

## Columbia State — Catching Up

By: Indi

The Cascades spread across the whole eastern horizon, the foothills before them covered in forests. They appeared frozen in place compared to the trees and homes flashing by outside the window of the light rail. Ryder had grown up seeing them in the distance, a sight so common he'd stopped paying them much attention unless someone else pointed them out. Even then it was only to offer up some apathetic agreement. It was automatic, like saying "bless you" when someone sneezed.

But after moving to the east side of the state for college—where everything was arid canyons or rolling hills covered in fields—he found himself appreciating the old view again.

The cougar turned away from the window behind him and settled into his seat. He wore shorts and a red shirt emblazoned with the initials of his school, Columbia State University. His baseball cap was also from school, the insignia hidden as he had it turned backward. He felt bold being decked out in his school colors while in the territory of their rival, the University of Columbia. Not that anyone on the train had noticed.

He'd envisioned himself proudly walking through a crowd of people in purple and gold, smirking as he ignored their scowls and insults. Maybe one would try to start something. If they did, he'd happily show off the voracious reputation of Columbia State.

There was only one obvious student from the University of Columbia on the train, though. The gray-white wolf sat across from him, focused on his phone. He'd glared at Ryder briefly when he'd sat down, but nothing since. A shame, since he looked rather tasty with his chubby, jiggling belly.

Ryder realized he was hungrier than he'd thought. Or just really in the mood to eat someone in general.

Partying and hunting had practically been the sole reasons Ryder had bothered applying for college. Freshman year had been a blast. By his second day in the dorms, he'd already eaten his roommate. The meal had been an easy one since they hadn't really clicked. After a week, he was pledging with the Tau Tau Psi fraternity. During the year he'd made some good friends, eaten some delicious strangers, and packed on the pounds during parties. He'd pulled off the Freshman One Hundred by a hair, his greatest accomplishment yet.

But—most importantly—he'd survived. He still had another three or four years to go, but his odds of making it out uneaten would steadily increase. Not that he dwelled too hard on the possibility.

Sophomore year promised to be a greater adventure. In a few days, Ryder would be living in the frat house. He'd miss hunting in the dorms, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about other preds every time he went to the bathroom or did the laundry.

Unless a party was happening, of course. He couldn't wait to hunt on campus again.

"Eye me up all you want, Trojan. I'm fine giving you a VIP tour of my gut."

Ryder blinked. The wolf had looked up from their phone and was glaring at him. Ryder realized he'd been staring at them on accident while thinking about college. He could've just stayed silent and looked away. If a pred bothered opening with threats they likely weren't one hundred percent committed to having a meal. But Ryder was hungry, and the wolf looked filling.

The cougar snorted. "I'm not about to ruin my appetite eating a Spartan. You're not worth the indigestion."

"Trojans might be junk food, but I'm willing to take a cheat day." The wolf snarled and stood up. He didn't charge though, simply took a wide stance and stuck out his gut a little. An intimidation tactic Ryder had seen at college parties. The wolf most likely did want to eat him now, and was trying to psych him out.

Ryder stood as well. The wolf was taller than him but thinner. Close to an even match as long as the wolf wasn't an athlete or experienced in martial arts. Other passengers in the train car had begun staring at the two preds from rival schools. A hawk in the same row as the wolf changed seats to get away from the looming brawl. Predation still made most people skittish, even in a place as big as Columbia City. A few eyes lingered on the pair, either out of curiosity or caution.

The scenic views outside the windows dipped out of sight and then vanished as the train went underground. The interior of the car darkened.

The wolf stepped forward and Ryder matched him, until they were right in each other's faces.

"Can't wait to watch your football team get trounced again at the Orchard Cup in a few months." The wolf grinned wide enough to show off his fangs. "Good thing you won't be there to see it."

"Only because I don't watch football," Ryder said. He struck the wolf hard in the groin with his knee. The wolf let out a yelp that turned into a high-pitched whine, his eyes watering as he slumped forward a bit. Ryder opened his mouth and shoved the wolf's head in, pushing it back until he felt the first swallow.

The pair swayed from the movements of the train. Ryder took another swallow and grabbed the wolf's arms, pinning them to their sides. He felt his prey trying to pull away, but their efforts were too weak, and Ryder wasn't wasting time. Nut shots weren't the fairest tactic to use in a hunt, but a good pred used any method to secure their prey and avoid ending up in a gut. He wouldn't lose any sleep over it.

Jaws stretched around shoulders, greedily continuing onward to the chest. Ryder shifted his grip from the wolf's arms to their pants for the next stage of consumption. The wolf's chances of escaping dwindled with every gulp. He tried to twist himself free, but Ryder followed his every move. When the wolf stumbled left, he went with them. When the wolf pulled back, he stepped forward. Ryder had heard others call the act of

eating someone a macabre dance; he felt the term was far too poetic, and instead thought of it as a drunken, blindfolded makeout session. The kisses were a fair bit deeper, though.

Once Ryder began swallowing the wolf's soft middle, victory was in sight. He loosened up and let himself enjoy the sensation of eating his prey; the squirms, the muffled yelling, the steady bulging of his belly. Predation wasn't just about feeding, after all. It was dominance, proof you could hold your own in a voracious world. Only a few minutes before, Ryder and the wolf had been equals. Now the wolf was simply food. It didn't matter how many people he'd eaten in the past; when it'd counted most, he'd choked.

Ryder tightened his grip on the wolf's pants and lifted him off the ground. The wolf began kicking, their feet banging against the roof of the train car. The noise startled some of the passengers. Ryder opened his mouth wider and his prey lurched in. His belly ballooned further out from under his shirt. The sandy-brown dome bulged from the wolf's struggles, constantly wobbling.

Gravity worked against the wolf, large gulps pulling him deeper and deeper into Ryder. Ryder moved one paw to the handrail above to steady himself, while the other helped guide his meal in. The wolf's kicks grew weaker, eventually turning into mere wiggles once only their feet remained on the outside. Ryder yanked off the wolf's shoes and dropped them on the ground. He could tell they were Naidoos from a glance thanks to the various shades of purple. He doubted they fit him, but they might make a nice find for another passenger.

The final gulp caused Ryder's belly to bounce as the wolf emptied into it. He slapped his swaying gut hard and chuckled. "Ya know, you didn't taste half-bad—for a Spartan~"

The taunt provoked a stiff kick from within that made Ryder stumble. He remembered how queasy struggles had made him at first. It'd been the hardest part of predation to get used to. Swallowing had been natural, and getting over the bland taste of clothing was more annoying than anything else. Thankfully the days of groaning and clamping his paws over his mouth were over. Mostly.

Another hard kick made him wince.

Lunch was going to be rowdy. He could've belched out the air in his stomach and quieted the wolf with ease, but he craved the squirms and wiggles. Despite the risks of letting a meal linger for long, Ryder decided to let him stew.

Ryder grabbed the side of his gut and gave it a shake, jostling the cursing wolf. "Gotta suck getting eaten by a Trojan on your home turf." He moved his paws over the lumpy surface of his middle, feeling it shift. His stomach stretched as the wolf tried in vain to escape. The sensation made him blush.

The train slowed to a stop as the speakers in the car announced their arrival at the Verona Station. "Hell yeah, perfect timing," Ryder said. He waddled over to the

nearest doors. Everyone else getting off kept their distance. Even those outside on the platform moved aside once they spotted the engorged cougar. He grinned. One easy meal was all it took to give him the aura of a fearsome predator. Yet another reason to eat the occasional person now and then.

Ryder left the train car with a swagger. He let his belly sway from side-to-side just to show off his catch. He looked for reactions, both good and bad. There were the timid ones who walked closer to the wall and avoided his gaze. The ones who smiled back in approval—including a panda with a bulging belly of his own.

Rarer were the hungry stares, from those pondering the risks of taking on a stuffed pred. They were who Ryder actually watched out for. With the wolf weighing him down he wouldn't be able to defend himself if another pred attacked. Swallowing him down would be hard, not impossible. And while the pred would be left grounded and immobile, they'd still be better off than Ryder, who'd be digesting. No one made a move on him, though.

Ryder waddled into the elevator, unwilling to take the stairs while stuffed. His wobbling gut didn't deter everyone, and the elevator ended up cramped as people squeezed in. Those pressed against the cougar's belly twitched as they felt his prey struggling; some inched away as best they could. The car emptied fast once it had arrived, with Ryder waddling out last.

Outside the station, the sun beat down upon Ryder. Fortunately, the walk ahead wasn't long.

Verona was a residential neighborhood of the city, mostly made up of older, small homes. Apartments and stores were along the southern border, along with a massive park. Beyond the park was the University District—student apartments, frat houses, and the University of Columbia itself.

Rampant predation was apparently a big enough problem in the park to warrant having security. A friend of his brother had worked there before becoming a park ranger. People didn't care if students gluttoned on each other, but they'd throw a fit the minute their morning jog or dog walk became risky. Not that a couple of security guards could stop every hungry pred looking for a snack.

Waddling down the street, Ryder kept a constant eye on the park, hoping to see some action. Despite the reputation, it appeared quiet. No one leaping out of bushes or chasing anyone down. Of course, the best hunting grounds were the least assuming ones.

Ryder breathed a sigh of relief once he spotted the apartment complex his brother lived in. He'd been beginning to wish his meal had been lighter. He grabbed his gut and slowly lumbered up the staircase to the second-floor apartments, huffing and puffing by the time he reached the top. The wolf's struggles had slowed significantly on the way over. He shifted about, only occasionally pushing or mumbling a curse too muffled to make out. Just calm enough to not be disruptive.

Ryder rang the doorbell and then stood back, making sure anyone on the other side would get a clear look at him through the peephole. The sound of clopping steps echoed from within, followed soon after by the clicking of the locks.

A hefty zebra opened the door. He wore glasses and a shirt that struggled to cover his doughy belly. Ryder still remembered when his brother's boyfriend Marcus had been half as large; merely plump. While predation was the reason most people ballooned in size, Marcus had gotten fat off his boyfriend's cooking. That and a lion he'd accidentally eaten one time, if the story was true. Ryder thought it sounded a bit too ridiculous.

"Glad to see you again, Ryder," Marcus said, cheerfully. "Come in, come in!" The zebra stepped aside, allowing Ryder to waddle in.

Ryder saw Marcus glance briefly at his gut. He knew the zebra wasn't exactly into predation. He never got preachy about it, though, so Ryder returned the favor by not chatting about it around him as much as he did with other preds. "Kind of couldn't resist grabbing a snack on the way over." He smiled and shrugged.

"Don't worry. You're not the first person to come over with a wobbling gut," Marcus said, politely. Ryder imagined he was dwelling on the meal's bad luck.

"Was that Ryder, Hon?"

Ryder's ears twitched at the sound of his brother's voice. Riley came out of a hallway and into the living room. The cougar was a few years older and a good deal fatter than Ryder. He frowned the moment he spotted Ryder's belly.

"Please don't tell me you went hunting in Verona Park?" Riley asked.

"Didn't step foot in the place," Ryder answered.

"Then you're not a complete idiot, at least. But you still took a risk hunting blind in an unfamiliar place."

"It was an easy meal. See? No injuries at all, not even a bruise." Ryder gestured towards himself.

"Yeah, well just because you came out on top doesn't mean things couldn't have gone wrong," Riley insisted. "You could've just waited until you were back at CSU; someplace familiar."

Riley could be overprotective of Ryder at times, much to the younger cougar's annoyance. He knew his brother meant well, but even their parents didn't fuss over his eating habits as much. If anything, they were actually more supportive.

"I know the risks of being a pred, bro," Ryder said. He'd lost count of how many times he'd repeated that to him before. "If things go wrong then whatever, that's just how life is. Just ask lunch here." He nudged his gut, prompting a weak squirm.

"Speaking of which," Marcus spoke up before Riley could respond, "why don't we sit down so Ryder doesn't hurt his back holding up his belly?"

Riley frowned, then nodded. Ryder sent a smile Marcus' way, both for the offer and for ending the argument before things escalated.

Ryder made his way over to a chair and settled in. His gut covered his lap and pressed against the arms of the chair. It was a comfortable fit overall, though; furniture big enough to handle Marcus coincidentally tended to be pred-friendly. Riley and Marcus took spots next to each other on the couch, with Riley leaning against the larger zebra.

"So, how was the trip to Mom and Dad's?" Riley asked.

"Alright," Ryder said. "They showed off all the painting they'd done over the summer. Bugged me about settling on a degree. Gave a whole lot of unnecessary hunting advice, like usual." The cougar leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Don't get too fat. Find out if any of your professors have a taste for felines. Don't go to parties at this sorority, or that frat; they're too voracious. Blah, blah, blah."

"They mean well. Sort of," Riley said. Ryder had the feeling his brother didn't like their parents encouraging him to hunt. "They were both active preds when they went to CSU, so they've got experience."

"Experience that's like two decades out of date. I had mom warning me about a sorority that got eaten out of existence five years ago. Meanwhile, dad was talking up a bar that closed down the year after he graduated."

"I think they're just happy to have a son into that sort of thing," Riley said with a snort. "I'm sure they bugged you about your muzzle, too."

Ryder pouted. "Duh. As if I'd forget." Both he and his brother suffered from a rare sleep-eating disorder. Rather than raid the fridge, they'd hunt down prey. Thankfully it only struck when they caught a whiff of prey, so they were fine as long as no one else was in the room with them. Nose plugs and a muzzle also helped, and would be necessary to prevent Ryder from accidentally eating his roommate—Kyler—once he moved into the frat house. He liked the rabbit too much to think of him as a potential meal.

"Don't worry, they still nag me about mine every time they call," Riley said.

Marcus leaned in against his boyfriend. "That's just because they like me where I am, and not where I could be." He gave Riley's belly a poke, causing the cougar to blush. He turned to Ryder. "Though even with it on, he still tries to nibble on me at night. I can always tell what sort of dreams he's having when he wraps his arms around me in bed and makes big chomping motions." Riley's face turned redder, while Ryder snorted.

"Let's talk about something else; anything else!" Riley blurted out. "How's that damn frat house you're moving into?"

Ryder lit up. "It's so huge, bro! And pretty new, too, so it's not falling apart or anything. There's a whole room just dedicated to showing off awards the frat has gotten, with pictures of all the previous members. I've found two of Dad from back in the day, before he got glasses and when he was, like, *bwoomp*." He held his arms out, hovering them around his huge gut.

"Not exactly a surprise that being in a frat fattens you up," Riley said.

"Yeah, but still. Anyway, I'm most excited about just being able to snooze in my own bed after glutting at the parties, now. No more crashing on a couch or the floor. Maybe I'll actually wake up well-rested when I need to do party clean up now." Ryder shuddered. "Trying to dig discarded clothes out from under furniture is a pain when you've slept like shit."

"Just...just don't get too complacent. It's still a frat house full of preds."

"They aren't *all* preds. Some of them are honestly just there to socialize and make connections or something." Ryder didn't bother mentioning how small a percentage that was. "Besides, I got through freshman year with hardly any scares. I can take care of myself." He pat his wobbling gut and smirked.

"You've also got Nathan and Noah watching out for you," Marcus said.

Ryder knew the zebra had meant to be supportive, but he couldn't help but frown again. Nathan and Noah were the younger twin brothers of a friend of Riley and Marcus. They were also the co-presidents of his frat. He'd met them before he'd even left for college, and having a connection to the higher-ups as a pledge had felt weird. He'd gone out of his way to avoid them when possible, if only to ensure no one thought he was getting special treatment. The twin arctic foxes had—thankfully—understood his concerns.

"They don't follow me around all the time or anything. They have important frat stuff to do." Ryder said.

"Like stuffing themselves with anyone in reach." Riley laughed.

"Well yeah, that too." The twins had eaten someone at every frat party he'd attended. More often than not they managed to have seconds, sometimes even thirds. Even Ryder thought they could be overly gluttonous at times. Not that he'd ever tell them.

The wolf inside Ryder had finally gone still. His stomach gurgled loudly, beginning the long process of turning its meal into fat. It may have been a forgone conclusion, but his smile grew smugger as he rubbed his belly and confirmed his prey was digesting. Another successful hunt completed.

"It's nice you probably won't end up on their menu, at least," Riley said.

"Yeah." Marcus nodded in agreement.

Ryder looked away. "I sort of asked them not to give me any special treatment like that." He saw Riley about to speak and beat him to it. "I mean when it comes to breaking frat rules or voracious bets and stuff! They aren't going to just gobble me up or whatever." Eating fellow frat brothers was discouraged, but not outright banned. It was accepted if done in self-defense or because of a game or bet, but in general they were encouraged to hunt members of other frats instead. All the frats and sororities followed similar unwritten rules.

"Well, then don't play pool against them." Riley sighed. "I'd be happier if you ended on one of their waistlines than that of a stranger, but I'd still rather have you

around.”

Ryder chuckled. “Thanks, bro.” He could tell any further conversation about the frat or predation would inevitably involve his brother worrying, and didn’t want to spend the rest of his visit reassuring him over and over again. “So, how’s the whole chef thing going?”

They talked for most of the afternoon. Topics jumped around, occasionally dipping back into school and jobs. Predation came up rarely, mentioned in passing as it related to whatever was being discussed; a day that’d been hectic because a coworker got eaten, or a classmate getting breaking a chair because they’d eaten someone on their way in. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Ryder’s belly shrunk and smoothed out as time passed. It gurgled and groaned loud enough for him to sheepishly apologize. He found himself wondering if he looked noticeably fatter yet, a thought which excited him.

Ryder checked his phone. “Damn, I need to head out. Takes about an hour to get to the hotel from here on the light rail, and I’m sure Kyler will be back soon.” They’d driven over from CSU together, opting to stay at a hotel so they could have a bit of privacy between visiting family and friends. It’d been fun, but both were already eager to head back and start moving stuff from their storage unit into their new room at the frat house.

He slowly lifted himself out of the chair, his gut jiggling and sloshing as he did. He covered his mouth with a paw, just barely muffling a belch. He still felt stuffed. “Thanks again for having me over. Was fun to chill for a bit.”

Marcus and Riley stood up and walked with Ryder towards the door. “Always great to have you over,” Marcus said.

Riley leaned in and gave his brother a side-hug, since the younger cougar’s belly made any other approach difficult. “Stay safe. Eat smart and don’t forget to study. You need to at least pretend you’re there to get a degree and not just eat.”

“I know, I know,” Ryder said. “But don’t be surprised if I show up for Thanksgiving fatter than you.” The comment got a frown from Riley and a snicker from Marcus.

“If you do, you’re never allowed to make fun of my weight ever again.”

“No promises,” Ryder smirked. He opened the door, wincing at how bright the sunlight was. “See ya,” he said, before waddling out and towards the stairs.

Once the door closed, Riley’s frown returned. “God, I hope he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Marcus gave his boyfriend’s paw a comforting squeeze. “I’m sure he’ll do his best. He got through freshman year, and I remember that being the toughest.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t putting yourself in danger by hunting,” Riley said. “Active

preds are more likely to get eaten, especially during college. And I've seen the rates of predation amongst fraternity members."

"Just remember, they don't *all* get eaten. Your parents got through it, and so did plenty of our friends." Marcus leaned in closer, resting his head on Riley's shoulder. "It's nothing we don't already all deal with daily, anyway. Worrying about it too much won't do us any good."

"I...yeah, you're right. I just want him to make it past twenty and not go out in some ridiculous, voracious blaze of glory."

Marcus laughed for a few seconds. "Sorry, sorry. You just sounded so stern for a moment there."

"I'm allowed to be stern when my brother's off being a dumb frat boy!"

"Of course you are." Marcus kissed Riley on the cheek. "But why don't we stop worrying and figure out dinner before you start hankering for zebra."

Riley blushed and his face twisted. "Hmmp. Know what? You're overdue for a proper stuffing. Pantry and fridge are full, so nothing is stopping me from filling you to the brim. I think it's going to be one of those nights where you end up too fat to get out of your chair afterward."

It was Marcus' turn to blush.

The couple made their way to the kitchen, paw in hoof, their bellies jiggling the whole way.