

The phone he bought was ten dollars. The most basic model, Holo, but hardly any customization settings. He didn't get the earclip. A quick call to Richard and both his phone were on the same number and shared the basic functions. He silenced his expensive phone and stashed it in his underwear drawer. Then he gave his number to his mom and prayed that she wouldn't notice it was his name or know how expensive it was to get.

He got use to having a phone over the week, putting all the numbers he knew in it, then finding out he could get a reader function for it and moved his books to it. He wouldn't have to be at his computer to read anymore.

The dreams with his fathers continued for a few more days, then they faded. He still woke up with morning wood, but it wasn't accompanied with erotic dreams anymore, but he did find his mind returning to them more often than not, when he took care of it in the shower.

After two weeks his friends had his number and Patrick found he had to silence his phone otherwise he kept being bothered by their call, and all they wanted to do was chat.

The one person he chatted with every days was Arthur. They spent at least ten minutes talking over lunch. No subjects were off limits except for sex. Patrick found out Arthur was addicted to candy corn, loved Japanese music, despised red bell peppers, was keeping busy over the summer by taking classes and was going to find a cure for dwarfisms.

For his part, Patrick told him about making up stories about the father he dreamed he had when a kid, That he liked his music on the quiet side, twentieth century jazz, and some classical composers. He liked all kind of food, not being in a position to afford not eating something. And that one day he'd probably own a bar.

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This Sunday had kept Patrick busy. There had been a group of trouble makers withing fifteen minutes of starting. They'd tried to intimidate him, but after the Sarantos, no one could scare him anymore. He dragged them outside two at a time.

Then he had to deal with a guy who tried to force one of the new waitress to sit on his lap for some 'quality' time. Another one escorted outside.

Then it was a woman who, after one too many, wouldn't leave Patrick alone. She pressed herself on him while he carded the newcomers and glowered at any other women who even smiled at him. He was set to endure her, since she just couldn't take the hint he didn't want her there, then she

tried to put a hand in his pants.

He almost decked her. That she was a woman made him hesitate, and that Jen pulled her away probably saved him a very embarrassing moment. After that things quieted down and his nerves settled too.

Influx had picked up again. The group filled the stairwell and from what he could see a good number were also outside. He quickly checked IDs and they were all legal. Then, as he handed one back the name on it registered. He looked up at the tiger.

"Alex?"

"Hi, Pat." He put his ID away and moved aside so the others could pass.

Patrick couldn't talk with him as he finished checking the group. Finally once they were all in and crowding the bar he turned to his brother.

"What are you doing here?" Patrick looked his brother over, and he actually looked like he belonged here. His jeans were worn, his running shoes scuffed in many places. The only thing that was a little out of place was the jacket he wore over his white shirt. It looked expensive.

"I wanted to see where you worked."

"How did you even know about it?"

"I asked Arthur."

Patrick shouldn't have been surprised Arthur had shared their conversations, it wasn't like he hadn't wanted him to, he simply hadn't expected it.

"Can you join me for a drink?" Alex asked.

Patrick checked his watch. At this hour he had half an hour before the next bus, arrivals should be calm until then. They went to the bar once the group had moved to tables.

"Don, this is Alex, one of my brothers."

The panda eyed the tiger. "Brother? You never mentioned you had a brother."

"It's something recent."

Don quirked a smile, but he didn't say anything. He offered his hand. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you Alex. I'm Don, I run this joint."

"Likewise." Alex shook it. "It's a nice place."

"Thank you. What can I get you?"

"How about an Hawaiian?"

"Ahh. I'm afraid I don't carry that beer. It's a little too expensive for my customers."

Alex's ears turned red. "I'll have what ever you recommend then." Don poured him a glass from the tap, set it before him and then filled a glass with orange soda for

Patrick.

"This one's on the house," Don said when Alex tried to pay. "Think of it as a welcome to the family drink."

"Thanks."

"I'm going to take a break," Patrick said taking his. "Things should be quiet until eleven-ten."

"Take as long as you need. I'll have one of the girls cover the door."

Patrick led Alex to the last available table.

"I guess you can't drink while working," Alex said, indicating the glass.

"I don't drink at all. I don't get how Don can after seeing the troubles the drunks can cause in here." He eyes Alex's glass. "You drink much?"

"No. I've only been legal for a few months, so I haven't had the occasions. If I go to a club I still go to Gentrify, it's an underage club so no alcohol. As a family we don't really drink much. Dads enjoy a glass of wine here and there, usually on special occasions. I've never seen uncle Damian drink. I've only seen Uncle Dominic drink once, at Grandpa's funeral."

"Do any of the others drink?"

"Aiden and Albert got plastered once." Alex hesitated, "After we visited you. They got really sick, and I haven't seen them drink anything since. I expect the rest tried it, but they didn't over do it to the point where we found out."

Patrick couldn't stop the smile. "That's right, you guys haven't been around alcohol as long as I have."

Alex frowned. "How long have you been around alcohol."

"Since I was fourteen."

"Does you mom drink?" Alex asked, horrified.

"No. That's when I started working here."

"How did you manage that?"

"I had my growth spurt early, and I was already wide shouldered. I'd gotten a fake ID that said I was eighteen. Don didn't buy it, so I told him I was really seventeen. he didn't buy that either, but he didn't say anything. He tried me out for the night, and I've been here ever since."

"Man, When I was fourteen I played video games, and worried about Aramis hooking up with Porthos."

"Who?"

"They're characters on a show I watched then. I was really into Aramis."

"Never had much time for entertainment shows."

"Arthur said you read novels."

"Lots of fantasies. I'm actually reading more now that I

have a phone." He took it out.

"What happened to the one Arthur gave you? Aaron's old one?"

"It's home. It's too valuable, if the wrong people see it they'd steal it. I got this and linked them."

"Arthur mentioned you weren't happy about the number."

"Do you know how much it cost?"

Alex shrugged. "Sure."

Patrick was annoyed at the lack of concern his brother showed. He wished he could get him, all of them to understand how different his world was from theirs. He smiled as he thought of something.

"Alex, how much money do you have?"

"On me? a couple hundred bucks in cash."

"Is that all you have access to?"

Alex looked at him suspiciously. "No, why?"

"If you need more, how would you do it?"

"I'd use my bank card. Pat, why do you need to know that?"

Patrick dug in his pocket and dumped it's content on the table. He had a five and three ones neatly folded with not even fifty cents in various coins.

"This is all the money I have."

Alex look at the bills and coins. "Okay."

"Alex, This is 'all' the money I have."

His brother looked at him, confused.

"I don't have a bank card. I don't have a bank account. Until Don pays me when he closes tonight, this is all the money I have to my name."

Alex looked at the bills, then at Patrick. his eyes grew wide. "How? What?" he grabbed the bills and counted them. "How much are you going to get tonight?"

"A hundred and fifty, plus what ever Jen and the other waitresses give me"

"For the night?"

"No, that's for working the weekend. And most of that is going to go to my mom for the bills. I'm going to keep fifty, and most of that is going to be spent on groceries."

Alex stared at him, his mouth didn't seem to work for a moment. "How can you do that? What if you want something?"

"There aren't any wants in my world, only needs, and those don't always get filled."

"Then why were you angry at Arthur? Because of him you have a phone."

"It isn't the phone that angered me. If that was it, with the plan, I would have been fine. It's the casual way he threw

away." Patrick lowered his voice. "Fifty grand on a phone number. You and him act like I would if I'd forgotten a penny on the table. That's what angered me. You have so much money you don't understand what its worth and how it makes me feel to have that dumped on me without second thoughts."

Alex drained his glass. "Shit, I didn't realize."

"I know. you and I, we live in different worlds. I want to be part of you family, but I'm not sure I'd ever want to be part of your world."

"But you have to work at a job like this. How can you want that when you could have it easier?"

"Because that way I know the worth of what I have."

"Do I want to know what you think of us?"

"You? I like you, I like the guys in our family I've met. well, except for Damian, he kind of gives me the creeps. But like I said, you live in a different world. I'm not going to judge you by the world I live in." Patrick noticed an ermine make a fuss with one of he waitresses. "Excuse me."

Patrick went and informed the guy that the staff was to be treated with respect. The ermine tried to get in his face about it, about the amount of money he could spend in this place. That if he didn't leave him alone, he was going to complain to his boss and get him fired.

Patrick hadn't planned on laughing in his face, but after the conversation he'd just had with Alex, he couldn't stop himself. Once he stopped he told the guy to feel free to complain, but that he was either going to treat the waitresses with respect or leave. Patrick didn't wait for a reply, just rejoined Alex, but he didn't say anything, keeping his eyes on the ermine.

After five minutes of the ermine behaving Patrick stopped focusing on him.

Alex was looking in his glass.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just realizing a things about stuff I'm planning to do."

Patrick waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't.

"What time do you normally leave?" Alex asked.

"Between two thirty and three."

"Do you mind if I walk with you?"

"Of course not. you didn't drive here?"

"I did, but I'll come back after."

"Okay." Patrick finished his soda. "I should really get back to work." He put the money back in his pocket and stood. Alex stood with him. "I'll get myself another beer."

"Well, hello there." A fox holding a tray joined them.

"and who are you, handsome?"

"Jen, this is my brother, Alex."

"Patrick, please tell me he's single."

"I am," Alex replied, smiling. "Not that I think it's going to help."

"Oh, and why's that?"

"I'm gay."

"Of course you are. That's just my luck. You wouldn't happen to have any brothers?"

"I do, but they're gay too."

Jen look at Patrick. "Are all the guys in your family gay?"

Patrick opened his mouth, but then surprise froze him.

She patted his shoulder. "Of course I know."

"How?" he asked, baffled.

"Oh, you don't scream 'I'm gay', but I've seen too many beautiful women throw themselves at you only to fall flat on their face to think you were straight."

"I don't call what that rabbit was doing 'throwing herself at me'."

"No, I wasn't including her, she was looking for a lawsuit. but there's been plenty of others."

Patrick tried to remember when a woman might have hit on him, but he couldn't.

"That's what I mean," The fox said. "That confused look you have. You never even noticed they were doing it." He turned to Alex. "It's good to meet you, Alex. Were you leaving or heading to the bar?"

"I was going to the bar."

"Can I get you anything?"

Alex gave her his glass. "I don't know what this was, Don served it to me, it was on tap."

With a nod she left.

"Pat, how much tip should I leave?"

Patric chuckled and gave his brother a quick primer on tipping before going back to the door.

The rest of the night was quiet. One girl came on to him when he refused to let her in because he ID was fake. He paid attention to what she did, and he could remember other women doing similar things before. He suggested she should leave.

The customers behaved, so Patrick kept a discreet eye on Alex. He talked with the waitresses who approached him, and they all left disappointed. Jen hadn't told anyone he was gay, and neither did the waitresses who talk to him. They all seemed to enjoy seeing the next one try her luck.

As he said he would, Alex nursed his beer for the rest of

the night, switching to a soda at last call. With the door locked Patrick rejoined him.

"What happens now?" Alex asked.

"They finish their drinks and leave. You've never closed a bar before?"

Alex chuckled. "I think the longest I've stayed at the club was two hours. Once I'd found a partner or two, there wasn't any point in staying."

Patrick looked at him, then his ears reddened. "Oh."

"I'm heading out," Jen said, "Here you go." She handed Patrick sixty dollars.

Patrick pocketed it. "You're leaving early tonight."

"Yeah. Bonnie's been sick and waking up at all hours. My sister's watching her, but she shouldn't have to deal with that any longer than she has to." She pulled Alex out of his chair and hugged him. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Likewise. I hope Bonnie gets well soon."

"Thanks. See you on Friday, Patrick." The fox sashayed away, drawing the eyes of everyone except the two tigers.

"Bonnie's her daughter," Patrick explained at Alex's quizzical look. "One year old now. The father just up and left a couple of weeks in the pregnancy. No one knows where he went to, which is fortunate for him. A few of us would have had words with him."

Alex nodded.

Mary appeared next to them. "Patrick, Don wants to see you."

"Thanks. I'll be right back."

The panda was behind his desk, and handed him an envelope as soon as he entered. "You can take off if you want."

"Are you sure? There's still a lot of people here." He pocketed the envelope.

"It's fine, if some of them start something, I'm still able to knock heads together. You go and enjoy some time with your brother."

"Thanks, see you Friday." Patrick grabbed his jacket on the way out and nodded to the stairs when Alex looked his way. "Normally I'd be one of the last one to leave, but Don figures I should spend time with you."

"That's pretty nice of him."

"Yeah, he's a good guy. I don't know what you want to do. Normally I just walk home, but if you have any ideas I'm game."

"Do you mind if I walk with you?"

"No, but isn't your car parked around here?"

"I'll come back for it afterward."

"Are you really sure? This isn't exactly a safe

neighborhood."

"That's okay. I might not be a black belt like Aaron, but I've gone a few rounds with the fighting game. I can hold my own."

Patrick thought it over then started walking. "I'm only agreeing to it because the gangs have been rounded up. It's a lot safer now."

"Yeah, that was quite a coup for the commissioner, wasn't it?"

"I guess. She seemed pretty happy with the results and I'm guessing her popularity is going up."

"Yeah, she really wanted to clean up the city, that was what motivated her to become commissioner."

Patrick chuckled. "You sound like you know her."

"Oh no, but I met her, when I was twelve. Dads went to a fund raising for her campaign. The theme was protecting the children, so they brought us. I got to shake her hand."

"She made quite an impression it sounds like."

"Yeah. I kind of decided then I wanted to do what she did."

"Run the police?"

"No, be a cop."

"You're going to be a police officer?"

"Yeah, I'm joining the academy in September."

"Wow. I didn't expect that. I figured you'd go in programing like dad."

"No way. I couldn't do that. I had a mandatory computer class in my freshman year and I was so bored. No. I want to help out people, keep them safe."

"Does dad know about that?"

Alex glanced at him.

"What?" Patrick asked.

"You said 'dad', singular. you said the same a moment ago, and I think you did a few times at the bar."

Patrick blushed. "Oh, yeah. I keep finding myself thinking of them as one person. I know there's two of them, obviously, but they look the same, dress the same they even talk the same. When I'm not around them, they just blend into one person."

"That's cool. I was just worried that you were still fixated on having just one father."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't have it any other way anymore." The memory of his dreams resurfaced and Patrick had to rearrange himself discreetly.

"But yeah, they know. They're concerned, police work isn't exactly the safest job, but they're supportive." He



sighed. "of course, I'm not sure if that's going to last once they find out I want to work on this side of the city."

"Why would you want that? Wouldn't it be better in your area? there's hardly any officers around here. Before they were rounded up the gangs owned the neighborhood, but even now, I don't think I saw one police car drive the streets all week."

"That's kind of why. I know the precincts in this areas don't get much money and hardly no one wants to work here, so that makes it the perfect place to make a difference. My part of town is fully covered, everyone wants to work there, I wouldn't matter, I'd be one among hundreds. Here I'd be able to make an actual difference."

"We could certainly use you." Before Patrick could say more there was a yell ahead, and they saw a form run out of a house.

Patrick took off after him. He didn't even think to warn Alex. An old skunk was in the doorway screaming after the thief. Mister Woo then had a coughing fit. Patrick redoubled his effort and caught up to the squirrel. He grabbed the collar and stopped, yanking the youth off his feet.

"Let go! let go of me!" The squirrel tried to get out of the shirt, but Patrick pull him up and wrapped his arm around his neck.

Patrick was stunned for a moment as the Squirrel's face came into the light. "Xavier?" Then he saw the large, thick book, he was holding. "Xavier Patrosky, what the Hell," sorry, "Are you doing with mister Woo's stamp collection?"

Alex arrived next to him, but Patrick ignored him. Xavier was struggling as hard as the fourteen year old could. He slammed the heel of his foot on Patrick's, and while the tiger winced at the pain he didn't let him go, barely restraining an impulse to tighten his arm around the neck.

"Let go of me!"

"Not until you tell me what you're up to?"

"What do you care?"

"Kid, I beat up those two bullies who were trying to force you to rob the convenience store with them last year. I did that because you were screaming your head off for them to leave you alone. What happened to you not wanting to steal?"

The Squirrel continued to try to escape him. "Things change, okay? Unlike you I'm not going to be stuck in this hellhole all my life. I'm going to go places."

"Yeah, you are. You're going to go return this and apologize."

"Fuck you!"

Patrick felt like smacking the kid, but then he

remembered Alex. He turned so they faced him.

"Xavier, say hello to my brother, Alex."

"What are you talking about, you don't have any brothers."

"It's a recent change. Now, Alex is a police officer. So your choices are very simple. We go see Mister Woo, you return his book and you apologize, or I give you to him, and you go to prison. You wanted to go places, well prison is most definitely out of here."

Alex showed momentary surprise, then his face hardened.

The squirrel looked at Alex with fear and then hardened his face too. "You wouldn't dare," he stated.

"Xavier, when have you ever known me to be afraid of getting in the way of someone hurting the neighborhood?"

"I'm fourteen. You can't send me to prison."

"Sure I can," Alex said, trying to sound tough. "I can charge you as an adult if the damage you caused is high enough."

Patrick had to bite back a laugh at the very exaggerated attitude, but Xavier cringed.

"It's just a book," the squirrel said with defiance.

"The old man you stole it from looked like he was having a heart attack. If he gets injured, or even dies as a consequence of your theft that gets added to your sentence."

Xavier started shaking. "I don't want to go to prison."

"Then you know what you have to do." Patrick released his neck, but took hold of his collar again, and led him back to the house. The skunk, whose fur was almost uniformly white in the poor light watched them approaching.

"Well?" Patrick asked Xavier, once they stood before him. The squirrel looked up at the tiger, who nodded to the skunk.

Resigned Xavier looked at the ground as he offered the large book back. "I'm sorry."

Mister Woo grabbed and cradled the book in his arms. "Mister Sanders, it was fortunate you were close by." He looked at the other tiger. "And who's that?"

Alex offered his hand. "Orr, sir, Officer Alexander Orr."

The old skunk looked at him dubious, and Alex winked.

"Now," Alex continued. "I know your property has been returned, but it's still within your right to press charges. This young man did steal your collection."

The skunk tightened his arms around the book and glared at the squirrel.

"Depending on the assessed value of your collection, this squirrel could find himself in juvenile detention, at the very least, for a few years."

Xavier looked up in horror.

"Or," Patrick said, "I'm sure we can reach a more amiable way for Xavier to make reparation."

The old man considered the squirrel for a moment. "Well, my house could do with a fresh coat of paint."

"You can't be serious?" Xavier complained.

"I am."

"If you don't want to do that," Alex said, "we can proceed with pressing charges."

"No!"

"So you'll paint this man's house?"

Xavier sighed. "Yeah."

"Good. When do you want him to start?"

"Tomorrow, ten am."

"Alright. Let me give you my number, if he doesn't show up let me know and I'll pick him up. I know a judge who really doesn't like people who break their words." The skunk took out his phone and Alex gave him his number.

"So you'll be here at ten?" Patrick.

The squirrel looked at him, dejected. "Yeah, I will."

"Alright. Now go home, and I better never catch you stealing anything, got that?"

The squirrel ran off the moment Patrick let him go.

They watched him until he vanished in the darkness. Mister Woo looked at Alex.

"Are you really a police officer?"

Alex smiled. "No, not yet anyway."

"Alex is my brother," Patrick said. The skunk looked at him, dubious. "I found out about him and my father a few days after my birthday."

Mister Woo looked Alex over and then at Patrick. "What are you doing still living here then?"

"This is my home. I'm not going to abandon it."

They wished him a good night and went back to their walking.

"That stuff about him being charged as an adult, was that true?"

Alex shook his head. "No. I was just looking to scare him. I mean I know there's cases where it can happen, but I doubt it would apply for something like this. Out of curiosity, what would you have done if he'd asked to see my badge?"

Patrick laughed. "No idea. I'm just glad you played along."

"Happy I could help. So you're the area's guardian angel?"

"No, but I'm not going to stand by and let a thief by if I can stop him. God gave my good running legs and strength, I'm going to use that to hep the neighborhood."

"Hmmm, you very much a Christian, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem for you?"

"Nah, But I guess it does explain your initial reaction to us being gay."

"Yeah, but it doesn't excuse it. I didn't realize it then, but I was raised with a rather narrow minded version of what Christianity is about. Finding out about your family forced me to break out of that. I'm still working through some of it, but I don't think I'll be running off screaming at the mention of gay sex anymore."

"Have you done it?"

"No. I don't think I'm ready for that yet. I still have this sense that sex has to be with someone you love, so I can't see myself just hooking up."

"I'm not going to disagree there, if you love the guy you're with it's definitely better."

They were quiet for a time, until Patrick noticed Alex was scanning the shadows. "Is something thing wrong?"

"No, why?"

"You're acting like you're looking for someone hiding in the shadows."

"oh, no. that's not it."

"What is it then?"

Alex took a moment to reply. "Well, Arthur said you didn't really like talking about sexual stuff."

"He's right, so don't give me the gory details, but at least tell me why you're peering into the shadows so much."

"You know how everyone in our family has an eccentricity, right?"

"Yeah, I remember Aaron liking older guys."

Alex nodded. "Well, mine is semi-public sex, and I've been noticing a lot of nooks where I could bring a guy and have some fun." Alex shivered.

"Wouldn't that be dangerous? What if you get caught? I don't think indecent exposure will look good on your application to the police academy."

Alex shrugged. "That's part of the thrill. Doing it while being quiet enough, not moving so much you give away what's happening." He almost said something, but closed his mouth. Patrick looked at him, but Alex shook his head. "You asked not to get he details."

"Thanks for the restraint then." Patrick pointed to the house. "There it is."

"I guess this is where we have to part ways."

"Yeah, as much as I'd like to, I can't invite you in. Mom would freak."

Alex hugged Patrick. "Thanks for letting me hang out with you."

Patrick needed a moment to get over the surprise, then hugged him back. "Hey, it was my pleasure. Hopefully we'll be able to do it again at some point."

"Definitely." they let go. "You take care, Pat."

"You too Alex." He watched his brother walk away for a moment before heading to his house.