

Going to start posting this to try and motivate myself in working on it again. Patreon supporters have already seen this all the way to chapter 119. This was another one of those tough chapters. The tone and content of the conversation was difficult to get right while keeping it heading in the direction I wanted it to go. Hope you enjoy it.

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Jackson's door opened to show an elderly ferret dressed in a tuxedo.

Surprised at seeing the elder male answer the door Jeremy glanced at the brass nameplate wondering for a moment if he'd turned in the wrong direction.

"You must be Mister Dawn." The ferret said. His voice was high and thin, almost whistling as he spoke. The male pulled the door open wider as he stepped back to let Jeremy enter. "Mister Buttons is expecting you in his study."

Jeremy looked back at the ferret once. The male was closing the door with his head down as if the simple task took great effort. In passing through the living area of Jackson's condo Jeremy looked out at the dinning room. The long table had been set for seven places. He could smell the pleasant aroma of cooking food in the air. Pausing at the entry to the kitchen he raised his eyebrows. He saw a pair of otters dressed in chef's whites busy making the meal ahead. A trio of tuxedoed servers were standing by and watching the progress of the meal in a corner. Jackson was clearly going all out on the meal.

The door to Jackson's office was closed. Knocking Jeremy had his paw on the knob but waited due to the door being closed for the first time in his experience. At the command to enter Jeremy open the door and stepped inside. Closing the door behind himself he took in the sight.

Jackson stood from behind his desk with a rare neutral expression. A large squirrel stood at the side of Jackson's desk. She was clearly a dominant and also appeared older than Jackson. The fur of her face was mostly grey, and whatever fat and even extra muscle she may have once had seemed to have withered away to the point of gauntness. She stared at Jeremy as Jackson began speaking.

"Jeremy, meet Wanda Howard, York's senior dominant. Wanda, Jeremy Dawn."

"Miss Howard." Jeremy replied as he stepped toward Jackson's desk. He wondered at Jackson's mention of a senior dominant. He'd never indicated there was any such hierarchy among dominants before.

"Mister Dawn. I've heard good things about you." The squirrel said as she held out an arm.

Jeremy shared the gesture of equals with the dominant, pleased at the prospect of being included in some new dominant hierarchy, even if the most junior amount them. Dropping his arm to his side he said "Thank you. That's likely due to Jackson's guidance."

Wanda gave a thin smile. "Since there is some time before our guests arrive its time to tell you the point of this dinner."

Jeremy looked from the squirrel to glance at Jackson. The fox was purposely keeping his eyes on Wanda. He focused on the female able to subdue a smile.

"It's been kept from you until now, and there's no easy way to tell you this in advance. Tonight you'll meet your betrothed."

Jeremy blinked and looked between the two dominants. "Excuse me? You said betrothed?"

"Yes. The dominant need we all experience is a biological imperative to spread our genes among our individual species. It's clearly meant to speed each species toward the second ascension. Societal conventions have in affect prevented that from happening. In order to ensure that our genes are distributed at least in part we are forced to arrange marriages between dominants." She paused a moment and in a softer tone continued, "I see by your reaction you have some questions."

Jeremy said nothing for a moment. Instead he used his dominant talent to give himself some extra time. He was seeing several things about his mentors in a new light. From Jackson's failed marriage to Zane and Alex's assertions that dominants have more responsibilities than he yet knew. He could even understand the reticence in informing him of such an obligation as a forced marriage. Considering his dismay and growing anger at the prospect he could guess there had been more than a few efforts of other young dominants to sabotage their arranged marriages.

He could also see Jackson's reaction. Knowing the fox as well as he did Jeremy thought the male was at least somewhat in disagreement with the subject of the conversation. Before tonight he had suspected there was a number of dominants that constituted some kind of elite governing body within the community. If true, and he had been given more than a few indications to believe that was so, he would do well to avoid crossing this squirrel.

Coming back to normal perception Jeremy took a deep breath. He'd kept the use of his talent to a minimum. The night was likely going to test his reserves in ways he'd never experienced.

"So, I assume this is one of many obligations I have to comply with in order to maintain certain privileges dominants are said to enjoy."

"Yes." Was the squirrel's matter of fact reply.

"I can understand the reasoning. No doubt you've had a few poor reactions in the past, yet I think that's no reason to keep the truth from us." Jeremy said. At another thought he asked, "I'm wondering why would I have never even heard of another weasel dominant?"

Wanda shrugged and said "She only recently tested positive for dominance." Even though Jeremy had little to assess her mood her body language made it seem she was beginning to relax.

Jeremy frowned at the squirrel. He'd been trying to show proper respect for the aged squirrel considering Jackson's mention of her seniority. "Then she must be somewhat young to have only recently been tested, yes?" He realized as he spoke his tone was a bit confrontational. He lowered his eyes and took a deep breath to get his emotions back under control before things got out of control.

"Yes. She's about the same age as you were when confirmed. In answer of your next question, the dominant that was our first contact once she had been confirmed not only told her of your existence but the likelihood of being selected as a mate."

"That explains seven place settings." Jeremy said mostly to himself.

Wanda's eye ridges rose at the comment but she made no reply.

"So anyway, if I'm going to be forced into this, what can you tell me about her?"

Wanda was about to answer when a knock on the door to the study closed her mouth.

"Sir, your guests have arrived." The breathless voice of the ferret that had answered the door for Jeremy came from the other side of the door.

"Well, excellent timing." Wanda said. "You can find out for yourself, Jeremy."

Jackson lead the way to the dinning room with Wanda right behind him. Even though he'd only met the dominant once Jeremy recognized Morgan Locke standing next to three weasels. Jeremy's attention turned to the three weasel accompanying him.

The male weasel was tall and lean while the older female was visibly fat. Both were looking at him wide eyed and clearly apprehensive. The young female met his gaze for a second before shifting her eyes to the side and lowering her head. They all looked somewhat uncomfortable. Standing close together the three weasels were barely making a move other than with their eyes. Jeremy considered how intimidating it must be having to face three unfamiliar dominants. None of them stood higher than the lower edge of Jeremy's chest. He took a deep breath realizing his anger and upset was likely showing in his expression and attitude

Jeremy's thoughts turned to the family of weasel suddenly standing in the spotlight before more dominants than they'd likely ever meet before. Having gone through the process of getting the tailored suit he now wore he was able to recognize their clothing was clearly of average quality. They'd have only had at best a few months of the dubious guidance from Morgan Locke. He suddenly had empathy for their situation. Schooling himself to calmness he looked at Jackson as the fox started making introductions.

Jackson introduced himself first, then Wanda and then Jeremy. With everyone's attention shifting with the introductions Jeremy stole a quick evaluating look at the young female. She was almost as tall as her mother but thin and pleasantly curvy. To Jeremy's eyes her facial markings made her pretty. For the two seconds he stared her eyes quickly shifted from person to person with the introductions. He hoped it was an indication of a quick mind behind the attractive face. As Jackson fell silent the large meerkat softly cleared his throat as the usual attention grab.

Morgan Locke introduced the male weasel as Hans Geedle, the fat female as his wife Marry and their young daughter as Rebecca. As everyone exchanged a quick greeting Jeremy scratched at the side of his muzzle in an effort to suppress a smile. The introductions had seemed more like a business meeting than a dinner. Dropping his arm he let his improved humor form a smile on his face.

Jackson filled the sudden silence. "We have a few minutes before dinner will be ready. Would anyone like a drink?" As he had asked the question he had half turned and gave a signal to the elderly tuxedoed ferret that had been standing behind him.

The ferret stepped forward and began taking everyone's order. When the ferret's eyes moved to Jeremy he simply asked for water. Rebecca was the last to order and also just asked for a water. Jeremy noticed her eyes glance his way a moment as she spoke. He wondered if her order was meant as a signal. As the ferret turned and made his way to the kitchen silence fell on the group.

As the silence lengthened Jeremy saw a look from Jackson. The male was clearly expecting him to take the lead and fill in the conversational gap.

"Mister Geedle, what line of work are you in?" Jeremy asked. He inwardly cringed even as he asked. It felt like such an inane question, but it was the only thing he could come up with.

With a slight frown the male turned to Jeremy and answered. "I work at the Merreck building."

"He's the janitor." Mary said.

Jeremy inwardly cringed again as much at her derogatory tone of voice as the statement.

With a look at her husband Mary added "Its about the only job someone with a record like his can get."

"At least you're not going hungry." Hans replied with equal venom.

At the sound of her sigh Jeremy looked at Rebecca. Her eyes were on the floor with her shoulders slumped.

"You're going to start with that now?" Mary said, clearly irritated and making a point of not looking at Hans.

In hopes that one of the other dominants would intervene in some way Jeremy looked to each in turn. Jackson had his eyes on the ceiling in an expression of pained tolerance on his face. Wanda was looking at Morgan clearly silently urging him to intervene and somehow prevent a full blown argument. Morgan was looking at Jeremy with a satisfied expression.

"You can't take leave of this for one night?" Hans replied to his wife.

Jeremy knew the dominant meerkat was enjoying the spectacle. Their previous encounter had ended poorly. Jeremy had even taken the unusual course of action of showing disrespect to the dominant. Dismissing the amused arrogant look from Locke, Jeremy turned to the weasels.

"I'm going to have to ask you to behave yourselves." Jeremy said as he started projecting pheromones. With no one else acting he would take the lead and try to calm things down.

The two adult weasel stared at him a moment. He realized at that moment that once he was forced into marrying Rebecca he would be the alpha of their family as well as his own. "If you can't remain civil I'll send you home and Wanda and Morgan can chaperone Rebecca." He was pleased to see both weasels nod to him submissively.

As the ferret returned with a tray of drinks the distraction gave Jeremy an excuse to check reactions. Jackson was smiling at him. Wanda had a look of surprise mixed with what Jeremy hoped was respect. Morgan looked disappointed. Rebecca had lifted her head up and looked to be suppressing a smile as she stared at her mother.

With the drinks handed out the ferret withdrew leaving the seven of them with a silent bow.

In the silence left by the ferret's absence Jackson took a sip from his drink and spoke first. "Jeremy, tell our guests a little about yourself."

Jeremy was for a moment left with no idea what to say. Considering what the night had been set up to accomplish he focused on what he wanted Rebecca to know about him.

"Well, I'm the youngest of four brothers." he said remembering the current situation only after his mistake. "Um, both parents and two of my brothers still live in the city. I actually share an apartment with one brother, thats Sam."

Jeremy paused gaging the reactions of everyone and thinking carefully of what to say next. He tapped his dominant ability to gain a few extra seconds. He wanted to downplay his position at the Bureau and not even mention the Thirteenth Floor. "I work as a kind of consultant."

"We know where you work. Morgan told us everything about you." Marry interrupted, the tone of her voice making the depths of her disinterest clear.

Jeremy looked at the meerkat and was relieved to see he could at least show some embarrassment.

"I see." Jeremy said forcing a slight smile. He had no doubt the dominant had given his own biased perspective of him. He paused an extra second taking in the expressions of the weasels and Morgan. "I wonder, is Morgan the only dominant you've spoken with? I ask because I was interviewed by more than a dozen in an effort to find one that would mentor me."

Marry replied, "No doubt because you were in that academy."

Jeremy guessed Morgan had likely also made little effort to ensure other dominants the chance of talking with Rebecca. He looked to Wanda and said "I'm sure Miss Howard can see to it that Rebecca gets a chance to talk with a number of other dominants. I've always felt it a good idea to hear different perspectives from several sources before making any major decisions."

The expression on the meerkat's face gave Jeremy all the confirmation he needed as to how the male had tried to monopolize the flow of information to the Geedle family.

"That certainly can be arranged." the squirrel said. She was staring at Morgan as she added "I happen to agree with Jeremy's advice."

The dominant meerkat was looking back with an abashed expression. He had clearly miscalculated and was now facing the consequences. Jeremy wanted to relax knowing he'd managed to avoid two traps. The trouble was the night was just starting. He mentally steeled himself for more.

The ferret reappeared to announce that dinner was ready to be served.

"Thank you Albert." Jackson said and gestured for everyone to move to the table. He briefly and politely directed where everyone was to sit. Jeremy found himself situated across from Rebecca. Jackson was at the head of the table while Morgan Locke was at the opposite end. The Geedle family sat on the left side of the table from Jackson while Wanda sat at Jeremy's left. As soon as everyone was seated the three servers came from the kitchen with the appetizer.

Jeremy looked at the bowl as it was set before him. Looking to the raccoon who had served him he thanked the female out of habit. As the servers withdrew he realized Jackson and Wanda were the only others to have thanked their servers. As Jeremy picked up the spoon for the soup he glanced at Rebecca and paused.

She had been watching him and had looked down at her numerous utensils and picked out the same spoon Jeremy had. He understood her actions. He watched for an opportunity as Jackson struck up a conversation with Wanda. About a third of the way through the soup the female glanced at Jeremy. He made eye contact with her and with a slight flick of an ear gained her attention. Setting his spoon down a moment he placed his hands behind the bowl. Setting his index fingers just behind the remaining utensils Jeremy moved them outward indicating which to use in what order.

Seeing the slight nod indicating her understanding he smiled and looked away. He cautiously watched her in his peripheral vision. He saw her eyes constantly shift to look at him for a second or two before

looking elsewhere. Marry sat next to her and often stared her intense dislike at Jeremy. Rebecca's father simply kept his head down and focused on his meal.

Jeremy sat back again as the soup bowl was removed by the same raccoon server and replaced with a plate of pasta mixed with shrimp and a thick sauce. As he thanked the server he heard Rebecca voice her thanks as well. Glancing at her with a quick smile and ear flick he looked to Jackson waiting until the fox picked up his fork. Lowering his head to start on the next course his eyes found Rebecca's to see her reaction. With her head lowered she copied his quick smile and flicked both ears in thanks.

After a few bites Jeremy took advantage of a brief silence and looked to the female across from him and asked, "Rebecca, are you still attending school?"

After glancing around the table for a moment she answered. "No, I'm working full time at a delivery service."

"Oh, which one?"

"Jenkins Delivery Service. They serve mostly the upper part of the island." She answered. Her expression was a bit apprehensive.

Jeremy nodded. "My first job was at Franklin Cleaning Services. It was just part time around my class schedule but it payed for a few extras." At her change of expression he smiled and added "Everyone has to start somewhere."

"Glad to hear how privileged you were even as a youth." Marry said. She stared at Jeremy, once again openly showing her dislike.

Everything had stopped as everyone looked to see what his reaction would be. Even Wanda and Jackson settled back in their chairs indicating he was free to respond as he wished. Jeremy tapped his talent again, using the extra subjective time reminding himself to remain calm and think of the best way to respond.

Back at normal perception Jeremy took a deep breath before responding. He put just a bit of command into his voice as he replied. "Privileged or not, I'm not fool enough to antagonize anyone I perceive as such. I don't pretend to be better than anyone, but I will not continue to suffer your poor attitude." He met her stare with his own.

"Our daughter has been promised to a male we are only now meeting. To me that's the very worst example of privilege, and I will not apologize for my feelings on this matter."

Jeremy sat back. He realized his body had relaxed as he considered her statement. Nodding he said, "I don't disagree. I truly understand, as this wasn't my choice either." He looked at Rebecca a moment and added, "Rebecca, I personally apologize for the necessity but I feel I should make our position clear."

Jeremy looked back to Marry. "Yes, we are being forced to marry each other. However, in the end your daughter will have the same privileges as any other dominant. At the same time, should we not fulfill our obligations as seen by our seniors we will have no privileges whatsoever."

He watched the female's harsh expression change as if she were chewing on something unsavory for a few moments. "Perhaps, but it still doesn't make it right."

"No," Jeremy said meeting her gaze, he agreed "it doesn't."