one sent flying this time.

When Campbell and Lavender were both punched backwards hard enough to cause them to fall backwards it was just Ari facing him, this time jumping up in the air as high as he could before landing on the floor with enough force it caused the rivets to pop and the foundation underneath to audibly fracture. This time the creature that they were fighting managed to block the majority of the blow but still hit the back of the wall once again. Ari closed the gap but as he moved to strike his fist he found a tentacle coiling around his wrist and yanking him up in the air, followed by the thick foot paw attempting to break his knee. Ari managed to catch it with his other hand and smirked as he found that the sensitivity had carried on with this one, only to get kicked in the face that caused him to shake his head.

"Can't believe I endured all this pain for a subpar creature like you," the soldier growled as he managed to pull Ari off of his feet and looked him right in the eye. "All that blustering, all that ability usage, and you just make me more powerful."

Ari just laughed at that and as he looked the heavily muscled creature up and down he could see the divot in his flesh, seeing the skin practically vibrating just as he had hoped. "They say that true power come from within," Ari said, the brutish face of the creature going from smug satisfaction to confusion. "Let's see how that works out for you."

Before the creature could say anything else Ari focused the shockwave power one last time, aiming right for the crystals that he believed were inside his chest. The second that he punched forward it felt like he had just hit an iron wall, but when he did he used his power to force his shockwave right into them. As the others attempted to move forward in order to aid Ari they were suddenly taken back as what resulted to little more of a flick caused the creature's chest to rapidly infrate until finally exploding outward. The hybrid blinked a few times from the blood that had completely coated his front as the other version of him still had a shocked expression frozen on his face as his detonated body slowly slid down before flopping on the ground.

"The fuck..." Lavender said as he held his broken arm while they gathered around the destroyed creature and blood-soaked Ari who was attempting to scrape the viscera off of him.

"Crystals inside were storing all the energy that I was throwing at him," Ari explained after spitting. "Just like the quarry, all it needed was a little push in the right direction, which was outwards. You don't think Rayarti would call a time out so that I can take a shower?"

Campbell just chuckled at that and pointed over towards the emergency shower that was over in the corner. Though they still had pressing matters to attend to, mostly the killing of Rayarti, he wasn't going to be fighting while soaked in blood. Fortunately the attire that he wore washed off easily just like his scales and as he went over and pulled on the line that hung above it he could feel the cold water wash over him. At the same time he gestured for the others to walk to him and used more of his healing power in order to fix them up, though he could feel it getting harder to muster the power as the fight and use of abilities took it out of him.

"What the hell are we going to do if we find more of those creatures?" Lavender asked as his bones knit themselves back together once Ari had pressed against it.

"Looks like he might have been the only one," Ka replied as he kept looking through the digital notes that were still up. "The others had met with a far more grisly end than even that one, or the procedure failed and nothing happened. My guess this one was the prototype that Rayarti had created using crystals that he had deliberately exposed to Ari's presence whenever Rayarti had met with him."

"Figures that he was taking advantage," Ari stated as he sputtered while washing his face before the water ran out and he shook his body. "Whew, that was refreshing, now hopefully that's the last major road block that he throws at us. Do you think you could trace the transfer to wherever he has his central servers?"

"It was a manual transfer," Lavender explained. "But given the power draw I think I might know where Rayarti's base of operations is, and presumably Rayarti himself. Unless you think he's going to cut his losses and run."

"Not a chance," Ari said as they went to the door that the creature had come from. "He'd rather die than admit that we got the better of him, and that's exactly the conclusion he's going to get."

The rest of the group nodded and once they had finished healing up they made their way through the other secure door deeper into the private area of Rayarti's mansion. Even before they left they could hear the sounds of banging on the metal of the one that led into the mansion proper, the security team no longer able to gain access to it after Lavender wiped the access codes. They were using the security put in place against them but they knew the fires of war was nipping at their heels. Ari nodded to the others and they locked the door they had just gone through in the same manner before they pushed further in.

As soon as they continued their push into the deeper depths of the mansion they saw why Rayarti had chose to keep this part away from prying eyes. It was more than just the fact that he was trying to duplicate super abilities, Ari's in particular, but he also had stores of weapons and detailed models of several areas that the hybrid recognized. Had this all really been a bid to just get his security teams in place so that he could take over areas, or was there something else in play? At this point however it really didn't matter since all these plans were going to die with him tonight, but it was intriguing that he had gone through all this trouble just to outst the Company in various cities.

Lavender continued to guide them through the halls while following the electricity consumption, the others sweeping through and making sure they were safe from any potential threats. After the massive fight they had just had with the mutated version of Ari they weren't sure if there were any more even though the evidence they found in the lab stated otherwise. As Ari continued to move though he found that the opposite was actually the case. There was little resistance waiting for them as they pushed through the various storage rooms and training area, along with other labs, and considering that they were getting to some expensive stuff it made him wonder if they weren't walking into some sort of trap.

Eventually the four got to an area that they found was where the majority of the power was being poured into, the other three

keeping the hallway covered as Lavender went to the keypad lock and began to hack it. Ari could feel his fur rising on the back of his neck as he waited to see if they were about to confront the one that had caused all the recent problems in this city. While they could hear the sounds of explosions that were in the distance they still weren't encountering any violence in their direction yet... and he wondered if they had really just pushed hard enough to escape the majority of the security teams. As they continued to wait Lavender announced that he had gotten the door and pushed it open while the rest of the crew poured it.

The second that Ari got inside and swept the room it became immediately apparent to him that there was no one in the room, causing him to let out a snarl. As Lavender closed and locked the door behind them the group found themselves in the security headquarters of Rayarti's enterprise. "Damn, you'd think that he'd be in here if he was going to stick around," Campbell said as they immediately began to look through the computer systems and other information. "We're going to need to scrub this entire room?"

"Why?" Ari replied, the others looking at him as he put his foot into one of the computer screens. "We're not here to arrest him guys, we're here to fucking kill him! I know that usually I do the network here but you have to get on the program that we are here for one purpose and one purpose only!"

There was a sound of sparks crackling as the monitor went out, the rest looking around at all the data that they were surrounded by. "So... we shouldn't do anything with this?" Ka asked, the others shrugging as Lavender finished with the door and moved to the computers. "I know that we're not going to be putting Rayarti up for this but it seems like, I don't know, kind of a waste that we got here?"

Ari let out a growl but he knew what they meant; though this was probably the reason why Rayarti wanted them to come here in the first place. As he looked around he found that there were no other obvious exits, which meant that with the security teams pushing forward they were going to have to figure out how to push their way through them in order to even escape. There was also the problem with the fact that they had no idea where he would be in a huge mansion like this if he hadn't been in his nerve center keeping track of his extraction from the area. When Lavender confirmed that he was working through everything remotely from somewhere in the mansion it meant that they were about to play a game of cat and mouse with time ticking down before even stronger forces come here and make their lives miserable.

But they couldn't retreat; they had already made their intentions known and he could see that they were trying to extract with as much of their research and equipment as possible. They might be able to smash a bunch of their infrastructure but with the main keycodes and data on Rayarti's person it would only be a temporary set-back. It didn't help that one of the things that the wolf had found in the caches of the servers that they were still connected to that a helicopter had been called and was currently flying towards their location. The group thought about perhaps finding where it would land and intercept but there were several viable areas and if Rayarti knew where it was going then they would probably be waiting for it as it came down.

"Maybe he's holed up in a panic room," Campbell said as Lavender managed to bring up a map of the mansion on the main screens, all of them looking up to see the security systems being put under their control.

"There are several," Lavender stated with a frustrated look on his face. "It would take us hours to search them, and that's without interference from Rayarti's security. They're already filtering into the restricted section by the way, my guess is we'll have maybe fifteen minutes before they reach here and attempt to breach."

"If he gave up this room then there has to be somewhere that Rayarti feels truly in control," Ka mentioned. "Some place that he would consider a place that he ruled absolutely, where he would hold all the cards. If not here, then where could it be?"

As the others continued to discuss on what a place like that could entail Ari had once place that he knew of that not only would no one ever look but that fit the description of what Ka had just told them. "I know where he is," Ari said, prompting the other three to look at him. "The grotto, his stupid sauna is built like a bomb shelter and that's where he conducts all his most serious talks according to him."

"That would fit," Ka stated as Lavender typed on the keyboard and the map zoomed in on the underground grotto before showing a path to get there. "Would explain why he didn't have any security here, he was never in this area and made this as a place that people would waste their time on. Looks like Ari was right... only question is how we're going to eliminate the dozens of guards that have swarmed the place between us and their boss?"

Ari had been resting against the desk as he captured his breath after the fight with the alternate version of himself, which had taken its toll on the others as well as their ammo supplies. There were weapons that were in the other rooms but from what Lavender had tracked they were already starting to approach the final hallway to reach the final metal door. He still had one power left on his glove and he couldn't think of what else he could do that would compliment the other three on their fighting styles, and he wasn't vicious enough to just take them on by himself with pure predatory rage as much as it lamented him to think it.

There was no way that one beast would break through the front lines, Ari thought to himself as he looked at the others, but

perhaps four would do the trick as he began to feel the power calling to him in his glove...

Chapter 29:

In the grotto of the Rayarti mansion the human continued to look at the screens within the sauna, the human frowning when he had lost connection to the security footage that he had been watching the entire time. He grumbled at the incompetence of the men that he had brought in for this and as he opened the heavy metal door and looked outside he saw that the only man still visible was the one on the minigun that he had brought in to sit right in front of the door. "Your unhackable network just went down," Rayarti replied as the zebra puffed on a cigar. "At this rate they're going to have control of everything before the sun comes up."

"Let them try," the zebra replied. "You said you want them dead, not that you want us to protect your infrastructure. By the time they realize that they've gotten in the rat trap my men are ready to snap it shut, and even if they do somehow get through it you'll be on the helicopter out of here and they're going to still be tearing this place apart looking for you."

Rayarti rolled his eyes but went back into the sauna, locking the door tight behind him and still watching what monitors were left. While most of the security cameras were down there was still a clear path between them and the courtyard where the helicopter was going to land. He had known that Ari would probably attempt to attack him while he was still there but he thought that with the limited resources and being wanted for murder would have kept the hybrid in check until they could leave, but as he tapped at the black box hard drive that was next to him time was running out for them both. At this point it was an unstoppable force that was meeting an immovable object; Ari's bloodthirsty, predatory nature versus his hardened and steadfast infrastructure.

As the human was about to call the delivery company to see how far along they were with the moving, expecting them to keep working even with the gunfire and explosions going on, there was a loud series of bangs that echoed near the stairwell to the grotto. They had only lost communication with the central nerve center about twenty minutes ago at most, which meant that if they were just outside they had not only went straight from there to this place but had also just shredded through a number of men that were augmented with super abilities. It couldn't be possible but as the zebra straightened up he saw several limbs flopped down the stone floors onto the grotto floor. When he got the minigun ready he aimed it right at the stairs as the one that had dropped the remains of the men slowly sauntered down them while staring at the zebra with red eyes that were practically glowing.

"You must be Ari," the zebra said as he fed the bullet belt into the weapon. "Heard a lot about you."

"I'm a pretty amazing guy," Ari replied as his eyes glanced around, noting that the pools were not lit like they were before or full of hunky men that was slightly disappointing. "That's a nice gun."

"Thanks," the zebra replied. "I had run a bet that I was actually going to be able to use it, and I'm glad that you have defied my expectations and actually thought to come down here. Before we get into it can I ask the status of my men?"

"Dead," Ari replied simply.

"A shame," the zebra huffed. "But we saved the best for last, and if you think that you can get through all of us and get to our client then you are sorely mistaken." As he grabbed the barrel of the minigun and rotated it those that were hidden underneath the water suddenly came up, all of them leveling high-powered rifles straight at them. There had to be at least two dozen men that were there including the zebra who was about to fire a thousand rounds a minute.

Before the zebra fired though a loud roar echoed through the grotto, one that didn't belong to Ari as he smirked while putting up a hood over his head that surrounded his bloody maw. Even though he was dripping in blood most of those that laid dead above them were not dripping from his claws. As he gripped his glove and channeled his power even more he brought up his foot and slammed it down on the stone floor, causing it to crack and erupt upwards into a cloud of dust that bellowed outwards. As Ari moved forward the zebra snapped out of it and got ready to fire, only to see another creature barreling down the stairs towards one of the men in the pool.

The first soldier didn't even get a shot off as Campbell pounced upon him, his powerful feline form even bigger and more savage than before as they both disappeared into the water. The pool bubbled and boiled briefly before it turned red as Ari shook his fingers again, this time the massive purple werewolf-like creature going to the right and slamming another soldier against the side of the pool so hard that it caused him to nearly get split in half. The sudden assault of four feral creatures had momentarily stunned the soldiers but they quickly recovered, starting to fire at not only Ari but Campbell and Lavender as the wet creatures emerged and moved on to their next target.

As the grotto erupted with gunfire Ari jumped up into the air as the minigun attempted to cut him down, and as he came back

down he landed on the back of the wholly mammoth that charged forward directly at the minigun and the zebra controlling it. Ari had to duck down and grab onto one of the tusks of the massive creature as the line of bullets threatened to riddle him, which as he did he was nearly jostled to the side in order as one of the guards that foolishly attempted to run at them got impaled with the other one. Ari jumped and kicked the guy off and then swung back up as Ka shifted to the left, Ka bringing up his hand and causing the pool water, along with the one inside of it, to freeze solid to absorb the hail of gunfire from the minigun that caused the ice to explode out.

Ari hadn't been sure that the other three would even go for the idea; while he had embraced the feral nature of his new form this would be the first time that the others would ever dip a toe into the power that he had developed called berzerker mode, one that spawned his current form and mindset. As they had started to bring down the door though and their guns were almost empty it was actually Lavender that had stepped up and spoke to the others that they needed to trust Ari, that he knew that this was the time when ferocity and power would overwhelm against the numbers that were being pushed against them. If they tried to do this the conventional way they might have managed to fight their way out but it probably would have been too late to stop Rayarti, and that was something he would not abide by.

There was a loud roar to his left and Ari looked over to see Lavender ripping the arm off of the one that had attempted to stab him as he charged, the hulking creature the epitome of the monster that one might see in a horror movie. As he continued to charge down the left next to him and Ka he could hear something else that was happening that was an unexpected benefit, it appeared from the way the soldiers were shouting just being close to the huge creature was causing their smartlink systems to malfunction. The one that shouted it didn't have long to say anything though as he had a set of fangs rip into his throat while the hybrid swiped his tail and caused a thin wave of concussive force to slam the one that was about to fire on Lavender into the wall. All three of them had to recoil when the wall that they were next to exploded out in a hail of ice and stone.

Ari slid into one of the pools in order to avoid the minigun and as he dived down into the water he was immediately lifted up again by the wholly mammoth that had also plunged into it. He had been most surprised by the growth of Ka after having the power filter into him, getting even bigger than Lavender who had gone straight down the hunter monster line. At this point he was pretty sure the hulking creature had taken several bullets but between his hide and fur he wondered if he even felt any of them, something that would have to be asked after they dealt with the minigun that was turning everything into swiss cheese. While being a powerhouse of muscle he also had his ice and telekinetic abilities, but while he could create an ice wall for Ari to duck behind he couldn't focus enough on the minigunner in order to latch onto him with his psychic tendrils.

With Ka pinned down in the pool and Lavender wrestling with two men at once Ari had to get to the zebra before he had a chance to take out any of them, though as he saw the ends of the gun glowing red he knew he would have to stop soon to cool down. The barrels were taking longer than normal and as Ari managed to get past the ice wall and slam his foot down at the fortification it didn't dislodge the zebra, but did cause him to recoil enough to run to the other side. After jumping on another soldier, taking a bullet to the thigh in the process, and snapping his head back he continued over to Campbell that had just been pulling himself up by his thick claws. As those red eyes met Ari's the two were ready to make the final push while the others were still preoccupied with the remaining soldiers attempting to stop the werewolf and wholly mammoth.

Though Campbell had been the most unsure when it came to accepting the power that Ari had given to them, but having been exposed the most to how he worked he seemed to embrace it the most of the three once he had finally allowed it to happen. Seeing the sabertooth tiger transform from the muscular fire-wielding creature to the beastly feline that he had become had caused all of Ari's own senses to become enflamed. They were perfect for each other; the strength and primal instinct to use it along with the intelligence to wield it properly. As they were getting closer to the larger pools that were near the sauna areas Ari could see that Campbell still had the aura of heat to him that was scalding those that were nearby.

Ari almost made it to the other side before having to duck behind another rock as the minigun trained on him, shattering the stone before the rhythmic firing ended. He heard the zebra shout reload and cover and as he looked up he saw that those who were hiding in the pool had all gotten out and were behind the barricade, ready to fire on anyone that got even closer to them. While the smaller areas had been rather easy to clear they had formed up too quickly for them to rip apart piece by piece, especially as they began to fire all at once to keep them pinned down where they were as the minigun was fed another belt of bullets and the barrels cooled down. When Ari tried to move towards the partially destroyed wet bar in the middle of the pathway he almost slipped on the water that had already been splashed down on the rock, which gave him an idea that he relayed on the radio.

All four of the creatures had opted for their attire to stretch and thankfully with it the radios, Lavender's disruption power not affecting it as Ari relayed the plan to them while sliding in against the wall of the bar. Thankfully with everything made out of stone it was soaking up the bullets enough to keep providing them cover and he could already hear several of them having to change clips to keep the assault going. He nodded back to Ka and Lavender and the werewolf's more nimble form pulling out of the pool that had been nearly completely destroyed and made a run towards Ari's position. As they fired on him Ari could see him flinch and snarl as he did take a shot in his side and arm before getting up to some of the hanging rocks and digging his claws to hang there behind it for cover.

The entire feint allowed enough time for the wholly mammoth to pull himself up and finally get some movement towards the group as well, eventually using his power in front of him in order to slide even faster as the guns were all pointed from Lavender to him. With the change in target Ari also moved forward from the bar and after grabbing a bottle of booze and taking a swig he stepped back and clapped his hands together, knocking all the bottles and glass bar top towards the group of creatures.

Though he was still a bit far away for it to really make a difference it helped to get them to not fire on Ka, especially the minigun that had recoiled up, and allowed the woolly mammoth to charge forward. Campbell had also started to move in a far more skulking fashion against the opposite wall, keeping to the shadows as they focused their efforts on the advancing creatures.

Lavender began to hop from stalagmite to stalagmite as well and as Ari also brought up the middle he and Lavender let out a roar, though they were just the distraction for the most part. Ari looked up to see the lights that were hanging just a few feet away from the saunas and while he would have liked to be the one to tear this zebra apart the part of hunting as a pack was allowing others to get the kill. With bullets whizzing past him Ka was able to get to his target, which was one of the largest pools that was the closest to the sauna that he could get to. His massive body jumped up into the air and even as the fur flew off of him from the minigun that had trained on him it wasn't enough to stop him from cannonballing into the water and causing a massive wave to rise up into the air.

Ari watched as the entire group got splashed and as Ari jumped up and grabbed onto the swinging light he could already see the blue arcs of electricity coursing through the air. The second the water hit the group, including the zebra wielding the minigun, the brightly glowing sabertooth tiger jumped forward and landed right in the puddle of water that spread out from the fortification. His fur had shifted from red to blue along with his glowing eyes as he discharged the electricity in his fur that quickly suffused through the entirety of the wet floor. With Lavender and Ari hanging from the ceiling and Ka at the bottom of the pool it was only their targets that were shocked, Ari watching with a smirk as the channeled power immediately caused all the soldiers to spasm and convulse.

It only lasted for a few seconds but by the end of it most of the men were already slumped over or on the ground, and if they had any of that crystalline lining in their armor it was either not enough or didn't help. Ari swung from light to light before he landed on the gasping zebra, kicking the minigun off of the mount as the striped equine attempted to reach for it. As he arched up his tail to strike he found himself pausing, the blade twitching in the air as the droplet of acidic venom dripped from the tip. It wasn't for any semblance of empathy though and as he leaned down while the others continued to move forward Ari took the wet cigar and looked at it before flicking aside.

"First time that feral instincts kick in can be tough," Ari said as he grabbed the zebra and lifted him up in the air, looking to the others that were limping forward. "You were fine prey, let that ease your mind for what happens next." The eyes of the zebra widened as he was suddenly tossed to the group that had approached, falling on his butt and landing on his back right in front of the werewolf. Though Ka had flopped to the side with the line of minigun rounds staining his fur the other two leered down at the injured creature, Ari inhaling deeply the fear that came from the screaming zebra before he was ripped apart by his pack.

As the others indulged with the instincts that came with his power Ari went down and quickly dispatched the others with either a dose of venom or a slice to their throat, whichever one was easier. Though he also tore a few chunks of flesh from the others it was mostly to regain his strength; he gave no moral qualms about eating the others, but there was a very special meal that he was waiting for as he went over to Ka after he had finished everything. The woolly mammoth was attempting to get back up but he could see several areas where the minigun had ripped even though his super outfit, though the fabric was already starting to knit back together as a means to staunch the bleeding. Though he, Lavender, and Campbell had all taken hits including several rounds that were causing him pain the regeneration that came with this power would keep them stable while he reached out and touched the struggling woolly mammoth.

"That was... an experience..." Ka said, groaning loudly as he could feel the healing power suffuse to fix the worst of his injuries to at least stabilize him. "What the hell do you think you're doing, you still have a mission to finish."

"Rayarti isn't going anywhere," Ari growled back as he could feel the most dire of the injuries closing up even as it drained his energy. "I'm done losing people because of this job, not when I'm here to protect them. You did good Ka, just rest and let me finish this up."

Though Ka was still in a lot of pain Ari had to stop, knowing that if he tried to fix everything that was wrong with him at this moment he would probably pass out as blood trickled out from where his nose pressed against the mask. There would be some scars there... they would all have them after this fight, but that was just the way that this job worked. He hoped that they would see the marks like he finally did with the scars on his body, marks of a good hunt that allowed them to show how they prevailed. For the moment though he just made sure that all of them were not suffering fatal wounds before looking to the door itself.

As he remembered that this place was deceptively secured Ari went to the metal door and scraped his claws against it, not to go inside but merely allow Rayarti to know that he was there. With the electrical surge from Campbell it knocked out any remaining cameras in the area and left the human that was inside in the dark. His power was too drained to use his shockwave powers on the door, which would have been nice and thematic, but there were other ways to open this tin can as he took a look around. As his eyes settled on the minigun that he had snapped off the mount and the half a belt of bullets on it there would be good enough as he told the others to back up while grabbing the piece of military hardware.

Though it was a bit damaged Ari found it worked enough to do what it needed, which was pepper the door and surrounding concrete. By the time he used the last of the bullets and tossed the smoking minigun to the side it was still standing, but all it took was one good kick and it caved in before slamming to the tiled ground. When he walked inside the smoke cleared enough to see Rayarti sitting there in his suit, the monitors showing nothing but static behind him. As Ari looked down he saw that the

man was holding a pistol and had it leveled right at him which caused Ari to smirk.

"After all this, you really think that a pistol is going to stop me?" Ari asked with a chuckle.

"Yes, yes, you won it seems," Rayarti replied as he sat up. "You can have your revenge and paint the inside of this sauna with my blood before I would even have a chance to fire off a shot, or perhaps use that power you stole from one of my men in order to flatten me against the very expensive tile you broke with that minigun. But if you want to maybe take a second before killing me to hear my offer I would greatly appreciate it."

Ari could feel his anger rising at being proposed to, especially since the last time he had been here it was the same thing given to him by Anubis. "You fuckers really are all alike," Ari snarled as he took another step forward, only to stop when he saw Rayarti click back the hammer. While he could probably close the distance and disarm him the human did have the jump on him and his power was almost completely depleted from everything it took to get there.

"I assure you that if you're talking about Anubis that I have a far different idea in mind then the anthroification and enslavement of humanity," Rayarti explained as he slowly stood up. "I thought I've shown you enough that you realize that there is far more to be had then just the ruling of the world, with your power and my expertise you wouldn't have to serve under a god... you could be a god yourself."

"Is that all you wanted me for?" Ari asked as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Use my power, super charge your men, take over the company? Do you really think that I would want to work under you?"

"Who said anything about you working for me?" Rayarti asked, gesturing towards him with his gun as Ari raised an eyeridge. "Gods do not work for mortal men, and I have no intention of becoming one of those creatures that you seem to be able to create. But you're the apex predator Ari, and a creature like you has no need for delving into mortal affairs. Between the two of us we could have control over everything; that power of yours and my technology I've been developing here will make dozens like you, hundreds even, each one capable of taking over a branch of the Company by themselves without them even realizing it."

Ari scoffed at that and shook his head, causing the eager look in the eyes of the human to fall and his grin to shift down into a sneer. "So it really has been all about wanting more power," Ari snerked, taking another step closer even as Rayarti once more aimed the gun at him. "That's why you were trying to hunt me down so eagerly in the first place, to take something that didn't belong to you, even when you could have easily carved yourself out a decent little niche in this world."

"Why carve out a niche when you can have it all?" Rayarti replied. "Why settle for mere domination when you can have absolute power like what you wield?"

"Absolute power..." Ari replied, his voice starting to echo as he suddenly looked down at what Rayarti believed to be his bare hand, only to watch it shimmer and shift before the glove formed in front of his power. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely, which is why it selects a caretaker, a guardian that would see this for the responsibility it was and protect it with everything it had. That's why it was so mad at me... I understand now that the nightmares you were showing me that I had not truly accepted my role, that you needed me to be the apex predator to protect something like this against the assholes of the world... like you."

Ari let out a slight hiss as he suddenly felt his fingers clench, though it was from more power that was flowing into him as he saw Rayarti get up and look at him with a sneer. "Another goody two-shoes hero set to try and protect the world with your powers," Rayarti spat. "It's wasted on you... wasted on those supers that sit in the protection of their guild tweedling their thumbs until some villain or disaster they could have prevented rears its ugly head. You say you protect the world when you could shape it, mold it into exactly what you want, when there are those like me that would know exactly how to use it unlike you pussies! Now that I know what it is I will wield it even if I have to kill you and chop off your hand!"

The sound of a gunshot rang out as Rayarti fired the gun right at Ari, and for a moment the air remained still after the echoing had died down. For a second the demonic hybrid stood completely still and as Rayarti breathed heavily he waited for the creature to drop. "I can sense this is the first time you've gotten your hands dirty with someone else's blood," Ari stated simply as he held out his gloved hand. "Or at least, your first attempt..."

The clink of metal against stone felt like it had reverberated more than the gunshot itself as the bullet Ari had dropped from his hand bounced on the ground. Before Rayarti could fire off another shot Ari moved fast enough that it looked like the air shimmered around him as his tail whipped around and sliced the hand of the human clean off. He only had a brief second to cry out in pain before he was suddenly pinned against the mosaic wall, Ari clutching against his throat and holding him there as he squirmed in his grasp. As he did Ari shuddered as he finally got the one thing he had been wanting from Rayarti since this all started...

...the smell of his fear.

It was so potent that it caused his pupils to turn to slits as he slid him back down towards one of the benches, feeling him still kick out a bit even as his hand attempted to clutch his wrist to try and stop the bleeding. "I think you realize now that I am no hero, and thus will not be making the mistake they do of merely getting you imprisoned," Ari explained, the smile on his face almost manic as he looked right into the quivering eyes of the human while stroking down his head. "But I am going to go slow, I will take my time, and you will not enjoy this..."

"...but I will. Immensely."

On the outside of the sauna the other three had transformed back to their normal states as they set themselves up on the fortification they had just cleared out, Lavender poking at the mount he had just put the minigun back on while the others levied the more conventional rifles. Once they had left their frenzy they had noticed just how truly destroyed everything was around them, most of the pools stained with red that had bodies floating about while the stone crumbled away where the minigun or concentrated fire hit it. Though everything up to that point was a bit hazy they knew that there were a swath of bloody bodies that led to this point which might have been why they didn't see anyone eager to come down the stairs.

Or it could be the screams that they were hearing along with the sounds of bones and muscle being torn apart, the wet visceral sounds echoing into the pool room that the three mostly ignored while they waited for Ari to finish up. "You think we should blow this place up?" Lavender asked the other two as he attempted to pull the trigger on the minigun only to have it fall off its base. "I'm not really up on my international law but I think what we did here might be considered a war crime."

"War crimes usually denote crossing international lines... I think," Campbell replied as he looked about. "Though burning this mansion to the ground would also make sure that none of the research that he was working on to try and replicate Ari or his power got out into the open."

"Yeah, I don't think this world could handle more than one of them running around loose," Lavender said. "I already have the delivery guys fucking off for the night so we don't have to worry about them moving any of that stuff, but if we need explosives I only have a few bricks of C-4 in my stash." The others nodded as they had enough between them to maybe bring down a sizable part of the building, but not the entire thing. As they wondered about salvaging from Rayarti's stash their heads all perked up as they heard a loud snap, followed by a gurgle, then a second snap.

As the three looked at one another wondering what was going on Ari walked out a few seconds later, handing Lavender a large metal black box before taking his blood-soaked body and diving into one of the remaining pools that wasn't tinted red. It became that way after he swam around for a bit and as he got up and shook himself off he saw that Lavender was already probing the box while the others looked at him. "Is it safe to assume that the mission is done?" Ka asked, which Ari was about to respond before he let out a loud belch and coughed a bit while beating on his chest.

"Still fighting a little bit it seems," Ari replied with a snicker. "But yes, the mission is complete, let's get the hell out of here. Are we blowing this place up or what?"

"Seems like anyone that's still alive have taken the hint and fucked off," Lavender said as he continued to look over the box. "I think I can find a use for this back at that hub, do you think we have a little time to go back to the central control room so I can unlock this thing and see what's inside?"

Ari just nodded as his bestial side had been satiated, buzzing from the completion of a very successful hunt as they made their way out of the broken grotto and head back towards the restricted area of the lab. Since they had taken the same path the others were able to see the trail of destruction that they had created and seeing the looks on their face just caused the demonic hybrid to smirk. While he could certainly see the horror at the extent of some of the guards, or what remained of them, he could also see the faintest hint of awe or even being impressed. Perhaps this was the start of something new, Ari thought to himself as they got back to the control center, but for the moment he was more than fine with being the only beast of the group as they raided the armory of the mansion while Lavender worked on the technical side of things.

As they got closer to their preparations being complete Ari could hear the sounds of sirens in the still night air that were quickly coming towards their location. Possibly a dead man's switch, or perhaps they could no longer ignore the flames that were coming up from certain parts of the mansion. With all four of them completely tapped out and none of them wishing to go to jail where they would hope Sam or Mr. Stevens would get them out they opted to get out as soon as they heard them. Fortunately even in their exhausted state they were more than motivated to get everything done with the group quickly slapping a few bricks on the abandoned vehicles before making their way back to the gate.

It didn't take long before they got back to the hill they had overlooked the mansion in the first place, the four still wincing and groaning as the adrenaline was wearing off and the pain from what wounds they still had could be felt. As the sun slowly rose over their destruction they could see the oranges of the sun mixing with the red and blue lights that were quickly rolling down the

hill. "Well then," Campbell said as they watched them as they were about to arrive too late. "What do we do now?"

"For now?" Ari replied as he turned back to the mansion that they had already primed, looking at the detonator that was in Campbell's hand. "Push that button and end this."

Chapter 30:

The explosion that had been reported on the news was attributed to a gas leak, which Ari imagined that they would as he watched the reporter stand in front of the charred remains of the building that they had demolished. Though they hadn't gotten the entire area taken out it was a much larger explosion than they imagined, though the C-4 was juiced by crystals imbued with a bit of flame power from what Campbell could muster. That seemed to have done the trick and the only thing that remained when they were done was a few walls and a collapsed area that used to be the garage. While they had to be quick they were pretty sure that they had gotten everything that resulted in Rayarti's research as well as the infrastructure that he had been planting so that he could put his super security soldiers in place once he had an acceptable means of harnessing the power of those crystals.

Though it had been almost a week since their mission was done there was still a lot of ripples that came from the death of the man, mostly considering the fact that there had been a lot of important people coming out to investigate his death. No doubt they were in the pocket of the billionaire and was probably just looking to see what their exposure would be since he had died under such mysterious circumstances. Of course there was nothing that they had to worry about that came from the wreckage of the house as everything from the servers to the equipment had been slagged in the explosion, and it wasn't like anyone had come in and taken a black box full of data on his operations and infrastructure... especially not someone whose power was technomancy. Lavender was still digging through the files but they had already managed to find a few stashes that they were able to access and was responsible for the rather lavish vacation they had decided to treat themselves on.

"Man, I wish all the missions we did finished out like this," Lavender said as he came in, clad only in a bathrobe just like Ari was as he brought in a set of drinks for the both of them. "Last time we had a victory lap like this was when we defeated Anubis."

"So it sounds like every time we defeat a megalomaniac hell-bent on trying to do something with the subjugation or take over of the world we can go on vacation," Ari said as he grabbed the towel belt of the other man and opened it, nuzzling against the abs and groin of the wolf's fur. "Mmmm, maybe we could go on a few more, especially if this is the view that I get."

"Well it's all yours," Lavender said as he ran his hands down the hood of the demonic hybrid, letting out a soft gasp as the forked tongue of the creature wrapped around it while pulsating slightly. "Mmmph... Ari, before we get too into what is about to happen, do you mind if I say something first? It's been on my mind for a while and with the others handling business with Sam I thought this might be the best time."

Ari's two sets of eyes looked up at him and though he was about to slurp it into his maw he pulled back instead, sitting back down on the couch while patting on the cushion to let Lavender do the same. "What's on your mind?" Ari asked. "Something about the data that you've found?"

"Oh no... well, actually there is something, but that can wait," Lavender replied as he sat down. "Ari... I heard what you said to Rayarti, and with everything else that we've been through including our little spat at the highrise I've started to realize more and more that I may have been a little too hard on you when it came to trusting you."

Ari chuckled at that and could see the wolf become embarrassed, rubbing the back of his head before Ari reached over and stroked his cheek. "To be honest, you were right to be wary of me during that time," Ari admitted. "There was a lot going on in my life when we first met and a lot of people looking to take the power that had been given to me. While I appreciate the sentiment and you coming to make it up to me I'm happy that you have been in my life... even if I might not have expressed it before, I haven't exactly been easy on you as well."

This time it was Lavender's turn to chuckle and at that point Ari realized that the wolf had his hands behind his back. He found his head tilting and the grin on the other man widened as he found that there was something he was hiding on him, though it didn't take much and just tickled his pectorals and abs until he was presented with a box. "I was told that you might like something like this," Campbell said as Ari's widened in delight at seeing the cake being presented to him. "And while you're enjoying that I thought of something else that could really make the beast relaxed."

Ari's face brightened even more as his own robe was thrown open, his twin shafts already semi-hard as he was ushered to sit back on the couch. Cake and a blow job... Lavender certainly knew him very well, and as he found himself starting to dig into confectionary the wolf had laid down on the cushions and nestled up in the same position Ari had been in moments before. The hybrid let out a muffled moan around the mouth full of cake that was in his maw as the canine tongue licked its way up and down each of his shafts, his tongue not as dexterous as his own but still capable of coiling around his member. Maybe he

should have him try out a cocktongue sometime while on his vacation as they certainly have experimented with many other different ideas, mostly those from Ka who was more than happy to experience other transformations.

For the moment though Ari was more than happy with the current situation, feeling incredibly satiated and relaxed just like Lavender had promised as eventually the wolf went from his tongue to his maw enveloping one of the shafts. Best apology ever... though as he heard the door open both him and the other man looked up to see someone walking inside. With the frosting still smeared across his muzzle Ari just grinned sheepishly as Campbell stood there in slight shock at the scene before them, though it was likely the cake that had thrown him off. He had quickly recovered and just laughed at the two before walking over.

"I was about to say that Ka is finishing up talking to Sam and wants us to meet up after he's done but it feels like he might wrap up before you," Campbell said once he had finished laughing. "What's this all about?"

"Apology," Ari managed to say even though half the cake was currently sitting in his mouth.

"Ah, Lavender finally decided that he was going to talk to you about having trust issues," Campbell said. "Well Ka said that he has something arranged for us while talking about what the CIA had to say, and since there's no way we're going to stuff those things in a speedo while they're completely out then we need to finish him off. Just keep on the cushions there Lavender, if you could put your other leg down Ari then this should get done real quick."

Ari's ears twitched but he did what he said, watching as the sabertooth tiger knelt down and began to stroke the other shaft that was unoccupied by the wolf as Ari groaned loudly. He had almost gotten the entirety of the rather hefty slice consumed even though he had taken down the remaining buffet that hadn't banned him yet, and as she finished licking the frosting he had both men sliding up and down on his cocks in unison. As his second shaft slid between the saber teeth of the feline Ari put his hand on each of their heads, bouncing his hips up on the couch as he could feel them working his sensitive flesh intensely. There were also a pair of fingers that were pushing into his pussy along the way and with the mix of pleasures coming from his groin he could already feel his toes starting to curl.

It only took another few minutes before he had the two muzzles down to the hilt of his scaly groin and was pumping into him, letting out a roar as he orgasmed into both their maws. The two grabbed onto his body as they expertly swallowed everything down and once they were done pulled off of his members with a loud pop that caused him to gasp loudly and nearly fall off of the couch. "There, see?" Campbell said as he patted both Lavender and Ari on the head. "Now stuff those pythons into your speedo, I can already hear Ka trying to call me."

"He just pinged me too," Lavender replied, leaving Ari a drooling mess as he had to recompose himself from the sugar rush and powerful rush of orgasmic pleasure. As Ari slowly got up and looked at his own phone while the other two checked theirs as well he saw that the wholly mammoth had also texted him as well. It told them all to get into speedos and also wear their bathrobes and meet them down into the spa, which considering the relaxing location meant he either had really good or really bad news.

The three of them quickly changed and made their way down the private resort hotel to their spa, the three of them looking to see where to go from the signs on the wall. As they continued their way through they passed by others that were clad in bikini's and speedos with most of them being anthros like they were. While their appearance was rather distinctive, especially Ari's, when the four had decided on where to go to hide out and were given a free ticket from the Company in order to get out of the city they decided on this resort unlike the others. Not only was it all inclusive but it was an extremely private getaway and something that they doubted either the Company nor the CIA would spring for since all they technically did was brutally murder some rogue billionaire.

Well, and dismantle his plan to infiltrate and become the major source of security that would then be leveraged in order to gain more power and dominance in the world market until his influence would be felt everywhere. No one was going to know that though, not when the CIA itself was involved as part of the wheeling and dealing with him in order to keep him quiet. It was part of the reason that they were probably even talking to their group considering that the only link between Rayari and them was the four that they had just met, or rather Sam had met with Ka as part of the deal.

Though all four of them wanted to be there they needed exposure to be at a minimum and despite Ka being huge and a wholly mammoth he was also the one that worked with the CIA the longest and knew the most if they were about to get fucked. Campbell had gone as back-up in the restaurant next to the bar but other than seeing half a dozen beer bottles that Sam drained he didn't get much else from the conversation. That meant they would just have to wait and as they went to the spa Ari couldn't help but perk up at the lean leopard attendant that looked him over before already leading them back into a private area. Though they had the funds that Lavender syphoned from the accounts Ari was wondering if they could even afford sometimes like this as they saw Ka clad only in a speedo while he sat in the hot tub.

"Now this is nice," Ari said as he looked around the area, seeing a private sauna area as well as plunge pool and massage table. "I'm... kind of surprised that we had to wear bathrobes and speedos."

"That's just because I'm expecting service here soon," Ka replied. "Compliments of the CIA, by the way."

"Oh really?" Campbell asked as they all slipped down into the water, which the four of them overfilled the tub slightly before they all settled in. "Are we celebrating then?"

"I suppose we are," Ka said with a grin on his face. "I just got all the details from Sam, it seems like we're all being welcomed back to the CIA with open arms. Even Ari."

Ari was just about to ask if they were even including him considering they hadn't even thought he was stable enough to do missions before and they sort of massacred an entire security company in the mean time. "So just like that, the prodigal sons return?" Ari asked. "Back into the fold with full benefits and all that good stuff?"

"Well.. there is a small caveat to it all," Ka said, his grin growing more sheepish as the three just looked at him in both confusion and concern. "They want us to work with them, but after our rather unorthodox and completely off the record taking out of someone that technically wasn't on anyone's list they want to keep us at a little more than an arm's length."

"...what the hell does that even mean?" Lavender asked. "We were already in their black file program, how much more removed can we get from the organization?"

"Well... it would be in the regard that we don't actually work for them... at all," Ka admitted, causing Lavender to splash his arms down in the water in frustration as Campbell rolled his eyes and Ari shook his head. "But they want to work WITH us, so that's something, right?"

"Ka, they want to essentially hire us out as mercenaries," Ari explained. "I've seen this all the time; government groups go through a black market contact like a Shadow Broker and then throw out what they want to do as a mission. It puts a couple of layers of privacy and security between them and the people that they don't want to be associated with, the only difference is that it feels like they want to give us more of a contract than anything."

"So we're more like... independant contractors I guess?" Campbell mused. "I mean, it's better then being blackballed by every government and security agency on the planet, though at this point I'm guessing that everyone will have heard about this and probably wants to keep a ten-foot pole between them and us. But that means no resources, no additional support, and nothing other than what they would pay us for a job... spoeking of which, are we getting paid for this?"

"Oh, we are getting a bonus it seems for totally not taking out Rayarti wink wink," Ka said. "But that's going to be pretty much the immediate end of our communications with them until we can work out a means of secure contact, probably something with Lavender to make sure it can't be traced."

Ari found himself sliding a little deeper in the water as he thought about the news that was just given to him, wondering what they were going to do moving forward. While he was never fond of being on the leash of the CIA it afforded them certain amenities that they couldn't get anywhere else, though if Rayarti told anyone about what he had planned on doing then he would have to be far more careful that others like him wouldn't go after him. As he thought about it the other three had been talking about potential solutions from the mercenary life to just taking the contact when a few servers came in with a few snacks and a few bottles of champagne as part of the celebration, though as the leopard from the front came in and whispered something in the ear of the wholly mammoth that caused his eyes to widen slightly.

"Oh, it seems that we do have a special treat prepared for us," Ka said as his grin widened. "It seems that we can take our speedos now that the main service is done."

With the other servers leaving the area there were several others that came into the room, these men much hunkier than the ones that had just come in and clad only in speedos. All four men perked up at seeing them walk in and could tell what they were for, and as the others looked them over they could see that they were just as interested. "Hey, where do you think you're going?" Ari asked as he caught the leopard by the tail, having him turn around with a curious expression on his face. "I don't suppose you're part of the snacks being offered."

"I... oh, um, I really should go up front and tend to the spa." the leopard replied, though Ari could tell that just like the others that had been brought in he was quite interested as his pants had already started to tent.

"I'm sure they'll be fine without you for a little bit," Ari purred seductively as the others were getting out of the hot tub as well, Lavender already practically pouncing upon the large tiger man with a very muscular build that he brought him over towards the sauna area. Campbell had found a lean lizard and hunky horse to occupy him and as the hybrid continued to press up against the blushing leopard the wholly mammoth came behind him. "Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

"Campbell told me that if I really want to be inducted into the crew that there was one thing left that I had to do," Ka said with a chuckle as he grabbed onto the demonic hybrid's hips and began to push his heavy shaft between the cheeks of the creature that was pressing the flustered feline against the wall. "So am I part of the team? You can still have that tasty leopard, you just get to be inbetween."

As Ari looked over at the sabertooth tiger he saw Campbell just give him a wry grin as he had the horse sitting down on the spa bench and his tailhole sliding down on it. Of course he would mention that they had all taken him from behind, with the former human being on the bottom save for the one time that he had gotten his other hole. "Well, considering all the fun that we're about to have I suppose I could let you take me," Ari replied as he waved his tail in the air, exposing himself as he had used his claws to slowly cut the clothing from the leopard that was already starting to writhe from the nuzzling that he was just getting. "Of course you better have someone behind you just to make sure you don't get too cocky, as it were."

Though the use of his glove wasn't exactly supposed to be used with others outside of the group and those that they were fighting, but considering the impromptu orgy had to deal with some rather big cocks and very voracious appetites he decided to... help things along. By this point he had gotten the leopard all the way naked and could see that he was very excited, his smaller member between the two of his throbbing shafts that had already recovered after his first impromptu blow job between the two. "You know, I've had a thing for felines," Ari admitted, shooting a look towards Campbell as the sabertooth tiger had already sensed the power going off and had put the lizard in his lap while he was hilt deep on the thick horse shaft. "Ever take two cocks at once?"

"I... what?" the leopard said as he looked down, his eyes widening at seeing Ari's body pressed against his own. "Oh, whoa, I don't think I could even take one of those..."

"You'll be surprised," Ari replied with a smirk. "What's your name?"

"K-Kylo," the leopard said.

"Well then Kylo," Ari whispered in his ear as he licked the ear of the leopard. "You're going to be in for a treat, especially since Ka's rather rambunctious, just relax and trust me..." Before Kylo could say anything Ari pushed his cock tongue into the maw of the feline to silence him, letting him squirm as he could already feel the power taking effect as he could feel those lips stretching out around it. As he got the leopard's legs wrapped around his thick hips he could feel something pushing up against his back, the head of Ka's cock already starting to also take advantage of the power suffusing through the room to start thrusting into him. Ari's back stiffened and his wings fluttered as he pressed up against Kylo while still keeping their muzzles locked together.

Ka was more than eager to prove himself to his lover and while Ka was appreciative it was hard for him to stuff both cocks inside the leopard he had been meaning to impale, eventually sliding one inside of the feline as his tail wagged about wildly. The sounds of moaning and grunting filled the air as Lavender plowed into the tiger while also sucking off the lizard that was bouncing on Campbell's lap. It didn't take long before Ka had his trunk wrapped around Ari's neck and was thrusting into him once he had gotten the second cock into the stretched out hole in order to get both heads into the feline. Even though the power was making it so that his two shafts didn't split this poor creature open Ari could see Kylo hardly hanging on as his face was melted in pure ecstasy...

Several hours later Ari was laying there in the sauna chamber, completely satiated as he ran his clawed fingers through the hair of the leopard that was on top of him. After splitting him practically in half and really showing off how stretchy he could get the leopard had practically been his cock sheath for the night, eventually moving off the wall after Ka had plowed into him and moved to the sauna where he took the tiger and Campbell as well. To top things off he was still inside Kylo while Lavender and Campbell had taken their turns, making sure to cement themselves as true lovers that the beast would allow on top of him.

"About time we get to be a part of one of these," Campbell said with a satisfied moan after having taken Ari's tailhole himself, Lavender satisfied with getting sucked off like he was about to up in the room before the two sat naked next to the two of them laying there. "Was starting to get jealous of you always getting the good perks."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure this is the last time we're probably going to get treated this way," Ari replied. "Unless we want to hook up with Dalia and start up as mercenaries again we don't have the infrastructure to just wait around for the occasional CIA job that would require outside sources in order to solve it that couldn't be connected to them."

Lavender just nodded in response until he suddenly perked up in epiphany. "Oh! That's what I was actually going to tell you two about," Lavender said. "I managed to crack the master encryption on Rayarti's files while I was waiting for them to bring up the cake for Ari, and in doing so I got access to pretty much everything he was setting up."

"Wait... are you sure we should be talking about this in front of... him?" Campbell asked as he pointed down to Kylo.

"Oh, he's completely out," Ari said as he put his hands through the short fluff of headfur on the leopard's head, watching him

squirm slightly. "But what about Rayarti's accounts? What can we do with them?"

"I'm sure most of the contacts will probably be garbage after hearing about his death," Lavender stated. "But all the accounts should still be able to be accessed like the ones I drained, including a super secret slush fund that he actually put a significant amount of untracable money. I haven't checked the funds yet, but it could be a lot... I mean, probably a whole lot now that I'm thinking about it if he was using it as a tax shelter..."

The three looked at one another and after unceremoniously pulling out of the leopard he grabbed Ka, who had the tiger, lizard, and horse all leaned up against him in the plunge pool, and immediately got their speedos on so they could rush up to their room. The second they were inside they went to the suite that the wolf had claimed as his own and among all the technological devices were around the one they were all curious in was the laptop connected to the black box that they had gotten from Rayarti's mansion. Ari had put it mostly out of his mind except for the occasional update that he had gotten from the other man. They were clearly interested at this point though as Lavender's power was being used to access the accounts that he had just been talking about, and when he eventually cleared through all the layers of security the three behind the wolf had taken a step back and the wolf nearly fell backwards.

"That's... a huge number," Campbell stated as he stared at the screen.

"Rayarti must have put most of his funds there when he was preparing to leave the country," Lavender said as he put his hands behind his head in shock. "I thought maybe a couple million at max might be there since he was preparing to push forward, not... that number."

As everyone looked at each other in both astonishment and awe Ari began to grin, licking his lips as he put his hands on Lavender's shoulders. "I think... we've just been given an unprecedented opportunity here," Ari began to explain as he curled his tail around Campbell and arm around Ka to bring them closer. "Between the four of us I think we have the ability to take this power and the money we've been given in order to do more than just take the occasional contract from the CIA."

"You want us to become... mercenaries?" Campbell asked.

"Mmmm, more like... independent security council," Ari said with a smirk. "Why should entities like the CIA and Company tell us who we can hunt when we have the ability to choose such things for ourselves? I think that if anyone should be the deciders on who deserves to get hunted by us it should be the hunters, don't you agree?"

The other three look at one another and Ari could tell that while they weren't sure of striking out for themselves that they were certainly intrigued by the idea. They wouldn't have the protections of such entities, but in reality he didn't even need them in his mind. They had taken out a demi-god and an entire corrupt, super security company with just the four of them, and if they got big enough then they could certainly bring in others in order to help. He even had the means to make others like those around him, those that would want to protect the power of the glove and those he held dear, although he would probably only want to keep the three around him as his lovers and those that he trusted implicitly.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Lavender said, though the giddiness in his voice belayed his anxiousness as he began to set up accounts of their own to drain the funds to. "Where are we going to set this thing up? That way I can send the bulk of the funds there early in order to help us set up."

Ari scratched his shin as he thought about where to set up their base of operations, only to feel a hand press on his shoulder and saw Campbell looking at him with a grin. "I happen to know that a certain someone has rented out property long term at a high-rise in a certain city," Campbell said. "I'm sure with the connections and money that we find in this black box we can get rid of those charges and set a few things up, not to mention we would have Mr. Stevens and Treeborn there in order to help us out right away."

Back to the city... he was sure that they had just left that place for the last time, and he wasn't sure how well their reception would be considering the mess they had made back there. But it was something that seemed to pull them back there and where everything had begun and where he had gained this power in the first place. It would certainly be a twist; there was something that he could see doing, and with Rayarti's short-lived security program now defunct it did leave a lot of openings for those that could use their help. He could help out the heroes guild for sure, and then he could still take the hunts that he wants in order to satiate his other desires.

"Lavender, go see if there is more floors to rent on that highrise," Ari said as he gave Campbell a wink. "I have the feeling we're going to need the room..."