

Wildworld current chapter

The tension in the room was palpable. Josh swore he could smell it. It felt like the room was full of static electricity and one wrong move would send bolts of lightning sizzling through the air. Dr. Smiles seemed oblivious to this, however, his demeanor as if he was welcoming old friends for supper. He chuckled.

“Now now, no need for such... hostility. We all want the same things after all.” The cats all looked amongst themselves in confusion. What could he possibly mean? Dr. Smiles gave a condescending look, like he knew something they didn’t and was astounded they hadn’t realized it yet. His tone was like a kindergarten teacher addressing his students. “You want to rescue your friends, do you not? Well don’t worry, I have no further need of them. I have... other toys to play with.” He cast a glance towards Jonathan, making his fur bristle. “You are all free to go at any time you wish.”

“We don’t want to go! We want to stop you from experimenting on innocent people!” Danielle snarled. Dr. Smiles looked around the group. There was a hint of disgust in his voice.

“I’m afraid we can only communicate one way. I don’t speak.... Feline.”

“They said they want to stop your horrid experiments.” Jonathan piped up from the back. Dr. Smiles turned to him, a look of keen interest on his face. Jonathan’s ears pressed flat against his skull, betraying his fear. But he held his ground.

“Ah, a translator.” The man smiled. “A true miracle of science, no?”

“Your ugly face is a miracle of science.” Jonathan shot back, his mouth speaking the words before his mind could think better of it. Dr. Smiles seemed unfazed.

“You want to stop me? What for? Stopping me won’t turn you back.” he paused for dramatic effect, allowing this information to sink in. Kill me if you want, but my formulas will die with me. Even your friends back at the zoo needed my help to perfect their product. Ash doesn’t have the know-how to turn you back. She’s light years behind.” The spiel cut through their hearts like miniature daggers.

“No! You’re lying! There has to be a way back!” Danielle growled. The other cats rose up their own cacophonies of protest.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Dr. Smiles continued, his tone almost sounding amused. “You’re thinking that there has to be a way back somehow. After all, you changed species once, right? And you’re right, there is. But I’m the only one who knows it, and if you harm me in any manner you kill any chance of changing your circumstances.” He adjusted his glasses, pushing them up his nose.

“But I don’t see why for the life of me you would want to change back. You live pampered lives at the park. You’re hardly responsible for anything other than your own pleasure. All you have to do is eat, sleep, and breed. If you ask me I did you all an immense favor.”

“But we’re caged up like... like... animals!” Danielle growled. “How is living in a prison doing us a favor?” Jonathan quickly translated the sentence. Dr. Smile’s expression did not budge, save for the slight lifting of an eyebrow.

“If you’d rather live in the wild I’d be happy to arrange that. I could even transport you all to your fitting habitats. But I think you will find the natural world much harsher than you expect. I think the zoo will be far more satisfactory for your needs.” Several of the cats shuddered, remembering the effort it took to get there. Cecil and Brittney simply nodded to themselves.

“I’d rather go back to the wild.” Brittney whispered to Cecil. “That’s much better than being caged up in here.”

“Yeah” Cecil agreed, “Hunting’s not that hard once you get used to it. I think it’s kinda fun.”

“Just think it over.” The man’s mouth stretched slightly upwards so that it was barely perceptible. “You’ll soon see that we have no reason to be enemies. We’re much better off as friends.”

“But that’s wrong!” Danielle growled. “We can’t let you keep doing this to other-” She stopped as she saw Dr. Smiles turn away as if preparing to leave. But before he stepped outside, he cast one last glance towards the group.

“Oh, by the way,” he mentioned, like he forgot something on a grocery list. “You and the clouded leopards are free to leave. The fox stays, though. I’m not... done with him yet.” Danielle cast a worried glance towards Jonathan, who looked absolutely petrified. She grit her fangs and the other cats did the same.

“Why should we let you have him?” Danielle growled. Dr. Smiles looked at Jonathan to translate, but the fox man was trying to hide behind the sink. No matter.

“Judging from your rather threatening tone, I presume that that deal won’t work for you. Too bad, it was a really good deal.” He daintily rested his head on his index finger, thinking for only the briefest of moments.

“We have three potential solutions here. One, I kill you all and leave your corpses for the scavengers. Two, you leave now with your friends, leave the fox behind, and carry on with your insignificant, carefree lives. I highly recommend this option.” He emphasized the word “highly”, giving the tone of a schoolteacher admonishing some unruly students. “Or lastly, you leave with everyone in tow, including Mr. Misfit, and I find some new toys to play with. Hurt more of those “innocent people” you go on and on about. It’s your choice, but once again I highly suggest taking option-”

“I suggest option D” Danielle snarled, before barking out a quick order. “Josh now!”

On cue a grey blur lept down from above, pinning the scientist to the ground. Before either Smiles could even grunt in pain from his shoulder slamming into the concrete his jugular was encased by a powerful set of jaws. They hadn’t clamped down, not yet, but the man could feel the tips of the deadly fangs poking against his skin. His guards haven’t even had time to raise their weapons, it had happened so fast. Dr. Smiles wasn’t sure if the liquid dripping down his neck was sweat or saliva.

Danielle chuffed in triumph. It hadn’t been planned, but as she held Smile’s and his cronies attention Josh had used his powerful back legs to hop on top of the white shelves that stored the numerous beakers and chemicals that Smiles used in his experiments. In the dim lighting his white and silver pelt was difficult to spot, which allowed him to creep closer and closer as Smiles went on and on. When he had moved to leave he unwittingly found himself

right under the big cat. Smiles should have known that a big cat's favorite attack angle was from above. Now his guards were starting to fidget, waving their guns between Josh, Danielle, and the others, not quite sure who to target. Danielle could feel the musky scent of fear entering her nostrils. She licked her muzzle, drinking it in. It gave her a feeling of power, of domination. It was time to chase these two scared rabbits out. She grinned, revealing her fangs. Words would not be necessary for this.

Snarling, she approached the two guards, who quickly trained their weapons on her. But she was soon joined by other snarls as the others began to follow. With silent footsteps she boldly approached them, knowing that they could only hit one or two of them before death sank its fangs into their necks. She knew they knew it too. In this small building, there was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. They had backed up into a corner, their motions more sporadic and undisciplined. Channeling her wild counterpart, she herded them towards the exit like gazelles on the serengeti. Glancing at the scientist one more time, they slunk out the door and into the clearing before a final growl from Brock sent them running off into the jungle. Danielle turned around to find Dr. Smiles still pinned under Josh, the snow leopard's tail twitching in anticipation and excitement.

"A-are you insane?" The man gasped, straining his voice to keep his neck away from the cat's fangs. "K-killing me is about the stupidest thing you can do! Unless you want to doom yourselves forever to-"

"Oh, we're not killing you." Danielle chuffed happily. "We're just leveling the playing field a little bit." Dr. Smiles glanced at Jonathan, who shrugged and repeated Danielle's words. The leopard padded up beside him, turning her head towards him.

“You can let go now, Josh. I don’t think he’s going anywhere.” The snow leopard opened his jaws, stepping back and smacking his lips like he’d just spit out a piece of gum. Danielle was sure a couple seconds more and Dr. Smiles would have been without a head. A cat could never sit still for long. The scientist coughed, gasping for breath like a fish out of water. His stonelike face had morphed into a curious expression, as if his features weren’t quite sure how to arrange themselves. His muscles cut through the skin on his face like a jungle, blazing paths never forged before. No longer was his voice cocky and confident. For the first time, perhaps in his life, he looked flustered.

“T-this is just absurd! Whatever do you think you’re doing?” Danielle grinned, revealing her sharp fangs.

“We’re making a new deal. Time to see your negotiation skills when you don’t have a posse to protect you.” Dr. Smiles sat up, brushing off his lab coat.

“It’s useless. Reinforcements will be here shortly, and you’ll be put back in your places. Mark my words I won’t be NEARLY as lenient as before.”

“I know. That’s why we’re taking you with us.” Dr. Smiles stopped what he was doing and looked up at the leopard, his pupils pinpricks in his eyes. His voice was much softer than before.

“What?”

“It’s simple, really. You come with us, or we’ll eat you alive.” Dr. Smiles stood up indignantly.

“You won’t kill me. And I’m not afraid of death.” His voice wavered slightly as he spoke the last word. Daniele chuffed, a malicious look in her eye. Even the other cats had to admit she was enjoying this a bit too much.

“Who said anything about killing you? You have plenty of fingers and toes to nibble on. Maybe I’ll rip off your legs and drag you through the forest. Or maybe I’ll eat your arms so you can’t do anymore experiments. It’s your choice.”

“Uhhh Danielle? Are you... okay?” Abigail called out from behind her. “You’re starting to get a little bit... psycho-y.” Danielle did the feline equivalent of a shrug.

“What, I’m hungry. It’s his fault for making me a carnivore.” The others had to admit that their stomachs were indeed grumbling. Hopefully it wouldn’t take a whole week to get back to camp. Dr. Smiles fidgeted nervously, appearing to mull it over. Finally he puffed up his coat, wiping the dirt off his glasses. He looked like a shell of the man who boldly entered the room just several minutes before.

“There’s no need for such violence. I’ll come with you.”

The trek through the jungle started out much the same way it had 7 days earlier, except it was surprisingly more difficult with a human in tow. Especially a human who despises getting dirty.

“Jeez, I thought WE had it rough” Josh whispered to Abigail as they watched Dr. Smiles stumble into another thorny branch. He yelped out an exclamation of both pain and frustration

before gingerly lifting the branch out of his way. Josh and Abigail ducked as it recoiled towards them before slowly vibrating back to normal.

“I’m almost glad we’ve got thick fur coats to protect us.” Abigail whispered back. Why she was whispering she wasn’t entirely sure. “I don’t think I’ve been poked once.”

“Pffft, he’s got to be bluffing.” Josh scoffed back. “I bet he’s doing this on purpose, to make us feel better.” Abigail tilted her head, unsure of whether she believed him or not. If he was pretending he was awfully convincing.

“Uh... does anyone actually know the way back?” Danielle, who was in the lead, stopped and turned towards the others. She had been following the vague scent trails they’d left behind but they had mostly faded into the background. The highways of her nose was clogged with incoming traffic left behind from other animals. The fresher scents only further confused her sense of direction. She wasn’t quite sure which way to follow.

“I thought you knew the way.” Brock murred. “We’re not lost, are we?”

“Uhhhh...” Danielle paused, not sure of what to say. Leopards weren’t used to following directions. Jungle gave way to jungle, and all of it looked mostly the same.

“Oh great. I’m following a bunch of nincompoops.” Josh growled from the back, trying to be quiet but still loud enough for everyone to hear.

Dr. Smiles seemed to notice the rising confusion. He let out a small groan of disgust, as if he was offended that he’d been captured by entities with such a clear lack of direction. It was

like a mouse leading around an elephant. Danielle, meanwhile, finally had an idea pop into her head. Why hadn't she done this before?

"Hey, Flash? Are you there?" She chirped pleasantly. "The cats are in the bag, we need a way out of here. What's our location? Over." To her surprise, the other end was eerily silent. Now that she thought about it it had been awhile since she'd heard a Flash fun fact or cheerful quib.

"Uhhhh Flash? Are you there?" Danielle said, concern starting to seep into her voice. Once again, the comms were silent. A lump started to rise in her throat as she glanced around at everyone else. The air of cautious optimism had slowly started to erode. But she couldn't call it quits yet. Maybe he was just on break?

"FLASH!!" She yelled, loud enough to startle both some of the cats, Jonathan, and Dr. Smiles. There was a collective jump which Danielle ignored. "YOU NEED TO WAKE UP AND TELL US WHERE WE ARE!!!" Once again the only noise was the buzz of insects and the cacophony of jungle life all around them. Danielle growled in frustration. Maybe it was the heat getting to her, or the noise, but she really wanted all this to be over. The sooner they got back with their hostage, the better. "I swear, I'm gonna sever that cheetah's jugular when I find him..."

"Screw him, he's probably asleep. Or eating. We can find our own way back." Brock chuffed confidently, pushing his way to the front of the pack. He pressed his nose against the ground, inhaling deeply several times. "I think I got a scent, guys. Follow me!"

It took three days of wandering before they finally reached familiar territory. Brock's nose was more often wrong than right, and as hunger seeped in it was easier and easier to get

distracted. Luckily, the one resource that isn't scarce in the jungle is water, so everyone's thirst was quenched. But apart from a small deer, a monkey, and some rodents that Cecil and Brittney bagged, there was nothing in terms of food. For Dr. Smiles there was even less, and the cats were starting to get worried. It was hard enough keeping him alive, let alone walking.

"I'm hungry." Abigail whispered to Josh.

"We all are." Josh responded, nipping the back of Dr. Smile's coat to make him move faster. "We're gonna starve our hostage before we even make it back."

"Well we're almost back so you all can shut it." Danielle hissed to the others. Once again she had retaken the lead. "The scents are much stronger now, so we should be back really soon."

"I can't wait to finally eat some real food." Abigail murred listfully. "I'd take zoo food at this point. Just being full for once."

"How the heck did you both manage?" Josh called out to Cecil and Brittney, who were running along above them in the trees. Cecil laughed.

"Experience." Cecil replied. "We were like you at first. But out here you learn quick if you don't want to starve."

"Yeah." Brittney chimed in. "It's actually easy to tell which animals are old or sick and will make easy prey. They have a certain smell to them that's easy to pick up."

“It smells a bit like rotting carrion.” Cecil agreed. “But waaaay better. You’d know it if you smelled it.”

“Hush guys. I think we’re there.” A few seconds later they indeed stumbled out to a clearing, but it was easy to think they had the wrong location. Nobody was there, and nothing remained except a flat lot and some weeds. The road still stretched across the back of the clearing, but it was devoid of any vehicles.

“Uhhh are we in the right place?” Abigail asked as they prodded into the space, Josh keeping an eye on Dr. Smiles as he went over to go sit on a log. “Where is everyone.”

“This is it.” Danielly confirmed bluntly, wishing her own senses could prove her wrong. But she couldn’t deny the scents of people and cheetah, even if they had faded over the last couple of days. She padded around the space looking for any clues. The others fanned out around her, each sharing the same idea.

“Wow, real smooth rescue, guys.” Brittney rolled her eyes. “Soooo well planned.” Danielle growled sharply at her, causing the smaller cat to back up with her tail between her legs.

“Ugh. I don’t have the time or patience for this.” She paced around in circles, trying to keep her head clear.

“Where could they have gone?” Jonathan asked, trying to refrain from breathing heavily. Danielle could smell fear all over the fox man. She was about to tell him not to panic, but someone beat her to it.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dr. Smiles leaned against the tree trunk, clearly not well. His face was an odd greenish color, and he had to huff and puff out his words. Still, it appeared he was at least able to talk.

“Y-you guys are s-such idiots. C-clearly they’ve all given up and gone home.”

“That’s stupid.” Danielle snarled. “They would have at least told us if we’d run out of time.” Dr. Smiles simply chuckled, before coughing and slumping down on the log.

“ T-then your organization must have been compromised. It’s simple, really. Did you not think we wouldn’t find yooooouuu...” his voice trailed off as he passed out, head slumping forwards and body going limp. Danielle was about to ask what he meant when the comms suddenly flickered to life, Flash’s voice breaking the silence like a jackhammer. It sounded desperate

“Guys! It’s Gould! Don’t trust him! Help! AAAAGGGU-” suddenly the mike cut out, filling the clearing with silence. For awhile nobody said anything, it was so quiet they could hear the rustling of the wind against their fur. Josh was the first one to break the silence.

“Uh oh.”

