

# **LETTING LOOSE**

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The environment of a gym was one of Dan's favorite places; that raw mix of sweat and musk battling against the scent of sterile cleaner and a dozen different protein powders, the sounds of grunts from his fellow devotees and the heavy clanking of metal; it may not have been as pleasant to the senses as sweet incense and choir music, but for the cheetah, this was church.

And what an apt comparison to make, in a gym like this—Dan knew the owner, an eccentric nutjob of a cat who had more magic and money than restraint, but he certainly could be useful. The gym, called The Bandersnatch, was unlike any Dan had ever trained in. The floor was inlaid with marble, the floor-to-ceiling mirrors framed in gold. Lines of sculpted pillars and bronze statues of figures with god-like physiques punctuated the rows of top-quality workout machines and racks of free weights. It was like working out in an ancient temple; but the decor didn't matter so much, so long as it would still challenge him. The machines and weights were all upscaled to cater to the biggest and the strongest.

Dan was in a rare position where he didn't feel out of place, as all around him were bodybuilders, powerlifters, and others pushing their bodies past their natural limits—but he still felt a twinge of pride that even then, he was definitely among the biggest here. The cheetah was a giant amongst other big cats, standing tall at seven feet, and a colossal mass of muscle. He had a classical look, with a fine tapered waist and chiseled abs, sculpted legs that made the columns lining the gym look soft and pliable by comparison, and a bust with sprawling traps and flaring lats to capture that essential V-shaped silhouette. The cheetah's spots were warped over his engorged muscle, the sleek fur highlighting his defined musculature. He pushed back his long brown hair, adjusted his glasses, and scanned the room—he was waiting for someone.

"Ah, there you are!" A strong hand smacked Dan on his sculpted glutes. The cheetah huffed, but otherwise showed no surprise—he didn't want to give the rat the satisfaction. He turned to face his workout partner, Victor Magnusson. He was Dan's rival and confidant, a friend he could rely on in tough situations—and a massively vain, strutting flirt half in love with his own reflection. The rat was attractive, for those that still found leather clad, pompadour combing, jukebox-punching greasers and other historical anachronisms attractive. To be fair, he was a beast in the gym—his grey fur and gold stripes were stretched taut over a behemoth physique of thick, meaty muscles. In fact, the rat had about a hundred pounds on Dan, with his plunging canyon of a chest and biceps the size of melons—but at their size, a hundred pounds was a drop in the bucket.

"I'm surprised you beat me here," Dan said, a tight grin spreading across his face. "I thought your gut'd get wedged in the door again," he quipped, smacking the slight curve of the rat's middle. In truth, Victor's thick torso was packed with dense abs and was as taut as a drum; but Dan would never admit to that.

"Uh-huh. Get your chicken legs on a treadmill, we don't have time for you to pretend to be clever, Bergstrom."

The two began with a rigorous run— Victor tapped out after two miles, but Dan had a bit of species pride to live up to, outpacing the rat by an extra mile.

"Keep telling you more cardio can help you lose some of that extra poundage, Magnusson," Dan said with a smirk.

"Bite me, Spots. A cheetah outrunning a rat is like a fish swimming better than a sloth. You don't get points for that." Victor responded, elbowing Dan in the middle. "We'll get down to the weights, see who the *real* champ is."

There had been a plan for this workout session—the two were *supposed* to work their backs and shoulders today, but that quickly fell to the wayside as both meatheads had a point to make. Victor set up his revenge on the bench press; he took his sweet time getting there, however. The rat stopped to flirt with, in quick succession, an otter working her glutes, a wolf on his third set of pull-ups, and a bear pulling a very impressive deadlift.

"Hey, Magnusson? Some of us are here to work out, y'know?" Bergstrom called out, cupping his hands to make sure as much of the gym heard as possible. Victor's face soured as the cheetah called him out, and sulked back to the bench press.

"Don't you know better than to interrupt a master at work, Bergstrom?"

Dan scoffed. "Is *that* what you called it? I thought I was saving you from crashing and burning. What was that line you used? 'Something must be wrong with my eyes, because I can't take them off of you'? When'd you have time to dust off *that* little relic?"

"Hey, it worked on your mom." Victor replied. "Anyways, are we going to spend all day chit-chatting or are we pumping iron?" He began sliding heavy plates onto the barbell, then paused as he glanced up at Dan. "Oh—I forgot, I'm setting up for my usual rep set. You sure you're going to be able to keep up with me, Spots?"

"Like I kept up with you on our run? Just load 'em up, old man."

Dan was good with numbers, but the cheetah admittedly lost count—the combined weight piled on that long-suffering barbell was somewhere in the range of a small vehicle, he was certain of that. With a side glance at the striped rat, who flashed a toothy smirk at him, Dan settled on the bench press, and gripped the bar tightly. He grunted as he hefted the weight in the air, his triceps billowing out and his pecs inflating, the shelf of his engorged chest pressing against his chin. He grit his teeth through the reps; one, two, three, four... he paused, a slight wobble in his hands as Victor leaned forward to spot him, casting the cheetah in the shadow of his own pec overhang. Five...

"C'mon, Bergstrom, halfway there."

Dan grunted, the swollen muscles of his arms churning like engine pistons. Six, seven... eight...

The cheetah exhaled sharply, and the barbell clattered loudly back into place.

"Hey, Spots, the set is for ten."

"Yeah? Well, it's eight today."

"For you, maybe."

Dan swerved around, narrowing his eyes as Victor cracked his knuckles. "Clear the way, kitten, you're in my seat." The rat quipped.

The cheetah watched Victor mount the bench, his thick lats flaring out as he gripped the bar. He smirked up at Dan, smoothly pumping the bar up and down, the cold iron smacking against Victor's pumped mass of pectoral brawn. His anvil-sized triceps rolled through the motions, smoothly and rhythmically. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...

Victor paused, huffing slightly. It seemed his arms had locked, the bar shaking slightly in the air. Dan watched intently, and with Victor's face shadowed beneath the cheetah's chest, he swore he saw an all too familiar glint in the rat's golden eyes. His smirk widened, growing toothy and all too smarmy.

Eight, nine... ten... eleven. An extra rep, just for showing off. Victor let the barbell drop with a bit of a flourish, beating his chest and letting out a victorious roar. Dan was glaring daggers at him.

"You *cheat*. You dirty old cheat, Magnusson." The cheetah crossed his arms. "I saw that glint in your eye. I know what that means."

Victor let out a soft, disbelieving laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about, Bergstrom."

"We had an understanding working out— no chemical augmentation from me, no demon magic from you." Dan prodded his finger at Victor's dense chest.

The rat batted his hand away. "Don't get pissy at me because I'm stronger, Spots."

"Uh-huh, bullshit. Get your fat ass over to the other side of the weight room, we're hitting the squat rack next."

Dan marched Victor over to the racks, weighing down the barbell with enough weight that it groaned under the pressure. He gestured toward it, and Victor mounted the bar. The rat shouldered the weight, and huffed, puffing up his cheeks as he felt the weight hit his shoulders.

"What's the matter, old man?" Dan crossed his thick arms, biceps mashed against his chest, straining his workout shirt. "Something weighing you down? Missing the smell of fire and brimstone?"

"Can it." Victor hissed through gritted teeth. The rat's legs were thick around as beer kegs, teardrop quads bristling and sculpted calves tensing, his glutes beefy and round as he squat down. He was immensely powerful—but Dan had loaded up the squat rack with the equivalent of a luxury car, and Victor's strength had its limits, especially if someone was watching him to make sure he *didn't* tap into any demonic influence he may or may not have access to. He grunted his way through seven reps, until the rat's knees locked and he had to cradle the bar back on to the rack.

Dan wore a thin smile as he clapped sarcastically. "Hey, I mean, don't take it too hard, Magnusson— most men your age can't even lift over a hundred pounds."

"I'm this close, Spots, I swear," Victor grumbled as he swapped positions with the cheetah. Dan mounted the weight, and his legs, his pride and joy, got to work. They were works of art; just as the great masters of the past had poured their hearts and souls into statues of saints and kings, Dan had spent years sculpting his diamond cut quads, thighs working like heavy duty tires as his perfectly shaped calves tensed, the lovingly crafted shape of his glutes flexing with each squat. He moved fluidly, showing as little strain as Victor did on the bench press.

The rat's eyes drifted down to the churning mass of muscle, going on his sixth rep—Dan was going slowly and deliberately, just to rub it in. Seven, eight, nine... and Victor spotted it. The thick, pulsing veins that snaked their way across the cheetah's musculature pulsed with a curious shade. Dan set the bar down after ten reps, an appropriately cat-like smile on his face.

Victor rolled his eyes. "Okay, wise-ass. What happened to no chemical augmentations? The veins in your leg muscles are glowing neon. I'm pretty sure your blood is radioactive right now."

Dan shrugged his broad shoulders, replying in an airy tone. "I don't know what you're talking about, Magnusson."

The rat cut the space between him and his workout partner, their chests smashing against each other with the force of a head-on collision. "Okay, Bergstrom. You *didn't* use any chemical augmentation, I *didn't* tap into any demonic force. But why don't we settle today in a more straightforward fashion?"

"Oh yeah? Well, it can't be an eating contest—you'd have an unfair advantage."

"Yeah well, your science fair ribbons aren't going to be much help here either, poindexter. You and me, in the boxing ring—we let everything loose. Nice, clean spar."

Dan eased up on Victor, standing straight to muse on that for a moment. There was a glint in his eye—even when working out, there was always *something* he had to hold back. A chance to really push himself? He could feel the cords of muscle tighten, like a bow string drawn taut. "You know what, Magnusson? You got yourself a deal—loser covers the winner's supps for a month."

"Deal—I just hope you have money for the good stuff," Victor smirked. "You don't get a bod like this on the cheap."

"Oh yeah, only the finest bacon burgers and triple-thick shakes for you," Dan replied.

"It's not a *crime* to enjoy good food, you know—you might try it sometime, maybe it'll get that stick out of your ass."

The cheetah smirked. "Yeah, well it's not a crime to walk around with a beer gut, either, so you're good either way."

"Get in the ring, Spots, we'll see if you can outrun my fist."

The two entered the Bandersnatch's professional listed ring, shedding their shirts and wrapping their hands tight, letting the chiseled mountains of muscle show between the two of them. "It ain't too late, Kitten," Victor said, cracking his knuckles. "You want to dip out and run away, I know it's your preferred strategy."

"It'd be a brisk walk to outrun you, Magnusson, I still got plenty of time."

"Alright, show me what you got, Bergstrom, hit me with your best shot!"

The two raised their fists, starting to circle one another and size each other up, eyes locked. The cheetah moved first, striking like a fourteen hundred pound cobra; he got Victor in the side, but it was only skin deep. Victor returned with a right wing hook, only just missing Dan's face and striking the bulwark of his shoulder—there might be a bruise, but it'd blend in with his spots.

The cheetah kept a cool head; he knew Victor pretty well, and his fighting style. He wasn't the most creative fighter, though he rarely had to be. He had picked up boxing at a young age, and practiced every day; he hit hard, like an avalanche, and was used to knocking out his opponents with one well-aimed punch that would hit like a battering ram. He had four, maybe five moves he kept coming back to, and it wasn't quite so impressive when his hands weren't wreathed in flame and demon horns were sticking out of his pompadour. Still, Dan was no fool—he knew the old adage; a man might know a thousand moves, but beware the man that practices one move a thousand times.

Victor was also taking this fight seriously. Dan had been on his tail for years, always just behind or right on par with him in terms of raw strength. He liked competition, and he would most likely try to bring Victor down through death by a thousand cuts, bobbing and weaving and hoping several small jabs would bring him down instead of one big hit. It was best to go on the defensive; let the cheetah crack his skull ramming into a brick wall.

Dan stomped forward, and the sheer power in his leg sent ripples across the boxing ring, hoping to throw off Victor's deeply rooted stance. The ring's ropes trembled, and for the first time, the cheetah saw Victor falter. It was a brief second, and the rat quickly recovered, but Dan saw the reason—they were starting to draw a crowd. This could be to his advantage; Victor always loved an adoring crowd, but in a more neutral audience? Maybe he could get them on his side.

The cheetah bent low, his leg muscles coiling like springs, and he launched himself in the air, delivering a flying kick that not only struck Victor in the abs, but also looked *really* cool. The rat staggered back, gritting his teeth as some of the audience cheered for Dan, then spat to the side.

"Lucky strike," the rat grunted. He pulled himself up and moved in on offense, just as Dan predicted. Victor charged him like an oncoming train, and Dan side-stepped him easily—only for Victor to strike with his left arm, his engorged bicep powering a cannonball's worth of force straight to the face. The cheetah's glasses flew off and Dan lost his balance.

Victor stood over him, thinking he had gotten the cheetah in one blow, just the way he liked it—but Dan leapt back to his feet, his mammoth body moving with surprising agility. "Good one," he grunted. For a moment, Victor had the advantage—the cheetah's sight was impaired, and the rat moved in to strike, but the lumbering greaser was hardly subtle. Dan could hear him on his right, could still see his unfocused bulk step to the side, and worse, he could

smell the pomade on him. Dan struck with the flat of his hand, giving a one-two strike to Victor's chest and abs, cutting through the dense layer of muscle to knock the wind out of him.

He had maybe a few seconds to gingerly move around the field, and snatch up his glasses. He had them on just in time to see Victor's foot strike him in his torso, his cobblestone abs absorbing most of the impact, but the cheetah staggered back, wheezing and suddenly regretting the egg-white omelet he had for breakfast.

"Had enough?" Victor asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"You wish, Magnusson."

Dan may need to switch up tactics after all; what if *he* beat Victor at his own game, and delivered an overwhelming punch to end the fight? The cheetah breathed deeply, letting his strength build up as he dodged and weaved Victor, now thoroughly on the offensive, egged on by the crowd. The big cat curled his arm, his lats flaring out as he swerved behind Victor and struck him once, twice, three times up his spine, sending ripples across the rat's landscape of back muscle. Victor was thrown off balance, and even staggered against the ropes, but threw himself back at Dan.

The two charged, curling back arms with enough brawn and raw power to punch through walls, and made their last gamble— Victor went low, Dan went high, and as they connected with one another, their combined momentum and mass collided with one another in a show of power that shook the floor. They hit the ground hard enough to buckle the ring, tearing through its foam surface and leaving a crater in which both of them now lay.

Dan huffed, his pecs bouncing from the exertion, as his sprawling tapestry of lat muscles rested against Victor's brick-wall back.

"...Damn." Dan huffed. "I cracked my lens."

Victor, also catching his breath, looked over his mountainous shoulder. "Okay... draw? You buy my supps, I buy yours."

"Throw in a replacement lens, you got a deal."

"Fine. You got it, Spots." Victor reached over, his bicep smacking into Dan's, to shake his hand. The two pulled each other up, and Dan patted the rat on the back.

"Thanks— that was oddly refreshing."

"Heh." Victor punched Dan in the side. "You are literally the only person I let get away with calling me fat. We good for Friday?"

"Course. Someone needs to put you through your paces, old man."