

Hunting Partners – Chapter Three

Jessi dropped unto her bed and lay, staring at the ceiling, until she felt able to deal with the world again. Finally she reached for her bag, pulled out her phone and decided to call her best friend.

“Hey Jessi, how are things?” the cat answered.

“Good. Well goodish.” the rat replied. “I still can’t believe they gave me two months of prey sensitivity meetings.”

“Hmm. I still say you got off lightly because you don’t look very threatening.” Aura answered. “If I’d cornered some mouse and shown him where his former classmate had gone, I’d probably be in those meetings till I graduated.”

“If you’d been the one to do it that little snack wouldn’t have dared say anything to anyone.” Jessi countered. “Besides. I really don’t see the point in multiple sessions. They all cover the same stuff anyway.” Her voice took on a high, mocking tone. “Be nice to those who are smaller than you. Behavior that is acceptable during hunting hours may not be acceptable on campus. The university celebrates diversity and promotes a safe learning environment for all species. It wasn’t too bad the first few times I went but having to waste an hour of every evening listening to the same bland platitudes is starting to get to me.”

“Sorry Jessi. I’d help if I could but all I can advise is that next time you feel like teasing some prey a little pick one who won’t go squealing to the authorities.” Aura responded.

“Yeah, I know.” the rat muttered. “Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to come over for a while? I was hoping I could get a look at your Immunology notes, and we could play a game or something, maybe just talk?” There was a hint of desperation in her voice that Jessi couldn’t quite conceal. Since she had vowed never to go to the cat’s home it had become a little difficult to arrange meet-ups.

“I ... kind of promised to go hunting with Stan tonight.” Aura admitted. “Could we try again tomorrow, or maybe Saturday?”

Jessi bit her lip. Of all the things she could be rejected for, a night spent hunting hurt the most. Before things had gone so wrong, she and Aura had always hunted together and Jessi had taken a lot of pride in her skills as a catcher. Now Aura was hunting with a fox who neither of them really knew and she couldn’t help but feel rejected, even if she was the one who was refusing to participate anymore. Selfish as it was, she hoped that Stan would mess up. Miss an easy catch, or make too much noise, or something. Anything that would reinforce her status as the better partner. “Lucky.” Jessi did her best to mask her resentment with genuine enthusiasm. “I wish I could join you.”

There was a silence on the other end that let her know that at least some of her envy had been noticed. It was also an invitation. Aura was too polite to try to tempt Jessi directly but the rat could tell that, if she asked, her friend would take her along in a heartbeat. “Yeah, we haven’t been having a lot of luck recently though.” Aura stated diplomatically. “What about you? You were setting up a rat only hunting group last I heard.”

It was a nice attempt to cheer her up, but it only made Jessi more frustrated. “Waste of time.” she muttered. “Of all the other rats on campus there are only about a dozen or so with any interest in hunting. Two of them are already working together and don’t want anyone else joining them, the

others are all too afraid to go out during hunting hours or know that I'm friends with you and assume we're setting a trap."

"Oh. I'm really sorry about that Jessi. You know that you are always welcome if ... well ... never mind. I can't cancel on Stan at this point. I'll try to see you tomorrow if that's okay?"

"Sure." Jessi put a little too much cheer in her voice to be natural. "Anyway, thanks for letting me moan for a bit, Aura. I'll see you in class, then?"

Once the call was over, Jessi turned her phone off and tossed it towards her desk. She had hoped that the call to her friend would make her feel better, but it had only made her envious and more frustrated. After half an hour of sulking she realized her belly was growling.

With a sigh she got up from her bed and stomped into the kitchen. She hadn't bothered to get anything to eat between coming back from classes and going to her prey sensitivity session and was just now noticing how hungry she was. Pulling open the fridge, she rummaged through hopefully.

Unfortunately, she had also forgotten to do any shopping recently, and what little remained on her shelf was less than inspiring. After a minute or so, she pulled a frozen pizza from one of the other shelves. Its owner might miss it, but she was the only predator in a building full of rodents and her flatmates had long ago decided that the occasional stolen meal was worth it to keep her satisfied. Jessi did try not to abuse that privilege too often though.

As the pizza slowly cooked she thought about her conversation with Aura and her prey sensitivity meetings. The real source of her frustration, she realized, was not the content of the meetings but the other students who had to attend them. Jessi was the only rat and by far the smallest creature there. None of the other predators really considered a rodent to be capable of hunting for herself and, while they knew she must have harassed one of the smaller students in order to get sent there, they only took that as further confirmation that she was a wannabe. A harmless little rat that liked to pretend she was a predator instead of prey and so had threatened someone even smaller in an attempt to feel powerful and ended up getting sent to these meetings alongside a group of actual carnivores.

It wasn't even that they teased her about it, not most of them anyway. Instead they went out of their way to be as polite and non-threatening to her as possible. It was their way of showing to the group leader that they weren't really biased against prey species and should therefore be let out of the punishment early. Even the leader treated her more favorably to the rest of the group. No one really believed that she was a real predator, just some idiot who had landed herself in the group by scaring an oversensitive mouse.

Jessi ground her front teeth in frustration. The worst thing about this was how right they actually were. Without a hunting partner, it was simply too dangerous for her to go out alone. Predators usually tried not to target other predators but nobody considered rats to be in that group. Without Aura to keep an eye out for her, the rewards of hunting just didn't outweigh the risks, and Jessi was left as a harmless rodent, hiding inside during hunting hours and eating processed bread and cheese.

Realizing that the pizza was probably done by now, Jessi pulled it out the oven and cut it into slices. Taking a bite, she chewed despondently. In terms of flavor, the pizza was far better than any mouse. At best, live prey just tasted salty and often with an unpleasant musky aftertaste. The pizza had a balanced mix of different flavors that had been chosen specifically to compliment each other. But it didn't wriggle. She couldn't smell any fear on it. It didn't squirm in her grip or emit frightened squeaks as she consumed it. It just turned into a uniform mush in her mouth. She couldn't even

simulate the blissful stretched feeling that came from forcing a live person down her gullet. If she tried to swallow the pizza whole she would likely end up burning her throat.

Still, she was hungry and pizza was what she had. If she couldn't get a hunting party together soon then pizza was all she was going to have until she graduated and possibly a long time after that. Jessi was just reaching for a second slice when a buzzing from her room interrupted her self pity. Someone was at the front door and had called her room to ask to be let in. Other than Aura, Jessi didn't have many friends and certainly none that would turn up unannounced during hunting hours.

The most likely explanation was that the caller was just pressing buttons at random, hoping that someone would be kind enough to let them in. It was not uncommon to get that kind of call during the night. When someone was being pursued by a predator, a no-hunting zone such as the university's Main Rodent Accommodation would often look like a good place to take refuge. At least until they got there and found the front door locked, at which point it would begin to look more like a literal dead end. Still, Jessi was not one to pass up a free show and, right now, watching someone else catch their prey was as close as she was likely to get to going hunting. Leaving her stolen pizza on the side to cool, Jessi headed downstairs to the front door.

To her surprise, it was not a tearful victim begging for someone to let them in. Instead a large tabby cat stood on the doorstep with a big smile, a large belly, and a mouse tucked under one arm. Jessi ran to the door and threw it open "Aura. I thought you weren't going to come."

"Hey Jessi. I didn't say I wouldn't come, just that I had already arranged to go hunting and, as you can see," She gestured at her full belly and the squirming mouse. "that went pretty well."

Jessi stared at the mouse in Aura's grip and the mouse shaped bulge beneath her shirt. In the two years that she and the cat had worked together she couldn't think of a single hunt that had ended with so much prey in so little time. Usually they had to wait for hours to get anyone but the cat couldn't have been hunting for more than half an hour and had already found two meals. "How did you manage that?" she asked.

"It was Stan's idea mostly." Aura admitted. "He overheard one of his classmates talking about a birthday party at the bar and thought we should check it out. It was supposed to have ended well before hunting hours but there was a nice group of stragglers who were apparently too drunk to keep track of the time." She lifted up the mouse as an example and Jessi could see the tear lines on his face. The poor guy was clearly learning an important lesson about priorities and knowing when to call it a night.

"Please?" he whispered almost conspiratorially, "You've got to help me. I swear I'll find a way to make it up to you if you do?"

Jessi had no idea what he was expecting her to do for him, but she didn't much care. Her concerns right now centered more around the intense surge of jealousy she was feeling. Jessi had always felt that Aura and her made a pretty effective hunting team. Her small size helped her to stay hidden until Aura could chase the prey in her direction and, once they were headed in her direction, very few prey got to see another sunrise. But all of that seemed worthless if some fox could just waltz in and help Aura make the kind of catches that Jessi could only have dreamed of. Still Aura was her friend and she should try to at least sound happy for her. "That's ... a really good catch." she stated lamely.

"Thanks. It was just luck really though. We were hoping one or two of them would stay out late but we didn't expect a whole group. Anyway, Stan and me both grabbed two each and decided the hunt

was finished which has freed up the rest of my night nicely. Also, as you were just telling me how hard it's been to find anyone to hunt with, I figured you might like this one."

Jessi and the mouse stared at each other, the rat having been caught completely off guard by Aura's surprising generosity. She knew the cat could manage two mice in one sitting and, even if Aura wasn't hungry now, she could always take him home for later. She licked her lips in anticipation and the mouse gave a little shudder. He had been hoping that the presence of a fellow rodent might improve his situation in some way. That she might speak out on his behalf or distract his captor for a moment. Realizing that he was alone among predators crushed that hope and left him feeling even more helpless than before.

Then Jessi's ears drooped. "I'm sorry, Aura," she muttered. "but I can't take him." She felt pretty bad about that. Her best friend had gone out of her way to bring her a very considerate gift and she was refusing to accept it.

"But ..." The cat looked crestfallen. "I thought you liked mice."

"I do, but you can't bring him in here." Jessi argued. "It's a no-hunting zone. The moment he's through the door he stops being prey. Then neither of us could eat him. I can't come out to you either. We already agreed on that."

Aura looked very downcast. "I hadn't really thought of that," she admitted. "Maybe we could pass him through a window or something? Or if you leaned out, I could help feed him to you without you having to leave the building?"

Jessi shook her head to both suggestions. "Him coming through the door has nothing to do with it. It's a no-hunting zone. If he's inside then he's not prey. Same applies in reverse. If I stuck even the tip of my tail through the door, you could grab it and pull the rest of me out. Sorry Aura."

Aura looked even more hurt. "You don't trust me at all, do you?" she asked.

"I trust you during the day." Jessi replied. "I trust you when we are inside this building. But when you are standing on my doorstep and trying to lure me outside with some very tempting bait ... Sorry, but I'm not coming out. It's too risky."

"Last time we were having a really bad hunting streak." Aura protested. "I know how badly I messed things up between us back then but this time I've already eaten. Doesn't that change things at all?"

Jessi gazed at the slight movement coming from Aura's midsection. The mouse inside must be putting up an impressive fight to be making an impression through the layers of muscle, fur, and fabric that separated them from the outside world. "You've had one mouse," she answered. "I doubt you would have any difficulty finding room for a rat in there as well. Even if you were absolutely stuffed, there would be nothing to keep you from taking me home for later."

She expected Aura to make another attempt to persuade her to come out, instead the cat simply nodded. "You're right, this was a silly idea. I'm sorry I brought him here. I really didn't mean to tease you with prey that you can't have or to make such a big deal out of this. Let me get rid of my catch and then I'll come in and we can actually do something fun together instead of arguing on your doorstep." The struggling mouse went frantic as Aura lifted him towards her jaws but his kicking didn't even slow the cat down.

Jessi could see the poor rodent trembling as he was guided, head first, towards the feline's open maw. She thought about the remaining pizza she had waiting for her. She also considered what it would be like to show up to the next prey sensitivity meeting with a full belly. That would show the rest of the group that she was a real predator. It would also be quite satisfying to sit through the platitudes on being tolerant of the smaller species with the remains of one stewing in her gut. The fact that he was a mouse, the same species that had reported her in the first place, only made her want him more. "Wait," she interrupted. "I've got some string upstairs. If you were to tie him up and then step back a little, I could come out and eat him without getting too close to you. Would you still be up for that?"

"If that suits you, then sure." Aura lowered the mouse again, who looked extremely relieved although he surely knew that this was a momentary reprieve at best.

"You would? Okay, wait there." Jessi gave the feline a surprised look before running back to her own room. By now she had all but convinced herself that this was some kind of trick and that the offered mouse was just bait to lure her outside. Squirmy, terrified, mouth-watering bait, but that was the kind you had to be the most careful of. The fact that Aura had instantly agreed to her plan had been unexpected and went a long way towards convincing Jessi that her friend's offer was sincere. Then again, maybe the cat was just confident that she would be able to cover the distance between them before Jessi could get back inside. By the time Jessi returned with the string she was beginning to doubt how safe this idea really was.

Still it was too late to back out now. She tossed the ball to Aura and the cat bent down and started tying her catch's legs together. The poor mouse howled and wriggled about, trying to make it as difficult for her as he could. Actually, it was equally possible that he was screaming due to how tight Aura was making the knots. Once his ankles were securely bound, Aura twisted his hands behind his back and started on his wrists, pressing her knee between his shoulder blades to make any further resistance as painful as she could for him. Finally, she tied the rope around his ankles to the rope on his wrists so he would barely be able to move at all. Once finished she stepped back and admired her handiwork. "Okay. That should keep him for a while. How far back do you want me to stand?"

Jessi wavered. Part of her was tempted to ask Aura to leave completely and call her phone once she was finished. Another part of her wanted to apologize for being so suspicious and step out in front of the cat as a way of showing that she really did trust her. "That lamppost," she compromised, pointing down the road. "At least as far as that."

She had half expected Aura to take offense at that and refuse to go but the cat just nodded and walked down the street to the specified point. Her casual acceptance should have been a comfort to Jessi but, instead, it made her wonder if she had chosen a far enough point. She had seen before how fast her friend could move when she wanted to, and she would be bending down with her mouth full of mouse. If Aura were to attack, could she definitely get back inside before the cat covered the distance between them? Well, there was only one way she would know for sure.

With a deep breath, Jessi broke the promise she had made to herself and stepped outside during hunting hours. Aura didn't move but her yellow eyes stayed fixed on Jessi. Cautiously, Jessi walked from her front door to where the trussed mouse wriggled on the pavement. Still watching her friend, she bent down and grabbed the hapless rodent by the throat. Her prey made one final effort to plead with her. Babbling tearfully about what had happened to his girlfriend and how much he just wanted to go home. He seemed to realize that she wasn't really paying him much attention though. His words had a flat, hopeless tone to them. He knew she wasn't listening, and that nothing he could say would save him now, but obviously felt compelled to say it anyway.

Opening her mouth, Jessi breathed over his face and he fell silent. She took her eyes off the watching cat just long enough to see the mouse's ears flatten back against his skull as he stared into the dark tunnel of her esophagus. She always loved it when prey did that. She knew it was just a natural reaction to the fear they were feeling, but it always seemed like their bodies were saying 'Oh, you're going to eat me? Here, let me tuck my ears out the way for you. There you go, I'm nice and streamlined now. Enjoy your meal.'

Realizing that she had let herself get distracted Jessi looked up fast but Aura was still in place. Standing beneath the lamp with her arms folded and a patient expression on her face. Wasting no more time, Jessi quickly shoved the head of her meal into her jaws. Warm, quivering, mouse fur brushed over her tongue and she eagerly took her first swallow. This was so much better than pizza.

She couldn't properly enjoy him though. She wanted to, this might be the last mouse she would eat in a long time and she wanted to savor every inch of his trembling body, but she couldn't risk getting too distracted right now. Gulp. The sooner she could get him down, the sooner she would be able to get back to safety. Gulp. His shoulders entered her mouth and she was forced to bend double to continue her progress. If ever there was a good time for Aura to pounce this was it but the cat just watched in silence.

Gulp. Jessi started working her way down the prey's back. His fur was standing on end and each new mouthful tickled the inside of her mouth before getting drenched and matted by her saliva. Gulp. Reaching his wrists, she made a brief attempt to untie them so that he would be able to wriggle properly once he reached her stomach. Only after failing to make any progress with the knot did she realize just how tight Aura had tied the bonds. Despite herself, she felt a momentary pang of sympathy for the mouse. He couldn't be getting any circulation to his hands or feet like this. Still, it wasn't like that would make much difference to him in the long run and, if her digestive system couldn't process the string, she could always cough it back up once her dinner was a little less solid. Another swallow pulled his bound wrists and ankles inside, leaving only his knees and tail sticking awkwardly from her jaws.

She checked again that her friend was keeping to the agreed distance, then threw back her head and gulped down what was left of his legs. Now only a few inches of tail remained. She would have very much liked to savor that, maybe get in some playful teasing before finishing him, but the sooner she could get back inside the sooner she could stop worrying and, if there was even a tiny bit of him still sticking out when she did that, she would be obliged to vomit up the entire mouse.

Like a strand of spaghetti, Jessi sucked the last of her meal into her mouth and swallowed. Then she half ran, half waddled, back to the safety of the doorway. "You finished?" Aura called out the moment Jessi was inside. "Can I come back now?"

She could clearly see that this was the case and didn't really need to ask, but Jessi appreciated the fact that she did. It was Aura's way of letting her know that she respected Jessi's concerns and would stay put for as long as was necessary for her rat friend to feel comfortable. "Yeah. Come on in. I'm sorry I've been so paranoid about this." Jessi called back.

Aura left the lamp post and walked slowly back towards Jessi, having to duck as she entered the building that had been designed with creatures much smaller than her in mind. "It's okay. You used to trust me enough that we could both go out together. It's my fault that we lost that. I can't complain when it makes things harder for me."

Jessi smiled apologetically and the two headed upstairs together and into Jessi's room. The next

couple of hours were spent playing video games, snacking on stolen pizza, and watching their meals slowly settle in.

Aura's meal was the first to stop moving of course. Not only did the cat have a significant head start on breaking down her prey, her stomach was far better adapted to processing live meat than Jessi's. The poor mouse inside lasted only half an hour or so into their gaming session before running out of oxygen, giving a few last feeble twitches, then settling down to embrace her new role as nutrition.

Noticing that the squirms in her friend's tummy had ceased, Jessi ran her fingers through the fur of her own and decided to share that information with the mouse still wriggling inside. That provoked some pretty impressive struggles from her meal, particularly given that his wrists were still tied to his ankles. Much to Jessi's pleasure the poor guy thrashed, and kicked, and wriggled inside her, demanding, then begging, for them to release his girlfriend before it was too late.

Eventually he seemed to realize that the 'too late' point had been reached some time ago and calmed down a bit. Or maybe he had just worn himself out, Jessi couldn't tell which. Helping herself to the last slice of pizza she leaned back and watched Aura struggle with a particularly tricky level of their game.

Eventually Aura yawned and put down the controller. "Well, it's been great hanging with you Jess but I need to call it a night. I'll try to drop in with my Immunology notes tomorrow."

Jessi nodded and followed the cat as she left the room. "Um, Aura? I ... Thank you for tonight, I really needed it."

The feline gave her a surprised look. "Any time, Jessi. That's what friends are for, right?"

The rat nodded softly. "Yeah but ... I'm not as sociable as you. I don't really have many other friends so it means a lot to me when you come round like this." It hurt to have to admit this about herself, particularly to Aura of all people, but she felt it needed saying. "Also, the fact that you knew I wasn't having any success with my own hunting so you decided to bring me some of your prey."

Aura laughed. "Hey, it's okay. I've enjoyed myself as well. Maybe I'll get another lucky catch soon and we'll be able to do this again. If not, well, I can still come round."

For a moment Jessi almost asked if they could start hunting together again. Right now the ill-fated hunting trip when her friend had turned on her felt distant and unreal. Aura clearly regretted it and Jessi was all but certain that her friend would never try something like that again. They both wanted for things to go back to the way they had been before that day. Still she resisted. No amount of squirmy meals was worth the risk of becoming one herself. However much she felt she could trust Aura this time, she had made up her mind to never put herself in that kind of danger again. "Thanks kitten," she replied. "I'll see you tomorrow then." and waved as Aura left.

Once alone, Jessi returned to her room and flopped onto her bed. Her belly made a loud slosh as she did so, followed by an agonized squeal from her food as he was thrown around in her digestive juices. Compared to his earlier protests, however, it was something of a disappointment. The mouse was near the end of his strength now and Jessi's acids were eating away his skin.

"Oh yes, I'm going to enjoy showing you off at the next PS meeting," she gloated. "You'll be mush, of course, but you'll still look impressive." Running her hands over her swollen belly she gave him a little squeeze and was rewarded with a groan and a few feeble kicks. It felt nice but was not as fun

as usual. The problem, she realized, was that, however good he may feel in there, she didn't really feel she had earned this meal.

She hadn't gone out and caught him, he was Aura's prey that had been given to her, tied up and helpless, out of pity. She might get a few impressed looks when she showed up to the next meeting, but most of the predators would probably assume that she had had help to catch her meal. The worst thing was she would know they were right. He was Aura's catch, not hers.

Irritated, she did her best to put those thoughts out of her mind. The mouse was a rare treat and she should be savoring what was left of him, not sulking. Particularly as she could tell he would not keep wriggling for much longer. Inside her belly, she could feel him writhing about, desperate to keep his head above the swirling acids for as long as possible, but it was a battle he could not keep winning for long. "Oh, you really want to live, don't you?" Jessi teased. Each time her stomach muscles pushed his head back under, he would find a new position to wriggle into and gasp another lungful of the stagnant air. Still, his movements were getting sluggish and losing coordination, a sure sign of prey at the end of its strength. "In fact, you're doing so well in there I'm almost tempted to let you go."

"Please ... I'll mmph!" His plea was cut short as the stomach walls pushed him under again and Jessi's digestive juices filled his mouth.

"Hmm ... nah. You get some sleep now, mousy, and soon enough you'll be a part of my body." With those words Jessi let out a final belch, removing the last few pockets of air from her stomach and tasting the prey on her lips for a second time. Her dinner tried to come back up for air but, this time, found that there was none left. She could feel him start to twitch helplessly as his body began to asphyxiate. He must somehow have managed to get his arms free from Aura bonds as she could feel his little paws running over her stomach walls, searching for some way out. Then his muzzle pressed against the top of her belly, desperately seeking any air pockets that might remain.

"Mmh, yes. That's it, mousy. You belong to me now. Settle down and my let body turn you into mush, just like your girlfriend is already doing." She broke off mid taunt to let out a yawn, then nestled down among her covers. "Don't worry, you won't be the last to go this way. I may not have worked out how just yet, but I'll find a way to get you some company soon."

A few little spasms were the only reply she got from her dinner before he gave in and went limp. The little heartbeat fluttered on for a few seconds more, desperately trying to keep the body alive in the hopes of some miraculous, last minute rescue, but soon that too fell still.

"Well, goodbye." Jessi mumbled, then rolled over to rest on top of now unmoving mouse and within a few minutes had fallen fast asleep.