

Now that Jeremy, or rather Dominic, has dealt with the latest set of predators it time for him to work on preparations for a possible next time.

Sam was cleaning up the kitchen when Jeremy got home. The stimulating smell of cooking was in the air. He paused outside the kitchen looking at his brother with a curious expression.

Sam smiled and said "Chicken, just something simple."

"Simple? It still smells good." Jeremy said turning to go to his room. He left the clothes for the rat persona in his pack and tossed the pack in the closet. With his brother home most of the day he would have to time the washing just right. Picking up one of the books he'd been reading he went back out to the living room and settled in on the couch. As he read Sam moved from cleaning the kitchen to the bath.

Jeremy was absorbed enough in the book that he didn't notice his brother start on cleaning the living room until the vacuum started. Looking up he watched Sam. His brother had always tended to be singleminded when it came to chores. He also wouldn't readily accept help. Jeremy lifted his legs out of the way as Sam maneuvered the vacuum between the couch and the coffee table.

"Want me to do anything?"

"No, I got it, but thanks anyway."

Jeremy set his feet back on the floor watching Sam. Even knowing his brother's tendency of finishing things himself he still felt the need to pitch in.

Sam finished vacuuming and started wrapping the cord. "Diner should be ready a little bit. Its been in the slow cooker just about long enough."

Jeremy laughed. "I'd have forgotten until you could smell it burning."

"Yeah, I know." Sam agreed with a short laugh. "You just don't have a feel for timing."

"I follow the recipes as much as you do."

"Maybe, but you ignore the part where it says times may vary depending on your oven." Sam said with a smirk.

Jeremy knew where his brother was going. He shook his head hoping he'd let it go just this once.

"You're the only person I know that ever burnt water."

"Once. That was once, and I got distracted." Jeremy defended himself again. "Technically, I didn't really burn water either."

"No," his brother corrected putting the vacuum away in the entry closet "you let it boil off and melted the bottom off the pot. Still, you're the only person I know to have done that."

"If this is what I have to put up with to eat your cooking I'll start eating out."

Sam closed the closet door and turned grinning his victory. "No you won't. Besides, I don't bring it up more than once or twice a year."

Jeremy's phone rang before he could respond. As he pulled it from his pocket he said "I don't bring up that time you fell out of the top bunk and failed to hit the floor as often."

"That's because none of you could figure out how I managed to defy gravity." Sam replied smirking.

Jeremy looked at the phone and pressed the answer button. "Yes, sir?" He answered as he looked at Sam. His brother knew by the way he answered the phone to pause the banter.

"Jeremy, how have you been?"

"Fine, Mister Buttons. This is a surprise. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Actually, I'm calling to schedule dinner with you. Are you free this Friday evening?"

"Yes, Sir." Jeremy answered knowing both listening to him could hear the surprise in his voice.

"Good, you know where I live?"

"Yes. It's the penthouse, if I remember right."

"You do. See you at seven, if that works for you?"

"Yes Sir, seven."

"Great, have a good evening then."

Jeremy stared at the phone after Jackson hung up.

Sam watched him and after a few seconds asked "Well?"

"That was Jackson Buttons. He invited me to dinner Friday."

Sam's jaw dropped. "No way."

"Yes." Jeremy replied. He was stunned at the call and even more at the invitation. He wondered and even dared hoped that this was the beginning of a mentorship with the male.

"What are you going to do?" Sam asked him, breaking him away from his thoughts.

"I'm going to go. What else am I supposed to do?" He answered smiling.

Sam caught his humor and smiled back. They chatted a bit until Sam announced dinner ready. After they ate Sam lingered for a while as Jeremy cleaned the few dishes they'd used in eating. Not long after that his brother left leaving the apartment to Jeremy. He considered reading for a bit but decided to go out as Dominic again.

He walked out of the apartment building and turned toward the subway entrance. Glancing up the alley Jeremy paused and watched as a mouse and raccoon hauled trash bags to a dumpster at the back of his building. He recognized the mouse as one of the maintenance workers for the building. He'd even had to get help from the mouse to access the freight elevator when his father had forced him to buy new

bedroom furniture. Jeremy stepped to the side and watched the two from the shadows. He could guess they were hauling trash out of an apartment and using the freight elevator to do so.

The activity had given him an idea. The freight elevator was just inside the building from the rear door they were using to haul trash outside. He remembered that the elevator had no special key or access. It was much like the normal elevators at the front of the building, they simply were not used by residents very often because while the back door was unlocked it was alarmed. One would need a key to disable the alarm for the door.

Jeremy had learned from the mouse most alarm systems used the same key. All he would need is the brand of the alarm and perhaps the model number. It would be an easy task from there in ordering the key through his connections with the Bureau to obtain a key for the building alarm. Once the two maintenance workers were finished he walked the short distance to the back door.

There were no security cameras in the alley. He tested the door and was not surprised to find it locked from outside. He knew from moving his furniture that it would lock behind anyone exiting. The mouse maintenance worker had locked the door open and disabled the alarm when the movers had delivered his furniture. He would need a key for the door as well. He backed away from the door and considered his options.

Jeremy hoped to keep any trace of his Dominic persona separate from his real identity. Should Dominic draw the attention of the authorities he didn't want any way for them to trace anything back to himself. He would have to steal the key as Dominic. It would be preferable to do so without leaving behind any evidence. He was still assessing his chances of breaking into his own building when the back door opened again.

The same two maintenance workers brought more trash out and threw it in the dumpster. Jeremy stood unmoving in the shadowed doorway of the building opposite and listened to their grumbling. It sounded as though they were being forced to work all night to get another apartment cleaned overnight. From their talk Jeremy gathered they would likely be making several trips. It took them nearly five minutes to once again transfer all the trash to the dumpster. After they'd gone back inside Jeremy considered something he'd never thought of trying on himself.

Stripping his clothes off he set his pack out of sight behind another dumpster. He then changed to Dominic and moved to the side of the door. Standing at the door to his building he took a deep breath in preparation and activated the command in PATOMES. It was a dizzying experience losing so much height so quickly. In seconds he was down to five inches tall. He didn't think any smaller would be feasible. He needed to get through the door unseen, but also within the short time the two maintenance workers would be preoccupied.

Ten minutes later they returned with more trash. Dominic made it through the blocked open door easily. He raced to the freight elevator and ducked behind one of the emptied trash bins the two were using in transferring trash. The thudding footsteps of the two maintenance workers entering the elevator for another trash tote felt like it was shaking the entire cab. They made two more trips taking out the trash before riding the elevator back up. Dominic waited until they were taking the first of the totes back out of the elevator.

Skulking out of the elevator Dominic followed the two as they made their way back to the unit they were cleaning out. He watched from three doors down as the raccoon unlocked the door and entered first. The mouse wheeled the tote he was steering into the apartment last. Dominic raced to the door thinking it would close quickly. Instead it had been blocked open. He froze for a moment fully exposed in the open doorway.

The mouse was just wheeling the tote out of sight into another room of the apartment. The raccoon was out of sight, presumably already in the room the mouse was entering. Dominic took the opportunity to enter the apartment and find a hiding place. He was unusually winded from chasing after the two maintenance workers. His Dominic body was simply not as fit as his own.

Whoever had occupied the unit had not treated it well. There were small bits of trash and crumpled papers everywhere on the floor. To Dominic it looked like the two maintenance workers were leaving the furniture for last. From his vantage point behind the couch he could see one of the worker's tool bag sitting just inside the door.

He listened as they went out to get two more totes from the elevator. It took them nearly fifteen minutes to fill the trash totes again. Once they left Dominic had the run of the apartment for at least five minutes. He judged it was plenty of time.

Stepping out from behind the couch he returned to normal size for his Dominic persona. Looking around the apartment he noticed a set of keys setting on the kitchen countertop. Examining the keys he guessed one of the maintenance workers and set their keys down. Since they were working together Dominic guessed they felt safe in leaving the keys behind. He couldn't believe accomplishing his task could be this easy.

Crossing to the front door he opened it a crack. The hallway was empty. Picking the key that most closely resembled his own apartment key Dominic opened the door just wide enough to reach out and insert the key in the lock. He'd rather not be seen as a rat in only his fur tampering with the door of a vacated apartment. The first key slid in but wouldn't turn the deadbolt. The second key was the same. The third key worked in the deadbolt.

Smiling to himself Dominic checked the hallway and left the apartment with the set of keys. He was twenty feet from the freight elevator when he noticed it was on its way back up already. Retracing his steps quickly and letting himself back in the apartment he dropped the set of keys in the tool bag and raced to the kitchen. Back down to a measly five inches he hid behind the refrigerator. He doubted that even should they select cleaning out the kitchen next they wouldn't take the trouble of pulling the heavy appliance.

He was forced to wait and listen as they continued emptying the apartment for another twenty minutes. It turned out to be to his benefit. As they left they discussed taking a break before returning to emptying out the bedroom. Alone in the apartment again Dominic returned to his regular size and retrieved the wayward keys. He was undecided about pushing his luck but curiosity got the better of him. Their discussion had made it seem as though they planed on taking a break, but should they make one more trip he'd be caught. He went into the bedroom to have a look around anyway.

In one look he could see why they were grumbling about having to work late. The bedroom was a mess. The mouse and raccoon had managed to clear space halfway into the room and yet there was still much more to accomplish. Dominic was shocked anyone could live with so much accumulated trash. He turned and left the bedroom feeling his fur crawl from the associated filthy feeling the room had given him. On his way to the door he glanced for the first time at the pictures still hanging on the wall.

He stopped involuntarily. There was a wedding picture of two rats hanging in the hallway.

"You fucking assholes. Lazy fucks like you give rats a bad reputation."

Back in the common hallway with his prize Dominic made his way to the freight elevator. Just as he was about to push the call button he heard the telltale sounds of the elevator begin to move. He had no desire to be trapped in the apartment again. Retracing his steps a few yards Dominic stopped at the door to the stairs. The door to the fire stairs were alarmed just as the back door. There was also a control box

set at the top right of the door that he presumed would turn the alarm off to allow maintenance to use the door. He knew using the push bar would set the alarm off but if one of the maintenance keys worked he had access to the stairs and the back door.

In searching for the proper key Dominic noticed each key was stamped on the bow. Quickly leafing through the keys he found one stamped with 'ALM'. Hearing a muffled bell of the elevator arriving on the floor he inserted the key and turned the alarm to the off position. The stairway door opened, without a sound. Dominic slid the key back out even as he slipped into the stairwell.

Freezing at a thought he looked at the ceiling and walls. There were no cameras in the stairwell. Sighing his relief he looked at the alarm box on his side of the door. The key slot was turned to the 'Off' position. On a hunch he used the keys to turn the alarm for that door back on. Smiling at leaving no trace of his presence he started down the stairs checking each level for cameras. On reaching the ground floor he again used his pilfered keys to leave the stairwell. Making his way to the back door Dominic let himself out of the building without raising the alarm.

In the alley he changed back to his weasel body and dressed before making his way around the building. He'd had enough excitement and spent enough time to exhaust himself. Back in his own apartment he stood just inside pleased at how clean his home was. He took an extra long shower before going to bed.

* * * *

Last week someone expressed a bit of surprise at the mention of there being feral counterparts for each sentient species. I'll go over my thinking on this.

For the purposes of the story I felt that as the first species started their rise only a subset of the population would be involved. Evolutionary speaking, it would be the result of a mutation in part of the whole population. Also like most mutations through evolution the original population doesn't change, or simply go away. The subset moving toward sentience would over time separate themselves enough to leave behind what would become a feral equivalent.

I simply decided to part ways there with a lot of science fiction stories where the new species eliminates the old. So, yes, for each species in Jeremy there's also a feral version.