

So you're back again. Well, that's almost enough to get me to curb the snark just a bit, almost. I can guess why most of you are back, so it's really not all that surprising. You want to know how Jeremy deals with the possibility of everyone finding out he's about to become a dominant. Don't get me wrong, it is gratifying that I can hold an audience. All I have to do now is come up with a way to keep you lot coming back.

The next day the academy was filled with rumor. All but one of the contestants as they had come to be called had denied having been tested. Jeremy even saw Hugo as the large wolf strutted past him down the hallway. He never even glanced at a single student even though he rudely brushed aside several. Stepping aside just as all the other students did he turned to watch, gathering intelligence. Almost all of the students lowered their heads and stared at the floor as Hugo passed. The male even went out of his way to brush his way past several smaller species. He was intentionally pushing them against a wall even though they'd already stepped aside. The arrogance on display caused Jeremy to break his self control.

Opening PATOMES he added Hugo's profile. It took only another second to label the wolf within PATOMES.

Having done so he knew it was time to reassess his resolution. His life was very likely on the line now. The rest of the day went by without any further interruption of the norm. The rumors had died, and without any official denial from the administration it was assumed by most that it was indeed Hugo that had been tested. Jeremy wondered at the wolf's reaction however.

He couldn't see any way the wolf could maintain the illusion he was creating. He momentarily considered the wolf had also been tested but the chances of two dominants presenting at the same place and time too remote a possibility to entertain. He thought it more likely the wolf had the idea of passing himself off as a dominant until he graduated.

The week for Jeremy ended without another sighting of Hugo. He did manage to make contact with Marcus. The lion was characteristically open to a private conversation with him at the end of the week. Jeremy waited for the feline at the front of the academy after the last module ended. Marcus didn't keep him waiting long.

The lion pressed pads with him and sat on the low stone wall outside the school. "Hi Jeremy. How have you been?"

"Good, you?"

"I'm making it okay. A few subjects kicking my ass but I'm doing well enough to stay positive."

Jeremy nodded. "You've heard the dominant rumor."

"Yeah, Hugo. Fuck, why him." Even the lion was genuinely fearful at the prospect.

"I wanted to talk to you about that, but you really need to keep it to yourself. It's important that no one knows."

Marcus stared at him his eyes slowly narrowing. "You?" He speculated.

"If I said, yes?" Jeremy asked trying his best to gauge the lion's reaction.

His smile was instant and seemingly genuine. He got up and before Jeremy could back away clapped him on the shoulder. "That's great. Better someone like you than that asshole."

As the lion sat back on the wall Jeremy replied "Thanks, but I'd need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes. You do realize my position."

The lion tilted his head as he continued smiling at Jeremy. He was sitting on the knee high wall and still looked down at the standing weasel.

"Stand up for me."

With a shrug he stood and looked down at Jeremy. His smile never wavered.

"You see my position." He repeated staring up at the towering feline.

Marcus' smile slowly faded. He was a head and a half taller than Jeremy. "I see. Shit, Hugo and his friends would tear you apart the first chance they got just to make sure you never had a chance to challenge them."

"Exactly."

The lion sat back down, his face furrowed in concentration.

"I need allies. I'm asking you first because even though we barely know each other you always struck me as trustworthy."

Marcus sat straighter and puffed his chest out a tiny fraction at the compliment. "Whatever you need from me. It'd be an honor to count a dominant as a friend."

"Thanks. For now just keep this to yourself." Jeremy said putting as much authority he could muster into his voice.

"Sure. You go it." Marcus replied as his muzzle dropped a fraction. Jeremy noticed the attitude in surprise. It was a clearly submissive behavior and yet the lion that was twice his size had just submitted to him.

Jeremy nodded and said "Good, and thanks again."

"Yeah, no problem." he answered, and continued to stare at him with his smile slowly reappearing.

It seemed to Jeremy as if he wanted to say more. "What?"

"Um, well, not in return for my help, or anything like that, but I could use some help too."

"How could I possibly help you?"

"You're in Economics 2.3 right?"

"I'm in 2.4 now, actually." Jeremy corrected. He suspected where the lion was going and was actually pleased at the opportunity.

"Yeah, even better. I've got my advancements for 2.3 coming up and I could use the help. That shit just kicks my ass."

"So, you want me to tutor you?"

"Yes, that is if you could spare the time." Marcus said, an almost pleading tone creeping into his voice.

"Yeah, sure." Jeremy answered "How soon is your final?"

"Its already scheduled for next Friday."

Jeremy nodded, thinking over his schedule for the weekend as Marcus stared at him. "Okay, how much time do you have Saturday afternoon?"

"Any time Saturday works for me. Should I come to your house?"

"No, that's all right." Jeremy said thinking of the stir a six foot plus tall lion suddenly showing up would cause. "Where do you live?"

Marcus told him. Jeremy was a bit surprised. "That's not far from where we live." He said with a smile. "How about three in the afternoon?"

The feline nodded vigorously as he stood. "Thats perfect. I'll be waiting. Thank you, Jeremy."

"Okay, see you then." Jeremy said taking a half step back from the lion. The conversation had gone better than he'd hoped.

"Great," Marcus said smiling down at Jeremy "and thanks for your trust, and the help."

Almost as an afterthought but also something in the feline's demeanor caused Jeremy to remind him "Remember, no one can know. Not even your parents."

The male sobered instantly. "Oh, right, I'll just tell them I asked for your help because you're one of the smartest in the academy."

"You don't have to lie to them." Jeremy said a bit nonplused.

"What? No I wouldn't. Don't you know your own reputation?"

"I have a reputation?" Jeremy asked, surprised and concerned at the sudden direction the conversation was going.

"Shit yeah, J. You're passing everybody in every module you take. Do you have any idea how much some people jostle over the seats behind you?"

"Why would-" Jeremy started before the reason struck him. "Oh. I never realized."

"Yeah, well, just keep it to yourself and ignore it." Marcus said a bit of humor in his voice and a smile on his face again.

It was Jeremy's turn to shrug and smile. "Okay. Well, see you tomorrow."

As Jeremy biked home he thought about what the lion had disclosed. He'd never even suspected people were jostling for position just to copy from him. It was a stupid and huge risk to take just for a better grade. If the instructors ever caught on those doing so would be expelled. And if they suspected Jeremy knew about it they'd expel him too. Now that he knew he'd have to do something, but the timing couldn't have been worse.

He couldn't afford to antagonize anyone at the moment. He couldn't instantly remember who sat behind him in any of his modules. He could think of a few, the ones that stood out. In fact, he realized that on pondering the situation he could name quite a few that sat behind him. They were mostly carnivores, and for the most part older and larger than him.

He'd never considered tutoring anyone before Marcus had asked him. He did know the academy kept the library open for hours after the last scheduled module. He could tutor Marcus next week after hours. He was sure word would get around after only days. The rumor mill thrived on things like a weasel tutoring a lion. Perhaps if given the chance those copying him would take the safer route for better marks. In return he'd have an opportunity to pick those willing and capable of helping defend him against people like Hugo.

He arrived home still smiling. His brothers had already started preparing the evening meal and he joined them. The night went normally and he finished more than half his homework before he felt tired. Friday and Saturday nights he and his brothers were allowed to stay late up as long as they kept up with their work. Sam was no longer restricted but still kept the same schedule on weeknights. They all stayed up late on Fridays just for the sense of freedom.

Jeremy sought out a moment alone with his father late that night. He was in the garage doing a little work on his motorcycle. It had always been his one indulgence. After their usual greeting Jeremy explained that he was going to start tutoring another student that had asked for his help. His father stood and walked to the door closing it. On his way back to the bench he picked up one of the garage stools and set it next to the one he'd been using.

Sitting on his stool he motioned for Jeremy sit and asked "It won't interfere with your own work?"

"It will not." Jeremy answered trying his best to match his father's authority. He sounded as submissive as always to his own ears but his father's face changed a tiny fraction.

"I've been hard on all of you, but you know my reasons." Steven stared at him for seconds, his attitude softening. "My own father sacrificed so much for our family. I wish he could see us now. All of his grandsons on the way to having a full education and his forth going to be a dominant. He'd have been even prouder than I am."

Jeremy couldn't think of anything to say. He'd never seen his father like this. He also wondered again at what he actually meant. Jeremy had his suspicions but would really rather not have them confirmed.

"A few months back, you changed. You became quiet, started watching everything as if you were afraid to miss anything. I feared maybe somebody had hurt you, but you sensed something then didn't you? Something changing about yourself?"

It would be easy to let him keep his illusion, Jeremy thought. He was about to deny his father's guess when he continued.

"Anyway, you do understand the precarious position you're in right now?"

"I do know what you mean. This tutoring thing is a step toward countering that."

His father nodded and stared at the floor a second before continuing "Now that the larger carnivores know, you'll have to watch them even closer."

"No one knows yet. I asked the dean to keep it under wraps for as long as possible."

Jeremy met his father's stare. He had a slight smile and perhaps there was a hint of admiration as well.

"Good, that's good. Your brothers can't help, you're already more capable than they are."

"Dad," Jeremy interrupted "I got things under control as they can be. I have a plan, and some friends already in mind. I can get through this."

Steven nodded and with a sigh said "Good. I never prepared for this."

"Nobody could have." Jeremy said finding it odd only after the fact that he had just comforted his father. It also had been noticed by Steven.

He looked back at Jeremy with a smile. "My son, the dominant alpha."

Searching for something to say, anything to shift the mood to something lighter Jeremy asserted "So, does that mean you'll teach me how to ride?"

Steven looked at his motorcycle then back to Jeremy. "If you want to learn, sure."

Jeremy blinked. "What? Really?"

"I get the feeling you're mature enough for the responsibility." He replied, the expression on his face almost daring Jeremy to back away from the challenge.

Jeremy couldn't stop the grin he felt spreading across his face.

"You already know how to take care of it, how many times have you tinkered with it now?"

"I only did that twice." he admitted.

"Well then, you shouldn't have a problem putting the carburetor back together."

With a smile Jeremy stood and started working on his father's bike. Steven watched over him and only occasionally pointed out a quicker way to reassemble the carburetor. Soon Jeremy had the motorcycle reassembled and cleaned up. His father dipped his fingers in a bit of cleaning gel and started rubbing it into his fur where the light coating of grease and dirt had accumulated. Jeremy copied him and after pausing for a second looked at his father.

"That's how you knew?"

"That was the only clue you left." He confirmed. "In fact had you left any other signs of tampering I wouldn't have guessed you had anything to do with it. You've always been somewhat meticulous in everything."

While rubbing the gel into the fur of his fingers Jeremy asked "If you knew, why did you never discipline me?"

Wiping the fur of his hands clean on a shop towel Steven answered "You may have worked on my bike without my authorization, but you didn't damage it or leave the job unfinished. I also didn't want to discourage your curiosity."

He looked at his father, speechless. He'd always been harsh and perhaps a bit over disciplining in his eyes before. As Jeremy took the offered towel from him he saw his father in a new way. He tried focusing on wiping his fingers clean to hide the emotion coming forth. His father took a half step closer and put an arm around his shoulders. He felt the light pressure of his father at his side and finished cleaning his paws. It was the first time his father had shown him this kind of companionship. He was being treated as an equal. He knew it couldn't but all the same he wanted the moment to last longer.

Sniffing Jeremy muttered "Thanks, thanks for everything."

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So, this is probably a good time to discuss the predation issue in Jeremy's world. Its largely what you would guess. As unfortunate as it sounds its also something that's grudgingly accepted as a fact of life. With the larger carnivore specie having such a huge size advantage, and more than a few remaining instincts driving them its hard not to have problems.

As for dealing with it, it's pretty much a common sense solution. The smaller you are the more careful you tend to be. Groups are favored to going out alone, especially at night. Almost an extension of life in the feral world. As mentioned before the area around the academy is a bit of a bubble so Jeremy and family have been somewhat sheltered, but not completely.

There was also a tiny hint there toward the end. Since predation is something that does happen and its treated like an accident by the authorities, insurance companies saw a way to also make a killing. Many offer predation insurance much like life insurance in our world. Yes, thats right, Jeremy's grandfather had insurance on himself. He was a victim and the payout was large enough to pay for all four of his grandsons to go to the academy. I'll leave it up to you how much further to go with the speculation.

Thats it for now, and as always I'm open to answering questions.