

Yeah, I know. Shut up. That's enough from you lot. Just read on, you pack of hyenas.

Jeremy opened his eyes and sat up looking for the source of the light in his eyes. It took a second for him to remember. He'd programed PATOMES to start the search function at two in the morning. He knew the perception of light from the menu in his vision would wake him. It was much better than using the alarm, that would have woken his brother and spoiled his alibi should he need one.

Slipping his backpack from under the bed Jeremy crept out of the room. Eric hadn't noticed he'd gone to bed in his shorts, it saved time and the minimized the risk of being discovered before he was out of the house. He'd left his bike next to the side door of the garage and slipped out without too much noise. He even kept his bike's wheels off the ground to keep the noise down. He doubted the clicking of the gears would wake anybody but also thought it better to be safe than discovered.

He got on his bike a couple houses down and started peddling. Reopening PATOMES and bringing up Hugo's profile he started tracking the wolf. At the late hour Jeremy expected there to be little activity on the roads. Instead cars passed him about once every minute, sometimes he was passed by several vehicles at a time. He wondered just how insulated his family had been, and just how strict his parents were compared to other families.

He turned down a smaller side road hoping to stay out of sight as much as possible. Several more turns and a half hour of travel brought Jeremy close to his quarry. He slowed recognizing the area he was in. He was on a side road that ran parallel to a state highway. The slightly sloping hill above him was a cemetery. Hugo's signal was directing him into the cemetery.

Jeremy was somewhat relieved he didn't have to try and lure the wolf out of his house. With Hugo being from a wealthy family Jeremy assumed they'd likely have an alarm system that would activate if he tried breaking in. While relieved at not having to take the risk of breaking into an unfamiliar house he now more than likely would have to deal with more than one person. Still, he'd take the trade off. It increased his chances of success while lowering the risk.

Jeremy rode a little further to the entrance. Turning in he started up the drive watching for movement among the monuments and trees. After a few minutes he was far enough from the road to lose sight of it and the highway. PATOMES told him he was two hundred yards from Hugo's position. He stopped and got off his bike and proceeded on foot. He could hear voices, they and PATOMES were in agreement. Hugo was at the source.

He crept forward slowly, hearing more than one voice. Carefully stepping from behind trees and the taller monuments Jeremy made his way closer to the sound of conversation. He could tell there were at least four people talking amongst themselves ahead of him. Finally making his way close enough to see what was going on he paused to watch and listen.

He recognized Hugo at the far side of the gathering. Another wolf stood next to him, he held an electric lamp similar in design to an camping lantern. This wolf was a bit smaller than Hugo yet similar enough in appearance to suggest a familial relationship. A jaguar crouched on his haunches to their left. He was shining a flashlight at the figure in the center and waving it back and forth in a way that Jeremy knew was aimed at blinding with momentary flashes of light. There were two figures with their backs to Jeremy, one clearly a tiger and another either a jackal or fox. They were all focused on the one in the center.

Jeremy gritted his teeth as he targeted each of the carnivores and added their profiles to PATOMES. They were clearly taunting the bound rabbit at the center of their circle. To Jeremy it sounded as though each would challenge the next to an even greater level of violence against the bound lagomorph. Their prisoner was forced to watch and listen from where they lay helpless. Thinking furiously he felt he had no choice but to add the rabbit to PATOMES as well.

Sensing they were almost to the point of taunting each other into action Jeremy triggered the command. Once activated they all lost mass rapidly. In seconds they were all seemingly out of sight.

Jeremy stalked forward, careful despite the lack of threat. With his backpack he shielded his face from the light as he approached the lamp. Kicking it over and turning his back to where the rabbit had been laying he crouched and turned it off. Sidestepping to the discarded flashlight he picked it up and as he turned pointed it in the area of where the rabbit would still be.

He saw movement in the short grass and rushed forward. He couldn't consider how terrifying he must have appeared at this point. He dropped low and searched quickly finding the rabbit in seconds. He carefully aimed the flashlight on them as he picked up the bunny and dropped them in the empty salt shaker. He'd brought for the same purposes but was intended for a different individual. Slipping the capped salt shaker in a pocket of his shorts he flicked the flashlight off.

He stood waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. With a quarter moon having risen only an hour before there was enough light to finish his task without it. He picked up all the discarded clothing the lamp and other personal effects he could find in the dark. He stuffed everything in the sleeves of shirts and bundled them in Hugo's signature leather jacket.

He took one last look at the site checking for anything he might have missed. He didn't see any movement in the grass. The dew on the grass had wet his footpads. For a moment he wondered if he'd stepped on any of the predators. A quick check with PATOMES let him know their profiles were still active. He hadn't inadvertently killed any of them.

"I know you can hear me. This is what you get for being what you were. Good luck surviving as you are now."

Jeremy turned and made his way back to his bike. Using the sleeves of the jacket he tied it to the crossbeam of his bike before climbing on. He retraced his path out of the cemetery and turned toward home. The large bundle between his legs made peddling awkward but he made the necessary adjustment. He took a turn away from the direction of his house and peddled for another half mile before stopping.

Jeremy stood with a foot on the ground listening to the neighborhood he'd stopped in. It was unfamiliar to him but was silent and looked safe. Stepping off his bike he walked over to the nearest lawn and crouched as he pulled the salt shaker from his pocket. He was careful to keep his fingers wrapped around the glass. With the shaker close to the ground and a paw above the opening he upended it. Knowing the rabbit would have tumbled out onto the grass he turned before standing and made his way to his bike.

Peddling away he waited until he was almost a mile away before returning the rabbit to their normal size. In all the hustle and rush of the moment and aiding darkness he'd never even noticed if it had been a male or female. He'd probably learn on the news later in the day.

He arrived home with the sky just beginning to brighten in the east. Sneaking back into the garage he stored his bike and made his way back to his bedroom. Sliding the backpack back under his bed Jeremy climbed under the covers moving slowly to make as little noise as possible. Eric was normally a

sound sleeper but it was now close to the time he woke. Jeremy lay staring at the bottom of the top bunk trying to relax.

His mind would not stop. He kept going over how his original plan had to be changed with each unexpected turn of events. He jerked as PATOMES opened and scrolled a notice across his vision.

[[SUBJECT CEMETERY 0004 NOT FOUND]]

That would have been the canine he'd never really identified. Jeremy only idly wondered what animal had gotten hold of the predator. PATOMES closed after he acknowledged the notice. The notice had broken his mind free from the endless circle of assessing his plan against his actions. He finally felt his body relax just as Eric started stirring above him. It was going to be a long day, but well worth it considering what had been on the line.

As Eric jumped from the top bunk Jeremy lifted himself up on an elbow and yawned. His brother only glanced back at him as he made his way to the bathroom. From experience Jeremy knew he'd be in there for more than half an hour before the shower even started. It was always the same on Saturdays. Jeremy could use the extra sleep but then that would weaken his alibi. He crawled out of bed and started his weekend, he would have to act as normal as possible.

He started on the remainder of his homework after breakfast and finished just before noon. Eric and Ian both gave him their usual irritated look as he collected his school work and stored it in his pack and left the table. After finishing his chores he spent the rest of the day in his normal routine.

That evening the news had a short segment of a failed attempt at predation. Little was said other than the subjects of the investigation were believed to have fled the jurisdiction. The unfortunate victim was in treatment for shock and traumatic stress. It was being said that her story did not match with the existing initial evidence. The talking heads went on to speculate that she'd not make a credible witness even if the suspects were apprehended. It was the typical result. It had been almost ten years since a case of predation had even been brought to trial.

By the time Jeremy was getting ready for bed only the jaguar and Hugo's profiles were still active. In the early hours of Sunday PATOMES woke him by opening with another notice.

[[SUBJECT HUGO NOT FOUND]]

Jeremy closed PATOMES and stared at the top bunk. He had thought he'd be relieved, instead he felt a tinge of remorse. He'd taken the occasional moment over the day to reassess his actions. There were several areas where he'd made mistakes. He'd walked all over wet grass at the scene of the crime, leaving foot prints everywhere. He's ridden his bike over grass and loose soil too. He hadn't been aware of whether there were surveillance cameras anywhere he'd gone. There were plenty of witnesses that had driven by him while riding his bike. He'd even left the rabbit to be found close to home.

He didn't want to think about it, but the rabbit was the most worrying. If the authorities actually believed her story, they'd be after him instead of searching for Hugo and his predator friends. Even faced with that possibility Jeremy refused to think of saving the rabbit as a mistake. He felt justified and was even prepared to take the same risk again should he be forced to make that choice.

Once Sunday morning came Jeremy was a bit anxious and looking for something new to occupy his time. For something to do other than sit in front of the television Jeremy sought out his father. He was in the garage vacuuming out the family car. Jeremy pitched in and helped by replacing the floor mats and wiping down the windows. He'd been given the chore of cleaning the vehicle before and knew where to help to speed the work along.

Steven asked a few of the typical questions to ensure everything was going well with him. As they finished Jeremy stood at the back of the car and watched his father put away the last of the cleaning tools.

"Okay, ask if you're going to ask."

Jeremy grinned. "Is it that obvious?"

"You've looked at it more than half a dozen times." Steven observed.

Jeremy smiled and asked "Can you start teaching me how to ride it?"

"Alright." He replied walking over to the motorcycle. "Climb on."

Jeremy walked to the side and swung a leg over the seat. With a leg on either side and his paws on the handlebars he took a moment to savor the feeling. With his father standing next to him giving his approval it was an exciting thrill just to stand over the machine.

"She's heavy, so when you right her be careful not to overcompensate. That's it, feel that? When you're riding her you'll feel how she wants to stay balanced. It won't be that difficult at all"

Steven stepped to the front and straddling the front wheel taking hold of the handlebars. "Sit."

Once Jeremy was sitting on the bike his father ran him through the controls. He instructed him in how to shift up and down and get the rough feel of the pressure required on the foot peddle to shift between gears. For half an hour he paced Jeremy through the operation of the bike. Finally he ordered Jeremy to start her.

The rumble and vibration of the engine under him sent a shiver up his spine. Steven stepped to the side holding the handlebar with only one hand and instructed Jeremy to take her out of the garage and stop in the driveway. He slowly brought the bike out and stopped. He felt the weight of the bike shift unpredictably as he stopped and wrestled it back under control.

"That's it, nice job. Feel how she wanted to stay upright until you stopped?"

Jeremy nodded, staring at his father eager to be allowed to take the bike out on the street. They shared eye contact for several seconds before Steven said "Alright, take her out, but keep it slow, and stay on our street."

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So, this is probably a good time to talk about the state of law enforcement in Jeremy's world. But I'm not going to. Instead lets take a step back to see a bit of a bigger picture. I've mentioned earlier that after the Continental Wars there was a period of rebuilding. This is where the largest departure is from our world.

In this case after the wars people had an almost physical distrust and loathing for governments. Not drawing any parallels to the current climate, that's not anything you'll have to worry about getting from

me. Anyway, the population of Jeremy's world are of a mind that their governments should not ever have the power to send the masses off to war ever again. As such national governments are pretty weak, local authorities aren't much better.

This would tend to leave local law enforcement as typically the first and almost only contact with any governing authority. Here too, they'd not be as powerful as we're used to. So the threat of teams of CSI techs prowling the city for Hugo and his friends is pretty much nonexistent. More on that later though.