

Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely p1

It had been hours since the large yacht had pulled away from the docks, the waters it had churned by moving forward slowly settling as the movement finally ceased. Soon the only sounds that could be heard was the gentle lapping of the dark waters against the sides of the hull as it floated there in the middle of the sea. With the dark clouds overhead blotting out the moon and stars it left everything in an eerie blackness that surrounded the vessel. Only the lights on inside the yacht illuminated the surrounding decks as well as the guards that slowly patrolled the area despite being completely alone on the waters.

Well... almost completely alone. The human guard walked past the port side engine failed to see the wire that had been threaded up just above the floorboard. When the man passed by the silent waters shifted as something broke the surface of it, the one that had been clinging to the hull ever since it had left the port slowly crawling up it. The creature took a second to hang there and let the water drip off the neoprene bodysuit, his exposed wings and tail flapping to remove the excess while he spit out the respirator that had been wedged between his fanged teeth.

As Ari continued to watch through the small screen that was over his right eye he could see that the guards were keeping to the lazy rotation that he had been watching while clinging underneath the waterline. The kangaroo-snake could feel his muscles twitch as the magnetic devices attached to his palms kept him against the yacht. Unlike most of the missions that he undertook there was no voice in his ear telling him what to do or where to go. It was one of the rare times that he was solo as he used his slightly aching muscles to push himself upwards towards the edge of the deck.

With a loud huff he hoisted himself over onto the polished wood of the yacht's deck and rolled to the nearby couch, using it as cover while he got his bearings. Usually he would have one of his team on overwatch but with the sensitive nature of the mission plus the location there would have been no way to get Campbell on board. The kangaroo cobra sighed a bit as he thought about the other man no doubt worrying about him while he was on such a dangerous task. It was just fine for him though as he clenched the fist that was covered in the glove, feeling the power of the gauntlet thrumming through his veins while he waited for the guard nearby to move out of sight.

It was a cloudless night on the still ocean seas, the moon shining overhead and causing Ari's grey scales and white fur to gleam as he took off the gear he wore that enabled him to stay underwater as long as he had. While he could have just used a power on his glove to have the same effect it would have been far past the limit of his abilities to hold such a power, not to mention with the adversary he was facing he wanted to make sure he had all three uses of his power at his disposal. As he glanced around at the open space of the deck he decided that one such use was merited at this point, taking a deep breath as he gave a mental activation of his power to cloak his form in shadows.

Darkness flowed over his body like a liquid and soon it was hard to distinguish him from the shadows of the deck as he began to move forward once more. The power that saturated his form gave him a little shiver, but it was something he had grown accustomed too as he made his way up to the cabins of the ship. It was almost disturbing how comfortable he had gotten with his powers as he went up behind one of the guards that was walking by and quickly dispatched him with a knife to the back and a hand to the mouth to keep them silent. As the body of the man fell into the ocean all Ari could think about was how far he had come since he had first put this cursed glove and what he had gone through to keep it... but that was a whole different tale.

For the moment Ari focused his attention on the job at hand as he waited for the nearby guard that had heard the splash to come over and investigate. The wolf hardly had a chance to look over the side before his searching eyes went unfocused and he fell forward as well. The tail blade on the kangaroo cobra's tail dripped with crimson as the second guard went into the water to join his body before he made his way along the side of the railing. As he got to the cabin door he took note of the time and reminded himself at this point he had fifteen minutes until they did a comms check and realized that they were down two.

Two quickly became four as Ari grabbed onto the rather large leopard man, holding him just long enough to guide his body down onto the rug instead of the hardwood floor where he would have made a more noticeable thud. A smirk crossed his lips as he saw the blood staining the white fibers and knew that his target would probably be more mad at that than the loss of her guards, not that it mattered to him in the slightest. Just as he got up though he saw the light of a flashlight beam that caused him to duck back down behind the couch one more and let out a hiss of annoyance. One of the guards had decided to break protocol in order to go down to the kitchen it seemed, which meant that he would discover the body that was lying on the table with his head in the bowl of soup that he had been drowned in.

Ari activated the second power slot on his gauntlet as soon as the guard passed by, feeling strength surge through his limbs and his scales and fur thicken before he jumped over the couch and headed straight towards the guard. By the time he was over the piece of furniture he could hear the audible gasp come from the rather large raptor man, but before he could call it in Ari landed a kick with this thick foot right into the radio that hung on the side of his belt and smashed it to pieces. It also knocked the man off-balance but before he could land a second blow to potentially incapacitate him he felt his fist sail through the air. The guy was fast... even with his augmented abilities he found himself getting pushed back as the guard tried to create some distance so he could draw his weapon.

A gunshot would ruin his stealth even worse than this man getting on the radio, and as he went for his weapon Ari did the

same. Though the raptor was as thickly muscled as most bodybuilders Ari's strength matched it and managed to keep him from drawing it while landing a punch right in his scaly throat. He could hear the sound of his wheezing and the shock gave him enough time to pull the gun out himself and completely remove the slide before tossing both pieces aside. The disarming gave the guard a chance to retaliate however and it was the kangaroo-cobra that found himself wheezing as he was given a blow straight to his ribs.

The audible crack in the air gave him the indication that at least one of them was broken as he found himself falling back, but even as he found it slightly harder to breathe it didn't stop him from getting back onto his feet. Even with the threat of the other man Ari gave a quick look at his watch and found himself with only ten minutes to go until the guards would do their comms check and give up the ghost. If everyone else wasn't as lackadaisical in their duties as this one he would need seven to get around and finish off everyone else, he calculated while eyeing up the man who just took out a baton, which meant he only had three minutes to dispatch this one. Probably more time than he needed, the hybrid smirked as he darted forward with claws outstretched.

Within a minute the two had been brought back down to the ground again with Ari on top, pinning the guard after getting punched twice in the side and returning the favor with a blow to his skull. It had been enough to disorient the raptor and after grabbing the baton he secured it against the raptor's already vulnerable neck and pulled back. His breath huffed out of his nostrils as he could feel the man still squirming beneath him while he put pressure down, trying to fight for his life while in a position of weakness. Ari remained resolute in his hold and as his back continued to arch his entire body trembled with exertion until he heard a crack and suddenly the body of the raptor went completely still.

As soon as that happened Ari's own form slumped against the floor as he wheezed slightly through his muzzle to try and catch his breath. He still had a minute to spare but didn't want to waste it on recovery as he pushed the limp form of the raptor off of him and got back up to his feet. He winced slightly at the pain in his chest and side and frowned, the injury would slow him slightly in his endeavor and as he looked back at the one who gave it to him he kicked the body in anger. Though it was tempting to use the final charge of his glove to heal himself he knew that he wanted to keep it just in case as he grabbed the baton and made his way up into the top deck while steadying his breathing...

Ten minutes later Ari found himself at the final door of the yacht while breathing heavily. The radio he had taken from one of the guards just to make sure of his work was dead silent; no one would be calling out for back up, there would be no frantic rush to the helm in order to try and drive them back to populated waters. It was just him and his target now as he slowly pulled down the door handle and opened it. Almost immediately candle light spilled out onto the deck as he let the door swing the rest of the way to reveal himself to the occupant within, his yellow eyes taking in the scene before him before landing on the black-scaled dragoness that sat on the couch drinking from a glass of wine.

As expected she wasn't alone either; Ari saw two men that had been sitting nearby get up and immediately draw their guns on him, his ears twitching as three more off to his side did the same. Almost immediately he put his hands in the air and showed that he wasn't armed, though considering how far he had intruded into the yacht that did little to lower the guards anxiety. "I'm here to see the Shadow Broker about business," Ari stated, lowering his head slightly as he continued to keep his hands up.

"You've got a lot of nerve coming in here," the wolf guard closest to him said.

"Sir, I'm not getting any responses from the others that are patrolling the decks," another guard, this one some sort of avian creature, said after he had been fiddling with the radio while the others kept their weapons trained on him.

"No doubt they are dead," the dragoness said in a bemused tone, which only prompted the men to react with more hostility before she snapped her fingers. "I think if he's that desperate to come in here like this then we should at least hear what he has to say. If we don't like it then I'm sure there's plenty of space down in the galley where you can keep him until you've had your fill of fun, and I'm sure that he is smart enough to behave while asking for something of me."

Ari could see the sneers of the men as they kept their weapons drawn but relaxed slightly, backing away just enough to allow him space to enter into the room. It was mainly to allow them to surround him more thoroughly as he walked over to the table while the Shadow Broker sipped on her wine. "Listen, you know I wouldn't be here if I wasn't desperate," Ari said as he looked at the dragoness with pleading eyes. "I'm all alone, I was abandoned by my group and now no one will hire me. If you could just give me a chance I could do more for you than all of these others put together."

"You killed my men just to ask for a job?" the wolf snarled as he and a huge bull man came over and grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him down on his knees as he felt the barrel of a gun press against his head.

As Ari could feel the pressure of the weapon against his skull all three looked up in surprise when they saw the dragoness laughing. "Frankly if he was so easily able to kill your men then I'm not quite sure they were worth what I was paying them," The Shadow Broker said, Ari hearing the wolf snarl in response. "Not to mention I have serious concerns about you and my private guard."

"What?! Why?" the wolf demanded.

"Because if you really were as good as you say then you would know who that is," The Shadow Broker replied before taking a sip of wine, Ari smirking as he looked up to see the shock on the faces of the two guards before she spoke again. "And I know you don't know who that is because if you did then you wouldn't have been stupid enough to get that close to him. A shame... I rather enjoyed your company."

Before the wolf could react to that the bull suddenly let out a cry of pain as Ari's tail slashed into it, causing him to fall back. The kangaroo-cobra pushed his second power further and as he knocked the gun aside, the bullet digging into the wood floor instead of his body, he let out a snarl. The feral strength and ferocity that he had been holding back rushed into his body like a hurricane as he pushed forward and knocked the lupine back. Soon the cries of pain that came from the bull were overshadowed by several gunshots as the others in the room attempted to fire on the enemy, only to hit the wolf as Ari used him as a shield. After absorbing several rounds he tossed the guard into the others before leaping forward and pouncing on the nearest one with a flash of claws and teeth.

The dragoness didn't move an inch even as Ari tore into the other guards as quickly as he had done to the wolf and bull, the few shots they did get off going wild as they were ripped limb from limb. Soon the walls were painted with blood as Ari ravaged the trained men like a rabid beast until he finally fell upon the one that had been on the radio. The bird let out a squawk as he was pounced upon and fell behind the couch, feathers and blood flying in air as the jaws of the beast clamped down onto the creature. While the sounds of bones snapping and flesh rending could be heard the dragoness merely leaned forward and poured herself another glass of wine, then a second while she waited for Ari to finish the last of her guards off.

Though it hadn't been intended the side-effect of the power had left Ari ravenous and by the time he was able to get a hold of himself he was looking down at the remains of the half-eaten avian. He could still feel the blood dripping from his jaws that wasn't just from this guard as he looked around the room after his bloodlust had abated. The room had been completely destroyed from their fight and after making sure that the still bodies of the remaining guards were well and truly dead his gleaming yellow eyes fixated on the last living creature in the room aside from him. Even with the violence that had erupted in the room the dragoness remained in her seat that was one of the few places spared the destructive act as he slowly lumbered over towards her.

"So, they sent you to kill me," the dragoness mused after taking a sip. "How ironic, one of my greatest assets coming here to finally end my enterprise under the guise of needing me for a job. I should have known better than to keep on that group of guards, they were getting rather sloppy after the whole cultist ordeal."

"You would be correct," Ari replied simply while licking his lips, his voice deeper with a distinctive growl even as he let the feral power abate a bit. "It's been a while, Dalia. Or would you prefer that I call you the Shadow Broker for this encounter?"

"Dalia is fine darling," Dalia stated as she gestured towards the seat that was opposite her. "I'm not sure what your timetable is on killing me but if you have a second perhaps you would like to have a seat and chat, maybe catch up for a bit? I haven't heard hair nor hide of you and your little band of miscreants since you decided to join up with the CIA."

Ari smirked at that and sat down on the provided seat, feeling his fingers twitch slightly as he reached for the glass of wine that was poured for him. Though he still had quite a bit of time left with his powers he could almost sense his glove was telling him to keep it moving, though it didn't have nearly the power over him like it had the first time he had met the dragoness. "Technically we're considered independent contractors," Ari said as he leaned back on the seat. "Campbell and Lavender are still adjusting to life outside of the hero business, but I'm glad that after dealing with Anubis we had somewhere to go that wasn't the source of all that messy business in the first place."

Dalia just nodded and continued to listen as Ari recounted everything that had happened since the last time they had met. It had felt like only yesterday that he had been picked up by her guards and was talking to her while completely naked, listening to a proposal that had come from a cult that was attempting to resurrect a dead god through the glove he wore. He informed her that through a bit of guile and a lot of trickery he and his group had managed to completely foil their plot and dismantled the entire thing, including pulling their tendrils from the hero organization that Campbell and Lavender used to work at. After that the three of them had gone on the run in order to avoid the charges that Ari still faced in the city, which is when they ended up meeting Sam and getting recruited by the CIA to use their super powers to dismantle other threats like the cultists they had previously faced.

Once Ari was finished Dalia just put her empty glass down on the table and leaned back against the cushions of the sofa. "It sounds like you've come quite a long way from the brutal mercenary that you used to be Ari," Dalia commented as she lit a cigarette. "I would say that I'm pleased to hear it, but it seems that life has brought your particular shadow of death to my doorstep. I would ask what particular act of mine had prompted your organization to bring you here but I don't feel like listening to whatever lie they fed you, so for my last act I would like to ask that you at least make it quick and try not to do anything that would ruin my dress."

Ari just nodded and motioned for her to get down on her knees as he adjusted the camera that was fastened to his shoulder harness. It had been recording the entire time as a means of proof that he was doing his task, and while it was only capable of

transmitting he had no doubt that someone was watching on the other side as his tail blade once more rose up in the air. He wasn't going to use the blade on it as the dragoness got down on her knees, the light from the two candles flickering slightly as she kept her head up the entire time. There would be no begging or pleading from her; even as he wrapped the thick appendage around her neck she only let out a slight huff, her body twitching as it constricted around her. As Ari's body tensed he activated the last power in his glove and waited for a few moments before looking directly down at her, making sure that she was fully in focus before twisting his tail and pulling it back.

A few minutes later Ari walked up from the engine room and made his way back towards the deck, heading to the emergency life raft that hung from the back of the ship. Since there was no one there to stop him the hybrid could take his time with his work and had even taken the liberty of grabbing a few snacks that he had stuffed into his bag. He had also taken the time to get a few of the more valuable items from the Shadow Broker and stashed them away as the means of hazard pay for this little endeavor, especially as he picked up the laptop next to the bed and felt a twinge of pain in his ribs. No doubt Campbell was going to be on him for that, he thought to himself as he finished putting the bags of loot into the boat before hopping in himself.

After a bit of manipulation Ari got the life raft, though it was more of a high-speed motorboat, and got the engines roaring to life. Soon the ocean was spraying up in the air as he drove it out away from the yacht only to stop and turn it to the side before he got too far from the other craft. Once it had stopped and the waves no longer lapped against the hull he turned back to the other vessel and pulled out a remote detonator, giving the rather expensive yacht one last look before he pushed the button. Almost immediately a shock wave rippled out as a fireball ripped through the hull and blasted up through the deck.

Even Ari had to take a step back in order to brace himself as the explosive he had placed ignited the fuel tanks and caused the entire yacht to be ripped apart from the force of the blast. If anyone had been alive they weren't anymore as the flaming hunk of twisted steel immediately began to sink down and disappear below the surface of the sea. He watched it happen and as quickly as the violence had erupted on the sea it soon became calm again as the last of the destroyed hull slipped down completely. Soon the only evidence that anything had ever been there were a few burning puddles of fuel and some scattered debris, Ari looking over the edge of his own boat as he heard part of the deck bump up against it.

Ari whistled to himself and looked down at the camera that he had pointed at the explosion to check on it. When he saw that the little red light was off he used his claws to pry open the metal back of it and disabled the connection to the battery. "I take it that means that I can speak now?" A voice said from underneath the tarp, Ari looking over to see the dragoness had popped her head out from underneath and had been watching him.

"Yeah, they're done watching," Ari replied as he tossed the disabled camera aside. "Would have thrown it in the ocean but then I would have had to pay for it. How does it feel to be officially dead?"

"Not the first time it's happened darling," Dalia replied as Ari got the engines started once more to take them back to the mainland. "But I do appreciate the assist. How did you manage that little feat?"

Ari just smirked as he dismissed the powers of his glove, feeling the sensation of relief as the pressure that came from using it ebbed away. "Displacement effect," Ari said simply, though a look from the dragoness prompted him to give further explanation. "Basically I took the power of my glove to shunt the real you behind me while still keeping an illusion of your body for me to dispatch, which good acting by the way. I had worried you might have not gotten my message through our old communications but after seeing the candles I knew that you would be ready to play along."

Dalia just chuckled at that and then asked for her laptop, the two spending the rest of their time gliding over the surface of the ocean in silence while she worked. No doubt she was already starting to build a new identity and contacts once the old ones were burned officially. With news of the yacht explosion spreading the enemies she had would likely believe that she had been killed by one of her rivals, and when the CIA no doubt leaks the footage of her death it would only cement it in their minds. After a few months a new Shadow Broker will emerge, likely under a different guise, and this time Ari had her favor. When she asked if it was because of him or his organization that she was still alive Ari just responded by giving her a coy grin and a wink.

Eventually the trip ended with the boat pulling into a small dry dock that had been abandoned for the most part, Ari driving right up to the dock where he would be leaving it. After helping Dalia up onto the concrete embankment he hoisted the loot up as well and secured it to his person along with the disabled camera. Aside from the laptop he allowed the dragoness to keep a few assets in order to get her started on her new life and kept the rest for himself. Though he could tell that she wasn't fond of seeing most of her gains going along with him it was only temporary, especially since she still had access to most of her accounts through the laptop he had taken.

"Well, hopefully we never have to meet like that again," Dalia said as the two walked to the cars he had parked outside the dock earlier for the extraction.

"If we do then I imagine it will be far less pleasant," Ari replied. "Just make sure to keep your head down and don't contact me again, if I have need of you I'll track you down."

"Of course," Dalia stated as the two stood in front of one another, her hand reaching up to brush underneath his chin. "It's good

to see that some things don't change, even with this new cloak of yours you're still the same ruthless, back-stabbing mercenary that I've come to adore. I look forward to seeing you again when you cash in this favor."

Ari remained silent at that and watched as she took her bag and went into the car that was provided for her. Even though he knew that it was a compliment coming from her hearing that she still thought of him that way had needled its way into his mind. Even though it had been years since the last time they had met she acted like he hadn't changed at all even after hearing the stories of what he had done in order to save his friends and by extension the world. Was he really still just some sort of mercenary to her even after all that, someone that couldn't be trusted to do anything other than destroy?

As he watched her speed off into the night Ari found himself cracking his scaly neck a few times before heading to his own vehicle. In reality he had been told to kill the Shadow Broker for real, though for what reason or for who he wasn't sure, and while he had some autonomy over his actions he knew that his handler would be pissed if he knew that she had gotten away. In all reality though he had done what they wanted and killed her off... though it was that kind of thinking that had also led to his problems with Campbell and the heroes guild in the first place. But that was ancient history, Ari reminded himself as he got into the car and sped off into the waxing light of dawn in the city.

Chapter 2:

It was nearly mid-afternoon before Ari got back to the safehouse that had been set up for him and the others. While he had been dealing with the Shadow Broker the other two former heroes were off dealing with some sort of espionage that hadn't interested him in the slightest. When he got inside it appeared that he had been the first one back from his mission and sighed at the prospect of being alone. He always preferred it when he could talk to the two after the mission was complete but it appeared that he would instead have to be satisfied for whatever leftovers were in the fridge while he waited for their return.

The apartment they had gotten was rather small with only a single bedroom and the living space attached to the kitchen, so when Ari started to make himself a sandwich it didn't take much for him to hear that he wasn't in fact alone. Since the three could practically sense one another due to the nature of their power he knew it wasn't them and it prompted the hybrid to duck underneath the counter and grab the gun that was hidden behind the sink. With his power glove on cooldown mode still he couldn't use it to help him and his own body was under heavy exertion having just finished clinging to a boat for hours before killing a dozen people. As he slowly made his way towards the source of the sound with his gun raised he pinpointed it to the bathroom, hearing the toilet flush just as he got in position in front of it.

As soon as the door opened the man that was on the other side immediately saw Ari standing there with the gun pointed at him, causing him to grab it and nearly recoil back into the bathroom as he let out a shout. "Holy hell!" the man shouted as Ari immediately pulled down the weapon upon recognizing him as they pulled out the buds from their ears they had been listening too. "Good morning to you too Ari, damn..."

"You know I'm not used to your presence yet Ka," Asfri scoffed as he watched the other guy catch his breath. "Looks like I scared the shit out of you if you hadn't already done so."

Ka just rolled his eyes and made his way past the larger man before heading into the kitchen. Ka was the most recent addition to their team brought in by their handler, Sam wanting someone that didn't have powers or a previous history with them to keep an eye on things and act as a liaison. Even at being nearly six feet tall the somewhat skinny Asian man was the shortest of the group, though he had quickly endeared himself to Ari and the others with his wit and caring personality. He was also rather smart and acted as their mission specialist, though Ari had a sneaking suspicion that he was also there in some sort of psychological capacity to assess his mental health after his... previous issues with hallucinations and such.

Once he had gotten settled down Ka asked him about how the mission went so that he could provide a briefing for Sam and the others. It was still strange for him to have to provide such a thing after all his time being on his own, but as Campbell had said it was structure that he could certainly use as he recounted everything that he had done while on the yacht. He naturally left out the part where he had saved the Shadow Broker instead of killing her; even though they had been together for a while he still didn't completely trust this new member of their new team. Fortunately his version of the events backed up by the camera footage was enough to convince Ka that everything was being told truthfully.

"Looks like another successful mission on the books," Ka said as he finished typing the last of his report before sending it off. "The other two should be done with their mission by tonight, so once we're all back together we can talk about where we're going next. Until then you're free to do whatever you'd like Ari."

"Oh, am I?" Ari asked, leaning in with a lustful grin as he took his scaly toes and rubbed them against the hairy legs of the other man. "Does that include you on the menu?"

With the libido of the three men being as high as they were, with Ari's being the highest of them all, it hadn't taken much in order

to get the man into their bed and become one of his lovers. With Ka being gay already and into muscular men it wasn't long until they had sniffed that out on him, and though they tended to keep more to one another each of them have been with the human male. Though he was trying to focus on his reports for the next part of the mission Ari could already smell the arousal on him the second that they had sat down together, especially since Ari opted to be naked while in their apartment. It didn't take much prompting from the kangaroo-cobra before he saw the tent form in Ka's pants that he moved his feet up and began to tease that.

"Hold on," Ka suddenly said, sliding back from Ari's foot before undoing the button of his pants. "The last thing I need to do is explain why I need to requisition another outfit after what you did the last time you wanted me." Ari growled in approval as he watched the man get naked, his smirk widening as he could see that half-hard cock getting pulled out of his underwear before they were discarded with the rest of his clothing.

"You're learning quick," Ari said as he walked over and shut the laptop, eyeing up the naked man hungrily before moving up to the point they were pressing against each other. Before Ka could say anything he found himself swept up in the muscular, furry arms of the kangaroo-cobra as the muzzle of the creature pressed down against his lips. Already Ari's cock-tongue was starting to swell just like his twin members and as his shafts pushed their way out to press against the midsection of the smaller man his kiss became more passionate by the second.

Though Ari knew that he had to be gentler with the human than his other two lovers that didn't stop him from practically breaking the wall as he pinned Ka against it, his chest already grinding against the smooth skin of the one against him. A groan could be heard as their make-out session became increasingly sexual with the cock tongue sliding into the human's mouth, darting in and out while it grew as stiff as his other shafts. Without the power of the glove their options were somewhat limited; during their initial downtime he had shown Ka the true measure of his abilities by making his holes inhumanly stretching, and even then he had trouble taking in everything that was given to him. Fortunately he had learned enough to at least handle the basics as he sucked on the tongue of the hybrid just like he would to those twin cocks pressed against his stomach.

As a growl escaped from Ari's throat Ka was pushed even harder against the wall, the human knowing better than to try and manipulate the primal nature of the creature that was pushing deeper into his mouth. The kangaroo-cobra always maintained enough composure to make sure that he didn't hurt his more fragile human lover or any of his companions even as his clawed fingers ran down the sides of the pinned man. But the libido in the creature was growing more intense by the second and after having such a successful but bloody mission Ari needed to get some sort of release. It was much easier for him to get lost in the pleasure of the moment as he pulled his cock tongue back long enough so that he could carry Ka to the shared bedroom.

One of the things they learned very quickly when it came to the safehouses that they requisitioned was to request a reinforced bed, which as the two practically landed on top of the bed Ari could hear the metal frame groan in protest. It didn't matter matter much to him considering that they were probably going to be leaving this place soon once the other two were done with their mission, not to mention the agency took care of the damage deposit as he had Ka laid down on his back while he was on top. The sound of wood being scratched filled the air as his larger body positioned itself right between the legs of the human that were pointed practically straight up in the air. Aside from being smart and funny the human also had the knack of being rather flexible as he positioned the flared head of one of his cocks against his hole.

"You are quite ravenous today," Ka said breathlessly as his hands pressed against the white fur of Ari's pectorals, fingers tracing down the scars that came down from the hybrid's shoulder.

"It was quite the mission," Ari replied with a growl, his hood flaring out from his neck while his tail wagged in the air. "As I told you."

Though Ari was about to lean down for another kiss he found his muzzle being pressed against by one of Ka's hand, looking down to see the other man gazing up at him with concern. "I know that you like to indulge in those baser instincts of yours ever since... the incident," Ka stated. "But at some point you are going to have to talk about it, whether it's with me or the others."

Ari just smirked at that and pushed past his hands, playfully bearing his fangs while looking eye to eye. "Let's try and make the mood one thing we don't kill today," Ari teased as he pressed his hips forward, pushing the head of his maleness up between the cheeks of the human. "Now unless you want this thing to go inside you dry I suggest you get the lube, otherwise you're going to have to explain why you're walking funny the next time we have a meeting."

Ka swallowed hard at that and immediately reached over towards the small nightstand that was next to the bed, Ari's fanged grin widening as he continued to put the slightest pressure against his hole while he fished for the bottle inside. Though Campbell and Lavender had the means to take him just like he was even with the extensive training that they have done the human still needed some aid when it came to larger insertions. He remembered the first time that he had gotten caught in a rut and could only take the tip into him even with lube, but with a bit of prep and some time between them he's gotten much better trained at it. Even so Ari knew even in his lustful state that the last thing he wanted to do was break someone that the agency had sent them, especially considering what they allowed him to get away with normally.

All those thoughts quickly exited his head when he felt something glide along the sensitive grey flesh of his throbbing member,

Ari letting out a hiss of pure pleasure as the lube was slathered over him. With Ka leaning forward in order to apply it their bodies also rubbed together and it gave them a chance to make out a little more while he waited for the application to continue. While the desire to plunge his cock tongue down into the man's throat was strong he refrained for the moment just so that he could concentrate on the important work he was doing. After about a minute he was ready to go, Ari letting out a growl of contentment as he pushed Ka back down on the bed and began to push his cock into him.

Just as he started to stretch out the ring of muscle however a ringing sound caused his ears to twitch and his nostrils to flare. It was their phone... and considering no one else knew that they were there it meant that it was likely Sam on the other end calling about the mission. When he looked back down at the open mouth and closed eye of the human taking his maleness he found himself in quite the predicament, especially since his could feel his hips continuing to push in despite the ringing growing louder it seemed. The lips of the kangaroo-cobra curled up in a snarl as he could feel the delicious heat starting to engulf the tip and first inch or so of his maleness and as his eyes flickered out towards the hallway a plan began to form in his mind.

Ka had been reeling with the sensation of stretching and pressure in his ass as the cock of the hybrid on top of him had continued its unrelenting pushing inside of him. Just as his insides were being spread apart however he had heard the phone ring as well but was in no position to try and argue with the beast of a man. Even as the pleasure suffused through his mind it was thinking of how he was going to explain to their boss that he missed a call only to feel the strong hands of Ari grab him by his hips. At first he thought that he was about to get impaled completely but to his surprise he was turned around, his squirming intensifying when the head of his cock remained in him, and then was brought up so that his back was pressed against Ari's chest.

Less than a minute later Ari had gotten to the main room of the thankfully small apartment and picked up the phone with one hand while the other remained wrapped around the chest of Ka. His clawed fingers had pushed into the mouth of the human to keep him silent as one of his thick shafts continued to be pushed deep inside of him, his stomach bulging slightly from the insertion as Ari answered the phone. "Hey boss, what's going on?" Ari answered, trying not to let the squirming man slide down too far onto the shaft that was deep inside him. "Ka? He's a bit tied up at the moment, but if I could get a message I'll relay it as soon as he's done."

As Ari listened to the man on the other line he had to turn his head away from the phone more than once as Ka had started to suck on his scaled fingers that were silencing him. It seemed that his impromptu handling of the phone call had resonated within his lover and had caused him to get into it, which only made it harder for the hybrid to keep focused on what he was doing. Fortunately it was mostly listening to what their handler had to say with only the punctuated responses affirming he was still listening being given in response. By the time the call was over however Ari had started to thrust his hips inwards and was doing everything in his power not to groan into the phone before he hung it up.

"That was very naughty of you," Ari growled as he tossed the phone aside, the device clattering to the ground before putting Ka on top of the kitchen table. "Here I was going to have a nice intimate session in the bed with you, but I think we should see if they reinforced this table instead."

All Ka could do even as the fingers were pulled from his mouth was moan in response as his stomach was pushed down onto the wood of the table, the lump that had been Ari's cock stretching out the skin being pushed back in even as the hybrid began to thrust deeper into him. The piece of wood furniture wobbled underneath them as the hybrid grabbed the human by his hairy legs and rocked his hips, pushing his thick rod of flesh in until he had almost completely hilted him. While his other cock remained outside sliding up against the impaled man there was no way he would be able to get it inside him in that state, though just having one inside was enough. Ari's eyes practically rolled back into his head as he let the sweet sensation of pure bliss wash over him, pushing away the other thoughts in his head as he leaned forward and dug his claws into the side of the table while really pounding Ka's hole...

Eventually the table did threaten to break underneath them and Ari decided once more to carry the smaller human back into the bedroom, whispering what Sam had told him to relay into his ear while still keeping his cock lodged deep inside. Though he wasn't sure if the other man even was coherent enough to get the message he would at least remember to tell him again if necessary while he put them both on the bed once more. Time slipped by as Ari continued to rut Ka, their groans and moans filling the air as the impressive stamina of the hybrid pushed the human to the limit and beyond. By the time Ari orgasmed his partner had practically passed out, which while not as impressive as his other two partners was at least a decent try as he finally collapsed next to him while still keeping his throbbing shaft inside for as long as possible as the darkness of night settled on their prone forms.

With the moonlight shining in through the window Ari found himself in the kitchen making himself a sandwich as he usually did, hearing the door open just as he finished with cutting it in half and putting it on the plate. While he would normally just have stuffed it in his face Campbell always insisted on making him use a plate even if they were only going to be in an area for a few days. As he was about to ask the sabertooth tiger and wolf how the mission went he found himself freezing as he looked upon a very different sight instead, the plate falling from his fingers as he saw five men with guns aimed straight at him. Before the plate even hit the ground they started to fire upon him and it was only his enhanced reflexes that kept him from getting shot as he jumped out of the window to the ground below.

Though he expected to fall the eight stories from the apartment that he was in he quickly found the lawn hitting him much sooner than expected, which was also strange since the building they were in was surrounded by concrete. As he quickly got onto his feet he saw that instead of being surrounded by the city he was in some sort of sprawling estate, the mansion behind him erupting with gunfire as he could hear the sound of an alarm blaring in the distance. "I... remember this place," Ari said to himself as he saw the gates at the front get crashed into by a truck, which stopped the vehicle in its tracks but not the armed men that started to pour out of it. "But... that's impossible..."

The stucco suddenly blew out from next to him that prompted the hybrid to move, running down the hill as he looked down at the pouch he had been holding the entire time instead of a sandwich. Even though he didn't realize he had it he remembered exactly how he had gotten it; this was the property of a rather ruthless drug dealer somewhere in the jungles of a country he couldn't even pronounce, a place that the Shadow Broker had tasked him to go to in order to steal what he had in his hands. It had been a rather bloody affair and though it wasn't necessary he had ended up killing the drug dealer before planting explosives in the house to remove any trace of his presence there. As he ran past the pool and saw the water shooting up from the bullets hitting it he knew that he was in the clear and soon the guards would have bigger problems than him as he used his claws, which had been augmented by the glove, to cut right through the wire before he pushed his way through.

Ari let out a cry of pain as his sides were scratched deeply by the sharp ends of the breach he had created, but he had already used his three powers for the glove and couldn't get the healing that would fix them. It didn't matter much to him anyway, or at least it hadn't back in that time, and as the gunfire stopped he found himself turning back. He knew what was about to happen because he had already lived through this, he had turned back at this same point due to the wounds that were slowly staining his white fur crimson and had just happened to catch movement that was in the upstairs window. No matter how many times he had told himself that it wasn't his fault, that the mission brief was incomplete and they should have known better, he still couldn't help but feel his heart drop to his feet when he saw several pairs of young eyes staring back at him from that area.

More than anything he wished that he could run back in, that he could somehow make his way through the fence and the gunfire that was still rocketing over his head, but even as that thought crossed his mind he had to look away from the house as a flash enveloped his vision. It was only for a moment before the wave of heat and concussive blast shattered the structure of the building and knocked both him and the fence down. It was always the same, next thing he knew he was flying through the air with a piece of wood sticking out of his side since he hadn't cleared the blast zone before landing back first into a nearby river.

Except this time as he suddenly shot up Ari found himself in bed, gasping for air as he felt the dampness from the sheets he had been laying on. It only took him a few seconds to regain his composure but for those moments it was like someone had stolen the breath out of his lungs. Back when that nightmare had actually happened he had floated downriver for a few hours before he had managed to regain consciousness and patch himself up enough to extradite himself from the area, but in this case it was merely rolling off the bed and practically landing on the floor with a thud. When he looked over to see if he had awoken Ka he found that the other man was not there, likely taking care of what Sam had asked him to do so that they could get ready for whatever mission they would be sent on next.

With the waves of anxiety and fear from reliving that moment slowly ebbing away Ari sighed and looked at his phone that sat on the nearby nightstand. Half an hour... and considering that it sounded like they were going to be on the move soon he was hoping for a lot more. He thought about getting back in bed and trying again but even just closing his eyes brought him right back to that scene and decided it was far too fresh in his mind to risk going back to. Instead he reached into the drawer and grabbed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter he had hidden in there before putting on some pants and moving out into the balcony.

The cool night air was a welcome relief as he moved out onto the small platform, leaning against the rickety metal railing that was the only thing separating him from an eight-story plunge to the ground below. As he thought back to the nightmare he had he remembered not caring back then whether he would have toppled off during that time, even the horrific sight of his botched mission had only pushed him to take bigger risks that his body had recorded in the form of scars. After lighting up and taking a drag from the cigarette he moved his fingers down to the claw-like scratches on his side where the fence had dug into him and knew that if it wasn't for the fact he wanted to get paid he probably would have just let himself drift down that river until the end. He hadn't been sure who he was helping or whether it was even worth it, and even with having Campbell and Lavender back in his life it was becoming increasingly hard to ignore what he had done before that point... even if it could be blamed on the psychosis from the one that had been trying to control him.

"Not thinkin of taking the concrete swan dive, are ya?"

The voice had come out of nowhere and was so jarring that it had caused Ari to drop his cigarette, watching the glowing ember drop down to the city street before looking around at what could have made that noise. At first he thought perhaps it was someone that had their radio or television on too loud but as he took a gander at the other balconies he noticed that they were all closed. Yet that voice was as clear as day to the point where he even looked back inside his own apartment to see if someone was trying to play a joke on him. The others knew better than to surprise him and with no one else in the other room he found himself completely alone with only his thoughts, though that voice he heard was definitely not his own inner monologue.

"Aw, still thinkin of yourself as alone, think that might hurt my feelins after all we've been through..."

Ari found himself growling slightly as he once more darted his head around to try and figure out what was going on and where the source of the voice was coming from. A cold shudder went down his spine as he suddenly remembered when he was dealing with the entity known as Anubis and the hallucinations he had to face, but strangely even though he had never heard this person before they felt... very familiar. "Ay, yer lookin in the wrong spot there," the voice said again, which as Ari found himself more confused then angry his gaze slowly started to move downwards. "There ya go, gettin warmer... warmer..."

Eventually Ari's gaze drifted down to his hand, or more specifically the glove that he had been wearing for what felt like ages. "Oh no, no no no," Ari said as he shook his head in disbelief. "There's no way that I can handle some sort of hallucination of my glove talking to me, not after all that other crap."

"I assure ya that you ain't hallucinating and I have nothin to do with Anubis," the voice replied as Ari continued to stare at his gloved hand in shock.

"Then... if you really are this artifact, why the hell are you talking to me now?" Ari asked angrily. "Where were you when I almost killed myself using you, or with Miguel? If you could talk why didn't you do so at any point before this moment?!"

Ari could feel his temper flaring as well as his nostrils while he waited for the response of his glove, his own brain reminding him that this was the sort of crazy thing that he was supposed to be reporting to Ka and the others. "I dunno, maybe it took me a while after you got rid of Anubis," the glove speculated. "Or perhaps because I need to talk some sense into you, talk you off the ledge as they say. Either way I'm here to stop you from continuing to try and kill yourself every time you go out on one of these missions."

The biting words of his glove, despite sounding like some sort of prohibition-era mobster, almost immediately took the edge off of his anger as he looked down at the ground below. Whether it was the nightmare he had just experienced or his own wallowing he wondered if this was some sort of defense mechanism of the glove, the artifact protecting its host so that it wouldn't have to go and find a new one. Once again he wondered where this voice of reason was when he flung himself headlong into danger before, but perhaps it was Anubis that had kept it from fully manifesting. Either way he had to think about what he was going to tell the others, though as he thought it he heard the glove respond that perhaps this should be their little secret until they could figure out more of what was going on.

Great, Ari mused in frustration, another secret that he had to keep from Campbell and the others. While not nearly as damning as the ones he had held before he had sworn to them that he would try and be more honest in exchange for them going along with this new venture of theirs. He knew though that if he told the CIA that they would probably bench him immediately for being mentally unstable, something that they had threatened more than once when they had first signed on, and that also meant the others would have to sit out as well. Campbell and Lavender gave up their lives as heroes in order to follow him into this new life and the last thing he wanted to do was take that away from them as he clutched his gloved fist.

Ari stayed out on the balcony for a while longer after grabbing another cigarette and after a while he heard the door slam and the other two members of their team walk inside. Both Campbell and Lavender were lugging the equipment that they brought to the surveillance job and as he watched through the window he could see a big grin on the faces of the red-furred sabertooth tiger and his purple furred lupine counterpart. It seemed their mission went well; though he would hear all about it when they did their group debriefing. As he finished off the last of his cigarette and flicked the butt out into the air he heard the balcony door open as well and turned to see that Ka was standing there.

"Hey, we need you in here now," Ka said. "Sam wants to talk to us, something big has come up apparently..."

Chapter 3:

"No."

"Ari, you know the reason they want us to go back."

"Absolutely fucking not."

"C'mon Ari, at least go in there and hear them out."

Ari continued to stand there and fume as he looked out of the window, the view from the highrise building they were in a starkly different view then the apartment they had been at only a few hours ago. The reason that Sam had wanted Ka to connect with

him was because they were being pulled from the area and relocated immediately to the regional headquarters to meet with him personally for their next mission. The four had been rather excited to see where they were going next since from what their human counterpart had gathered it was supposed to be something big. As soon as they got out from the airport they were shuttled to the building where they now resided in, but their excitement for the potential of their latest task quickly turned to shock as they entered into the briefing room and found a familiar map that was hung up on the wall.

"There is no way in hell I'm ever going back to that city," Ari said as he turned to face Campbell, trying to not look at the pleading face of the feline. Like his own body Campbell had remained transformed in his heavily muscled sabertooth tiger form even after they got rid of Anubis just like Lavender, though the wolf had merely gained a ton of muscle and a few other notable features the two of them had started human and could no longer transform back even with the glove. "Why don't they just drop a nuke on it or something and call it a day?"

"I know you don't mean that," Campbell replied as he went up to the kangaroo-cobra and put his hands on his shoulders, Ari feeling the radiant heat coming from them that was a byproduct of the feline's superpower. "Why don't you just go inside and listen to what's going on, and then we can tell Sam whether or not we're in. You know if he's instructing us personally that it's probably something of importance and he wouldn't send you back there if there wasn't a really good reason."

Though Ari continued to scowl he could feel the toothy smile of the other man starting to rub off on him. He always counted on Campbell to be his source of optimism and this was no different, even if was suffering from a lack of sleep after his midnight mission and subsequent nightmare. Though just seeing the picture of that city had caused him to have a visceral reaction he knew that the other man was right and told him to lead the way back into the briefing room. The sabertooth tiger smiled and took him by the hand before heading back inside where it appeared Sam and the others were waiting for them.

Aside from their team the only other person that was in the room was their handler. Sam had been the one that recruited them in the first place and while it was so far the best decision they had made Ari still didn't quite trust the man's easy-going smile and casual demeanor. Considering the types of missions that he had sent them on it was hard to imagine someone could make such judgements and still be cavalier about it, especially when he thought back to the hero organization they had been a part of that had similar facades and turned out to be the biggest villains of all. But for the moment Ari had no reason not to mistrust him as he sat down in the seat provided and tore into the free bagels that had been provided while Campbell took his spot next to him.

"Right then," Sam stated once Ari finished tearing into the baked good, his laser pointer once more illuminating the screen behind him. "Now that we have Ari with us I think it's time that we get right down into it. As we all know from Ari storming out a few minutes ago this is a city that most of you are very familiar with, it was also the site of one of the biggest hero-related controversies that the world had ever seen. I assume that you read the mission briefings when it came to the misadventures of these three?"

"Yeah, that was quite the wild file," Ka confirmed, his gaze drifting towards Ari who just scowled as he finished eating.

"Well it seems the fallout from the plans of Anubis had only just begun after these three were extracted from the city," Sam explained as he clicked onto the next slide that showed a familiar building to the three. "The hero management company tried its best to recover after the wave of scandal that came from some of its top executives being in the pocket of a world-ending entity, but shockingly a few ads and goodwill campaigns they did weren't enough to sway the public's opinion of them back into the positive. While the protests have stopped for the most part the mistrust for heroes and people with abilities has only grown and it's reached the point where intervention is needed."

"Wait, I think I remember seeing this on a stream we were watching while on the last mission," Lavender spoke up. "Some sort of anti-hero militia group is trying to go directly against the Company?"

"That is correct," Sam said. "For the moment it seems that most of the trouble that they're causing is localized to a few incidences with clashes between them and areas where heroes were working. From the information that we had gathered after they called for our help their numbers are continuing to grow after there have been some reports that there is still corruption within the company, not to mention that the villains are taking advantage of their weak positioning in order to wreck their own particular brand of havok."

"Sounds like a cluster," Ari stated, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed over his crumb-covered chest. "I still don't see what this has to do with us."

Sam just rolled his eyes and clicked over to another slide, this one showing the three of them pictured at the power plant where they had taken down the cult of anubis. "The ones higher up believe that with your unique knowledge of the city, the Company, the heroes and villains, and such that you would be the best to go in and see about these militias and whether or not they're an actual threat. There is also the fact that because you were crucial in dispatching the cult and exposing the corruption in the Company that these groups may see you as allies rather than enemies, and that is a very valuable leverage that we can have in this situation."

After that most of what Sam had to say was the logistics in their mission; Ari's ears began to twitch as he slowly tuned out the talk of their safehouse, the contacts that they were going to be using, and things of that nature. The only thing his mind could think of at the moment was the fact that they were going back to a city that he had expressly been attempting to avoid ever since everything that had happened there. He had joined up with Sam and the CIA in order to convince Campbell and Lavender not to go back to the Company when they had offered, now it seemed that the deal would push them right back into the fires of that place. It was a place full of bad memories, and with nightmares already starting to haunt him from his past the last thing he wanted was to go back to a place where many of them were either cultivated or the cause of.

A sudden kick to his chair caused Ari to perk up and as he caught Campbell out of the corner of his eye giving him a scowl he realized he had drifted off a bit during the mission briefing. Between the late night boat ride and the nightmare he had taken previously he was already running on little sleep, plus the little nap he had attempted to take on the flight was interrupted by several babies that had all decided to have colic at once. It was perhaps the source of his extreme irritation but when Sam asked if he was fine Ari just gave him a cheeky smile and stated he couldn't wait to get back to his old stomping grounds. The second that the group had finished with the meeting Ari stood up and announced that he had to go get some air before rushing out and heading to the stairwell.

At the floor they were at Ari made his way up to the roof instead of trying to go all the way down to street level. It was also blissfully empty and gave Ari a chance to sort through things while not exposing the others to his fraying. The rest of the group, especially Campbell, had been exposed to enough of his neurosis as his fingers went to get a cigarette out of his pocket and felt them trembling slightly. Just seeing the display of anxiety and weakness caused a snarl to form on his muzzle before he put the cigarette into his mouth and lit it, cupping his clawed hands around it to try and shelter the flame of the cheap lighter from the winds of the roof.

"Need a light?"

Ari looked up and saw Campbell standing there, the sabertooth tiger giving him a wry grin as he held out a finger and manifested a tongue of flame on the end of it. Though he was the one that he had been trying to hide from the sight of his partner put him at ease as he put the end of his cigarette against the finger and lit it before looking back out over their surroundings. For his part Campbell didn't say anything and just stood there next to him, his presence reassuring the kangaroo-cobra while he puffed away. After how long they had spent together they had grown to know how each other worked to the point where the feline knew when to pry and went to just stand there and give the hybrid time to process.

Plus Campbell didn't need to ask to know what was the source of his distress. The fucking Company... just thinking about the hell that they had gone through thanks to them had caused the scaly hood on the back of his neck to flare out. He could also feel a tingling sensation in his gloved hand and could sense that strange voice was whispering for him to consider things as they come. While a few years ago this type of stress may have caused him to go off the handle having such reassurances, even one as bizarre as the source of his power talking to him, made it hard to justify going off into his usual rage like he had done before.

The shift in attitude seemed to have taken Campbell by surprise as Ari felt those thick, muscular arms wrap around his torso and bring him closer. "You feeling alright?" Campbell finally asked. "I know that seeing that city must have brought up some bad memories."

"Nothing that I can't handle," Ari replied as he flicked the spent butt of the cigarette over the edge. "Plus it's not like Anubis is waiting for me, we're just finding out how the Company managed to screw themselves up this time, and we have the backing of Sam and the agency in case things get dicey." As Ari waited for the response for Campbell he was surprised when he didn't get one, turning to see a shocked look on the feline's face. "What?"

"I just never heard you so... positive before," Campbell replied, grinning sheepishly when Ari gave him a look. "Sorry, but normally the Ari I know would be ranting and raving about how it was bullshit that they would send us back here. I was half-expecting to walk in on you throwing stuff off the roof."

"Well if that's the case I better not smile in case I'd cause you to panic," Ari said with a slight chuckle before patting Campbell on the rear. While they agreed to keep their physical displays of affection to a minimum while at the office the comment about his attitude and given him a bit of a boost. "Tell the others to get ready, I would hate to miss our flight and then it comes out of our paychecks."

Campbell nodded and went to the door of the roof access, only to turn around and look at Ari once more with those glimmering red eyes. "You know that if it gets to be too much we can always do something else," Campbell stated in a serious tone. "I don't want you to fall back into bad habits because we're back in the city, you got it?"

"To be fair a lot of those bad habits ended at that power station," Ari joked, the grin on his face falling away when it was met with the stony face of the feline that caused him to break eye contact. "Plus I've been meaning to visit Miguel for a while, it would be good to go and pay my respects after all this time." While Ari could see that Campbell was still worried about him he left the roof, leaving the hybrid to his thoughts once more. Anubis, Miguel, the glove, the Company... no matter how hard he tried to run

from his past it always seemed to catch up to him, Ari mused as he looked over the city, and perhaps his nightmares were just one more way that he was being punished for his past actions.

But as Ari shook off his feelings he quickly reminded himself that he wasn't going to fall back into those old habits; not only were they bad for his health but he had promised Campbell and Lavender that he wouldn't. Plus as he had told Campbell it wasn't like Anubis was there anymore... though the fact that he had just had a nightmare and his glove started talking to him was some cause for concern. Was fate somehow forecasting what was about to happen to him when he flew back to his home city? Would the Company even want their help?

All things considered that last question was already answered for him; like Lavender he had been hearing stories about problems that were rising up with the hero syndicates that were all over the world. He had felt a bit bad about them since it was likely his actions in particular were responsible for the corruption and fall of a number of heroes, though if they hadn't been corruptible to begin with then he shouldn't have been able to do anything. It was a flimsy excuse but one that kept the guilt at condemning so many people to endure the enslavement of Anubis for his own personal gain at bay... but it seemed that he would have to confront the partial consequences of his actions finally. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, Ari thought to himself as he made his way back down the stairs himself to where the others were, maybe it was just a simple case of unrest and they could leave the city as soon as possible.

Less than a day later Ari found himself driving down the streets of the city, or rather lying in the backseat looking out the tinted windows while Ka drove the three of them in a rather large van. Though it had been years since they had last stepped foot in this area they weren't sure just how long of a lasting impression they had made and wanted to make sure that they remained undercover for as long as possible. As the kangaroo-cobra looked out he saw a number of areas that were familiar to him, most notably the skyscraper that contained the heroes guild that they were supposed to be helping. A small smirk formed on his muzzle as he glanced over to the building next to it and remembered the base that he had set up there in order to infiltrate it the first time, though they wouldn't be holing up in the same place twice as they continued on further downtown until they got to a residential loft building.

As the van pulled into the small underground parking spot there were no other cars in the lot, which was completely by design. This building had been recently finished and before they got any tenants the Company had essentially leased the entire building for the month so that they could work without the worry of neighbors catching on to their actions or worrying about the noise. The underground garage also meant that they could get in and out without their more monstrous natures being seen; while there were quite a few more anthros out in the world then there used to be thanks to Anubis even creatures of their kind were far and few between. Lavender was probably the most normal out of the group and the wolf was easily bigger than most bodybuilders.

But none of them planning on going out to do any sightseeing as they took the elevator up to the floor of their new apartment for the next month or so. Instead of four different rooms for each of them they all opted to take the large penthouse suite that was on the top floor. It was a step up from the last place they had started out in when they hooked up with the company, though for Ari it hadn't been his choice to do so. But this was a completely different situation and as Ari and Campbell made sure that the rooms were secure Lavender set up his computer and got to work securing their network. Ka was left to go out and get supplies for the four of them and also pick up their handler from the Company that would be helping them as their liaison.

"Man, this feels weird," Lavender commented as Ari felt the top of the cupboards for anything that might be hidden up there before putting in a gun of his own.

"What, being back in the city?" Ari asked.

"Yeah, but also technically working for the company again," Lavender explained. "I know that we're not and that essentially we've been loaned out to stop this snafu they got going on, but it certainly feels like it did when we were underneath their thumb. Of course I don't suppose you really have that much experience in that regard since you left the organization the first chance you got."

"An organization that had pressed me into their service in the first place," Ari shot back while hopping down from the chair. "I know you and Campbell loved to be heroes but as I've said before I had no interest in playing pretend. Frankly I think we just let the Company and these anti-hero groups go at each other and see who wins, maybe they have a point that people with powers are dangerous."

Lavender frowned at that and went back to his computer, and though Ari felt bad for his comment he didn't for having it. While the wolf used his technomancy skills and Campbell his fire powers for good he knew that if they had gotten into the clutches of those that had been corrupted they would essentially be villains. While the saber tooth tiger understood and had forgiven him for the betrayal that came with his escape from the Company he suspected that the wolf was still weary of his machinations even after all this time. That hadn't mattered to much to Ari as it never interfered with their job or personal life, plus shortly after they joined up with Ka the wolf had found someone to distract himself with and dote affection upon other than just the two of

them.

After about an hour everyone had just about finished up with their checks when they heard the door open again, Ka walking through the door with a number of bags that were laden across his arms. The others quickly rushed in and helped with the supplies, mostly the foodstuffs as it had been a long flight with little in the way of snacks. As they were sorting through everything Lavender asked where their handler was and the human said that he was on his way and would knock once he was here. With their meeting postponed for the time being Ari said that he was going to try and take a nap before they would have a meeting to discuss their plans and plodded his way towards the bedroom.

Unlike their last living arrangement there were multiple bedrooms that Ari could have chosen but the exhausted kangaroo-cobra decided to just go to the nearest door that had a bed in it. Fortunately everything had been furnished for them ahead of time and as the rather large man flopped down onto the bed he found himself letting out a groan of relief. Between the anxiety of coming back to the city and being up for nearly two days straight without sleep it didn't matter to him if the president was about to visit them. If there was something important they could try and wake him up but as he slowly rolled himself up in the covers he found his eyelids getting heavier before they closed completely...

When they opened again Ari suddenly found himself in a room that he couldn't recognize, though given there was only a table and two chairs in it he didn't exactly have the information to narrow things down. He looked down at himself and saw that he was in a familiar outfit; it was his mercenary fatigues, what he used to wear when he was out gallivanting across the globe for the Shadow Broker. Before he could do anything though he heard the door open and turned to see someone walk through it. For a second he was confused on who the human was before it suddenly came to him that this was Dynamo, one of the heroes of the Berlin branch of the Company.

As he began to talk Ari knew that he was hearing German but could understand it perfectly, which was because he had activated one of the powers of his glove in order to do so. The mission he had been on suddenly became clear but as soon as he realized what was about to happen he felt like a passenger in his own body. "So, you want to know why I am here on your front door?" Ari heard himself say, but while he didn't want to speak the words that he knew were coming he couldn't stop himself as the other man nodded. "I have something that I need to show you, that I need to show all the heroes of this world, something that concerns the very fate of humanity itself."

Internally Ari could feel himself grimace as he knew that his words would intrigue the hero to listen to him and, more importantly, maintain eye contact. They were all so predictable... just dangle the carrot of potentially saving the world in front of their faces that they wouldn't even notice that his eyes had started to turn to spirals or that alien thoughts had started to form in their mind. For many this power wouldn't even work but he had pegged Dynamo with his physical-based power as an easy target for hypnotic conditioning, which proved to be right as his jaw began to slacken while he continued to talk. Soon the thoughts of saving the world or even trying to find out why he was there could be seen being leached out of his head by his power as he leaned forward.

"That's a good boy, keep watching my eyes and listen to what I have to say," Ari said with a smirk on his face as he continued to watch the mental faculties of the hero begin to falter. "I'm going to give you a number and when we're done here not only are you going to cover for my escape but you'll call that number and continue to get instructions on what to do. You may work for the heroes but you belong to the voice that's on the other end of that line, do you understand me?"

Betrayal... it was something that Ari knew well and even just seeing it on the face of the one that he had hypnotized put a knot in his stomach. At this point he had already given up on his life and was unleashing his pain and agony on the world while getting paid for it, though the money didn't matter for him. This was about revenge, not only on the organization that had put him in a dire situation in the first place but also the heroes that worked for them. He wanted to make sure that this one would be in the pocket of the shadow broker to be at her beck and call... though as he looked over the enthralled creature he found that he didn't have to leave right away as the kangaroo-cobra continued to focus on the mind of hero while standing up from his chair.

"Kneel before me," Ari hissed, watching the weak-willed human do what he said. All that power and no ability to even reach it, not with the tendrils of his own continuing to work their way through his mind as he pulled down his pants and exposed his half-hard member. "Please me hero, please me like you hope to do to the company that you work for and the citizens you think you save."

Ari found it hard to watch as he knew what would happen to this hero that had leaned forward and licked his cock. He would be one of those that would be marked by Anubis and transform, almost becoming his servant and be on his knees just like he had been at this moment. One of the reasons he had selected Dynamo aside from being physical based in his power was he knew that the hero was gay and could potentially use it to his advantage, though all that meant for right then and there was that he was more than eager to suck his cock. It would only be the first step towards his betrayal of the Company and humanity in general but right at that moment he didn't care for anything but his own needs, which was his theme for his time as a mercenary.

Suddenly a low growl snapped Ari out of his thoughts and as pleasure continued to be given to him by the submissive human he saw the face of the man starting to push out and his eyes were turning purple. The mark of Anubis... that didn't happen here, he hadn't even been aware of what he was really doing for most of this time, but as Ari continued to feed his throbbing shaft into the mouth of the man the lips that were spread over his sensitive flesh darkened and stretched further with every suck. He

suddenly found himself in control of his body again but before he could do anything he was slammed against the wall as the transforming wolf man practically deep-throated one of his members. The outline of it could be seen pushing out his increasingly furry throat as the mark of Anubis formed on his head, a devilish grin forming on his face as he looked straight up at the shocked hybrid.

Your power, tampered...

Your soul, tainted...

The voice that Ari heard sent a shiver down his spine, but it wasn't the voice of Anubis. As the mostly lupine head continued to bob up and down on his cock with one hand holding the shaft he saw a reflection in the mirrored window that hung on the wall. It wasn't his reflection... and yet it was, and while he only caught a glimpse of it he knew that it wasn't the image of a kangaroo-cobra mercenary he saw...

...it was the visage of a monster that smirked back at him.

Ari suddenly awoke with gasping breaths like he was drowning. Suddenly seeing what he had done in such vivid detail felt like he was being mocked, though at the moment he merely clutched his head as he tried not to have a panic attack. Why now... why is he being tortured by his past? As he struggled to suck in breath through his nostrils his mind felt like it was on fire as he was given a show of the consequences of his actions while layering another terrible hallucination on top of it.

Once he had gotten his breathing somewhat normalized his shaking fingers went to his phone and looked at the time on it. Hardly ten minutes... that wouldn't even be enough to be called a power nap. As his shock and anxiety turned to frustration he managed to pull himself together just in time for the door to open and for Campbell to come in.

"Ari, you got to come here," Campbell stated excitedly. "Our liaison for the company is here, and you're never going to believe who it is."

Chapter 4:

"Holy shit, Mr. Stevens?" Ari said as he walked out of the bedroom and saw the lion man standing there. "What are you still doing with the company? I would have thought they retired you after the whole incident."

"Seems that after they cleaned house they needed all the help they could get from people they could trust," Mr. Stevens replied.

"Well I'm glad they're keeping you busy," Ari replied. "Wouldn't want you lion around, am I right?" The other three just stared at him like he had grown another head and prompted the hybrid to roll his eyes.

"Anyway, I'm mostly glad to see you all," Mr. Stevens said as he sat down at the table with the others including Ari, the lion glaring at him slightly before going down to his laptop.

"You're not still mad that I turned you into a lion man to keep my cover with the cult, are you?" Ari asked while they waited.

There was a moment of absolute silence as everyone else looked at Mr. Stevens, who just stared down his muzzle towards the kangaroo-cobra. "Yes, I am still mad that you turned me into a lion man," Mr. Stevens replied. "But as you know I don't let things like petty squabbles interfere with my work, and there is a lot of work to be done here. I'm sure that your CIA handler gave you the broad strokes about this particular mission so I'm not going to go over that, but instead I have a point of contact that I want you two to investigate."

The four were given a packet and as Ari opened his the first page was a photograph of a human man. "That is Mr. Desmond Rayardi," Mr. Stevens explained. "He is the leader of the largest anti-hero faction that has been growing in the city. He's a hedge fund manager turned activist that had both the time and money to burn in order to further his cause by any means."

"Sounds like someone cosplaying as a cop or military man," Lavender stated while he flipped through the pages. "I'm sure the CIA didn't send us out here just because of that, otherwise they would have dispatched us when the protests were taking place."

"Very astute as usual Lavender, there is something more going on to this than meets the eye," Mr. Stevens informed them to

move on to the next briefing, which showed a bunch of banking information. "From what your friends were managing to get us it seems that our new General is buying up machinery, land, and supplies that could potentially build his own city, yet he's been using it so far just to take potshots at heroes. Of course it's not just them they're fighting either as they've also given a few villains their licks too."

As the other nodded Ari just sighed and tossed the file in the air before rubbing his hands across his face. "Alright, we get it!" Ari practically shouted. "Let's go to this guy's mansion or whatever, kick in the door, beat his ass, and then have him answer a few questions if he's upright and still has his tongue. Why are we even trying to look into what he's doing?"

The outburst had caught everyone by surprise save for Mr. Stevens, who just cleared his throat before continuing. "As I was about to say before I was so rudely interrupted," Mr. Stevens stated. "The other problem is that Mr. Rayardi has more than just physical supplies at his beck and call, he also has built up a lot of influence in the city hierarchy that he can call upon to get him and his militia out of trouble. Anything that he can't do with a phone call he can accomplish with the army of lawyers at his beck and call."

"...I still don't see how this disqualifies my plan," Ari stated while he sat back in the chair, using his toe claws to grip into the wood while he leaned backwards. "We took down a god and his cult, how are we getting held up by a guy that probably would go down like a sack of potatoes with one punch? I probably wouldn't even need to use all three of my powers to take him out."

The others around the table gave him a look before they began to ask Mr. Stevens questions like if there was a pattern to his attacks or if he was just lashing out with his small army. Ari found himself bobbing back and forth with his tail twitching anxiously while listening to them speak. Even with his augmented hearing the lack of sleep was starting to catch up to him and the voices of the others were starting to sound like they were talking while underwater. As his mind began to wander towards the kitchen to where there would hopefully be a pot of coffee he suddenly felt gravity take hold of him and began to fall backwards.

The others jumped as Ari landed on his back with a loud crash, though as Campbell and Lavender looked up from their seats the kangaroo-cobra quickly bounced back on his feet. "I think they didn't build this building right or something," Ari lied as he rubbed the back of his head while putting the chair back in his place. "Everything feels tilted to the left, but while I'm up I'll go make us a pot of coffee and you three keep going on with the mission briefing. Don't worry about me missing anything, I wasn't even really listening in the first place."

Though the reality was that he had completely phased out of the conversation the cavalier answered seemed to be enough that the others just thought of him as being bored with the concept of subterfuge as a means of completing the mission. It fit with his usual attitude as he went into the separate kitchen area and rummaged around for a bit before he found what he had been looking for. Though his muzzle scrunched up in distain at Ka's choice of coffee it was the only kind that they had and as he started up the coffee maker he could still hear the other voices in the room. Maybe they didn't need him on this mission, Ari thought to himself while he watched the water slowly drip through, this seemed like something way below their pay grade anyway .

"Thinkin of runnin again, are ya?"

"Fuck me..." Ari said with a sigh as he gripped the counter, his hands shaking slightly as he could hear the chuckle of the voice's glove in his mind.

"I believe ya got enough of that from yer other companions," the voice countered.

"Look, I'm having a bad..." Ari pretended to look at the watch he didn't have before muttering once more. "...existence right now, if you could just stop doing whatever it is you're doing and let me sleep for like an hour that would be great."

"Ain't the one givin you nightmares," the glove replied. "You done did that all on yer own, but the timing of this particular bout is a bit concerning considerin your proximitude towards the original source of all your problems. Perhaps instead of runnin from your problems and tryin to get yourself killed like you usually do ya might want to try standing up to them."

This time Ari didn't have a retort to the glove as he allowed the sounds of the running coffee maker to sooth his nerves while he contemplated what the voice had just told him. He wasn't sure what was worse; that he had the voice of his power glove talking to him, or that it was actually making a lot of sense. It was the only companion to travel with him for the longest time and knew all of his sorted past as he found his fingers reflexively going up to rub the missing section of his left ear. Maybe it had been right before, that Anubis had been oppressing hte voice in his glove and only recently was able to come out and actually give him some semblance of advice.

"In case you don't remember Anubis is gone," Ari reiterated as the coffee finished up and he started to pour himself a cup. "And considering my nightmares started the day before I got called to this shithole of a city it couldn't be something here that caused

them to resurface. So, what, am I just torturing myself with the past because I'm bored?"

"Bored of what?" Campbell's voice suddenly rang out, causing the hybrid to jump and drop the pot of coffee onto the ground. While it was thankfully a plastic pot the contents still spilled out onto Ari's feet that caused him to yowl in pain and jump from foot to foot. "Ari! C'mon, we got to cool those burns."

Before Ari knew what was happening he was being dragged from the kitchen into the nearby bathroom, the pain in his feet radiating upwards while he saw Campbell turn on the bath. When he was told to put his feet underneath the tap he did so and nearly punched the wall as the cold water immediately hit the affected scales. More than once the kangaroo-cobra had to bite his finger as he waited for the sensation to pass but fortunately with his feet being mostly scales it was able to pass quickly. Though he told the sabertooth tiger that he was fine the other man closed the door and grabbed a washcloth before slowly rubbing his feet with it.

"Feeling better?" Campbell asked as he slowly rubbed the grey scales, causing Ari to bite his lip for a completely different reason.

"Feeling... something..." Ari said with a huff as the sensation was quickly turning from pain to something else, the sensitive feet curling as he gripped the sides of the bathtub. "Unless you want to test the durability of this tub I think you're good to go."

Campbell let out a soft ah of understanding before putting the washcloth to the side, though he kept Ari's feet under the cold water while leaning back against the tile. "So... not even in a day in the city and we're already back to our old routines, huh?" Campbell joked, Ari snorting as well and shaking his head before he felt a furry hand under his chin. "All joking aside, I don't like this turn you're having, not with all the progress you seemed to be making while we were working together."

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Ari replied dismissively. "Aside from apparently being a klutz today there's nothing that you have to worry about, plus from the sound of it this mission is going to be easier than changing a light bulb."

"Well, it may be easy but we still have to make sure that you're doing alright given your... previous problems," Campbell replied as his voice suddenly took a nervous shift in tone. "That being said it seems that the CIA have deemed it feasible that you get some help talking through what you might be feeling and have someone that they want you to report to." Ari groaned in dismay but it was cut short with a yelp as Campbell grabbed onto his middle toe and gave it a squeeze. "I mean it Ari, if you don't go through with this they're going to ground the whole team and send us packing for the nearest radar installation to listen to chatter for sixteen hours."

Ari huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, but he knew that the CIA had been threatening to put him on such a program for quite some time if he ever showed signs of mental instability. "Fine..." Ari finally said. "Who are they sending to try and shrink my big head."

"Actually..." Campbell hesitated for a moment before finally blurting it out. "It's Ka."

"I fucking knew it!" Ari said as he tried to get up, only for Campbell to once more squeeze the toe he hadn't let go of that sent the hybrid nearly crashing to the floor from the sensation. "Gah... why..."

"Because I know that I can stop you without having to pin you to the ground like this," Campbell explained with a smirk on his sabertooth muzzle. "Now you're going to be nice to Ka and meet with him once per week until this mission is done, you got that? No excuses."

"F-fine..." Ka replied reluctantly, finally letting out a gasp when he was let go off before quickly curling around and letting out a lustful growl. "Now that you teased the beast you're going to have to satiate him. I'll give you ten seconds to get to the bedroom before we test the homeowner's warranty the Company got on this place..."

The other two were still talking with Mr. Stevens about the mission when they heard the bathroom door practically slam open and the saber tooth tiger came barreling out the door with the kangaroo-cobra right behind him a few seconds later. As the lion looked to the wolf and human they both about what to do they both just shook their head and asked him to continue even as Ari slammed the bedroom door shut. The previous sleep deprivation was banished from his system as he found his lusts doing more than enough to keep him up in more than one way. Once the door was closed Ari pulled off of the shorts he had been wearing for modesty and pounced on Campbell to do the same to him. He could feel a wave of heat radiate out from the feline as his powers flared up from their feral foreplay, but that just made things all the hotter for both of them in every sense of the word.

It didn't take long before Ari had Campbell pinned against the bed, his tail blade carefully lowering the shorts the rest of the way before tossing them aside without ripping them. With the muscular feline naked he was about to get right to the main act, but

then he remembered the torturous toehold that he had done and decided to return the favor. Unlike Ka's delicate frame he knew that he could be a little more vigorous with his feline lover, feeling him start to practically salivate as he brought up a clawed hand to his chin. It had been a while since it was just the two of them and considering they were back in the city where they had first met it was only fitting that they would come back in the same manner.

With Ari's muscular arms wrapped around the neck and chest of the restrained saber tooth tiger Ari took his own flexible feet and practically wrapped them around the soft padded paws of the feline in front of him. The second his digits made contact with theirs Campbell let out a moan that both knew could probably be heard in the main living area. Ari was far too horny to care and while it was mostly to tease him the sensations also felt good to him. The rosy tail whipped around as the hybrid continued to stimulate them both while he began to get ready for the main event. A growl escaped from Ari's throat as he nibbled on the ear of the creature that he held captive, feeling Campbell tremble in delight at being taken by him as he felt his twin shafts throb in response to the stimulation.

While Ari could only take one of his shaft he knew from experience that the saber tooth tiger was more than capable of both. With Campbell properly subdued Ari reached down with the hand that had been squeezing the red-furred pectoral and instead gripped both of his shafts in order to push in at the same time. He could feel the other man squirming as both heads were pressing up against his tailhole but once more the hybrid merely licked against his ear and growled softly to relax. Campbell knew the drill and other than tensing a bit from the sudden shock of being stretched open by two heads at once his inner walls were easily separated to give Ka access.

Once he had gotten inside of the feline Ari wasted no time in pushing himself in, his hand once more traveling across the thick fur of Campbell's thigh towards his abs and groin. The other man's cock was as hard as a rock and just from the claws squeezing against the sensitive flesh he could feel the other man trembling in his gasp. Despite being such a powerful predator he was still putty in Ari's hands when he got this way, and that was the way he liked it while he continued to use his feet to keep him a quivering mess. Even if Campbell had thoughts of trying to overpower him to get on top the pleasure that was coursing through his body left him in a very vulnerable state while Ari began to thrust up into him.

Ari's ear twitched as he could hear something going on outside. Mr. Stevens had probably wrapped things up with the other two and were leaving, which meant that it was possible that Ka and Lavender may try to come in and join them. While that was just fine with him usually he wanted Campbell all to himself this time and it seemed that the others could sense that as they didn't disturb their rutting. Though it wasn't always the case in this moment the saber tooth tiger belonged to him and only him as he pushed the feline down on the bed and began to really thrust his twin cocks deep into him.

The two continued to be locked like that for a while, time slipping by unnoticed as the bed shook with the kangaroo-cobra's plowing into the mewling male beneath him. It wasn't just the act or the dominance that Ari was getting off on either as he could feel every muscle in his body working, his gaze drifting down to his own form as well as Campbell's. This city had created them, their hardened muscles and thick cocks were forged in the crucible of what they had to go through in this city. While he detested almost everything about this place he knew in his mind that this was the one thing he could say was a positive as he leaned on top of the furry back of the feline and once more squeezed his nipples, which had already started to leak onto the sheets as well as his cock.

The bed could be changed later, or if the Company was smart enough they would put stain resistant sheets down knowing their proclivities. As Ari's scaled hips began to burn from exertion the sensation of those tight walls clamping down on him and feel his maleness getting hilt deep into the other man was finally too much for him to hold back. With a loud hiss he came hard into the tiger, gripping onto his shoulders while Campbell did the same with the sheets beneath him. The first proper breeding in this city, Ari's lust-drunk mind mused as his breath hitched with each pump of his cocks into the feline, and when the climax finished hitting he fell forward and immediately fell asleep. It took Campbell a few seconds to realize that the kangaroo-cobra had passed out, the heavy weight of the larger creature causing him to huff as he attempted to crawl into a better position...

When Ari opened his eyes again he found himself getting punched in the face, a stark contrast to the scene that he had just left what felt like moments ago. The blow had caused his already disoriented mind to fumble in his thoughts and when he was hit again it forced his focus back into alignment. He was in a room with three others... two humans and a snake man that were all wearing suits. Though his ears were still ringing from the hits he could hear the sound of pounding music above him and realized that he had somehow gotten into a nightclub.

This job... he had been tasked with a simple matter of sneaking into a place and stealing the contents of a safe that was located underneath a Russian nightclub that was being used as a front for the mafias. He had been rather bold in his storming in and killing the guards that were at the back of the kitchen, then making his way down to the basement while the rest of the help scattered. What he had not been expecting was that it was completely empty save for a single chair that sat in the middle of a pool of light that was fitted with restraints, or the blow to the back of his head that he got from the one that was currently punching him in the face. They knew he was coming and in his brazen attempt to finish the mission quickly he hadn't even checked to see if there had been any danger like an ambush.

...mostly because at that point, he had no longer cared.

The man said something in a language he couldn't understand and from the tingling in his hand he could sense that his gauntlet

hadn't been activated as of that moment. That was good, it meant that he had all his powers available to him and he could pretty much kill these three and escape without much of a second thought. Yet as he continued to sit there the snake that was in front of him said something before hitting him again, this time in the stomach that caused him to groan and lean forward. His entire body shook from the pain but he did nothing to stop it, and he remembered why as he was hit in the face once more.

This was when he had learned that Campbell had taken the fall for his escape. Before that point he had been so preoccupied with his own survival and setting things up with the wealth that he had stolen while betraying the other man that he hadn't even thought of the consequences for his actions, but a few days before this job he had taken a few moments to check up on the city and had heard the news. He hadn't realized it at the time but that was when his recklessness had gone into overdrive; he had always been a little cavalier when it came to his own life, but this was the first time he had allowed himself to be caught in such a stupid trap. Once more the thugs that were interrogating him said something but he couldn't understand it at all, and once more as he was laid into he just took it.

Ari had lost count of the number of punches but eventually the snake stopped, shaking his fists as the hybrid leaned forward. He could feel something trickling out past his lips and as he looked up at the thugs with his blurred vision he managed to just give them a toothy grin. Is that the best they had... he remembered muttering it despite having been hit repeatedly in the head and whether or not they actually understood his words he followed it up by spitting blood on their fancy suits to emphasize the point. The other two had backed away in time but he had managed to get it on his target, which only caused the snake to hiss angrily before he disappeared into the shadows.

For a few moments he was left there with the other two and it gave Ari a chance to catch his breath before the snake returned holding something in his hand. The glint of the light on the blade caused the hybrid's yellow eyes to widen slightly and before he could say or do anything the thug came up to him and grabbed his left ear. Ari managed to tell him to hold on and was about to activate one of the powers of his glove but the beating he had received prior to this had dulled his senses and slowed his reaction time. Once more the snake said something and with a sneer on his face took the blade and sliced it upwards.

Red hot pain filled Ari's body and the next thing he knew everything went back with only the sound of his own howling in his ears. He could feel movement and felt the rush of power flowing through him but his brain couldn't seem to register what he was doing, it was like his body was on auto-pilot and all he could see was red. He could only feel the pain in his ear and rage flowing through his mind as the sound of the screams of the others joined in the echoes of his own in his own mind. By the time he was able to reclaim his senses he found himself panting and covered in blood... but other than what dripped down from his muzzle and the side of his head none of it was his.

Though he didn't need to see the scene before him to know what happened Ari found himself staring anyway while his chest heaved up and down from the heavy breath he was taking. The three men laid there around the chair, glassy eyes staring lifelessly up at him as he saw that he had been as creative as he was brutal in their execution. It mattered little to him as he began to search their torn and bloody suits in order to see if he could find anything that could help him in finishing up this mission, his mind clinging to that as a buoy of rationality in the chaos that he was surrounded by. As he found a set of keys that were labeled office he took the cash and weapons on them as well before using whatever clean parts of their clothing he could find to wipe the blood off his hands and face before heading upstairs.

As he made his way into the office and saw that the safe was there all along he happened to pass by a wall of windows that looked out into the club below. They were only slightly reflective but as he stared at them he could faintly see his own reflection in the mirror. His ear was still bleeding and he looked like he had just gone through a meat packing plant face first, but as his fingers went up to touch the tender appendage he found that his glove had already been maxed out with three very offensive based powers. One for each guy... he had been quite upset, and by the time his glove would recharge to give him his healing ability back it will likely be too late.

But as he looked at the pallid face of the kangaroo-cobra staring back at him he remembered at that moment that he didn't want to heal it even if he had the chance. He deserved it... for what he had done to Campbell, and this would be his way of always reminding himself when he looked in the mirror of what he had done in order to procure his freedom. It had been a life for a life, Campbell's for his, and at the moment it didn't look like a very good trade. He found the reflection snarling before the scene suddenly broke along with the window, his fist shattering it with one punch and causing the glass to rain down into the dance floor below. The other windows suddenly exploded outwards as well as though a shockwave had rippled through them and for the briefest of moment the glass coalesced to show him his reflection again, though once more it was a different version of him that sneered back at him...

When Ari awoke this time there wasn't a shock to the system like before, instead he found his eyes slowly opening as he laid there on the bed. He could feel the heat and fur of Campbell laying next to him and when the saber tooth tiger looked back in question he realized he hadn't even been asleep long enough for the feline to have nodded off either. He was also still inside the other man and instead of saying anything he just pulled himself up and out before muttering he needed a cigarette. Though he could see the confusion in the eyes of his lover the hybrid needed to get out of the bedroom for the moment, rubbing his left ear as he went down to the parking garage to light up and to be alone.

It had been several days since the group had arrived in the city; each day Mr. Stevens had come in to give them an update on what was going on as well as any new reports of hero or villain attacks from the militia. For the moment it appeared things were quiet, and that meant a lot of sitting around and doing nothing. Though the Company had provided entertainment in the form of television and video games, which Ari had specifically requested when they took the mission, the fact that they couldn't leave the apartment without being escorted in the van or hidden away had started to quickly make the three go stir crazy. None of them were used to sitting around and waiting for something to happen, most of the time when they were sent somewhere it was to get something done or, in Ari's case usually, someone to kill.

By the end of the fourth day Ari was practically pacing in the living room while Lavender and Campbell sat on the couch together watching a movie. Ka had gone off to see if he could scout a place where they could set up near the suspected militia meeting ground and the hybrid had never been more envious of a scouting mission in all his life. At this point the only place he had gone out was to the Company tower in order to visit the vault where heroes were laid to rest so that he could visit the one he knew who rested there, and while there had been a certain amount of catharsis in seeing that his previous sacrifice had not gone to waste it was a fleeting moment of emotion in a growing sea of boredom and anxiety. He just didn't understand it, why would they bring him out there just so that he would have to wait for their signal in order to do anything about it?

It also had not help that in those four days that they had been there Ari had gotten a total of maybe a few hours of sleep during that time. The nightmares were growing more prolific with each passing day and since the glove could only be active for so long he had been attempting to keep himself awake by any means necessary. If they could just finish this mission they could get out of there and perhaps these nightmares would stop, he contemplated as he made his seventh trip to the kitchen in the hour and poured himself another cup of coffee, but this laying about was making it hard for him to not fall asleep where his past was waiting for him. It also didn't help that every so often his glove would chime in trying to offer him some sort of advice that he either didn't listen to or flat out told was stupid, though hearing it continue to say that he was needed for the rest of the team was making it easier to push off the normally destructive tenancies that he was used to falling back on.

When the door opened up again Ari's head shot up and saw that Ka was standing there with his camera as well as a few boxes of takeout that he had been told to get before he came back from his operation. "So, are we ready to go?" Ari asked while Campbell and Lavender also got up from their seats. "Can we finally go to this militia camp and take out everyone?"

"As we've mentioned to you multiple times, we're not going to be taking anyone out if we can help it," Ka replied as he set the boxes of food down only to be immediately beset upon by the saber tooth tiger and wolf. "But I did get some more information on the venue that they use in order to have these anti-hero meetings, from the looks of it the leader doesn't go to any of them unless they are discussing something important and they don't talk about the attacks they're making. If anything the group I found was more like a support group for those who were messed with by heroes and had their lives changed for the worse."

"Great, another dead end..." Ari said in annoyance.

"Well, it gives us a chance to try and probe their defenses a little more, make sure we're not going off half-cocked like you seem to enjoy doing despite having twice the number as most," Ka joked, which did lighten the kangaroo-cobra's mood. "Also, since it's Friday evening I do believe we have something to do other than storming the gates of their compound wherever that is." Ari tilted his head and looked at him in question, which caused Ka to sigh and rub his head. "Your weekly evaluation, remember?"

Ari once more groaned and rubbed his hands against his face as he remembered the mandatory counseling that he had agreed to do in order to keep them on the mission and in active service. "I suppose it's better than just waiting around this place slowly dying of old age," Ari muttered, though as Ka led him over towards the small office room that was off to the side of the kitchen he perked up and a sly smile went across his muzzle. "Plus I'm sure we can do a rather thorough evaluation if-"

"We're not having sex Ari," Ka said flatly, the ears of the kangaroo-cobra drooping at the denial of his plan before he had even had a chance to get it out there. "This is serious business, Sam already knows about our evolved relationship and almost pulled me from your evaluation. I said that I would keep it professional and basically staked my job on making sure that we don't mess around while we make sure that you're still mentally stable enough to go on missions, plus I wouldn't want to do anything less than my best to take care of you."

Though the words were meant to be endearing the hybrid still found himself huffing and grumbling as he was brought into the mostly empty room that was occupied with only a couple couches and chairs. Part of Ari wondered if this had been the plan for this room all along as he was told to lie down on the couch on his back while the human took his place in one of the chairs while opening up his laptop. The hybrid did what he was told but only because it was someone he knew that was doing it; had they replaced Ka with someone else it would have been hard to not buck the authority of a stranger, but even if it was someone he considered a friend conducting this session he still felt a fair bit of trepidation. He had been through... a lot, and not only did he want to revisit such things but also didn't want to inflict such things upon others.

Ka finished setting up his laptop and spoke into a small microphone indicating the date, time, and whom he was speaking with before he set it down on a small table that was next to him. "Now Ari, I know that you've had a rather traumatic experience in

this city, or several from what Campbell and Lavender told me," Ka said as his voice took on a more professional tone. "I'm just here to talk anything out that you might think is weighing on your mind, and by the way anything you say will be kept in this room in case you were worried about that. Lavender and Campbell both promised me they won't listen in so you can talk about whatever is troubling you."

As Ari laid there he could feel his mind practically swelling with potential things that he could say to Ka at that moment. There was the fact he was back at a city that had traumatized him more times than he could count, that he was working for a company that had caused all this to happen in their own way, and that his glove was talking to him and he was getting horrific nightmares about his past. It felt like a lot to dump on someone for their first time so he decided to just go into battle that he had undertaken with the entity known only as Anubis and his plans to turn the entire world into anthro slaves. Though Ka knew about the official explanation of what happened Ari filled in a few details that only he and the others knew; that he had tricked Anubis into thinking he was working for him and had betrayed his friends, and the only reason that it even worked was that he had done so in the first place and also had the help of a jaguar named Miguel.

"I remember hearing you and Campbell talking about this Miguel before," Ka said as he typed into his computer. "You never really talked about him before though, at least not to me, and I could tell that the name was a sore point for you. Do you think that perhaps you could tell me a little about him?"

"Well... he was sort of the reason that I got into everything," Ari admitted while he curled his toes over one another. "Not just because I found the glove by following him home, but also because he wanted to be a hero more than anything else in the world. When I had started getting powers thanks to this thing he was so excited that he had even made me an outfit in case I wanted to try my hand at being one... but in the end even with everything I did with Campbell and Lavender he became the real hero that actually stopped Anubis. He literally sacrificed everything so that the city could be safe and... and it was my fault that he was put in that position in the first place."

"So you blame yourself for putting Miguel in a position that he needed to sacrifice himself," Ka reiterated. "Do you think if things had been different he might have survived, and if he did would someone else have potentially taken his place?"

Ari was about to respond when the question really sank in and caused him to think. He guessed that if he had never went home with Miguel then he would have never found the glove, which meant that someone else would have. It might have been someone that was more easily manipulated by Anubis too, and if that had been the case... then the world would be a much different place. Even so it was still hard to justify the death of someone he cared about, especially since he had gone off and done quite a few unsavory things in order to try and bring him back before the end.

When he relayed all that to Ka the human typed down something in his laptop before looking back up at Ari. "You're talking about your mercenary work when you speak of unsavory thing," Ka asked, Ari nodding his head as the hybrid was thankful for the change of subject. "I know that you did some hard things for your job, things that got you those scars on your body. Perhaps they weren't all physical though... especially if you're trying to put your life on a different path."

"I... um... I suppose not," Ari replied, faltering slightly as they were getting close to the subject of his nightmares. "I'm... not sure if you noticed, but I haven't exactly been sleeping the greatest, maybe been a tiny bit more ornery than usual."

"We've noticed," Ka replied simply.

"Oh, well then, I've lately been having these strange nightmares when it comes to my past," Ari admitted. "I don't know why now, but every time I shut my eyes I find myself reliving something that I would rather have just stayed in the dark recesses of my memory where it belongs." For a second the hybrid thought about telling Ka about the fact that his power glove had started talking to him too, but he decided that might be a little too much for one session as he waited for the other man to respond.

"Well... our minds can process trauma in a number of different ways," Ka said as he set the laptop aside.

"Can't I get it to process in a way that allows me to sleep?" Ari asked sarcastically.

"Not how that works," Ka replied as he stood up. "However I think that maybe I could help with that, just give me a few minutes and I'll be right back."

Ari nodded and watched Ka leave before settling into the cushions of the couch. While he knew this was supposed to help him Ari couldn't help but feel even more miserable than before, especially as old memories of what he had done came to the surface. For the longest time he didn't think he deserved any sort of atonement and past him probably would have thought that this was a worthy method of torture for the crimes that he had committed. Instead he got the glove whispering in his mind that Ka was trying to show him the good in what he had done and to try and let go of the blame he had put on himself, which only caused him to clench his fist with the glove even tighter despite knowing that it did nothing.

As Ari stared off into the ceiling he was suddenly startled as the door opened suddenly again, Ka standing there with a frown on his face. "Ka, what's wrong?" Ari asked, only to have him stay silent as another man entered into the room. "Sam?"

"Sorry kid, there's no way we can trust you with a mission like this," Sam said as two more people in heavy armor came in and pointed guns directly at him while a third moved its way towards the couch. "Or any mission really, not with what we just heard. In fact I think that we need to make sure that you can't be allowed to cause this kind of destruction to anyone ever again."

With the guns pointed almost directly at his face Ari had put his hands up in the air to show that he wasn't armed, which allowed the third man to pull them behind his back and cuff them into place. "Wait, Sam, you got to believe that these nightmares are just something that are probably coming up due to stress or something," Ari pleaded as he felt something get fitted around his glove, the tingling in his hand that he had grown used to after all this time disappearing while a second set of straps were being secured over his muzzle. "C'mon, you know that I can handle this, this is bullshit!"

"Call it whatever you want," Sam said as he took out a cigar and put it in his mouth. "But at least this way you don't have to worry about hurting anyone ever again."

Ari tried to continue to state his case but when he felt the straps tighten against the back of his neck he suddenly could no longer speak from the muzzle around his snout. He also felt his tail get clipped to the chains of his handcuffs and when that was secure he found himself getting lifted up onto his feet. With the two guns trained on him there was nothing he could do but let them carry him out of the office and into the main section of the apartment. When he was brought out he saw Lavender and Campbell standing there talking to two other members of this task force, and while he tried to get their attention the only thing he got from the two of them was a mournful look before he was escorted out into the hallway.

"Wish things could have ended better," Sam said as Ari was led towards the elevator doors, which two more men were at holding them open leading them to an empty shaft. When Ari stopped in his tracks at seeing the expanse of darkness below his eyes widened and he tried to push back only to get stopped by one of his escorts as the other put a bag over his head. With his vision gone and his tail and hands bound there was nothing he could do as he heard his handler wish him luck in his next life before he was pushed, causing him to fall backwards and plummet down the elevator shaft to his demise...

Ari felt his body bounce slightly on the couch cushions as he opened his eyes and let out a gasp like he had been underwater. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he looked around and found the familiar setting of the empty office surrounding him. "That was a dirty fucking trick!" Ari shouted once he realized what had happened, his trembling body laying back on the couch as he smacked himself in the head. "Fucking nightmares... fucking nightmares!"

A few moments later the door swung open and Ka rushed in, Ari seeing Lavender and Campbell in the background looking in before the door was closed behind the human. "Ari, what's wrong?" Ka asked in concern, kneeling down by Ari's side as the kangaroo-cobra continued to hyperventilate. "Just breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Take your time, no need to rush it."

The soothing words managed to snap Ari out of it as he did what he was told, eventually starting to even out his breathing. When it looked like he had normalized Ka asked what had happened and Ari found himself pouring out all the details of his latest nightmare. "So it's not just your past," Ka said as he sat back down in the chair. "It seems like something inside you is extremely conflicted, or maybe there is something going on that we don't know about with your glove that's affecting your mind."

"Yeah... maybe," Ari managed to reply. "I'm not sure if they told you this but back when Anubis was around I used to have these... hallucinations, which turned out to be Anubis trying to control me so that I would align with him and create these anthro slaves of his. You don't think something similar is going on, do you?"

"Do you think that this is Anubis?" Ka asked.

"I... no, not really..." Ari replied hesitantly. "Considering how I left things with him I doubt that he would just be sending me nightmares when he could do so much worse, not to mention we snapped his tether to this realm."

"Perhaps it's something residual in the glove then," Ka conjectured before reaching into his pocket and pulling out an orange bottle. "Anyway this is what I wanted to get for you. They're sleeping pills, ones that should hopefully at least get you a few hours of sleep so that you're not running on fumes. There's only a couple in there but if I put in a request I'm sure I can pick up more for you, just make sure you're only taking one a night and that you're doing it at a time that you are fairly certain your sleep will be uninterrupted."

Ari's frown deepened as he looked at the pills being offered to him. While he was no stranger to drugs they were more often than not the fun kind, or those that were introduced to him against his will. At this point though he was willing to try just about anything as he felt his eyes begin to droop again after the adrenaline had worn off. As Ka continued to inform him on all the potential side-effects and proper usage of the pills the door suddenly opened with a very concerned Campbell informing them

that they had to go.

The anti-hero militia had just struck in a big way.

Chapter 6:

By the time the van carrying Ari and the others had gotten to the site most of the fires had already been put out, the firefighters spraying down the partially destroyed building in order to get the last of the flames they could see out before doing their inspection. Since it was fire based and there might be potentially technology Campbell and Lavender decided to go along with Ari while Ka stayed back and analyzed the results of their first session along with checking news feeds and other contacts. Since the Company had given them the heads-up they had gotten there before the news crews did, which was good considering they didn't want their presence to be quite known in the city just yet, and with it being the middle of the night they decided to risk letting Lavender drive while the other two hid in the back seat.

As soon as they got close enough to the perimeter that was being set up one of the firefighters came up waving his arms to stop them, only for Lavender to stick his head out of the car and cause him to stop and give them a thumbs-up instead. No doubt Mr. Stevens coordinating to get them the clearance they needed, Ari mused as they drove up towards an area of the parking lot that wasn't covered with emergency vehicles or their equipment. Along with the firefighters there was a significant police presence as well, though from what they had been told while driving there that anyone connected with the scene had already been hauled away. As she looked at the blown-out wall of the building they were surprised that the casualty count wasn't higher.

Two civilians, three members of the militia and one hero, it was the first time that one had finally fallen under their attack. The group had officially graduated to hero-killers, though from what the initial reports coming into the Company said it was mostly an accident. A hero that could control air had been dispatched this chemical plant in order to help with a leak that had been reported in the area, only to be ambushed by the militia that attempted to capture him. Why they wanted to do that in the first place was anyone's guess, but the ensuing fight had caused a rupture to rip through one of the more flammable chemical tanks and caused the explosion that wrecked the havoc the three were looking at.

It was fortunate that it had been mostly inert gasses that were produced here and it was a small plant, as Ari looked over towards the nearby buildings he knew that if there had been something nastier in there or if it was a bigger production facility they might have leveled the block and killed everyone in it. But as it stood they had the potential to possibly find something that would give them a lead on the main headquarters of this anti-hero militia or who its enigmatic leader really was. Most of the equipment that the group had brought with them was dropped or scattered when the explosion happened and police had been rather quick on the scene as well as a few other heroes that quickly came on the scene to try and help their fallen companion. Unfortunately none of them had the same power that Campbell wielded as he stepped forward and waved his hand, red eyes glowing fiercely as the remaining flames died down and were pushed aside.

Once they had cleared a path into the main section of the plant they each put on a gas mask and made their way inside. As expected the explosion had decimated the building and the equipment inside of it, but that wouldn't stop them as they began to pick through the debris and rubble. The firefighters had already cleared the building of any other potential victims or survivors so all that was left for them was rocks, twisted metal, and anything they could find underneath it. Ari tried to think of a superpower he could replicate in order to make searching faster but other than the earth moving abilities of a former villain he had dispatched the last time he was in the city he couldn't think of anything to move the rubble around that wouldn't destroy the items underneath.

Which meant... if he couldn't move the top layer to search underneath, he would need a better way of looking for what laid beneath. He remembered in his travels that he met a charming young man that had the power to sniff out valuable objects, whether to him or in general, who had turned into a dragon when the ritual of Anubis went off. In the back of his mind he wondered if they were doing alright and managed to adapt to the change as he activated the first power on his glove to mimic that ability. The second he did so he found that there were a few items that came into his vision, though from the sense of it he was catching the fire trucks and other equipment outside that had value in saving lives.

As the other two continued to look around Ari stood there and attempted to hone the ability further, though he was having a hard time of it. Between the gas mask, the lights and sirens outside, and his own sleep deprivation trying to mold and shape a power he was unfamiliar with made it extremely difficult. He could feel his body shaking slightly as he continued to press inwards and could feel the strain on his body as he forced the ability to do what he needed. As the minutes passed he eventually managed to filter out the equipment that was outside as well as the items that Campbell and Lavender had on them which they believed valuable to them, which only left a few items that he could sense somewhere beneath his feet.

Like using a dowsing rod to find water Ari slowly spread out his arms and stuck out his tail as far as he could in order to try and feel where they were. He was glad that it didn't manifest like the actual power did, which was through smell, and as he walked towards one of the balconies areas that hadn't collapse he could feel his valuable senses tingling. When he got a good sense of where it was he called over Lavender to use his strength to pull the rocks out of the way and find out what was underneath before moving in the direction of the next ping. In total he got five decent signals with the wolf and tiger taking two each while

Ari got to work on the last one that he had found.

Once they had unearthed everything they decided to go outside before the building collapsed on them and made their way to the nearest exit in the form of a hole blasted out of the wall. When they emerged once more they saw that the start of the media team for the city was starting to descend upon the cordoned off area set for them. Though they were being rather calm about it at the moment if news got out that a hero was killed on the scene it would make for a feeding frenzy that even they wouldn't be able to sneak away from. For the moment they had a little time though and wanted to see if Ari's senses had worked and they got treasure or if it turned out to be junk.

The items that Lavender had dug up were some piece of equipment that was likely used for the chemical plant, which was valuable for the company but not for them, and some sort of modified gun that was only slightly bent up. For Campbell he had gotten a little more success in the form of a crystal that must have been valuable to either the hero or the militia and some sort of coin that Ari joked they couldn't make heads or tails of. The two just gave him a look before they asked what he had found, to which the kangaroo-cobra grinned and pulled out the military bag that he had managed to uncover. When they looked inside of it they found a few things of note like flares and a few tools, but what really perked up Lavender's interest was the digital radio that was inside.

As Lavender took the radio to see what he could do with it later the crystal, coin, and gun were all put into the military pack and latched back up before they made their way to the van. As they got inside all three of them got a text from Ka that news about the hero death had just become public and if they don't want to become part of the story they needed to leave as soon as they could. Ari and Campbell both took tarps they had brought with and pulled them over themselves while Lavender attempted to make his way through the emergency personnel and the growing crowd of reporters that were trying to get past them. Fortunately with the news freshly breaking by the time the reporters on-scene had caught wind of it they were already past the perimeter and driving back onto the main road.

"That was way too close," Lavender said as the two in the backseat uncovered themselves. "Could you imagine the media firestorm if they had found the former cult crusher on scene where a hero died?"

"Cult crusher... I like that," Ari said with a smirk before he looked down at the bag in contemplation. "Sort of strange when you think about it; last time we were here we had to save the city from the heroes, now we're trying to save the heroes from the city."

"Ebb and flow I guess," Campbell said, Ari nodding his head in response before realizing that the saber tooth tiger was looking at him in concern. "Your nose... it's bleeding."

Ari brought his fingers to his nose in concern and when he pulled them back they were stained with a bright crimson as a few more droplets dripped past his lips and onto the bag. He suddenly became very aware of the throbbing in his head and the pain that was shooting up his arm, a warning that he had been using the power of the glove for too long. As the hybrid quickly dismissed the sensing of valuables he wasn't sure what was more concerning, that he had taken so long to realize he was at the danger zone or that it had come up on him so quickly. Normally he could go for up to a few hours, especially with only one power active, but they had only been at the sight for an hour max and that was when they had gotten out of the van.

"Must have been something in the chemical plant," Ari said as he pressed his wrist against his nostrils to try and staunch the bleeding.

Campbell looked at him with a critical gaze, but it was quickly replaced with one of concern as he grabbed a piece of cloth from the van and gave it to Ari while tilting his head back. "If that's the case then we need the Company to get you a doctor," Campbell suggested. "Maybe even go there to the clinic, considering we're looking into this for them after how they treated us I think we can swing a nighttime appointment."

"I'm telling you I'm fine," Ari pressed, waving his hands dismissively. "This isn't even the worst that I've bled this week. Plus if I was really feeling anything you know I would tell you, I just need to get back and get some sleep."

The last part was definitely the truth as Campbell continued to dote on him while Lavender drove back to the apartment. In reality he knew exactly what had happened, but if he told them then they would try to limit his use of the glove until they found out why his stamina had been shortened so significantly. Even as they drove home he had already gotten a few theories about what happened, which when he reached out mentally to see if the glove would concur he found it to be frustratingly silent. The one time that he could actually use a voice in his head, the hybrid fumed as they continued to drive back to the apartment.

By the time they reached the underground garage the bleeding had stopped and Campbell had stopped hovering over him to make sure that he was alright. As soon as they got up Lavender went to try and do something with the radio they found while the saber tooth tiger and human were put in charge of the military bag. Ari found himself clutching the pill bottle in his pocket as he asked the others if they didn't mind him turning in for the night, which got little resistance even though they were in the middle of an investigation. Perhaps his sleep deprivation was more noticeable than he had imagined... either way Ari just thanked them and made a quick stop to the bathroom for a mouthful of water to wash the pill down before making his way back to the

bedroom he had claimed earlier with Campbell and crawling underneath the covers.

"This had better work..." Ari murmured to himself as he laid back on the pillow, his vision starting to spin slightly as he stared up into the ceiling while his eyes slowly closed. "I wonder... how long it'll take... before... yawn..." The kangaroo-cobra didn't even get to finish the sentence as fatigue took him over, causing him to sink down into a state of deep slumber. The last thing that crossed his mind before he fully blacked out was that he hoped nothing was waiting for him on the other side...

When Ari slowly opened his eyes again he found that he was surrounded by darkness, which depending on what time it was could either be a really good or really bad thing. At least he wasn't in one of his earlier mercenary missions, he thought to himself as he slowly tried to get up only to find his body floating. This was new, and as he struggled to try and get on his feet he suddenly found himself on them as the darkness had solidified into something he could walk on. A fleeting idea had crossed his mind that perhaps the pill had been as effective as Ka had thought, but just because it cancelled out his dream didn't mean it stopped his mind from thinking.

"If this is going in real time then I'm in for a very, very boring couple of hours," Ari said out loud as he looked around the darkness for a sign of anything. "Hello? Am I in a coma or something? Flash a light in my eyes twice if I'm currently in the hospital and in a vegetative state."

As expected there was no sudden flash of light, but what he did eventually see was a figure that started to coalesce out of the darkness in front of him. When it finally started to take shape Ari let out a gasp and took a few steps back from the jackal figure that stood before him. "No... no way..." Ari said in disbelief as that smirking visage of Anubis continued to stare at him. "No, I refuse to believe it! Miguel and I stopped him from ever having a connection to this world!"

As Ari began to find his breath coming in short, ragged gasps from the sight of the creature the jackal did not move nor even blink as a second figure appeared on his left side. This one was a far better sight to see as the jaguar that formed gave him an easy smile and was frozen mid-wave. Miguel... was this some sort of new nightmare his mind had cooked up while under the influence of the sleep drug? Or maybe he was just seeing things because of his talk with Ka, either way he found that both images were a bit unsettling to see next to one another until more figures began to coalesce in front of him.

Campbell... Lavender... Mr. Stevens... not only did they show up, but so did people that he hadn't thought about in years since he had last come to this city. He found a laugh actually escaping his lips as he saw the anthro deer known as Treeborn, the druidic hero that he had managed to get to help him take down Anubis instead of serve him. Then on the other side there was a familiar bull and kitsune that were two heroes, his face curling in distaste as he remembered Shockwave and Mesmer from that same raid but on the opposite team. Last he had heard they were still in prison for what they had done to aid Anubis, considered irredeemable by the Company and locked away so that they couldn't harm anyone else.

It was all an interesting trip down memory lane and a fair shake better than having to relive his greatest hits as a scumbag mercenary, but he still wasn't sure what this all meant. Since he wasn't dealing with the real Anubis he found himself breathing a little easier as he went up to a few of them and found they were more like holograms than anything else. "Alright brain, what are you trying to tell me with this," Ari mused out loud as he put his clawed fingers to his chin. "Is it something to do with the city, or with the glove, or Anubis? Can I at least get a hint?"

Suddenly all the other images dissolved away from the scene and left him with one more that appeared before him, one that caused his jaw to drop as it was a face he hadn't seen in ages. It was him... but him as a human, back before this glove had come into his life. He found a couple laughs spilling out of his mouth as he went up to himself and looked around it several times while in shock. He had been so much smaller back then, he observed as he got back in front of himself, so much more idealistic...

So much weaker.

The alien thought had been so powerful that it had caused the entirety of Ari's body to shudder as he looked around for the source of it, only to see nothing but darkness around him still. When he looked back at his image though he found it had changed; gone was the human of his past, instead replaced with his current state as a kangaroo-cobra. It was like looking in a mirror if it was three-dimensional in nature as Ari found himself noting the change in stature to his previous human self.

This form is so much more powerful, don't you agree?

Ari found himself snarling as he looked away from his reflection and into the darkness, letting out a loud roar as he spread his arms out and flexed his claws in defiance. "I'm getting really fucking sick and tired of voices in my head and people playing the mysterious fucking deity!" Ari shouted. "Either just come out and tell me what you're going to do or get the fuck out of my head! I'm done with this, and with all you power fuckers that think this is fun or something!"

Ari found himself panting heavily as he let out all the rage that had been building up inside of him out into the void, but as he

had expected he didn't get a response back. Perhaps he had hoped for a voice to call back, even if it was to confirm that he wasn't going insane like he had with Anubis. It felt different though as he dwelled on those past experiences versus now, the reason he suspected it was his own brain was that it felt so familiar to him and not like someone playing with his mind. While it was a refreshing change of pace it still didn't explain his nightmares or what they had to do with anything, though as he turned back around he found that the model that reflected him was gone.

Before he even had a chance to utter how strange that was he felt a presence behind him and spun back around just in time to have a clawed hand grip his throat. As a crushing pressure bore down on his windpipe he found his head getting tilted it back that made it hard to see his attacker, but as he scratched against the muscular hand he managed to see that it was him... except that more monstrous version that he had been catching glimpses of. "You think you're powerful enough to challenge a god?" Ari heard his own voice said, though it was a bit deeper and had an almost feral quality to it. "You are still pathetic... but you could change all that."

"What... the fuck... does that... mean..." Ari managed to gasp out, only to get slammed against a wall that wasn't there before and pinned there while he continued to squirm in the grip of this monstrous doppleganger.

"You had a glimpse of what you could be when you were with Anubis," the other Ari snarled back. "But he wasn't imbuing you with power, he was taking it from you, using it for himself while keeping you weak... and yet you still beat him. Yet with the blockage removed you still find yourself too timid to take what is rightfully yours and too scarred to realize it, but in the forge of misery you will find the crucible to refine yourself to what you truly are."

With the ironclad grip on his neck Ari began to feel his body quiver as he could feel himself losing consciousness, but just as his eyes started to roll back into his head he was dropped unceremoniously to the ground. As he coughed and gasped for air the only thing that burned in his mind was that there was something else out there that was fucking with him, something that was definitely not Anubis and seemed to only have eyes for him. What he truly was... what in the hell did that even mean. As he slowly stood back up he felt a shiver go down his spine as the question was answered for him.

An apex predator among the powerful.

A beast that terrorizes from the shadows.

A...

Huge...

Fucking...

MONSTER.

That last word rang in Ari's mind like a bell and as he got to his feet he found himself at a rare loss for words. The promise of power, he had heard that before from his former tormentor as he looked around for that other version of himself. If the human had been his past and then he saw his current self, was that thing that attacked him supposed to represent his future?

No... Ari found himself pushing away the notion as he found himself pacing in the abyss once more. He had gotten a taste of that life while being a mercenary, and that was exactly what he was trying to get away from. He had people that counted on him to be sane and rational as well as powerful, but from what little he saw of the entity that attacked him it was anything but that. It even scared him with how ferocious it had been and even as he saw nothing around him he found himself holding onto his arms and shivering slightly from the experience.

He wasn't sure how long he walked around in the emptiness of his mind but as he did he heard something that caused him pause. It sounded like someone was calling his name... and it sounded like Campbell? The hybrid's eyes narrowed as he waited for whatever trick was about to be played on him, only to just hear his name repeated over and over. Eventually a light started to shine down on him and as he felt himself being lifted up he could hear it getting louder and louder...

"Ari!" Campbell shouted, Ari's eyes shooting open as he felt the saber tooth tiger practically shaking him awake. "Wake up!"

"I'm awake! I'm awake!" Ari shouted back, pushing away the muscular arms of the other man that caused him to fall back onto the bed again. "What the hell is going on?"

"Well we needed you to get up because Mr. Stevens is here and he wants to brief us on a potential plan of action," Campbell

explained. "Ka had been telling us to just let you keep sleeping but considering it's been almost two days we thought that it was time to make sure you weren't in a coma and get you up to speed on what was going on. Since you're up now why don't you get dressed and you can join us."

Ari found his head still groggy as he tried to focus on what the feline was saying before he watched Campbell practically bounce out of the bedroom and into the main living area. Two days... considering that he had been awake for nearly all of five that tracked, though he hadn't thought the medication Ka would give him would be so powerful. Or perhaps it had just allowed him to finally go completely under and bypass the layer of hell that his consciousness was getting caught on all this time. Even as he got up and stretched his rested body he continued to remember what he had been told in that strange mental state he was in.

It was not something for him to dwell on at the moment though, with his body refreshed enough to finally focus he put on his usual pair of gym shorts and walked out to see that the lion was once more at their table with laptop in front of him. The other three were there as well and as soon as Ari sat down with him he had a cup of coffee slid his way. Though he had drank more then he could possibly have wanted in his lifetime over the last few days he was still waking up and found himself desiring the caffeine more then his distaste for the flavor. To his pleasant surprise he found it was a better brand then what they had been subjected to the last week or so and when he looked up at Ka the human just gave him a knowing wink.

"Well, now that we're all here I have news that I think you will all want to hear," Mr. Stevens said as he once more passed them all a folder to look over while he talked. "After the death of the hero and several others at the chemical plant there has been increased pressure that is starting to push anger away from the hero groups and towards the militia. The Company feels like we can capitalize on this and potentially destabilize them further, but in order to do that we need to get more information on vital things like headcount, weapons supplies, and things of that nature."

"How are they managing to still avoid detection?" Campbell asked. "Between the Company and our resources we should have had these answers snuffed out a while ago. Are they really just that secretive?"

"As I mentioned before it's more complicated then that," Mr. Stevens explained. "Mr. Rayardi is hiding behind a web of red tape and plausible deniability, even the attack on the chemical plant can't be linked to him and we've been trying quite hard to do so. It's that same shield he's using to make sure that we don't get a solid hold on his financial or administrative numbers and hero powers are little match against bureaucracy."

"So the same laws that they swore to uphold are keeping their hands tied?" Ari asked with a chuckle. "Man, I'm going to have to remember that for next time."

"Anyway," Mr. Stevens chimed in as he gestured for them to turn the page in their report. "We've received word that Mr. Rayardi is attending a black tie affair in the city for some sort of charity related to the chaos the hero corruption caused and figured that this might be a good time to ingratiate yourselves to him. Hope you got a tuxedo in your size because this party is tonight and we're going to need you there."

A murmur spread between the rest of the group before Lavender spoke up. "Are you sure that we should be going public like this?"

"At this point we can't see the harm in putting you on a more active investigation role," Mr. Stevens confirmed. "Whispers of your return have already started to filter through the information networks and its only a matter of time before someone catches a shot of one of you. We believe that it would be better for you to make an introduction before that happens so that you can craft the narrative of why you're there in the first place."

This time Ari was able to track the conversation far more closely as they discussed how they were going to go about crashing the party. Though the charity event was open to the public they would need a special pass if they were going to get into any room that might have Desmond Rayarti in it. Those had already gone out to the influential of the city however and if they were caught with a forged one it would immediately throw the two into suspicion. The only other idea they had was to somehow get invited into the back areas of the party by someone else, which was why Mr. Stevens believed that Ari would make the best Trojan Horse in order to get in.

Though Ari wasn't a fan of big gatherings of people even he admitted that it was a good way to try and get closer to the guy. Once he was there he might even be able to plant one of Lavender's bugs on him so that he could be tracked, or maybe catch up on some juicy gossip that would help point them to the militia. The only problem that the hybrid vocalized was that subtlety and tact were not really his strong suits, to which Mr. Stevens replied that it was the reason that Campbell was coming along. While Lavender would be useful on a mission like this he was the least known and also most connected to the Company and they didn't want to risk someone connecting the dots if the three of them suddenly showed up together, which was why Ka also elected to stay behind.

It would be him and Campbell teamed up just like the good old days, Ari thought to himself, except this time he wouldn't poison

his partner and leave him to take the fall for his escape. At least... he hoped that wouldn't happen again, though as the kangaroo-cobra wondered if there was an actual chance where that scenario would come up he got a clap on his shoulder from Campbell. He was informed that the Company was bringing up their tailor that specialized in unique body types in order to get them ready for the party, which Ari explained was a good thing since he had left his last tuxedo on a bathroom floor in Morocco. With the party being only a few hours away everyone hustled to get ready for their grand reentry into society.

Chapter 7:

A few hours later the conference hall of one of the fancier hotels in the city was ready for a party; valets were ready to take the cars of those that were coming in to the charity ball while inside servers made sure that hungry and thirsty guests were taken care of while security made the rounds to keep everyone safe. It was the type of event that Ari would avoid like the plague, yet as he squeezed his way out of the car they had rented for the event he found himself standing right at the door with Campbell standing next to him. "Can you remind me again why we're doing this?" Ari asked as they could see that their unusual stature squeezed into a set of tuxedos that just managed to fit them despite extensive alterations.

"Because our job told us too and we might be stopping a potential psychopath from destroying the city because of his anti-hero hatred?" Campbell asked back.

"I mean... I guess," Ari said with a sigh as he spat into his palms and slicked his fur back. "I guess we go mingle."

"Try not to punch anyone," Ka's voice said in the earpiece they both had. While the two would be going into this by themselves both Ka and Lavender had decided to situate themselves in the van a few blocks away while utilizing the technology of both the Company and their CIA outfit so they could attach hardly visible cameras and microphones to them. Though it gave the other two a chance to see and hear what was going on it was unlikely they would be able to come in as back-up should things actually get hairy.

Not that Ari expected things to go horrifically wrong like they usually did in these normally benign settings, the kangaroo-cobra attempting to loosen the collar around his scaly neck without cutting the fabric with his claws. Since they didn't want to look like they were talking to someone other than each other the two whispered that they would be on radio silent for the foreseeable future before making their way up to the door. As they passed by several groups of people that were outside the gala for one reason or the other they could see that they were getting a lot of looks but none of them seemed to be in recognition. It was likely due to their exotic natures, though as both Ari and Campbell submitted themselves for a weapons check the hybrid couldn't help but look up and see the banner announcing that the charity was for those harmed by heroes.

Though the company had managed to keep a pretty decent lid on it there had always been the rumor of what actually happened at that power plant milling about among people. If they were looking none of those people were here as they were given the green lights to go inside by the security staff after getting a concerned look about their teeth and claws. They guessed they believed their guns would beat their natural weapons and to an extent they were probably right. The fact they weren't searching for powers was rather interesting to Ari, though he suspected perhaps they didn't bother because they didn't expect any heroes to be showing up to a fundraiser needed because of them.

As the two walked up the main stairs and into the ballroom they found the majority of people were there. A live band was playing in the corner and Ari couldn't help but notice the rather large spread of party food that was sitting there for free. A warning squeeze from Campbell reminded him that they were on the clock as they walked towards a group of people to try and eavesdrop on. While they walked Lavender whispered in their ear to walk slowly and to keep their chests pointed up so that they could run anyone they encountered through the facial recognition scanner to find associates of their target.

Though they were able to move freely at first someone eventually recognized Ari and started to make a direct line over to where the two stood. At first the two were asked by a few people if they were heroes, which Ari and Campbell both vehemently denied, but as several others got into the mix someone finally recognized the kangaroo-cobra correctly. As soon as the incident was brought up there was a murmur that went through the group and quickly escaped its confines to the party in general. Well this plan of the lion certainly seems like its working, Ari thought to himself as more and more people began to gather around them and ask what happened when everyone started turning into anthros, if this didn't attract his attention nothing would.

With a lot of the questions entering into sensitive territory they fortunately had the non-disclosure agreement they had signed after the event had first ended which they leaned heavily on now to say they couldn't talk about it. Though many of the guests were disappointed it was better than supplementing rumors because they weren't sure exactly what the Company had told the general public. As people began to fade away from the conversation because of the lack of juicy details Ari caught something out of the corner of his eye that grabbed his attention. Most of the people that were near him either were interesting his story or excited to meet someone that had saved the entire city, but floating just outside their group were a few that had a different look on their faces.

Anger.

That was one that Ari could easily recognize in the crowd and as he whispered both to Campbell as well as the two listening in their ears he noticed the guys he clocked were making their way towards him. Now this was a party he could get behind, and as he continued to keep track of them in his peripheral he whispered through the comm link that they had about potential trouble that was incoming. Once more Ari was warned not to punch anyone by Lavender and Ka as the crowd of party guests dispersed a bit to allow this new group of people in.

"So, you're that hero that fought that cult," one of the men, a rather large fellow with scraggly hair that had been attempted to be combed straight, declared while his three friends came up behind him.

"Depends on which version of the story you're subscribing to," Ari replied while sizing them up. The one talking to him held himself like he might know how to fight but the three behind him were likely there more for emotional support than to back him up in an actual fight. "Name's Ari."

"Chet."

"Of course it is."

"The hell does that mean?"

A quick jab to Ari's ribs reminded the kangaroo-cobra of the venue they were currently in and the hybrid coughed before motioning towards the snack table. "Hey, why don't we all go get something from the bar," Ari deflected. "I know that I'm parched after all this tongue wagging and I think that conversation is better when you have something alcoholic in your hand, don't you think?"

"Pffft, like I would share a drink with you," Chet replied with venom in his voice as Ari could sense the malice in the room growing. "You have a lot of nerve showing up here."

"Like he told you, we're not heroes." Campbell stepped in. "We just happened to step in when the city needed help, that's all."

Though that hadn't been entirely true the Campbell that stood there as a saber tooth tiger was definitely not the same Campbell who was human that worked for the hero guild, so unless someone knew his name or powers and connected the dots they wouldn't know it. "You're telling me you look like that and you aren't part of that guild of cutthroats?" Chet asked in a more heated tone. "I know when someone has powers, I'm not stupid."

"You sure about that?" Ari shot back, which prompted the other man to move forward before the ones behind him held it back. "Careful, you lose your temper like that and you won't just get kicked out, your friends will have to carry you out. Now do you want to throw down right here and disrupt this nice party or do you want to take up my offer and go to the bar for a drink?"

"Perhaps you would prefer food and drink of a more substantial nature," a new voice chimed in, both Ari and Campbell turning to see who this new addition to the conversation was. Even if they hadn't already seen his picture in the file they could have guessed that this man was Desmond Rayarti with his immaculate hair and beard while dressed in a suit that was potentially worth more than what had been donated so far. "I happen to have access to the high donor area of the gala, and considering that you two are the ones that saved this city I think that deserves something better than cheap champagne bought by the case."

Ari had to blink a few times at the pretentiousness of this man, it stung his eyes like he was cutting onions but masked his disdain considering this was their target for the endeavor. As both he and Campbell accepted the invitation he found that this man also didn't seem like he could hold his own in a fight, at least not a physical one. He's experienced this type before; as someone with the resources to do so he would be the one sending others to do his dirty work while he sat back with clean hands, keeping himself as far away from the actual action as possible while taking credit for anything significant. It was a particular brand of person that he hated and reminded him a lot of the Company, which was perhaps why the two were at odds with one another.

As they moved to the back of the conference area and into a smaller atrium that had also been set up for the party Ari kept his observations to himself for the moment. If Rayarti really had the means that were talked about in the file there was no doubt that he would have eyes on him, making sure that they didn't present a threat to him. It wouldn't be a surprise if he had Chet and the others come up to him in order to see how he would react to the threat. Part of them keeping themselves out of danger was to control every aspect of their environment as much as they can, which was likely why they were being moved to a more secure location in order to have the conversation. It did make Ari smirk when he was allowed into the VIP section with Rayarti's permission while Chet and his buddies were held back, the kangaroo-cobra flipping them off before he walked into the atrium.

When the two had a chance to get a read on their location they found it to be a starkly different party than the one that was open

to the public. Soft music from a quartet filled the room and everything was more fancily decorated, even the food and drink offerings were uplifted as the portable bar and buffet table were replaced with a stone and polished wood fixture completely with two bartenders and a chef behind a full-service table. Ari didn't think he could have been more uncomfortable if he had tried and it didn't help that he immediately caught stares as soon as he walked inside. Even with the tuxedo on it seemed these people knew exactly what he was, a murderous mercenary with blood on his hands.

But Rayarti seemed unfazed by the revelations of his other party guests and directed then towards the bar where the three sat down. "Now here we are," Rayarti said as he gestured to the bottles on the shelf, some of them older than Ari was as a cloth napkin was placed before him. "A finer selection for the more discerning palate. Now I imagine that you are probably more of a whisky type Ari, or would you prefer a bourbon instead?"

"I'm not picky," Ari replied simply, his sharp eyes continuing to examine the mannerisms of the man as he ordered drinks for the three of them. It didn't take long before they each had a glass in front of them and as Rayarti raised his up in the air both Ari and Campbell did the same.

"To the saviors of the city who did what the so-called heroes couldn't," Rayarti said as they clinked the glasses together before taking a sip. "I must admit I am a bit of a fan of your work Ari, I know that I probably don't have the whole story but from the pieces that I've gathered you really are the one to thank for stopping all that nasty business. I was hoping that we could have this drink sooner but soon after the whole thing you and your friends disappeared off the map."

So this guy did know about him, Ari mused while he took another drink to stall for time, it looked like Mr. Stevens had made the right call after all in arranging for this meet-up. "I guess you could say that I played my part in the whole endeavor," Ari replied, keeping things close to the chest for now and pushing the conversation to other matters. "I'm sorry though, here you bought us a drink and we don't even know your name."

"Ah, where are my manners," Rayarti replied as he held out his hand to Ari and Campbell. "My name is Desmond Rayarti, I helped organize this fundraiser in order to help those that heroes didn't." As Ari shook his hand he wondered in the back of his mind if he was waiting to see if the two knew him, which would be a rather clever plot in this case. Or he could be giving the guy too much credit as the man continued to talk about the party that they were at.

"It sounds like you're quite the philanthropist," Campbell said once Rayarti had finished introducing himself. "Though, if I may ask, you seem to have a very specific theme in mind and I was wondering why that is?"

"I suppose I wasn't being too subtle with my disdain for those that believe themselves to be above us," Rayarti said with a chuckle. "While the reasons why are a long, uninteresting story I will admit that my reasons for doing things like this aren't purely altruistic in nature, though what event like this isn't. Personally I think that you and Ari highlighted what many people have been thinking for the longest time; that the era of heroes protecting the city are over and that we need something that we can control in order to stop crime and villains that isn't centralized to one agency that can be so easily corrupted."

Ari found himself nodding in agreement as he took another drink while Rayarti shifted the topic to the fundraiser they were having, the hybrid letting him talk while he took a second to muse. It certainly sounded like they found someone that would start an anti-hero militia, to the point where he wondered how two powerful organizations like the ones that they were working for couldn't take this guy down already. With that in mind it put the hybrid even more on guard despite them just having a conversation at the bar. People like Chet were easy when it came to confrontation, but this guy reminded Ari a lot of the Shadow Broker as they finished off their drinks and got a second round.

But they weren't there just for Ari to get a read on the guy, their purpose was to try and find a way to get the information of his organization off of him so that he could be investigated and possibly brought down. He thought about using one of his powers to copy Lavender's ability and get a sense of any cell phones or tablets he might have on his person, but he remembered the wolf saying that in places with a lot of technology it could be hard to focus. Given the number of screens, payment processors, sound systems, and anything else that might be in the building he didn't want to have a headache trying to hone the power while still keeping conversation. The only other thought was to try and plant a tracker on him to see if they could get a location out of him, but if he was the type to vet people with thugs before approaching then he also likely scanned himself for bugs like Ari did when he came back from a mission.

The three continued to chat as they went from the bar over towards the small waterfall that was in the atrium, but the subject of the anti-hero militia wasn't coming up organically and as Ari looked over at Campbell he could see the subtle inclinations of his frustration on his face. While they hadn't expected Rayarti to just blurt out his plans and coordinates to his facilities they had hoped that with how much he seemed to dislike heroes that the subject would come up, but when they weren't talking about the fundraiser they were being told how he enjoyed various hobbies and asking about how Ari's powers worked. Eventually Ari found himself on the defensive as he had to make sure that he didn't say anything that would give up the ghost and with a third drink in his hand he was finding it hard to make sure he kept things surface level. It felt like both sides were trying to pry information out of one another and with the night coming to a close they were ready to call it as far as their information gathering mission.

But it hadn't been a total loss, Ari thought to himself as he tipped back the last of his fifth drink. Not only did he get to drink a

bunch of expensive liquor on someone else's dime but he did make contact with the one that was potentially responsible for all this. He doubted that those he worked for would see it the same way but as he looked over and saw Campbell sway slightly he also knew that they would also have the benefit of sloppy drunken sex together, possibly in the alley outside of this building. The mental image of Lavender and Ka listening in while that happened caused him to snort, which he explained to the two that looked at him that he had held in a sneeze.

"Well, look at the time," Rayarti said as they heard the last call come from the bartenders. "I do hope that I didn't take up too much of your time, but it was such a pleasure meeting with you finally Ari. You are as impressive as they said, and you as well Campbell, glad to see you got out of the hero business and doing something far more substantial."

"Thanks?" Campbell replied, this time Ari patting the saber tooth tiger on the back to remind him of their mission as the two got up from their chairs. "I mean, I'm glad you think so, it's been great working with Ari."

"I'm glad to hear that," Rayarti replied as he stood up as well, pulling a card out of his pocket and handing it to Ari. "I would like to talk again at some point, I'm sure you have all sorts of thrilling adventures that you don't want to recall in such astute company. If you are staying in town for a while and feel like having another drink know that I'm willing to provide in exchange for such stories."

Ari nodded and thanked him for the card before taking a look at it. Aside from his name and a phone number there was nothing else on it even when he flipped it to the back. He had dealt with drug cartels that had given him more information than this to contact him with but for the moment a phone number was something they could use as he and Campbell thanked him for the drinks before leaving. As they started to walk towards the exit Ari could feel the world spinning slightly and while not heavily intoxicated he suspected he might not have to take his pill in order to get to sleep.

As the previous idea of ravishing Campbell in the back alley they had gotten into crept back into his mind Ari's mind sobered up quickly when he saw that there were shadows following him. He was used to being tailed before and instead of heading towards the street where they would meet up with the other two they instead deliberately made their actions known that they would be heading to the nearby corner store to grab something for the road. While the two could have easily lost their tail even with their inebriated state Ari wanted to see just who was following them around and what they wanted. A place that had aisles and cameras was perfect for it as he whispered to Campbell to play up his drunken state while walking into the first convenience store they could find.

When the two got inside they nodded to the clerk that gave them a questioning look, which Ari expected considering they were two heavily muscled exotic anthros wearing tuxedos, but after quickly slipping him a couple hundred bucks and telling him to take a break he simply disappeared. While he didn't need the man to leave he also didn't want to get someone caught in the crossfire should this turn messy as they quickly went to the drinks aisle where he could still see the camera monitor. About a minute later they heard the bell ring and Ari saw four men enter into the room, all of whom he recognized as a smirk crossed his muzzle. Looks like Chet had something else he wanted to say to him, Ari speculated before he noticed that at least two of them had a gun in their hands that they were hiding behind their back.

With the situation being a little more serious than he had thought Ari patted Campbell on the shoulder and whispered him to move further back into the store, grabbing one of the bags on the way and stuffing it into his hands. With the four investigating the empty counter they didn't have much time to prepare, and while he could easily just kill them it would be hard to explain four bodies in a corner store after trying to keep under the radar. As the saber tooth tiger took the contents of the bag and cupped it tightly in his hands Ari went to the next aisle over and looked through the shelves until he found a few bottles of cooking oil that he sliced open with his tail. There was only seconds left to prepare the last of his ambush and as his eyes darted around he noticed a few cans of bug spray and a microwave that was used for heating up food.

A few moments later the four men had finished looking around for the clerk and shrugged their shoulders before moving on, but as one of them began to go down the drinks aisle they immediately ducked back as they heard popping sounds come from the back of it. The two men with the guns immediately went to the next aisle over and tried to blitz the saber tooth tiger they could see the backside of only to slip and fall with one of them causing a very real gunshot to go off. With the men in a panic they didn't notice that the chip bags were slowly being crunched down as an invisible kangaroo-cobra made his way over them, waiting for the moment the microwave exploded and diverted their attention to drop down and stab one guy in the neck with the tip of his blade tail while grabbing the other.

The potent venom in his tail blade knocked the guy out cold as Ari reappeared upon attacking the two, and as he held Chet in a headlock he saw Campbell moving and brushing the popcorn off of his paws before disarming the two by heating the metal of their oil-coated guns before restraining them. "Looks like I'm going to be able to punch someone in the face tonight after all," Ari growled as he dragged Chet towards the back while he tried to squirm out of his grasp as he looked to Campbell. "Make sure these these go somewhere they can't be seen or interrupt our heart to heart, I hear the dumpster is nice this time of year."

Those that were still conscious but bound started to shout before being gagged by Campbell as well by some sponges he had found on the shelves along with a roll of duct tape. As Ari continued to drag his captive towards the beer cooler they had in the back he heard Lavender and Ka ask if they were needed for back-up, which with a few words that sounded like he was talking to the tiger told them to stand by. If Chet was working for Rayarti having two guys come in without appearing to be prompted

would make them look like they were at the gala to snoop around, which was exactly why Ari took matters into his own hands. Plus it had been a while since he had some actual fun as he opened the door and felt the blast of cold air before going inside and locking it behind him.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Chet shouted as he continued to claw at the furry arm that held him, which did little to loosen Ari's hold on him.

"Ah ah, I don't think so," Ari said with a chuckle as the chill of the air settled over them, though with a simple activation of his glove he didn't feel the creeping cold that he was sure the human did. "You wanted so badly to have a conversation with me, so I'm going to give it to you. The guns were a little unnecessary, did you think that we were going to have a shoot-out in the corner store or something?"

"Fucking... bastards..." Chet gasped out, Ari simply flexing his arm to restrict his air flow and put some pressure on his choroid artery to do the same to the blood to his brain. He didn't want the guy to pass out, but he wanted to make sure that this human knew who was in charge of the show before relaxing again.

"Now that you understand the position you're in I have some questions for you," Ari whispered menacingly in his ear. "Your answers will determine how you leave this cooler and how much I have to pay to have the clerk clean up after me. I would answer fast too since I'm sure that the cold is going to grow increasingly uncomfortable for you the longer we stay here."

There was another bit of struggling from the human and Chet even tried to reverse the grapple, but while the guy knew a few moves Ari continued to subdue him even while under the influence. "Alright, now that we've gotten that out of our system," Ari said as he kept his hold tight. "Tell me, why were you following us out of the gala? And don't just say that you wanted to talk to us some more, I am too tired, drunk, and horny to deal with lying right now."

Though Chet continued to try and escape the combination of the cold and his threat helped to subdue him even more to the point where he could relax his arm a bit so the human could speak. He could tell that there was a lot of hesitation in what he wanted to say but with a little motivation from his tail blade brushing against his cheek it got him to finally speak up. "We wanted to make sure you weren't actually some sort of hero trying to find out about us," Chet finally admitted. "You fuckers have been trying to get at us ever since that accident at the chemical plant."

"Well, good on you for admitting that you belong to them," Ari stated with a chuckle, hearing the human grumble before he applied a bit more pressure to get him focused. "So not that I really care, but why all the hate to the heroes? I get they're all a bunch of twats but that doesn't really justify you killing them."

There was a hissing retort that Ari guessed was him laughing with a partially collapsed trachea before he continued on. "That last one... was an accident..." Chet said. "But who cares if we did, that's one less hero out there making lives miserable. You should know, considering what they did to you."

This time there was a slight yelp that came from the human as his entire body twitched at that. It was a memory that he didn't want to concern himself with the moment but as he heard the man chuckle he could tell that Chet knew he had touched a nerve. "Listen, as engaging as this banter is with you I think I have enough for now," Ari said, being careful not to seem too interested in the militia since he was already suspected of being a hero plant. "So here's what we're going to do, I'm going to knock your ass out and if you're lucky the police will get here before you freeze to death, unless there's anything else of note that you might want to tell me?"

"Yeah, I do have one more thing to say," Chet sneered as Ari felt his body shift. "Fuck you, anthro." In the next second Ari suddenly felt a shooting pain in his leg as the knife that Chet had managed to sneak out of his pocket was buried in his thigh, causing him to lose his grip. As Ari snarled in pain the attack was followed by the human pushing him back into the wall of beer boxes that fell down on top of him and around him like an avalanche.

"You mother fucker!" Ari howled as he watched Chet make a run for the door. With a grimace he pulled out the knife that had been left inside his leg and decided to return the favor, throwing it across the room where the blade buried itself into the back of the human's leg. Despite blood streaming down his jeans and collapsing to the ground the other man continued to try and reach for the door, only to be stopped by a beer bottle that Ari grabbed and whipped at him that smashed into the back of his head.

But Ari wasn't done yet and as his pain gave way to seething rage he went over and grabbed Chet by the shirt, looking into his unfocused eyes with a snarl on his face before he glanced around the room. When they landed on something that they could use he dragged the human over towards the cooling unit before hoisting him up. Even with the wound in his leg he easily brought him up in the air and as the human saw where he was being led to the hybrid's face curled into a cruel snare. For a brief moment the hybrid drank in the look of pure terror on his face before he took Chet and shoved him forward...

...right into the industrial cooling fan.

Ari didn't get very far in before the entire unit ground to a halt, but it was more than enough for what he needed it to do. As blood trickled from the filter in the front he attempted to pull it back out but found that the blade was jammed right in his neck, and after a few unsuccessful tugs the kangaroo-cobra just sighed and took a step. "Sorry to leave you hanging there," Ari said as he made his way through the blood, beer, and broken glass while clutching onto the wound of his leg. "But you deserve it."

Since he still had the third slot available on his glove decided to use it to heal himself, and as he breathed out heavily from the activation he shuddered from the sensation of the wound closing up through his power. It also unfortunately removed his buzzed state and after glancing about he grabbed a bottle of alcohol from the shelf while Campbell came up to him. "I got the three contained in the back of the shop to wait for the police," Campbell informed Ari, his eyes going from the booze he had took a few gulps down to the blood-stained hole in his pants. "What happened to you?"

"Bastard ruined my tuxedo," Ari said once he had finished his pull, offering the bottle to Campbell who declined it. "So I put him in the corner to cool off. He wasn't a huge fan of that."

Campbell looked at the drinking hybrid in question before he leaned over and looked past him to the beer cooler, then sighed and put his hand to his head after seeing the scene on the other side of the glass. "Mr. Stevens is not going to like this," Campbell stated as he took the bottle right before Ari was about to drink from it and did so himself. "We're going to need a clean-up team to make this disappear, not to mention if he was actually connected to Rayarti that we may have damaged all the progress we just made."

"Actually... just take the hard drives out of the surveillance system," Ari said as a plan began to form in his mind. "We give the cashier a couple more bills and tell him to call the police after about twenty minutes and say that he was in the back room and didn't see anything." Campbell just stared at him in question and Ari motioned for him to follow as he went to the camera system to disable it. "If Rayarti did plan this and sees us cover it up with our resources then he'll know that we actually work for the heroes or some other organization, but if we leave a mess and just don't get caught then at best he knows its us and thinks that we're a couple of psychopaths or at worst believes that he pissed off the heroes enough that they may have retaliated and are sending a message."

While it was clear Campbell wasn't on board with Ari's particular brand of theatrics he stated that it would at least keep their cover intact a bit more. "Wait a second," Campbell said suddenly as they were about to find the cashier to bribe him. "What about the other three guys in the militia? They're going to know its us just based on their testimony."

Ari thought about it for a little bit, scratching his chin before the sneer from before came back on his muzzle. "Tell the cashier to wait thirty minutes to call the cops," Ari instructed while he walked to the back room. "That should be more than enough time."

Chapter 7:

"Police are still looking for the rest of the remains of four men that were brutally attacked and killed in corner store tonight," the wolfess on the screen said as the scene of police cars around the small store continued to move about behind her. "So far there are no suspects and police are warning those in the area to stay inside for the night while they investigate. Fortunately the cashier was in the back restocking and said that when he had come out the only thing that remained was the bloodbath from what is described as a vicious and deranged set of killings."

Lavender and Ka both looked straight at Ari, who had leaned back in the chair while still drinking from the bottle he had plifered from the same store that was on the television. "What?" Ari said as the two continued to stare at him. "I had to make it look like something a hero wouldn't do, if it does come back to us then we need them to believe that it was done by someone dangerous who didn't have those sort of connections to sweep it under the rug. If anything you should be thanking me."

"We just don't want to see you... falling back to old habits," Lavender explained, Ari scoffing at that. "While we think that this new gusto that you're approaching life with is good the last thing we need is you over-correcting."

"Also you know you can't take that medication tonight with you drinking," Ka interjected. "I don't care how good your metabolism is, you do not want to mess with the side-effects that come with mixing the two." Ari just waved his hand dismissively at the prospect and took another drink, only to once more have the bottle taken away by Campbell. The kangaroo-cobra frowned and crossed his arms over his chest as he watched the saber tooth tiger take a deep pull from the bottle before putting it aside.

With one of his vices taken away Ari decided to get up and indulge in another, grabbing his cigarettes before heading out the door to go down to the underground parking lot. The others didn't want him smoking in the apartment and considering his rather unique body type he didn't want to risk the roof or going outside. Fortunately he found that he could remain hidden below, though it was a pain to have to go all the way down just to get a smoke as he took the stairs down. A few minutes later he lit up as he leaned against the concrete support pillar, taking a puff before rubbing his forehead.

Had he gone too far again? The thought crept up on him as he found the quietness of the space allowing him to think more clearly. While he felt that the use of force on the hero-killing, anthro-hating guy that stabbed him in the leg was justified the other three had just been following the wrong person. He was at least nice enough to kill them first before he did what he did, and considering that Lavender looked them up when they were being driven home and found they were all career criminals helped to ease his guilt.

Perhaps it was something that he would bring up in his next therapy session, which apparently was being moved up after giving the report of what happened after the gala. They had been happy with the information that he had gleaned, Ari grumbled internally as he took another drag, but once they got to the means of acquisition to that information and subsequent cleaning up they suddenly have a problem. That wasn't all that fair as far as he was concerned.

As he got halfway done with his cigarette he could hear the security gate to the front of the garage open, causing Ari to perk up slightly. He had forgotten about the debriefing that was supposed to happen after the party and as he watched the car drive down he could see the unmistakable visage of Mr. Stevens as he parked in the spot next to the van and got out. "I already heard that you had a rather exciting night at the gala," Mr. Stevens said as he went up to the hybrid. "Or at least after the gala."

"If you're going to chew my ear off someone already beat you to the punch," Ari said as he pointed to his scarred ear.

"Trying to keep you in line is no longer my concern Ari," Mr. Stevens said as he pointed to the pack that Ari clutched. "You mind?"

Ari was slightly taken aback by the request but nodded and took one out for him, using his lighter once the lion had it in his mouth. "Didn't know you smoked," Ari said once Mr. Stevens had gotten it lit and took a puff.

"I tried to quit back when I was human," Mr. Stevens explained as he leaned against the same pillar. "Even succeeded for a while, but after everything that happened with Anubis I found myself taking it back up to help ease my nerves." Ari frowned slightly at that and took a draw of his own cigarette, something that the lion picked up on as he did the same. "I know I said I was mad at you for my new form, but you have to understand that I don't actually blame you for what happened to me."

"Really?" Ari asked in shock.

"You did what you had to do in order to win over Anubis and stop him from enslaving humanity," Mr. Stevens said simply. "Considering what you had lost during that entire thing I would say that my own human nature was a small price to pay for having a hand at stopping it, even seeing it as a point of pride, no pun intended."

Ari laughed at that and even Mr. Stevens managed a chuckle before his face fell again as he continued on. "The point that I'm trying to make is that I understand that sometimes we have to do things that don't make us look very good in order to get the job done," Mr. Stevens ruminated. "I saw it all the time when I worked as internal affairs for the Company; heroes that had to do something unspeakable in order to save others or prevent some horror, and then had to explain to others that only saw the aftermath of their actions to prevent said horror why the thing they did was necessary. The others up there are still getting used to that concept, the Company I think did them a disservice in trying to shelter them from this truth... just make sure that when you kill that you are doing it for the right reason, that's what separates men from monsters."

The lion finished up his cigarette as Ari continued to stare at him in shock, eventually letting out a hiss of pain as his had burned down to his fingers. He had never really heard Mr. Stevens give a full-fledged pep talk before and it was almost eerie how much it matched with his current mindset. With both finishing up at the same time the two walked to the elevator and rode it up with the hybrid trying not to stare at him the entire time. Kill for the right reason, that was a bit of a far cry from what he was used with this group, in fact the only time he ever heard that sentiment from another was Sam after they had first joined the CIA.

Of course Sam had specifically recruited him for his skills in network, Ari mused as they walked to the apartment where the others greeted Mr. Stevens upon seeing him. That made it even stranger that they didn't just send him in to kill Rayarti and be done with it but he suspected there was some political hurdles to be leapt over. From what the man had said at the gala he kept up a pretty generous public profile that allowed him to speak out against heroes without sounding like the bad guy. Maybe they were wrong about him being the leader of this militia, and as the thought lingered he found himself being told to have a seat with the others.

"So while the Company is less than impressed with what happened to the four at the corner market they believed that the mission otherwise went as expected," Mr. Stevens informed the rest of the group, this time not having a file to give them as this was a last minute after-mission briefing. "Now one interesting thing that came out of the unpleasantness is that Ari seems to have kicked the hornet's nest, his action to leave the source of the killings as a mystery has caused those that we know to be in the militia to start telephoning one another to try and get advice. While none of them directly called Desmond Rayarti we did get a few more contacts that we could add to the list of known conspirators and a lead on a potential stash house that they're using for all these supplies."

"Oh yeah, speaking of supplies," Ari chimed in. "Did we get any information out of that stuff we found at the chemical plant?"

"I'm still working on the digital radio," Lavender explained. "Whoever is doing their encryption is no slouch, but I'm trying a few programs that might get a tap on their open line. The gun was something that you would fire darts out of and was potentially going to be used to knock out Dynamo with a tranquilizer, and the crystal is currently at the Company lab for analysis."

With his question answered succinctly Ari sat back in his chair and allowed the update briefing to continue, though as usual when it came to matters of logistics with the aftermath of their actions he found his mind drifting a bit. He still found himself preoccupied with what Mr. Stevens had said, especially his choice of the word monster. He hadn't mentioned his latest drug-induced encounter since he started to wonder if it hadn't been a combination of the pharmaceutical intervention plus his anxiety that created such a strange dream. Maybe he was trying to tell himself that he was letting the stress of what he was doing get to him and to not worry so much about his past, Ari mused, or perhaps he was trying to digest everything after finally getting some time away from the encounter with Anubis.

But as he looked out through the window at the city skyline lit up against the backdrop of the night that still didn't make any sense on why it was happening now. If anything this place was dredging up old feelings that he had about the Company, his role in everything, and was a constant reminder of the betrayal he had done to Campbell. Despite the saber tooth tiger repeatedly forgiving him for his role in the downfall of his hero career there was always the worry in the back of his mind that one day he'll admit that he would always hold such a thing against him. Maybe after this mission it was time for them to take a vacation away from all this, Ari thought to himself, something they could do in the future that was just the four of them that didn't involve work.

"Ay, there ya go."

The others jumped as Ari's chair scraped back while he almost kicked against the table, and before anyone could ask he told them that the booze had run through his system faster than he had anticipated before moving to the bathroom. Campbell called out that they were just going to finish up and that he would tell him if there was anything important as the hybrid scooted by him in urgency. Ari thanked him and apologized for the sudden departure before finally getting into the bathroom and closing the door behind him. Though he no reason to suspect that they would try and listen in on him the hybrid turned on the sink to full blast before sitting down on the toilet while looking at his glove.

"Could you not do that while I'm around people?" Ari said angrily.

"Hey, you were the one having the introspective moment while everyone else was listenin to the meeting all prim and proper-like," the glove replied, causing Ari to roll his eyes. "I was just congratulating you on thinking about things in the future, the old Ari wouldn't have bothered trying to plan something ahead because he expected ta be in the ground."

"Oh... thanks, I guess," Ari replied with a sigh. "I know this is going to be weird asking my glove for advice, but do you have any particular thoughts on being used to kill a bunch of people?"

"I feel honored that yer askin me a question about the morality of the situation after all this time, it brings a tear to your finger," the glove joked, which prompted the hybrid to sit back on the toilet and groan audibly. "In all seriousness you've been fighting for your life so long you can't tell the difference between justified and cold-blooded anymore, and I think yous like it that way. After your mercenary days you had Anubis messin with your head that allowed you to get off on what you were doing, and even when yous took the job for the CIA that just meant there was someone else responsible for the death that you were the instrument of. Now they gots you thinkin about stuff concernin your methods and that's not somethin yer used to, so yer tryin to figure everything out in that big furry head of yours."

Ari sighed and looked at his watch to make sure he wasn't spending an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom before looking back at his glove. "That was a great way to not answer my question," Ari pointed out, which just caused the voice to chuckle. "Can you at least tell me what is causing these nightmares so I don't need to worry about what I see when I close my eyes?"

"What am I, your psychiatrist?" the glove responded indignantly. "I gots to save your skin whenever you get in your head, talk you off the ledge, and know what's goin on in your head? Go talk to Ka if you want your head shrunk."

For a few seconds Ari found himself speechless at hearing how offended his glove sounded at being asked such a question before getting up from the toilet and turning off the water. Maybe it was tired because it had just gotten used, or maybe it just happened to be that he is talking to a glove that he still wasn't sure just some sort of manifestation of his mind. It was still better than the nightmares or anything Anubis threw his way as he went out of the door and saw that Mr. Stevens had left. When he sat down the others informed him that they were to lie low for a while to see if Ari's tactic would shake any more fruit from the tree.

"Well, it sounds like I was right to do what I did after all," Ari gloated as a grin spread over his face. "I think that means I'm entitled to a bit of a reward. I'm thinking that we could use a little teamwork exercise."

As Ka looked at the other two in confusion both groaned, though the smirks on their faces belied their apparent frustration. "Uh, quick question," Ka asked. "What is a teamwork exercise and why do I get the impression that it's something not what it seems like?"

"Oh yeah, we've never showed you some of the games we used to play," Ka replied as his grin widened. "Since this is something for these two you can be my little helper in exchange for a reward of your own, and you can start by finding me quite a bit of rope and something that we can use as two blindfolds..."

About thirty minutes later all four of them were naked in the bedroom; Ari laid there with his back against the bed while Campbell and Lavender knelt on the bed back to back against each other right at the hybrid's midsection. Their arms had already been tied behind their back and as he watched Ka was looping more of it around their thick furry chests. "That's a real good job with those ropes," Ari complimented as the two men were tied together tight, causing them both to huff as they shook their heads about that had been blindfolded too. "You a boy scout or something?"

"Or something," Ka replied, sticking his tongue out at Ari who just gave him a lustful grin. "This is an interesting set up, you say you've done this before?"

"Yeah, though its way easier with another person here to do everything," Ari said as the two men rubbed against one another while getting into a better position. "Alright, so the object of this little teamwork exercise is that they have to work together in order to get the stimulation they want, otherwise if one tries to move about in the wrong direction or the other is having trouble focusing they're just going to get more frustrated. For your last task as my helper I want you to take my cocks and help guide them into their tailholes since they're a little too tied up to do it themselves."

Ari smirked at his little joke but it quickly turned to a huff as Ka did what he was told, his fingers against the sensitive flesh causing the already half-hard members to jump at the touch. Both shafts had already been lubed up in preparation for this event and as the tips were pushed underneath the two men they both already let a groan of pleasure just from feeling them press up against their tailholes. They had been conditioned rather well, Ari mused as he could see that they were both already completely erect themselves and sticking up in the air as they waited to be penetrated.

With the angle of their bodies and how his own twin shafts were situated it was slightly awkward to push them in at first, but it didn't take long until he heard a gasp from Campbell as his cheeks were spread open, followed quickly after by the wolf whose head nearly shot back and bumped into the saber tooth tiger. Ari let out a growl of approval as Ka finished feeding his cocks into the tailholes of the two men before stepping back and watching the show begin. While the kangaroo-cobra could have easily helped guide them down it was far more fun watching the two horny men try to keep their balance while impaling themselves on his thick shaft. They had gotten quite adapt at keeping themselves upright, spreading out their legs to help lower themselves as he watched inch after inch of his throbbing members disappear into their stretched out holes.

Once his task had been completed Ka crawled over Ari's trembling legs and moved over to the side of the bed where he teased the nipple of the hybrid while watching the two as well. "So, now that I've set you up," Ka asked as Ari softly gasped at the extra stimulation even with two sets of inner walls clamping down on his sensitive flesh. "What is my reward?"

"You can go ahead and use whatever is open for you to have fun with," Ari explained with a bemused smirk while gesturing to the two. "Perhaps you want to sit on their cocks to make it even harder for them to concentrate, or if you can maneuver yourself you could get access to Campbell's pussy. Anything not currently filled or filling another is yours to use."

"Anything?" Ka asked, Ari nodding his head once more. The human got a mischevious look in his eyes as he looked at the three, watching as the two continued to sink down on Ari's cocks, before crawling up once ore and sliding across his scaly chest. It didn't take long before Ari was staring right at the maleness of the human man dangling in front of his face.

An interesting choice, Ari thought to himself as his grin grew bigger, but not a challenge he was going to back down from. With Ka watching the two continue to struggle to lower themselves down at the same time Ari brought up his hands and clasped them against the hips of the human. It had been a while since he had done such a thing with one but he knew how to work his muzzle around as he let out a long breath against it just to tease him a bit. The man above him shivered from the sensation as he allowed Ari to set the pace as he felt the mutated tongue of the hybrid lick against his shaft.

With his cock tongue already pushing past his lips from the stimulation happening to the two bound men Ari was already becoming intensely riled up. He would essentially be blowing himself and Ka with their cocks rubbing together, one of them would also just be able to coil around his even while completely erect. With his kangaroo muzzle it wasn't hard to completely engulf the human while making sure that they slid between his fangs as sort of a guide rail as Campbell enjoyed calling it. Once they were inside Ari showed off his tonguing skills, feeling the throbbing shaft slide around inside of him while a similar sensation was happening in reverse to his two companions.

He was definitely glad that they had decided to bring Ka into the fold when it came to their sexual exploits. The first few months that they worked together both Campbell and Lavender expressed concerns about how they would deal with Ari's rutting phases while having an uninitiated human in the mix. They had thought about freezing him out whenever they were thinking about getting together but the concept didn't last long in action. More than once Ari found Ka being party to him taking Campbell or Lavender with primal intent, and after seeing the look on his face while he was balls deep in either one of them it gave him the sense that after the first time it had started to happen on purpose.

Aside from being a truly caring individual Ka turned out to be down for a lot of what they had to offer. The only thing that Ari hadn't done to him was transform him into anything like he had done with the others. While most of the problems that came with that were from the connection to Anubis he didn't want to have to explain why their human companion was suddenly a giant four-armed beaver man or something like that. But Ka seemed content with just being part of their group as he began to push down to get even more of his maleness into the snout beneath him while a huff from his nostrils blew across his sack that he was fondling with the tip of his tongue.

Even with the added stimulation that came from a cock and his lips rubbing against his own cock tongue Ari continued to make Campbell and Lavender work for their release. With their hands behind their backs there was no way to pleasure themselves, which meant that they would either need to reliably hit their prostates with the throbbing members inside of them or get Ari to orgasm so that he would reciprocate the favor. Even though he could only see the taint of the human that was on top of him Ka managed to push up enough so that he could watch the two continue to wiggle about while in their binds as slid down lower. He remembered the first time that they had tried this after he had gained his second cock where they almost fell off the bed, but this time they were able to slide up and down his shafts in unison.

With Ari focusing on pleasuring Ka he was able to keep things going longer and make the two work for it more, but eventually both Campbell and Lavender managed to get all the way down to the hilt with their tailholes. Their legs were practically pressed flat against the bed and it was the hybrid that had started to hump upwards in response to their ministrations. The feel of those tight inner walls engulfing his throbbing flesh was more than enough, and while he had already managed to get Ari to cum while still inside his muzzle he thought he could still get the two bound men to cum hands free. Instead he let out a loud roar as he orgasmed instead, his body convulsing as the two let out a cry of triumph.

Ari gave Ka a playful slap on the rear to get his half-hard cock out of his muzzle before Ari just gave the other two a smirk. "Yeah yeah, gloat all you want," Ari teased as he the two chuckled at his admission, and though they couldn't see it his smile grew while he looked at Ka. "Seems like you still need to get your own release, luckily we have someone that could help you two while your still enjoying yourselves."

The two let out a huh before Campbell suddenly let out a growl as the human got the hint from what Ari had said and settled himself in between the furry legs of the saber tooth tiger. Even though he hadn't climaxed yet the guy was already a sweaty, panting mess with his nipples already lactating, his chest as wet as the other two men that had a similar condition. He remembered the first time Ka had managed to rub against Campbell's pectorals and got wet palms from his leaking nips and had actually found it fascinating. It was what solidified his place in their hearts and their bed as he watched the human take as much of Campbell into his mouth as he could in one go.

With Ari's cock still embedded deep inside the man it didn't take long before the equally thick cock of the feline throbbed hard. Ka could sense what was happening and pulled his mouth off just in time before Campbell exploded. With being tied to Lavender his bucking caused the wolf to do the same, the wolf's heavy paws curling as the hybrid reached forward and stroked one of those sensitive pads. While the human was still dealing with the aftermath of the saber tooth tiger's climax he had intended to take care of the wolf next, only for the combination of the additional stimulation and getting his feet rub had done the same as a blow job for him.

Lavender huffed and panted as he orgasmed shortly after Campbell did and even though he had already come down from the peak of his pleasure the feeling of the two bound men squirming and writhing from their own release was just as heavenly. All three men eventually calmed down all at once and with Ka's help Ari got the two men untied and off of his shafts. It had been so good to feel such a connection to the others while in this city that had brought them together, and for the first time in a while he was truly contented. Eventually the others shuffled off and left Campbell with Ari since the bed could only fit two of their frames at once.

As he spooned with the saber tooth tiger and had his snout buried in the thick red fur of his neck he found his eyes slowly closing. It had been a hell of a day but Ari was glad that for the moment it seemed there was a respite from all the chaos and horror in the world. Maybe things were finally turning around for them...

When Ari opened his eyes again he found himself still grabbing onto fur, but this time instead of the smell of Campbell's shampoo and the heat of his flesh it was a coppery scent of blood and a deep chill. As he pulled away he found that he had been clutching onto a huge bear man lying there lifeless instead of the saber tooth tiger that he had been holding onto. It took him a little longer then before to realize what what was going on with being drunk but when he spun around and saw several other other anthros were sprawled out around him. When he got to his feet he let out a wince of pain and as his hands instinctively went to his side he found that there was a piece of shrapnel sticking out of it.

While definitely not one of his most intense dreams it was not one that he would ever want to relieve as he winced while pulling out the jagged shard of metal. "I thought you weren't supposed to feel pain in dreams," Ari muttered to himself as he let out a gasp while the final inch slid out of him. "This is bullshit."

Once he had gotten it out he felt his glove but already knew that there was no power in it, having already used the three powers that had gotten him to this point in the first place. If it wasn't for the missile that had hit their truck after they had escaped from the warlord they had stolen from they would have gotten away scott free. Instead he was staggering to his feet and making his way towards the wreckage of their vehicle to retrieve the package. He already knew what was waiting for him on the other side but he knew that trying to resist he already knew it wouldn't work.

"Ari..." a voice said as he got to the wreckage, Ari sighing as he looked around to find that the lizard who had been driving the vehicle was lying there while clutching his leg that was clearly broken. "Thank god you're here. We need to get to the evac site in twenty minutes."

"I know Eric," Ari said flatly as he passed by the lizard guy and crawled his way up into the flaming wreckage, one of the powers that he had gotten was resistance to fire that had actually reminded him of Campbell. "You just keep holding onto the leg, you'll be fine."

"That's a relief," Eric replied with a sigh, though Ari knew better as he shook his head. "Are you injured?"

Ari looked down at his own stomach and saw the blood spreading over his uniform while he held the wound with one hand. "I'll live," Ari said as he pulled the metal case out of from where it had been securely stored, letting out a grimace as he finally had to put his weight against it to get it unwedged. "Why don't you try and get up enough so that I can help you to the evac site."

"Oh my god, I can't believe that we're actually going to make it out of this," the lizard said as he held onto the side of the car, practically crying as he managed to get onto his feet. "I don't even want to ask if the others are alright, I just want to get out of this hellhole and get back to my family. It's going to be a little bit tough with the leg, I think I see the bone poking out, but if we work together then-

A loud bang echoed through the air, followed by the thud of the lizard as the force of the bullet that flew through his skull crumpled him to the ground. He had always felt bad that he hadn't tried to help the other man during this mission and as he looked at the blood pooling around the lizard's head he remembered that he hadn't even stopped to look at him. The worst part was this mission wasn't even for anything critical, had he ditched the briefcase and brought Eric instead the only thing he would have lost was a bit of money and some reputation with the Shadow Broker. He wasn't sure what was worse, Ari thought to himself as he finally knelt down and closed the eyes of the lizard, the ones that showed him the dangers he took or the ones that showed him the dangers he avoided.

Chapter 9:

Ari found himself walking up once more still clutching onto Campbell, but with the memory of the nightmare that he had just relived he found himself shrinking away from the saber tooth tiger and eventually sliding off the bed. When he looked over at his phone he saw that he had managed to get about half an hour of sleep before he had been woken up at this point. Seems the liquor hadn't done much to keep the nightmares at bay, which Ari was sure to log into his mind as he decided to go down into the underground parking area in order to have a smoke and shake the memories. He thought about just taking one of the pills that still rattled around in his pocket but he knew that Ka had given him some pretty strict warnings when it came to those and opted instead for a hit of nicotine.

These nightmares... as Ari lit up he found a scowl on his lips. It reminded him too much of when he was terrorized by Anubis with hallucinations that had driven him to the brink of insanity. He had feared that perhaps these were the same but even the one that had not been a recollection of his past and was more a fear of his future didn't feel the same as those back then. This was something different, and he really didn't like different as he continued to puff away.

Someone else playing a dirty trick on him, or perhaps it was his guilty conscience, or maybe he was finally processing though things like Ka had said. It definitely wasn't a coincidence that these were starting to happen when his glove had started to talk to him, plus there was the fact he had that other strange dream while drugged by that pill. That certainly felt more familiar to him when he remembered the so-called deity reaching out to him in order to recruit him to the cause. At least some things don't change as he thought about Chet and the fact that aside from despising heroes he was also an anthro hater as well, something he hadn't had to deal with in some time.

"This city fucking sucks," Ari muttered to himself as he finished the cigarette and crushed the butt of it against the concrete pillar. Just as he was about to head back up to the apartment to maybe try and fall asleep again he felt his pocket buzz, pulling out his phone to see that someone was calling him on his old number that he had forwarded to this one. "Well that's a blast

from the past, not many people knew this number..."

Though usually all calls went through Lavender in order to be traced he decided to throw caution to the wind and answer it. "Ari, I see from the news that you're back in town," the voice on the other end of the line said. "Looks like you wasted no time in getting your hands bloodied once more."

"I like to hit the ground running," Ari replied as he tried to place the voice in his mind. "Are you calling to catch back up, or maybe you're inviting me to go bowling?"

"Good to hear your wit is still intact," the voice replied. "I don't want to talk too much on the phone, I imagine your time with Lavender will allow to understand why. If you can slip any leashes you might have I want you to meet me in the park about five blocks north in one hour, just make sure to cover your ugly mug before you do."

Before Ari could ask anything else the line went dead. As he looked at the screen that told him that the call was hung up he found himself rubbing his finger against the screen. A strange clandestine call in the middle of the night from someone that not only knew his old number but also about him and Lavender. The voice was also somewhat familiar but he couldn't quite put his finger on it, though that didn't surprise him considering he was rather lousy with that sort of thing.

As Ari checked the time he wondered if he should tell the others about all this. He knew that Campbell was fast asleep but wondered if Ka and Lavender were still up, though he hadn't seen them when he crept down to the parking area to have his smoke. A clandestine meeting with someone was not something that he needed to assemble the team for, and while it could be a trap it was unlikely that he couldn't handle it. The only problem that he could see was his glove was currently on its twelve-hour cooldown, but as he went back upstairs in order to get ready he knew he had plenty of means to defend himself as he got on his hoodie and jeans, donning his old superhero attire that he hadn't worn since he had left the city.

About an hour later the kangaroo-cobra was slowly walking through the small park he had been told to go to. It was a typical city park in that it only was a few blocks with a small patch of forest, some playground equipment, and a few other things that most people didn't even know existed much less used. With it being later in the night there was no one walking around either and that was just fine with him as he let his tail swing free in the air. It meant less people that could potentially turn out to be assassins in disguise, which he had been ambushed with enough in his lifetime to start to get a phobia of crowd. While the darkness would help hide those same people at least he could see them coming with his enhanced vision.

The guy on the other end of the phone hadn't told him exactly where to meet and as Ari continued to scope out the place he found that there weren't many places one could do so without being out in the open. If this one knew him in his past he wouldn't be talking about catching up and reminiscing about the old times, this was a meeting with purpose and those types of meetings were not done near the hot dog cart that was near the street. He eventually walked over to some of the larger trees and decided to wait in their shadow until he saw movement, lighting a cigarette while he waited. As he stood there he could hear a rustling of the branches that were overhead, but as he looked up he failed to notice the roots had slowly begin to grow and become more fluid in their movements.

It wasn't until several vine-like branches suddenly burst out of the wood and wrapped around his waist did Ari realize something was wrong, but as he tried to kick away from the tree restraining him all he felt were the thick roots wrapping around his huge feet paws and practically pulling them into the soil. He managed to grab his knife from his waistband but before he could cut the offending branches away several had looped around his biceps and pulled his arms back until they were pinned against the tree. His back hit the bark with a dull thud and as it knocked the wind out of him he felt another vine branch slither around his neck before tightening. This was not what he expected... but as he struggled against his bindings and felt the tug of his strength against the tree holding him it was a power that he was actually familiar with as he noticed the silhouette of a deer anthro in the shadows of a nearby tree.

"Treeborn?" Ari asked, causing the hero to step out into the light spilled from the lamp that was nearby. "Holy shit man, it's been a while. I see you've added a few new tricks to your arsenal."

"I see that you're still the same reckless man that you were when we last met," Treeborn replied with a smirk as the vines stopped crawling around the restrained hybrid. "I hope you don't mind the precaution, you were never the most predicable one and I wanted to be sure that you were in the right mindset for conversation before we began. Plus I will admit it's fun feeling you strung up like that as it reminds me of the past."

Ari let out a huff as the initial shock and rush of adrenaline passed and he felt one of them slither into his jeans and loop around his groin. "So that's why I'm here?" Ari asked as his own muzzle broke into a smile once he realized there was no immediate danger. "Knew I was in town and wanted to get some of my trunk planted inside you."

"Gods you're still a horny bastard too," Treeborn said with a chuckle.

"Looks who's talking," Ari shot back as he gestured with his hips to show the outline of the vines slithering around inside it.

"I suppose that rubbed off on me the last time we were fighting together and you turned me into this," Treeborn said as he rested his vines once more, the smile on his face falling slightly as he approached closer. "But this isn't a social call Ari. I'm not sure what you're doing in the city but I have to warn you that there are enemies you made here that are happy to have seen you return here, if you know what I'm saying."

"Ah, people who want to put me in the ground," Ari sighed. "I suppose I made enough of those enemies during my wild years, though I'm surprised that you aren't in the loop about my mission here. Didn't the heroes guild want to bring you in on this since we worked together?"

"I don't work for the heroes guild anymore," Treeborn stated with a slight shrug. "Even after I was cleared and allowed to go back to work I couldn't shake what I had done while I was under the influence of Anubis." There was a tremor that went through the deer as he turned his head and looked out towards the area that Ari knew was the direction of the old power plant they had destroyed the last time he was in the city. "I still know where all the bodies are buried, and I couldn't put my hero costume on without feeling the betrayal I had done to this city weighing me down, it made me feel like a monster."

Ari found himself grimacing at Treeborn's use of the word monster, but the deer morph didn't seem to notice as he continued on. "But I wasn't the only one that left the hero guild that day," Treeborn continued to explain. "Your old friends Shockwave and Mesmer are still out there and they also have hung up their capes, though for all but the official story they were told that they would never work for the Company again after the stunts they pulled and only avoided jail time by pulling a plea that involves constant monitoring. They may not be villains, but they lead a life of resentment and anger that is solely directed towards you."

Ari let out a snort as he heard that the two former heroes were pissed specifically at him. They had committed all manner of terrible acts for one of the members of the hero guild that had been corrupted by Anubis, including wetwork that would have made him pause. In essence they were acting very un-hero-like and it appeared that his information on them had been outdated. Just the fact that they were allowed to live somewhat normal lives while not in the embrace of the Company caused his anger to flare and he could feel his muscles straining against the vines that held him. In response he felt them tighten with Treeborn whispering for him to relax and take a deep breath, which he did so reluctantly before the deer went into the details on the two and how they had started their own independent security consulting agency.

Even with his initial surge of anger dying down he still found his fur bristling at the idea of those two free. If anyone should have been punished for what happened when it came to that whole situation it should have been them, yet they're able to live free and clear running a business that's just one step down from hero work. Treeborn could sense his anger from the vines and went up to pat him on the snout, something that had caught him by surprise. He began to feel like this was how the somewhat naturalistic creature acted towards creatures that were hostile and though he wasn't a fan of being treated like an animal he couldn't help but admit to himself that it felt rather good and calmed him down.

After a brief exchange of how the two were doing otherwise, Ari talking as much as he could about his work in the CIA while Treeborn explained that he had started a greenhouse in the city among other projects, the deer mentioned that it would be good for them to part ways. Despite the park being mostly abandoned the more the two were together the higher the chance that either of them might get caught as the deer snapped his fingers and the vines withdrew back into the tree to free the hybrid. "Oh hey, I have one question for you," Ari asked as he shook out his body, stopping the deer just as he was about to disappear into the shadows. "Have you been having nightmares recently?"

"Constantly," Treeborn replied with a slight turn of his head over the shoulder. "Ever since the encounter with Anubis, why?"

"I see, though not quite what I'm looking for," Ari stated, scratching his left ear as he thought. "Anything... particularly vivid about what you did in your past that's happened in the last week or so, or maybe hallucinations of consequences for your actions? Not like what we dealt with concerning Anubis, but just like your brain is torturing you for some reason?"

There was a few moments where silence hung between them, but to the surprise of the hybrid Treeborn walked back and pressed a hand against his cheek. "It sounds like your trials and tribulations are not quite over for you," Treeborn said as he looked into the yellow eyes of the hybrid with his own emerald green ones. "Our primal natures are always trying to tell us something, most don't know how to listen. I know for a fact that you are aware of the primal side of yourself, and while I always advise caution in that regard if you're still chaining it up like you did before it might be time to let it stretch its legs and see why its so riled up in the first place."

The advice took Ari by surprise and Treeborn just smiled again and kissed him on the cheek before running off into the woods. He could track him for a bit until he suddenly disappeared, leaving him alone in the park with only the sounds of the animals surrounding him. As the shadows settled on him once more the information that he had been given once more bubbled to the surface of his mind. Shockwave and Mesmer, in his mind he lamented leaving those two alive when he could have potentially just gotten rid of them and did the world a favor.

But at the moment other than blowing his cover the two weren't his main concern, not when he had been brought in specifically

to deal with heroes that were being attacked. Once he had solved the problem he and the other would be able to leave this place once more and they could continue on with their lives as normal. As he began to walk past the closed shops and look through the ones that were still open it was hard for him to remember exactly what normal was. It definitely wasn't like most people as he passed by a pizza shop and saw a number of people enjoying themselves while talking about things probably like how their work went or what they planned to do tomorrow.

Sort of hard to do that when one was essentially a contract killer. While they did other missions and Sam made sure never to actually call them that the missions that they went on, with him in particular, were often designated to take out one or more targets. There was little difference between this and what he used to do for the Shadow Broker and when he used to be by himself when he first got the glove he wasn't exactly using it to help old ladies cross the street. He always knew that he wasn't a hero but as he caught his reflection while staring in the pizza shop he took himself by surprise at just how intimidating he looked while he stood there.

Ari's introspection was cut short as he could start to see more movement inside the pizza shop, mainly to the family that was sitting there with one of the kids crying and their father dialing on his phone. Damn, the hybrid thought mentally as he quickly moved on, last thing he needed to do was get picked up by the police. He wasn't sure how the relationship was between the Company and the cops were but it wasn't something he wanted to test out as he slid into a nearby ally and continued back towards the apartment. Fortunately he didn't hear police sirens coming up on his location as he continued to walk, though the image of how frightened that family was just looking at him stung like having held poison ivy.

Once he had gotten back to the apartment he found that his nighttime interlude hadn't caught the attention of others, at least not to the point where they were sitting there waiting for him. With the prospect of sleep eluding him Ari just went to the couch and turned on the television while keeping the volume at its lowest potential point. That late at night on regular television it was just news programs and infomercials, and while he could tell that they were still talking about the murders in the corner store it had become less of the main story and more of just an update. There was still no telling on what the consequences would be for that particular act other than the looks that he had gotten from the other group as he flexed his glove hand but he hoped that they would happen soon.

As Ari switched it over to the streaming services that had been provided to them he could feel a tingle in his hand.

"Enjoyed yer trip down memory lane?" Ari's glove asked.

"It was good to see that Treeborn was adapting to life after that whole incident," Ari replied softly, not wanting to wake up the others even though he had been assured multiple times that he was actually just talking through his mind when they were in conversation after their encounter in the kitchen. "Of all the heroes that got messed up from that whole endeavor, aside from my people, I always hoped that he could move on from it all. He didn't deserve what happened to him or to be haunted the way he clearly is."

"Sort of familiar, isn't it?" Ari's glove replied, causing the hybrid to snort. "You two had a lot in common."

"Yeah, except that he was practically possessed by Anubis when he was doing those evil acts," Ari replied. "I was just being an asshole that was abusing the power given to me that had a change of heart, which only happened because I got betrayed and ended up back with Campbell and Lavender, so there's a big difference between our circumstances. As I said before he doesn't deserve what happened to him."

"But you do," the glove retorted, causing the scowl on Ari's face to deepen. "Or perhaps you think you deserve even more than what's already happened to ya. Don't you think you've already punished yourself enough?"

Ari didn't have an answer to that and as he felt the presence leave his mind it seemed that the glove had made his point and had left. The years he had spent as a mercenary had been the most self-destructive years of his life and as he rubbed his severed ear he knew that it had been because he felt like he deserved death. Perhaps his glove was right, Ari thought as he put on a video game, maybe he was being too rough on himself. It was a strange and almost absurd thought that had crossed his mind but as he thought about it he wondered if the reason his nightmares were cropping up was because there was still one person that hadn't forgiven him yet... himself.

"Ugh, that was a cheesy fucking thought," Ari said to himself as he shook his head. "I got to stop listening to Ka when he does those stupid motivational mantras."

With the introspection broken Ari decided to at least lay down on the couch while the television was going and try to rest his eyes while not going into full sleep. He knew it was risky but some rest was better than none, especially if the anti-hero militia decided to act out after what had happened to the group. After a few breathing exercises he closed his eyes and focused more on getting into a meditative state than going to bed and hoped that would be enough. It didn't take long before the soft breath that came out of his mouth turned to loud snores as his hand smacked against the floor next to the couch...

A loud crash caused Ari to open his eyes again, and as his head bolted upright he found himself in a very different place than the apartment where he had laid his head. As he looked outside the window he saw that the scenery of the city had changed to somewhere very different and far more hostile in nature. The entire area was a war zone and he had been sent in specifically in order to try and find a defector for a nation that wished to speak with him. As his thoughts came back to him on what happened in this particular area he knew that not only did he find the defector but he had managed to get him close to the edge of the war zone where they were now.

But in his reckless nature and desire to sleep while waiting for his glove to charge, thinking that he had given those he had stolen the unconscious man from the slip. The bang he heard was the countermeasures he had installed on the doorframe in the main entrance of the building they had hunkered down going off, no doubt taking out whomever was unfortunate enough to knock on the door. As he got up and off of the couch he heard commotion going on in the other room and saw two humans that he had tasked with helping him navigate through the warzone coming out from where they had stashed their hostage. As they asked him what they were going to do Ari knew what to say, but he found himself rubbing his hands against his face as he already knew the outcome.

He would put those two up against the front of the apartment in order to hold them off while he snuck out the back with the hostage.

Yet another show of why he was such an asshole, and at this point he was starting to get sick of it. But as he opened his mouth to give the order to have them post up behind the corners to fire upon the main entrance and get shredded by machine gun fire he found his hands balling up into fists. He knew that this wasn't real, that this was just some strange nightmare conjured up from his past by his subconscious, but if he was going to be aware of it he knew he could try and change something. Even though he had no powers left in his glove he told the other two to grab the hostage and to go out the window and down the fire escape while he held them off.

The others looked at him like he was crazy but a quick snarl from him prompted the two to do what he was told while he readied his assault rifle. "If I'm going to be trapped within the nightmare of my past I may as well have a little fun with it," Ari muttered to himself as he got into position behind the kitchen counter with a grenade. "Plus it's not like you can die in a nightmare... or can you? No, I don't think so..."

It was too late for Ari to change his mind as a blast from the doorway caused him to cover his head to avoid the splinters of what used to be the door being detonated inwards. The second he had a chance to recover he took his grenade and tossed it into the hallway where they were. He could hear the sounds of them shouting as they scrambled and a few seconds there was a loud bang that caused dust from the roof above to shower down on him even more. Those that scrambled into the room in order to avoid the explosion Ari quickly gunned down, then sprayed the rest of the area with bullets in order to give the others enough time to escape.

While he had managed to empty the entire clip by the time he grabbed another one to reload he saw someone walk in with a gas mask and an LMG straddled against their hip. The hybrid's eyes widened and as he jumped to the side it unleashed a hailstorm of bullets that started to rip up everything in the area, including his cobra hood as he felt several bullets tear through it. That hadn't happened before and as he hit the floor while debris rained down around him all he could do was gasp in pain as he could feel the holes where the scaly flesh had been perforated. When the machine gun finally stopped he could practically see through the walls that it had cut through as the sounds of the men shouting could be heard approaching his position.

This was how they died, Ari thought to himself as he began to feel his breathing quicken, he had left them here in this death trap and were probably either gunned down in that instant or killed later. If they were lucky it was the former and even as he slowly got to his feet he wondered why he was being shown this. There was nothing he could do, there was no amount of preparation that could have prevented this from happening and he would be dead instead of them! Why show him this when he didn't have the power to stop it?!

He wasn't strong enough to deal with it!

There was nothing he could do!

He was... he was...

Weak...

As the soldiers barreled their way into the apartment they suddenly heard a loud roar, Ari standing up as he felt his muscles flex with newfound power. It was like he had activated all three powers in his glove at once and as he felt his claws lengthen he stared right at the first soldier that was about to come up and shoot him. He could see the fear in his eyes and knew that there

was only weakness there, prey exposed when the predator came around. Ari didn't even hear the scream as he pounced upon the man and sank his bared fangs right into the flesh of the soldier's neck while his tail sliced through the neck of the one standing next to him...

Chapter 9:

Ari awoke with a loud gasp and as he nearly fell over the couch he caught himself with his hand while he struggled to regain his breath. He felt something warm dripping down past his lips as he hung there and for a second his entire body froze as he could taste blood. For a fraction of a second he had thought of the worst but as a dull pain began to manifest in his mouth he realized with some relief that he had merely bitten his tongue while in the dream. It was enough to cause concern and as he got up he could see that from the show that was on the television that once more he had managed to maybe sneak in an hour before the nightmare he had been exposed too woke him up.

Holding his mouth to prevent himself from dripping Ari got to the bathroom and washed out his mouth before looking at it. To his surprise he had bitten a hole clean through and as he realized the damage the pain began to get that much worse. Even if his glove wasn't still on cooldown he wouldn't risk a charge just to heal it though, but as he wondered if he should put a band-aid on it or something he saw a figure in the mirror standing there behind him. "I smelled the blood," Campbell stated as he moved forward, looking at the tongue that Ari was still holding onto in concern. "Wow, you went right through, how did that happen?"

"Though I would give myself a cool new piercing and overestimated," Ari replied with a cheeky grin, though even just talking caused the dull pain to flicker in his mouth as he grew more serious. "Another nightmare."

"About your past?" Campbell asked as he got out the nearby first aid kit and started to tend to the wound.

"Yeah, though I feel like they're evolving," Ari stated, trying to keep his tongue from wagging too much as the puncture was cleaned. "These aren't like Anubis, but it's not the glove either... at least I don't think it is." The hybrid held still upon the saber tooth tiger's request and once Campbell was done spit the blood that had accumulated into the sink before continuing. "Honestly I have no idea what it is; it doesn't feel malicious but at the same time something is feeding me these nightmares, or maybe it really is just my inner beast telling me something."

"Your inner beast, that's something I haven't heard in a long time," Campbell mused. "Where did that come from? Also this is going to sting a little but it'll stop the bleeding so you don't drown in your own fluids."

Ari waited until after Campbell pressed a superheated finger in the hole to cauterize the flesh before he explained the meeting that he had with Treborn about the two ex-heroes that were on the warpath looking for him. He could sense the hostility rise in the other man at the mention of Shockwave and Mesmer before coming to the same conclusion that he had, while he would love to deal with them their primary focus was on the problem at hand. It was still good to keep everyone on alert though, keep an eye out for a minotaur and a kitsune that might try and put a damper on their day somehow. Campbell also mentioned that it would be a good idea to bring Mr. Stevens up on this new development so that the Company could maybe use their resources to keep an eye on the two so they couldn't hinder the investigation at all.

Once they had finished patching up Ari's tongue they went back to the couch and cuddled together while watching movies, Ari having a few cups of coffee while letting the saber tooth tiger eventually fall back asleep. Though he knew he had to keep his wits about him there was the pills that he had in his pocket, making a mental note to definitely not drink so that he could take them the next night. While the idea of potentially interacting with that strange voice and monstrous version of himself loomed in the shadows of drug-induced sleep he had to risk it so he wasn't nodding off any more than he normally did. As the sun slowly rose up over the city Ari was able to watch it while looking at the rerun of a show he had already watched several times before, feeling a sense of calm stoicism in the quiet apartment with Campbell by his side.

That moment was quickly broken as Ari got a phone call, this time from Mr. Stevens informing them that he would be there in half an hour in order to update them on the situation concerning the anti-hero militia. The hybrid used the flat of his tail to wake up Campbell and after letting out a snort the two of them went to go and wake up the others. It didn't take long before they found Ka and Lavender tangled up together, both of them asleep in one another's arms. Though Ari opted to get a bucket of cold water the feline stopped him and merely snapped his fingers, creating a rumble of thunder that quickly prompted the two to get up.

With the four up and about they got breakfast ready in time for Mr. Stevens to get there. The lion declined sharing in their food and instead told them to have a seat rather quickly so that they can get briefed. "We managed to get a lead on a possible leader within the anti-hero militia," Mr. Stevens explained as everyone got a singular file that had a picture of an older woman that was sitting at a table in what looked to be a cafe. "This is Janette Armstrong; we believe that she is one of the people handling logistics for the group, if this is true then bringing her in would be a major step in trying to find where Rayarti and his men are hiding all these resources that he's been buying up."

"Or she could be a school teacher that one of the militia members called up to make sure their kid was alright after the attack," Ka spoke up. "Do we have any hard proof that she's working directly for the militia?"

"Only that her son was maimed when one of the hero fights against a villain had caused a subway tunnel to partially collapse," Mr. Stevens informed them. "Since that time she's been very active with the protests that happened after the Anubis incident, but after that all we have is speculation and the fact that she works part time for a shipping company that handles a lot of Desmond Rayarti's business."

"We're going to want to be sure then," Ka responded. "Right now we have Ari in a very precarious situation of trust with them and if we provoke a response through her then we could lose what he got at the party, speaking of which was there any word that Ari and Campbell were linked to the murders in the corner store?"

"So far nothing has come up to the exact cause that we've heard through their chatter," Mr. Stevens said.

"Alright, so what do you want us to do with this Janette Armstrong then?" Ari asked after finishing up the bagel that he had been given. "Classic snatch and grab?"

"Ari, I don't think-" Campbell began to say before Mr. Stevens cut him off.

"Actually Ari is going to be correct on this one," Mr. Stevens replied. "The Company wishes for you to run with this hunter group that you have made up and press Mrs. Armstrong for information, maybe even flip her if possible. As Ka mentioned though it's very important that your identities do not get revealed to her in a way that she can report back, we want to keep making this look like they have gained enemies that may or may not be from the heroes guild."

Though Ari tried to hide it from the rest of the group inside he was elated to finally do something that wasn't waiting around this apartment or go to a fancy party. They spent some more time talking about the woman's schedule along with the best time they were going to take her and where they would go. Considering the Company had to stay as far away from looking involved in this as possible the group would need to utilize their own resources in order to make it happen. This wasn't just the usual observe and report, they were about to go on a full-blown operation in order to try and finally make some progress with this militia.

Once they had finished the briefing they allowed Mr. Stevens a few minutes to get out of the area before they rolled out themselves. While driving during the day was a risk with Ka at the wheel they didn't have to worry too much about being seen. Since time seemed to be of the essence they needed to scout out a location that they could store someone for a few days without anyone getting wise, somewhere they could also get in and out of somewhat easily without people noticing them. Preferably somewhere on the edge of town and with not a lot of traffic going through it, which was why Ari pointed them towards the abandoned industrial district. It was the place where he had done a number of operations when he still did things in the city and was also a great place for people who didn't want to be found to hide out.

It didn't take them long to find a place that would work for them once they had started touring the area. It was an old flour mill that had been condemned with everything else after technological innovations swept the city and as they walked inside they could see that there was still equipment inside. Likely too costly for them to remove it instead of just leaving it here to rot, though as Ari looked over several pieces of machinery he always found that one man's trash was his treasure. They couldn't just do this as themselves, even if they wore masks all the time they found that people often went silent when facing off against a direct threat... so they needed to make themselves an indirect threat by putting a layer of anonymity between them that was more than just a layer of fabric that would show off their anthro nature anyway.

Once they had settled on an area they spent all day reinforcing the walls and building what they needed to in order to make sure that their plan would go off without a hitch. As they did they began to talk about the real part of the job that would cause them the most problems, which would be the kidnapping. From what Mr. Stevens said she had a pretty regular schedule but that it was mostly conducted within the confines of the city. During the day she would work at the shipping company that was the reason she was the target in the first place, then afterwards would go home and spend the rest of her night there without too much deviation. The only time she did something different was when she went to church or to the gym for her weekly aerobics class, both of which were considered poor areas to attempt a snatch and grab given the crowds of people.

"What if we did a lure cast?" Lavender suggested as he finished with the welding of the wall that they had built in one of the grain silos while Ari and Campbell maneuvered a thick piece of one-way glass into place. "There has to be something that would draw her out of the house, we just find out what she likes and tell her she won a year supply of that to get her into the open."

"That's an awful lot of exposure," Campbell replied while straining to hold up the heavy glass as Ka began to weld it into the fixture. "Same reason why we can't go into her workplace and pretend to be a customer, we're trying to hide the fact that we're anthros and also that Ari and I are involved."

"What if we used Ari's glove to break into her house?" Ka chimed in. "Or he could use it to disguise himself, make it so that she believes that a human organization grabbed her."

This time it was Ka that shook his head at that as he finally was allowed to let go, rubbing his fingers. "Rayarti knows about my glove and might have people looking out for it or the powers that I use," Ari explained. "I shouldn't have used them in the corner market, but considering that none of them were left alive when it was all said and done there was no harm there. Since this is strictly catch and release we want to make sure we convey the message that whomever captured her is simply looking for revenge or something of that nature, and maybe if we're lucky we can finally get some information we can act on."

The others grumbled in agreement to that as they finished up the final touches on their makeshift interrogation room. The days of sitting around were not just getting to Ari as the others were starting to get anxious to get out there and do something, even Lavender despite wanting to spend most of his time behind the computer screen. They needed some action to spice things up, or perhaps they were also getting sick of the city they used to call home but were nothing more than strangers in. Either way they were ready to get going and finally make some progress on this mission for a group that they had forsaken so long ago.

It took another day before they finally believed they were ready for the next aspect of this mission. Even with all the talk they had done they found that the best solution they had was the simplest; when the human woman went to leave work or go get groceries they would swoop in and use Ari's tail to incapacitate her, then drag her into the van and drive off before anyone knew what was happening. It was not the most elegant plan but Ari reminded them that sometimes the best plans were the easiest ones as they finished up the last second additions to the site. The only problem that they had yet to solve was that whenever she stopped or was exposed it was often in a hard to reach spot, her car was parked behind the security fencing of the shipping company and when she went to get groceries she stayed in the car and had them loaded into her trunk.

As Lavender suggested maybe trying for abducting her during her class Ari got an idea, one that would involve exposure of one of their own but in a limited capacity. Since they were trying to make it look like humans were involved in the campaign against the heroes Ka would take the point this time. Though he was visibly nervous at being given the point on a mission, something that he rarely got to do since the three of them had powers and the bodies to match to take care of most problems, Campbell quickly went over and reassured him that he would be fine. The rest of them agreed and after giving him a few words of encouragement they began to go over the plan while on the ride back to the apartment.

By the time they got back a basic plan had been created for what they were going to do, but just as Ari was about to suggest that they get pizza to celebrate he found Ka tapping him on the shoulder and motioning for them to go to the office area. The kangaroo-cobra frowned at that but knew that given what he had been experiencing that he would have to do it or else be removed from the roster. As he heard the other two discussing what sort of toppings they wanted he shouted to the two of them what his preferences were before disappearing into the other room. Before he knew it Ari was laying back on the couch while Ka had taken up his position next to him on the couch with his laptop and recorder on the table.

"So how have you been feeling?" Ka asked. "I know that you were experiencing some insomnia, have the pills been helping with that?"

"They help a bit," Ari replied as he tossed the empty bottle to Ka. "Problem is that they're getting less potent with each time I use them. I even tried doubling up last night and while it did get me through the night I found myself in this weird darkness."

Ari was about to continue on about the voice he had met in his first drug-induced sleep and how it hadn't returned, but he found himself holding back on that particular aspect as Ka looked at the empty container. "Well... it seems as though your body has developed quite the tolerance to them already," Ka conjectured as he put the bottle in his own pocket. "I suspected that with your unique physiology that we may have to deal with your body adapting to them, but I'm sure we can get the techs back at the CIA to try and find something that will not only keep you down but also try and block those nightmares that you're having. Now, I know that you know I have to ask this, but are you sure that the nightmares are just that?"

"Yeah, they're not Anubis at least if that's what you're wondering," Ari grumbled.

"That's good to hear," Ka said with a small nod, pausing for a second before he continued on. "I do have to say that when I was getting you the pills the first time that there was something rather disturbing that was caught on the recording. You seemed to be shouting at the fact that you were having these nightmares and from the sound of your voice you were in quite a bit of distress."

Ari's ears flattened against the side of his head as he was reminded of their last session, recalling the scenario that he had been forced to endure while he was under. "It was... just a particularly vivid nightmare that had caught me by surprise," Ari said in response. "I was used to it going one way and it blindsided me, I can assure you that's not going to happen again."

"I see," Ka stated simply, continuing to write down notes on his laptop that Ari couldn't see. He thought about using his glove to borrow Lavender's power and peek into the computer, but knew that if he got caught there would be consequences for his curiosity as the human leaned back. "So if these nightmares are not being supernaturally induced by anyone, which given their

start time we can assume that's true, then why do you think you're having them?"

"I suppose that's the million dollar question," Ari responded with a loud sigh. "It keeps showing me my time when I was off on my own working as a mercenary, and while I admit that I was quite the asshole back then and only cared for myself I would like to think that my turning the corner and working with you guys would help remedy that guilt."

"So you feel guilty about your past?" Ka asked, Ari's teeth bearing slightly at letting that sort of information go.

"I suppose I do a little," Ka reluctantly answered. "Not to mention I had just betrayed Campbell in order to escape and then went around leaving a path of destruction and death in my wake. I didn't care what job I took, the more dangerous the better, and looking back I didn't even really do it for the money... though don't get me wrong, the money was nice, though I can't even remember what I spent it on half the time and have more than enough of it stashed around to last a lifetime."

"I imagine that's true given you paid for our supplies in gold coins that you just happened to produce after disappearing with Campbell for a few hours," Ka said with a chuckle, causing the hybrid to scoff and roll his eyes as the human put a hand on his muscular chest where there was a particularly large scar. "But while I do think that these nightmares are definitely a cause for concern there is also the potential that your mind is finally starting to process what happened to you and the thoughts that had caused you to get these scars. I think you've been running from these feelings for a long time and while the timing is not ideal your new processes for life are trying to come to grips with the fact that before this point you were a little more... cavalier with your life."

Ari imagined that the word that Ka wanted to use was suicidal, at least he believed that was the far more apt description when it came to these scars. Campbell and the others had known for a long time that if he had been careful even in the most dangerous of missions all he needed was his healing power as one of his slots on his glove to heal up almost anything. While he had given them the excuse that sometimes he just ran out of slots to get out of situation, which was actually true once in a while, he knew that even when he was with them that he often would just barge recklessly into a situation. In fact as the two continued to wind down their session with a general report on how Ari was processing their latest mission he realized that this was the first time since he could remember that he hadn't just went to Rayarti's mansion or wherever he lived and kill or maim his way to the mission being completed while dealing with the consequences later.

For a second as Ari finished up his notes Ka expected his glove to chime in that he told him so or that he was making the smart play, but it remained blissfully quiet as the human wrapped up their notes. "Hey, aren't I supposed to get a sticker or something for doing a good job?" Ari asked. "Maybe a sloppy make out session?"

"That's not how therapy works Ari," Ka said with a chuckle. "And while I would love to indulge with you otherwise all that construction has got me beat. I don't have the same constitution you guys have."

Ari was well aware of Ka's humanity as he got up from the couch and followed him out into the living room, Campbell and Lavender immediately going up to him and told him about the pizza he needed to pick up while the hybrid went over to the armchair and sat down. Getting therapy, restraining himself, actually finding a desire to live... funny that all this was happening in this particular city, he mused while seeing Ka leaving. As he looked out the window he thought for sure that the desire to go back to his old habits, the easy ways of doing things, would rear their ugly head once more. While he did admittedly have a minor setback at the corner store it had all worked out in the end and had given them the lead they were about to track down without him killing anyone.

As he laid there waiting for food Ari happened to catch Campbell's eye and the saber tooth tiger smiled at him, which he reciprocated before turning back towards the television. Was this a life worth living, perhaps for the first time since he had gained possession of the glove he believed that it was. While he was always fond of Campbell, and then Lavender to a lesser extent, he found that their time together was more precious to him than doing missions that inflicted pain and misery on others. No more betrayal, no more unnecessary bloodshed, and even if he had to burn the entire city to the ground he would make sure that those three he kept under his metaphorical wing were protected.

But his introspection was interrupted as he could smell the pizza already, his entire body perking up as Ka came in with the food for the night. Despite his tiredness from lack of sleep the hybrid was more than energetic enough to get something to eat, pushing Lavender aside with his tail before he could grab one of the boxes that he knew contained what he wanted. There was more than enough for all of them though and they knew they had to make sure that they kept their strength up.

They were about to kidnap someone the next day, after all.

Chapter 10:

The next day the sun was shining down on the denizens of the city as they made their way to and from where they needed to

go, and for one van in particular the occupants inside were ready to perform a kidnapping in broad daylight. Ari looked out of the tinted windows of the vehicle as they drove to the store that was frequented by one Janette Armstrong. Though the time varied a bit they knew the make and model of her car and could park near the entrance so that they could watch out for her, as long as no one ran the license plate on the vehicle that they had stolen. Lavender had assured them that he had already scrubbed the plates out and the ones that were attached came back clean, but that didn't mean someone could see it and match the make and model to a van that had suddenly vanished off the face of the earth.

As they turned into the parking lot there was a thud as Ari's head had hit the class, waking up the kangaroo-cobra that had almost nodded off while he sat there. The last thing he wanted was to experience a nightmare in the middle of a mission and as they waited for Ka to pull into a spot he grabbed an energy drink he had picked up and chugged it down. Though he had operated on little to no sleep before he hated doing it; not only was his reflexes sluggish when it came to things but if he was doing something boring, like waiting for someone to do their weekly grocery shopping, there was the very real possibility that he might nod off. At this point he wasn't sure how many hours of sleep he had in the last few weeks but he knew it wasn't enough as he slurped down the last of the can and tossed it behind him, almost hitting Lavender as the wolf growled at him.

Ari wasn't sure how long he had to wait until they saw the car they were looking for, only that he had just finished his third can by the time that it finally showed up. As soon as Campbell had spotted it everyone got ready with Ka pulling the van out while the others put on masks with lenses over the eyes. While anyone that looked at Ari would know that he was some sort of anthro they didn't want anyone to identify him directly, though if they did it right there should be no witnesses at all. The grocery pick-up for the store was near the back and there was a small wooded divider between it and the other parts of the property.

Ka drove them to where the border was and then unbuckled his seat belt before getting out of the van. Campbell quickly crawled up front and nearly smacked Ari with his tail as he squeezed into the seat, the saber tooth tiger grumbling that he had left it up all the way before pulling it back so he could drive. By the time he had settled in the other two watched as the human jogged up to the loading bay while wearing a uniform they had managed to procure from a local store. While this meant that Ka would be exposed they had taken steps to obscure his features, the man brushing the long blonde hair from his face that had several prosthetics to alter it to make him look almost completely different.

Once everyone was in place they just had to wait for Janette to come to pick up her groceries, which wasn't too long after they had sped back there. They had one shot to get this right and if they didn't want to reveal themselves Ari had to make sure to perform his role while she was distracted. Even though the energy drinks were coursing through his system the kangaroo-cobra found himself yawning, but when the actual employee from the grocery store had finished grabbing her order he let the adrenaline in his system take over. With Ka approaching from her blind spot Ari patted Campbell's shoulder as he positioned himself while the feline drove them around...

As the van moved its way through the back of the lot Janette remained focused on her rear view mirror, adjusting her makeup while she waited for her groceries to be put into her car. Ka made sure that the other employees had gone back in to get the order and after jamming the doors with an iron bar he went over and knocked on the passenger side window. The noise had caused her to jump and as she looked over at him Ka waved and gave her a smile before motioning for her to roll down the window. While a look of annoyance crossed her face she did what was asked of her and allowed him to stick his head in.

"Mrs. Armstrong, I'm sorry to say that there's been a little mix-up with your order," Ka lied, watching the van rolling around until it was coming up on her driver side. "I don't suppose you might want to pull over and wait for a few minutes while we get everything straightened away?"

"Are you serious?" Janette exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air as she started to dig around her purse. "I have to get home as soon as I can, is there any way that you can speed this up so that I can get it done immediately? I can pay extra for the inconvenience of having to skip someone else to get mine done first."

No cutting in line for you, Ari thought to himself with a smirk as he opened the sliding passenger side door just as Campbell pulled up next to her car. Before she could turn around the kangaroo-cobra whipped his tail around and sent the blade into the window, causing it to shatter and the tip of the spike to push into her neck. In the next second the woman was slumped forward and the sound of the car horn filled their air from her leaning against it, and as Ka ran around to get into the van Ari reached into the car and pulled her out with one fell swoop. As soon as she was lifted from the seat the car began to roll forward and that was just fine with the hybrid as he tossed her back to Lavender before slamming the door shut.

Campbell quickly but not suspiciously drove around to the side of the alley that the store bordered with another building before he switched seats with Ka once more. As the human got back into the driver seat he had already pulled off the uniform and replaced it with a regular blue jacket instead while also taking off the wig and prosthetics. By the time they were making their way out of the store there was a completely different person than who had gone in driving the van into the store parking lot. As they continued to drive Campbell buckled the unconscious lady into her seat as Lavender scanned the frequencies to see when their handiwork would be found out.

After a couple minutes Lavender reported that someone had called it in, one of the employees of the store telling the police that they had just gotten past a jammed door in their back lot and found that the car of Janette Armstrong had crashed into the nearby wooded lot with no one driving it. They hadn't ruled it a kidnapping yet though and that had caused everyone in the van

to breathe a sigh of relief. If it had gone out right away as a kidnapping it meant that someone had seen them do it, which meant there was the chance that they could be identified as a group of anthros and either potentially heroes or as Ari himself.

Though they had gotten away clean they would still have to ditch the stolen van, switching out for a car they had bought with cash and a fake identity. It was a used vehicle that was on its last legs so no one even batted an eye when Ka had paid for it all at once before driving it off the lot and right to the area where they would ditch the van for it. Though they were all giving one another relieved grins they knew that this was just the beginning of the operation, getting out clean meant that they had to try and break this lady to find out what, if any, involvement she has with the anti-hero militia. As Ari looked at her it was hard to believe that she had anything to do with anything, but he knew that sometimes appearances could be deceiving.

By the time they had gotten back to the abandoned district of the city dusk had fallen over the city, the sky taking on a brilliant orange hue as they drove into the main mill entrance. The room that they had secured to hold her in was one of the old grain silos they had retrofitted to become a holding cell and interrogation room. Ari's venom was also starting to wear off during that time and as they brought her into the somewhat furnished space they dumped her on the bed and got out before she would walk up. If they couldn't turn her the plan was to let her go with a tracker, but the whole point of the set-up was so that she believed that some mysterious, clandestine organization had kidnapped her.

"You know, in a way we're sort of just playing into this whole thing," Campbell commented as he leaned back in the chair, stuffing chips into his face as they watched her slowly start to stir through the one-way mirror they had installed.

"What do you mean?" Lavender asked from his monitoring station.

"Well, they think that heroes are actively ruining their lives," Campbell explained. "We're technically working for the heroes, which means that in reality her being stuck in this place is a result of heroes. In essence heroes are, in fact, ruining their lives."

"I think that argument goes out the window when they blew up a chemical plant," Lavender retorted before glancing over at Ari, who was at the coffee machine they had put into their side of the interrogation room. "What do you think Ari? Are we exasperating the situation, or is this just the consequences of their actions?"

"I think that I'm way too tired to be having a discussion on the ethics of what we're doing here," Ari said as he watched the coffee being brewed with bleary eyes. "Ask Ka."

"Hey, don't drag me into this," Ka stated from his own chair, holding his hands up from the laptop he was working on. "I'm getting ready to do a psychological profile on this lady as soon as she wakes up from Ari's venom. I just try not to think about it and cash the paychecks that my work gets me."

Though Ari turned to hide it he found his muzzle forming into a slight frown at hearing that. With all the exposure to his past that he had been getting it was hard to hear someone with the same attitude, even if it was a different circumstance to it. He knew that he needed to clear his head and get focused while not dwelling on something that was left outside of a mission. That was especially true when it was finally about to start getting interesting as all four perked up at seeing Janette start to finally shake off the venom that had been given to her.

"Man, she is taking ages to clear her head," Campbell said as he went over and sat down next to the sound equipment that had been set up. "How much venom did you give her?"

"Like I can control the dosage," Ari scoffed in response, prompting the others to just shake their head before turning their attention back to the human on the other side of the glass. It was strange for the hybrid to be the one that wasn't getting interrogated for one reason or another and in fact it was kind of fun as he felt his mood lifting while seeing the human start to examine her surroundings. "It's kind of like watching the animals at the zoo, except that these can talk."

As they could see her mouth move they knew that she was trying to speak to them, which they had decided to only go through a microphone that Lavender clicked on. "What's going on?" Janette asked, a clear note of panic in her voice as she began to feel around the walls for something that would let her out. "What happened to me?"

"What happened is that you have been a very naughty woman Janette," Campbell spoke through the microphone, the other three hearing the distortion that was processing his voice so that the human wouldn't know it was them should they ever meet again. "We believe that you have ties to a very serious organization that is threatening to take lives for the sake of their cause."

The other three leaned in as they could see her giving the room a confused look. "Are you talking about those protests?" Janette asked. "Those were months ago, and they didn't threaten to kill anyone!"

"We're not talking about the hero guild protests Janette," Campbell continued on, scratching the question off of his list as he

asked it. "Why are you receiving communications from the anti-hero militia group, the one that is responsible for the deaths of several people already with the promise of more to come?"

Though they were knowingly laying it on a little thick Ari had no intentions of making this situation a long-term one. While they could easily keep her interned for days, maybe even weeks, the news would quickly catch on that she was abducted and soon they would have to deal with hiding her while everyone was looking. Plus he could care less about the information she had, save she told them right where the stronghold of the group was along with the signed confession of Rayarti as its leader, and was more curious on what the group would do with her gone. After the murders at the corner store they were already probably on high alert, this would help kick the hornet's nest and maybe provoke a response that they could act on.

Ari hadn't realized that he had drifted off until he heard a shout that had knocked his attention back to the situation at hand. She was practically screaming at this point for them to let her out, causing his ears to hurt at listening to her shrill voice as she let out a screech that would peel the paint off of the walls. The others visibly flinched as well and as Campbell tried to get her to calm down it was clear that she was having none of it, not even listening to what he was saying as he attempted to calm her down. Eventually they just muted the microphone that went into her room and the four sighed once their ears stopped ringing.

"Well that could have gone better," Lavender said once he had uncovered his ears. "What's the word on her involvement with the group?"

"It's too soon to tell," Ka replied with a shrug. "She's currently experiencing the surprise of being taken from her usual surroundings and as expected she's not taking it well, though a reaction like this was unexpected in the severity of it. I'm starting to wonder if perhaps her routine was more than just her enjoying having a scheduled life, and if that's the case we may never get any information out of her."

Ari just groaned and put his hands to his face before getting up and practically storming out of the grain silo. He had to step away or else he would have grabbed the microphone and screamed right back at the woman, which would have been counterproductive. His fur still was practically standing on end and Ka's potential diagnosis made all their efforts in this place potentially worthless. They had risked exposing themselves and potentially going to jail for a dead-end that they would eventually have to let go in a way that also doesn't risk anyone knowing that it was them.

Just as Ari was about to light a cigarette as his excuse to be outside he suddenly felt his phone vibrating in his pocket. When he fished it out he expected that it would be Mr. Stevens or potentially Sam, but as he looked at the screen he found that it was a call that was going through the phone number that he had for personal calls. He quickly went inside and snapped his fingers at Lavender before pointing to his phone, which prompted the wolf to spring up and go to his computer to trace the call. Once he was in place Ari took a deep breath before he answered the phone and put it on speaker.

"Is this Ari?"

Ari recognized the voice on the other line and as he looked over at Campbell he could see that the saber tooth tiger knew it too. "That is correct," Ari replied nonchalantly. "Is this Desmond Rayarti?"

"Good ear," Rayarti replied with a slight chuckle before his tone fell. "Listen, I was rather reluctant to make this call to you all things considered, but given your track record in solving problems I'm hoping that perhaps you could do the same with mine."

Ari glanced to the others who were listening intently and thought about it for a second before responding. "I'm all ears... well, mostly all ears," Ari joked. "What can I do you for Mr. Rayarti?"

"A dear friend of mine has informed me that one of their staff that they hold dear has gone missing," Rayarti explained, a shiver going down his spine as he had a feeling he knew what he was about to be asked. "I'm not sure if you watch the news but they've already reported on the fact that her window was smashed and they had taken her from her car. They're currently investigating it as a kidnapping, but so far they haven't come up with any leads other than a human guy was spotted moving towards the loading bay from someone on a smoke break."

Someone saw Ka... it was a good thing that they had taken precautions in that case. "Are you asking me to try and find her for your friend?" Ari asked, trying to not let the smirk on his face show in his voice. "Are you sure you don't want the police to find her, or perhaps the hero guild?"

"I would rather have someone that can actually get things done on the case," Rayarti replied, the biting tone in his voice apparent. Ari had made the hero comment deliberately to see if he would bite, and while he was clearly irritated at the mention of the heroes getting involved he hid it fairly well. "While I'm sure that this is below your pay grade I would be willing to compensate you handsomely for her rescue. I am a man of means Ari, and a very good friend to have."

Ari found himself stroking his muzzle as he heard a few more details about what Rayarti would expect in this rescue mission,

including the payment that had caused the hybrid's eyes to widen slightly. While he was no stranger to getting quite the payday when it came to missions usually it was a lot less pay for a lot more work. As he glanced back at the silo however he perhaps was a little jaded because the goal of his objective was sitting not more than a hundred feet away from them. If Janette was going to be useless as far as information on the anti-hero militia she could be used to help them through a different means.

When he came back inside Ari found that the other three were just looking at the woman on the other side of the window, who was currently on the bed they had provided in the fetal position. It was very clear that things were not going well yet and when there was the option of potentially cutting her loose while still pushing their mission forward. As Ari explained the call and the fact that Rayarti was asking for his help he could see their eyes light up with a potential out for this particular situation that they have gotten themselves into. But while the offer was rather tempting there were a number of pitfalls that could be waiting for them, especially if this turned out to be a ruse.

After a bit of deliberation between the four they decided on a plan of action; Ari would call Rayarti back and take the job while also seeing if he could get a personal meeting, at the same time the other three would attempt to see if they could potentially break Janette to get any more information out of her. It was a two-pronged attack and since Campbell was seen with the hybrid at the party he would go as back-up in case anything happened. Though Ari suspected that he just didn't want to be around the crying woman that they had kidnapped he was glad to get someone else with him, especially since he was feeling exceptionally drowsy and there was always an electric tingle around the saber tooth tiger that he enjoyed. Though Lavender wasn't too keen on staying with Ka he had his laptop to keep him company as he was the only one with the power to make sure his line was encrypted.

Ari and Campbell went to the van they had and after driving about a mile back into the city Ari called Rayarti back and told him that he would take the mission but would want to meet to get a formal briefing. Much to his dismay while the other man was more than happy to meet with him and Campbell the location that he was given was a restaurant that was downtown. While the two were already known to be back in town after their little stunt at the party he wasn't sure he was comfortable with being in such a public place like that. Plus he had hoped that perhaps Rayarti would bring them back to somewhere a little more personal in nature, but it was unlikely that he would just take them back to his secret villain lair and divulge his full plan for world domination.

As Ari laid back in the seat while Campbell drove them to the destination he found that even in the somewhat cramped backseat, or at least for him, he found his head slowly starting to droop. There was only so much caffeine and sugar that he could consume until his heart exploded even with his augmented form and as he rubbed his hands over his head he was starting to feel the post mission crash. The adrenaline from the kidnapping had long since worn off and if he had been honest to himself he probably would have nodded off while waiting for Ka to figure out what made the woman tick. Even with a little more action coming into things through this meeting it was hard to concentrate his mind on the game plan.

Soon the sounds of the traffic and the hum of the engine was starting to lull Ari even more, at least until there was a crash and jarring sensation that nearly knocked him off the seat. Before he could ask Campbell what the hell was going on the tires skidded on the road as they were pushed to the side by another forceful impact that caused the windows to shatter out. What the hell was happening, did Rayarti lure them into a trap? As Ari reached down into his belt he found that he had remembered to grab his pistol. As the saber tooth tiger in the front seat tried to keep them on the road the hybrid was ready to make sure that those who were attacking them wouldn't live long enough to regret it.

It quickly was revealed that he wasn't the only one that had brought a gun as Ari had to immediately back away from the broken window as gunfire rattled the metal of the van. This was definitely not the reception that he had expected to get when he was called to dinner with Rayarti, though perhaps he should have. As he gripped his fist that had the glove he wondered if perhaps he should use a power in order to just get rid of these men before he remembered that if he did that the general public might think it was a hero that was causing havoc in the streets of the city. Considering his whole thing was using the powers of others this whole restriction was really starting to chafe his ass.

Another round of gunfire brought Ari back to the present and he decided to activate one of his powers to augment his weapon, something he had seen another hero do when he first started out in his freelancing career. Of course it had been used on him at the time so he had been less than enthused about bullets flying at him twice as fast as they should be, but once he had rectified the misunderstanding he found it quite useful. After a bit of concentration power flowed through his hand and into the gun before he jumped up. As soon as he looked out the window however Ari's jaw dropped when he saw that they were not driving through the city but rather on a dusty desert road as several dune buggies chased after them.

Ari remembered this particular vision; he had been tasked to kill someone that owed the Shadow Broker a large sum of money and had expressed no will to pay it back. Normally it would have been an easy task to slip in and out unnoticed but the broker wanted it to be a public execution to set an example for others. Back in that day Ari was more than willing to take on the extra risk of the job even if it meant that he would be chased out of the city by those loyal to the one he had killed. At this point in his life he knew that he actually took the job because of the danger, but as he fired back on the buggies and watched his bullets sink into their vehicles the rush of adrenaline caused him to laugh almost manically despite himself.

As a large bump nearly sent him up into the ceiling Ari dropped his gun out of the window, and as he poked his head out on instinct to look at it he suddenly turned it to look forward. In getting caught up in the memory he had forgotten what had come

after actually dropping his weapon back them. His eyes widened as he saw the car barreling towards them and turned back to make a dive for the seat belt that was in the backseat. It was what he had done back then too and as he heard the crunch of metal against metal he suddenly found himself going in a completely different direction.

Technically it was the cars that were going in the different direction, though in reality they had actually come to a dead stop after they had crashed into one another. For a brief moment he could see the driver as the air bag inflated in his face while he twisted his body to that his back would hit the windshield first. Fortunately the force of the impact had shattered the glass of both vehicles as he flew through the open portals of both and found himself in a completely different vehicle. He landed with a dull thud and could feel the ribcage of the man he had landed against get crushed by his weight.

With the momentum of both vehicles completely arrested he remembered what happened next, with the others in the car incapacitated from the crash he would crawl out and be captured by the ones in the other vehicles. But as he happened to see himself in the rear view mirror and saw the red eyes staring back at him a sudden wave of feral energy pulsed through him. He wouldn't just leave these odious men alive in order to back up the others and after using his tail to slice into the flesh of the ones that were already incapacitated he felt his muscles bunch up with pure power before springing forward...

...and rolling right into the space between the back seat of the van and the ones in front of it. The resounding thud and sudden shout of Campbell asking if he was alright brought Ari back to reality and when he looked up he found there was no broken glass or dead bodies. As he quickly used his clawed hands to crawl back up on the seat he quickly told the startled saber tooth tiger that he was alright and just hadn't been paying attention. Though he could see the other man's eyes in the rear view mirror instead of his own he couldn't tell if the other one had bought his excuse or not.

Regardless as the van pulled up to the restaurant Ari found himself shaking his head while he waited for Campbell to park. With his nerves on fire after what he had just experience the hybrid quickly took a few breaths in order to steady himself before getting out of the van with his partner. While he had no idea what they were in for when it came to meeting Rayarti in this place he hardly expected that there would be some sort of ambush, though it wouldn't be the first time he had thought that only for it to end in a shootout. Creating a bloodbath that would likely made the news didn't seem to be the man's style anyway as they walked in through the door.

As soon as they walked inside Ari felt immediately out of place, especially since he saw everyone in rather fancy attire immediately look at them the second they made their way inside. When Ari glanced over at Campbell he could see that the other man was just as uncomfortable about their current situation and the hybrid whispered that he would rather be out in the field. The feline snorted at that and caused even more people to look at them before they made their way up to the one in front. When they did Ari wasn't sure what to expect considering the atmosphere of the place but to their surprise the second they got within view they were motioned to follow him back into the dining area.

The ambience of the place didn't change and if anything the two of them felt more like they shouldn't be there. Even the anthros that were more oddly shaped had on nice suits and were giving them a look as they were escorted towards an area in the back that was slightly raised up. It looked to be a more private area of the dining room and Ari remembered being escorted to places like this before, usually to meet nasty people that would be giving him nastier jobs. Usually the place was empty and there was only the light on over them to give them a creepy vibe instead of the rather pleasant atmosphere with a piano playing in the corner.

Rayarti was at a small table by himself and as Ari clocked the room he didn't see anyone that might be covering as a body guard for him. It was a rather bold move even if he was just asking for their help, most people he knew that made such meetings would have a gun on the back of his head during the entire duration. Either this man was very confident that they wouldn't snatch him in the middle of this place or he had some sort of contingency plan in case they did do something against him. There was also the possibility that he didn't even think of them as potential threats... but if this guy really was the mastermind to these anti-hero groups then Ari doubted he would be that naive.

"Ari, Campbell, how good of you to join me on such short notice," Rayarti said as the two sat down. "I do hope I wasn't interrupting anything important. Feel free to order whatever you'd like as repayment for getting you here."

Though Campbell was about to decline he let out a slight yelp as Ari jammed his heel into the foot paw of the saber tooth tiger before thanking him and picking up the menu. Ari knew that these were often token gestures and one of the ways that they can figure one another out is through this initial interaction. Since the feline wasn't as well versed in such things he wanted to make sure that he tried to give as many cues about what to do as he could while he looked through the menu that was provided for him. He looked through the options before finding a rather nice cut of meat that wasn't too expensive to show that he wasn't afraid to take a reward when given, not take advantage of generosity, and it gave him the aura of a predator. Plus a steak gave him the added benefit of a steak knife... just in case.

Campbell ordered a pasta dish that couldn't be helped, but they at least both got wine with their meal as they handed the menus back to the waiter who promptly walked away. "You have good tastes," Rayarti said as he sipped his own glass. "I hope you don't mind if I don't order anything, I will not be here too long I'm afraid."

"I suppose we better get to business then," Ari said as he put the napkin in the lap. "Tell me about your problem."

Ari and Campbell both listened to what Rayari had to say, basically rehashing what was told to the hybrid over the phone as the two ate. "Sounds like a snatch and grab," Ari stated once the human man was done. "Has there been any ransom to the family?"

"Unfortunately we have not heard any word from the kidnappers," Rayarti replied. "I'm just a friend of the family so I don't have all the details, but what I can't understand is why anyone would want to take the poor woman. She's a clerk at the local shipping company and doesn't really have access to anything of importance that I know of."

"It sounds like a bunch of amateurs to me," Campbell interjected.

"I agree," Ari replied. "Is there anything else that you can provide us as far as information into Janette or the crime scene?"

"I'm afraid the cops took the car and have already released the crime scene despite my best efforts," Rayarti replied.

"That's alright, we've done more with less," Ari said as he picked his fangs with his steak knife. "Alright, I guess that the only thing we have left to discuss is going to be the payment for our services. I'm sure I don't need to quote you a price considering that you know how much this woman's life is worth for you, and that you know better than giving me a check, credit card, or as a personal favor."

"I expect nothing less from a professional," Rayarti said as he stood up, looking at his watch before straightening his tie. "I trust that you know that I have the means to pay you and in a method that I'm sure you'll find acceptable." Ari smirked slightly as he watched the human start to go. After calling him out it seemed that he wouldn't know how much he would be getting paid for this, but the real reward for this would be the favor he would gain with this man for doing this with him.

Though he knew that he already had gotten what he wanted there was one thing that had come up in his mind, a rather risky question that he couldn't help himself to ask. "Mr. Rayarti," Ari asked, prompting the man to stop and turn back around when he was only a few feet away. "I know that someone of your stature probably has people that could do what you're asking us to do, you don't have anyone in your circle that could help, like that Chet fellow we met at the party."

Ari watched intently while retaining his aloof demeanor to see how the human would react to the question. Out of the peripheral of his eye he could see that Campbell had shot him a look, but it was too late to take back what he had said as he could see the body language of Rayarti shift with his shoulders twitching slightly. "You must not have heard," Rayarti replied with a slight coldness in his voice. "Chet had decided to go off and freelance with someone, and in return it got him killed."

"Oh wow, I'm so sorry to hear," Ari replied as he feigned sympathy before giving him a look of mock realization. "Wait, it wasn't that murder that we heard in the store, was it?"

"Indeed it was," Rayarti replied, shaking his head slightly before looking at his watch once more. "I really must go, I have a car waiting for me and they like to charge for being a minute late. The meal is already taken care of so feel free to order a desert or anything if you'd like."

Ari just nodded and wished him a fond farewell, waving him off before turning back to his steak. "Mmmm, cooled down since we talked," Ari said before turning towards Campbell. "Would you mind being a dear for me?"

"At this rate I'm going to start charging you," Campbell replied as he held his hand over the steak before the paws glowed red, causing the meat to sizzle before he pulled away. "Are you sure that it was wise to ask about him, considering you know that the guy was following us probably on his command and that we're the ones that killed them?"

"Yeah, but we're also the ones that kidnapped the one he's hiring us to find," Ari replied with a shrug as he began to eat once more. "Plus it's good to figure out exactly what his relationship with that man was, for all we know Chet really did go rogue or something and defied Rayarti's orders. He was a piece of shit anthro hater after all, which meant that perhaps Rayarti was telling the truth that he had gone rogue just to fuck up our day."

Campbell looked down at his own meal in thought as Ari finished the last of his wine and flagged down the waiter to get another glass. He had started to potentially suspect that there was more to the attempted ambush of Chet and had wondered if there was some sort of internal conflict going on. If the man they just met really hadn't given the order to have them followed then it was possible that Rayarti thought that the conflict might be happening within his own organization. If he could get Janette back with a believable story on how he found her then it was possible that the man would continue to utilize his services, something he had done with other clients before if he needed to get into their organization without killing anyone.

Once the two of them had finished their meal, which naturally included dessert, the two left the restaurant to head back to the apartment instead of go back to where they were holding the one they were about to save...

Chapter 10:

Two days had passed since Ari had the meeting with Rayarti, giving it some time to marinate while also allowing Lavender and Ka to see if they could get any information out of their captive. Despite using many of the tricks of the trade that the human had under his belt he couldn't get the woman to talk about anything other than her family and wanting to get back to her job. As far as he could tell either this person was an expert in counter-interrogation... or she was just some random woman that didn't know what was going on to save her life. While that was frustrating in itself they fortunately had an avenue that was opened to them with this rescue mission, the only problem that they had to work out was how they were going to make the mission look like one without getting any of their group involved in it.

Since they didn't want Lavender or Ka getting involved more then they already had Ari came up with a different idea so that he and Campbell could look like the heroes without involving anyone else. While Lavender made sure to scrub any and all evidence electronically that they had been there the two got to work setting up the scene for a truly epic confrontation... with absolutely no one. "Can you explain to me again why we're putting in all this effort?" Campbell asked as he made the mark on the small pile of oil barrels that they had set up on the road to the silo. "Why don't we just go in and return her to Rayarti?"

"Campbell... I would have figured that you learned more from me at this point," Ari replied teasingly after biting off a strip of duct tape and pressing a gun against the back of a vehicle. "A guy like Rayarti isn't going to believe that we just found the woman, got her out of whatever predicament she was in, and then waltzed her back into the arms of her family. He's going to expect some collateral damage, especially if he's been following my career, and even if he wasn't watching us, which he probably will be, then we have to do something to make sure that the Janette has a story to tell when she gets delivered back."

"I suppose that makes sense," Campbell replied with a shrug. "And at least with your idea we don't actually have to have any bloodshed, just make sure you don't over-exert yourself to put on a show."

Ari just gave Campbell a smug grin back as he prepped the last of the timers onto the device he had rigged up. While they could have just as easily created remote timers that Lavender would be able to interact with the hybrid didn't want anything to potentially trace back to them and by extension him. He could have also attempted to mimic Lavender's power and done it himself but he needed to focus on a lot of other things and didn't want another one added to the list. That just meant that they had to make sure they got their timing down right and for the last day they had been rehearsing everything to make sure they didn't accidentally blow themselves up.

As the two reached the makeshift door to the silo open they saw Lavender squeeze his way out, the heavily muscled wolf stumbling slightly while still carrying his laptop. "Alright, I think I pretty much covered everything," Lavender explained to them as Ka came out right behind him. "I even managed to erase any telemetry data from passing satellites in case Rayarti's influence goes deeper then we thought. Anyone that's looking at this place won't find hair nor hide of us."

"I also scrubbed down everything in the silo and anywhere we touched," Ka interjected. "Are you sure that you don't want us to come along and help?"

"Let's try and keep our connection a secret for as long as possible," Ari explained. "That way we can bring you two in later, or at the very least Lavender. I'm not sure what Rayarti can get access to but if he pings you as a working member of the CIA before joining us he might have some questions."

The human understood and nodded his head as they finished the clean-up of the area before heading to the van. With their presence essentially eliminated the show would be ready to start, there was just one thing left that Ari had to do before they could get it started. That was just wait for the sun to set as they drove back to the apartment, though that was easier said then done as he chugged down yet another energy drink. The last two days had not been good to him as far as sleep was concerned; he had tried one more dose of the sleeping medication that he had gotten from Ka, but aside from having very little effect there was an even worse nightmare waiting for him that involved nearly drowning. By this point everyone that was in the apartment knew of his condition and were worried about it, though the only one he talked to about it was the one that insisted they try and fit in more sessions in an attempt to help.

It wasn't really helping all that much, Ari thought to himself as he tried not to lean too far back in the seat lest he get pulled into another nightmare. The last thing he wanted to do was freak out in front of the others while they drove back to the apartment and he wasn't sure what was waiting for him on the other side of his closed eyelids. He much preferred staying up and with a crucial mission coming up to get into the good graces of Rayarti he couldn't let himself get distracted. Some food would help, Ari mused, and by the time they reached the night his true predatory instincts would come out with the help of the glove.

As he looked down at his hand he wondered whether or not he would be hearing the voice again soon. After having it interject

in his mind so many times it was almost strange the last few days when he didn't hear it at all. Perhaps it was just because he was busy with the current mission at hand and knew better than to interrupt him while he was working, though in reality the truth of what this voice was was almost frighteningly elusive. While Ari would take the current mysteriousness over dealing with something like Anubis it was still something that he had to concern himself with as he ate the food that had been given to him. It took him a few moments to realize what it even was but in essence it didn't really matter to him as he honed his focus on the task at hand.

The hours wore on and as day turned to night Ari waited for the moon to be high in the sky before calling Rayarti and giving him the news that he had tracked down where Janette was located. The hybrid could hear the relief in the other man's voice and told him that his payment was already secure and waiting for him once the job was done. Though it was a bit of risk he asked if there was any proof that would be needed in order to show that the job was done, something that he would offer to normal clients on something like this, only to be told that the return of the woman was fine enough. That sounded perfectly fine for him but knew that just because they said they wouldn't be watching doesn't mean they wouldn't be, especially since he had the money to easily follow them.

With everything already scrubbed from the area there was no reason for them to worry that Rayarti will find the location early, the only thing that would be rough would be explaining why she was left alone in some abandoned factory building. Ari looked at his watch as Campbell went over the map that they had drawn to mark where they had placed the explosives and the timing. This was going to be more theatrics than anything at this point since there wasn't any actually to fight, but the last thing he wanted to do was go to the wrong spot and get blown up. Though he had practically memorized it himself already it was never such a thing as too much planning, especially with someone like Campbell.

Once they got to the midnight hour it was time for them to start in the rescue mission that really wasn't, taking a different van that Ari stole from a nearby auto shop while Lavender and Ka would follow behind. Even though they wouldn't be actively participating in the mission he still wanted to keep them close just in case they were needed. It was likely a precaution that was not necessary as they drove back out to the abandoned industrial plant. As they got there the van that held their other two teammates kept their distance while they made sure to park outside of the blast zone while getting prepared.

"You think that there's anyone out there watching?" Campbell asked while he got his gun ready.

"I sure hope not," Ari whispered back as he got his glove and night vision goggles ready. "I'm hoping that if he does somehow find out about our plans it's because he managed to follow us here, otherwise if he's been watching this place since the phone call then it'd be rather suspicious. Just keep to the script and as soon as we leave the van we treat this like an actual mission, how much time do we have?"

Campbell looked at his watch and told Ari that there was only about five minutes left until they had to get into position. Though normally they would wait Ari could already feel himself starting to nod off and knew that if he waited around in the van much longer that the adrenaline would wane and he could potentially fall into another nightmare. While just the saber tooth tiger would be the one to see it the last thing he needed was to wake up after reliving some of his old glory days with a fully loaded assault rifle in his lap along with a number of grenades and his glove prepped to start slinging powers around. Plus it would give them a chance to get eyes on the field and make sure that what Campbell had thought wasn't true and that they were actually alone.

Though Ari thought about potentially using a power in order to scan the area he decided against it; just like with no longer talking about the mission itself he had no idea who would be listening and with what technology, especially considering what he had seen. Plus if somehow Rayarti had roped villains or heroes into his little plan, which would be a bit ironic considering his organization but not completely unreasonable, there were powers that he had to put into play as well. As the two faked scouting about they really did watch for any movement that might be happening in the outskirts of the abandoned industrial plant. Between two sets of augmented eyes however they found no movement that they could pick up on and as Ari gave Campbell a nod they slowly moved into the perimeter of the zone they were breaching.

As Ari moved between the scattered remains of the heavy equipment he could see that his hands were quivering slightly, his gun shaking a little as he vision swam briefly. The energy drinks were having the opposite of an optimal effect on him as he had to take a second to take a deep breath and steady himself before moving forward once more. Anyone that might be looking in on him would think that perhaps he was a bit nervous on running such a sensitive mission when in actuality it was the exact opposite. While there was some intrigue there on trying to fool Rayarti it didn't have the same kick as a real mission where his life was on the line and a mistake could be the difference from escaping with his life and getting killed.

"Perhaps it's a good thing then that you aren't on a real mission."

It was only the immense amount of trigger discipline that Ari had which kept him from firing off a round as he heard the voice in his head. "Why now..." Ari lamented with a sigh, though the scare did provide him with the jolt that was needed in order to make sure he got to his cue on time. "As you can see I'm in the middle of something."

"Yes, a very important something," the voice of the glove said sarcastically. "Seems that when you don't want to think of

something you dive into your work, though I'm here to remind you that this was the exact thing that got you to where you are in the first place."

"Great, I'll talk to Ka later, now can I use you to do my job?!" Ari practically shouted mentally, though as he heard Campbell ask if he said something he took a second to compose himself when he realized his thoughts were starting to leak into the real world. What a time to bust into his thought process, Ari thought to himself as he replied on the radio that he just thought he saw something that turned out to be a rat. At some point he would have to figure out just what the hell was going on with all this, but now was not that moment as he heard no response from the glove while he channeled power into it.

Suddenly the audible sound of a siren going off could be heard that echoed throughout the mostly empty industrial complex as Ari's body shook slightly from the concentration. Campbell let out a shout that they had been compromised and as Ari checked his watch he knew that this would be the most dangerous part of the entire mission. Fortunately the reticle that he had in his night vision he could see some thermographic paint that was on the ground that they had left behind. As much as he would have liked to mark the bomb itself he once more didn't want to give Rayarti an inch to know that they had staged this whole event. It wasn't even the closest that he had ever been to an explosion as he willed his glove to bring out the first round of kidnapers.

As the phantom creatures fired upon them he created sparks and fake dirt flying up in his illusion, though Ari could feel himself already starting to sweat at creating such an elaborate phantasm. This power he hadn't actually gotten the inspiration from a hero; while he was traveling through western Europe he had gotten tickets from the shadow broker as a way of thanking him for getting rid of a troublesome target. It turned out that the anthro on stage used illusions in order to create a concert all by himself without the need to have things like props and stagehands. He had been rather impressed with how everything had turned out and after sleeping with the guy he was given a first hand experience on how it worked to create everything but the tactile sensation of a real being.

"Why couldn't I get a dream about that night," Ari grumbled to himself as he began to fire back, only to be kicked to the side by the concussive blast of the bomb that had been placed to mimic a rocket launcher. As he quickly got back to his feet he gave a little nod to Campbell, who began to glow with a bright orange light before releasing a fireball at the area. Even though his ears were still ringing a bit despite the protection in them Ari managed to keep his attention on the scene and have the phantom soldiers react accordingly, even having one be set on fire and run around shouting.

As the two pushed forward Ari found his pulse starting to pound in his head as he conjured up vehicles that came out of the nearby factory and drove towards his location. It was the first time since the shadow broker mission that he had really been giving his glove a work out, which was causing his muscles to strain slightly the more elaborate the illusion he was creating. This was only one slot that he was using... and since he really wanted to put on a show he had intended on doing a second, more flashy power to show that he was using the glove to fight the enemy that he had created. Though he was already breathing hard Ari focused once more and in a flashy display he did a power that he had become known for, shadow tentacles rising up in the air and wrapping around several of the spectral creatures that he had created.

It was strange trying to coil around something that didn't actually exist and it was causing him to get even more distracted while they continued on with the show. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Campbell was reacting to another explosion that they had planted closer to the silo and knew that soon they would have to actually reach the silo and show the defeat of the fake enemy. As Ari looked up to the air though he saw that one of the reasons they were being so flashy hadn't shown up yet and it caused a frown to form on his face. Usually they were a little quicker on the ball than this, the hybrid thought to himself as he looked at his watch, and if they continued on much longer they were going to have problems from the actual authorities coming down on them.

Perhaps a little more flash was needed as Ari got Campbell's attention, giving the saber tooth tiger the signal to go bigger. Campbell nodded in response and the glow of his body intensified as he exerted more energy to push his power into the next realm. Arcs of electricity began to bounce between the pieces of rusted metal as Ari manifested a bit of a larger vehicle for the feline to target and when it got into range the other man shot a bolt of lightning straight at it. Naturally it didn't hit anything but Ari made sure to have it go up in a fake fireball as he hoped the discharge wouldn't activate or short out any of the remaining explosives that were on the field.

As the thunder echoed through the district Ari took a second to catch his breath and continued to look up at the sky even as he fired at the illusionary targets. After about a minute or so he finally heard the noise that he had been wanting to, a smirk curling as he could hear the sound of a helicopter coming their way. While the news chopper would miss most of the events they had planned it would be enough to show that they were there and there was some force against them to have Rayarti look into. He just hoped that it wasn't the police, otherwise they were going to have a problem considering the grand finale they had planned as Ari moved forward once more.

As Ari got behind one of the junked out cars he heard Campbell shout something over the radio about being off, which snapped the hybrid out of his observation of the skies and put his concentration back down to the ground. He hadn't realized just how much he had been moving and in his distracted state he had planted himself right behind one of the cars they had rigged to blow. The only thing that he had time to do was check his watch to realize just how big of an error he had made before a flash of white and a deafening boom shocked his senses. Even as he flew through the air and felt the searing pain of superheated

metal digging into his flesh he still managed to think mentally that he had to stop finding himself getting flung through the air and wondered if this would become a new nightmare.

That was the only thought that managed to get through the blinding pain as he crumpled to the ground a few feet away from the smouldering crater that the car had become. Fortunately it had been one of the smaller bombs they had rigged and the paneling of the car had shielded him from some of the blow, but as he could feel blood dribbling from his nose and mouth he knew he found himself looking up and gripping his glove hand tight. Even with the searing agony that came from what was probably a number of broken bones and ruptured muscles on his left side he continued to focus on the power that he was manifesting, at least for the remaining guards as he released the grip on his shadow tentacles. There was still one last thing that had to be done before they could be considered finished and Ari hoped that Campbell would have the sense to complete the job instead of running to him while he laid there bleeding out.

Once more another fireball lit up the sky, this time with the helicopter's lights being seen overhead capturing the moment, but it didn't come from any bomb they had placed. The flaming saber tooth tiger let out a shout as he created an eruption of fire hot enough to suck the air out of the surrounding area that would have killed anyone in the radius of it had they been there. Even before the light from the fire died out however Ari found that Campbell was right next to his broken body. He could see the concern on the feline face as the ringing in Ari's ears subsided enough to hear him asking if he was alright.

"Relax..." Ari groaned as he was slowly helped into a sitting position, continuing to spit up blood as he looked around and saw that the operation was complete. As soon as he did he used the last slot of his power glove in order to activate the one ability he had utilized since the beginning, wincing in pain as he felt his bones being reset and the punctures to his body being knitted together when the wave of magic flowed through him. "See, never better."

There was a moment where Campbell looked at Ari in confusion, which prompted Ari to do the same in return. "Sorry, it's just usually trying to get you to remember to save a slot for healing was like pulling teeth," Campbell explained, a big smile forming on the tiger's face as he helped Ari back up to his feet. "I'm not sure whatever you're doing with Ka but I want you to keep it up."

"Let's just get the mission over, idiot," Ari said with a smirk as he gave the feline a smack on the butt before heading into the silo. The fireball that he had produced not only got rid of the imaginary creatures but also blew open the door so they didn't have to waste time with it. Now that the media helicopter was there it wouldn't be too long before the police were behind.

As they got inside the silo the two could see that Janette was curled up underneath the bed that they had created for her, which made the next part real easy. Ari went up to the glass and pulled out an iron spike while Campbell pulled out a collapsible hammer that was in his utility belt. The hybrid gave a nod and turned away as the feline swung as hard as he could, the hammer striking the spike right on the head and causing the thick glass to shatter. Almost immediately the two could hear the shrill scream of the woman on the other side and since they didn't have time to try and calm her down Campbell just went up and sprayed her in the face with a chemical compound that rendered her unconscious.

Once they had gotten her, Campbell slinging her over his shoulder, they immediately made their way back out through the broken window and blown open door. As they ran through the destroyed industrial complex the two could see the red and blue lights starting to appear in the reflection of the other buildings. It was time to get the hell out of there and even with both of them running as hard as they could the sound of the sirens were getting even closer. As soon as they got to the van Campbell practically threw the woman into the backseat with Ari before practically diving into the driver side.

Fortunately one of the great things about having been in this area multiple times was that they knew of another way out of the area besides the main road. Ari had to hold onto Janette as they bounced around the broken asphalt he could feel himself starting to black out, the power of the glove leeching the strength and energy out of him. This was the first time since he had worn the glove to the limit that he had felt so weak and though he tried as vehemently as possible to stay awake he found himself slumping down on the other seat. The second his head hit the cushion he found himself losing consciousness completely, the sounds of the sirens echoing in his ears as he completely passed out.

Chapter 13:

Ari once more found himself drifting in the void, sighing loudly as he could already tell where he was even before he fully grasped the nature of his current condition. "At least it's better than a nightmare I suppose," Ari said to himself as he continued to look around wearily. "As long as that weird voice or that freaky version of myself isn't around."

The hybrid flinched slightly as he thought that perhaps that might accidentally cause the manifestation of either of those things, but instead he was just greeted with nothing but silence. He remembered how long the last time he had gone into a stupor like this and hoped that this would only last a few minutes though given the nature of how many energy drinks he had consumed he wondered if maybe his heart didn't actually explode. That didn't feel like it was true though and that he was very much alive, which was at least somewhat of a relief, the next thing he wondered was what would happen next. He didn't believe that he was lucky enough to have a few minutes or hours of respite in this place and he really wished that he could just sit back and have a

drink.

To Ari's surprise he suddenly found himself in a beach chair holding said beverage, looking at the crystalline glass filled with the amber liquid before taking a sip. Not bad... he thought to himself as he brought back the cup to look at it again. He wondered if he could get drunk in this place in order to pass the time but as he began to muse what else was going to happen he saw a tiki bar form out of the shadows. It wasn't unmanned however and as he slowly got up from the chair he watched as the jackal that was wiping it down gave him a grin.

"It can't be..." Ari said in awe as he made his way to one of the bar stools and sat down. "Anubis?" Even as the words left his muzzle though he knew that this wasn't the old god he had defeated; for one this jackal was much leaner and more toned and for the second it looked like his body was made of shiny black leather. It was similar to something else he had seen before and as he looked down at his glove his mind made the connection.

"Looks like it's bout time we met face to face," the jackal's gruff voice said, which was identical to the one in his mind as he leaned in. "Or rather face ta palm I suppose. Interesting manifestation I have to say, wouldna thought you saw me like that and I guess that I'm a bit flattered." As Ari continued to stare dumbfounded he watched the jackal pull a cigar out from behind the bar and light it. When he was offered a cigarette the hybrid snapped out of his shock and nodded, which prompted the man behind the bar to produce one of his favorite brand and give it to him.

"This is way too fucking weird," Ari stated once he had taken a puff, finding much like the scotch it tasted exactly how he thought. "What do you mean this is your physical manifestation? Why do you look like a weird jackal plushie bartender?"

"This is whatcha think I might look like if I had a physical body," the jackal replied with a shrug. "The jackal part is probably cause ya still associate the glove with Anubis. As for the rest of it, well, tactile sensation is quite the thing."

Ari found himself shaking his head and putting the glass down on the bar, running his fingers over the smooth wood as he sees the bartender refill it. While he might have been surprised about something like this before, his time with the hallucinations and these more current nightmares had already shown him how real these dreams felt. The other one that was there with him seemed more than content to just stand there and wait for him to get acclimated to this dreamscape. As Ari grabbed the glass once more and took a drink while a swimming pool manifested next to them.

"Seems like I'm starting to get the hang of this," Ari said as he took another drink before setting the glass down and looking right at the jackal. "So you have a name?"

"A name?" the jackal replied. "I suppose you can call me Rote for now."

Rote... an interesting name, but Ari was far more concerned on what was going on rather than just talk to his glove that was playing bartender in his mind. He had to think about what was going on and focusing at the task at hand on how to get rid of these nightmares that have been plaguing his mind when he was otherwise trying to sleep. Even with this being a welcome respite from such things he knew that he couldn't just pass out every time he wanted to try and reset his mental clock. The bartender once more continued to let him ruminate on his thoughts while sipping on the drink that had been provided to him.

Just as he thought about perhaps trying to interrogate the manifestation of his nightmares with the jackal when he suddenly saw something that caused him to pause mid-sip. It was him... but that other version of him, the one that had threatened him the last time he had been in a place like this. His eyes scanned the darkness to see where the creature was but had quickly lost sight of him in the shadows that surrounded this little piece of mental paradise. After giving a few moments to make sure he didn't see anything else Ari went back to the jackal bartender only to find that they had vanished.

For a brief moment Ari braced himself in case he was about to get jumped but as he quickly spun back around he found himself alone once more. It was getting on his nerves that this stuff was happening and the last thing he wanted to do was play cat and mouse games with either some deity, his guilt, or something else that was trying to screw with him. When he attempted to go into the darkness though he found himself in a rare moment of hesitation considering the potential for some sort of ambush. As he looked back at the bar and the pool that had been sitting there he came up with an idea, and as he held up his hand he found that there was a flashlight in his hand.

Though it didn't make things much better considering it didn't seem to illuminate anything beyond the light of the beam he continued to move forward regardless. Perhaps he should have thought of the sun or something, Ari ruminated as he looked up into the shadows that were engulfing him. Though he thought that perhaps the idea might manifest the darkness remained while he continued to move forward. It didn't take long before the bar and pool area disappeared completely and he was surrounded by the shadows once more.

It didn't take long before the light did finally shine on something, Ari smelling the smoke from the burning wreckage of the car that he found. It was wrapped around a telephone pole after he had set off the bomb that he planted inside of it all those years

ago. This was one of the first jobs that he had ever done after he had escaped from the heroes guild of the very city that he was now residing in, which at the time he had been rather proud in. There was no collateral damage, nothing else that happened, it was pretty much a picture perfect assassination. Not only had he been proud of that hit but it had gotten in the good graces of the shadow broker but also gave him a rather sizable payday from it.

"This was the start of your slippery slope," a voice growled in the darkness, one that Ari recognized immediately.

"You again," Ari replied as he shined his flashlight around, trying to see if he could find his demonic doppelganger. "At least you're not trying to strangle me."

"Not yet," the other version of him said with a dark chuckle, causing Ari's ears to twitch.

"Do you think we could perhaps get to the end point of whatever it is you're trying to do here?" Ari asked as he took a moment to look over his handiwork before continuing on. "Maybe tell me why my glove can suddenly talk to me, or what was up with you and the creepy voice in that last dream? If there is something that you want me to do or are trying to get me to think about I would appreciate just a straight answer."

Though Ari continued to posture in reality he could feel his body trembling slightly despite himself. "Have you ever considered that you don't get any of the answers you want is because the questions you ask are pointless?" the feral voice of his alter ego replied, continuing to echo into the darkness as Ari walked forward even more. "You were on the cusp of absolute greatness and then were dragged back down into the mud, but even with you overcoming the one that put you there it has left you wallowing in it like a pig."

Ari felt the grimace on his face growing bigger as he was reminded of Anubis, though somewhere in the back of his mind he was glad that it wasn't talking about Campbell and the others. The god-like entity had tried to make him ditch his friends and lovers, and when that didn't work offered to enslave them to his will instead so that they could be his pets. Just the idea of that proposition bubbling back up into his mind caused his teeth to clench and his hand holding the flashlight to nearly crack the casing. As he came up on another scene in the darkness though his attention was taken away from his memory by that dark chuckle once more echoing throughout the area while he stumbled upon a partially destroyed house.

"I can still feel the primal rage within you Ari," the voice once more said, though this time it was slipping a little bit and no longer sounded like him as he investigated the house. This was a fire that he had deliberately set in order to make a paranoid government official leave his house and put himself into a situation to be blackmailed later. "As you can see indulging in the power that's given to you doesn't have to make you a brute like the others think; you've used it to become as cunning as your cobra side, outwitting others that underestimated you before delivering a different kind of brutality."

Even though Ari had felt rather guilty at having destroyed nearly the entirety of the man's house just so that he could get access to him there was a part of the younger hybrid that had felt immense pride at figuring out how to manipulate the other man that others couldn't touch. It was at the same time he was starting to get a reputation for being a killer and taking on mostly network jobs, so it had been a nice change of pace in reality. As he started to walk away from it though he wondered what the point of bringing him down memory lane was, not just here but in the nightmares that he had been having. If whoever was controlling the show really wanted to show him something it was still not clear... although if this was just the machinations of his own mind like Ka had told him about during their therapy sessions then it's possible his brain really was trying to figure out something that he hadn't grasped consciously or subconsciously.

Just as Ari was once more about to ask the voice for further clarification he heard something that had caught him by surprise. It was the sound of the ocean, and as he made his way towards it his flashlight shined on a scene that he certainly didn't need to be reminded of. The dead guards, the Shadow Broker, everything was there just how he had remembered it right before faking her death. It had been a bloodbath that he had created, and this time he was shocked to see himself slowly rising up from behind the couch with blood dripping down his snout.

Except it wasn't him, it was the other version of himself that he had been seeing. This time there was no being attacked, no reflections that were playing tricks on him, it was just the creature itself made manifest as it hopped over the couch while staring at him with those evil red eyes. "So you finally show yourself," Ari said as he saw the crimson-smeard snout of the other man curl up into a wicked grin. "What are you, some sort of demon? The manifestation of my evil side or my guilt or whatever this is supposed to be?"

"I'm simply your... potential," the demonic creature said as he stepped forward. Ari could feel that same aura that he had brushed against during their last meeting, but this time it was magnified five fold as this creature radiated power and dominance. "But as I said before that potential is being muted, pushed down and restrained like some beast by some sort of ill-gotten sense of morals and expectations put on you by others."

"Others that help me navigate this world," Ari shot back, trying not to trip on any of the bodies as they began to circle one another. "If what you're telling me to do is let go and be the same psychopathic killer like what I did here then you can forget it."

I'm not going to risk my sanity again just so I can squeeze an extra bit of power out of this glove, it's served me well enough so far and with my team by my side I can keep going through life without racking up any more guilt from my mercenary days."

To Ari's surprise the other version of himself just laughed, and as he stretched out his fingers he could hear the guards that he had killed mimicking the sound as though to mock him. "You believe your power is going to be good enough until the moment that it's not," the other suddenly snapped, that laugh turning to a snarl so fast that it caused the other hybrid to jump slightly. "When your friends lay at your feet slaughtered by an enemy you couldn't handle, then what will you say at that moment?"

Before Ari could respond to that his eye happened to catch a glimpse of the guards that had been moving around and found his jaw dropping when he saw that they had shifted into a few familiar faces. Even though he knew it was fake it took the hybrid's breath away as he saw the very realistic bodies of his lovers, friends, and even his handlers spread out just like it had been when he had killed those guards. This was it, this was his worst nightmare, and it was being shown to him so vividly it almost caused him to puke as he put his hand to his mouth. He had thought about what would happen if he had ever went completely insane, but there was a stark difference between those thoughts and what he was experiencing as his hands were clean of the usual blood.

They would be killed... because he didn't indulge in his power, he didn't allow himself to completely let loose as he heard his other self let out a chuckle while putting a cigarette in his mouth. "I see you're starting to finally get it," the other Ari said once he had lit up and took a puff, the smoke somehow spreading over the entire area and causing both the furniture and the bodies to disappear. "You want to let go so badly but you fear them thinking you've gone rabid, when really it might be the only thing that saves them when the time comes. If anything they should be thanking you for finally figuring out how to let loose like you did here."

"How do you even know I want this power still?" Ari shot back as he attempted to manifest his own cigarette after seeing his demonic double do it, finding an already lit one in his hand that he immediately puffed on.

"We wouldn't be having this conversation if it wasn't still there, if you still couldn't feel how good it felt to harness that power." The other Ari explained simply. "But the beast doesn't enjoy being caged, and if you don't want that little scenario in your head to happen then you best be getting to accepting it and embracing your true predator... or put it down and join the flock that you believe you are there to protect. Can't have it both ways Ari, you know that better than anyone."

When Ari tried to say something back he found himself floating once more while the flashlight slipped from his fingers. He knew the sensation from the last time that he was in such a state, though there was no voice calling out to him as he gradually drifted back up into consciousness. As he looked down at the scene he was leaving the other version of him just looked up and gave him a smirk while waving at him with a pair of fingers. Ari responded with one of his own and just as he did he found the light that surrounding him grew even brighter before everything disappeared around him.

Ari opened his eyes once more to find that the light he was experiencing was the sunlight that shined in through the windows. This time he was much more aware and alert to his surroundings as he slowly got up out of the bed he was in and looked over at his phone that had been placed next to him. Much to his relief he had only slept through the rest of the night and most of the day, around twelve hours at his estimation. No doubt Lavender and Campbell dragged his unconscious body up here and as he gripped the hand that wore his glove he wondered how he had managed to drain so much power that it caused him to pass out; he had long since trained himself on his limits and as far as the hybrid could tell he hadn't even been close, even with the complexity of his tasks.

Once he had given himself a chance to wake up Ari lifted his sore body and slowly got up, sliding off of the soft bed and letting his feet hit the floor before the rest of his body followed suit. He could hear voices in the other room and from the sound of it there was more than just his team making discussions, the baritone of Mr. Stevens unmistakable as he made sure he had his cigarettes on him before heading out. The second he stepped out of the bedroom he saw the other four snap their heads in his direction with varying looks of relief as Campbell got up and immediately started to dote on him. The hybrid quickly reassured the saber tooth tiger and the others that he was fine and asked what they were working on as he took a seat at the table.

"Lavender planted a bug on Janette while she was passed out along with you," Ka explained, Lavender looking up from the headphones that were inserted in his lupine ears while giving Ari a thumbs up. "So far he's been sifting through conversations that she's had with others but so far the only thing we've heard is her reuniting with her family after Campbell returned her home. Other than that its been pretty much radio silent on her end, but now that you're up we can move on with the second part of what's been happening."

Before Ari could ask what that was Mr. Stevens slid him a phone that had several missed calls on it. "That's Campbell's phone," Mr. Stevens informed him. "Ever since you rescued Janette from your own confinement and got on the news he has been calling in order to get a meeting. Now Campbell wanted to wait until you were up and about in order to respond and had texted Rayarti explaining such, but from the looks of it he's rather keen on getting details on what happened despite hearing you were unconscious."

Ari picked up the phone and took a look at it, scrolling through the messages and reading the short text exchange that explained

how he was otherwise incapacitated and couldn't make a meeting until he was better. He didn't need to be Lavender to see that the calls were coming from the same number and was likely the same one he used to contact him the first time. The fact he wasn't swapping burners piqued his curiosity, especially since most of those that he dealt with were so paranoid they often didn't call from the same location twice, so to see him being so open was rather intriguing. Of course that didn't mean he wasn't using something else in order to make sure the number couldn't be traced or tapped, especially since he was going up against the resources of the heroes guild.

But with the potential for call tracing aside it appeared that their little stunt had gotten the proper response, especially since they managed to get on the news for it. Even though their names and the reason for the explosive firefight remained out of the presses the fact that Ari had called Rayarti right beforehand about the mission meant that it was likely he had made the connection. It caused him to smirk as he read through the texts and found the man really chomping at the bit to talk with him, and it was likely for more than just to give him the reward promised. Though Campbell was hesitant to have Ari go right back into a mission after passing out from overexertion Ari wanted to get this done so that he could demand a vacation from Sam somewhere crazy expensive.

After getting some food in his stomach, mostly leftovers that had come from the meals of the others while they waited for him to wake up, Ari took his own phone and called Rayarti back. Despite the insistence that he had made in calling Campbell's phone multiple times he seemed almost aloof when the two talked terms of how he would collect the reward for saving Janette. Though he was worried that they would be conducting another dinner meeting at some restaurant he was given a location that was actually a hotel in the city. Considering that it was the penthouse of one of the best hotels out there he was guessing that either this guy wanted absolute privacy for the exchange or there was something else that he wanted to talk to him about.

Another meeting with Rayarti... every time they did something it felt like they were taking another tiny step forward towards ending this mission. Even though it was agonizingly slow he knew that they had to do it this way in order to make sure that they just get it done, especially since the hybrid was starting to get a strange feeling about this entire thing. This entire thing was confusing enough but then he had to also deal with this strange mental de-fragmentation as Ka called it, and he wondered if it was causing him to lose his edge when it came to reading people. That's what he considered to be one of his greatest assets when he was doing mercenary work and it made him wonder if perhaps that creature in his mind was right, that he was getting soft while relying on the help of others like Campbell who drove next to him.

Since they weren't in the middle of a mission or trying to keep a low profile there was no reason for them to sneak around, though they did make sure to get a different car in order to make the approach. Fortunately while Ari was unconscious Lavender had been getting new vehicles registered under their name after ditching the van and they actually had a half a dozen different ones to choose from. They were all clean and registered to them, something that was thanks not only to their tech-minded wolf but also the organization they belonged to. Since those out there might be looking for connections they couldn't get anything that came from the heroes guild, especially now that they were sliding up to get cozy with someone that considers the organization an enemy.

It didn't take them long to get through the city, Campbell and Ari finding the layout of the city coming back to them. Ari found himself frowning as it brought back memories that weren't exactly ones that he wished to remember. Other than Miguel and the others that were a part of his team, and those he took with him when he finally left this place. There was nothing here that had ever prompted him to want to come to this place and the more he waxed nostalgic the more he hated it.

At this point he was glad that Campbell was driving as they parked in the nearby structure before getting out of the car. Even though he had been essentially knocked out for the last twelve hours he didn't want to get into a car accident on the way to the hotel. Though there was no reason to think that he was on the bad side of the police there was no reason to get on their radar, especially if any of the anti-heroes were involved with them. It was best to just keep it going on the sly, Ari thought to himself as they went into the hotel and got the key to the room that was waiting for them.

Ari couldn't help but chuckle as he saw the look on the human's face when he asked for the room key. He knew it was because he was a brute and for some reason that tickled him more than usual; usually something like that would irritate him, but as he got the card and made his way towards the elevator he just found it funny. Campbell gave him a look and the hybrid just scoffed at him and tickled his sides once they got into the car. The levity only lasted for a few seconds though as the large saber tooth tiger squirming around caused the alarms in the elevator to go off and nearly made the entire lift jam.

"Someone is in a good mood," Campbell said as they waited to get to the top floor.

"I suppose I'm just happy that we might be getting close to done on this particular mission so we can get out of here," Ari explained, though as a small bit of silence filtered in between the two it prompted a question to float up in his mind. "Do you think that I would be able to save all of you?"

The question had taken the feline by surprise as Campbell looked over at him. "What do you mean?" Campbell asked.

"Like, if there was something where you were all in grave danger and I was the only one to get you guys out," Ari attempted to explain, though he could feel himself faltering as he tried to properly voice what he was thinking. "Just... do you think that with

what you've seen from me you think I could keep all of you alive even if the chips are down?"

Though there were only a few floors left between them and the penthouse apartment Campbell took a few seconds in order to contemplate the question. "I think... that it's something you really don't need to worry about," Campbell said as a small grin came to his face. "Between the three of us we can take on anything, not to mention the fact that you already saved Lavender and I from a life of enslavement under Anubis. Now Ka, he would probably need some help, but other than that you don't need to worry about having to try and take on the world by yourself anymore."

Though Ari was happy at hearing that Campbell and the others would stick by his side and fight with him it still didn't answer the question that he had proposed, and with the time they had left he didn't feel the need to try and reiterate. The thoughts of what he had seen in that blackness and the dead bodies of his friends shouldn't have bothered him but it did still manage to get underneath his skin. As he heard a ding and the floor announced that they had arrived however the hybrid immediately got back into the proper mindset. It was time to hopefully finally take this guy down once and for all and get to the bottom of this mystery ironically while at the top of the hotel.

Chapter 14:

As soon as the doors opened both Ari and Campbell felt their bodies tense in case this had all been some sort of elaborate set-up, but that brief shot of adrenaline was short lived as they made their way inside the large hallway. There were only two rooms on the entire floor and the hybrid was told that it would be the one on the right, using the card given to him in order to get inside. It was a rather strange display of trust that Rayardi was giving him when he could have just knocked and made his thoughts on the man even more muddled. There was one thing that the intelligence got right as they opened the door and found the penthouse to be just as glamorous as advertised.

"Ah, there you two are," Rayardi said as he suddenly appeared from one of the other rooms while wearing a rather casual but still business-like suit. "When I heard that Ari had gotten injured while on the mission I was fraught with distress, but it appears that it was misplaced. You are still looking as strong as ever."

"Uh, thanks I guess," Ari replied as they were led further into the penthouse to an area that would be considered a dining area. "I'm made of pretty tough stuff as I'm sure you know. Now about my payment."

While there was the possibility that Rayardi will just give him the payment and end the transaction there Ari knew that he would be expecting him to see what it would be. To be honest the hybrid was curious on what form of payment the man would be giving him for saving someone he claimed to be a friend as they were brought to the rather extravagant table. "I have to say that you will be forever in Janette's debt for rescuing her from such a hairy situation," Rayardi said as he motioned with his hand and suddenly a large bear man came out from seemingly nowhere and put a briefcase on the table. "I'm sure she'll have some cookies that she'll want to give you, but for the moment I'm sure that you'll be satisfied with this."

Campbell and Ari were both sitting next to one another as the hybrid slowly opened the briefcase to peek inside, getting his glove ready to defend in case it exploded or something of that nature. When he saw a familiar glint instead he opened it up all the way and saw that it had a number of small gold bars that were stacked inside of it. This wouldn't be the first time he was paid in gold bouillon as a mercenary but as Campbell's jaw dropped while he took one of the bars out he could see the saber tooth tiger was rather impressed. Though he wasn't sure of the current price of gold at the moment Ari guessed that it was somewhere in the six figure range as he put the gold back and closed the briefcase.

"The payment certainly is acceptable," Ari replied with the bemused grin still on his face. "I was thinking it would either be gold or diamonds, jobs like this usually don't have cash."

"It certainly makes things easier when it comes to certain things," Rayardi said with a chuckle before he whispered something to the bear that had stood next to him. The large anthro gave a small nod and walked back to another part of the penthouse to leave the three of them alone while the human leaned forward. "Perhaps if you're interested in earning a few more briefcases you will hear me out on another proposal, we could make one various gemstones if you'd like."

This was the moment that Ari was waiting for and as he could feel Campbell tense slightly the hybrid just slid the briefcase to him in order to occupy his thoughts while he took the lead. This whole mission was just a dress rehearsal; he had seen it a number of times when they wanted to make sure that he was what people said, or to prove that he was trustworthy enough to endorse. It was possible that Rayardi didn't even know who Janette was and just used it as an excuse to see them in action and also maybe score a little goodwill should he take the credit for it. Even though this was the jewel that they were looking for, though Ari was definitely going to keep the money, they had to carefully extract it in order to get what they want.

While Ari told him that he was interested and asked for details Rayardi held up a hand and asked if they wanted to come with them into the living area where they could be more comfortable. Though Ari's side glance could tell that Campbell was

chomping at the bit to get the information this was the time for them to remain calm, something that he would be sure that the feline would be surprised at. Though the hybrid was all about the action this had been a necessary step in order to get to it, especially if he wanted to get paid like he had just did. That unfortunately meant a lot of pomp and circumstance, though it wasn't always bad as they walked into the living room area and found it set up with several tables of snacks.

Though he was used to be wined and dined as part of these pitches there was something unusual about this one that Ari couldn't quite place. There were other seats that were set up besides just the couch and while most of the furniture looked like something that would belong in a penthouse there were others that weren't, almost like there was extra seating. It felt like something else was going on here and with Campbell still holding onto the briefcase he was also picking up that something was going on. But with Ari's stomach growling and the leftovers he had eaten a few hours earlier had not satiated him enough to ignore free food.

"I can tell that you are wondering what is going on," Rayardi said once the three of them had sat down on the couch. "To tell the truth I was not here in the city just to meet you and give you your payment, I'm actually here to pitch a new company to investors. Obviously you won't be a part of the meeting since I'm sure that it would bore you to tears, but if you would like I think that perhaps we can enter into a mutually beneficial arrangement that involves them."

"Sounds like you got many irons in the fire," Ari replied while leaning back. "But what does an ex-mercenary have to do with this new venture of yours?"

"Your experience would actually be rather invaluable when it comes to this new business," Rayardi explained. "Considering how long we've been relying on heroes in order to protect this city and the havoc that trust caused I think it's time that we add an additional layer of security that doesn't have their hands all over it. Especially given the anti-hero militias that's rising up there is only going to be more distress in the future and the citizens are going to require protection from it."

That was a twist... Ari continued to maintain his composure even as he heard Rayardi speak ill of the anti-hero militias. While it could be a cover in order to keep distancing himself from these groups, especially with the heat from killing a hero still on them which was likely why they hadn't surfaced in a while, it would be strange to keep posturing in front of him. It just sounded like he was trying to take advantage of the chaos in order to make some money off the deal, and that was something that Ari could certainly understand. While he continued to eat Rayardi spoke that he would essentially be offered a job and in exchange for helping with the training of security forces and the execution of complex contracts he would be paid handsomely for it.

Though Ari initially was about to refuse he found himself in a bit of situation. He didn't know how to express that he already had a job without mentioning that he worked for the CIA, which if Rayardi had the means or the contacts to look into it he could potentially find a link despite their group working in shadow ops. "While you have a tempting offer, I think I would have to have a discussion with my partner here on whether or not we would take it," Ari finally said, wanting to keep their options open. "If you have any missions that you want us to do while we're in town then feel free to give us a call though, happy to earn another one of those briefcases."

As Rayardi was about to respond the three heard a buzzing noise that prompted the human to look at his phone. "Well why don't I give you two a chance to talk about it without me hovering over you," Rayardi stated. "I have some people that I need to prep for the meeting that just came in and it should only take a few moments. Also keep helping yourselves to the food, no one ever eats at these things anyway but it's still considered rude if I don't have something out for them."

Ari and Campbell both nodded and let Rayardi leave the room, but while they could have discussed what the deal was the hybrid had a better idea of how to use the time. Getting information on this new venture might lead to a clue or two about who he was working with and after giving the nod to the saber tooth tiger he got up and followed the same path the human had. As he did he activated his glove and more specifically an ability he had used rather recently, his form going invisible with only his shimmering silhouette to indicate his presence. Once he was sure that the power was in full effect he made his way through the penthouse until he could hear the voice of the human again and carefully peeked around the corner.

What Ari saw there caused him to nearly fall forward, the sight of the kitsune and minotaur standing there immediately causing his blood to boil. Mesmer and Shockwave... the last time he had saw those two the heroes guild was sanctioning them for working with Anubis to try and enslave humanity. While they had stated that they were under the mental command of the entity known as Anubis that made them do the terrible things they did the hybrid believed that they enjoyed their roles more than they had let on. They were also responsible for a lot of the hardship that Ari had endured during that time and the fact that they weren't in jail for the rest of their lives was angering enough without seeing them in a penthouse apartment.

Though the three were talking it was too low for Ari to hear, and while he could have used a power to sharpen his senses he knew that with Mesmer in play he had to be very careful with his abilities. She was a powerful mentalist and since the two had tussled before it was possible she had a sense of when he used his powers. It was possible that he had already given himself away by going invisible but that was already something that he had done. Instead he chose to withdraw and sit back down next to Campbell, who gave him a worrying stare at how distraught he looked before Ari waved him off.

The two continued to eat and wait for Rayardi to come back. When he finally did Ari had managed to compose himself enough

to keep the knowledge he had a secret. Once more the two made small talk before Ari decided that they had spent enough time making conversation, prompting Campbell to get up while he did the same. Once more Ari gave a non-committal answer and told Rayardi to call him if he needed anything before getting out of the hotel.

It was time to regroup with the others, but before they did that Ari told Campbell to go around the corner of the parking garage while he rooted around in the back. As always they had brought extra equipment in case they needed it, and one of those things was a camera with a rather decent lens on it. While he updated Campbell on the situation with Mesmer and Shockwave he waited to see if he could catch anyone coming to the meeting that Rayardi was about to meet and snapped any pictures of those who drove in. Though he couldn't confirm if any of them would be heading to the penthouse it would have to be enough.

After about half an hour Ari told Campbell to go and got the pictures downloaded into a flash drive as they drove back to the apartment. He made sure that they took a few back streets in order to make sure they weren't followed until they got there, eventually getting to the underground parking garage. Once they had parked he tossed the feline the flash drive and told him that he would be up in a minute, taking out a cigarette and lighting it while he leaned against the vehicle. He hadn't realized how long he had gone without one and needed to take a minute to sort his mind out.

Shockwave and Mesmer... those two were bad news, and Rayardi was conversing with them. If he was being courted by him then it was possible that he was trying to get more former heroes to join him in this security venture. Technically the two were never classified as villains, so working with them wouldn't be a stain on his record to hire them on, just like it would be if he and Campbell were brought into the fold. He still didn't like the fact that the two were in play, but was it because of his personal distaste for him, or potentially what that meant when it came to Rayardi.

Once he had finished his smoke he thought about fitting in one more to make up for lost time, only to feel a prickle in the back of his neck that caused him to sigh. "Ah, you got quite da thoughts stirrin in yer head, eh?" the voice of the glove said. "Startin to feel somethin other then thoughts ah bloodshed an death?"

"Oh piss off," Ari replied. "After dealing with you in the dream world I don't think I can handle much more of your good vibes, not to mention you're about as helpful as a screen door on a submarine. You can't tell me what's going on with the glove or with whatever this alternate version of me is?"

"Fraid not," the voice replied simply.

"Well, thanks, you're about as helpful as usual," Ari stated as he took the unlit cigarette and put it back in the pack. "I suppose I should go back to the others anyway, no doubt they're finished looking at the pictures and Campbell told them about our two new friends. You're not going to chatter in my ear the entire time, because if you still have more to say then I'll just light up again."

"Nah, just pokin in to see how all this excitement is treatin ya," the voice said with a chuckle. "Yer gonna have to figure out all that by yerself."

Ari just shook his head and finished off the cigarette before flicking the spent butt into the corner. "Great, remain as aloof and mysterious as always," Ari said as he began to move towards the elevator. "Can you at least tell me when you think I'm going to figure this all out."

"Knowin you, probably a minute too late," the glove snarked.

After that the sensation of the consciousness of the glove left him by the time Ari made his way to the elevator. He would probably have to talk to Ka about all this in their session that was coming up, but for the moment he had bigger fish to fry. There was a lot of information to unpack and he needed to get back up to the others to discuss it. As soon as he got to the apartment he saw the other three were already around the table, hearing the hum of a laptop that Lavender had up while the others were busy pouring over documents and notes that Campbell had made.

When he got to the table himself they had already started to formulate a plan in order to capitalize on this offer that Rayardi had floated to Ari. Lavender had also been upset at hearing that Mesmer and Shockwave were in play and possibly involved in the anti-hero militia that they were trying to bring down. The fact that he was trying to make a security company out of all this and didn't seem to be directly involved in the group, at least not that the two of them could tell, made it an interesting twist in the whole thing. The wolf told the two that they should have just bugged the room in order to hear what was going on with the meeting, only for Ari to tell him that someone like Rayardi sweeps for bugs as frequently as he did.

Before the four of them could really dig into the logistics of their new opportunity Lavender picked up something on the police scanner that got all their attention. The anti-hero militia was on the move and they were heading to an area where there was a hero and villain currently fighting over a rail station that had been derailed. With it growing more heated by the second the militia was going to add fuel to the fire and potentially result in another bunch of deaths, but the problem as they looked at one

another was how they would be able to do anything about it. Though Campbell and Lavender wanted to go out there and help the two had worked with Ari long enough to know that they were no longer heroes and this wasn't technically their fight even if they wanted to do it for the good of the city.

But Ari found himself looking out the window and strongly considering getting involved, but not for any altruistic reason. If Rayardi wasn't involved in these anti-hero groups and was just being opportunistic about the situation that meant that there was someone else there that might be pulling the strings to this whole thing. Not to mention after his encounter with Chet he had been growing increasingly annoyed with the fact that they seemed to be against more than just heroes, and if they could find another string to pull on this would be the opportunity to find it. They quickly suit up and make their way down to the basement parking structure with the entire group being conscripted this time just in case there's more trouble than they could handle, plus Ari had an idea that would hopefully keep their presence less known.

The metro rail that was under attack was only fifteen minutes away but by the time they got even close the entire area was in gridlock, especially with the police cars setting up a perimeter and the mob that had formed around it. As soon as they got close Ari told Lavender to get ready to use his power and hack whatever he could find while Ka tried to profile as many of the anti-hero militia as possible in order to see if there were any people in charge. "Alright, remember that we're going to be on the clock once I put us into our disguised forms," Ari explained. "I already used one power earlier and this is probably going to suck stretching it out, but I would rather we go in looking like something else than having Rayarti think we're poking around in his business."

"You're going to disguise us?" Ka asked. "Like some sort of illusion?"

The other three chuckled at that and as the human looked at them all in confusion Campbell just patted him on the shoulder. "If we're going to go in, we're going to do it right," Campbell said with a wink. "I forgot this is your first time that we're exposing you to this type of power, that is if Ari is planning on including you in it."

"May as well," Ari said with a shrug before looking at Ka. "I know that we've been trying to keep you from this type of power just in case but considering you were already caught once while we were kidnapping that Janette, plus it'll integrate you fully into our little team. My advice to you is to just ride the wave when you start to feel it and adjust yourself as necessary, since there shouldn't be any pain involved let me know if you feel anything like that or any other bizarre sensations."

Though Ka had joked that turning into something else would already be considered a bizarre sensation Ari had already dug deep into the the power of his glove. While normally he would do all three slots in quick succession and then let his glove recharge he was capable of dredging up an unused power if he had only done one or two. It was a more recent adaptation and it always sucked for him to do it, but considering the circumstances he knew that if they waited for the glove to be recharged it would be far too late. Ari took a few deep breaths and made sure to include all four of them plus their clothing, cracking his neck as he knew that this would be an incredibly draining endeavor.

The second that he activated the power he could hear Campbell and Lavender let out a moan while Ka just gasped in shock. Considering the circumstances that usually surrounded their more recent transformations it was only natural for the two to regard the changes with a sense of pleasure, something that the hybrid himself enjoyed as well. Since he was changing four people at once he decided to make them all the same species just for the ease of his power with the only question being what it should be. While his species was somewhat unique the other two were feline and lupine that were generally more common in the city, which meant he wanted to stray away from those as well as potentially anything serpentine in nature while still having something that would help just in case a fight broke out.

Since he didn't tell the others what he had chosen the rest of the group just looked down at themselves to see what they were becoming, Ka in particular looking down at himself in awe as he could see his skinny frame starting to swell with new muscle. While both Campbell and Lavender weren't changing much when it came to their physiques there were definitely signs of them transforming as the two examined themselves. "Well, this is something new," Lavender said as he saw the white and purple fur on his body melt into his flesh while turning a grey color. "What inspired this?"

"Just something that I've had in my back pocket," Ari replied, though for a few moments it was hard to understand him as his already elongated snout began to stretch even more while his lower teeth began to push out. Though he had made sure to include the clothing they wore as part of the transformation process he could see their shirts and pants tightening slightly as they all adopted a bulkier frame, save for Lavender whose main changes were actually slimming him down a little bit while his lupine ears grew large and floppy. Once again Ka was the biggest changes as he tried to kick off his shoes only to have them burst as they swelled out into a massive pair of elephantine feet.

Looks like he had forgotten shoes, Ari thought to himself as he could feel his spine pulling up his tail while the mass shifted to the rest of his body, though in his mind he gave himself a pass since Ka was the only one who wore them. The power had managed to envelop the rest of their outfit and merely changed it to make accommodations for smaller tails, thicker necks and arms, and their groins as Ka nearly popped out the fly of his pants before the fabric shifted to compensate. Though the grey skin had completely enveloped his human features Ari swore he could see the changing human turning red before looking down and pulling up his waistband to see what he was packing, which caused his eyes to widen as the hybrid could imagine what it looked like on his still relatively small hips. It didn't take long before the rest of Ka's body had swelled out to fit it and as he

shook his head he let out a groan while his human nose stretched out like a snake to become his trunk while his skull morphed and reshaped.

Once they had finished Ari could feel his body tremble slightly while they made their way out of the van, though it wasn't from the pleasure that he had gotten from his transformation. He had already started to feel fatigued as soon as he used his power and with having to maintain all four of their disguises he could already feel it wearing down on him. This was the first time since the explosion at the chemical factory though that the group had gone out though and they needed to gather up all the information that they could before they lost their chance. He wouldn't be able to hold the forms long, but as they heard an uprising from the crowd that had gathered around the rail station he doubted that it would be long before this place got locked down anyway.

When the four got out of the car they agreed to go into groups of two to stay safe; Lavender chose Ka to go with him, which was fine by Ari as he put his arm around Campbell's elephant form and gave a thumbs up. With the four being completely unrecognizable they didn't have to worry about being seen by cameras and reported back to Rayarti as they began to push their way into the increasingly irate crowd. The only thing Ari knew he had to worry about was someone that could sense that they were in a disguised state, which would be a hero, villain, or someone in the militia was hiding that specific power. There was also the need to avoid being thrown in prison since they would have to hope that the company or their outfit would bail them out.

As Ari scanned through the crowd while Campbell kept by his side he could see that Chet was potentially the outlier of the group; there was a rather healthy mix of anthros and humans in this particular group, and from what he could observe they were just fine standing side by side with one another while they protest the hero involvement. It seemed unlike the chemical plant the police that were already here had made sure that people weren't trying to push their way into a dangerous situation. As the two weaved their way through they managed to get a bit more information and found the derailment was caused by a villain named Ferralite that had warped the tracks so he could get something that was on the cargo train.

Someone that controls metal could be a rough customer, and they still didn't get an identity on who the hero was that was fighting them. Considering how long it's been the fact that they're still fighting meant that the hero was either not powerful enough to overcome the usually defensive based power user or had already lost track of them. As Ari looked at his watch he knew that soon there would be more heroes arriving if they couldn't handle it and considering the protesters were already starting to push their luck when it came to trying to get into the perimeter that had been set up. Though Ari wanted to get more information and take as much time as possible to get it the timer was running out and he told Campbell to call Ka and Lavender to begin to retreat.

Before Campbell could even get his phone to his face they were immediately pushed back as a blinding light filled the sky followed by a concussive blast that knocked the two off of their feet. Ari immediately had to cover his ears as they began to ring while he laid there on the ground with everyone else. When he looked over at Campbell he was also on his back with his head looking back and forth with a stunned look on his face. As soon as they recovered the two got to their feet and checked one another as well as themselves for injuries before trying to figure out what had just happened.

Among the sirens and screams Ari saw that the rail station was up in flames; most of the roof had been blown out along with the walls and the rest of the building was already starting to collapse. The glass on all the buildings and cars in the surrounding area had been shattered and was still raining down on the street as people ran for it. Things seemed to slow down around the hybrid as his situational awareness kicked in and as his eyes flicked back and forth his mind began to take in more information. Was it the hero or the villain that had caused the rail station to blow up, Ari thought, and if it wasn't them who had blown up the station then who had caused the explosion and why?

As Ari came to his senses and the crowds began to thin out a bit from people running from the explosion he saw an opening that was in the police line. It was something that was incredibly risky even while disguised as something out but with time running out he had to choose between taking the chance or withdrawing with the others in order to regroup. "Campbell, let's go," Ari said as he grabbed onto the other elephant's shoulder.

"What about Ka and Ari?" Campbell asked as he was about to try his phone again, only to find that it had gotten broken in the explosion.

"If they're fine they're fine," Ari replied. "If not then the hospital will get to them and we'll have to explain how they went from elephants to a wolf and human, and if they're dead... well, then there's nothing we can do to help them anyway." Though Campbell frowned for a moment at that, mostly because he probably sounded a little like his own mercenary self, between the chaos of the crowd and the sound of sirens steadily getting closer there wouldn't be much time before everything was locked down. Though the saber tooth tiger's face showed he wasn't keen on the idea he also knew that this might be a rare opportunity to try and see what happened and get to the bottom of this organization's motivation.

Fortunately Ari's invisibility power was still slotted into the glove from his sneaking around in Rayarti's party and with a little additional effort he cloaked both himself and Campbell. As soon as he expended the ability again he felt a wave of fatigue wash over him and he was forced to give up their previous disguise in order to maintain this one. While that would possibly leave Ka and Lavender with some questions if they were still conscious they should feel the power wane and get somewhere to change back before anyone noticed them shifting into their human and wolf forms. A little awkwardness on their part was a small price

to pay as they made their way through the crowd and got through the breach in the police barricade, the cops more concerned with the injured since most were those that were holding the perimeter and closest to the destroyed rail station.

The second they got through the blown-out doors and into the building the smell of burning metal and smoke filled Ari's nostrils, causing him to cough before taking the mask from his costume and putting it up over his face. He heard Campbell make a similar noise but suddenly the flames that were producing the acrid fumes were pushed to the side so that it made a corridor that they could go down. While he couldn't extinguish the flames completely, at least not all of them without pushing himself to the limit like Ari was, it would help them navigate the ruins of the rail station as they made their way to the platform where the fight no doubt was happening. Since the train had derailed some ways away from the entrance to the station and the fight had cleared out those remaining they thankfully didn't see any signs of casualties yet, though if anyone was still around and holed up somewhere it was unlikely they would find them on their way to the tracks.

Even with Campbell manipulating the flames Ari could feel the heat practically singing his fur as they got to what he believed was ground zero of the explosion. Almost immediately as soon as they got into the area his mercenary senses kicked in and he started to assess what happened while they climbed through pieces of broken roof. The bomb had definitely gone off in this area and with it being mostly open the energy dissipated on the roof and walls to push them back, which meant it was some sort of mostly concussive force like a plastic explosive. He looked down the tracks when they got closer and saw the train had been pushed back a couple feet from the force of the explosion but had mostly just obliterated the first car that was hopefully empty, but his real question was where were the hero and villain that were fighting in here and if one of them was the potential force of the destruction here.

With the two of them being inside Ari dropped the invisibility to try and conserve energy while they looked as fast as they could for any clues that could potentially point them in some sort of direction. Everything that the hybrid had gathered about this organization and what their plans were was as blown up as the building while he crawled up a partially destroyed concrete tower to gain a better vantage point. With the militia gaining a notorious reputation after the chemical plant the last thing they would want to do is sour their public perception by being linked to a deliberate attack like this, but if the hero or the villain was responsible that just made less sense. The hero would never do something like this when their reputation was already shaky and if it was the villain he would have done it right away for maximum destruction.

Ari didn't have long to ruminate on it though as his vantage point gave him what he was looking for, calling out to Campbell and pointing to movement that he saw in the flames and smoke. The saber tooth tiger quickly suppressed the flames in that area and the hybrid used his natural athletics skill to slide down the column and jump to the roof of a partially destroyed ticket station to bypass most of the debris. When he got there he saw that there were actually two bodies there instead of one, with the guy that he had spotted someone he hadn't recognized and guessed was probably the villain considering the garish attire that he wore. The other was underneath the shadow of a large concrete slab that had fallen on top of them with only a few pieces of straggling rebar saving him from being crushed.

With the other man being semi-conscious Ari went for the mostly obscured one underneath the rubble to try and pull them out to assess their condition. If they could get an eyewitness account then they might know what happened, but those thoughts went out the window when Ari grabbed the arm and realized that there were patches of brown fur and plant leaves among the burns that he recognized. It couldn't be... but as Ari reached in and grabbed the head of the man to try and stabilize him while pulling out he felt the telltale antlers of a deer and knew even before he slid the body out who it would be. The realization did little to temper the shock when he managed to get the anthro creature out of the rubble and saw the bloodied face of Treeborn staring up at him.

Ari heard a gasp behind him and instinctively perked up his tail, only to put it down when his mind registered that it was Campbell. "Is that... Treeborn?" Campbell asked as Ari tried to find a pulse. "I thought he was retired?"

"He's supposed to be," Ari replied with a grimace as he put his ear against the chest of the severely injured man, avoiding the jagged piece of metal that protruded from his chest. "Still alive... but hardly. There's no way he could make it to a hospital in this condition... I still have one slot left, but if I do it you may have to drag both of us out of here."

"You know that I always will," Campbell said reassuringly, putting a hand on Ari's shoulder as the hybrid contemplated his next move. With his powers already risking the red line there was no guarantee he could even heal the deer anthro to the point where he would survive, but if he didn't then someone he considered a friend would die in his arms. Suddenly he squeezed his eyes shut as he was reminded of all the nightmares he had been having, all the people that he had let die or killed just to get a mission done.

That wouldn't happen today...

Ari reached out and grabbed onto the piece of metal while pressing the palm of his other hand against the chest of the deer. His face curled into a slight grimace as he activated his power; while blood began to trickle down from where he held the sharp edges of the metal it was all directed to Treeborn, slowly closing the wound and repairing any damage to organs while extracting the shrapnel. It was a slow, painful process but Ari knew that if he tried to rush it he could kill the deer before the healing took hold and there was no way he would rush the process just because of a small cut on his palms. The hybrid continued to ignore the pain in his hand and instead focused solely on targeting anything vital before his reserves ran dry and he couldn't heal the

deer anymore.

Dig deep, Ari told himself as he saw the wound closing up around the metal being extracted.

You are powerful, you are strong...

You will do anything to protect your friends...

Anything...

As Campbell continued to hold onto him Ari let out a loud cry that echoed through the destroyed rail station and eclipsed the sound of crackling flames and crumbling concrete as he pushed every last bit of energy he could. He found himself falling forward before he was caught and heard the clanging of the bloodied metal shard even before he realized he had let it go once it was out of the deer's chest. When he looked down he saw that Treeborn had started to breathe again and while he was still out cold a surprising number of wounds and burns had closed up, and while he would still need to go to a hospital he was at least out of danger as Ari was suddenly hugged from behind.

"That was amazing!" Campbell said as Ari turned around to face the feline, the look of awe on the tiger's face turning to concern when he saw the bloody palm that was shredded by the metal. "Your hand..."

"Flesh wound," Ari replied breathlessly as he motioned for Campbell to help him to his feet as he staggered slightly. "Get Treeborn out of here and back to the apartment, no hospitals, I'm going to try and get some info out of-" Ari's words were cut short when he saw that the villain he had seen moving around in the first place was lying very still on the floor, a bright green foam dripping out of his mouth as he stared out with glassy, lifeless eyes. "What the fuck?"

Ari broke free from Campbell and felt a fresh surge of adrenaline as he knelt down and pressed his clawed fingers against the neck of the other man. "Is he..." Campbell asked, Ari just nodding in response before standing up. "Was it the explosion?"

"No, he was stable when I first got here," Ari replied as he turned the head of the villain as the foam went from green to red even as he tried to determine the cause. "This has to be poison, and considering the type it wasn't administered too long ago." As the realization of what was happening began to click in his head the realization dawning on him prompted him to look around, his ears twitching as his senses sharpened even further. The fatigue and heat that he had been experiencing was banished from his body as he listened for a pattern among the chaos.

"Ari?" Campbell asked, a slight tremor of worry in his voice as he saw Ari straightening up and cracking his back and shoulder muscles.

"Get Treeborn out of here," Ari said as he continued to hone into the source of the noise he had heard. "I'm going hunting."

Campbell grabbed onto the unconscious deer and ducked slightly as another piece of roof fell down near them, though Ari didn't move an inch. "Ari, you have to be exhausted," Campbell said. "Plus I won't be able to protect you from the flames, you sure you want to do that?"

Ari just turned his head slightly to crack his neck and as he did Campbell caught the slightest glint of red in the eyes of the hybrid as Ari just gave him a toothy smirk. "I'm feeling... *motivated*."

Chapter 15:

The four quickly made their way away from the destroyed rail station, using their dark clothing in order to try and blend in with the shadows while they cut through the park. With the chaos from the explosion the police would be cleaning up that mess for hours and the heroes would be occupied with trying to investigate what happened between their man and the villain. All they needed to do was get out of there before the lockdown of the area dropped and trapped them in the area. The two humans, crocodile, and velociraptor anthro continued to make their way through the path until they got to the other side of the park to the relatively empty street beyond.

"Fuckin hell, where is the gods damn truck?" The crocodile asked in anger as he adjusted the pack on his back.

"Two more blocks to go," the male human replied as he looked at his watch. "Response time is going to be tight but as long as

we can get outside the district before the choppers get here we won't have a care."

"Should have just done what I thought and mingled with the crowd," the human woman replied.

"I'm pretty sure that we wouldn't do much mingling with these," the crocodile stated as he held up his assault rifle. "Nor the extra explosives we brought along."

The others scoffed at that save for the woman as she just rolled her eyes while the four continued to go past the street and into the alley, unaware that a pair of glowing red eyes were staring down at them. Just as they got to an iron gate the man hit it first and seemed surprised as it didn't open up while the others looked at him. As the crocodile pointed his weapon at the entrance the others asked what the hold up was, which their partner responded by telling them that this gate was open when he came back from stashing the car. Suddenly the victorious atmosphere that had been around the four dissipated as the human man pulled a lock pick from his pocket and started to work on the lock.

As the man continued to struggle the human woman and velociraptor man pulled out their weapons as well, the former pulling out a knife while the other upholstered his pistol. Suddenly they heard something clatter in the entrance of the alley that caused the three to immediately point down towards it, their senses all on high alert as they continued to hear something. The crocodile held his hand up and moved forward while the other two only took a few steps to keep the one picking the lock safe. After getting about halfway down the alley his finger reached the trigger as the source of the noise was suddenly known.

It was a number of aluminum cans that were being scattered by the wind that blew across the street, the reptilian anthro breathing a sigh of relief as his shoulders relaxed a bit. But that was short lived when he realized that they were rather deliberately placed to blow down and cause noise. It was a rather classic trap and by the time he looked back up something had already jumped down from the roof of the rather tall building and had landed right on the velociraptor. Ari had already taken in the entire scene and knew exactly what he was going to do as he got up and remained standing on the man he had taken down, stomping on his head while grabbing the arm of the woman that swung her knife down and twisting to the point of hearing the bones snap.

Ari could feel the blood pounding in his ears as he took his muscular arm and grabbed onto the throat of the woman, the strength coursing through his thicker physique allowing him to hold her there in one place as he caught the knife before it fell to the ground with his foot and kicked it back up. With how close he was to the other two the crocodile had hesitated in pulling the trigger and that would prove to be his downfall as he caught the weapon by the hilt and flung it straight at the scaly man. Several rounds buried themselves into the brick of the building as the mercenary fell backwards, though the blade had buried itself into his chest it didn't hit the heart like Ari had intended.

But as the crocodile began to flail in pain on the ground Ari suddenly felt two blows to his side from the woman and reflexively struck with his tail, hitting her with the bladed tip in hip that caused her to scream. "I can smell the poison on that blade even where I was perched," Ari growled, his red eyes gleaming as he watched her gasping and groaning. "It was you... you killed the villain and almost did the same to that hero."

The mercenary didn't respond with nothing more than a scream as she clutched her side, and when Ari looked down he saw something that he did not expect. The knockout venom that would have put her to sleep was something different judging from the black veins that were quickly spreading from the wound. It was certainly a change, but before he could focus on that there was a bang and Ari pulled back just in time while the bullet hit the side of the alley. His head snapped around and saw that the one picking the lock had forsaken his task and had whipped out his gun but misfired as he drew it.

With the barrel pointed straight at him Ari grabbed onto the woman and put her in front of him as he ran forward, seeing her already writhing for jerking as the other mercenary unloaded his gun trying to hit him. They all sunk into the back of his human shield though and when he had gotten up to him the hybrid heard the click of the empty chamber. Once he heard that Ari snarled and tossed the lifeless body aside before grabbing onto the throat of the human man and ramming him against the gate that Ari had closed and locked before they got there. He could hear ribs cracking but that would just help motivate this man to ask him what he knew.

"Time to talk!" Ari snarled. "Who hired you for the rail station job?!"

"We got it through a dead drop!" the human man shouted. "C'mon Ari, you know how the game works, we don't know who hires us."

Hearing his own name snapped Ari out of the bloodlust that he was experiencing enough to contemplate what had just happened. This creature knew his name... and while he did have a reputation in the mercenary community it was mostly outside of this city, unless they were brought in from the outside for this specific job. His mind went to the Shadow Broker but she wouldn't have had the time to build up a new identity, not to mention she wouldn't be so reckless as to drop his name. That meant that either his reputation preceded him in this case by coincidence or someone that perhaps was a fan had talked about him.

Ari was in no mood to play coy and squeezed the windpipe of the man before letting go enough to let him speak. "You better answer this next question right," Ari growled. "What do you know about the circumstances of this job, why did they want you to pretend that this was a deadly clash between hero and villain?"

"Ari, please..." the man begged, only to get his words cut off when Ari tightened his grip once more.

"Like you said, I know how the game works," Ari replied. "Surely your curiosity got you to look into why, a group like yours wouldn't go into a situation like this completely blind. Now talk while you still can, or we're going to see how this curious new venom of mine works on you."

The wavering of the bladed tail tip prompted the mercenary to tell him what he knew, which unfortunately was not much as he had said. His group had been brought in as a team and told to set up the rail station job and was told to make it look like a hero and villain had killed each other in the resulting blast. When Ari pressed on why they grabbed Treeborn he said that both hero and villain were already provided for them as well as the call that went out about the fight in the first place. All they had to do was derail the train before it reached the station, fake a fight, and then blow the whole thing up once they had the proper audience.

Ari felt his entire body shaking and as he stared at the mercenary while his fingers clenched, his smirk growing as he heard the cracking of bone and gasping of air until finally everything went silent. With the head of the man finally hanging limply forward after Ari saw the light of his eyes leave the hybrid just let the former mercenary slide down to the ground and flop on the floor. When he looked around he saw that there was no life left in this alley other than his own and after taking a second to catch his breath he grabbed the duffel bag and gathered up their weapons and other weapons to take with him. No reason to let something like that go to waste, Ari thought to himself as he gave each of them another kick for good measure.

As he passed by the crocodile that was foaming at the mouth and smirked at that before getting ready to find a car to steal. As he passed by one of the shop windows he found himself pausing at the reflection he passed by. When he saw the creature in the window those glowing red eyes didn't belong to some ghostly apparition... it belonged to him. He suddenly became aware of how hard he was breathing as the muscular kangaroo-cobra looked at himself he found the one in the window had the look of a predator.

An apex predator...

That was him...

The fact that he looked like what many might consider to be a monster Ari quickly snapped out of his thoughts by the sounds of sirens that were starting to approach his location. Despite the problems that were happening at the rail station the sound of gun shots will have no doubt caused someone to call and he would have trouble soon if he stuck around. Fortunately he felt more than ready to run as he used his longer claws in order to make his way up the wall and eventually hopped up onto the roof. He felt so strong; if he hadn't used all three of his power slots on his glove he might thought that he had somehow activated it, though that did make him wonder where the power was coming from.

But he didn't have time to think about it as he ran back to the apartment, jumping from roof to roof until he got to the neighborhood that his building was at. When he got there he slowed himself down and when he did he immediately began to feel the fatigue that had been banished for the moment. It felt like his limbs were deflating and if he actually looked down at his body he would have noticed that his biceps and chests that had been so swollen were becoming thinner. While he still retained his bulky nature the powerful monster that he had become disappeared back into his normal nature.

Ari opted less for speed instead of stealth to make sure no one that might have been watching him could see where he lived. By the time he snuck down into the underground parking structure he had to brace himself against the wall while catching his breath. It felt like he had just ran a marathon several times over and as his hands shook he got a cigarette out of his pants and brought it to his mouth. After feeling so strong and powerful when he had taken out that mercenary group the weakness that had come from coming down was a stark contrast.

Even though he wanted to collapse right then and there Ari knew that there was work to be done and at the very least they needed to do the debriefing and check in on Treeborn. They had been given a potential piece of the puzzle when it came to this anti-hero militia and he had to know why they had brought him there. With the mercenaries being useless when it came to information the fact they were there in the first place meant that there was a bigger game in play other than just a bunch of pissed off people against the heroes guild. But with his head swimming and his mind threatening to just shut down it was hard to try and put everything together.

With a few minutes to breathe and his cigarette finished Ari flicked it to the corner and made his way back towards the elevator. As he leaned against the elevator car wall the only thought he could hold in his mind was wondering if there were any energy drinks left in the fridge. He made a mental reminder to put more on the list as well as a few more packs of cigarettes as he got

up to the apartment. When he walked inside he was surprised to find that the main room was empty and felt a pang of worry when he remembered that he hadn't even checked if Ka and Lavender were alright.

After grabbing an energy drink Ari started to investigate the other rooms and as he looked into the one that normally he used he found that it was occupied, the bandaged up deer laying there. "You did tell me no hospitals," Campbell's voice said as Ari turned to see the saber tooth tiger standing there in the doorway. "Figured here was just as good as he recovered, plus Ka did have some medical training."

"So Ka and Lavender are both alright?" Ari asked as he sat down on a nearby chair, hoping to hide the fatigue that was still seeping into his limbs.

"Yeah, they're off to meet Mr. Stevens so that they can inform them of what we saw," Campbell explained. "They were further away from the explosion than we are, so they were able to blend in with the crowd and get out early. Ka managed to get some information about the militia's location but I figured that we could capitalize on that later, did you manage to get anything from your little sojourn?"

"Not much...." Ari admitted. "Someone hired mercenaries to stage this attack though, trying to frame it as a hero and villain battle mishap. They wouldn't tell me who was the one who hired them so until we see what the narrative is we won't know who this was supposed to frame."

"I imagine it would be the heroes, right?" Campbell asked as he went to sit down next to the hybrid.

"I don't know at this point," Ari admitted as he leaned forward and put his head in his hands. "It feels like my head is stuffed full of cotton and I want to go to sleep, but I know that the nightmares are probably waiting for me." Ari felt Campbell pat him on the shoulder and told him that they'll make the two of them some late dinner before leaving the room.

Ari just nodded and let himself lean back against the chair as Campbell left the room, the only sounds coming from the soft breathing that came from the deer on the bed. He was glad that they managed to save his life even with the fatigue it caused and as the hybrid once more rested his head against his palm he thought about the situation. If Treeborn hadn't told him that he was retired he would have figured that he just had a bad match-up with a villain, but between that knowledge and the fact that he knew the mercenaries were the one that poisoned the other guy this frame was clearly meant for something. Whomever had set this up hadn't counted on them being there though and saving Treeborn and unless there was another set of witnesses he had killed the only other ones that knew they were there.

When Ari was about to get up and see if Treeborn was still fine he let out a grunt of surprise when he found that his arm was stuck to the armrest of the chair. As he looked down he let out a gasp of surprise when he saw vines coiling around his bicep and forearm. With it being so tight there was no way for him to wiggle out and before he could try to use his other arm another plant moved from behind the back and looped around his throat. The fatigue that had been fogging his mind suddenly cleared as he tried to grab at the vines around his neck only to have his other hand lassoed.

He had been a position like this before and as he tried to struggle against his bindings he could hear the sound of the deer chuckling as he slowly rose up from the bed. "Treeborn, what the hell are you doing!?" Ari shouted as the other man sat up and turned to face him. "It's me, Ari, I'm not your-"

The vine around his neck tightened and as he tried to tense his muscles against the plant it was like he was pressing against an iron rope while Treeborn looked at him. "You really haven't gotten it yet, have you?" Treeborn said, his eyes a blood red as he slowly slid off the bed. "All that power literally at your fingertips and instead you render yourself almost helpless after just a few hours. It's quite honestly pathetic."

Ari tried to shake his head but at this point it was a struggle to just breathe, especially as more of the vines wrapped around his chest and tightened against it. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, the only thought that was running through his head was how this even happened. There was no way he would have fallen for something like this, and yet as he heard the deer laughing it seemed like he had been bested by whatever force was at work. His breathe started to come in short, ragged bursts as his vision grew dark with only the sight of the smirking creature still able to be seen.

"You could have stopped this," Treeborn mocked as he got close. "You had a taste of it tonight, yet you still find yourself returning to the sheep instead of shedding that skin and becoming a wolf." Ari's eyes widened as he suddenly realized what was going on, but there was nothing he could do about it...

Helpless...

Weak...

Pathetic...

Suddenly the restrictions around Ari's body were gone and he let out a wheezing, gasping breath to try and draw the air back into his lungs. His tactical awareness immediately kicked in and when he looked down he saw that the vines were gone and his breathing wasn't restricted at all anymore. It didn't stop the hybrid from continuing to suck in as much oxygen as he could while getting those cutting words out of his skull. As his eyes got used to the darkness of the room once more he did see that there was one thing that was similar, Treeborn sitting up and looking at him.

"That must have been some nightmare," Treeborn said as he leaned his head against his knees while sitting on the bed.

Hearing the normal candor of the deer anthro was rather soothing after hearing his sneering tone from before, and as Ari got up and shook his head he could still feel the vines against his fur and scales to the point of taking off his shirt just to find some relief. When he remembered where he was the hybrid was about to put it back on before Treeborn waved off the notion. "I know you and your kin enough that such modesty is not traditional for you," Treeborn said as he pulled the covers off of himself, which other than the bandages were completely bare. "Not to mention I'm in a similar position."

"Well, I imagine that they would have to examine you quite thoroughly," Ari replied. "I suppose that means you're buck naked right now."

Treeborn groaned and laid back against the pillows once more. "I see that your personality is still intact," Treeborn replied. "Perhaps your libido is as well?"

"Are you really propositioning me right now Treeborn?" Ari asked with a chuckle. "You were just involved with an explosion and were almost crushed to death. If it wasn't for my healing you'd be in the morgue right now instead of on my bed."

"Though the power of nature I heal rather quick," Treeborn replied as he pulled down one of the bandages on his chest to reveal that the burn had not only scabbed over but already had fur sprouting from it. "Though you are right, had you not intervened I probably would have perished. Perhaps this is just my way of thanking you for doing so, after all what is a life but to cherish it with others."

Though he hadn't been involved much with the druid other than during his time being possessed by Anubis and subsequent fighting Ari knew that Treeborn had probably saved their lives as much as they had with him. At first he thought that maybe this was another nightmare but considering how no one had died or been brutally maimed he was hoping this was reality. Ari sat down on the bed next to Treeborn and as he pressed his hand against the cervine's cheek he could see the need in his eyes. There was something else with it as well as though and as he pulled away he knew that look well enough as well... the look of someone that had been in the jaws of death.

The mask of desire that had been on his face fell away and as Ari held him close he could feel the emotions that the former hero had pouring out of him in the form of tears. As the hands of the deer pressed against his sides he just let it happen, patting him on the back while he waited for the other man to get it out. Having been so close to the edge before he knew that it was a rough place to be and even when he was looking for it he had felt severe rage or sadness at what he was doing. His time as a mercenary had blunted that, but even with his time as a hero it was clear that the druid was not used to such life or death situations.

The two stayed that way for a while and as Ari continued to hold him like that he saw Campbell come in and check on them, which the hybrid quickly shooed away to allow Treeborn to remain unfettered by anyone else being in the room. After some time had passed it seemed the cervine had gotten it all out and laid back on the bed, breathing a sigh while wiping the wetness from his face. "Sorry, that just snuck up on me," Treeborn admitted with a chuckle. "Normally I'm all about the expression of emotions but, well..."

"Don't worry about it," Ari replied with a chuckle of his own. "And if it makes you feel better I found the four that had set the whole thing up, they're not going to be coming back around anytime soon. Unfortunately they had no idea who hired them but all things considered I doubt they're going to try and get a repeat performance with you now that you've survived."

"Well... normally I don't experience exuberance for the death of another and celebrate life, but I think I'm going to make an exception in this case," Treeborn said with a coy grin on his face. From the release of emotion the deer seemed much more relaxed and that allowed Ari to do the same. "I wish I could help you find who tried to do this to me, but honestly the only thing I remember was that I was doing my usual meditation in the forest and the next thing I knew I was tied up in the rail station."

Ari just nodded and sat back onto the bed himself as he chewed on the information that he had been given. While Treeborn didn't know who had taken him the hybrid could imagine that it was probably the mercenary group, though the fact that they could sneak up on the druid made him wonder. One of the druid's powers was having a sense of the environment around him,

so either he got taken and his memory was erased or somehow he had gotten snuck up on and it bypassed his power. Either way it was a little concerning for Ari, but as he continued to lay there he felt a pair of hands on his shorts.

"What, did you think that just because I broke down that I wasn't horny?" Treeborn asked as Ari looked down to see the deer was in his lap, pulling down the pants he had loosened and his eyes widening as the twin shafts pushed out while already half-hard. "Ohh... so the rumors were true, that is quite interesting equipment you have here."

"Yeah, got a pussy down there as well," Ari chuckled as the mood lightened and he was feeling his own desires overriding his more rational sense. Since they had to wait for Ka and Lavender to come back anyway there was no reason that they couldn't have themselves a little fun and the deer was more than eager to play. To his surprise though Treeborn leaned back and looked out the window into the night sky.

"Since you have more holes than I can satisfy myself I was wondering if you would let me work my magic on you," Treeborn cooed as he traced a finger down the valley between his scaly pectorals. While the hybrid was a little wary on letting the deer out of bed and on his own two hooves it seemed his healing ability was more than just boasting. After stuffing his cocks back in his pants he offered a robe to the deer, who just smirked and waved it off before leading him back out through the apartment.

About ten minutes later Treeborn had led Ari to a small clearing that was little more than a patch of field of an abandoned lot that didn't even have any trees in it. While he was surprised that the druid could sense this place he wasn't surprised that he knew where every patch of grass was in this entire city. It was strange to see the deer walking out in the moonlight while completely naked but from the way that he moved this was not the first time he had done so. Once they got to the middle of the field Treeborn held up his hands and suddenly a circle of shrubs surrounded them.

"That's a neat trick," Ari said as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"I have more than that when it comes to tricks," Treeborn replied as he stepped forward. "But if we're going to do this all natural then you will need to be in a similar situation. Go on and get naked."

Even with the shrubbery that was hiding them Ari found that this would be one of the first times that he would be having sex right in the middle of a field in the middle of the city. he could still see the skyscrapers that could be seen in the open roof of their little bungalow that Treeborn had created for him. There was something about it that was rather enticing though and he found himself taking off his pants, not having bothered to put on his shirt since the bedroom. It doesn't take long before he was standing just as naked as the deer himself as he began to feel something tickling against the soles of his feet that caused him to moan.

Treeborn seemed to pick up that his feet were very sensitive and continued to wrap the vines that were growing underneath them, curling around his toes and up his ankles. Though it reminded him a bit of the nightmare that he had just experienced Ari could sense that these vines were coiling around his body with much different intentions. The hybrid was a bit surprised that he was able to create something like this without the usual trees like the last time they had met up, but it was clear that even with being injured he still had power to spare. Ari found himself twitching against the bindings that were crawling up his body and he found himself growing anxious at the loss of control.

"I can sense your turmoil," Treeborn said as he walked up to Ari and ran his hands down the muscular chest of the hybrid. "If you are uncomfortable with being bound up like this then we can switch tactics, I just figured with your reaction to the last time I had you bound up like this you might enjoy it."

"No, I do enjoy it," Ari admitted, trying not to let his discomfort show even as he began to get hard again. "It's just a bit of instinct I suppose. Plus... the nightmare I had involved something similar to this, so..."

"Ah, the feeling of helplessness that can come with being bound can be a bit daunting," Treeborn explained while rubbing down his chest. "However I also find that those who are as powerful as you can find a bit of catharsis in being tied up, especially if someone is more of a primal nature such as yourself. I have found that those who like that can actually... unleash themselves, if you will, really release the beast while knowing that someone like me can keep them in their place."

"Unleash the beast..." Ari repeated, his ears twitching as the words of the druid resonated in his skull. With his encounter with the mercenaries still fresh in his mind perhaps he could use this experience for more than just getting his rocks off, which admittedly his lusts were quickly overwhelming his rational sense as the vines remained just slightly above his ankles. "You think you could handle something like that?"

"I have tamed fiercer creatures," Treeborn replied with a smirk as he waved his hands, which caused flowers to bloom on the hedges that were around them. "Just breathe in and let me guide you, I can make sure that you are brought to your highest highs without any danger. Go ahead and lose control of yourself, let that primal lust that's inside of you surface while in my embrace."

The words of the deer almost had an hypnotic effect to it as Ari found himself nodding, inhaling deeply as told while the flowers bloomed all around them. He guessed that the pollen in them was able to alter his mood somehow and as he continued to breathe deep Treeborn had him lie down on the ground. While normally that would give the druid all the control considering his powers that was what the hybrid found himself wanting as he slowly lowered himself down. Release the beast inside of him.... Ari wasn't sure if this was such a good idea, but he was too horny to care at this point as he kept his arms on the ground and sat up slightly to watch the naked cervine work his magic.

Almost as soon as Ari had laid down he could feel more vines pushing their way up from the dirt in order to coil around his forearms and hands. His breath caught in his throat as he felt them tighten and pull them to the ground, pinning them there while more began to curl up his biceps and over his shoulders. At the same time the vines around his feet that had been providing him with more low-level stimulation had pushed his legs apart and coiled up his calves while several others from around his hips to latch around his thighs. The hybrid was both shocked and impressed when he saw the bright green plants still growing over him, keeping him on the ground with his legs slightly bent while his tail was overgrown and pushed to the side.

This was a somewhat familiar position that he was in, but this time Ari was in it voluntarily and purely for pleasure as he felt his tailhole and pussy being tickled. Meanwhile Deerborn went up to him and slowly slid his hands down his knees and over his hips while conjuring more plants from nowhere while the hybrid started to squirm even more. The deer seemed to have no intention of going easy on him and one more he was reminded to just let himself go and trust that he could be contained. The kangaroo-cobra swallowed hard as he could feel that pressure to do exactly what he wanted, especially with the fresh taste he had gotten of the destructive side of things with this beast inside of him.

If Treeborn was worried about him breaking free or doing something to hurt him it was not apparent on his face as he took one of his hooved feet and stepped over the restrained body of the hybrid. Ari found himself fixating on the deer as he stood over him and slowly stroked his own cock, looking down at him as though checking for something. It was hard for the hybrid to focus on anything other than him and his own throbbing arousal as the rest of the world seemed to fall away from the edges of his consciousness. It was like when he was so fatigued he couldn't see straight, except this time his senses were razor sharp.

Ari found his breathing growing heavier as Treeborn gently touched against his face and forehead, pressing pressing his fingers against the flaring nostrils as he began to shake within his plant restraints. They should have been rather easier to tear from the ground but even with his strength growing he found that the vines held fast to his body and only slithered further around his form while weaving into intricate patterns. From what he had seen when he made contact with the druid before the guy was really into using his powers for rope-like play along with bondage, something called Shibari if he remembered Lavender correctly when he had brought it up once. With every loop and knot that crossed over his body there came a pressure with it that was gentle enough to not restrict his pleasure but still had enough hold to keep him from doing more than wiggling about.

And wiggle he did, Ari letting out a soft snarl as Treeborn's hands went from his face down his neck and to his shoulders. There was no rush of madness or the usual savagery that came with the loss of control that he was experiencing, instead of the raging fire it was more like waves slowly moving further up a shore. Ka could learn a thing or two about this, Ari managed to quip mentally while he watched the deer do his work, though it was becoming hard to think about anything other than the pleasure he was getting. It was like a mix of a massage and a meditation session, though instead of relaxation a completely different feeling was building up inside of him as he found a snarl escaping from his lips.

"That's it," Treeborn said as he finished rubbing against Ari's impressive pecs and leaned back, his butt firmly pressed against the groin of the other man while vines grew around the hybrid's chest that still kept them exposed. "Just release that beast, show me what I can sense lurking around underneath the surface. Let the flow of nature carry you to that inner animal."

Ari groaned and arched his back as much as he could while being tied down as the vines that had been playing around between his legs had started to push into his tailhole and pussy. They were much thicker than the ones that had wrapped around his thickening muscles and as he huffed loudly the pleasure made him almost forget what he was about to say as he looked into Treeborn's eyes. "This is dangerous..." Ari warned as he began to get anxious enough to break the spell that the deer had cast over him. "I don't know if I can hold back if I slip too far."

"Who is telling you to hold back?" Treeborn asked, chuckling at the look of surprise on Ari's face before it suddenly got serious. "You healed me, saved my life, and now all I'm doing is returning the favor. One of my powers is soothing the savage beast, and while it didn't necessarily get enough traction in the heroes guild it certainly has its uses when going up against those who used rage to fuel their strength."

"Soothe the savage beast," Ari repeated, his words stuttering slightly when he could feel the vines pushing slightly deeper inside of him and threatening to sink his thoughts down into the mire of pleasure forming in his head. Though he still thought Treeborn was playing quite the dangerous game it seemed like he knew what he was doing, and it was getting harder to resist as he let out another growl from the deer starting to push one of his shafts inside of him. As his thoughts became more muddled he remembered that Ka had mentioned something about conflict within himself potentially breeding these nightmares, was it possible that this time the real enemy tormenting him really just was himself?

Ari didn't have much time to think about it though as the penetration of his holes continued, Treeborn waving his hand in the air

and Ari feeling several vines slide up his neck and began to wrap around his head. As he felt the plants quickly loop around his jaws and form into a makeshift plant mask it appeared to him that the time for talking was over and the deer was ready to release the beast. When the kangaroo-cobra tried to snap down instinctively on the plants he found that just like the ones on his body they were incredibly strong for being so thin while a bigger vine similar to the ones inside his holes slithered into his maw. Any thoughts that Treeborn couldn't handle himself were put to rest as even with the surge of adrenaline coursing through his body his tensing muscles did little but slightly move the deer while his head was pulled back and his maw invaded.

As it slid down into his throat and muffled his snarls and growls it only focused Ari's attention more to the feelings that were growing in his body. Even though Treeborn wasn't doing anything with the plants other than stimulating him it felt like power was pouring into him and making his form grow bigger to the point he could feel the vines loosen and tighten once more around his new frame. It reminded him once more not only of the mercenary experience but also his time on the yacht, but there was no power being used through his already spent glove. Was this some sort of new ability that was coming from the glove, or had this monster been inside him this entire time?

Treeborn was more than appreciative of his growing form as he licked his lips at seeing his abs growing more defined while his arms and legs thickened. Ari gurgled and gagged as the deer slid down further on one of his shafts, his throat clamping against the vine that had started to swell out his neck while another set of vines wrapped around his head. This time they had leaves that flattened over his eyes and effectively blinded him, leaving his only sense to be touch while a small set of tendrils plugged his nostrils as well. He began to see what Treeborn meant by filling him as Ari's tailhole and pussy were stretched wide with the vines starting to slide in and out of them.

With every hole filled including his ears Ari was completely at the mercy of the one sitting on his cock, which causing quite the stir inside of him. That potent feeling of strength and power was confined, contained, and the more he struggled against it the more he was restrained. The only thing he body could do was quiver in pleasure as he was stimulated from all ends while the vines continued to tighten to control his movements. It was the ultimate dicotomy between weakness and power as the euphoria took the rage that normally came with such a rush and tempered it immensely.

A fleeting thought made Ari wonder why his dreams couldn't be like this as he held the mental image of that lithe deer riding his cock while he was stuffed full with vines. Each time Treeborn pulled off and slammed down on his maleness while his tailhole and pussy were being teased it only caused him to huff against the bindings of his head, his muzzle thrashing back and forth while it felt like his teeth were growing longer. It was a bestial set of changes that were mutating on his body and the more he felt it the more indulgant it was becoming. There was no way he was going to hurt this deer and as Treeborn was able to slip the second shaft into his tailhole as well his toes curled from the claws growing longer and forming into wicked talons.

Whether it was Treeborn's power or something to do with his own body the one thing that surprised Ari enough to lift him out of the thick mire of pleasure his thoughts trudged through was there was no feeling of needing to dominate. Instead he just wanted to rut and he didn't care how he got there, which the druid was providing in spades as he could slightly hear the gasping that came from his mouth. His own growls and starls were still muted and even as his teeth began to dig into the vine he felt another one just push in and keep his jaws spread apart. it made him wonder how he looked, remembering the image he saw in the reflection of the storefront except completely bound and decked out in tasteful vine shibari.

With nothing he could do against the bindings against him all Ari could do was take the pleasure and feel every inch of this form while still being blissed out from whatever Treeborn was feeding him. With both shafts rubbing up inside the tailhole of the deer all he could feel was the intense pleasure and the strength that his body contained. If he wasn't restrained he would have the other man on the ground pounding him into the dirt that he loves so much, but even as he was being driven to orgasm there was a zen that came with this predatory nature. It made him feel like this form was something he could get along with and let out a muffled roar when he hit his climax.

Ari could feel something hitting his chest and realized that Treeborn had shared in his orgasm, but with his senses all plugged up the only thing he could sense besides the afterglow was a sudden and intense heat...

Chapter 17:

"I'm sorry, but you should have told me before you and Treeborn decided to go out in the middle of a field to have sex," Campbell said as him as well as both Ari and Treeborn sat at the table, fresh bandages on the burns on their arms as they both glared at the saber tooth tiger. "When I'm hearing familiar muffled growls that sounded like he was gagged I just reacted."

"Overreacted is more like," Ari grumbled. "I get that you can get all hot and bothered but I would appreciate if you didn't inflict the same to us."

Campbell just huffed and crossed his arms over his thick chest as the two continued to stare at him. Ari could certainly understand where the feline was coming from considering he might have had a similar reaction, but that still didn't change the fact that he had used his fire powers to burn out half the grove that Treeborn had created and got them singed in the process.

Had he not been still half-wrapped in the vines and post-climax he might have lashed out but the only thing that happened was practically bucking the buck off of his lap in shock. For a brief second Treeborn and Campbell had squared off with one another before they realized what was going on and led them to sneak back to the apartment after causing a scene with two of the group being mostly naked.

Fortunately with it being late at night no one was really out there, especially since most of the noises that Ari had been making were muffled by the vines while they were engaged in the act. The only thing that would have attracted anyone's attention was the fireball that Campbell had set off that lit up the entire area. "Well, I will admit that your heart was certainly in the right place," Ari said finally. "Now that Treeborn is back to rights perhaps we can talk about what happened at the rail station."

"I already told you what I know," Treeborn replied with a shrug. "They must have drugged me or something, because I can't remember anything."

Ari already knew that but just wanted to get the subject changed in order to get Campbell off the hook of being in Treeborn's ire. He had the sneaking suspicion that the deer was more angry at his plants being burned than himself but he didn't need the deer to be fuming all night about it. Plus there was still the fact that they had a conspiracy that was unfolding right in front of them that had nearly caused the druid's demise and the destruction of an entire rail station. It was far more important than some plants, but as Treeborn had said there was nothing he could do to help them other than helping them brainstorm what happened.

After a while Lavender and Ka had come back from their meeting with Mr. Stevens where they had gotten the update from the heroes guild on the bombing. They had found the four mercenaries that were dead in the alley and made sure to keep their group out of it, potentially keeping up the narrative that those against the militia had killed them and the heroes weren't involved. Other than that they had cleaned up some of the area and found that while most of the protesters had scattered and most of the police and fire personnel were dealing with the explosion they had managed to get a few in custody. From what Mr. Stevens said however they were not confident that the ones they got would lead them towards the source of the militia or where their base of operations were.

With the rather dismal briefing Ari had to excuse himself and headed down to the underground parking structure to have a cigarette. All the relaxation he had gotten with Treeborn was pretty much gone and he was feeling the stress once more of the mission at hand. With all this sneaking around they had jack to show for it other than a steadily rising body count. While they didn't have the consequences if they couldn't figure out what was going on, the heroes guild likely taking the brunt of whatever they couldn't do, the last thing that Ari enjoyed was failing a mission and having that on his record.

Plus there was the other problem that he was having concerning his inner turmoil, or beast as Treeborn was keen to call it. With his senses cut off by the vines that had been wrapped around his body he hadn't had a chance to see what he had become but he knew that somehow without the power of the glove he had transformed. The deer had also stated that his powers merely drew out such a primal creature and was not responsible for its creation or how it manifested. While it aligned with what he had been experiencing in his dreams it still pissed him off that it was happening in the first place.

The rest of the night Ari told the others to get to sleep while he stayed up and waited to see if there would be any updates on the rail line bombing. With the events of the night weighing down on everyone they were quick to accept that offer and after bidding Treeborn a fond farewell they settled in for the night. After about an hour the hybrid was sitting on the couch with an energy drink on his stomach while watching television. He had flipped through the channels while also having the laptop open and playing live feeds from other news feeds to see if he could get anything.

In reality the only reason he had so much stuff up was to keep himself stimulated, not desiring to have any manner of nightmares that night that would bring down his otherwise cathartic night. While being with Treeborn had allowed the beast to surface and he had been into it at the time Ari wondered if he hadn't indulged a little too much. What he hadn't told Treeborn nor the others was that the feeling of that inner monster hadn't receded as much as he had let on; even though he had transformed back into his former self the fact he hadn't seen himself nor was able to really let loose had caused a bit of a primal edging within him. The fact that Campbell had come in powers literally blazing had also interrupted the almost ritualistic summoning the druid was doing and had left him more than slightly frustrated.

It was something that Ari expected would probably manifest in his nightmares either from exhaustion or through pharmaceuticals, not that the latter worked much for him anyway, so instead of facing it he just decided to stay up. They had to be getting close to figuring this stupid militia out, he reasoned as he leaned forward and used his prehensile tongue to wrap around the can and bring it to his lips. All he had to do was wait for the heroes guild to gather all the evidence at the rail station and also from Treeborn and finally send them to perform the killing blow. It was what helped keep him up as he waited for the phone to ring...

Except as the days passed the phone didn't ring, nor did they get any information back from the heroes guild for the next few days. Though the rail station was the headline of the news for a while it eventually fell away and left them with trying to coordinate with Mr. Stevens to figure out what to do next. Just like with the chemical plant the group went to ground as soon as everyone had scattered and even the people they captured either wouldn't talk or didn't know what was going on. That just left what little information they had gotten from the mercenary group and Treeborn, but even when Ari reached out with his old contacts the only thing he got was that they were often hired to perform jobs like this one.

By the end of the third day Ari was lying back on the couch rubbing his hands against his face while Ka watched him from his usual chair that they had set up. Before the human could say anything Ari just sat up and grabbed onto the nearby table, the other man managing to get his laptop off of it before the hybrid threw it across the room. "So... I can sense that you're getting a little tense." Ka said as Ari went back onto the couch.

"How are we still in this god-forsaken city?!" Ari shouted, his eyes twitching while he reached for the large can of energy drink he had upgraded too after the second day. "They blew up a rail station, we found a mercenary group probably hired by Rayarti, how is it that we haven't just stormed his mansion or whatever and take him out?! I could have finished this in the first day!"

"Ari, they still don't know to what involvement Rayarti is in," Ka clarified, which only caused the sound of fabric tearing to be heard as Ari dug his claws into the cushions. "I mean, you're probably right that he's a bad guy, but there is nothing we can do about it. Even Sam can't get us the clearance to run a black op on this guy's property because of the potential legal implications." The soft growl that escaped Ari's lips was a little more tempered that time and it prompted Ka to lean forward. "I don't think the stalling in the mission is what's really bothering you though, we've been staked out like this for weeks at a time, so mind telling me what the real reason is for all this?"

There was a moment that Ari was about to open his mouth and tell him when he suddenly felt the words catch in his throat. How would he explain to people that depended on him that he had gone about three days without sleep just because he couldn't get over the fact that the monster inside of him was trying to get him to indulge like some weird Jekyll and Hyde situation? "It's just been a complicated set of emotions that I've been going through," Ari half-admitted. "And it's frustrating because it's sort of like the Anubis situation, except that there's no one that I can look forward to punching in the face."

"You do know that psychologists deal with complicated emotions all the time, right?" Ka responded, causing Ari to groan and him to chuckle. "But we haven't really went into the whole Anubis situation as you call it, I can imagine that watching your friends get transformed into anthros and turned into slaves right in front of you had to be traumatic. Now I know you said that this doesn't feel like the same thing but perhaps maybe that experience is influencing your insomnia and nightmares, especially since you're back where it all began?"

Ari had felt that for a while, but to hear Ka just bring it up like that had caused his lips to curl in a grimace. He had never intended on coming back to this city and thought that working for the CIA meant that he would go literally anywhere else in the world but here. As he thought back on it he guessed that was a bit naive considering they did have intimate knowledge of this city and the heroes guild that was under siege. Maybe that was why his glove and his powers were being to temperamental, his mind subconsciously remembering what happened to him and the others when it came to this place. As he looked over at Ka he realized he had been deep in his own thoughts and actually hadn't responded to the question yet.

"I think that the sooner we leave this place the better," Ari quipped, though as he just saw Ka continue to stare at him he knew that this wasn't a good enough answer. "I really don't know, this was the site of my greatest ass-kicking ever, not to mention I stopped someone that fancied themselves a deity. Shouldn't that be a good thing?"

"Stress is still stress, even if the end result was something good," Ka explained. "Our trauma can shape us in ways we don't expect and sometimes can lie dormant until something brings it to the surface. To bring up something recent you were very reluctant to use your transformation power on me, now I'm guessing considering the stories that you, Campbell, and Lavender have said you used that power rather judiciously when you first discovered it."

Ari felt himself blushing slightly at what Ka meant by that as he recalled telling a few exploits of his lovers while in bed with the human. While he had told himself it was just because he wanted to keep his powers in check and not potentially alter the human in reality it was likely because of what happened with Anubis. He realized at that moment that when it came time for it to be a mission he quickly utilized the power to infiltrate the protest, but not to just have some fun. It made him wonder if perhaps Ka might have felt excluded being a human in a group of powerful, muscular creatures. He was also the only one in their group that didn't have any powers to speak of other than what he got from his training, though among the group he did have the degree that they didn't, which Ari guessed was something as he laid back on the chair.

As Ari was about to explain that he was just worried for the human and didn't want him to sacrifice his humanity just to have some fun there was a knock at the door, both men pausing as Campbell stuck his head in and informed them that he and Lavender were going to go meet Mr. Stevens. It appeared the heroes guild finally had something that they were willing to share but they wouldn't let it leave the lab, and with it being technological in nature it made sense for the wolf to go with Campbell. That meant the other two would stay there and continue to monitor the equipment that Lavender had set up to try and find some frequency that the militia was using to communicate, which caused Ari to groan. The hybrid was already having trouble staying awake and the last thing he needed was to have the sound of static filling his ears as he slowly got up from the couch.

From the look that was on Ka's face it was also not on his list of favorite things to do as they went out of the office area to see Lavender already packing up the other equipment they might need. Though Ari wanted to ask if they could just come along there was no real basis for the two of them to go, plus the last thing they wanted to do was have Ari be seen at the heroes guild for any reason. It was still risky for Campbell and Lavender to go but from the sound of it the company was starting to become even more reluctant to share information to those that weren't their own people. While it made sense to Ari, while Treeborn

wasn't technically under their employ someone attempted to assassinate him to make it look like it, he still found himself grumbling as the two mentioned that they would come back with energy drinks and food for dinner.

Dinner... as Ari looked out the window he was shocked to find that it was night once more. With him staying up constantly it was causing the days and nights to blur together to the point where he would have to check his clock more than once in order to remember what time it was. He was also starting to get to the limit of staying awake and knew if he didn't do something soon there would be hell to pay on his body. It sure wasn't helping his mood at all and it was only getting worse as he sat himself down on the table and looked at the screen that was attached to the partially destroyed radio.

It didn't take long before the monotony of watching the radio started to get to Ari and he rubbed his face, and as he glanced over he saw that Ka wasn't exactly enthused about the prospect either. There was never anything that was going on with this piece of salvaged technology and from what they heard the crystal, coin, and gun were still being analyzed by the Company. At this point Ari wished that they had taken the stuff and got it analyzed by their own people, though Sam had said that even if they wanted to they didn't want to bring in more CIA resources in case Rayarti had a means to track that sort of stuff. That just left the radio and without Lavender being able to fiddle with it they were just hoping that there was some sort of stray signal that they might get lucky on.

That just left Ari with nothing to do and the potential for nightmares growing with his eyes drooping already. As he flexed his fingers with the power glove he thought about what they had just talked about and a small smirk came to his muzzle. Since it was unlikely that they were going to be going on a mission at that moment it wouldn't hurt to use a power for some fun, especially since the door had been opened during the rail station. Though he felt a twitch of doubt at using his powers so frivolously while waiting for movement in the mission it had already been several days since they had even heard anything from the militia or the heroes guild and if the pattern held true they probably wouldn't be seen unless another hero and villain fight broke out. Considering the last two times heroes have made themselves known ended in disaster it was more likely that the Company wouldn't send anyone out unless it was absolutely necessary, so there was no reason to suspect that they would be called out as he began to channel power into his glove.

As Ka sat there looking at the radio frequencies his nose started to twitch, the human rubbing it as he watched the screen of oscillating lines that made little sense to him. Ari continued to keep the power drip into the other man slow to make sure the surprise lasted for as long as possible while seeing the hair on his head slowly start to turn an orangish red color. With the hybrid being sleep deprived it was hard to keep his power with such fine control though and as his concentration slipped he saw the ears of the man slowly stretch out, causing them to twitch while his nose began to blacken and reshape. Though Ka had been almost falling asleep the feeling of his flesh reshaping and his ears migrating to the top of his head caused him to reach up and scratch them, which also made him aware of his sharpening nails as he let out a gasp.

Ari chuckled at that and after Ka got over his surprise he looked over at the hybrid while still feeling the changes happening to his face and head. "What's this all about?" Ka asked, his voice slightly altered while his jaws began to push out and fur grew on his throat that cascaded down past the collar of his shirt. "I thought you were against me changing?"

"Seems like you were just fine after the rail station," Ari mused while holding his hand against his head and watching the human lean forward from their spine stretching into the start of a tail. "Since we're going to be stuck here I thought that perhaps we might have ourselves a little fun. Unless you're against it of course, I could always stop here and change you back... though it would be a shame considering I already spent the power slot to transform you."

"I mean, I guess it would be good experience to look into the way you and the others think," Ka quickly retorted, bringing up his hands to keep Ari from stopping what he was doing as the skin of his palms puffed out and turned as black as his nose that was pushing out from his face. "Plus it feels... wierd, but in a good way? Why a fox though?"

"Because I think you're a foxy guy," Ari replied with a chuckle, which only caused Ka to roll his eyes as they went from brown to a brilliant blue. "Plus I figured that you wouldn't want to go into something so drastically different for your second time, I'm sure that the elephant form was a bit jarring for you but I needed something close to the three of us rather than you. Unless of course you liked being a big beefy elephant man, in which case I'm sure I can shift my power around to make it happen."

Though Ka blushed at the idea of becoming an elephant, the thought clearly intriguing the transforming human, he shook his head as he pressed his hands against the fur of his cheeks. "I think I wouldn't mind trying fur if you don't mind," Ka replied as he took off his shirt, exposing the red and white fur that was underneath it while his arms swelled slightly. "Also how do you guys stand clothing with fur? I'm already getting warm with it on and I just started getting it."

"Now you can understand why we're usually naked," Ari purred in a more seductive tone, the other reason for his morphing of the other man becoming apparent as he reached forward and pressed against the growing bulge in his pants. Since Ka was no stranger to being in the nude around the other man plus the growing fascination with his changing body caused him to eagerly take up the invitation and strip down the rest of the way. Though the hybrid was incredibly horny he wanted to make sure Ka's first time as an anthro be as pleasing as possible while he watched him look over his body in awe.

In order to conserve his power Ari had made sure that the fox form had a similar body shape to his human body, keeping him

trim and lithe while bulking him up just enough to make his fur-covered physique stand out. As the fur grew out of the small of his back Ka turned behind with increasing flexibility and let out a groan as the lump that had been just above his butt crack pushed out more while it fluffed out into a proper vulpine tail. By this point most of the human features of his face were gone and as he looked back at the one transforming him there was a sudden pop in his jaws as they finished extending into a proper muzzle. Ari found himself licking his lips as his tongue swelled in his maw, the hybrid having already taken off his clothes he wasn't going to wait for Ka to finish before exploring that new body himself.

Ka almost got knocked over in his chair as the bigger man practically pounced on him, Ari putting that new muzzle to work as he pushed his cock tongue inside of it. The pleasure that came from that velvety soft tongue lapping against the sensitive flesh as it explored the inside of his new mouth nearly caused the hybrid to orgasm right there as his eyes rolled back slightly. But even with his libido spiking and his control waning from the lack of sleep there was enough control there that he held back and didn't just simply ravish the fox right then and there. Just like with the transformation itself he wanted to make things slow and sensual while his feet rubbed against the human's, feeling the tows crack and swell while fur spread out over them. With the fur covering his body and his head mostly transformed already he had turned out to be quite the fox and with him still being smaller Ari felt his more dominant nature coming out to play as he pulled back to his chair and brought Ka with him.

The fox man let out a yip of surprise at being lifted up like a doll and brought to the lap of the other man, feeling those twin cocks throbbing against him while Ari held him close. "So, this is what it's like to have sex as an anthro," Ka said as he rubbed the thick fur of his chest against Ari's scaly pectorals while his clawed hands gently pressed against the other man's muzzle. "I feel like I've been missing out with you holding back on me."

"Then let me make up for lost time," Ari replied simply as he lifted Ka slightly higher up while feeling his tail brush against his knees. "Because the power doesn't just make you an anthro..."

Ka tilted his new vulpine head in confusion at what Ari said, but the kangaroo-cobra just smirked as he used one hand to support the fox on top of him while the other went down towards his crotch. Both of his cocks were fully erect and ready to go and as he guided both tips up to the hole above them he could feel the new vulpine shudder in realization. Up until this point he hadn't had both shafts completely inside of him, the anatomy of the human would be unable to handle it, but with Ari's power coursing through him it also allowed him to make such adjustments for the insertion to be possible. As Ari slowly guided his throbbing shafts towards the fox's hole it reminded him of when he had done such a thing with Campbell and Lavender when they had first met, though now with their new bodies there was no need for such alterations as both men could easily fit his cocks inside of them.

But for Ka this would be a new experience and with his body being not much larger than his old one Ari knew he would be in for quite the experience. The fox let out a husky moan and pressed against the bigger man beneath him while those tapered tips began to stretch out the ring of muscle between his furry cheeks. Much like with the transformation itself Ari had made sure that there would be no pain in this new experience either, his free hand holding onto the fox to keep him from falling backwards as both heads popped into him at the same time. The hybrid could feel the member of the other man throb hard against his chest at being double penetrated for the first time and even with the modifications to his anatomy Ka was practically shivering in his grasp.

Even though he could have slid Ka down on his ridged lengths in one go he gave the guy a chance to acclimate to just having his tailhole stretched out further than he had ever experienced before, panting slightly as he did. The hand he had on Ka's back stroked up and down to help him and the hybrid marveled at just how responsive he was to his new form. The last of his human flesh had long since disappeared under the soft fur he was now carressing and it twitched with such sensitivity that he was almost hard to hold onto. Once more it reminded Ari of the times with Campbell early on, and though it was a bit disconcerting as the string of thought led to what had caused the sabertooth tiger to become permanently like that his lust far outweighed the trepidation. Once more the two engaging in a sloppy, passionate kiss as the hand on the fox's butt slowly released to allow gravity to slide Ka further down the two shafts.

Ka's hands grabbed onto Ari's back as he let out a muffled groan from having his insides stretched open so thoroughly, his eyes half-lidded even while he continued to bob his head against the cock tongue that was inside his maw. With his new paw feet dangling just above the floor the more he lowered down on those twin shafts the more Ari was able to angle the fox so he could use his own prehensile feet to massage them. As he had expected the human had gained the sensitivity to his feet like Ka and the others had, feeling him convulse in his grasp when those soft paw pads were carressed for the first time. Ka's entire body was thrumming with pure pleasure and with Ari's nostrils huffing in the scent of this exquisite creature his restraint was quickly slipping.

It didn't take long before Ari was rolling his hips upwards and starting to thrust in and out of Ka's stretched hole, practically bouncing the fox on his lap while they continued to keep their bodies pressed against one another. The hybrid could feel his nipples leaking onto the fox's fur and wondered briefly if that was something that the other man had gotten as well, though those thoughts were quickly lost in the haze of blissful pleasure. The growls and snarls that came from Ari were growing more intense in accordance with his thrusting and with the fox firmly in his grasp he was starting to lose control of his faculties. It didn't help that Ka was egging him on; whenever his muzzle wasn't stuffed with cock tongue he had his hands wrapped around Ari's shoulders and was telling him to go in harder even when those cocks were buried up to the hilt.

"How does it feel, little fox," Ari managed to snarl out as he got closer to his climax, the only things running through his mind

being sex and dominance. "Being fucked by a real predator."

"So good," Ka managed to gasp back. "You're the predator..."

"Yeah, you're my prey," Ari growled. "Say it."

"I'm your prey..."

"Say it again!"

"I'm your prey!"

"What does a predator do with prey?!"

"Whatever he wants!"

Even with being reinforced the chair was practically ready to break as the two began to rut in a frenzy, the twin cocks sliding almost completely out of the fox they were sheathed in before being slammed back into him. Both let out a howl of pure ecstasy that would have definitely been heard by neighbors if they had them as both men orgasmed at nearly the same time, their claws both digging into the wood of the floor as Ari came hard inside of the other man. They clutched against each other while riding the waves of pleasure and as both shafts spurted inside of the fox Ari could feel the stomach of the smaller vulpine bloating slightly from how much was being pumped inside of him. It would be minutes before they finally calmed down enough to stop panting, and as they did the ears of both anthros twitched as they heard something that caused their heads to turn to the radio.

It was faint, but there was definitely the sound of someone talking that could be heard over the static that caused them to try and hone their senses towards it. While it might have been overlooked to humans the sensitive ears of the two could just make out someone discussing a meeting and something about a resupply. Though they couldn't catch most of it, most importantly the location, they knew it was something that they needed to inform Lavender about in order to get him to work as quickly as possible. Unfortunately they knew that with him being practically across the city they would never make it in time to intercept, but while it was not what Ari was hoping to do he knew there would be one way to get there quickly as he placed one hand on the radio while focusing the power on his glove...

Chapter 19:

At the building that contained the Heroes Guild both Lavender and Campbell were sitting in the break room waiting for Mr. Stevens to get back to them with their dossiers so that they could get home. The crystal that Ari had found at the chemical spill was some sort of amplification matrix for powers, one that the hero who had died while trying to help wouldn't have needed considering his powers were good enough to be a part of the guild. That meant that the militia was using it for something, but without the source of the power it was like finding a battery and trying to figure out what electronic device it had fallen from. The gun was also a curiosity in that they found a neurotoxin on the inside of the barrel that was a powerful paralytic, which could have all manner of uses to a group that hated heroes.

The only thing that they couldn't find any meaning behind was the coin and as Campbell flipped it in the air Lavender was looking at his laptop. "I'm sure they're not breaking your equipment Lavender," Campbell said as he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in the chair. "If you were so worried about it I could have brought Ari instead."

"You know I needed to make sure that there was nothing going on with the technological aspects of the equipment we found," Lavender replied. "Plus I'm concerned that Ari is not quite himself, which is something to say given his nature, but considering I've had to recycle several bags of aluminum cans I think that nightmare problem of his is only getting worse. What's going to happen if we get a call and he's been up for a week straight?"

"Ari's been through worse," Campbell stated sternly. "Plus he's actually doing the therapy sessions with Ka and he's been much more interested in self-preservation than he has even in the last few months we've been doing missions. I think he's actually turned a corner, maybe these nightmares are just his way of going through the healing process."

Lavender frowned at that and shook his head, but didn't say anything as he went back to his screen and continued to manipulate the data on it using his power. In reality Campbell actually believed what he said, noting that even with the problems he'd been having there was a significant attitude change that the hybrid had while they were at the city. Perhaps he was finally getting some semblance of closure, the feline thought to himself, and once they finished this mission he would have a fresh

outlook on life. It was an interesting development in their little group and he hoped that there would be more growth as Ari continued to work through his issues with Ka.

Campbell's thoughts were interrupted though as both he and Lavender felt a disturbance in the room that caused them both to sit up, fire flaring up through his fur as they saw the air distort and warp around them. The shimmer lasted only for a few seconds before two anthros suddenly appeared and flopped on the floor, Ka and Ari groaning as the larger hybrid had landed on top of the fox while holding onto the radio. "We got a signal," Ari said simply as he tossed the equipment to Lavender, who continued to just stare dumbfounded at the two naked men that had suddenly appeared before them even as he caught the electronics tossed to him. "You might want to check on that."

With how quickly Ari had reacted he hadn't even had time to pull out of the fox and as he looked over at Campbell he saw the flames of the feline extinguish and a smirk play on the corners of his muzzle. "I see that therapy is going well," Campbell quipped as Ari slid his cocks out of Ka, who convulsed in pleasure from his insides no longer being stretched open as he laid there panting on the floor. "The fox thing is new, we're not keeping him human anymore?"

"It's just an experiment," Ari replied as he stretched his naked body. "Plus you remember your first time transforming, the emotions can be overwhelming." Campbell just continued to stare at Ari, who grew increasingly flustered as he just gave a sheepish grin to the sabertooth tiger. "Also I was more than a bit horny and tired."

"There we are," Campbell scoffed as he went over and helped Ka to his feet.

"Well to be fair Ka wanted it to happen to," Ari interjected. "Basically begged me to do it."

"I did not!" Ka shot back.

"I could see it in your eyes," Ari quickly said.

"You saw that I wanted to be turned into a fox guy and ravished by you?" Ka asked as both he and Campbell shook their heads.

"Well, the translation might have been a bit off," Ari replied with his grin growing wider. "But I think the message was still well recieved."

This time it was Ka that grinned sheepishly and blushed, but before he could say anything Lavender shouted at them all to shut up while concentrating hard on the radio that Ari had brought him. It was clear that he was using his power as much as he could must and that the screen of the radio he was holding glowed brighter then ever. The three went deathly quiet as they waited for the wolf to get done with whatever he was doing and when the muted voices on the device suddenly went dead the glow did as well. Lavender shook his head and took a moment to regain his composure before looking up at the three.

"Did you get any information from the message?" Campbell asked.

"No, the message was vague and didn't give out much on details," Lavender explained as he set the radio down on the floor. "My guess is that they probably were speaking in some sort of code. The good news is that even though they were using an encrypted line I was able to use their own radio to bypass a lot of it and get a location of where it was coming from. Now the one that was sending the message was going through some sort of proxy network, but the one receiving them was far easier to track and actually somewhere in the city."

"That's awesome!" Ari said enthusiastically, clapping his hands together. "Let's go in there and bust some heads and finally get this mission done!"

"Hold on Ari," Campbell quickly responded as he put a hand on the hybrid's shoulder. "We got to at least look into this area first before we make a move on it, not to mention you're not exactly ready to take anything on both power and otherwise."

Ari was about to refute that before Campbell gestured down at the hybrid's naked body, causing both of them to laugh. Though he was ready to go and wouldn't have even minded doing so in the buff he had just used several powers and would need to give it a rest before he could go in guns blazing. Normally that wouldn't have been a problem either but he found himself pulling back on his usual impatience, especially since he was dealing with something that was still ofuscated in mystery. Once he got in there he was ready to tear into whatever the hell was keeping him in this city, but as Campbell helped Ka clean up after their tryst in the apartment he knew that if they were planning something he would have to be... patient, though even just thinking the word caused him to groan.

Just as Ari was about to ask if they could possibly go and scout the place the door to the break room opened, Mr. Stevens about to say something as he walked in only to see that there were not only two more people in the room than when he had left but that those new people were also buck naked and standing there with a surprised look on their faces. "Ah, Ari, glad you could join us I guess," Mr. Stevens said as he quickly recovered his composure, taking the files that he had been holding and handing them to Lavender and Campbell. "This is everything the guild has on the evidence they found in the rail station and from those mercenaries that you were so kind to dispatch for us."

"You're welcome," Ari replied curtly as he snatched the file out of Lavender's hands and looked at himself while the wolf glared at him. "Did you manage to talk to Treeborn yet?"

"Seems that he has gone to ground in the truest sense of the word," Mr. Stevens replied. "From what Campbell has told me though he didn't remember much about his abduction, which given the gun that you found in the remains of the chemical factory we can guess why. The only question is why they would try and pin a rail station bombing on a former hero fighting with a villain that was hardly on our radar to begin with."

More questions... with every step forward it seemed that they were just going nowhere, Ari fumed to himself as Campbell discussed the Company's next actions concerning this frame job. Though Rayarti was still at the top of the list there was no real motivation that Ari had clocked other than the security company that he was starting, though he could have just as easily done that without organizing an anti-hero militia. There was Chet that he killed, Janette that they had kidnapped, and the mercenaries that were hired, but each time they found a piece like that it either turned out to be completely disconnected or something that didn't fit the puzzle they were trying to solve. From the sound of it the Heroes Guild was not having much better luck on their end and with things escalating in the city it was only a matter of time before something turned into a catastrophe and they'd find out about the plans as they were happening.

Ari needed more information, and since he had managed to essentially sneak into the hero guild without anyone seeing him it was time to take advantage of their partnership that was fairly one-sided up until this point. Mr. Stevens seemed to sense what he was about to do and merely stepped aside to allow the naked hybrid to stride out of the break room and into the office area, remarking on how nice their remodeling was since the last time they were there as Campbell and Lavender quickly followed behind him. Though the sabertooth tiger was telling him to stop all Ari could hear was the blood pounding in his mutilated ears as he made his way towards the one place he believed would be able to help more than anything else. Though it was located in a slightly different location the main surveillance center of the company had actually expanded since the last time he was there as he activated the last power on his glove and kicked the metal door off its hinges before Campbell or Lavender could stop him.

The technicians that were inside the room turned around in shock at the naked creature that walked into the area, Ari's eyes flickering from one screen to another before he turned to Campbell. "Tell them the location that you got from the transmission," Ari ordered, and though the wolf was still looking at him angrily it seemed that he was also tired of waiting and gave the coordinates to the human at one of the consoles. "I want you to zoom in on that area and tell me everything that you can gather about it in the next ten minutes. GO."

The last word was punctuated with a snarl that caused everyone to immediately launch into a frenzy of activity as Ari crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his large foot on the ground. By the time Mr. Stevens had caught up with them with a pair of shorts for him and Ka to wear at the minimum there was already a picture pulled up on the main screen, a warehouse that was in one of the busier areas of the harbor. "A shipping warehouse..." Ari said under his breath as he watched the stats for the area get pulled onto other areas. "They mentioned supplies, best way to get them without anyone knowing would be to smuggle them in."

"We've already had several heroes investigate the harbor after finding out the potential link with that woman you kidnapped," Mr. Stevens said as he stepped forward. "They didn't find a connection between any of the warehouses and Rayarti, not even from the other accounts that we know he keeps private."

"Probably because he knows that you know about his private accounts," Ari replied as he remembered his most recent payment, smirking slightly as he shook his head. "He's paying with cash, or at least cash equivalent, and likely moving it in a way that no one would think to track. If I had to put my money on something I'm guessing that he's quite the art lover?"

Though Mr. Stevens remained quiet one of the technicians that had clearly been on the case turned back and informed Ari that he frequents quite a few auction houses in order to buy artwork that caused the hybrid to shake his head. "Man, you guys have been in the protection business so long against villains you forgot the basics of being a normal criminal," Ari chastized while turning back to the lion. "Easiest way to make payments that are untraceable is through artwork, hell sometimes the one paying it even declares it stolen so they can get the insurance payment on it while still getting whatever they need funded. My guess is he ships the artwork there under the guise of being sent to a museum or something, but once it reaches that shipping warehouse it gets exchanged for whatever was smuggled off the boat that day with it being marked as shipped so that no one is the wiser."

The room went silent after Ari's assessment of the situation, and while the rest of his team was excited at the potential to finally move forward in the investigation the hybrid was fuming. From the sound of it they had suspected the docks as an entry point

and couldn't solve it, which made him wonder if Janette really did have any connections or if they were just shaking the tree to see what fell out of it. While it had allowed him to gain access to Rayarti the fact that they were deceived by the company in order to do so caused the fur to raise up on the back of his neck. Back in this city for a few weeks and they were already getting manipulated, Ari thought to himself as he went over and got a copy of the information that they had dug up on a spare flash drive before tossing it to Lavender, it put a bad taste in his mouth and made him want to leave this place... but not before going over to Mr. Stevens until their muzzles were practically touching.

"You tell those that are higher up then you to stop fucking around," Ari said. "I'm not doing this with one hand tied behind our backs anymore; you brought us in because you know we can get the job done, and that's what I'm going to do regardless if the company has to take a hit to its credibility." The lion merely gave a small nod in response as he continued to stand there stoically, and just as Ari stormed off he remembered something else that he turned back to say. "As far as I'm concerned this shit storm is still the fault of this place and if the only reason to stay here is to save your sorry asses I'm going to tell Sam that we're out of here."

With the threat sufficiently delivered Ari motioned for the other three to gather around him, then used his power in order to recall them to the apartment. At first he wasn't sure if he would get all four of them back considering he had only used the power initially for two, but as he found the surveillance room dissolve away and reform into the familiar walls of their headquarters all three had come back with him. Before Campbell or Lavender could say anything Ari put up his gloved hand and told them that they had twelve hours to disseminate that information and figure out the best route to go in before he would storm the gates and finally get the answers he wanted. Though he could sense that the two wanted to protest the rather rash move Ari's patience had officially reached its limit as the euphoria he had gained with Ka had disappeared from the anger of being back at that place and dealing with the bureaucratic bullshit that he had left in the first place.

Campbell mentioned something about coffee and Lavender went to examine the data, which allowed Ari time to go back down to the garage area and have a smoke while allowing himself to calm down. It also helped to keep him awake and after having adrenaline pushed through his system after the high of sex he no doubt would have a crash coming that he needed to slog through. He could feel his mind screaming at him to sleep but he knew that there would be no rest for him at the moment, at least none that he wanted to try and take at the moment. The best case scenario was that he would fall into another comatose state and have to deal with his inner beast or whatever it was while the worst case was enduring more potent and powerful nightmares about his past or the consequences of it while getting no actual respite.

Neither scenario was particularly appealing as he leaned up against his usual concrete pillar, letting the smoke stream out of his nostrils while he tried to not focus on the pounding headache that he had been fighting with after being awake for so long. "Perhaps ya might wanna let yer team handle this one, eh?" the voice of the glove suddenly chimed in, causing Ari to groan audibly. "This rate you'll be sleepwalkin through most da mission."

"Perhaps you could shut the hell up and let me enjoy the pleasure of this cigarette," Ari shot back. "I'd punch you against this pillar but all I'm doing is breaking my own hand."

"See, ya smarter then ya look," the voice said with a laugh. "But seriously, maybe these nightmares are tryin to tell ya not to fly off the handle at every little thing, ya know?"

Ari found himself rolling his eyes once more and rubbing his head, but as he was about to respond he heard a noise and turned back to see the elevator door open. "Surprised to see you down here," Ari stated to the fox as he tried to not concentrate on the voice in his head, though fortunately it seemed the glove had taken the hint and was no longer active. "You smoke now?"

Ka just shook his head and leaned up against the nearby pillar that faced Ari, which prompted the hybrid to take another drag. "There's actually something that I wanted to talk to you about away from the others," Ka stated as Ari casually looked back over at him. "It's about what happened before we were suddenly rushed to the Heroes Guild." Ka explained. "Concerning our time together."

"What, turning you into a fox?" Ari asked incredulously.

"No, not that part, though I am curious on how long this lasts," Ka replied, prompting Ari to smirk and deactivate the power that caused the fur to immediately recede from the other man's body. "Thanks for that, anyway it's about the last part right before the radio went off, when you started to get more aggressive. I actually have been thinking about it and I think I may have an addendum to your condition that you might be interested in."

For a second Ari had to think about what Ka was talking about considering everything was a lustful blur, but when it finally registered he looked at the transforming human in slight surprise. "The whole calling you prey thing?" Ari asked, Ka nodding his head in response. "I thought we were just getting into the moment, though if that's something you want to expand on I could turn you into a sexy deer or something."

"No, that's not... wait, you can do that?" Ka asked, Ari laughing at the look of genuine interest before the human shook his head

while the last of his muzzle was sucked in to reform his human face. "Anyway, I think that you might have something that we can actually look into, it something that mostly affects predator-based anthros, it's called Apex Predator Syndrome."

"Apex Predator Syndrome?" Ari repeated, Ka nodding his head in response. "Sounds like something made up."

"I assure you it's quite real," Ka said. "You mentioned in therapy that in some of your nightmares or in these momentarily hallucinations you see a stronger, fiercer version of yourself that you can't quite explain. Now I haven't had a chance to look it up thoroughly but those who have suffered intense trauma that involves becoming powerless or having a lack of control can sometimes develop this syndrome, which causes the predator to become over-dominant and aggressive in order to try and compensate for that loss and to make sure that it never happens again."

Though Ka continued on with the various symptoms and reasons why he thought that Ari had it the hybrid had already retreated back into his own mind, mulling over what the man had just said to him. Was everything he was experiencing boiled down to a simple syndrome that was present in other anthros? His ear twitched as he caught that perhaps having the glove had also helped aggravate his condition since it gave him the power to indulge in such a fantasy, but that didn't explain the nightmares he was having or the fact the glove was talking to him... did it? With things potentially nearing completion of this mission perhaps more time with Ka was needed to see if this was the source of all his woes... after they got done with the warehouse raid.

The two continued to discuss Ka's potential diagnosis for a while longer before a visible chill went through the human's body due to the fact he was still only wearing the shorts that Mr. Stevens had given him. That left the hybrid to enjoy one more cigarette alone, hoping that he didn't have to listen to the glove try to psychoanalyze him either. It seemed that for this brief moment however he was well and truly alone with his thoughts... though as he lit up once more he found that it wasn't as relaxing as he had hoped. The questions from earlier in the company and this new information dropped on him by his therapist had only muddied the waters even more and hoped that by the end of the night at least one of those would be resolved that would allow them to get out of this place.

Once he had finished with the second one he tossed the butt into the corner and tried to stretch out his fatigued muscles as best he could before heading back up into the apartment. The adrenaline had long since worn off and he was left only with the nicotine that he had just took in and the energy drink he had downed while in his therapy session with Ka. Both were wearing off fast and with the glove on cool down there was nothing he could do but wait... and wait... and wait...

The night eventually passed and the sun came up with Ari looking out the window over the city. Campbell and Lavender had worked well into the night in order to get something resembling a plan for breaching the warehouse and getting an idea of the anti-hero militia's plans. As per usual anything that was remotely connected to Rayarti was nowhere near the site and from the looks of the satellite photos they had the shipping company also used it for legitimate work. Blending in black market dealings with legitimate shipping helped in case someone like them was staking out the place, though that wouldn't stop Ari from running with this lead until he reached the end.

But the problem came with the logistics of the operation. While Ari was the most knowledgeable about such things if he was spotted snooping around the warehouse and it turned out to be nothing, or worse, a trap, then he will have blown his cover with Rayarti and they would likely never hear from the man again. On the other hand, Ari pointed out, if he didn't go along and the group missed something then it was possible that they would never find a link between the militia and Rayarti or any clues on their hideout. If that was the case the hybrid was pretty sure he would lose his mind and just start tearing up the city looking for something, a notion he expressed to the others that caused them all to look at each other wearily.

But at this point it was hard for Ari to even care; he wasn't sure how long he had been up at this point but he knew that he was starting to see things, though unlike his other iterations of hallucinations these were just shapes that disappeared or shadows that didn't exist. Even though he tried to hide it his words were also starting to slur slightly and his movements weren't nearly as graceful as he usually was, but with the others buried in the work to get the mission done all he had to do was say he was fine and had been napping to get them off his back. He reassured himself that once the mission started the tension and adrenaline of the moment would clear his senses and allow him to use his powers to the fullest. But even as Ari continued to push for them to use tonight as the means to breach both Campbell and Lavender disagreed and stated they didn't have enough information or knew if the group would even be there to intercept at this point.

As night began to fall on the city once more Ari felt a sense of delirium begin to set in, shaking his head as he lost all concept of the passage of time. He would hear Campbell say something to him while standing next to the table only for the hybrid to look up and see that the sabertooth tiger was no longer in the room anymore. It was causing Ari's eye to twitch slightly and even though he tried to continue to act normal he found himself rocking back and forth on the couch watching a television that wasn't even on. At some point Campbell had sat down next to him and covered him with a blanket, slowly taking the energy drink out of his hand and telling him that Ka was looking into a means of medication he wasn't resistant too and they could plan the infiltration after that.

Ari just nodded and thanked Campbell for the blanket before wishing him good night, sitting there silently as everyone around him shuffled off to bed. But the hybrid wasn't just sitting there in silence because he could no longer focus on anything for more than a few moments, that was besides the point, instead he had been paying attention to the heavy footsteps of his teammates as they got into bed for the night. He was waiting to hear the sounds of their sleeping and it didn't take long with how hard

they'd been working in order for his ears to pick it up. With both of them asleep he knew that Ari was likely in bed with either one of them, which meant his breathing was harder to hear, but the human needed his sleep more than any of them as he slowly got up from the couch and made his way to the kitchen.

The night before Ari had stashed all his equipment underneath the kitchen counter so that they wouldn't hear him rummaging around tonight, the kangaroo-cobra still as quiet as a mouse while he carefully brought up his backpack full of gear. It clinked quietly as he moved it but as his ears continued to monitor the other two he found that they had not been alerted to his movement at all. Once he had his stuff he took the mission plans that they had been working on and slipped the flash drive into his pocket, then made his way out of the apartment and carefully stepped to the elevator. This was the most critical part of the plan as he wouldn't be able to say he was just going out for a cigarette if he was caught, not with his equipment bag slung over his shoulder and dressed up in his usual mission attire.

Part of him thought about going down the stairs but Ari knew their hearing wasn't that good as he called the car and stepped inside, cracking open an energy drink as he did. While he knew the others would be pissed at him sneaking out and doing the mission while they slept he couldn't wait anymore; whether it was the company slowing him down or the need to protect some relationship he didn't even care about the hybrid couldn't take it anymore. Patience was never his strong suit anyway, he reasoned as he downed the entire can before the elevator reached the bottom floor of the apartment complex. Once the doors opened he went to the van and fished in the pocket of his backpack for the keys to open it so he could finally start this mission for real...

...only to find that they were missing.

"The hell?" Ari said to himself as his fingers slid through the material of the backpack pocket, then up to the next one to find them empty as well. "Shit..."

"Looking for something?" Ka's voice suddenly rang out, Ari freezing for a moment before turning around to see him standing there holding the keys to the van in his hand. "Did you really think that you were going to sneak out without any of us knowing?"

"I was... sort of hoping," Ari replied as he went over towards the human holding his means of leaving. "Did you just clock me tonight?"

"I actually heard you banging around yesterday gathering up your stuff," Ka admitted. "I happened to be in the bathroom at the time, but I'm honestly surprised that Campbell and Lavender didn't hear you considering how much you were dropping stuff."

Ari frowned slightly at that as he didn't remember being that klutzy... though he couldn't really remember much of yesterday at all as he took a few steps forward and held out his hand. "Just give me the keys Ka," Ari said while curling his fingers. "You know that I can hotwire the van before you can get back up to warn the others, or I can just use my tail and knock you out for the next few hours if you would prefer to lay on the pavement for a bit."

To Ari's surprise Ka tossed him the keys, the hybrid fumbling with them a bit before securing them in his palm. "The only condition I have is that you take me with you," Ka stated, the request taking Ari by surprise. "I know that you were going to do this anyway and while I could have warned the other two they would have just tried to tie you down, which would have made you fight against them harder and lead to a even more dangerous situation. You seem to have a bit of problem with listening to others, something that you might need to work on down the line."

"You really are a good therapist," Ari replied with a toothy grin before gesturing to the van. "Fine, you can be my eyes and ears while I go and figure out what's going on with this shipping station. Maybe we can find a smoking gun that connects directly to Rayarti and we can finally get out of here."

Chapter 20:

With Ka taking the wheel Ari got his gear on while they drove down to the docks, the kangaroo-cobra preparing himself for the incursion mission as best he could. Between his gear and his glove he had more than enough firepower to take down a few guards and see if there was any information related to Rayarti or this anti-hero militia. Though he could feel the excitement and thrill of the impending mission it was muted, to the point where he had to stop and shake his head when his vision went blurry for a second. He wasn't actually on the mission yet though, he reassured himself, and knew once he got in if anything he could use his glove in order to perk himself up and provide all the focus he needed.

The van came to a stop just outside the fence that separated the shipping warehouses from the nearby office buildings. There were a few trees that grew around it and from the aerial photos that had been shot the weakest area in the defense line was a culvert that drained water from the area to prevent flooding. It was a decent enough point of egress and with the smugglers

trying to blend in it meant that they wouldn't be able to put up a lot of surveillance without being suspicious. While he wished that Lavender was there to spoof the cameras or something he once more knew he could rely on his glove to get him through it as he told Ka to stay in the car and watch his camera feed in case he got in trouble.

Ari got out of the van as Ka told him to be careful and after looking around to make sure they hadn't been spotted or followed Ari skulked his way from the van to the culvert. Fortunately with these all being office buildings and with how late it was there was no one really around that would spot him, and anyone that was out would stick out like a sore thumb to him. Though he did the same he made sure to move with purpose to his entry point and as soon as he got inside the large spillage pipe he pulled out his rifle and turned on the laser sight. Now he could feel his heart pumping, Ari thought to himself with a smirk on his muzzle as he climbed through the storm drain and eventually popped the grate closest to the warehouse in question.

Once he was on the other side of the fence Ari knew to keep his head on a swivel and keep an eye out. Even if nothing was happening here if someone saw him and they called the cops it would be quite the mess that would have to be cleaned up as he made his way to the door of the warehouse. As he picked the lock he whispered into his commlink to Ka if he saw any movement, which he responded with the negative and told him to hurry up. Ari just rolled his eyes and asked whether they want this done quiet or end up on the six o'clock news as he finished picking the lock and finally getting inside.

Ari found himself grimacing as he got to the other side of the door and slowly closed it behind him. That lock was far too simple and he took far too long on it for comfort, but by this point he was already in the middle of it and wasn't going to let the mission fail just because he was a bit sleep-deprived. Plus from what he had already gathered it was possible they were either barking up the wrong tree or they really skimped on security as he walked further into the warehouse proper. Stacks of crates were all over the place and all of them marked with numbers that meant nothing to the hybrid; what he needed to find was some sort of shipping manifest, if he could link any of these with Rayarti he might figure out what he's shipping out and potentially what could be brought in for him or the militia. Failing that he had taken a few trackers that Lavender had made and if he found any suspicious boxes loaded with grenades or missiles he could slide one in and track it that way.

As he turned one corner he decided to expedite the process and use one of his powers, Ari focusing on one that he rarely used and felt the tingle of energy go through his body before settling on his hands. It was a form of psychometry that he had learned during a stint in a heroes guild that had actually saved his skin from a potentially disastrous shipwreck, which he paid back by taking care of a villain that was killing off their members. As he touched one of the crates he focused on the inside and found an image coming to his mind of a factory, someone shaping the metal within before putting it in this box. Car parts... while useful it was unlikely something that either Rayarti or the militia would find a real use for as he moved on.

After the first few boxes he found it getting exponentially harder to see what was the spiritual element tagged to them, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he found some sort of perfume or essential oils being packed by desperate middle-aged women to sell in bulk. So far he hadn't found anything that was linked to anything and he was almost halfway done with the stock that was just on the ground level. This was not moving things along the way he had hoped and as he passed by the outer wall to get to the next loading bay he paused as he saw shadows move across the portal. They were moving fast and it wasn't just some security guard that was out on patrol, even with just seeing the shillouettes he could sense that it was an entire security team that had just passed by on the other side of the wall.

Shit... Ari mentally kicked himself as he realized he had never checked for any alarms on the door before he went inside. A careless mistake, one that could cost him dearly as he got on his commlink and told Ka to leave as soon as he could. When he got nothing but static on the other line the hybrid knew it was one of two things; either they had found Ka first and already killed or captured them, or they had deployed some sort of jamming device to cut him off. He silently hoped for jamming device as he crawled up a stack of crates with his rifle slung behind his back, that meant that they didn't know how many were in here and that they had potentially missed the van that Ka was in as he climbed to the rafters of the warehouse and sprinted towards the window that faced his direction.

As soon as he got to the large glass window he could see that the van was still there but that there was no movement inside nor doors open. That could mean anything, but as he continued to watch he saw two figures come from the trees that he had just used to hide himself minutes ago heading towards it. If Ka was still trying to get him on the radio that meant that he was a sitting duck, but one thing that would certainly get his attention was a high-powered rifle firing in his general direction. It would be a two for one deal and after breaking the glass pane with his shoulder he stuck the barrel of the rifle out and aimed down the scope at the two.

It was an easy shot; even with the trees and fence providing cover the two were moving slowly to prevent the occupants of the van from seeing them, he should have them down in two shots which will also alert Ka to drive off and get the other two to help. As he continued to look down the scope though he had to stop and back away as his eye twitched, feeling his fingers shake while they held onto the gun as he wiped his eye to get it to stay steady. Even when he managed to breathe out he could feel the tremble in his lungs that came out while he put his scaly finger on the trigger. Just use your power, Ari thought to himself as he tracked the two movement, activate your glove to steady your nerves and take the shots, you will still have one left to escape. Ari lined up the shot as best he could manually and then with time running out he focused on his glove and activated it to give him the sniper's grace before pulling the trigger...

...except no power manifested.

The first shot managed to hit one of them in the leg but wasn't a kill shot by any stretch, and as Ari compensated to get the second one he swung wide and hit the tree instead. He managed to unload three more rounds but only succeeded in hitting the first man in the shoulder before he heard the sound of bullets ricocheting against metal right next to him that caused him to jump. The team had also heard his gunfire and were quickly converging on his position, and while he was still kicking himself for his reckless shooting his brain kicked into survival mode and he began to fire back while bouncing from beam to beam to escape. As he glanced over his side he saw a skylight that was partially open, if he could just make it there and to the roof he could activate his last power and use it to fly away... maybe.

With doubt creeping into his mind his limbs suddenly felt like they were filled with lead and even the adrenaline of the gunfight was doing nothing to rouse him while he sprayed bullets at the position of the team. When he emptied the first clip he quickly ejected it and popped the second one in while continuing to move, only for his foot to land on nothing but air. He looked down just in time to see that his foot had missed the beam by several inches and as his body sank down further he had two choices, either drop the gun and grab the beam or keep the gun and plummet several stories. He opted for the former and though his chest smashed into the beam he was able to wrap his arms around it, his legs kicking in the air several times before he hoisted himself up as his rifle hit the floor a few moments later.

"This is not going very well," Ari grumbled as he pulled out his sidearm and pulled the slide back. "Now I'm going to make it everyone's problem."

With the fate of Ka still unknown and his anger rising exponentially Ari decided to try and get some answers the old fashioned way, by maiming and killing anyone that he came in contact with as he ran towards one of the larger stacks of crates instead of the skylights. The team had pushed forward to investigate his gun clattering to the ground and with several of the crates tarpied he used it as a slide to drop expeditiously on one of the men in the back. This time his aim was true and after landing on the guy and crumpling him to the ground he immediately fired on the two that were right in front of them and dropped them both. The rest of the team quickly got over their surprise however and Ari only had a second to spin around and duck behind one of the metal containers as they opened fire and riddled the area with bullets.

As Ari took a second to breath his mind raced with what to do, his eyes squeezing shut as he forced himself to focus while forming a fist with his gloved hand. "Alright, if ever there was a time for you to pull through, it's fucking now," Ari whispered to the glove as he focused on the only power that his mind could think of that might help in this situation. "Don't pull that shit on me like you did with Ka, if he's dead I'm personally blaming you."

This time there was no response as Ari expected, instead he braced himself for what he expected to be a metaphysical mule kick to the chest as he put everything into this last power slot. His breathing quickened and as he activated it his eyes immediately shot open wide, tiny vessels pulsing in his sclera as blood immediately began to drip from his nostrils. Though the initial shot of pain was intense he could feel his strength rising and his skin thickening, letting out a roar as power surged through his body. This was what he needed and as his claws grew longer he dug them into the crate he had been using for cover and spun around once before throwing it right at the team shooting at it.

The roar had caused them to hesitate for a few moments, but nothing prepared them for the steel shipping crate flying towards them. While several managed to duck out of the way there were several who didn't, their bodies flying to the side from the force of the impact before hitting the ground. With all of them distracted it gave Ari enough time to close the gap between them, his mouth dripping with saliva tinted red as he caught the guy turning around to face him by the throat and landing several quick stabs into his midsection before tossing them aside. With his heart pounding hard in his chest Ari was still able to clock four more men that had gotten surprised by the presence of this bloodthirsty creature that stood before them, but that was exactly what he wanted as he lurched forward and grabbed the rifle out of the first man's hands before cracking him in the skull with it.

As the remaining three started to run Ari knew he had to catch at least one of them alive, though that's not exactly what he wanted in the moment as he ran forward. Two of them began to shoot backwards while they ran and though they managed to catch the hybrid in the shoulder and side it wasn't enough to slow him down, his claws slicing into them and dropping them into a bloody heap before going for the last one. They had made it to the door just as he came up on her and as she spun around she put her hands up in the air and shouted for him to stop. Though the bloodlust was pumping in his veins the mission and Ka was enough to snap him out of enough to not bring his claws down on her, instead just giving a snarl to show he was not letting her live at the moment out of kindness.

"Who called you," Ari growled, watching her intently to make sure she didn't pull anything as she continued to cower at the door.

"We're an independent security service!" the woman managed to reply while still shaking. "You killed all my friends..."

"They were in the wrong line of work," Ari snapped back as he took a step closer. "Now mercenaries I can believe taking the money and asking questions later, but you would have a record of hire. Who is paying for your services?! And if I don't like your answer..."

"Wait, I swear I can tell you who it is!" the woman replied. "We can go to our truck, I have a computer, just access the records

there! Just let me live!"

This was too easy... Ari could feel his mercenary senses tingling as he slowly straightened up, looking around before his gaze went back to the woman. "Why are you telling me all this?" Ari asked. "Aren't you going to tell me that your employer will kill you or you don't know anything or something like that?"

"I... I can tell you that too, but I need you to answer a question first," Ari found himself taking a step back as her entire demeanor changed, the scared girl act she was putting on dropping to reveal a smug, confident smirk while she put her hands down. "Are you enjoying your time back in the city, Ari?"

In the next second the woman vanished as Ari felt something dig into his thigh, wincing in pain as he quickly reached down and pulled out the dart that had embedded itself there. "Ah fuck..." Ari managed to say before his legs gave out from underneath him like they were made of toothpicks, crumpling to the ground on his side as the rest of his body quickly followed suit in becoming completely numb. As he had twisted himself around before he fell he saw that the two guards he had taken down were no longer there either, but there was someone walking towards him as he lost the connection to his glove.

"Ah, my dear, sweet Ari," a familiar voice said as Ari managed to tilt his head up enough to see the muzzle of the white-furred vulpine staring down at him. "It's so nice to finally see you again, I see you're still kind of an idiot."

"And I see you're still really a bitch Mesmer," Ari shot back, though it was growing increasingly hard to speak as even with his physique the poison was working quickly through his body. No, not poison, Ari corrected himself, the neurotoxin that the Company found in that gun. Shit, he thought to himself, that means that she's working with the militia, and she was here it was unlikely that she was alone. "Where's hoofhead, you two finally break up, or still being evil scumbags together?"

Ari suddenly felt something slam against his exposed back and even in his paralyzed state his body curled up slightly as a minotaur-like creature stepped over him into his field of view. "I see he's still a smartass as well," Shockwave stated as he bent down right in front of Ari's face. "In case you couldn't guess from that kick that poison freezes your muscles but not your nerves, so anything we do to your body you will feel in its entirety."

"Super." Ari scoffed as best he could.

"Now, while we would love to show you just how well that works you have an important meeting to get to," Mesmer said as she stood back up, brushing off the silk dress she wore. "Don't worry, your friend in the van is coming along too, we haven't killed him... yet. Of course this meeting is off the books, so you're going to have to be incapacitated."

"Tell Rayarti that he should just call me," Ari managed to say, though his jaws were quickly freezing and making it hard to speak. "Less paperwork."

Both Mesmer and Shockwave laughed at that, which would have caused Ari to look at them in confusion if his face wasn't practically frozen. "You all still think that Rayarti is in charge?" Mesmer asked, once again shocking Ari even though he couldn't express it. "You really are that dumb. Shockwave, enlighten him."

As Ari managed to glance back up at the bull he could see the massive man raising up his hoof with a smirk on his face. "Any last quips?" Shockwave asked.

"Yeah... I can see your dick," Ari managed to say as the slightest hint of smirk formed on his face. "Both of mine are bigger than-"

Chapter 21:

When Ari emerged from the darkness he found himself strapped down to a table that was leaning up at a forty-five degree angle, his head throbbing what he didn't doubt was a hoof-shaped indent on his forehead as a single lightbulb shined directly into his face. For once he would have enjoyed being in the dream world or whatever it was for a while, but it appeared he was skipping straight to the main feature as he could hear movement over the ringing in his ears. Though it was hard to see between his blurred vision and the light in his eyes he did see someone in a white lab coat milling about around him. As he shifted in the restraints it caught the man's attention, seeing him practically spin around to look at him.

"Ah, someone is finally awake from their little nap," the man said, his accent rather thick that reminded Ari of some less than savory places he had visited in the realm of Eastern Europe. As he began to get more aware of his surroundings he found that

he was not only hooked up to an IV drip but a heart monitor as well, which while in most situations that might be a good thing he knew well enough that he was in a lot of trouble. "Now Ari, may I call you Ari? I am Dr. Hertz, and before you ask yes, that is my real name."

"I was about to say that it was a little on the nose otherwise," Ari groaned as the pounding in his head increased from the swinging light. "Speaking of which, do you think you could get me some advil or something? A minotaur decided to do a dance number on my forehead and it's hard for me to concentrate if the pounding in my brain is doing an encore."

"Ohhh, I assure you that soon your headache will be the least of your concerns," Dr. Hertz said with a laugh. "But before we get to the main event there is someone that would like to ask you a few questions, and it's better for all parties if you're lucid enough to do so. Depending on your answers we'll see just how much fun we're going to have."

It took all of Ari's willpower not to roll his eyes and potentially provoke his torturer into starting early, but even though he was in a tight spot he realized that he might be in a position that could be a bit beneficial. If the leader of the militia is about to talk to him and he managed to escape then they could just find them and kill them... or put them in prison, whichever happened to come about first. It wouldn't be the first time he had performed a reverse interrogation before but he knew that with Ka in play he had to be very careful of how he went about it. Considering the big bad was going to talk to him personally it was more likely than not that they were just going to kill them after they got the information they needed, which meant that he would need to stall for time until Campbell or Lavender figured out where they were and came to the rescue or he got out himself.

With Dr. Hertz backing off it left Ari with just the light in his eyes and the pounding headache Shockwave gave him, something which he would be more than happy to return in kind, it took all of the hybrid's willpower just to stay focused as he continued to take an assessment of the situation. The leather straps that he was bound with were laced with some sort of metal but if he could muster enough strength he might be able to break them or the anchors that they were tied to as he wiggled around a little bit to test their tightness. As he tried to look around the room though the light from the bulb made it hard to see past a couple feet, so he wasn't sure if there were security cameras or guards in place aside from Dr. Hertz in case he tried. This would not be an instantaneous escape and if they thought he was more trouble then he was worth they might just kill him and Ka and be done with it.

Though he was unaware of exactly how much time had passed Ari heard a door further down into the darkness opening and closing along with the cherry from the end of a lit cigarette. "Hey, I know you're supposed to be doing the whole bad cop, worse cop in this room, but I could really use a smoke." Ari said, turning on the charm as best he could while the figure in the darkness remained still. "C'mon, if this is my last hurrah then you should at least give me one last pleasure before you start torturing me."

There was another moment of silence and for a second Ari thought his plea would go on deaf ears until the shadow approached and entered into the light. "I suppose it's the least I could do for you," the feminine voice replied, Ari's jaw dropping to the point it had let the cigarette put into it fall into his lap before it was replaced. "Although you didn't extend the same curiosity to me."

"Janette?!" Ari shouted, this time keeping his tongue against the butt of the cigarette to have it remain in his mouth while the woman lit the end. "Are you fucking kidding me?!"

"I'm afraid not," Janette replied as she flicked the lighter close with one smooth motion before taking a step back from the light. "When you kidnapped me at the store I must admit that you threw one by me, I have since punished my security team for letting such a lapse in my protection happen. While they could have just as easily extracted me from that silo you had me in I decided to wait and see if I could get any information from my captors, but in that regard you were too careful and I had to stage my means of escape."

Ari found himself shaking his head in disbelief before looking at the woman once more, still confused at seeing the face that last time had a look of pure fear and horror on it. "There's no way that you're the leader of this whole outfit, I refuse to believe it," Ari replied, only to have her laugh and rub her temple before just looking at him which prompted him to lash out as much as he could. "I had you in my claws, I could have ended this! I should have killed you when I had the chance!"

"If it makes you feel any better the act has gotten past most people," Janette replied as she took a puff of her cigarette. "Even Rayarti was quick to come to my aid when my people told him that I had been kidnapped, which was where you came in. To find out that you were both my captor and savior was quite the shock, so I suppose as far as that goes we can consider ourselves even in that regard."

Even with his rage at being fooled by the one before him it was quickly tempered with his exhaustion, the fires dying down until he was merely fuming as he could feel the hot breath streaming out of his nostrils. The leader of the anti-hero militia and they had scooped them up in one of their first missions only to let her go because they had been pointed in Rayarti's direction. Perhaps that had been the intention all along, to make such a public figure the target so that they could keep investigations on them and not on anything they were doing. It technically worked since the hero guild had completely dismissed the shipping warehouses because there was nothing tied to Rayarti there, especially after they had kidnapped the person standing before him and let her go.

Ari's ears twitch as he heard her laughing and parted his lips in order to bare his teeth, though it was clear she knew who had the upper hand as he tried to lunge at her only to get a few inches away from the table before falling back against it. "I think you'll find that Dr. Hertz is quite good at what he does," Janette said as she leaned in and blew a cloud of smoke into Ari's face. "Now whether or not he gets to exercise that expertise depends on you."

"I don't think you're going to find me very useful," Ari shot back.

"We'll see about that," Janette replied with a smug grin. "Now, considering your reputation in this city and the pretense that you left I'm guessing that someone brought you in specifically to try and figure out what's going on with my loyal soldiers. Did the hero guild hire you directly, or is someone else behind the attack on my people?"

They think that he's still a mercenary, Ari realized as he took a deep draw from his cigarette while deep in thought, and if that's the case then she doesn't know who hired him out. The ploy that there was another group working against them had worked to some extent it seemed and if he could find a way to work it to his favor he might just survive the night after all. "Listen lady," Ari spat. "You know how our kind operate, we don't kiss and tellaaaaahhhh!!!"

Ari was interrupted as Janette had taken a drag of her own cigarette before pushing the lit end right into his nostrils, causing him to cry out in pain before blowing out his nose and shaking his head to get it out. "I find that answer to be unacceptable," Janette stated simply as Ari breathed through his mouth while his eyes watered at his burned nasal passage. "So one of two things is going to happen; either that's the truth and you're going to die by it, or you will realize the error of your ways and tell the answer to either myself or Dr. Hertz. Save yourself the pain Ari, just tell us what we want to know and you can have some semblance of a quick death."

"You crazy bitch!" Ari shouted, his emotions raw from all the new information and the lack of sleep as he tried to lash out with his tail at her. "When I get out of these I'm going to make sure to kill you last, and no amount of information will save you from what I can do."

"Hm, Rayarti is right, you are the definant one," Janette complimented. "It's a shame that you're working for the heroes, I think that we would have made quite the team."

"Nothing says we can't do so now,' Ari quickly retorted. "I'm willing to forgive for the whole nose thing if you are willing to do the same for the kidnapping."

Janette once more chuckled at that before shaking her head. "You've already cast your lot in with those fools," Janette replied, her voice taking on a darker tone than before as she reached forward and grabbed Ari by the ears to jerk his head up. "Maybe with your history I could have bought it, but regardless of who paid you in the end you still worked against me, which means you were working for them."

Ari attempted to take advantage of how close she was and snapped at her, but she appeared to be prepared for such a response and stepped back before his teeth could sink in. "What the fuck is your problem lady?!" Ari once more shouted as the pain in his forehead was now accompanied by a different throbbing at the back of his skull. "Why do you hate heroes so much that you're willing to put the lives of people in this city in danger to ruin them? What did they do to you, kill your husband? Kick your dog? Ruin your sweet sixteen?"

This time there was no laugh, just a cold, hard look that came from the woman as she turned to Dr. Hertz. "I think our friend here needs some reminding of who answers the questions here and who asks them," Janette said as she took out another cigarette and lit it. "I'm going to see if the other one is awake yet, this one may not answer our questions but I doubt the human will have the fortitude or stomach to hold out like he can."

Shit, Ka is here, Ari thought to himself as he watched Janette leave. Though he was sure that the CIA probably taught the other man how to resist torture it was unlikely that they would go soft on him just because he was human, which meant the pain that would be inflicted upon him would likely happen to his partner as well. But before he could think of how to potentially save at least him from this situation he felt metal press against his sides followed by the shock of thousands of volts coursing through his system. He felt every muscle in his body tense and his jaws clench together as the glowing blue light from the battery connected to the cables jabbed into him lit up the human's gleeful expression.

For an unknown amount of time Ari's body convulsed and shook as the electricity ran through him, only to finally stop and allow him to breathe. He could feel blood already running past his lips as his already weakened condition was being exasperated by the torture. For the first few times the guy didn't even ask any questions other than if he was having fun yet, which Ari quickly responded by spitting whatever happened to be in his mouth at the man. That only seemed to make him more eager and after what felt like the tenth time the hybrid could practically feel his heart about to burst in his chest while Dr. Hertz put the electrodes down and went to grab a bottle of water for himself.

As Ari laid there panting heavily any thought of him trying to force his way out through the bindings was long gone; even if he had somehow managed to get the energy to try and pop the bindings the electrocutions had caused his muscles to twitch and spasm to the point where they were becoming useless. There was no power left in his body... and as his eyes squeezed shut he could almost hear those words echoing in his own mind as he remembered what his other self had been saying. Even though he no longer had a death wish his mind had committed the other cardinal sin when it came to this profession, he thought himself invincible.

That theory was being rapidly put to the test and even though the zapping him phase of his torture had passed it was time for the bad doctor to really show off what he was capable of. After electricity came water, the table being kicked back to where he was flat on his back before a towel was put over his muzzle. This was something that he had trained for briefly in the CIA when Sam first onboarded him but as the choking sensation intensified with each round he found it harder and harder to catch his breath. After that came the questions from the man asking who he was working with, why he was trying to take down the anti-hero militia, and what his relationship to the hero's guild was. Each time he managed to tell the man to go fuck himself and was rewarded for his efforts with another gallon of water dumped over his head.

"Oh my, your tenacity is certainly living up to the reputation," Dr. Hertz said as Ari found himself getting reclined back mostly upright, spitting out water as he shook the excess off of his head. "Anything that you want to say for yourself?"

"Yeah," Ari managed to choke out after coughing up the last of the water in his lungs, his head wearily swaying back and forth while still managing to look at the man. "Thanks for the shower."

Though Dr. Hertz still sneered at that Ari could see his eye twitching slightly, which meant that he was getting to him. Just make a mistake, Ari thought to himself as he watched him get something off the nearby tray, make one wrong move that he could capitalize on. As he heard the door open once more he expected to see Janette once more, only to find that it was a face he would be fine with never seeing again. "Look at you," Shockwave said as he sauntered up to him. "The big bad Ari, scourge of the world, mercenary extordinaire."

"Don't forget... runner-up salsa dance competition finalist," Ari replied, causing the bull to chuckle once more before landing a punch right into the chest of the restrained hybrid. Despite his best efforts to brace for it Ari found himself sucking air before coughing violently from the force of the super creature's punch. "That's definitely... a rib broken..."

"Ah, I must be getting soft in retirement," Shockwave replied. "Usually I could get three on the first try and still not kill someone, maybe we'll have better luck on the other side." Before Ari could say anything Shockwave landed another punch and this time the cracking noise was audible as the concussive force alone of the bull was almost enough to cause Ari to black out. "What now Ari, any funny quips that you'd like to make before we continue?"

Even amidst the burning pain in his lungs he had thought of one, but the pain in his chest made hard to breathe much less form words as the bull gave him two more shots to the solar plexus. The hybrid could vaguely hear the doctor say something about going easy so that he could answer questions but it was clear Shockwave had some pent-up aggression he wanted to get out on him in the form of using him as a living punching bag. When it was clear that his chest and stomach could take no more punishment he moved onto the limbs instead, crushing several bones from the volley of punches and causing the hybrid to scream out in pain. Several areas of his scales and fur were stained red with crimson where the flesh had been torn and by the time the bull was finished Ari felt a disturbing numbness that was going through his system that was accompanied by shooting pain whenever he tried to shift his arms or legs.

"Ah, look at him!" Dr. Hertz said as he looked into Ari's eyes, slapping him in the face several times to make sure he was still responsible. "I'm the one working here, not you! At this rate he's going to have to answer our questions through an ouija board!"

"Guess I got a little carried away," Shockwave replied with a smirk, holding up Ari's face so that his listless eyes could actually focus on him. "Just know that if I had my way I would have put you in the ground myself here and now, but if I'm lucky maybe I can get whatever Dr. Hertz leaves behind. What do you think about that Ari?"

It took more than a minute for Ari to finally get enough breath in his lungs to say what he wanted, blood pouring out of his mouth as soon as he opened it that dripped down Shockwave's arms. "Beef... tenderizer..." Ari managed to spit out. "Joke..."

Shockwave just chuckled and shook his head, then caught Ari's head in a left hook that caused his entire body to practically rotate around in the restraints. At first he thought it was enough to finally go unconscious and escape from the pain, but as he heard his jaw crack and his jaw practically press against his chest he knew that the bull had aimed low on purpose. It didn't stop his ears from ringing or his head to slam back against the table he laid on, but as his vision turned red in one eye he could see that there would be no second blow. Shockwave was ushered out of the room by the doctor and after flipping him off one last time he left the room, slamming the door shut behind him and leaving Ari in the room with Dr. Hertz once more.

For once the doctor had taken on a bit of a healing role, but it was just to make sure that Shockwave hadn't cut any arteries or

did any damage that would have been immediately life-threatening. Ari was grateful for the break as he tried to normalize his breathing, though the best he could do was keep wheezing in short breath to keep the pain to a minimum. As soon as he got out of this torture device he would make sure to kill him first, then rescue Ka, and then kill Janette... though not necessarily in that order. Though he wasn't sure how much time had passed since he had first been captured he could only hope that it was getting close to morning and that the others would notice their disappearance, they just had to hold out until then as he felt something prick his skin just above the elbow.

When Ari looked down he saw that his torturer was giving him some sort of injection, causing him to look down in question as the man smiled up at him. "I noticed that you were getting a little drowsy," Dr. Hertz stated as he finished with the injection. "So I gave you something to help with that."

"I notice that you didn't swab the area first, " Ari said as best he could with his jaw still hanging loosely, though as the warmth immediately began to spread in his veins he felt his head perking up a bit. "You're a bad doctor, you know that? What the hell did you give me anyway?"

"Oh, just something to give you a little pick me up so we can continue," Dr. Hertz explained. "Some apentimines, adrenaline, and a special little mixture of my own that will make your nerves feel like they're on fire. That should soften you up for another round of questioning, otherwise I'm going to have to go back to our little friend Mr. Zappy again."

I'll give you a Mr. Zappy, Ari grumbled mentally, though as he felt his heart starting to beat harder in his chest his mind finally registered that there might be a problem. With being in a sleep-deprived state he had been chugging energy drinks and coffee as well as nicotine for the last few days, and while he wasn't sure exactly what time it was since he had come to this place he knew that it wasn't long enough for all that to clear his system. Whether or not the doctor believed him he had to tell him that he probably just gave him a lethal dose of speed, but before he could form the words out his entire body spasm and every muscle he had suddenly clenched. Between the pain of the torture he had already gotten and this new chemical that was introduced into his system every inch of his flesh felt like it was on fire, but more importantly he could feel his heart pounding so hard it was hard to even keep track of how fast it was going.

Ari let out a cry of anguish and flopped against his restraints futilely and he suddenly became acutely aware of every broken bone, every blood vessel, every reminder of the catastrophic failure he had just undergone in a mission. This was his consequences finally catching up to him, unlike in those nightmares of his past he wouldn't just get to walk away from it, or foist his fate upon another while he walked off into the sunset. He was experiencing years upon years of built-up karma crashing down on him and it was all because he returned to this damned city, though the only thing he could even formulate a thought on was the intense pain racking his body and the fact his heart was about to explode. Even with the dislocated jaw he let out a shout that reverberated through the entire room and probably to the ones beyond before suddenly convulsing and shaking so hard that it caused the table to shudder.

Dr. Hertz seemed to have realized his error as Ari could see the look of shock at the abnormal reaction to his injection, but the hybrid already knew that it was too late as time seemed to slow down around him. Even with things moving at a tenth of what they should be, the lightbulb's pendulous swing arcing slowly while the doctor slowly turned around, he could still feel his heart beating like it was normal. It was pain incarnate, especially as his body moved involuntarily due to the sudden spike in blood pressure. Ari felt himself blink his eyes one last time and as his vision slowly cascaded down to the floor he could no longer count the beats of his heart...

...because there weren't any.

By the time Dr. Hertz had gotten the crash cart the drone of the machine he was hooked up to showed nothing but a straight line, the monotone beep punctuating the atmosphere like an air raid siren as the hybrid's head hung down limply from his restraints. With blood flowing from his mouth his head only fell to the side as the human kicked the gears underneath the table and caused it to go flat, the limp form of the creature bouncing slightly as he put the paddles against the blood-stained scales of the kangaroo-cobra's chest. Though there was no one in the room he called out the word clear and then activated the defibrillator, causing his chest to rise slightly in the air before falling back down. When the diagnostic machine didn't respond he upped the amps and tried again, only to once more get no result.

After the fourth try with no response Dr. Hertz put the paddles aside and fell back against the equipment that he had previously been using to drain the life from the hybrid, his methods proving too effective as he sat there with his head in his hand while watching the crimson liquid splash down from the table onto the floor. "Shit..." Dr. Hertz said as he put his hand to his head. "He's going to kill me for this..."

When Ari opened his eyes again he let out another scream and fell on the floor, though as the agony cascaded through his form he found that his settings had changed considerably. Gone was the restraints that had held him to the table and the single light that had been practically blinding him, though as he struggled to get on all fours from his current position all the injuries seemed to have followed him to this place. "What... what the fuck..." Ari muttered as he held onto his burning chest. "I

thought... you couldn't feel pain... in a dream..."

"That's because it ain't a dream," a familiar voice said, Ari slowly looking up to see the face of the life-sized anubian stuffed animal staring down at him. "You're dead."

It took Ari a moment to process what had just been said to him by the manifestation of his glove's voice, though the longer he remained like that the more the pain was fading into numbness. "Well... that fucking sucks, I guess," Ari said in a defeated tone as he managed to get himself into a sitting position. "Makes that form of yours more apt. I'm really dead?"

"Well, dyin actually," the jackal said with a shrug. "Heart called it quits, rest of da organs right behind, brain'll be left to shut the lights off as the last which is why yer here now. Now the good news is time dilates while in yer head space, so ya prolly got, what, ten minutes ere before shufflin off this mortal coil?"

"Are you fucking serious?!" Ari shouted in a sudden flare-up of anger, lunging for the jackal before flopping on the floor with his still-broken body. "What the hell am I supposed to do in ten mintues?! Why bring me here if there's nothing I can do?!?"

"Didn't bring ya here actually," the jackal clarified as he took another step back from the flailing claws of the hybrid. "Plus I'm dyin wit ya, so that's no party for me either. Suppose it was fun while it lasted."

With his body going increasingly cold and hard to control he found himself falling forward, landing on his chest as the jackal sighed and shook his head. This couldn't be how it ended, Ari raged and seethed inside his own mind, his last act on this world was to get one of his teammates killed and fail a mission just as he finally got a significant piece of it? How did he manage to survive all that time throwing his life to the whims of fate only to have it taken away when it finally mattered to him whether he lived or died? It wasn't fair... this wasn't fair!

As Ari was about to slide forward he felt a pair of hands grab onto his shoulders, but as he was picked up by them he quickly gathered that it wasn't his glove doing it as he found his own visage snarling right in his face. "You call what you've done with your pathetic life fair?" The other Ari growled as he put him on his feet and wrenched his head to the left, Ari's still sore jaw dropping as he saw all the nightmares that he had been experiencing laid out right in front of him and all playing at once. "How is anything you've done in your life up to this point fair to you or especially those around you?!"

"Fuck you!... me!" Ari shot back, trying to pull his head away from the grip of the other version of himself only to find himself unable to even get out of his grasp. "All those times weren't my fault, those others joined on that mission with me! They knew what they were getting into, I couldn't save any of them! Sometimes I couldn't even save myself!"

At that Ari was dropped back to his floor, his legs giving out immediately from under him and causing him to collapse to the floor. "Exactly, you were so caught up with wanting to die that you didn't care about anything else," the other version of him explained. "You didn't care about your weakness because you wanted it exploited, you couldn't care less about the consequences of not being strong enough because it didn't matter to you. Now you finally have a way to atone for that pathetic version of yourself and you keep pushing it away, and as predicted you finally come to terms with it exactly when its too late."

"Too late..." Ari repeated, digging his hands into the darkness that merely curled and tendrils around his fingers while his body shook. "It's too late... my weakness did let everyone down, not just here but my entire time as a mercenary. I really am... pathetic..."

With the numbness seeping deep into his body and the darkness pressing in close around him Ari closed his eyes and waited for the final consequence, only to open them again as he felt a hand more tenderly grab him by his chin and lift his head up. This time instead of seeing the alternate version of himself there was nothing... yet he knew he could feel a presence more powerful and ancient than anything he had ever experienced, even more so than Anubis himself. "It's not too late, but this is your final chance," the voice boomed, a mixture of his own and something alien as it rattled him to the very core. "Embrace my power, give in to the predatory nature you have denied yourself for so long, become the monster that will save you and everyone you love for as long as you draw breath."

Even with just the mere touch of this entity on his face he could feel it; everything that had been promised to him, the power that he had so desperately yearned for, the strength that had merely gotten a taste of these last few weeks... it was all there, all waiting for him to embrace it. "What... is the catch?" Ari asked, though he knew with every word he spoke he was slipping deeper into the abyss of death. "What would you have me do in exchange?"

"Embrace me, my avatar of the apex predator," the entity replied simply. "Indulge in my ravenousness, be enraptured by my primal savagery, delight in viciousness... my power is yours, in exchange be its caretaker, inspire awe and terror alike, and most importantly... never fear the monster you've become, embrace it as I have created you like I did the glove you wear so proudly."

With the seconds drifting away like sands in an hourglass there was no more time left, this was the last time Ari would exist as

he was. Would he be reborn in his own blood and failure to become the avatar of destruction that this entity wanted, or would he endure the final consequence of his actions to its entirety? Such a heavy decision with such little time... but as the last of his memories were winking out of his mind his thoughts became that of Campbell, Ka, and even Lavender, and in that moment he knew exactly what his choice would be. Perhaps he knew all this time and just needed the clock to run out to make it, but as his body disappeared into the deep shadows of death his last thought was telling the entity that had shepherded him all this way a single word...

...yes.

Chapter 21:

As mere seconds passed in the real world Dr. Hertz was frantically packing his things, taking everything that he could fit in his bag even if it was covered in blood. "There is no way they're going to pin this shit on me," Dr. Hertz mumbled as he used his hand to sweep whatever medications were left into the already bulging leather before finally closing it. "That damn bull, if he hadn't come in here and worked him over my plan would have lasted for hours without even causing a blip in his heart rate."

With everything packed away he got ready to leave, only to stop when he heard a noise come from the diagnostic monitor that caused him to turn back around. After how quickly everything had happened he hadn't bothered to unhook Ari from the diagnostic machine and as he looked at the line he swore he heard the EKG ping, but considering the hybrid had been dead for minutes by this point there was no way he would have naturally resuscitated himself. From what he had been told about this super he did have a bit of regeneration but not enough to repair a blown heart, yet as he stared at the screen he saw another spike appear in the readout that caused him to drop his toolbag. The shock of seeing someone come back after being dead for so long and not getting worked on had caused him to miss the fact that Ari's fingers were starting to twitch and that his entire frame was starting to stretch and grow as though being molded like playdoh.

As Dr. Hertz stepped forward in awe he did see the body tremble and shiver from more than just post-mortem movement and for a flicker of a moment he thought that perhaps this entire operation could be salvaged after all. "It's a miracle," Dr. Hertz gasped as he went to the readout and pushed several buttons, watching as not only did his heart rate come back but also his brain wave and oxygen levels. "Brain activity is... astonishing, no atrophy at all from being dead so long, and blood oxygenation is actually higher than what it should be. If these levels are correct then he should be awake any minute-"

A loud snapping sound caused the doctor to suddenly stiffen, realizing in his haste to see if his mistake had been corrected that he had put his back to the quickly recovering patient. As the sound of leather being broken echoed in his ears he also heard a deep, rumbling growl come from behind him along with the creaking of the table holding the hybrid. Instead of turning around he opted to run, but before he could take a step he felt something grab onto his coat and spin him around so fast that it caused his vision to spin. As he was pulled back he lost his balance and fell in the direction of the creature, eventually landing on the still-wet chest of the hybrid as his terrified eyes stared straight into the fang-filled maw of the monstrous creature staring right back at him with bright red eyes.

"What's up Doc."