

Hunting Partners – Chapter Two

Morning came far sooner than it had any reasonable right to. Jessi woke to an incessant bleeping and realized that she had already slept through the first five minutes of her alarm. She had not had a restful night and the evidence was all around her. Her pillows were on the floor and the bed cover was piled against the wall. Her mouth felt unpleasantly dry and she realized that she was lying in a puddle of her own drool.

Disgusted, the rat heaved herself up, wiped the saliva from her cheek fur, then punched her alarm clock into silence. Her belly sloshed as she moved, several pounds of semi-liquid mouse settling into a new position. Jessi regarded the bulge in her midsection with bleary eyes, recalling the events of the previous night and remembering why she was so tired. Well, on the bright side, this meant that she wouldn't need any breakfast. Grabbing her pillow off the floor, Jessi placed it over the wet patch on her bed then lay down to get another half hour of sleep.

Just over an hour later, Jessi trudged in to the Biology Department's main lecture hall and took her usual seat. Aura wasn't there yet which was a relief in some ways but Jessi had been hoping she would have a chance to speak to her best friend before the lecture began, rather than spend an awkward hour sitting beside her in silence.

Gradually the lecture hall filled with other students and Jessi pulled her coat a little tighter over her belly. It didn't do much to conceal the evidence of Tayla's remains but it was better than nothing. A lot of people felt that rats were not 'true' predators and had various reactions to seeing one still showing the signs of a recent meal. Smaller rodents, and even some fellow rats, tended to get upset about it and often put more effort into avoiding her afterwards than they did in keeping away from more traditional predators.

Her fellow predators could also react badly to realizing that she ate people. Some got annoyed about it and complained about 'omnivores and wannabes taking all the good prey', while others were patronizingly impressed and asked her how her 'first' hunt had gone. All things considered, she preferred to avoid drawing too much attention to her diet except around Aura and a few other predators who knew her well enough to not make assumptions.

Jessi was so focused on concealing the evidence of last night's meal that she barely thought about Aura until the lecture started. Only then did she start to wonder where her feline friend was. Aura always sat next to her, but Jessi supposed that the events of last night may have changed things a little. She wanted to look behind her to try to spot the cat, but sitting so close to the front, she couldn't easily do that without drawing undue attention to herself. A faint nervous feeling welled up in her chest. Aura had called her last night and she hadn't answered.

There weren't many things large enough to prey on cats and predators eating each other was pretty rare. It did happen though and if Aura had run into a bear or a particularly large wolf on her way home then she might not have made it back safely. She quickly told herself that she was being silly. Aura was a cat. She was more than capable of taking care of herself. It was far more likely that she had just slept in after such a late night or that she had skipped this lesson specifically to avoid having an awkward conversation. Still, the vague feeling of concern was enough to keep the rat fidgeting throughout the lesson on mitochondria.

When at last the lecture finished Jessi stuffed her notes into her bag and turned towards the door, just in time to see a flick of feline tail leaving. Breaking into a run she headed after it. "Hey Aura." The cat glanced back, just long enough for Jessi to confirm that it really was her friend, then vanished into the crowd.

Jessi tried to run after her. Her smaller size should have given her an advantage in squeezing through the crowded halls but the fact that she was carrying the weight of a full grown mouse in her belly was more than enough to counter that. Tayla sloshed back and forth as Jessi tried to run, making her belly sway in time with her steps.

Soon Aura was out of sight and Jessi was out of breath. Panting a little from the run, Jessi decided that it didn't really matter. They were on the same course and had even chosen the same modules. Aura couldn't avoid her forever and if the cat was not ready for the conversation they needed to have then it was probably best to leave her alone for a while. Instead, she decided to head towards the engineering department. She might not have listened to most of her dinner's final words but she remembered the girl's course and, shy as she was about her current appearance, that was one group she wouldn't mind showing Tayla off to.

The engineering department was half way across campus and by the time she reached it Jessi was out of breath again. She wasn't very familiar with this part of the university, but it didn't take her long to find a crowd slowly filing into one of the classrooms. She waited until most of them were inside then crept up on a nerdy looking mouse boy and grabbed his tail.

He spun round looking furious and started to say something, then stopped. It wasn't even close to hunting hours and, even if it had been, the university buildings were all strict no-hunting zones so he was perfectly safe. Intellectually, he probably knew that but mice still had some pretty strong instincts when it came to predators and, with her sloshing belly and wide grin, there was no mistaking Jessi for anything else. Whoever he had expected to find holding his tail, he was clearly not ready for this. His angry demand petered out into a meek "Um? Please let go, miss?"

Jessi's grin widened. Instead of letting go she took a tighter hold and reeled him closer. "I was just wondering," she asked coyly. "if you might have known a fellow mouse named Tayla?"

"I ..." Her victim's eyes widened then fixed themselves on her belly. A look of horror spread across his face, far more that would be expected had he simply known of her or sat next to her in class. Jessi could even see the tears starting to well in the corners of his eyes. "That's not ... please tell me ... I..." he spluttered.

"You were friends then?" She leaned down until her nose was almost touching his. "Well, in that case, I'm sure you won't mind letting the rest of her friends know that she won't be coming to class today, hmm?"

"I ... but ..." He could only make weak protests in response. Putting one hand on the back of his head, Jessi drew him closer still, positioning his head so that one ear was pressed against her overstretched shirt. From there, he could hear every wet slosh and squelch of Tayla's form breaking down. He struggled to get away but Jessi was a lot stronger and held him firmly in place.

"That's right, mousy. Say a quick goodbye to your friend. Although, if you ever want to see her again, a cute little guy like yourself would be a very welcome treat." She licked her lips, loud enough for him to hear. "I'm sure you'd wriggle and squirm just as delightfully as she did."

That last taunt provoked a squeak of pure terror from her victim. He scrabbled backwards, just at the moment that Jessi finally let go of him, causing him to fall to the floor. Half tripping in his haste to get back up, he scurried away to join his fellow engineers in the classroom.

Jessi laughed at his panicked scampering. Dumb prey. It wasn't like she could actually do anything

to him here. Hopefully he would keep quiet about their interaction though, and simply let the rest of Tayla's friends know that they would never see her again. Jessi had already been reported three times to the university's Diversity and Predation office for harassment and use of anti-prey language. Last time they had even made her attend a sensitivity meeting. She certainly didn't need another complaint against her. On the other hand, that had been far too entertaining to pass up. Still chuckling to herself, Jessi left the engineering department.

Annoyingly, her next lecture wasn't until the afternoon so she was now left with a good deal of free time. It wasn't quite long enough for it to be worth going home but, with Aura still avoiding her, she didn't have anyone to talk to. Apart from the cat, all her predatory friends were on different courses and she couldn't think of any of them who would be on campus and out of a lecture at this time. She couldn't even call them as she had forgotten to retrieve her phone from the drawer she had shoved it in last night. Admittedly, there were a couple of mice on her course who usually at least tolerated her presence but she doubted that tolerance would go far while she was so clearly finishing off the remains of a squeaky little meal. With few other options, Jessi headed to the park where at least there were benches to sit on.

It was actually quite a pleasant way to spend the morning. She stretched out in the sun, watched a couple playing Frisbee near the pond and occasionally poked at the vaguely mouse-shaped lumps beneath her fur. Tayla was making pretty good progress in there. She was still mostly solid, and more or less in one piece, but was a good deal softer than she had been last night and coming apart quite nicely. Of course, Jessi knew that if it had been Aura who had eaten the girl, or indeed a predator of almost any other species, then Tayla would be a pool of unrecognizable mush by now. She had always been a little envious of her friend's more efficient metabolism.

Still, her digestive system would process Tayla just as thoroughly as that of any other predator given enough time, and the warm sunshine on her fur and her gentle poking would only hasten things. Smiling to herself, Jessi let out a satisfied burp and, this time, tasted nothing but rich mouse meat. The unpleasant flavor of Tayla's perfume was completely gone.

After maybe an hour of lazing around in the park, Jessi started to get bored. There was only so long she could poke at her belly and mutter teasing comments before she needed an actual living person to talk to. Getting up she decided to head to the university cafeteria. She wasn't in the least bit hungry, of course, but it was lunch time and others would be so it seemed like a good place to find people.

Once inside, it didn't take her long to spot Aura. The tabby was sitting with her back to the entrance so Jessi couldn't see her face, but it was definitely her. Sneaking up, she grabbed her friend by the tail. "Hey kitty. You still avoiding me?"

Aura spun round, her eyes flashing with murderous rage and her usually concealed claws were bared, then she saw who it was. "Jess! Don't do that!" she complained sinking back into her seat. "And yes. I kind of figured this would be one place where I wouldn't run into you today."

"If you want me to go, I will." Jessi offered, "But we are going to have to talk eventually."

"No, stay." Aura waved at the empty chair beside her. "To be honest, I was more worried that you wouldn't want to see me. I thought it would be better to give you some time to cool off first."

"So you're not mad at me?" Jessi checked dropping into the offered chair.

The cat gave her a blank look. "Why would I be mad?"

"I lied to you." Jessi pointed out. "I swore blind that I would stay put and wait for you to get back then turned tail the moment you were out of sight."

Aura gave her an odd look. "I was going to eat you. Do you think I'd be mad if you'd tried to run away or struggled instead? Do you get angry when your prey tries to escape? You were just trying to survive and, as you're still here, you did a pretty awesome job of it."

"I really didn't expect that to work. When you agreed I thought for a while that you were just toying with me. I still can't believe you actually fell for that."

"Hey!" Aura glared at her. "Keep rubbing it in like that and I might get mad."

Jessi grinned cheekily at her friend then her expression fell to a more serious one. "I just ... I just want to know why, I guess. I've never seen you fall for that kind of trick before. Was I really more convincing than any of them or was it because we were friends or something?"

Aura frowned and considered the question. "Actually, I think it was because you took your shirt off. I'm used to my prey screaming and fighting me to the last swallow. When dealing with that, it's pretty obvious that everything they say is just another attempt at getting free. The fact that you just cooperated meant I wasn't really thinking of you as one of them at that point. Oh and speaking of your shirt ..." Aura reached into her bag and pulled out the shirt Jessi had been wearing on last night's hunting trip.

"Oh, thanks." Jessi reclaimed it and stuffed it into her own bag. It was one of her favorite shirts, particularly for hunting in. It was dark which made her harder to spot at night as well as being nice and stretchy.

"And you're not mad that I tried to eat you?" Aura checked.

Jessi hesitated. "You told me at the time that it was a spur of the moment decision. That was true, right? You weren't planning that when you invited me hunting?" she asked.

The cat nodded. "It was only after you'd eaten that mouse that it even occurred to me. You just looked so temptingly plump once you'd finished with her."

"Then I guess I forgive you." Jessi decided. "I'm not exactly happy about it, but you were just following your instincts. You were hungry and I was stupid enough to be nearby and in no state to run." She picked up one of the fries from Aura's plate and bit it in half. "Plus our last few hunts have all been unsuccessful, I should have realized that I'd start to look quite tempting after that." She finished off the fry, sending it down to join the mushy engineering student stewing inside her, then reached for another.

Aura moved to defend her plate. "You might look less tempting if you'd stop stealing my food." she protested. "Come on. You ate an entire mouse less than twenty four hours ago, you can not still be hungry."

"I'm not. I just don't want her getting lonely in there." Jessi answered. "Anyway, you don't even like fries."

"Yeah, but I need something to keep me going after you stole my mouse." Aura answered. "Actually, on that topic, are you up for another trip tonight? I can promise that it won't end the same

way.”

“I ... well ...” Jessi shook her head slightly. “I’ve got some coursework I should be doing. That and I’ve been trying to get some earlier nights recently.”

“Well how about tomorrow then?” Aura asked. “Also, if you’re behind on the coursework you could come over some time and we could look at it together.”

Jessi shook her head to both suggestions. “Sorry Aura,” There was no easy way to say this. However she phased it, it was going to hurt the cat and damage their friendship. “I really do forgive you for what happened last night and would still like to hang out with you when possible but it can’t be anywhere that you could eat me. So no more hunts together and if we meet up off campus it has to be at my apartment, not yours.”

There was a long silence, during which the cat just stared at her plate. “Oh.” she stated at last. “I guess that makes sense. I really am sorry about this.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” Jessi insisted. “I was the one who wanted to go hunting with you. I decided to take that risk and it’s my fault that I was there and vulnerable when you decided to eat me. It was pretty stupid risk to take. Actually, that’s kind of my point. I’m not angry with you but I’ve definitely learned not to take risks like that ever again.”

Aura nodded, still not happy but a little reassured by Jessi’s words. “We’re still friends then?”

Jessi grinned. “Depends. How many of your fries are you going to let me steal?”