“You’re absolutely sure about this?” Alain squinted at the screen, which was showing a complex biochemical formula. “You know I can’t read these bloody things, just spell it out for me.”

“It’s just a synthetic version of growth hormone, a few extra tweaks to improve efficiency, that’s all.” Leroy was adamant, but then again Leroy was always adamant - as a scientist he was sure in whatever he set his mind to, and when he’d had a breakthrough it was often Alain that had to reign him in lest his experiments get a little too…experimental.

“You know, when anyone else in this department says ‘that’s all’ it’s not usually a good thing.”

“Look, we’ve done plenty of testing and it works perfectly on plant life, no side effects. We perfect this formula and we’re looking at a way to regrow the Amazon in a matter of months, not years. Do you have any idea how big this is?”

“Oh I do, and that’s what worries me.” Alain peered at the screen again. “I know you, and I know that you haven’t tested all eventualities. There’s a reason this lab is in the middle of nowhere, and it’s not because the stuff we make tends to be harmless!”

Leroy scoffed, but he knew his partner was right. The laboratory was hidden deep in the forest, away from prying eyes and more importantly from legal consequences, but that meant the only life for miles around was the forest itself, the various plants and animals living within. It specialised in compounds that really shouldn’t be allowed to exist, meaning the isolation served as another layer of defence in case something went wrong. Under Leroy’s command that rarely happened but occasionally a more junior scientist got a little too eager to prove themselves.

“Come with me, I’ll show you.” Leroy led Alain into another room, where there were a couple of plants in separate glass tubes. One was a regular size, a few leaves on a stalk with a couple flowers on top, the other was a small bush pressing against the inside of the glass. Another scientist was busy watering them with a small plastic watering can with flowers painted on it, one that looked like it belonged in a child’s playpen.

“Give us a sec.” Leroy gestured at the technician and he quickly left, leaving Alain to raise an eyebrow at the watering can.

“Ignore that, he lost a bet. Look, look at these two plants. Same seed, same germination time more or less. One treated and one left alone.” Leroy gestured wildly. “You can’t tell me it doesn’t work, right? Like come on!”

“Yes, because that entirely addresses my fear of fringe cases existing that we don’t know about.” Alain sighed as Leroy continued on regardless of his pithy retort.

“We know it works on anything with a DNA match of at least 85%, and that’s a pretty big bracket. We’re talking basically all the plant life in the forest right now, imagine that. This forest but a hundred times bigger!”

Alain suddenly felt his stomach drop. “You uh… you coded that very specifically didn’t you?”

Leroy chuckled. “Am I really that obvious?”

“Alright spill the beans. You’ve got some kind of dispersal method, a spray of some kind?”

Again Leroy laughed, louder this time. “Think bigger. It’s aerosol in form, and it’s being dispersed over a wide area.”

“No way you built a fucking bomb.” Alain took a step back. “You did, didn’t you?”

“Maybe.” Leroy led Alain out of the smaller laboratory and back into the main room. Alain didn’t come down here that often, and it was interesting seeing how none of the various other techs working around the room gave them a second look. Perhaps they were just used to Leroy explaining things to people - Alain had to admit much of the science down here was beyond him. His job was making sure what they made wasn’t going to bring about mass destruction, and his whole department was based around that.

“So let me get this straight. Not only have you made a highly experimental and not fully tested compound, but your idea of testing it is to load this stuff into a bomb and detonate it over a patch of forest that we assume is uninhabited?” Alain dragged a hand down his face. “I suppose it’s too much to ask that you use just a little common sense first.”

“You see, this is why I didn’t tell you.” Leroy began walking to the door as he talked, Alain making a face as he followed. “I knew you’d disagree, and I also knew that you’d try to talk me out of it. So I figured I’d tell you when it’s too late to stop it. Shae, can you get the door?” This was directed at another scientist nearby, one that nodded and pulled a heavy duty lever on the wall next to him, causing the doors to the lab to open with a faint hiss of steam. Leroy stopped to grab an umbrella from beside the door, and Alain again looked at him and pulled a face before grabbing an umbrella as well. Walking outside was like stepping into the middle of an undiscovered wilderness - if it weren’t for the laboratory right behind them they wouldn’t be able to tell where the nearest civilisation was for miles.

“Let’s not wander around for too long, paperwork will start building up if I’m out here for ages. At least you didn’t store it in the lab. Where is this thing anyway?” Alain looked around, but in response Leroy just pointed upwards. The scientist squinted as he could just about make out the shape of a plane, far above the forest and seemingly carrying something. Underneath. He couldn’t tell exactly what due to the distance, but he didn’t have to see to know what it was.

“....How in the hell did you get clearance for a *plane*?”

Leroy grinned. “Had to pull a few strings, call in some favours. Head of accounting owes me big time after I transmuted his old jewellery into…newer jewellery. Mostly.” Alain made a mental note to double check whatever Leroy had done to Carson’s rings and necklaces.

“You better hope this works or there’s gonna be a big chunk missing from your paycheck.” Alain muttered, but Leroy just shrugged indifferently. He was never in it for the money, Alain knew that more than anyone.

“I’d open that if I were you.” Leroy gestured to the umbrella, opening his own one as he did so. It was bright and sunny, with not a cloud on the horizon, and Alain felt a little silly holding his umbrella above his head in the bright sunlight.

**BANG**

Instantly the sky was dark, little droplets falling down onto the forest like a hail of arrows. The detonation was intensely powerful but much of the explosion was directed horizontally rather than vertically, meaning that the droplets were spread over a large swathe of the forest. Alain looked at his boots, which were getting splashed by the liquid, and sure enough it was the compound. Without any kind of testing or prior approval, Leroy had just begun the first real test of his formula, and the testing ground was everything around them.

“You’re insane.” Alain shook his head as the ground grew sodden around them. “You better hope for your sake that this doesn’t ruin the forest.”  
  
“Ah come on, it’s not like it’s gonna do anything bad to it. It’s a compound for growth, not a toxin or anything.”

“Again, you don’t know that!” Alain sighed, a weary sound that indicated that not only was this not the first time he’d had to deal with Leroy’s antics, it was not the third or even tenth time. “You’re lucky you’re a department head or I’d be forcing you into so many safety courses you’d have the entire rulebook memorised by the end of them all.”

Leroy just chuckled. “Look, we have to wait a while for the effects to kick in anyway, then we’ll know if we screwed up. I’m gonna brew us some coffee, you want some?”

“You know sometimes I envy how you can just do nothing for hours and somehow make that task more important than half the stuff I’m doing.” Leroy chuckled at that - as department head his schedule was cyclical: when it was light he had long periods of nothing, but when it was busy it was quite the opposite. Alain never had that opportunity, nor did he think it would agree with him. “Alright fine, but don’t skimp on the sugar this time.” Alain folded his umbrella as he went inside, shoving his hands into his lab coat pockets - a sure sign of irritation, if it wasn’t obvious enough already. Leroy knew he’d come around to the idea, he always did in the end. With a chuckle he followed his partner inside to brew some coffee and hopefully pass the next few hours quickly.

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An hour hadn’t even passed before Alain was forced to come back down to the lab. Just half an hour, and Leroy was already paging him to come down, this time with a bit of urgency in his voice. He sighed as he finished his coffee, chugging the whole thing before getting up and walking towards the lab. When he arrived Leroy was indicating at the screen near the door.

“Look, we’ve got a visitor!”

Alain was already sceptical considering where they were, aka in the middle of nowhere, but when he checked the screen his eyes widened. There was an anthro wolf at the door, stark naked and cheerfully waving at the camera.

“That’s a wolf. That’s a wolf on two legs at the door. A. WOLF.”

“I know! Isn’t this exciting?” Leroy grinned, but Alain wasn’t having it.

“No! No this is anything but exciting! You’ve released a mutagenic compound onto some poor sod just walking through the forest! Do you have any idea of the sort of paperwork this involves?”

“Relax, he was probably just some hiker or something. We’ve just gotta bring him in and see what’s what, I’m sure we can sort out an antidote or something.”

“I…” Alain was lost for words for a second, just seething with a mixture of rage, confusion and utter hopelessness for his colleague. Once he’d recovered he pressed a couple of buttons to try and get the sound working, and after some fiddling the speaker crackled to life.

“Hello? Anyone home? I don’t know what this place is but you’re the only building for miles around so you’ve gotta be doing something in there! Hello!?” The wolf had a pretty resonant voice, rich and bassy even through the speakers.

Alain dragged a hand down his face. “I told you that you didn’t test this stuff enough. The ecology of this forest is going to be in shambles after this.”

“Never mind the ecology, look at him! We gotta bring him in and get some tests going.” Leroy reached for the door lever but Alain stopped him.

“We don’t know if whatever changed him is from a reaction with some disease, some combination of compounds, anything at all. We stay sterile until we know for sure.”

After a second Leroy nodded, then pulled the lever. The door slowly opened and there he was.

“Ah thank goodness, I was wondering if this place was abandoned.” He walked inside, and Alain noted that he didn’t walk like a person. It was the gait of an animal, loping and graceful, lacking in the bipedal stiffness that most on two legs were cursed with. He walked towards the two scientists but Leroy held his hands up.

“Woah woah, no touching, we need to run a few tests first just in case. You could be dangerous after all. My name is Leroy, this is Alain. If you’d like to come this way, we’ve got a chamber that we can keep you in until we’re sure that you’re safe.” Leroy led the way into another room, the one in which the test plants were kept. There was a technician in there, but he took one look at the wolf and just walked out without a word, not even wanting to get involved. Alain chuckled as he walked past him, moving towards one of the empty chambers. This one was larger than the others, a glass cube with various HUDs lighting up the glass, sensors poking through here and there. Alain opened it up and the wolf walked inside.

“Hey, you got like a chair or something? Two legs is a bit uncomfortable to stand on.”

Alain grabbed the technician’s chair, a large leather armchair, and after some awkward shuffling they both managed to get it through the door and into the cube. The wolf sighed happily as he collapsed into it, stretching out and whining slightly as his joints popped and cracked. For the first time Leroy noticed that the wolf was quite muscular, not so much well-built but definitely toned, almost like a swimmer’s built but a little bulkier.

“So what’s your name, and where did you come from?” Leroy asked, standing just outside the glass.

“I don’t really have a translation for the name, it’s more like a sensation than a word, but I guess you can use Rain after Dusk. As for where I came from, that’s easy. The forest.”

“Wait, your name is….oh. Oh shit, you’re not human, you never were human.” It didn’t take Leroy long to put the pieces together. “You’re feral, a wild wolf. Or you were. Now the compound has turned you into something else.” He hummed for a second, thinking it through in his head as Alain began to breathe heavily.

“Leroy, with all due respect you’re a moron. You have any idea what kind of compound you have to make to turn a WILD WOLF INTO THIS?” He gestured at the cube, where the wolf just waved happily. “We’re not just talking mutagenic, this is multi-stage ribonucleic redistribution. This is genetic fuckery we’re dealing with here. This shouldn’t be possible, not with what we’ve got in here. Hell, this shouldn’t be possible AT ALL! I need to see a sample of that compound now, right now. And grab a sample off…Dusk Rain.”

“Rain after Dusk.”

“Whatever.” Alain waved his hands. “I need to see the damage first.” He grabbed a syringe off the table nearby, but when he walked to the chamber he tilted his head. There was something off about the wolf, and after a moment he placed it - he was bigger, just by a little bit. On a whim he grabbed a tape measure from a nearby drawer.

“What’s that?” Rain after Dusk looked at the tape with curiosity, holding out his arm as Alain put the syringe in and drew a vial of blood.

“Tape measure, Just wrap it around your arm with the 0 at the top.” Alain got him to measure a few different places, writing down the measurements on his phone as he did so. He gave the vial to Leroy, who immediately walked towards the stairs to take it up for microscopic analysis. MA was under the leadership of a scientist by the name of Cray, and he sighed as he saw Leroy come in.  
  
“Alright, what do you need this time? Whatever it is, you owe me a favour for it.”

Leroy just held out the vial of blood, balancing it between a couple fingers. “Don’t use it all, we don’t want to keep drawing blood if possible.”

“Blood?” Cray was immediately suspicious. “Whose blood?”

“Trust me, it’s better if you don’t ask that question.”

Cray wasn’t too happy about it but he took the vial anyway, placing it into a machine hooked up to a large monitor. After a couple of seconds it began to whir and various ingredients formed a list on the screen. Cray frowned when he saw it.

“That’s… that’s weird. You sure this is blood?” Leroy just nodded in response, and again Cray hummed. He pulled out the vial and brought it over to another machine, one that Leroy recognised as an electron microscope. He slotted the sample in and again pulled the image up on a screen, yet more statistics popping up alongside it. Whatever they said didn’t offer Cray any insight, as he looked just as confused after reading them. “Only a couple explanations. One is that this is something very old, revived from hibernation.” He looked hopefully at Leroy but the scientist shook his head. “Then the other option is that this is a dormant evolutionary pathway. DNA is the code but RNA is the translation, it controls a lot of your gene expression. What we’re seeing here is the expression of a dormant gene sequence, one that shouldn’t exist. An evolutionary dead-end so to speak, something that died out years ago. You’ve got blood from a fossil.”

“Well that’s - “  
  
“I’m not finished.” Cray pointed to the screen. “See that? That’s the Mitotic Index, basically a calculation defining how fast cells are dividing. It varies depending on the type of cell, but at most you expect to see 5% more or less. This blood is at 35%. What’s more, it’s not static.” He pressed a button to refresh the stats, and sure enough the number was higher. “35.7%. That’s in a couple of minutes, which means whatever this blood belongs to is growing over 6 times faster than it should.”

“It can’t be.” Leroy looked at the screen, his eyes wide. “That rate of growth shouldn’t be possible, I've never seen anything that extreme.” There was a tone of urgency in his voice that Cray picked up on - Leroy was often quite carefree even in the most extreme situations, and hearing him worried told Cray that this was a big deal. “We’re gonna need an antidote for this before it gets out of hand.” Leroy took the vial back off Cray, the level of blood in it slightly lower. “Keep running tests on that sample, let me know if anything changes. I might be back, so stay free for me.”

“No guarantees.” Cray chuckled as Leroy went back down the stairs again, running back into the chamber. He took a look at the wolf and immediately he could see it - Rain after Dusk was bigger than before, that lean build slowly but surely evolving into a heavyset muscular one. He didn’t even need to check Alain’s previous measurements to know it.

“I don’t know what’s happening, but I do know it feels amazing.” Leroy looked up as the wolf spoke, the creature flexing an arm as he did so. “I can feel the strength surging through my body over and over, like some electric charge or something. Feels good.” He flexed again and Leroy swore he could see the muscle growing right before his eyes.

“Well?” Leroy jumped as Alain put a hand on his shoulder. “What did Cray say?”

“It’s some kind of alternate evolutionary line, a dormant one now being expressed. That’s not the bad part though, the bigger issue is that it’s growing fast. Very fast.” Leroy held up the vial of blood, which was full again. “We need to slow down the rate if possible, just so he doesn’t outgrow the chamber.”

“Nothing can grow that fast, it’s not possible.”

“Yeah well there’s a lot of that going around today, isn’t there.” Something in Leroy’s tone tipped off Alain, who didn’t push it any further.

“Alright fine, so he’s growing twice as fast as normal.”

“Six times as fast.”

“SIX?”

Leroy just nodded. “And climbing. Either we slow it down or things are gonna get ugly.”

“Shit. Shiiiiit. Alright.” Alain paced around the room a bit as he thought. “I think we’ve got some weights around somewhere, nothing too big but should be enough to test him. Maybe if we force the cells into anaerobic respiration it’ll slow the growth process? We don’t have anything else to go on, so I think it’s at least worth a shot.”

It took a little bit of searching but sure enough there were some dumbbells and weight plates scattered around one of the upper labs, part of physical testing equipment, and after Leroy had carried them down the stairs (and complained the whole way down) Alain put them into the chamber.

“We want you to try working out with these, you just lift them up and put them down again. Like this.” Alain demonstrated a few exercises, starting with a bicep curl and ending with a bench press on his back. Rain after Dusk nodded, grabbing the lighter weights first. Initially he struggled to lift them up, unused to this sort of resistance, and Alain left him to go and study the analysis of the blood some more. He assumed that the constant exercise would tire the wolf out, but even after almost 15 minutes straight of struggling he didn’t even look out of breath. Worse still he was noticeably bigger now, muscle bulging across his frame as he lifted the smaller weights with ease. Someone had given him a shirt and trousers, presumably Leroy considering they looked like clothes he would wear, and the shirt was looking strained by the twin peaks of the wolf’s pecs as he pushed the weights up and down.

“Hey uh, how long do you want me to do this? It’s getting easier the more I do it.” Rain after Dusk demonstrated by gripping the dumbbell with one hand and casually throwing it into the air, catching it like it weighed nothing at all. That was a 25 pound dumbbell, and he made it look like it was a fifth of the weight with how he handled it. The wolf had actually moved onto the largest weights already, 50lb dumbbells that looked immensely heavy, and while he was struggling again Alain knew that it was only a matter of time before he found that easy too. The trouble was if he did nothing then eventually the wolf would just keep growing until they couldn’t contain him anymore, but he wasn’t making any headway on the antidote - everything he tried was just falling apart. Everything was going wrong, and it was about to get worse. His pager rang, and Leroy’s voice had that same tremor as before.

“We’ve got another one.”

This time they didn’t bother with the protocols, instead going to the door and opening it immediately. Once more those heavy doors parted to reveal a second anthro animal, and this time it was a badger standing there.

“Hey, I uh…I don’t know what’s happening but something weird is going on.” He sounded confused, much less sure of himself than the wolf, and the two scientists looked at each other as he stood there nervously waiting for an answer.

“Come in, we’ll need to run some tests. You’re not the first.” Alain reached out and took the badger by the hand, leading him inside. Leroy raised an eyebrow at the physical contact.

“What happened to quarantine?”

“I checked while you were analysing the blood, whatever you’ve sprayed them with it’s absorbed almost fully. We’re not going to catch it by contact that’s for sure, and I’m confident it’s not airborne. Now are you gonna help me or what?”

Leroy did just that, grabbing the badger’s arm and guiding him towards the chambers that the wolf was in. Once in they put him in a separate chamber from the wolf, but even so it was clear to see that the wolf was much bigger. The badger was definitely larger than he should have been, but he looked more normally proportioned - if that was even the right adjective to use considering what was happening. The wolf was a lot more muscular, his body thick and toned with strength,, and even with Leroy’s old clothes on he was practically bursting out of them. Leroy grabbed another shirt for the badger, and when he put it on it was fitting slightly loose on his frame.

“Looks like you weren’t kidding.” The badger gestured towards Rain after Dusk, who just grinned and waved. “I’m guessing Mr Smiles over there caught the same thing I did.”

“My name is Rain after Dusk, and yes that’s probably the case.” The wolf smiled, but the badger was having none of it, retaining his surly expression.

“I’m Grfen, and I’d rather spend the time here finding a solution to this mess.”

“Alright enough.” This was Alain, who had grabbed a syringe off the table and brought it over to Grfen. “Hold still, I need a sample of blood.” The badger obediently held his arm out while Alain took the sample. “I’m guessing you were also feral until not too long ago.”

“Uh huh.” Grfen crossed his arms over his chest. “What’s with the weights?” he asked, gesturing to Rain after Dusk’s chamber.

“We thought anaerobic respiration would slow the growth rate, but it seems to do the opposite. You don’t need to use those.” Alain dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

“So what, lifting makes me grow bigger?”

“You’re already growing bigger, lifting just makes it happen faster. We can’t stop it right now so maybe try not to make it worse.” Alain was calm on the outside but inside he was panicking. The wolf was huge already, 7ft tall and built like a truck, and he knew it was only a matter of time before the badger followed suit. He hid his nervousness as he handed the second vial of blood to Leroy, who walked back up the stairs towards Cray’s lab again.

This time Cray was ready for him, and he took the second vial of blood eagerly.

“Same source?”

“Kinda.” Leroy watched his colleague load a sample into the electron microscope again. “Same compound is responsible but this is a different subject. Not as large.”

“Interesting.” Cray hummed as he checked the stats on the monitor. “Similar but not quite the same, slightly lower Mitotic Index. The rate of growth is lower too, this one isn’t as drastic.” He grabbed the vial and loaded it into another machine, yet another monitor showing various component molecules. “It’s still blood, but the chemicals are all over the place. Iron content is way up, presumably to allow for the growth just so the creature doesn’t suffocate while doing so.”

“I need a way to stop the growth, not make it go faster.” Leroy said with a hint of panic. “There must be some way to reverse it, or at the very least slow it down!”

“Reversing it is impossible, you can’t turn two cells back into one again. You might be able to lower the rate back down to a normal level, but whatever you do is not going to be pretty. You’re essentially going to be killing large numbers of cells with some form of radiation and hoping there’s enough good ones left to resume business as normal.”

“Radiotherapy?”

Cray nodded. “More or less. The difference is when you’re treating cancer you’ve got a big X marks the tumour to aim at. With this, I have no clue where you’d even start. Worse still, there’s a lot of weird stuff in here, so much that I'm not even sure if the radiation would work. Did you manage to dispose of the last sample of blood?”

“Not yet.” Leroy pulled it out of his pocket, or rather he tried to - it had leaked, and when he pulled his hand out his pocket it was bright red. The glass was cracked, crimson liquid seeping through the sides. “Ah crap.”

“See what works on that first, then we’ll go from there.”

Leroy nodded, repocketing the messy vial with a slight grimace. He ran back downstairs, but when he entered the lab again he saw the badger had completely ignored Alain and was busy lifting the weights like his life depended on it. Leroy could see the difference in his body already, the muscle cording his arms and rippling across his chest - just like the wolf exercise emphasised the growth, but unlike the wolf his growth was much slower, maybe half the speed. By comparison Rain after Dusk wasn’t even in the chamber anymore, he was sitting on a nearby chair that looked comically small under his 9ft tall body. Leroy could actually see the growth due to the clothes on the wolf’s body slowly tightening - he watched in real time as the fabric was pressed against rock hard muscle, little rips appearing here and there as it was slowly stretched beyond its limit. The sleeves were already fraying, so tight around his shoulders that it looked like it was painted on, and when Rain after Dusk took a particularly deep breath there was a loud ripping sound and the shirt finally gave up the battle against his body, loudly ripping apart right across the chest. It just split in half, going from a T-shirt to what looked like an open buttoned shirt, revealing the twin pecs below and allowing them to jut much further out. The release of pressure made him sigh in relief, and as a result he stretched and flexed his arms, which instantly made the sleeves of said shirt explode. It was like watching someone tear apart tissue paper, there didn’t seem to be any effort involved whatsoever - he just flexed and the shirt exploded off his rapidly expanding body. The wolf just looked at it apologetically, little scraps of clothing still clinging to his torso here and there as he dusted himself down.

“Leroy, please tell me you’ve got good news.” Alain looked a little frazzled, perhaps due to the stress of this whole issue.

“Not really. No viable way of reversing the process that doesn’t outright kill them.” He took the vial of blood out of his pocket, Alain recoiling slightly at the state of it. “I need you to destroy this for me.”

“You just had to break it didn’t you?” Alain sighed as he took the vial, walking over to the incinerator. He didn’t even bother to pour it out, just chucking the whole glass vial in there by itself and pulling the lever. The glass evaporated in a matter of seconds, and Alain turned away as if to prove his point that it was done. “There. Happy?”

Leroy just pointed in response, and Alain turned around to see that the blood was still there, just pooling innocently in a few thousand degrees of heat.

“That’s…” Alain went to the monitor and checked the settings, upping the heat as far as it would go, but still it stayed there. “What the fuck have you done with this stuff?”

“I don’t know but it looks like we can’t get rid of it.” Leroy shut off the incinerator, noting how the blood wasn’t even steaming. It was hot, but bubbled languidly as if it were tar instead of boiling liquid.

“This is insane. This can’t be happening, I can’t take this many impossible things in one day.” Alain groaned as he held his head in his hands. “Luckily the badger had a lower exposure, else we’d be in even more trouble.”

Leroy stopped at that. “Wait…how do you know the exposure?”

“I don’t, but it makes sense. It’s why the growth rate is lower, and why he took longer to get here. We’re essentially the epicentre of the explosion, it happened directly above us.”

“But this forest isn’t level. It’s got some hills, big ones.” Leroy didn’t need to finish the sentence for Alain to catch on. If something got a larger dose than the wolf, then the results could be catastrophic to say the least.

“We have to make sure.” Alain signalled with his hand. “Come on, grab your stuff. Once we’ve confirmed there are no stupidly large anthro animals around, we can cross another issue off the list.”

“Fine, but we bring those two along with us.” Leroy gestured at the wolf and the badger.

“You really think that’s a good idea?”

“You think leaving them to outgrow the lab is a better one?” Alain had to concede that point, and with a reluctant grumble he let the badger out and guided them both to the door. Rain after Dusk had to duck just to get out of the lab, the doorway too small for him, and the two scientists shared a worried glance.

“Alright, field trip time. We’re looking for concentrated areas of the compound, places with little cover, high up, stuff like that. Got it?” Leroy looked around as everyone nodded, and waited until he was sure they both agreed before pulling the lever and opening the door to the forest once more.

Leroy immediately regretted his decision to bring the subjects along when he realised he would have to somehow fit them all into the car. It was a sturdy looking range rover, shared by the facility whenever someone needed to venture out to collect leaf samples or something, and while it was big it definitely wasn’t designed for a 9ft wolf and a 7ft badger at the same time, much less ones that looked like they drank steroids for breakfast. It took about 5 minutes to somehow cram them both into the back seats, and even then Rain after Dusk especially was forced to lean forward so that his head poked between the two front seats, the rest of his body squashed into the space behind Alain. They both had the seats forward as far as they would go too, and still it wasn’t enough.

“I don’t think we can do the seatbelts.” Grfen sounded rather muffled, possible because his face was sideways against the roof.

“I’d be more worried about what we crash into to be honest.” Alain commented drily, but Leroy waved a hand at him.

“Don’t worry, I’m a good driver. They won’t need them.” Leroy shrugged and put his foot down. There was an awful grinding sound as the suspension tried its best to shove itself all the way through the chassis, but after some very worrying crunches the truck slowly began to move forwards. After a while they even managed to pick up some speed.

“You have an area in mind?” Alain asked, looking out the window as they drove.

“Kind of. I know the rough area, but we’ll need to look out for signs. Stuff like….large….” He trailed off as they stopped the truck in front of what looked like a giant bush. It was shrubbery but massive, 20ft of leaves and bushes walling off some kind of clearing. “Guess we found our spot.” He got out the truck, but as he did so there was a loud crunch and Grfen fell out of the back. In front of him were the twisted remains of the door that he’d broken off on the way out.

“Uhh… I can fix that.”

Leroy just sighed, going to the trunk and pulling out a huge machete. “Don’t worry about it.” was his only remark as he got to work on the bushes. Alain quickly joined him, just pulling the leaves apart with his bare hands in Leroy’s wake. He had been in the forest a few times, not often mind you but enough to get an idea of what it was like past the little clearing that the compound resided in. As they hacked their way through the vegetation he was sure that there was something wrong. He’d assumed the compound would have some sort of effect on the plants as well, but it wasn’t quite true - yes all the plants were bigger, but some had grown more than others. It wasn’t due to landscape as far as he could tell, otherwise all the trees would be bigger and the bushes smaller: no, this seemed like a trail of some kind, as if the growth was following in the wake of some creature.

“You seeing what I’m seeing?” Leroy called back, and Alain nodded.

“Something causing growth maybe? Could be due to wind trails spreading the compound in specific areas.”

“Unlikely.” Leroy hacked at a particularly stubborn branch with his machete. Alain didn’t want to ask why he had one or where he’d gotten it, considering they were in the middle of nowhere and he’d never seen the blade before. “I’m thinking if the body reaches a high enough saturation it naturally replicates the compound. More growth, more compound, more growth. It would be a continuous cycle that would never end.”

Alain was about to fire off another theory but then they made it through the thicket of trees into a clearing, and all four of them just stopped dead. Both Rain after Dusk and Grfen were very large by now, 10ft and 7ft respectively, but they both paled in comparison to the absolute monster of a stag in front of them. One titanic hoof ploughed into the ground in front of them as almost 100ft of muscular beast stood upright, stretching up into the sky like some sort of earthbound deity.

“No fucking way.” Alain was dumbstruck at the sheer size - it was hard to believe something this big could have once been a regular stag, but it was the truth.

“That’s…” Even Leroy was lost for words upon seeing him, just craning his neck backwards to try and take in the whole magnificent body. It just went on and on, this building-sized stag just happily playing with the tops of the trees, plucking entire trunks from the ground like they were toothpicks.

“Impossible? I’ve gone past denial and moved to acceptance at this point.” Alain gave a weak chuckle as he clapped Leroy on the shoulder. “HEY! CAN YOU HEAR US!?” He yelled up at the deer, his voice echoing through the clearing. The creature didn’t seem to notice, so Alain tried again, this time even louder. “**HEYYYY! DOWN HERE!**” Finally the stag looked down, registering the four of them far below him.

“OH HEY.” His voice was immense, a great booming baritone that rumbled through the landscape. Alain was pretty sure it was unintentional but he had to cover his ears regardless, the whole party squirming in pain as the sound damn near burst their eardrums. “OOPS.” He said in a slightly quieter voice, although still immensely loud. He slowly crouched so that he could get a better look, bringing that enormous face down to the floor so that he could be face to face, or as close as he could get. This ended up with him effectively lying on the floor just to get a good look at them. Leroy couldn’t help but feel intimidated - after all, he could be crushed like an insect if the stag decided to just step on him, intentionally or not.

“What’s your name?” Alain asked, still looking like his worldview had been shattered and he was just trying to ignore it and pretend everything was fine.

“SAVAUREN.” Even whispering the stag’s voice made the ground around them shake, and he looked apologetic as the party almost fell over from the vibration. “IS THAT YOUR CAR OVER THERE?”

Leroy winced as the stag reached over and picked up the truck like it was little more than a toy car. He actually made zooming sounds as he drove it along the ground with his hand, treating it like it really was a toy for a while before dropping it in the middle of the clearing with a hearty laugh. Leroy was too busy falling over from the impact to notice the dents in the metal where the stag had grabbed it and warped the steel out of shape.

“THIS THING IS TINY, HEH. HOW COME YOU GUYS ARE SO SMALL?”

Once Leroy had regained his balance he shrugged. “Believe me I wish I knew. Can we run a few tests on you? We need to figure out why you’re so large.”

“SURE.” Leroy pulled out the syringe from his pocket, and almost out of habit he went to tap the stag’s shoulder to try and find a vein. He stopped himself when he realised basic anatomy is a little tricky when the subject is the size of a multi-storey car park, instead just feeling around until what felt like a huge steel cable under his fingers indicated he’d found a vein. However when he tried to jam the needle into the deer’s titanic shoulder he found the flesh was far harder than he expected, so hard that the needle failed to penetrate. On closer inspection it was a mix of two factors: the first was that the deer’s skin was much thicker, although proportionally it was probably the same as before. The other was that his body was *much* more muscular than even the wolf’s. Savauren was absolutely jacked beyond belief, muscle exploding out of every corner of his body. The strength behind those limbs was obscene, enough power packed into one house-sized bicep to crush rock like it was honeycomb, to rip up centuries old trees and turn rocks into dust with the simplest of movements. It was a scary amount of strength, and something told Leroy that he was thoroughly enjoying it. Even while leaning down, when the scientist went to take a sample Savauren couldn’t resist flexing one of those almighty biceps, the muscle almost doubling in size as great cords of strength corded his limb and swelled against his fur, veins the size of undersea cables visible even under said fur.

“See that?” Leroy pointed to the bicep, looking back at the wolf and badger for comparison. “Proportionally he’s many times thicker.”

“So? He’s been exposed more, it makes sense.” Alain crossed his arms as he looked the stag up and down.

“No, because the expansion isn’t linear, he’s not just scaling up purely in size. He’s….” Leroy went silent before muttering something under his breath, looking up at the stag with a new appreciation.

“Eh?”

“It’s not linear, it’s cubic. Square cube law.” Leroy smacked his fist into his hand. “That’s why the growth looks like it focuses on muscle, it’s not a coincidence, it’s a necessity. The solution for larger sizes is to increase the density, which in this case means - “

“More muscle.” Alain looked at Savauren, suddenly realising just what Leroy was getting at. “The bigger they are, the stronger they get. Not by a little bit either, by a lot.” He looked at the stag again and really paid attention to the body. The earth shook again as Savauren sat up, letting Alain get a better viewpoint of everything, and it was like looking at a professional bodybuilder and then some. Pecs that were huge boulders of muscle, shoulders like cannonballs only 20 times larger, biceps so thick they looked like they could crack a continent with one punch. Those legs like redwood trunks, great slabs of raw, unparalleled strength that even while resting twitched with immense power. Leroy could only imagine what the shockwave would be like if Savauren decided to run, and the strength in those legs was let loose upon this fragile forest. Safe to say there wouldn’t be any trees left standing nearby.

“YOU LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?” Savauren winked, tensing his body to make all that muscle stand out even more. Leroy was happy to gawk in amazement until Alain pulled him away, pointing to the rest of the clearing.

“Look, we were right. Look at the plants, they’re all larger round here - he must be causing the growth somehow.” Alain pointed to Grfen, who was already catching up to Rain after Dusk in terms of growth. The height difference was barely a foot now, both of them pushing 10-11ft and looking noticeably bulkier. “Those two as well, their growth rates are beginning to match up. Just being near this stag is making everything larger.”

“There must be a way to stop it, some way to reverse the growth. God, what happens if it just never stops? What if they just grow forever?” Leroy ran his hands through his hair.

“YOU’RE NOT STOPPING ANYTHING.” Savauren boomed, leaning forwards to glare at the two scientists. His horns were enormous, easily several tons of bone scything through the air with scary speed, Savauren seemingly completely unaware that his neck had enough strength to bend steel like tissue. “I LIKE BEING LARGE. IT FEELS *SO* ***GOOD*,** ALL THIS STRENGTH, THIS POWER. I’M NEVER GOING BACK, AND YOU CAN’T MAKE ME. GOT IT?” He leaned in close for effect, and both the scientists just put their hands up and nodded, trying not to make the giant menacing herbivore angry. Savauren leaned back, his point made, and Leroy stepped forwards.

“Hey, you say you feel stronger. Just how much stronger are you than before? Can you give it a rough number?” He pulled out a pen and notepad, expecting the stag to start talking about the changes, but instead he grinned and stood up.

“LET ME SHOW YOU.” He said, turning to the boulders around the side of the clearing. These weren’t small rocks, rather huge boulders the size of houses, parts of the mountain that had fallen and slowly been grown over by moss and trees. Savauren reached down and dug his fingers into the soil, grinning as his body swelled with mass, as all the strength locked in that form was brought to bear on the poor rock. The sound was cataclysmic as slowly over 100 tons of solid rock was ripped from the ground and held aloft, forced into the air by what must have been the most powerful stag in existence. He roared in triumph as he hauled it up, then having made his point he set himself low. He crouched, those thighs tensing as he lowered his body and got himself underneath the rock, putting every last inch of his frame to use.

“**GRRRAAAAAAAAGHHHH!!!!”**

The roar that Savauren let out was biblical as he launched the rock with every last bit of strength that he had. It went sailing out over the forest, high enough that they almost lost sight of it, but they were more preoccupied with the ground around them ripping apart. The laws of physics meant that an equal amount of force was driven into the ground when he threw it, and evidently that was a lot more than regular old earth could handle. Great cracks sheared through the ground, and Rain after Dusk was forced to grab Leroy and haul him upwards lest he fall into one of them. The trees nearby somehow survived the show of strength, but they were definitely leaning away from the clearing now that the world had stopped shaking and he could see them again.

There was an almighty explosion from far away, so loud that they could feel it from all the way over here - the rock falling to earth, presumably making a very large hole somewhere in the forest. Savauren panted as he stood there, that immense chest rising and falling like almighty bellows, powering the titanic engine he called his body.

“HOW’S THAT FOR STRONG?”

Leroy didn’t know what to say to that. He felt like he was in a comic of some kind, like he was watching science fiction play out in front of him - it was all so surreal he couldn’t get his head straight. Part of it was the impossibility of what he had just witnessed, the fact that no living organism should even be able to approach this level of strength and size. But another part of it was the realisation that there was something else to worry about. He’d thought those were mountains in the distance, but he was wrong. They were moving. No, to be more specific: they were *walking*.

“Savauren, you think you could give us a lift?”

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“This was a horrible idea.” Alain looked like he was about to throw up, and rightfully so - the motion underneath them was sickeningly uneven, sometimes huge lurches and other times smooth bumps. It didn’t help that they were 80ft in the air and with nothing but Savauren’s hand to stop them falling to their deaths. Not that the stag wouldn’t catch them of course, but Alain wasn’t a fan of putting his life quite literally in the hands of another.

“OH DON’T WORRY, YOU’RE LIGHT.” Savauren grinned at Alain’s discomfort. Despite graciously agreeing to carry them he had still allowed himself a bit of fun, namely pretending to drop them and catching them at the last second, or other pranks to that extent. To him they were little more than toys, tiny dolls that he could mess around with to his heart’s content - after all, they weren’t going to stop him. The only reason he was going along with this was because he was also curious about the living mountain - taking them along was hardly a burden, and they might be able to show him a thing or two. At least, that was his reasoning, and why he had them sitting on his open palm as he walked through the forest.

“I’M SURPRISED YOU DIDN’T NOTICE HIM EARLIER.” Savauren chuckled, the sound like an avalanche rumbling through their bodies. Leroy felt a wash of cold realisation rush through him.

“Him?”

“YEAH. DUNNO HIS NAME BUT HE’S BEEN GROWING EVEN FASTER THAN ME, AND THAT’S SAYING SOMETHING.” Savauren gave another flex just to emphasise the point - in the few minutes he’d been talking with the scientists he’d grown another 20 feet, the rate of growth only increasing over time, and accordingly his body had only thickened with the extra height. Each step thundered into the ground, trees and plants effortlessly crushed underfoot as he scythed his way through the forest. He kept one hand open, the one that the team were sitting on, meaning they got a good view as the stag walked towards what they had thought were mountains. This viewpoint however was more enlightening.

It was an absolutely titanic bear, so large he didn’t seem real. It looked like something out of a video game, some gargantuan being roaming the land, a deity from an old time. Leroy couldn’t even estimate the height accurately - his best guess was anywhere from 5000 to 15000 feet. At this size there just wasn’t anything to go off, everything around the creature was tiny in comparison. It felt weird calling the bear a creature - the idea that this was another living thing like them, that this had once been sharing the forest with them, it was absurd. This was a god now, a living deity ponderously patrolling the forest.

“You feel that?” Grfen shivered as they felt something vibrate the air, a vast booming *THUMP* that seemed to echo outwards. It was as if the world itself was breathing, the very atmosphere contracting as it was forced to accommodate something far *far* too vast, as the planet shuddered under the unspeakable weight being stomped into it. Footsteps, but on a whole other scale entirely.

“We need to get closer, I need a sample if possible!” Leroy shouted up, to which Savauren just nodded and picked up the pace a bit. As they approached though something felt…off. It was almost as if the air was getting thicker, and it was such an unsettling feeling that even Savauren faltered, the stag stumbling a little for seemingly no reason.

“WOAH.” He took another step and the sensation only intensified. On his hand the party were feeling it too, all of them groaning as the pressure formed around them.

“The hell is this?” Alain winced as his body seemed to buzz, every cell vibrating in unison at the command of something in the air. He looked at Leroy and his eyes widened - his partner was growing, right before his eyes. He’d been exposed evidently, but the compound wasn’t supposed to still be in the air - not only was it dense enough to fall to the forest floor, it should have all been absorbed by now. He looked down and sure enough his body was swelling too, muscle pushing against the fabric of his lab coat and slowly forcing the seams to burst apart.

“Hey! Take a step away from him” Leroy shouted this up, his voice tinged with pleasure, and as Savauren did just that the sensation lessened. After a few steps it disappeared entirely, but the growth was not accordingly reversed - they stayed at the increased size, looking at each other in confusion. Only Leroy seemed to understand.

“It’s him. The bear. He’s generating the compound in an area around him.” Leroy held his hands over his eyes, trying to see the ground near where the bear was walking, and sure enough the plants directly underneath him were enormous, as if they’d been growing for centuries and then some. Even as he watched they were still growing, but the rate was far beyond what he’d seen before. “Looks like it’s more concentrated the closer we get to him.”

“That’s not all.” Alain pointed to the two animals behind them, and Leroy’s jaw almost hit the floor when he saw they were both pushing 20ft tall and impossibly jacked. Grfen looked like he’d done nothing but pump iron for half a century, the badger flexing biceps the size of beach balls and chuckling.

“Ohhh, I could get used to this.” he said, his voice rumbling with undisguised pleasure as he flexed harder. Rain after Dusk was similarly larger, although he wasn’t as enamoured with his size as the others.

“We have to get a sample one way or another, one of us has to go near him to get it.” Leroy looked around for volunteers but there was no need to pick one: Grfen stepped forward, his face lighting up at the prospect of even more growth.

“So what, you guys just need some fur or something?”

“Blood, we need his blood. You’ll have to cut him with something to get it.”

Grfen grinned, jumping off Savauren’s hand. He fell a good 80ft to the ground, impacting with a loud thud and knocking over a few trees, then he grabbed one of them. The end was sharp where it had snapped, and he looked up at the group with it held in one hand like a stake.

“Don’t go anywhere!” he shouted before sprinting at the bear. Immediately his body was forced into overdrive, every cell exploding with size as he packed on just as much muscle as height. Each step thudded into the ground with more and more weight, each pulse of growth only made him groan and grin harder by the second. He could feel the world growing more fragile around him, the trees bending out of the way as he scythed through them like some living wrecking ball, laughing at his ascension. By the time he reached the bear he was just as large as Savauren, if not more so, and with no hesitation he hefted the tree - now basically a twig in his hands - and jammed it right into the bear’s foot. If it was felt there was no indication, and Grfen really had to ram it home in order to pierce the skin. It took him thrusting almost 40ft of tree into the limb, but eventually he made it through, pulling it out and smiling as he saw red on the end. He ran back towards the group, tree held triumphantly in his hand.

To Alain it looked like an optical illusion. Grfen looked like he was much closer than he actually was due to the size, and when he thought the badger was right in front of him he was actually still several miles away. When he eventually did arrive back he was almost 300ft tall, his body so swollen with power that he was almost giddy. He took the now toothpick-sized tree and wiped some of the blood on Savauren’s palm, next to the group.

“There you go little guy. Let me know if you find a cure. I’m not gonna need it.” With a chuckle Grfen walked off, the forest shaking from his mere presence as he walked back towards the bear once again. Leroy got to work immediately, taking a smear of the blood and putting it into the microscope he’d brought with him. They didn’t have the full means to analyse it with them, but there was no need - the blood cells were so large they were almost visible to the naked eye, having grown thousands of times larger than they should. Even as they watched the smear on Savauren’s palm moved like an oil slick, growing more and more until it was dripping off the edge of his hand.

“UGH.” Savauren wiped it off with his other hand and felt a shiver of growth again, comparatively little compared to before but enough to make him notice. “HIS BLOOD TOO?”

“Looks like it.” Alain was also poking at the blood, feeling the same shocks of growth as his system was exposed bit by bit. “Lower concentration, but this is just a small amount of blood.”

“No, it’s not. His cells actually contain the compound, they’re replicating themselves with it already in there.” Leroy’s face was ashen as he looked at the bear. “It’s grey goo, we can’t stop it. The compound is replicating itself, which means the growth is exponential, and there’s no way we can slow it down, let alone halt it. That bear is going to keep growing until this planet is the size of a marble to him. Maybe more. We won’t know until his head breaks the atmosphere and he runs out of oxygen, and by that point we just have to hope he doesn’t break the planet when he falls unconscious.”

Alain too looked at the bear. He gazed upon their work, and all the worry seemed to leave his face. “We’ve fucked this way too far, haven’t we?”

“Yyyyyyep.” Leroy looked at the blood on Savauren’s hand, still pooling larger by the second. “If he doesn’t break the planet then the stuff near him will when it grows to his size too.”

For the first time today Alain just smiled. Perhaps it was the weight of all his worries disappearing, the realisation that there was no salvaging this, that he would just have to let it happen. Hell, he could even enjoy it.

“Savauren, put us down.” he called up, and Savauren did so, dropping them to the floor. Rain after Dusk looked at them from above as Alain began to walk towards the bear, instantly growing again.

“The hell are you doing?” Leroy went to pull him back but was afflicted with the same growth, his lab coat ripping apart as new muscle tore it to shreds, his frame constricted for maybe half a second before the fabric gave way to diamond-hard strength. The demise of his clothes was far faster than Alain’s jacket, which was forced to endure the scientist slowly flexing harder and harder, watching the seams sloooowly tear apart as he flexed them into pieces, cords ripping and cloth shredding as it revealed the glorious power underneath.

“RRRRAGH! DAMN that feels good.” Alain grinned down at his partner. “Look, we’re all fucked either way, might as well make it enjoyable. You fancy a walk into the growth sunset?” He grinned as he held out his hand, the limb so engorged with strength it looked like a tree trunk - and was on the way to being thicker than one too. Leroy looked at it for a second, then he also grinned and grabbed it. With Rain after Dusk thudding along behind them, they walked towards the bear, and towards the end of the world. Or the growth of it - none of them could tell anymore.