

It's been a busy couple of weeks for the person behind the curtain. I have something scheduled for about this time next week so chapter 75 will show up a day early. The buffer for Jeremy is down to about twenty chapters for the first time in about a year. Aside from that I have a building number of side stories I need to focus on. Now that things behind the curtain are starting to calm down a bit I intend to get a little more productive. For now back to Jeremy.

Sam quickly settled in to his training schedule at The Thirteenth Floor and became eager to finish and start taking clients of his own. Jeremy accepted his brother's occasional oversharing with somewhat forced smiles and patient forbearance. It was seeming like his brother was developing into a different person. He was now much more relaxed and open. Jeremy often wondered at the change and just how abusive Eric had been to his brother.

They would soon have to deal with a late season snowstorm that had been forecast to hit sometime Thursday night Friday morning. As a result Jenna cautioned everyone to be ready for an influx of clients. Jeremy was a bit skeptical. From his experience it was more likely people would want to stay in and ride the storm out at home. If the forecast held he would have multiple appointments to fill for both Thursday and Friday. It would be the first time Jenna had scheduled more than one client in a twenty four hour period.

Wednesday evening when he left The Floor the forecast was holding for the storm to hit Friday morning. Back in his apartment he was delighted to see Sam had made all the preparations for the coming storm. Sam had stocked candles in case power went out, and plenty of batteries as well. He'd also stocked up on food to the point that they'd not have to shop for the next week or more. They were all set. They were ready to relax and enjoy the storm for the duration.

Then Jenna called. Jeremy's schedule had been filled with a surprising three clients for the night. There were a lot of The Floor's regular clients clamoring for a quick tryst in anticipation of the storm and resulting shutdowns. Sam was also expected to come in as well. They both made their way to work carrying the heavy jackets they expected to have to use on the way back.

Sam made the comment "Hey, at least it's within walking distance."

Jeremy shrugged "And the work ain't half bad."

Their mood had improved by the time they made it to The Floor. On seeing the couches half full of waiting clients their mood took a dive. They both slipped through the door to Backstage and made their separate ways inside. Checking his tablet Jeremy read the new note from Jenna. Clients were flooding in, and even more were expected. Jeremy would likely have much more than three clients that night.

Jeremy checked his room quickly and went back out to escort his first client of what would be a long grueling night. It seemed to him that instead of preparing for the blizzard some people felt oddly frisky at the thought of the slightest danger looming. Most asked to skip the massage and a good deal of the foreplay and move right to the main event. He'd worked himself to exhaustion by the time the sun rose behind the expected thick clouds outside.

He had to continue even as spent as he was. The reputation of his place on The Floor was now on the line. Like the rest of the male staff he had to resort to mostly oral foreplay to please his clients. Jeremy made the extra effort to make sure they were pleased even if he thought them fools being out this close to a predicted blizzard just for some gratification. He made it through all the same.

At six O'Clock Thursday evening Jenna was forced to close the doors due to the storm arriving early. She ordered everybody to go home and come back only after the storm was over. They could properly clean The Floor afterwards. As exhausted Jeremy felt he changed his assessment when he saw Sam.

His brother had been cleared by the state just in time for this to be his first active week on The Floor. He was walking oddly as they made their way to the apartment. As he watched his brother struggle he knew it wasn't from the three inches of snow that had already accumulated. Jeremy empathized with his brother. His own equipment was sore and raw from the demands of the past twenty hour marathon.

He offered his brother an arm to assist and felt most of his brother's weight shift to him.

"Thanks. That was some fucked up night."

"Yes, it was." Jeremy felt his own soreness but it was nothing compared to Sam's obvious discomfort. He wondered how the female's had fared. Shaking his head he realized he didn't really want to know. Not for several days anyway.

Back in the apartment Jeremy helped his brother to his bathroom and into the tub to soak the soreness out. With Sam situated he went out to the deck and turned on the heaters. There was five inches of snow on the deck and it was piling up in the corners even higher. Even the winds were picking up as predicted.

Looking out from his deck Jeremy could barely see the buildings across the park through the snow. There was still several hours of daylight left but the city could only be made out by the lights that were on. He should have been exhausted. Instead he was energized by the sight. As he watched the snow thicken he understood why so many had shown up at The Floor.

The feel in the air stirred something in him. There was an excitement from the storm he couldn't turn away from. It felt as though something elemental and primitive was moving with the storm. He could almost feel its presence. It compelled him to action. He gripped the railing confused at how to handle whatever this was that called to him. He turned and his paws crunched through the snow as he went inside.

He stood inside the sliding glass door listening. His brother was still in the bathroom. He'd likely stay there for some time then go to bed. Jeremy would have an alibi unless Sam decided to disturb him. He'd never done that before. Even with their relationship mostly repaired Sam never felt the need to disturb his dominant brother.

Just to ensure his brother's routine Jeremy knocked on the door of Sam's bathroom. "You haven't fallen asleep in there have you?"

A shouted "No, I'm almost finished. See you tomorrow." from inside made him smile.

Jeremy turned to his bedroom and collected what he needed. Stuffing his pack he softly left the apartment making sure to save his own profile before leaving. He didn't want to miss out on any benefits he might gain from his recent physical efforts. As the elevator descended he altered his appearance with PATOMES. The nondescript coyote stepped out into the lobby and made his way to the common restrooms. Inside a stall he changed his body once again. The rat took the place of the coyote and changed clothes.

Dominic stuffed the coyote's clothes in his backpack. Coming out of the stall the rat moved to the large vent cover at the back wall of the restroom. With a practiced pull and jerk the cover came free. Dominic set his pack inside the cavity, replaced the cover and stood. Taking a deep breath he walked to the door and into the lobby.

The air outside hit his sinuses and forced a sneeze from the rat. He turned right and walked through the snow covering the sidewalk. His small paws barely penetrated the crust. As a rat he was much smaller than his weasel dominant alpha body. Just a fraction of the mass he usually inhabited he felt lighter. He was lighter, he discovered. Dominic was light enough to actually walk on the snow and not fall through too deeply as long as he stepped carefully.

Once, his paw landed a bit harder than usual and pushed in past his ankle. Suddenly off balance Dominic dropped to knee deep in the snow until he recovered. Walking again he gained the proper experience quickly. His slight weight making the walk over the snow less of a challenge as it grew colder. It was packing and forming a thin yet brittle crust that only helped the rat.

He paused to watch a few children out playing in the new snow. Three bunnies watched over by at least one parent, they scooped up and tossed the snow with abandon. Dominic watched and wondered if the young rabbits felt the power in the storm as he did. Their actions suggested they felt at least a hint of what gripped him. He moved on when he noticed the stare from the larger rabbit. He'd almost forgotten how much rats were discriminated against.

Traffic was down to a trickle with six inches on the ground. There was now a high hedgerow of plowed snow separating the street from the sidewalks. There was once again over an inch of new snow clogging the streets already. Even the plows now seemed to be in retreat against the potency of the storm. In the process of regrouping they were focusing on the main streets and leaving the less traveled and unessential pathways until later. The city was changing under the storm and its blanket of snow. It was returning to its primitive roots. Returning to a time when any predator was dominant and feared.

Dominic knew the predators would be out in the storm. Thick as fleas on a feral, they'd be on the hunt. They would be answering the same silent call he felt. No sane prey species would dare step foot outside on a night like the one approaching.

Dominic smiled to himself thinking there was a higher predator on the prowl tonight. With it building toward eight inches of snow on the sidewalks should he fall through now he'd be in up to his knees. He moved slow and careful still gaining experience. He knew with his slow gait he looked like a tourist stranded outside in the sudden storm.

He'd been circling his apartment in ever widening arcs for over an hour now. The last light of the day had failed causing the streetlights to blink on. There were few people about. He felt alone, isolated but oddly safe. Now that the rush of the storm had faded he was feeling the fatigue of trundling over the snow. With his legs beginning to ache he sought refuge in a subway entrance.

The warm air rushing out from underground only chilled him further. He feet were numb from the cold, looking down he didn't know how rats could cope without fur on their toes.

"Jerimus, check out the rat. Must be lost."

Dominic looked up at the comment. The badger that had spoken was standing at the bottom of the stairs. He was joined by a fox and an ocelot. The cat turned to an unseen companion before he added "He looks half drowned too." Looking back he added "What an idiot." and stared straight at Dominic.

The rat straightened as another pair joined the three. The tiger he all but ignored and focused on the jackal. He was more than seven feet tall and unlike the rest of his species even thicker than the tiger. At that size the jackal had to be a dominant alpha. Dominic narrowed his eyes and prepared to make a run for it. He purposely hadn't gone into the subway because of the cameras that watched everything.

"Come here rat." The jackal rumbled.

Dominic finished targeting each of them with PATOMES and taunted "Go fuck your buddies." and fled. He made it fifteen feet before his feet pushed through the snow and all but halted his progress. He veered into an alley as he heard the five shout at him from the mouth of the subway. They were in pursuit but also slowed by the snow. A glance back proved they were not was encumbered as Dominic's rat form. He activated the PATOMES command.

The alley he had chosen was piled with even more snow than the street. Dominic forced his way in as the drifts came up to his waist. He pushed on knowing he only needed to get out of sight of any passerby. Four feet into the alley he saw that the side of the building to his left was nearly clear of snow thanks to the wind direction. He made the clearing just as the tiger caught up to him.

He felt his body lifted from the ground by the back of his jacket. He dangled in the air as he heard the triumphant tiger proclaim "Here's one ballsy rat, easily caught by a cat." followed by his deep rumbling laugh.

He was turned enough to be given the opportunity to see the others as they joined the tiger. The jackal was slowly sauntering up to the other four. It was clear he hadn't exerted himself and instead let his minions do the strenuous work. He still had an unhappy expression on his face.

"See what you did, rat. Ya made me get my fur wet from chasing you, you stupid fuck."

"Stupid? Seems to me you're the stupid one, fuck-knuckle." Dominic shot back. The tiger and jackal were so engrossed in him they hadn't yet noticed they were more than a foot shorter. The other three were looking at themselves with the familiar signs of discovery. It wouldn't be long before they said something and allowed the ringleader time to react.

"Jerimus, I think-" the badger started.

"Shut the fuck up. When I want an opinion out of you I'll give it to you." The jackal rounded on the badger interrupting him. He paused and stared at the shortened badger clearly wondering at the much looser clothing of his friend. The fox and ocelot were now wearing equally overlarge clothing. Dominic felt another paw take hold of the back of his jacket as the tiger added the second to keep him elevated.

He turned his head to examine the tiger. "Whassa matter kitty, a simple rat too much for you to hold up?"

The tiger was already down to half the size he had been. He was still large enough to keep Dominic off the ground but not for much longer. Looking back to the jackal he saw the dominant was finally coming to understand the situation. He had turned back to look at the tiger and rat. The expression on his face was one of shock. With his advantage of size and dominance fading he was locked in a panic.

"If any of you want a chance of getting your size back do not move from where you stand." Dominic advised.

He'd heard of people in these situations. They were so used to having the ability to command and force others to their will any situation out of the norm tended to send them into a state where their minds locked up. They froze like a feral in headlights. The jackal was giving Dominic firsthand experience of what that looked like. He was forced to admit even dominants weren't immune.

By the time his feet touched the ground again all five were practically standing with their clothes piled around them. He shrugged off the paws of the tiger and turned. The cat was now only six inches taller than him. He stepped away from the dwindling tiger and examined the deeper areas of the alley. He could see the typical movement found in any alley. It was home to several feral rats.

Turning back to the shrinking quintet he said "We're going to play a game tonight. The name of the game is survival. Leave the alley and you surrender the size I took from you and you're on your own for the rest of your pathetic life as you are at that point. Stay in the alley and stay alive until sunrise I'll give anyone that survives all your size back."

Dominic looked at the five. They were all just about down to eight inches tall. He leaned down and put his paws on his knees to address them again. "Understand the rules so far?"

Dominic watched the five as they stared back at him. "Come on assholes, give me some indication you get it." At their collective nod he stood. "Good, one last thing. I get to change the playing conditions as I see fit as time goes on. Lets start, now."

Dominic watched as all five stumbled out of the pile of their clothes and grouped together. "Interesting, isn't this how street gangs work together? I've never actually seen that up close." He said as he stepped over to their clothes. As he picked up the discarded clothes the five backed away from him. He'd only programed their shrinkage down to five inches. They obviously thought at that size all they had to do was run the clock out. He had other plans.

Tossing the clothes in a dumpster he watched as the attention of the five went to the feral rats he'd disturbed. "Yes, thats the problem with alleys in this city isn't it? There're just chock full of rats."

He watched the five back away from the trio of rats advancing to investigate the quintet. The rats were big. Nine to ten inches long, they were all more than a match for the five backing away from them. "I suggest teamwork." Dominic said as he crossed his arms over his chest. He was truly feeling the cold now that he wasn't exerting himself.

The rats while aggressive were still acting somewhat timid confronted by the five tiny people. Dominic guessed they recognized the smell of what to them were the undisputed rulers of the world about them. He targeted all three ferals and trigged the command.

The changes were apparent in seconds. Each of the rats began to expand. Ten inches became eleven, then twelve.

The quintet backed further from the growing rats.

Thirteen inches then fourteen, the rats continued to grow. Their growth was not just in size. Jeremy had again programed PATOMES to add the majority of mass as muscle. Already far larger than any feral rat he'd ever seen they finally stopped growing at sixteen inches long. Their beady eyes were level with each of the five predators. Their shoulders were almost twice the height of the five inch predators. The rats advanced on their prey slowly.

The jackal took action first. He shoved the badger at one of the rats. As the badger stumbled in front of the rat it pounced. It wasn't even close to a fair fight. The badger went under with a tinny shriek as the rat bit into his back. The badger's screams sounded a gruesome soundtrack as the struggle continued.

The jackal pushed the tiger out of the group next. The cat proved nimble and kept his footing, it saved his life. He dodged to the side and only brushed up against the second huge rat even as it lunged at him. He found himself behind the rat and for a second considered his options. He turned and fled deeper into the alley. Instead of giving chase the rat turned at the ocelot that was being pushed its way by the jackal.

The ocelot too was quick on his feet but the rat had learned. It lunged forward even as it brought its tail to bear. The cat managed to dodge the initial lunge but the rat's tail struck him in the chest. He went down as if run over. The ocelot tried to scramble to his feet but the rat turned and was on him too fast. The rat's huge paw covered more than half his chest as it clamped his jaws over the tiny cat's head. It was over for the cat much quicker than for the badger.

With one rat left unoccupied the jackal was forced to think of another plan. The fox had taken the opportunity to make his escape and was more than a foot from the other canine. The last rat had focused on the tiny figure that had been feeding his fellows. Without anything left to give the hungry oversized rodent the jackal knew he was the final item on the menu. He turned and ran after the fox.

The rat sprung after him and caught the former dominant before he'd gone a foot. With his back to the charging rat he went down just as fast as the ocelot.

The fox was three feet from the opening of the alley and closing the distance fast. Jeremy quickly set the command and triggered PATOMES. In five paces the fox shrank to only an inch tall. He stopped running only inches from the opening to the street and looked up at the massive rat.

"I said if you leave the alley you remain at the size you leave at." Dominic answered the unspoken question.

He turned from the fox and searched for the tiger. He noticed a hole in the snow. The cat must have taken to tunneling for a place to hide from the rats. Dominic again triggered a command. In seconds the tiger's hiding spot was foiled. At ten inches long he couldn't stay in the small hiding space he'd made. He too made a run for the alley opening.

He was on the wrong side of the rats. They had finished their meals and were in position to block his escape. Having conquered their fear of people smaller than them they moved aggressively. They hunted the feline as a team mercilessly. He managed to dodge and escape for almost a minute until one of the rats made a successful swipe that knocked him off his feet. All three were on him in an instant.

Dominic turned to leave. It had taken less than half an hour. He programed the rats to return to their normal size over the course of the next hour. They'd keep a large percentage of the muscle he'd given them. He stopped at the sight of the fox still in the alleyway. He'd climbed on top of the snow bank and from that vantage stared at the rats devouring his friend.

Dominic could see from the tracks the fox had made the male had never passed the line marking the entrance to the alley. He crouched down to ask the fox "What was the jackal's surname?"

"Green. Jerimus Green." The shivering fox replied. He had wrapped his arms around himself much as Dominic had.

"It's just a matter of time for you. If the rats don't get you the cold will."

"Please. I haven't left the alley yet." He said pointing to an imaginary line of demarkation.

"You had every intention of leaving."

"And you never had any intention of letting us live." The fox retorted angrily.

"Nope." Dominic answered and walked out of the alley.

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In detailing the geography of Jeremy's world lets follow his path he took for his road trip.

Just to the south of York lays the state of Virginia. In his world it has become one of the largest nations on the continent. Virginia encompasses what we know of as the remainder of New Jersey, a good portion of Pennsylvania, all of Maryland, Delaware and west Virginia. Its southern border is the same we know it shares with south Carolina.

Prior to the Continental wars Virginia was a major power east of the Mississippi. Virginia is where a large number of ambitious carnivores had gathered others in an attempt to once again rule over the prey species. It had over time militarily subjugated York to its north and several states to the south and west. This expansion occurred over several generations.

All of the governors during this expansion of Virginia's power were dominants of the larger carnivorous species. While they were ambitious they were not stupid. They look the long view and planned like few other states. They took their time knowing that a too rapid expansion would invite a backlash from their neighbors. As it was, this long line of its dominant alpha governors held secret their ambitions on gaining the status of a world empire. If not for the wars they just may have managed to accomplish that feat.

The last dominant governor of Virginia was just before the Continental Wars. Through a miscalculation Virginia's power was shattered during the war. More on this next week.