

SIX

“Well, come on. We planned to go see Cathy,” Max stated climbing down his chair to the floor. “We’ll let her know what happened.” He patiently waited for Steve to work his way down from the table. “I can’t get over how big and different the room looks from way down here.”

“I felt dizzy for a moment up there, Dad. It was like staring over the edge of a five or six story building.”

Max looked up at the curled-up ball that was his youngest son. “Jake, do you plan to stay there for the next six hours, or will you join us?”

Jake ignored him.

Steve put a forepaw on his father’s shoulder and pointed towards the trap door with his eyes.

“Bro, we’ll let you be. If you change your mind, just follow your nose.”

The two feral skunks waddled over to the trap door and nosed about until they found the tiny ring that blended in. It smelled faintly of mint and cedar. After a couple of tries, they were able to lift the smaller skunk-size door and slipped down below onto the top step leading into the basement, which is when they realized there was a human-size trap door above them with a smaller skunk-size insert on one end.

“I wondered if there was an interior access to the basement or just the door under the deck,” Steve commented.

There were a few dim led nightlights plugged into the wall. While they wouldn’t have given much light for a human to see by, both the skunks could see enough detail with them to spot the narrow ramp on the edge of the stairs. Nosing at it, they could make out Cathy’s cedar and mint scent.

“It’s almost weird how quickly we’ve adapted to this,” Steve chirred.

“I had a bit more practice with it as a toony skunk that first night, Steve,” Max responded. “But I agree. It’s almost disconcerting.”

“The scientist in me is screaming this isn’t possible. Where did all our human mass go? If it was all converted to energy that fast, the camp would have been burned to the ground and we’d be ashes right along with it.”

“After my time in the navy, son, I can tell you there are some things in this world that can’t be explained by science. Come on.”

They quickly made their way to the basement floor and snuffled about until they picked up the trail again, leading to another small trap door under the back corner of the stairs. Max reached to pull it up. Steve held his father's forepaw in place with his own forepaw.

"Wait, Dad. We can't just barge in. It's her home, not ours. Remember, she scratched in warning last night before entering the camp." Steve scratched at the door a couple times with one forepaw.

They didn't wait long. Cathy poked her muzzle out of the trap door and her eyes shot wide in surprise. She came the rest of the way through "Hello!" she exclaimed in a very excited voice as she nuzzled each of them on the cheek in greeting. "Was this an 'accident' after several rounds or did you do this on purpose?"

"A little bit of both," Max replied. "I saw how dejected you seemed to be when you left yesterday. So, Steven and I discussed it today and we agreed we'd ask the board to double skunk us. Except..." he trailed off and looked down.

"Jake wasn't as willing to help us as we thought at first. We pushed him a little too hard and he sandbagged the game trying to prevent us from getting double skunked."

Cathy gasped. "He was so scared yesterday and yet you made him play tonight? Oh God. Come on. We shouldn't leave him alone."

"He's not going to want to see you."

"Even so, I need to talk to him about this."

They followed her back upstairs. Jake was still curled up whimpering on his chair.

"Jake," Max called out to his son. "We have company."

Cathy didn't wait. She climbed up the chair and nudged the new feral skunk. Jake looked up at her, hissed and cowered away as far as he could without falling off the chair. Cathy nudged him again and started grooming him like a mother would her kit. Jake seemed to calm a bit and looked at her again. She sat up and opened her arms offering to hug.

"It's alright, you're safe," she cooed to him in a motherly voice.

Jake hesitated for a moment and then accepted the hug and started crying on her shoulder. She rocked him back and forth, letting him cry his heart out. She continued to reassure him. She carefully stroked his back with one paw. Jake began to calm down.

"I'm so sorry, Jake. The board can be a bitch when it comes to sandbagging." She looked down at the other two. "I'll log into my Paypal account when I return to my den, Steve, and refund you two days rent."

Steve stared at her in surprise. And pointed to himself and his father. “We chose to do this.”

“But Jake didn’t. And because he sandbagged, the three of you are now skunks for the next 24 to 30 hours.”

“What?!” Jake cried out pulling out of her embrace.

“As I said, the board doesn’t like sandbagging to prevent transformation. The transformation time is compounded in such cases. From past observation,” she paused briefly before continuing, “and personal experience, it’s double time at the minimum plus add up to six hours for each person involved. So, twelve hours minimum and as there are three of you, that could be an additional eighteen hours. It all depends on the level of sandbagging. It punishes both the sandbagger and the one or ones to be skunked with the same length of time regardless of whether or not the ones to be skunked wanted that.”

Jake’s tail sagged. “I tried to break up my hand, but the cut put me back to what I had before. I then tried to help the others peg. The cards were too fucking good for me throughout the game. They had already changed into anthro skunks before the final hand. It freaked me out. The game wasn’t over and they were already starting to change. I didn’t want the board to win that easily.” The tears began to run down his muzzle again.

Cathy pulled him into another hug. “It’s alright, Jake. All of you will pull through this. I just wasn’t expecting to have to do Skunk 101 this week. Come on.” She pulled out of the hug and climbed down the chair.

Jake hesitated for a moment before climbing down after her.

“Skunk 101?” Max and Steve asked in near unison.

“Well, you’re feral skunks for the next day plus. I’ll teach you the basics of being a skunk. You’re going to get hungry at some point. Come morning we’ll all need to sleep. Tomorrow evening, you’ll need to be shown how to properly groom yourselves and so on until you change back.”

Jake cowered back from her.

She looked at him and swished her tail. “You don’t have to, Jake. You could just go curl-up in your bed and try to sleep it off. But you will get thirsty and it’s going to be a challenge to get up to either the kitchen or bathroom sinks. You’ll get hungry and you don’t have enough body mass to pull the fridge door open and get at the leftover pizza, which might not be safe for you as a skunk. I bet there’s onions and garlic on it.”

“How did you...” Jake trailed off as he realized he could smell the lingering scent of pizza.

“You have a stronger sense of smell now, Jake. Come on, I know you wanted to remain human. But I’ll try to make it up to you by making it fun for you. I usually only get to teach others how

to be a skunk a couple times a year.” Cathy was nearly floating on her paws as she led them towards the door. She wasn’t going to be lonely for the next twenty-four hours or so. Deep inside she was giddy with anticipation. She paused looking back at them and winked. She put her right forepaw to one of the door panels, caught her claw in it and slid it aside revealing a gap big enough for them all to crawl through. Once outside, she closed it behind her.

Jake stared about in amazement at how well he could see by the light of the stars and nearby camps. It wasn’t daylight but like on a very cloudy day. More than enough to see by. Steve felt similar amazement.

“So, forage for breakfast first or shooting range?” Cathy asked her entourage

“Well, we had dinner not that long ago just before our transformation,” Steve replied. “What’s this about a shooting range?”

“She took me to it Saturday evening, Steve, before we returned to the camp,” Max replied. He turned to Cathy. “But you said you only spray in self-defense as you only have five or six shots.”

“As do you in this form. And yes a skunk normally only sprays in self-defense. But I’ll expend one shot for the all of you if you want to see how far I can shoot. Besides, one of the first things you need to know as a skunk is your range and distance squirting musk.” She wrinkled her nose. “And how much it reeks, which is why we usually only fire it if we absolutely must. It’s your main defensive weapon against would-be-predators. Come on.”