

## || Jasper Brantley ||

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	-2 STR / +1 DEX / +1 INT / +1 CHA	
	+5 Deception / +3 History / +1 Performance / +1 Insight / +1 Survival	
	Lv. 3 Shapeshift / Lv. 1 Puppetry	

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[ [Application](#) / [He-Him](#) / [The Cats Downriver](#) ]

**“Now—*that’s* quite a look for you!”**

Jasper held out his arms for dramatic effect. **“I was told shoulder-length rubber gloves were the hit-new fashion trend.”** The tall tuxedo tom let out a snort.

The two of them stood at the bank of a clogged river that runs through what used to be the heart of the city, known as the Starpath River. Debris, loose junk, even some loose clothing could be seen piling up by the boughs of the Prosperity Bridge into grubby, condensing piles of greys and browns. You name it, it’s probably in this river.

Several other cats were already stationed around the bank slowly picking apart the litter. There were even a few waist deep in the middle of the water—not even the slightest bit concerned about the temperature or freezing water lapping at their fur.

Jasper shivered just at the sight of them.

Normally, the thought of fishing around with his arms in a river in the deep of winter sounded like the perfect activity meant for anyone but himself. And yet, Jasper was out here for exactly that. Willingly! Maybe he was getting used to the cold after all.

A slight gust of wind swept around his still outstretched limbs, and directly through his bones. Alright. Maybe he’d never be used to the cold. Again, the tuxedo tom let out a guffaw at his sudden shivering.

This particular tom was the one who invited him to come join in with helping cleaning up the river. Long-haired, silky black fur despite the scuffs of dirt from doing who-knows-what sort of odd job that day, a perpetual sleepy smile on his muzzle, and sharp green eyes that betrayed a deeply intelligent mind. He wore a slightly ragged dull, olive green jumpsuit with the top half tied off at his waist.

His name is Edwin. And who, as Jasper had just learned a week and a half ago, was in fact...his Uncle. Who in turn learned the same day he had a nephew.

All of this was a story of itself—and one Jasper was desperately trying to avoid thinking about at this moment.

It was hard to gauge his thoughts on the tom beyond the superficial things. Jasper had gotten the sense that Edwin thought the same. Or, *assumed*, rather. The tom was as hard to read as himself at times.

Nonetheless, the two of them have been affable with each other, if slightly awkward at moments, but Edwin had taken it all in stride. Laughed more than once at the news as though he could hardly still believe it.

Jasper pretended not to notice the way his eyebrows furrowed when he laughed. Or the lingering stare Edwin gave him every once in a while.

He knew they weren't directed at him.

In this very moment though, that internal tension was all but released as Jasper watched Edwin wave and call out to the other cats by the river. Each one shouted back with a toothy grin or joking pleasantry. Edwin was a regular around here. Every time cats would form up by the Starpath River, he'd be one of the very first to stop by. And he had invited Jasper to join him that day.

He stressed that this wasn't some "*bonding*" experience for the two of them. He could just tell that Jasper was like him—he liked to keep busy. And there's no better way to do that than to find some way to help others out. Jasper couldn't agree more.

Edwin squinted at Jasper. Keeping his paws on his hips, he tilted his head practically sideways as he studied his attire.

**"Ain't it just a little overkill, though?"** He couldn't tear his eyes away from the shining rubber gloves.

Jasper chuckled himself. **"Can't risk a thing. My paws are my livelihood. My boss would put me out of a job if I come home with even a speck of dirt in my claws."** He nodded with playful seriousness.

Edwin let out a low whistle.

**"Well, we can't have *that*, now can we?"** He stepped closer and slapped the back of his shoulder with a freezing wet \*SMACK!\*. How gracious of him.

With a sopping wet paw behind his back guiding him to the river, Edwin brings Jasper to a pile of debris he had already started working on.

Edwin extended out a paw, as if to say, *tada!*

Jasper blinked. Oh—oh!

**“It’s uh—it’s certainly coming along,”** Was it...? The mass of trash looked just like the others around here. Edwin sighed.

**“Yeaah, it’s not much. You’d never imagine that a whole flock of us have been here since the smoke from the factory was glowing from the sunrise.”** He said with a flourish of his free paw. **“Speaking of—hey, Anya! Talia! Need another set of paws over there?”**

Just a handful of meters away was a small huddle of cats, two of whom raised their heads and called back out to Edwin. Jasper followed him along to the group. Introductions were exchanged and laughs were immediately shared, a few jokes sent Jasper’s way about the comically sized gloves that he heartily joined in on. All the while they worked together on dismantling, sorting, and filtering whatever trash they happened upon.

Chatter flowed easily among them. It was fascinating learning more of the history of the place. The locals were eager to share their old, fond memories of the Starlight River. It was hard to believe a polluted river like this was once beautifully pristine. Migrating birds were always spotted swimming about, and you could even see schools of traveling fish while walking atop the grand bridge.

Jasper adored it all. There was a real piece of history here, something that had meaning and heart to these catfolk. It’s one of the things he loved about restoring antiques. Bringing back something broken or damaged to be loved and appreciated once again. Or perhaps how it should’ve been loved in the first place.

A few of the older New Star cats would occasionally glare disdainfully at the coughing towers outlining the horizon. Edwin was one of them, but was always quick to turn the mood more hopeful. Talking about how they’re gonna fix this, that one day they’ll tear the oily tumor out of this city and return it to how it used to be. That always seemed to pick up everyone’s spirits.

It became easy to forget that the cat standing next to him was actually related to him. A part of his family he never knew existed for his entire life. Instead, they were simply two catfolk working together to help bring a little bit of joy back to this city.

It didn't take long for either of them to find strange odds and ends. Old cans, bottles, all the standard junk, but sometimes you'd find a random gear part or even some lost silverware. Edwin and Jasper heaved and pulled at a stubborn mound clogging part of the river's flow, and finally out they pulled the culprit: an entire bicycle wheel. Nothing else attached. Just a single, massive wheel. Neither knew what to do with it.

At one point, Jasper just so happened to have pulled up a loose chain with some gunk attached. It didn't take long for him to realize it was a piece of old jewelry. The way his stoic demeanor lit up into sheer delight, you'd think he found an old case filled with precious metals and jewels and not a soiled, tarnished necklace. The locals said he's welcome to claim whatever he finds, and he eagerly told them they made his day.

All in all, despite the frigid water turning his feet numb and the wholly unpleasant smell clogging his nose, this was actually a little fun. Everyone was in good spirits. The talk was lighthearted and bits of garbage were picked out, piece by piece.

And yet. And yet, there was something bitter alongside the sweetness.

Looking around the place, even after hours of work, it almost seemed like nothing had gotten done at all. Cats tried to smile away their exhaustion as a new wave of garbage took over what was just removed. The spires of churning smoke billowed through the skies, covering up what should be a pristine blue into a hazy, harsh grey.

A bustling city encumbered by its own growth. The suspensions that keep it aloft tightening and straining even as its citizens do its best to slacken them. The sight of it all gnawed at him.

**“Oy. Jasper.”** Another ice cold smack of a paw hit his back. Jasper was sure Edwin was doing this on purpose now. **“Your paws stopped moving.”** Jasper hummed thoughtfully. Edwin raised an eyebrow, and followed his eyesight to the polluted sky. He seemed to understand enough.

Edwin sighed and crossed his arms. That little bit of vexation returned in his eyes.

**“It didn't used to be like this. Sure, times were hard for a lot of folks, but the city took care of us. Now? We're picking up what's left of our home.”**

Jasper hummed again.

**“The city's development exploded with the introduction of laurelstone technology. It provided plenty of new opportunities, but the city wasn't prepared to handle what it brought.”**

**“Bingo.”** Edwin said.

Jasper stared at the sky for a moment longer, then turned in full to the tuxedo tom.

**“If you knew back then what you do now, what would you have done to prevent things from turning out the way it did?”**

Both of Edwin’s eyebrows raised high.

**“Now that’s a big question. I’m guessing there’s a bigger reason behind it?”** Jasper nodded once.

**“In some ways, New Star City reminds me of my own home city. Both the good, and the bad,”** Jasper’s gentle stoicism fell to something a bit more stoney.

**“It’s nowhere near the point New Star is, but it’s been expanding faster and faster each year. It’s becoming more competitive to find stable jobs. We’re doing our best to keep up with it all. I wonder if it’ll be enough.”**

**“You mentioned ‘we?’”** Edwin asked.

**“Our city’s guard. I’m not a part of it ‘officially’—it’s a long story—but, anyways, we have a couple of support systems in place. Things to keep the citizens safe, fed, and off the streets. It’s helped curve some rising problems, but is it enough...?”**

Jasper sighs, and turns to Edwin. The easygoing smile on his face was gone. He looked to be taking Jasper’s words very seriously.

**“Am I overthinking this?”** He hadn’t meant that in an admonishing way. Jasper genuinely wanted this cat’s opinion.

Edwin stared at Jasper. Again, with that look. His eyes fell almost closed, and he gently scoffed between his teeth. His smile turned a touch wry. Mumbling just a bit too loud, he said supposedly to himself,

**“Can’t believe you’re really her kid.”** Jasper pointedly did not react.

If Edwin was expecting him to, he eventually sighed and relented to the actual question. Paws back on his hips, he swayed back and forth with dramatic thinking. And finally, he goes,

**“I dunno, kid. I’m not some official board member of the city.”** Jasper withheld the usual, *‘I’m not a kid’* remark on the tip of his tongue. But the serious look returned on his expression as he gave Jasper his full attention.

**“What I do know, is that it sounds like you and your folks are alright. You won’t let what happened here happen again.”**

Edwin tapped his head with his free paw.

**“Keep that mindset. Always think about what else you can do to help. Don’t always settle for ‘good-enough’, cause what might be good for now isn’t enough later.”**

And then, out suddenly calls a voice from another drift pile.

**“So you do have a little wisdom locked up there, old man?”**

Edwin barked a laugh at the teenager. **“I’m full of it! Absolutely jam packed with knowledge! You just never asked me nicely.”** Laughs and snickers arose around in good fun. Jasper couldn’t help but join in, too.

Edwin turned back to Jasper. His paw yet again slapped his shoulder, but this time without freezing water dripping through his clothing. **“What say we finish up what we got, then head off? We all got a regular spot we go to after a full day of working at the river. They got the best fried fish in the city.”**

Quite a number of voices piped up, each sharing their own favorite meal or dessert. Alongside growing attitudes and remarks of, *‘let’s get going NOW!’*

A deep, bellowed laugh escaped from Jasper.

**SUMMARY:** Jasper joins his unexpected new family member in helping out with cleaning the Starlight River. The day swings by with strange garbage finds and raucous laughter from a tightly-knit community tied by their dedication to each other and their home.

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