

Patrick rolled his shoulder again, The healing bandage had been off for a week now, but it was still tender. It had ensured his shoulder healed well, the scars at the point where the bullet went in were so thin his regrowing fur already hid them. he still had a few weeks of stretching exercises to do to make sure he didn't lose any flexibility, but he did those at home. One more visit with the doctor in two weeks and he'd be done with this.

He'd gotten out of the house immediately after dinner, his mom wasn't working tonight, so he told her he was just going out for a walk, maybe visit some friends. When he saw the bus, he knew what he was going to do instead. He'd been finding reasons why now wasn't the right time to go to the bar, at first was because his shoulder was still healing. Then it was because he wasn't a hundred percent, then he didn't quite feel like it.

He'd had enough of procrastinating, This was something he'd told himself he'd do, He was going to do it. He'd talked about it with Mother Rosetta, with himself, and even with Joey. So he got on the bus. He'd been saving money planing for this trip, scraping every penny he could manage, since he hadn't gotten more work. he had enough for the bus both ways and a couple of sodas, if the bar didn't over charge for them.

Tonight was a good night to go, being Thursday, Don wouldn't need him at the bar and it was probably going to be less crowded at this one too.

It took two hours to reach the area the bar was in, and then he had to walk thirty minutes to get to it. It wasn't impressive, a low brick building with dirty windows, graffiti covered walls and the rooster sign above the door wasn't lit up. Getting closer it looked like one side was broken. A parking lot across the road had a few old cars in it.

He hesitated at the door, wondering if he really wanted to do this. Just like when he'd entered his father's house, he couldn't shake the feeling that crossing this door would change everything for him.

He reached for the handle just as the door swung open at him and he stepped out of the way. A tiger wearing a cowboy hat and a tan trench coat walked by without acknowledging him. Patrick found himself looking at his feet and he was wearing cowboy boots. Patrick had never seen someone dressed as a cowboy outside of the old movies his mom watched every so often.

The man took a few steps toward the parking lot then stopped. He turned to look at him.

"Can I help you with something?" he growled.

Patrick immediately looked away with a quiet. "Sorry." And just to get away he entered the bar. Only realizing what he'd done once the door closed behind him. Well, he was in now, he couldn't really back out anymore.

The room was smaller than Don's place, maybe half the space. the bar was in the opposite corner to the door with a few tables scattered about, only three of which were occupied and four of the six stools were taken.

Like their website said, the atmosphere was calm. The music, something old and country sounding, was soft enough he couldn't make out the lyrics. No one paid him any attention as he crossed the room and sat at the bar. Looking at them, he was happy to note most wore jeans and shirts, so he didn't stand out too much in his jeans, T and jacket.

He asked the bartender, a skinny brown bear, if he had any orange soda, and got a strange look in return.

"Are you even legal?"

Patrick showed him in ID.

"Okay, how about a beer then?"

"No thanks. what soda do you have?"

"Got coke."

"I'll have one."

The bar man shrugged. "It's your money." He filled a glass for him and asked for six dollars. Patrick paid it without commenting. Don only charged four for soda and he kept a wider selection.

Patrick sipped his soda slowly, watching the other men in the bar in the mirror. At the tables they were paired up, but weren't acting the way gays would. they weren't holding hands or doing lewd things to each other, they were just sitting there, talking and enjoying their beers.

The gayest thing he saw was when two of them left. They waved to the barman, then held each other's hands had they walked out. Maybe this being gay thing wasn't going to be all that bad.

"Hey, buddy." An arm fell across Patrick's shoulders and he froze. "You new here? Never seen you here before. And trust me, I'd remember a body like yours."

Patrick forced himself to turn his head and look at the man almost completely draped over him. he was a dog of some sort, rottweiler maybe? He didn't sound drunk, but his breath stank of rum.

The dog leaned in. "You know, we kind of have a tradition here."

"Harold, leave the kid alone," the barman interrupted, but the dog just waved him off.

"Yurick, why don't you get this fine fellow another rum and coke on me?"

Patrick wanted to refuse, but he couldn't get his mouth to work. he was horrified to see another glass appear before him and smell the alcohol wafting off it.

The dog leaned in even closer. "come on, just drink them up, it'll help loosen you up, you're all stiff. After that I can show you a good time." The arm on his shoulder dropped off and Patrick felt his ass being groped.

Patrick bolted off the seat, finally able to move. "This was a mistake," he said and he headed to the door, although what he wanted to say and do was a lot more vulgar, and violent.

He pushed the door open and stalked out.

"Hey Buddy!" the dog yelled after him.

Patrick ignored him, the closing door cutting off what else he said. Yeah, this had been the worse mistake he'd ever made. He'd hoped that with a quiet atmosphere it would be different from the other places he'd read about, like the fuck markets down in the gay district. He'd stayed away from those because he wanted nothing to do with that kind of life. He'd been an idiot to believe this place would be any different. Fags were the same everywhere.

Was this what it meant to be gay? sleaze? His father hadn't seem like that, but he'd seen him only twice, how did he know how he behaved the rest of the time? as far as he knew they could be stalking the bars, looking for anyone to take advantage of. Patrick shuddered at the thought. If that was true, he didn't want to be related to them.

"Hey buddy!" the voice came again.

Great, the dog had followed him. "Leave me alone."

The dog grabbed Patrick's shoulder and spun him around. "Listen here buddy. You don't get to come in here, parade that yummy body of yours around and then run off when someone responds to the advertisement." The dog licked his maw.

Patrick wriggled out of the hold. "What the fuck are you talking about? Just go back inside. I'm not looking for any trouble."

The dog leaned in close. "I'm not offering you trouble. I'm offering you a good time." He grabbed Patrick's crotch and squeezed.

He didn't think. Patrick's fist flew and the man staggered back. "Don't you fucking touch me you fag," he growled.

"I don't care what you say. I know you want me. I can smell it." The dog's speech was starting to slur. "I'm just going to have to convince you to come with me so I can show

you a good time."

The dog came at him. Patrick sent a jab at his muzzle and then swung hard, sending him spinning back and crashing to the ground.

Patrick looked at him, panting. For a moment he thought he'd killed him, but then he saw his chest move. He was still breathing. He turned and walked away. Fuck, this hadn't been what he'd wanted.

A hand landed on his shoulder and Patrick spun around, fist raised. Was that asshole already back for more?

A jaguar with his hands raised was backing up. "Whoa kid, calm down."

"What the fuck do you want?"

"I was parking and saw what happened. Are you okay?"

Patrick hesitated a moment, looking over the man's shoulder at the parking lot. He couldn't remember what car had been there when he arrived. He realized he was being paranoid. He lowered his fist. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay, that's good. You look a little rattled. Do you need me to give you a ride somewhere?"

Patrick had a memory of a car stopping next to him, a window lowering and a tiger saying. "Come in, kid. I'm going to give you a ride home." That had been an uncomfortable ride.

"I'm fine, thanks. I can manage on my own."

"Okay, kid, you be careful out there." The jaguar turned and headed back to the parking lot.

Well, at least he hadn't punched that guy. He actually seemed nice and considerate. He'd cared enough to check in on him, a complete stranger. Not like that fag who'd been all over him and thought they'd have sex just because he said so.

Patrick stopped moving. Okay, he had something. The fags were the sleazy ones, and the gays were like that jaguar, normal guys, other than being attracted to guys. Okay, he could make that work. He was gay, but he wasn't a fag. He'd never be a fag.

He turned. "Hey mister."

The jaguar stopped and turned. He was at the edge of the parking lot.

"Thanks for caring."

The jaguar just looked at him for a moment, head tilting to the side. "You're welcome," he finally said. "Have a good night."

"You too."

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Tom watched the tiger walk away. Thanks for caring? jeez, what world did that kid live in that he had to thank someone

for that?

Once the tiger was out of sight Tom headed to his car. Sitting in it he checked again to confirm the kid hadn't double back and he placed a call.

"Tom Bracha, reporting in." He reached back and groped at the back seat. "The kid had an altercation. he took care of it, but I had to expose myself to make sure he was okay."

"Will you be able to stay with him?" the man said.

His hand closed around something and he pulled it up. "Yeah, I can follow him on foot, but if something else happens there's no way he's going to believe it's a coincidence if I have to intervene." It was one of his baseball caps, but not the one he wanted this one had holes for his ears. he threw it on the passenger seat and looked back.

"I can have Donovan Carmichael in your area in ten minutes."

"That works." He grabbed his sport jacket. Under that was the cap he wanted. "Do we have the busses on this route covered? I doubt he'd going to walk all the way home."

"I'm arranging that right now."

"Okay. You also need to send someone at my location. The guy the kid punched will have to be looked after. I don't think there's anything wrong with him, he's getting up now, but we need to make sure he doesn't cause any further troubles. He's a rottweiler, right ear notched. he's got on a blue shirt, black jeans and he's got a split lip."

"Alright, I'll dispatch someone to keep an eye on him."

"If they get him drunk enough he'll forget the night. I know the type." He knew from first hand experience. It had been years ago, but something like that didn't leave you.

"Understood."

Tom ended the call. he took off the suit's jacket and replaced it with the sport one. He stepped out of the car, folded his ears back and put the baseball cap on. There, with that and keeping his hands in his pocket his silhouette was completely changed. There was no way the kid was going to make him. He ran to get eyes on him again and then followed him at a good distance.

Tom didn't know why the company had the kid followed. it was strange, but after all the company had done for him, he wasn't going to nitpick why this one kid deserved the protection and all the personnel they had devoted to him.

It wasn't as much now as it had been in the start. When they first started watching him there had been four teams on him at all time. The orders were simple, keep the kid safe and unaware he was under surveillance. Tom had stopped three attempts on him by gang members. He wasn't familiar with the

local gangs, but they always wore the same colors. He knew of five other attempts over the first three weeks.

In all, he was under heavy surveillance for a month or so, then the teams were pulled out. It matched the arrest of most of the gang leaders in the city so Tom figured that had been the threat on the kid. Until then he'd wondered if he was someone important, even with living in the Brownstones, then he figured he was an informant and someone within the police didn't want his involvement known, but wanted him protected.

The kid had been without protection for a few weeks, then the order came down to restart watching him. He'd been attack by one of the gang members. At the same time his boss had been replaced, which again made him wonder how important the tiger was, no ordinary target would cause that kind of reaction. the new surveillance wasn't as intense, a few people at first, now it was down to one on him at all time, with support when required.

Someone fell in step behind him. Tom didn't react, but he paid attention to who was following him. A zippo flicked open, was lit and then the prickling of a cigarette burning.

"You know Donovan, those things are going to kill you."

Smoke flew over Tom's shoulder. "I'm more likely to die of lead poisoning."

"Where do you even get those things? As far as I know no one sells them anymore."

"Same place any other vices are filled. The internet." Another cloud of smoke passed him. "Anyway, I've got the kid. You go back to your girlfriend. We have Sandy on the bus we expect him to take and Emerson on the next one, so he's covered." Tom didn't say anything. He made the next right.

He kept going for three blocks, then took an indirect route back to his car, regularly making sure no one was following him. Once in it he checked his watch. She would still be up.

She answered on the second ring.

"Tomas?"

"Hi hun, how are you doing?" He smiled. hearing her melodious voice always did that to him. She was the best thing to ever have happened to him.

"I'm good, I was about to stretch out and listen to a book. You don't usually call at this time, is everything alright?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to let you now I'm heading home so I'll be there within the hour."

"Really? that's wonderful. I wasn't expecting to see you until I got up tomorrow. why are you coming in early?"

"They have to close the building for the night, something

about a problem with the gas lines, we can't have anyone in so I'm given the night off."

"And will you have to go in tomorrow?"

"I won't know until I call them. I'll probably have to at least show up for instructions. I'll see you soon, I love you."

"I love you too. drive carefully."

As far as Ania knew, he was a security agent, and the company he worked for did building security. He had a varying schedule because he didn't always work at the same building.

He didn't like lying to her, although except for it being people instead of buildings what he'd told her was sort of true. He felt it was better than her worrying about his life being in danger when it rarely was. His military training, his years doing black ops, saw to it that he could take on everything.

Well, almost everything, a voice at the back of his head reminded him.