

Hunting Partners – Chapter Four

Jessi took a sip of her beer and drummed her fingers against the bar stool impatiently. Fortunately, she wasn't waiting for long as, just a few minutes later, she felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see her best friend behind her. The big grin on Aura's face told her everything she needed to know about the cat's own exam results. "So," Aura asked first. "how did it go?"

"Well I passed." Jessi stated. "Which, in itself, is more than I was expecting. Turns out I did pretty well actually. Do I need to ask how you did, or should I just wait until it explodes out of you?"

"You know that offer for a Masters I was given?" Aura began. "The one that only applied if I averaged seventy percent on the remaining exams?"

"I take it your score was at least that, then?" the rat replied.

Aura unfurled a handful of papers. "Eighty four." she smirked.

Jessi gave a low whistle and gestured at the stool beside her. "If that isn't worth celebrating, I don't know what is."

"Yeah." The cat joined her and, within moments, had ordered a round of drinks for both of them.

An hour or so later, the two were still there, slightly drunk and both discussing their plans for the future. Aura's seemed pretty clear, she had the results she needed and a follow up position at a significantly more prestigious university. The only question was whether, given her unexpectedly high grade, she should start fishing for somewhere even better. Jessi, however, had less direction.

"I'm still not sure what I actually want to do with Bioscience." she explained again. "I guess I kind of ended up in this course because it was always the subject I scored highest in but I was never really sure what it was leading up to." She'd gone over this a few times before but it was a topic that she had been trying not to dwell on for the last few weeks. Now that their exams were over and the results were back she no longer had an excuse to avoid thinking about it.

"Take a gap year?" Aura suggested. "Drift around for a while and see what you fall into."

"Maybe?" Jessi replied. "I kind of want some kind of direction though. It's a bit scary not knowing what's coming."

Aura shrugged. "Worry about that tomorrow." she insisted. "We've just got our results, we both exceeded expectations, tonight's for partying." She lifted her own glass and Jessi did the same.

Half an hour later, the rat's phone started bleeping from her pocket. Jessi dug it out and silenced the alarm. "Ah shit. I didn't realize how late it was getting. You want to continue this at my place?" she offered.

"Actually, I think I might stay out for a bit." The cat glanced around the room. Gradually the demographics of the bar were changing. The vast majority of the students out celebrating were members of the prey species and, when Jessi had first arrived, they had significantly outnumbered the predators. This last half hour, however, most of the smaller members had finished their drinks and left. Even as Aura spoke, a pair of rabbits got up and headed out. "Results day is always pretty good for hunting and, having spent the last few weeks shut inside and revising, it sounds like a pleasant way to unwind."

“Yeah.” Jessi did her best to hide her disappointment. She was also feeling pretty pent up from revising and had been hoping to release that tension by spending a few hours with her friend. “If you catch someone soon, maybe you could drop in afterwards?” she offered as she got down from her stool.

Aura caught her arm to prevent her from leaving. “Jess?” The cat gave her a pained expression as she struggled for the words. “Tonight is probably the best hunting opportunity of the year. I know it's my fault that you won't work with me anymore and I know that trying to pressure you would be a good way to end our friendship but ... Well, we are both going our separate ways soon anyway, so it can't hurt to try. Please Jessi, come hunting with me? I promise you'll get back home safely and, with a bit of luck, with a full belly as well.”

Jessi pulled her arm back hard and, to her surprise, the cat let go without resistance. “You can't ask me that!” she growled. “Do you know how hard it was to stop hunting completely? We could have worked together all year but you had to ruin it and I was the one that lost out on any chance of catching prey because of that. Now you're asking me to risk my life again just because you want some company while hunting?” She surprised herself at the anger that her words came out with. She had told herself that she had forgiven Aura for trying to eat her but, subconsciously at least, she still blamed the cat for ruining their partnership. It may have been her decision to abstain from hunting since that night but that still left her feeling frustrated at her own inability to safely catch prey and with no one else she could blame for it but Aura.

The cat hung her head. “I know. I'm sorry, it's just that this is really the last chance we'll get. I'm leaving in a week or so and I don't know when we'll next meet in person. I know how badly I screwed things up for you but I didn't realize you would swear off hunting for the entire year. I'm sorry if this offer upsets you or looks like I'm trying to set a trap but, if you do refuse, I can just go by myself and hope you forgive me for it. I've got some rope so I'll try to bring you a mouse or something if I can catch one.”

Jessi glanced at the clock above the bar. It was half past nine. Half an hour should be plenty of time for her to back to her apartment but not if she stood around arguing about it for much longer. “I ... I should just go home.” she insisted. “Sorry Aura, I'd love to come. Really, I miss our hunts more than you know, but ... I have my whole life ahead of me. I just graduated. I even managed to pass somehow. There's so much stuff I want to do with my life. I can't justify risking all of that for one night of fun.”

Aura nodded. “Very sensible.” she agreed. “I guess I'll see you later tonight. Hopefully with a catch for you as well.”

Jessi wavered in the doorway, still debating whether to leave or not. As she did so, a small shrew got up from further along the bar, turned off the alarm on his own phone and headed out. He gave Aura a wide berth as he passed, instinctively avoiding the predatory feline, then pushed awkwardly past Jessi.

That was the deciding factor for the rat. The shrew had been so cautious of Aura, even though hunting hours had not yet begun, but he hadn't even considered that Jessi could be a threat. For a moment, she felt like chasing him down and explaining that she was as much a predator as any cat, that her stomach was just as deadly as Aura's, and that he should be equally afraid of ending up in either of them. Another twenty minutes or so and she would even be able to give him a first hand demonstration of just how predatory a rat could be.

But she knew it would do no good. He probably wouldn't believe her and would be safely indoors long before she could do anything other than shout at him. For that matter, she would need to get home as well. She was going to spend the best hunting night of the year hiding in a safe zone, belly growling but too afraid to go outside, just like all the other prey.

Grinding her front teeth together, Jessi turned away from the bar and headed back to her friend. "Okay Aura, you win. Let's go hunting."

Ten minutes later, the two of them were walking side by side down the road. There were a few groups still out celebrating but, by now, they either consisted only of predators or were obviously on their way to safety. Still, both girls knew that not everyone would make it. There would always be a few that misjudged the time, got lost on the way, or were simply too drunk to realize the danger.

It was drizzling lightly, but that wasn't enough to deter either those celebrating the end of their studies or those looking to make a meal out of the former group. A passing wolf gave the two of them an odd look, clearly wondering why a rodent like Jessi was willingly walking beside a feline so close to hunting hours. Thankfully, he didn't actually say anything. Jessi wasn't sure she could take another slight to her status as a predator at the moment.

As the hour drew later, the passing groups became less frequent and the members more hurried. Most of them shuffled away or crossed the road when they spotted Aura and, several times, Jessi noticed that the groups of prey were already being shadowed by one or more predators. The atmosphere of celebration was already changing into one of fear and silent anticipation. Nearby, she heard someone shout, then a rabbit sprinted past the end of the road leisurely pursued by a large canine. He wouldn't be able to catch her for a few minutes yet, but the chance of that bunny making it home in time was looking pretty slim.

Then the university's clock began to chime. The anticipatory rustle of the city before hunting hours died away and all Jessi could hear was the clang of the bell. Soon the last chime faded and everything went silent. It didn't last long though. Less than a minute after the bells had stopped they heard the first scream of the night. "No! No, get away! Please, I don't ..." The screaming faded into the distance.

Jessi shivered slightly, but not with fear. Dangerous as it was without a larger creature to protect her she loved being out during hunting hours. The city took on a whole new life that was completely hidden during the safer parts of the day. After so long spending her nights indoors it was an almost tangible relief to be out hunting again. She grinned up at her friend and protector. "So, the usual place then?"

Aura shook her head. "Most of the prey out tonight will be around the bars or clubs. Of course, the most obvious spots will probably have attracted too many hunters already but I've got a few ideas for where we could try."

Jessi nodded and followed the feline's lead. On the way, they passed several others who were out hunting. It wasn't common to see so many of the larger species wandering around during hunting hours. Most predators relied on stealth to at least get close to their prey and, unless they had a partner working as a catcher, preferred to stay hidden until a potential meal came within pouncing distance. Tonight, however, the sudden glut of prey, many of them already inebriated, allowed for more direct strategies and there were predators wandering around with no attempt at concealment.

Jessi noticed several of them greedily sizing her up before they spotted Aura and lost interest. Despite herself, she shuffled a little closer to her friend and, in response, Aura rested one hand on

her shoulder, a clear sign to the others that Jessi could not be claimed without a fight. Normally she would have resented the implication that she needed protection, however true it might be, but tonight she was simply glad to be out hunting again.

They didn't just pass predators, of course. Every so often they would spot prey species nearby, but never close enough to justify a chase and they always made a quick escape when they saw Aura coming towards them.

Then Jessi heard footsteps behind her and, turning round, saw a plump looking mouse girl running in their direction. Spotting Aura, the mouse's eyes widened and she momentarily hesitated then, to Jessi's surprise, she resumed her sprint towards them.

Deciding to take advantage of the smaller rodent's apparently suicidal decision, Jessi stepped into the center of the road, arms spread and mouth already watering in anticipation of her catch. Aura, however, made no attempt to intercept the prey and, instead, pulled Jessi aside to allow the mouse to pass. Moments later, Jessi saw why. A huge wolf rounded the corner and followed after the mouse, passing the two of them without even acknowledging their presence. Apparently that meal was already spoken for.

Both mouse and wolf vanished around the next corner and, a couple of seconds later, Jessi heard a terrified scream. It seemed that someone would not be going home tonight. As the screaming came to an abrupt end, Jessi smiled to herself. She was a little disappointed that neither her nor Aura had been the first to spot such a tempting morsel but, hopefully, they would find a suitable catch soon.

A few minutes later, bringing both to a dead stop, then glanced round the edge of a building to their left. Jessi peered around the corner as well and spotted a vole walking alone in their direction. He had clearly enjoyed a few drinks already, not to the extent that he was unsteady on his feet but definitely enough to make him less alert than he should have been.

Ducking back to avoid being spotted, Jessi glanced up at her feline companion. "So, how do you want to do this?" she asked.

"You chase, I'll catch for once." the cat whispered back. "Just give me a couple of minutes to get into position then drive him back the way he's come."

Jessi gave her friend a surprised look. They never did things that way round. It wasn't safe for a rat like her to go wandering around during hunting hours so Aura always made sure she was safely hidden before heading off to search for their prey. With the prey coming straight towards them, however, the situation was almost completely reversed. Jessi would be safer staying put until the vole drew near while Aura could slip through the back roads to get behind him without any danger. She nodded in agreement, but the cat was already heading away.

Crouching low, Jessi closed her eyes and listened to the footsteps as her prey drew steadily nearer. The closer he got, the more her mouth watered in anticipation. Soon she could even catch faint wafts of his scent as the wind changed direction. Standing up, she stepped out in front of him and smiled brightly. "Hello there."

The vole blinked at her in surprise and took a step back. The rat girl didn't look too threatening but she was larger than him and there was something in her expression that he really didn't like. "Um, hi?" he began. "I ... um, I was just on my way home. You should probably do so too, you know?"

Jessi's smile widened a little. She had expected him to run, not try and talk. Part of her was a little

offended. What would it take to get people to recognize her as a threat? But his response also suited her quite well. She couldn't be certain that Aura would be in place yet and any delay before the chase started would help give her friend more time. "Yeah, it is getting kind of late," she agreed. "I don't usually stay out after hunting hours but I figured there would be plenty of others out celebrating tonight so it wouldn't be as risky as usual." She took a step closer holding her hand out in a friendly gesture. Maybe she could finish this without any help from Aura at all.

Unfortunately, something about her manner must have tipped him off. Instead of taking her hand he stepped back sharply. "Right. Anyway, I didn't mean to stay out so late and really should be getting home now." He started edging to the left, trying to slip past her while keeping as much distance as possible between them.

At the other end of the street, Jessi spotted Aura emerge from a side alley and give a quick wave. "You know what, lets stop pretending here," she told him. "We both know that the only place you're going is warm, dark, and dripping with acid." She stepped firmly into the vole's path, stretching out her arms to block him from passing.

He didn't bother replying, just turned tail and sprinted back the way he had come. Jessi followed at a leisurely pace. About half way down the road her prey finally noticed the cat blocking the way ahead of him. Turning back he stared helplessly at the advancing rat, then turned again to see the cat was now also pacing towards him. He was trapped between the two predators. There were no side routes or other ways he could go, to escape he was going to have to run straight past one of them.

After only a second's hesitation he made up his mind and ran back towards Jessi, swerving to one side and trying to duck under her reach as he passed. It didn't work. Jessi tripped him easily then dropped down onto the fallen vole, pinning him against the tarmac and twisting his arms behind his back. After so long anticipating this, she was actually a little disappointed that her prey had gone down so easily.

"Nice catch." Aura complimented, "Although I'm pretty sure that that was supposed to be my job."

"I guess he thought you looked scarier." Jessi replied. "Assuming we're still going on our old system then this one is yours, right?"

The cat shrugged. "He's small enough for you to handle. You have him."

Something about her tone made Jessi look up sharply. "Last time I ate someone while leaving you hungry it almost ended very badly for me," she pointed out.

Aura looked hurt. "I thought we'd agreed to put that in the past."

"I have. I wouldn't be out with you if not." Jessi pointed out. "Still, you told me last time that you'd decided to eat me because I had just made myself fat and appealing while leaving you hungry. I know this is different but I'd still prefer to let you eat first and catch someone for myself afterwards." She felt bad for saying it. It wasn't easy to tell her best friend that she still didn't completely trust her. It felt even worse to give up the vole. He was just the right size for her and, after he had run into her arms while trying to get away from Aura she would very much like to show him that her own species could be just as dangerous as any cat.

"Last time, we hadn't made a catch in weeks." Aura pointed out. "I was hungry and frustrated and beginning to feel like a fairly poor hunter. I'm sorry that I decided to take that out on you, but tonight there are loads of people just waiting for us to catch them. Why would I go after a friend

when there are so many strangers who would make a far better meal instead?"

Jessi wavered. "I'd still feel better about this if you had something in your stomach before I make myself any fatter."

"Fine." Aura knelt down beside her and grabbed the vole by the scruff of his neck. "I was hoping for something a little larger tonight, but I guess this will do for a start."

The little rodent squealed as Aura started to shred the fabric of his shirt. "Please! I don't want to cause an argument between you two. Why ... why don't you both go catch a rabbit or something, and then you could catch something smaller for her. Surely that's a compromise we could all agree on?"

Jessi smirked a little at his desperate attempt to get out of this. He was so very tempting. "Hmm, what was your name, little vole?" she asked.

He shuddered at her use of the past tense but answered her question readily enough. "L ... Lannos? Please, I'm sure there are tastier people out there. You don't really want to eat me."

Jessi's smile widened a little as Aura finished with the shirt and started ripping his pants apart. She didn't think there were words to describe how wrong Lannos was right now. "Oh, I assure you I do."

The little vole seemed to lose his voice at this and only made weak whimpering noises. Jessi waited until Aura had ripped the last few pieces of his clothing to shreds. "You know," she stated. "if you'd still prefer to find a bunny instead, I might actually be willing to go first after all."

The cat nodded. "Suits me." She handed the squirming morsel back to Jessi.

He made a valiant effort to break free while being passed from one predator to the other but Jessi pinned him without too much difficulty. Not that it would have saved him if he had slipped out of her hold. The large feline standing to one side was enough to ensure that he would not get far. Rolling him onto his back Jessi clamped her knees against either side of his chest and stared down at the squirming rodent. "Look at me, Lannos," she instructed. "Look right into my jaws. I'm the last thing you are ever going to see so you should make the most of this."

"Please?" Her taunt seemed to have restored his voice, even if he couldn't think of anything original to use it for. "Please? I'm begging you. I just finished my degree. I've worked so hard for this and just wanted one night to celebrate it. Can't you make an exception just this once?"

The rat grinned down at him. She loved it when they begged. "You finished tonight as well?" she asked. "What was it you were studying?"

He stared up at her, unable to control his trembling and obviously wondering what answer would most improve his chances of surviving this. "G... geology?" he answered at last.

Jessi had no idea if that was the truth or not but didn't really care. "Sounds good. I'm glad you survived long enough to finish your exams. You must be wondering what to do next but, as luck would have it, I think I have a position that you'll excel in." Her tongue slipped out of her mouth and ran once over her lips, letting a little droplet of saliva fall and splash against his nose. "Don't worry, you don't actually need any qualifications at all to be my dinner and I'm sure you'll find being converted into fat is something that will come naturally once you get started. You might even ..."

“Jessi, could you please just eat your meal?” Aura demanded. “I know you like to play with them, but I'm hungry and would prefer it if we could finish this before all the good prey get claimed.”

Jessi sighed. “Sure. Well, Lannos, you heard her. It's time I put you in my tummy.” Opening her jaws wide Jessi pressed down on the vole, forcing his entire head into her gaping maw. Damn, he tasted good. Her belly gave a little rumble in anticipation of his arrival. The prey tried screaming, tried struggling, tried begging her for mercy, but nothing stopped his head from sliding over the back of her tongue and starting down her gullet.

Jessi pulled the wriggly vole into a sitting position, working her head from side to side to ease his shoulders between her cheeks. It had been far too long since she last did this. Another gulp pulled him deeper, making her jaws ache as they stretched over his chest. The little rodent's tail thrashed around in blind panic, but it was the only part of him that could move much. His legs were pinned beneath Jessi's thighs and she was still twisting his arms behind his back. Not that that was necessary for much longer. With a shove, Jessi pushed her muzzle down to his hips, feeling his head and shoulders slide into her stomach as she did so.

Now all that was left was the vole's butt, tail, and legs. Aura bent down beside her and helped out with that, holding the poor rodent's ankles together and lifting his legs so that Jessi could get him down with ease. The vole's plump tush was briefly framed by her jaws before vanishing from the outside world forever. Jessi's stomach let out another growl as she gulped down Lannos's thighs, thanking her for the mass of wriggly rodent being delivered to it. A few more gulps pulled the rest of his legs down into her gullet, leaving only a pair of twitching hind paws still to go.

As Jessi was getting started on those, Aura suddenly caught hold of her wrists and twisted them painfully behind the rat's back. Instantly, Jessi's eyes went wide. She tried to turn her head but her throat was still full of prey and she immediately started choking. Her alarmed cry turned into a strangled gasp and she fought to regain some control over herself.

In the end, her body's reaction to having her windpipe blocked was stronger than any other response and she was forced to swallow several times in rapid succession, getting Lannos's paws down her esophagus before she could do anything else. Of course, that gave Aura all the time she needed to tie Jessi's wrists together.

“Au ... Aura!” Jessi gasped the moment her throat was clear. “Why? You promised this wouldn't happen again.”

“Yes.” The cat answered simply. “And you promised that you would stay put and wait for me to return, remember?”

“That's what this is about? You said you'd forgiven me.”

“There was never anything to forgive.” Aura explained. “I'm not angry that you broke your promise. You had every right to make your escape when I left you. If anything, I'm angry with myself. I shouldn't have fallen for such an obvious trick.”

“Come on, Aura!” Jessi whined. “You said yourself, tonight is going to be easy hunting for everyone. We've been out here less than half an hour and we've already made a catch so finding someone else should be easy. Or, if you want, I could cough this guy back up and you could have him instead.”

Aura made a disgusted noise at the idea of eating somebody after they had already been in someone else's stomach. "That's pretty much the same argument you made last time," she pointed out. "I mean it worked then but there is no way I'm falling for it twice in a row. Besides, I don't want anyone else right now. Just you."

"Why?" Jessi protested. "Are you really so determined to get revenge on me for lying that you would pass up all the other prey we could be enjoying together?"

"Like I said," the cat insisted. "I'm not angry that you lied. This isn't some kind of punishment Jessi. I really did like you and I'm sorry that your life is coming to an end but... well, you know how it feels when prey that you really should have caught manages to get away, right? Remember that bunny that slipped past us back in first year? You can't even swallow rabbits but you still spent the next few days obsessing over what we should have done differently and wishing we could have another shot at her. Not at anyone else, but that rabbit specifically. It's not easy as a hunter to have to admit that your quarry outsmarted you. Ever since that night I've been cursing myself for falling for such an obvious ploy."

"So it wouldn't have made any difference if I had passed up that vole?" Jessi asked.

"Well, it would probably have bought you a more little time," the cat admitted. "I know how much you've been wanting to hunt again and didn't want to do this to you until you had a full belly. Also, I have to admit, I kind of want to try swallowing someone who already has their stomach full of prey." She reached out and ran her fingers over the curve of Jessi's gut, feeling the squirms coming from within. "It's not an opportunity that crops up very often and I'm quite interested to see what you will be like."

Had her hands been free Jessi would have swatted the cat's paw away. As it was, she could do nothing to prevent Aura from feeling her belly, other than try to wriggle out of reach which was not very effective. She shuffled backwards as best she could and glared at the grinning feline. "Were we ever really friends?" she demanded. "Or has this always been your intention for me? Just how long have you been playing your role while leading me to this?"

"We were friends," Aura insisted. "Perhaps still are. We've always worked well together and I've enjoyed your company very much. I promise, even after you tricked me and I started planning this, I wasn't only hanging out with you as to look for opportunities. You can believe what you want but I really am fond of you and will miss you once you are gone."

"Then why go through with this?" Jessi demanded. "You've clearly got me so you don't have to worry about any more hunter's pride stuff. I managed to escape you for a while and got a little extra time out of it but, in the end, you pulled off a better trick and caught me again. Does it really matter if you decide not to eat me now? You could walk me home then go catch a different meal and we could continue being friends while both knowing that you could have eaten me if you had wanted. Win-win, right? You get a meal, we stay friends, and you will have proven that you could have eaten me if you'd wanted to."

Aura smiled. "You're looking at this from a prey's perspective, Jess. Think how would you respond as a predator if someone you knew tried that argument."

Jessi frowned for a moment then shuddered as she worked out Aura's point. It didn't matter if the cat proved that she could have eaten her catch, what mattered was that she did not. If Jessi did manage to provide some argument that would persuade her friend to let her go, that wouldn't mean that Aura had proven she could have eaten her, it would mean that the cat had let her prey trick her twice in a

row. If she was going to talk her way out of this, and with her arms tied together and Aura standing over her there wasn't much hope of any other escape, she would need to come up with something that meant more to the feline than the shame of losing her prey for a second time.

“So you're going to eat me now because you didn't manage to eat me back then?” Jessi pointed out. “There never was an option that gave me any chance of survival was there? It was just a matter of whether I died then or now. How is that fair?”

“Hmm, because being fair to the prey is obviously the whole point of this.” Aura countered. “Was it fair that we both teamed up on that vole? I blocked off his only escape route before the chase even began. We both made sure that there was absolutely no chance of him getting away and, in the end, you put him in his rightful place; your belly.” Again Aura reached out and gave the stuffed rat's midsection a gentle rub, feeling the poor creature inside still thrashing about. “You should have been my dinner months ago, Jessi. I'm not sorry that you survived though. You had a good chunk of extra life and got to finish your degree, I would have felt bad cutting that short, even got to enjoy another squirmy meal, but now it's time you became one.”

Aura's fingers drifted lower, sliding from the squirming bulge in Jessi's belly to the fly of the rat's jeans. Jessi gasped a little as Aura undid the button and she felt her belly sag, dropping into a lower position now that the pressure of her pants had stopped holding it up. This was it. Aura was starting to undress her and, if she didn't do something fast, she would soon be sliding down her best friend's gullet.

The temptation was to resist, even if the only way she could do so was to shuffle helplessly backwards. Instead Jessi leaned forwards, putting her face far closer to the cat's than was comfortable. “Aura!” she snarled. “Stop this. I'm not your food. We are friends!”

For a moment, her refusal to behave like prey threw the cat. Aura took her hand away from Jessi's jeans and leaned back, looking shocked that her friend had suddenly yelled at her. Unfortunately, the ropes around Jessi's wrists made it impossible for her to press her momentary advantage. She wriggled about, trying to get to her feet but the next second Aura pinned her down, shoving her hard against the tarmac with one hand. “Nice try rodent.” she smirked. “I don't think I've ever had food talk to me like that before.”

“I'm not your food. I've been your friend since we were freshers.” Jessi growled but it was no good. She had lost all the authority she had briefly wielded and was now just squirming prey, shouting and screaming beneath a predator's paws.

“Well, maybe I do owe you something.” Aura offered. “You did say that you felt this was a little unfair. Maybe I should give you a sporting chance to escape. How about it, little rat?”

“No fucking way.” Jessi snarled. She didn't need to hear what Aura's offer was, she knew all too well what a 'sporting chance' meant. It was what you offered prey if you felt like humiliating them a little before enjoying your meal. “I'm not playing any of your games. Either let me go or eat me now. I'm not going to give you any more satisfaction out of this.”

Aura gave a disappointed sigh. “Well, I guess if you really want me to pick one of those then I'll have to choose the eat option. It was nice knowing you Jessi.” She grabbed the hem of Jessi's jeans and started pulling them down the rat's legs.

“W... wait!” The terror of watching herself being undressed in preparation for eating was too much for the poor rat. “What kind of game were you offering? Are you seriously going to let me go if I

win?”

“Of course. In fact, I'd have no choice in the matter.” Aura insisted. “All you have to do to win is to get back home. I'll give you ... let's say, three lives. First time I catch you I take your pants and shoes, second time your shirt, third time your underwear and anything else that I don't feel like swallowing. If I catch you four times, though, you'll go down my throat like a good little rodent. If you can get to safety before that you get to keep your life and any dignity you have left. Any questions?”

Jessi shuddered, she really didn't want to play that game. It was better than being eaten outright though. “How ... how long do I get? As a head start, I mean?” She asked first.

“Hmm... how about a minute? That sounds fair to you?” Aura answered.

“That's all?” Jessi whined. “Aura, please, we both know that you're faster than me. Give me a chance?”

“I'm already giving you three chances.” the cat answered smugly.

“But I don't even know where we are.” Jessi wailed. “I was following you on the way here. I might start running in completely the wrong direction and I wouldn't even know it.” That was actually a lie. Jessi had a pretty good sense of direction and was already planning her route back home. Still, it suited her to have the cat believe that she was completely lost.

Sure enough, Aura's smile grew even wider at the news that her victim had no idea which way to run. “Your home is roughly in that direction.” she waved her hand. “Just keep heading that way and you'll eventually come the River Street, assuming you make it that far. I know that you can find your own way back from there. Anything else or should we begin?”

Jessi followed Aura's gesture with her eyes. The directions pretty much matched with where she was assuming that they were. Aura's suggestion wasn't the fastest route back home but she had expected Aura to make up something completely useless. Maybe the cat did intend to give her a chance after all? “One moment. Let me let my dinner out first.” Leaning forward, Jessi started toretch. The vole would probably have a very interesting story to tell once he got home, hopefully he would not be the only one.

Just as Lannos's head was starting to slide back into her esophagus, Aura caught her by the throat and squeezed tight. “No, I don't think so, Jessi.” she insisted. “Like I said, I'm kind of interested to see what a double meal feels like so you aren't allowed to cough him back up. In fact, I'm making it a rule of the game. If you try to let your catch out again then you instantly forfeit any lives you have left.” Her grip softened a little and Jessi gasped for air then quickly gulped her prey back down.

“I... I'm not playing then.” Jessi gasped as soon as she was able. “If you aren't going to give me a fair chance of winning then I'm not even going to try.”

“Okay, no one's forcing you.” Aura accepted. “I know it will be difficult with your hands tied like that, but do try to wriggle on your way down, okay? You know how much I enjoy active prey.”

“Wait! Aura, please?” Jessi wriggled back as the cat started pulling at her jeans again. “Okay, I'll do it. But at least untie my arms before we start? You can give me that much, right?”

Aura made a show of considering that for a moment before shaking her head. “Nah. Maybe after

I've caught you a few times but, for now, I really want to see you try to run like that. No more stalling, your first life starts ... ” The cat stood back up, taking her weight off the unfortunate rat. “Now!”

Jessi rolled onto her front and quickly got her legs beneath her. Getting to her feet was not easy with her arms tied behind her back and her large meal weighing her down, but pure desperation gave her the strength to do so. Staggering just a little from the weight in her guts, she broke into a sprint and made it all of two steps before being yanked back by her tail.

“Got you!” Aura sang.

Jessi stared back at the cat holding her by the tail. “That ... that's not ... you promised to give me a minute head start.” she protested.

“Yep, each time I take a life.” Aura agreed. “But I said nothing about when we first start. Now, I believe you owe me those jeans.”

“This isn't fair and you know it.” Jessi swore back.

“Heh. How about a new rule, Jess? Each time you complain about things not being fair I'm going to deduct an extra life. Of course, you didn't know that so I'll be nice and just take the one this time.”

Jessi glared at the feline but said nothing. Protesting further would only provide the predator with more sadistic amusement. Besides, Aura was already acting. Grabbing Jessi's jeans she pulled them the rest of the way down around the rat's ankles. Reluctantly, Jessi lifted first one leg and then the other, allowing Aura to remove both her jeans and her shoes. She cringed as Aura allowed her to lower each foot in turn and she felt the rainwater soak through her socks.

“If it's any consolation, you will get a head start each time from now on.” Aura folded the rat's jeans and then, as promised, let go of Jessi's tail.

The moment Aura was no longer holding her, Jessi broke into a run. She didn't bother glancing back to see if the cat was sticking to the agreed time limit. Regardless of how rigged the game was, Jessi knew she would need to focus all of her attention on running if she was to have any chance of surviving it.

Reaching the end of the street, Jessi swerved left and darted down an alleyway. Her paws skidded in the wet tarmac and her water-logged socks were not making this any easier but she didn't have the time to get rid of them. Far worse was the thrashing ball of meat in her stomach. The extra weight would have been enough of a handicap had he not been struggling but, as it was, every kick from her dinner threatened to unbalance her. She struggled to maintain the perfect balance between speed and control. She had seen before how fast Aura could move and knew how difficult it would be to stay ahead of the cat but, at the same time, she couldn't afford to run too fast, particularly not with a thrashing vole in her stomach. A single slip could cost her everything right now.

Of course, the balance between speed and stability was not the only thing she had to worry about. Jessi also needed to work out which way she was going as she ran through the network of streets and alleys. She knew roughly where she was in relation to her home but this was not a part of town she was at all familiar with, especially at night. At the end of the next road, Jessi hesitated for just a moment, glancing both ways for some clue as to which would get her home the soonest. Even a second wasted this way was costly, but not so much as picking the wrong direction would be.

Behind her, there was a scuffle of footsteps and an anticipatory hiss as the feline rounded the last corner and spotted her quarry. Jessi almost glanced back but she knew that would cost her even more time. She had seen enough people make that mistake when being pursued. Instead she chose a direction, almost at random, and resumed her sprint, hoping to increase her lead a little.

Unfortunately, with Aura so close behind her, Jessi could no longer afford to limit her speed. She reached the end of the street with the cat just a few paces behind her but, as she tried to turn, a poorly timed kick from her unwilling passenger was enough to overbalance her and she fell hard on the pavement.

Dazed and a little bruised, Jessi was not given time to recover from her fall. Aura's shoe landed firmly between her breasts and pinned the poor rodent to the ground. "Well Jessi, that's two lives you've lost so far. Let's get you out of that shirt, shall we?"

Jessi squirmed a bit as Aura knelt down. The cat's normally retracted claws flashed in the moonlight as they tore a giant hole in the front of her shirt. She flinched, half expecting to feel them sink into her bare flesh next, but Aura was careful not to leave a scratch on the cowering rat's body. Several more slashes through the fabric allowed Aura to pull the remains of Jessi's top away without her needing to untie the rat's arms.

"You are going to have to do a lot better than that." she laughed. "Unless, of course, you want to end up in my tummy."

Jessi ground her teeth and glared at the feline who had once been her best friend. She didn't respond to Aura's teasing though. She didn't trust herself to avoid saying anything that would cost her a third life.

"Well, would you like a hand up?" Aura smirked offering one paw to the downed rat. "I'm pretty eager to start the next round."

Jessi would very much have liked to refuse the cat's offer and to struggle to her feet herself. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done with her arms tied and her belly full of vole and she didn't trust Aura not to counting down while she was struggling. Swallowing her pride, she nodded and allowed Aura to pull her back to her feet.

Lannos thrashed around harder than ever as he felt himself being tossed around again. Like this it would be almost impossible for her to outrun the predatory feline. Jessi curled her tail around the squirming lump before speaking. "Listen, Lannos?" she began. "I know you are scared right now and have no reason to trust me but if she wins this then you'll die too, understand? On the other hand, if I make it home in one piece, I promise to let you go unharmed. All you have to do in return is stop struggling. I won't be able to save either of us with you throwing me off balance. Does that sound fair to you?"

The response was a pathetic whimper. "Please. I just want to go home." he whined.

"I know. Me too." Jessi answered. "But I can't spit you out until I'm safe. If Aura eats me then you'll be digested as well. If you hold still there is just a chance that we'll both make it through this alive. Can you do that for me?"

There were a few more twitches from her stomach but then they ceased completely, the little vole holding perfectly still inside her. "Thank you." Jessi responded. "Keep that up and I'll do my best to get us both home safely."

“Clever.” Aura noted. “Although, I can't picture you actually keeping to that, even if you do survive this.”

Jessi winced. That was the last thing she needed Lannos overhearing right now. “Shows what you know about me.” she retaliated. “If he stays still, I'll keep my end of the bargain.”

“Heh, sure.” The cat smirked. “Anyway, your minute head start is nearly up so you should probably start running again.”

Jessi's eyes widened and she broke into a sprint away from the cat, cursing herself for assuming that Aura would actually warn her before starting to count down. Her belly lurched from side to side as she ran, likely making things very unpleasant for the poor vole inside. He kept to their agreement though, and Jessi couldn't feel so much as a twitch from her prey as he was thrown about with every step she took.

It certainly made running a lot easier. Jessi tore through the network of streets, trying to guess the best direction to take. That too was getting easier as she ran. The closer she got to the Main Rodent Accommodation Building, the more familiar the streets became. Unfortunately it was also getting more populated. A couple of foxes looked up as she ran past them but evidently guessed that she was already spoken for and turned back to their conversation. They both already had squirming lumps in their bellies anyway.

Ignoring them in turn, Jessi struggled on. She was panting desperately now. Lannos might be easier to carry now that he wasn't struggling but he still added a lot of weight. The alcohol in her system was not helping either but at least Aura would share that particular disadvantage.

Actually, now that she thought about it, Jessi realized that she had seen the cat drink very little while they were celebrating at the bar. Aura had ordered plenty of drinks but had sipped them slowly while encouraging Jessi to finish hers. The cat had evidently planned this night quite carefully in order to maximize her chance of getting a stuffed rat for dinner. Still, Jessi knew she was getting close to home now and, with one life still remaining, she was starting to believe that she could make it.

Then she turned a corner onto Farway Street and saw Aura leaning against a wall a short distance ahead of her. The cat had not only run faster but had clearly guessed the route that Jessi would be taking and run ahead to cut her off. Jessi skidded to a stop, spun round and tried her best to escape before Aura could catch up.

Unfortunately, every step she took was now taking her further from the only place where she would be safe. Not being able to cut through Farway Street would add a significant amount to her route. She would either have to circle round or take a longer and less familiar route home. Not that she had time to worry about where she was going right now. Her primary concern was putting some distance between herself and the hungry predator close on her heels.

She didn't dare look over her shoulder to see how close Aura was, but she knew it wasn't far. She could hear the cat's breathing. Aura was panting heavily from the exertion but her breaths were more regular and more controlled than Jessi's desperate gasps. Even worse, they were undeniably getting closer. A light touch to her shoulder was all it took. Jessi staggered, then fell, rolling painfully over the tarmacked road. With her hands tied, she couldn't even catch herself to soften the fall.

Aura overshot by a few steps then returned, still panting heavily, to stand over the bruised rat. "Good ... good effort." she gasped. "You're certainly more of a challenge now that your food isn't wriggling."

As it happened, Lannos was wriggling at that moment. He'd been very cooperative until now, but feeling Jessi fall and being unable to see what was happening had proven too much for the little vole to endure and he was thrashing around in blind terror.

Jessi winced and gagged. She didn't often have trouble keeping her prey down but she never been forced to run so hard or for so long before. Her body knew that she was in danger and knew that the thrashing lump of meat was hindering her ability to escape. It wanted him out.

Aura watched as the rat heaved in the middle of the road, retching and choking as she struggled to keep the contents of her stomach inside her. "You know, I was only going to take your underwear." she stated. "But if I see so much as a scrap of that vole's fur then the game is over and you'll both be spending the night in my stomach instead."

The added threat was enough for the rat to regain control. With a few firm swallows, she managed to push the smaller rodent back down her gullet and take several deep breaths. Lannos too seemed to have decided that it was not in his best interests to escape right now and had stopped struggling.

"Just your underwear then?" Aura confirmed, then bent down and started removing Jessi's bra.

The rat groaned weakly as Aura worked. There was no point in trying to defend herself. Even if her arms had been free she would still have had no chance against the larger creature. The cat made short work of her bra, then removed her panties, then pulled her wet socks off as well, leaving Jessi bare and exposed. A couple of tears ran down the rat's nose as the cat undressed her, but Aura wasn't finished yet.

Pulling the prey to her feet, Aura inspected the now naked rat. "Not bad. Mind if I take a few photos before letting you run again?"

"No fucking way." Jessi snarled. "I'm not going to give you any more satisfaction out of this than you're already getting."

"That's a shame." The cat purred. "I'd really like to have a few pictures to remember you by. In fact, if you were willing to cooperate, I might even give you an extra minute head start this time."

Jessi bit her lip. She could think of nothing more humiliating than having to stand and let her one time friend take photos of her naked. Photos that, knowing Aura, would likely end up on the internet along with comments detailing how good she had tasted once this was over. Still, the extra head start was too tempting for her to pass up. She was already more than halfway back home. At her current rate it was unlikely that she would make it without being caught again but an extra minute could easily change that.

"Fine." she whimpered, hating herself even as she said it. "What do you want me to do?"

Aura grinned and pulled out her phone. "Arms up over your head and stick your belly out." she commanded. "Let's see you showing off that wriggly little vole."

"I can't." Jessi protested, half turning to show Aura that her wrists were still tied. "Not unless you are willing to untie me first. You did say that you'd consider it after catching me a couple of times

and it would make for better pictures.”

“Just do your best, Jessi.” Aura instructed her. “I don't really feel like untying you right now.”

Gritting her teeth, Jessi posed for the camera as best as she was able, allowing Aura to take several photos from different angles. “Nice.” The cat smirked, “But you could try smiling a little more.”

“Aura, I am standing naked in the rain and likely going to die tonight. I literally can not smile right now.”

“Okay, I guess we can go back to just one minute head start then.” the predator answered.

Jessi groaned and did her best to pull the corners of her mouth upwards. It wasn't a true smile by any definition of the word but it seemed to satisfy Aura. “Okay, now say 'I'm a tasty prey treat.'” Aura pressed.

“No. I'm not doing that.” Jessi glared at the feline.

“Well if you really don't want ...”

“No!” Jessi knew that Aura was about to threaten to take away her extra time and that, if the cat did so, she would not be able to refuse. “Aura, please? We were friends and hunting partners once. I know you enjoy playing with your food, I do to, but making me say that I'm prey undermines everything we once had. If you really meant it when you said that you weren't just pretending to be my friend then, please, don't make me say something like that?”

She half expected Aura to tell her that she had just lost her extra minute head start, or even that the game was now over and that she had lost what little chance of survival she had ever had. Instead the cat nodded and returned her phone to her pocket. “Yeah, okay.” she mumbled. “You've always been good at letting me know when I'm going too far with something. That's probably why we were such good friends.” She put one hand on the rat's shoulder and gave her an encouraging smile.

“I'm sorry for making you do that. You'll get your two minutes. Oh and, if you do manage to survive this, I promise to delete those photos as well.” For a moment, Jessi could almost forget what Aura was doing to her and believe that they were still friends. Aura looked nothing but open and compassionate. Then the cat blinked and the sadistic glee filled her expression again. “Anyway, you should probably start running now, unless you want to be cat food.”

Jessi nodded weakly and took off down the road, still horribly conflicted about how she should feel towards her one time friend right now. It wasn't as if she could fault Aura for doing this to her. Had their situations been reversed, she doubted that her behavior would have been much different. She certainly wasn't planning on honoring her deal with poor Lannos should they somehow make it back in time.

She quickly dismissed such thoughts. They were a distraction and she needed to put all her attention to running right now. Once she was safely back home she could sit down and try to sort through her emotions, right now, she needed to focus on getting that chance. Jessi's belly swung back and forth as she ran, in time with her now uncovered breasts.

One advantage to having been caught was that Aura was, once again, behind her. Farway Street was now clear and she could go back to her original route home. As she ran down the long road she caught a glimpse of movement from one of the windows and realized that someone inside was

watching her. A pink tinge appeared through the fur of her cheeks. She was probably putting on a show for half the neighborhood. Still, worrying about that was just another distraction so she did her best not to think about it.

After Farway Street, Jessi crossed a bridge and redoubled her speed. She was now in very familiar territory and no longer had to worry about taking a wrong turn. Still, her two minutes were likely up by now and she was some way from home with no chances remaining. Everything depended on her getting back to safety before Aura caught up.

The rat's bare paws splashed in the puddles as she sprinted the remaining distance. Her lungs heaved as she struggled to get enough air, she had never pushed herself so hard in her life. She spun round another corner, feeling Lannos's weight thud against her inside walls as she did so. Still the motion was entirely due to her own change in momentum, the little vole was still on his best behavior, making this as easy as he could for her.

Maybe she would spare him after all. She did feel quite grateful that he had been so cooperative and letting him live would be a good way of saying thank you. On the other hand, Aura was not the only one who loathed losing prey that she considered hers. Not only that, but Lannos was likely the last squirmy meal she would enjoy in quite some time. Perhaps his cooperation had only earned him her sincere thanks and a reprieve from the teasing she usually inflicted on her food.

Still, this wasn't the time to think about that. She could decide what to do with her meal if and when she made it safely home. It was looking more and more likely that she would though. As Jessi turned another corner she saw the Main Rodent Accommodation Building ahead of her and, with the last reserves of her strength, put on a final burst of speed.

Glancing over her shoulder, Jessi checked the street she had come from, half expecting to see Aura closing in on her. That was how these kind of games were supposed to end. The prey was not actually supposed to escape, just humiliate themselves while trying. Still, there was no one there. The cat could not be far behind by this point but it was actually looking likely that she would survive this.

Racing the last few feet to the door, Jessi twisted her bound wrists to her hips, reaching her keys. The keys that she kept on a chain. The chain was always tied to the belt of her jeans. The jeans that Aura had taken from her before the chase had even started.

Slamming hard against the front door, Jessi let out a horrified scream and pushed down on the handle in desperation. It didn't budge of course. She patted the place where her keys usually were tied but found nothing but her own bare fur. Looking round, Jessi sought for some other option. Hiding was not an option, Aura would find her in seconds. Nor was running any further, the road ahead came to a dead end and going back would almost certainly result in her coming face to face with the advancing cat. Even if she did manage to slip past Aura somehow, where would she go?

It was still hunting hours. The only safe place she had access to was the building that she was currently locked out of. If she could survive to morning then she would be able to return to the student offices and request a replacement key, but that was a stupid hope. She was already exhausted, weighed down by her heavy meal, with no safe place to retreat to, her wrists tied together, ages left before hunting hours ended, and with one skilled predator hunting the area for her specifically. It was pure naivety to think that she would be anything but a softening bulge by morning.

With no other options, Jessi turned to the intercom beside the door. She couldn't reach the buttons

with her hands so resorted to ramming her shoulder into the control panel, pressing several buttons at random. "Please? Someone, let me in. I... I live here. Please, I've lost my keys and I can't get in." she begged. The intercom made a low buzzing as it waited for the person on the other end to respond. After maybe thirty seconds of that it cut off. Jessi slammed the buttons and tried again. "Please! Someone answer me!" she demanded.

It was no use. People often turned up pleading during the night and rarely, if ever, were let in. Not when they were being pursued by a predator at any rate. Nobody wanted to risk angering a carnivore in case they got singled out for special attention. Tonight was an even worse time to try than usual, the daring would still be out celebrating and the cautious would know better than to answer the door during hunting hours.

As the buzz once again cut off, Jessi heard a faint jangle coming from the road behind her. Already knowing what she was going to see, the poor rat turned her head and looked back. Her keys glinted in the moonlight as they were tossed into the air, then fell back into the tabby cat's paw. With a defeated groan, Jessi sank to the steps outside her front door. Even if she had not been trapped between the predator and a dead end, she had no more strength to run. All she could do was watch as Aura sauntered closer.

"Hello again, Jessi."

"You were never actually going to let me go, were you?" Jessi whimpered.

"No. I've been looking forward to eating you for too long." Aura answered. Coming to a stop, she sat down on the front door step beside the hapless rat. "It was a good effort though. I enjoyed chasing you and you should be very proud of how well you did."

Jessi stared up at the cat. Now that the game was over Aura seemed to have lost her more sadistic side and gone back to the calm and polite version that Jessi was more familiar with. "We were friends." she pleaded.

"You've tried that several times already." Aura pointed out. "Besides, we still are friends. I like you, Jess, and will always remember you fondly. But this does seem like a good time to do this. I'm going to be moving halfway across the country in a couple of months and I know we would still be able to talk online and stuff but it wouldn't be the same. You said yourself that you didn't know what you were going to do next, now you do."

"But I had my whole life ahead of me." Jessi protested. "I was going to take a year off, I could have gone traveling, there was so much left to do."

"Mmh, I know, but I've cut lots of lives short. So have you for that matter. It's just the way things work." She placed one hand on Jessi's shoulder in a comforting gesture.

The rat shuddered and stared at the pavement. She couldn't believe it was going to end like this. Sure, she had seen plenty of others come to a similar end. She had felt them wriggle, twitch, and asphyxiate in her own stomach, but she had honestly never expected to meet that fate herself. "I just ... I'm a predator, Aura, not prey."

"Of course you are a predator, Jess." the feline answered. "I know most people don't see you that way, and that you've always had to go the extra mile to prove yourself as a hunter, but you don't have to do that with me. I've known you were a fellow hunter since the day we first met. Still, that doesn't change the fact that you are also prey. It is possible to be both."

Jessi didn't have an answer to that. Rats were one of the smallest species capable of hunting so none of the people she considered food were large to enough eat anyone else. As far as she was concerned predators and prey were two separate groups and she had always done her best to confirm her status as a member of the first one. The idea that being eaten did not make her any less of a hunter was a new one to her. It was kind of comforting, although it didn't come close to making up for the fact that she would soon lose her life. "I still wish I hadn't trusted you," she mumbled. "Given the choice, I'd have taken never getting to eat anyone else over being eaten myself any day."

"Yeah. It was a mistake." Aura agreed. "If it makes you feel better, I thought you would come hunting with me months ago. You were a lot more careful than I expected."

Jessi knew that Aura meant to comfort her with the compliment but instead it made her feel worse. Tonight would likely have been the last time she met Aura face to face, at least until the cat finished her Masters. If she had just kept her promise to herself one night longer she would have made it. A few tears ran down her muzzle as she remembered the moment she had relented and agreed to join the cat. Had she really cared so much about the opinion of one shrew that it had been worth gambling her whole life over?

Aura noticed the tears and gently brushed them from Jessi's cheeks. "I didn't mean it like that," she assured. "I put a lot of work into getting you to trust me again and preparing for tonight. The fact that you fell for it isn't anything to be ashamed of. Now hold still for me and we can get started."

Jessi whimpered as the cat lifted her into her lap, turning her prey around so that Jessi sat facing her. The poor rat made no attempt to resist, in Jessi's mind, that was prey behavior and continuing to struggle once she was caught would only confirm her status as Aura's dinner. Besides, unlike most prey the feline caught, Jessi actually knew how much stronger Aura was than her. Even had her hands been free, there would have been no point in struggling.

Aura's pink tongue ran once over her lips as she inspected her intended meal. The naked rat stared back in helpless terror. "I will miss you, Jessi," Aura told her. "You were a good friend and I promise not to forget you like most food. Still..." She ran an inquisitive finger down the rat's body, lingering over the girl's stretched belly. "... you do look quite appetizing right now."

Jessi could feel Lannos thrashing against her inner walls beneath the cat's touch. In her current situation, she had almost forgotten about him. He seemed to have figured out that holding still would not improve his chances at the moment, not that it ever would have, and was now desperate to escape. Through her stomach walls she could hear him pleading, begging her to at least spare him even if she couldn't save herself. Fat chance of that. If she was going to die tonight, then at least it would be with a squirmy vole treat in her own belly.

Her attention was rapidly brought back to the present by the touch of Aura's paw behind her head. Gently, but with far more strength than Jessi could hope to resist, the cat guided her forwards, straight towards those waiting lips.

"Aura! Please? Not yet! I ... I just need another minute! Please stop!" she begged but it did no good. The lips parted and she was treated to the sight of Aura's salivating maw, strands of drool glistening in the street light and, behind the cat's tongue, the dark tunnel of her esophagus waiting for her. It was the most terrifying sight imaginable to the hapless rodent and she screwed up her eyes and screamed to blot it out. "Please? Aura, for the sake of our friendship, just one more minute!" she wailed.

The cat stopped. Hesitantly, Jessi opened her eyes to see Aura's mouth was closed once again. The cat glared at her impatiently. "Really?" she let out a reluctant sigh. "You know I never do this but I guess, for you, I'd be willing to grant a small request. Are you sure that's what you want to spend our friendship on, a few seconds extra life?"

Jessi almost agreed at once but managed to stop herself. "I ... what else could I ask for?" she checked.

"I'm not going to let you go." Aura answered at once. "Sorry Jess, but you are going down my throat whatever you say. Still, I would be willing to hold back for a bit if you really want that ... or you could ask me to delete those photos, remember?"

Jessi winced. She really didn't want those pictures posting online. On the other hand, staring down the feline's gullet had been the worst moment of her life and she would have done anything to postpone that for just a little longer.

Aura, however, was not going to wait for her to properly weigh the pros and cons of that decision. "You know what?" the cat decided. "You can tell me what you'd like once you're in my tummy." She took hold of Jessi's head again.

"No! Time!" the rat begged. "More time! Please, Aura, that's what I want."

Aura relented with a sour look. "Fine. But this is the only time you get to use our friendship as a bargaining token. Once your minute is up I'm going to treat you just the same as any other meal."

"One minute?" Jessi whined. "Is that really all I get?"

"Yep." The cat glanced at her phone then set it down on the step so they could both see the time. "And it's already started so make the most of it."

Jessi shuddered. "Could ... could you at least take these ropes off?" she begged.

"Nope. I would have accepted that as your request but you chose a minute instead. Well, fifty seconds now."

Jessi stared round in helpless panic. Why had she asked for this? The extra time was not making it any easier to accept her impending fate, just drawing it out. She whimpered pathetically and stared down at Aura's midsection. Perhaps it was possible to come to terms with the idea that she would soon be inside there, tucked away beneath the cat's fur and T-shirt, but it was not something she could manage in the time she had left.

The seconds seemed to crawl by yet, at the same time, it felt like an impossible amount of her precious minute was already gone. She tried to think of something she could say that might save her, but she already knew that nothing would. She just stared in morbid fascination at her best friend's belly wondering what it would be like in there. She supposed that most prey in her situation would be wondering if it was going to hurt, it was certainly a question her own food had asked her from time to time. Unfortunately, it was one that she knew the answer to all too well. It would be absolute agony in there and, from the behavior of past meals, she suspected that Aura's stomach was even worse than her own.

The feline's belly gave a low growl and Jessi shuddered as she pictured the hot acids already pooling in anticipation of her arrival. The last few seconds on Aura's phone slipped away and then

the cat leaned forwards. "Time's up," she declared, taking hold of Jessi's shoulders and pulling her forwards. "lets get started."

"No! Aura, please? Just a little longer?" Jessi begged but the cat just scowled at her.

"Shut up, food!" Aura snapped. Her jaws stretched open and, without any further hesitation, she crammed the rat's head inside.

Jessi howled as she felt herself being shoved into the tight space. Aura's saliva glands had clearly been working overdrive in preparation for this and the fur around her face was immediately drenched in thick viscous cat drool. Aura's sandpaper tongue rippled under Jessi's chin, helping to smear the coating of drool around as she savored the taste of her prey. From the rumbling purr that started almost immediately, Jessi guessed that Aura was quite enjoying her flavor.

"Please? You can't do this! I'm a pred!" Jessi wailed, but Aura was already working the rat's shoulders between her lips. Jessi's muzzle brushed past the predator's uvula and she was acutely aware that the only way she could go from there was down the long dark tunnel that lay beneath her nose. She let out a single terrified scream that came to an abrupt end as Aura finally managed to get her shoulders inside and Jessi was smothered by the tight esophageal walls.

"Mmph!" The muscular tube was soft and squishy but it was also far tighter than Jessi had imagined. She couldn't breathe! The slick peristaltic muscles squeezed against her face, conforming to every curve and crevice as her entire head was pushed into the feline's gullet. In blind panic, Jessi started to kick but Aura simply lifted her hips, angling her so that her flailing legs could not reach anything but empty space.

Gulp! The first swallow pulled Jessi down as a powerful muscular wave ran down the cat's throat. The surrounding tube seemed to tighten behind her head, dragging her deeper in a long rolling movement. As her head sank lower, her chest and upper torso were pulled into Aura's mouth resulting in her breasts resting on either side of the feline's rough tongue.

The next part gave Aura some difficulty. Jessi's belly hung beneath her, massively stretched by Lannos's frantic struggles. Still, Jessi knew that it would not be enough to save her, she had once watched her friend down a large and heavily pregnant bunny in just a few swallows. Compared to that, she and Lannos would go down with relative ease.

Sure enough, the cat's jaws slowly worked their way over Jessi's full belly. Aura's sandpaper tongue pressed against her breasts, helping to guide them into the feline's gullet and make more room for her belly in the cat's hot maw. Aura's purr seemed to come from all around Jessi now, reverberating through the walls of her throat. The cat was clearly enjoying herself and each pleased swallow came with another bone-crushing squeeze for the poor rodent. Lannos was still fighting hard in her belly but Jessi could feel her own resistance starting to wane. She still kicked and wriggled as Aura started swallowing her bloated midsection but the lack of air and tightness of Aura's gullet were fast taking their toll on her.

Aura took full advantage of her dinner's weakness and quickly gulped Jessi deeper. The poor rat squealed in pain as her belly was squeezed down the feline's esophagus. Still, she was better off than Lannos. The little vole had been just the right size for Jessi's stomach but, now that her belly was being squeezed by Aura's gullet, the rodent found himself without any space at all. His struggles rapidly turned to helpless twitches, weaker even than Jessi's asphyxiating squirms.

Jessi could feel her butt sliding over the back of Aura's tongue now. Another powerful swallow

pushed it down into the esophagus and Jessi let out an airless whine as she felt her belly being squished past the cat's collarbone. Then, to her relief, she found the walls around her head were loosening a little. There was space around her muzzle and she could actually draw breath, although not much with her chest still being squeezed by Aura's esophagus. The moment of relief was short lived as it quickly dawned on her what this meant. She had come to the end of her journey and was now entering Aura's stomach. Jessi managed to use her regained ability to breathe to let out a single horrified scream before another swallow pushed her muzzle into the pool of fierce acids that were waiting for her. Unlike Jessi's stomach, which was adapted to an omnivorous diet, Aura's was lethally optimized to process meat, regardless of whether that meat was still alive and kicking.

Jessi thrashed and writhed in torment as the fiery liquid immediately started attacking her sensitive nose but it did nothing to save her. Aura caught the girl's flailing legs and held them together at her ankles, as much to prevent Jessi from hurting herself on her sharp teeth as anything else, before continuing to swallow. With her dinner's hips already sliding down her neck, the difficult part was over and she slowed a little to savor her friend's tender thigh meat.

After a few eager licks to Jessi's thighs Aura swallowed again, sending them down her throat with ease. Jessi gasped in relief as she finally got her head out of the burning fluids but it was a mixed blessing. As more and more of her body entered Aura's stomach she was forced to curl into a ball. The surrounding walls stretched to accommodate her, but only the barest minimum necessary. It did mean that her face was above the acids, but also that more and more of her body was exposed to them.

Aura ran her tongue through the fur of Jessi's calves, not wanting the meal to end so soon but loving each swallow far too much to slow down. Gulp! The rat's bare paws twitched as they passed her lips and Aura took a moment to savor the little pink soles, making the toes curl as she ran her rough tongue over them. They were still wet from Jessi's futile run through the city but Aura didn't care. She wanted the rat in her stomach and, with a soft "glp" she sent the muddy paws sliding down her gullet like the rest of her dinner.

Now only a few inches of hairless tail remained, thrashing wildly from her lips. With a smile she slurped the living noodle into her mouth, delighting in the way it squirmed against her tongue, then tilted back her head and gave one final swallow. Just like that, the best friend Aura had ever had became nothing but another squirming piece of meat in her belly.

Jessi whimpered as the powerful peristaltic wave crammed the last of her into Aura's stomach. This was it. The muscular walls around her had held numerous rats, as well as mice, rabbits, hares, and who knew how many other species in the past. None of them had survived. They had all dissolved in Aura's powerful digestive juices and been poured as a liquid slush into the cat's intestines. She was just the latest in a long series of people to meet that fate and would soon be joining them as a thin layer of padding beneath the feline's fur. Her life was over.

The confined space made everything seem to echo weirdly. She could hear the steady thud of the cat's heart and a worrying liquid groaning as her digestive system started to fire up, further away she could hear a wet slurp as Aura smacked her lips in satisfaction, but everything beyond that was distant and muted. Suddenly the stomach lurched forward as Aura got back to her feet and she whimpered as the pool of acids sloshed around her.

"Well Jessi, you were delicious. Thanks for that." The cat's voice was muted but still perfectly understandable. There was another lurch, although gentler this time as the feline started walking. Jessi had no doubts where she was being taken. If Aura didn't come over to her place after a successful hunt the cat would always head home to enjoy a lazy night digesting her prey.

Hot acids splashed over her with every step the feline took. Jessi tried to lift herself out of the burning fluid but it was useless. Aura's stomach was too tight and there wasn't enough space for her to do anything but wriggle helplessly. "Aura? Please?" the young rat begged. "Don't do this to me! It hurts!"

"Yeah. I know it does." the cat answered. "It's just part of being digested, I'm afraid."

The stomach walls rocked back and forth with each step the predator took, sloshing the digestive acids around and spreading it over every inch of Jessi's body. "Please?" she whimpered. "Aura, I can't bear this."

"Well, I could take your air away if you like." Aura offered. "It won't be pleasant but at least it will be quick."

"No!" As much pain as she was in, Jessi wasn't quite that desperate.

"Then sit tight and stop complaining." Aura insisted. "As your friend, I am willing to bring this to a quick end if you really can't take any more, and that's certainly not something I would do for any other meal. Still, your squirming really does feel good in there so I'd prefer not to cut it short. Don't worry, it will only be an hour or so at the longest."

Jessi whimpered a little at that. Her own meals usually lasted until long after she fell asleep, but she had seen before how quickly the cat could finish off her prey. A little kick came from her own belly as Lannos fought to escape. After the exertion of the chase, her stomach was finally starting to get to work, turning the wriggly vole into calories to replace those she had burned. Of course, given the differences between Aura's digestive system and her own, Lannos was probably better off in her stomach than outside it and would likely remain conscious and relatively intact longer than she would. Of course that wouldn't protect him indefinitely, by morning they would both be a uniform slurry, ready for a trip through Aura's intestines.

At the thought of it, Jessi broke down and started to cry. She couldn't handle knowing what was in store for her. She just wanted to go back home. Back to the safety and comfort of her bed. Ideally basking in the knowledge that she had finally passed her degree and actually able to enjoy the squirms of her own meal. "Please?" she begged. "Aura, please?" but there was no response from the feline.

Ten minutes later, Aura pushed open the door to her own house. Staggering heavily into the living room, she flopped on the couch, prompting loud protests from her dinner, then reached for the remote and turned on her television. "You okay in there, Jess?" she asked.

"No! Please let me out! Aura, please?" came the response.

"Well I guess that's about what I expected." the cat replied.

"Aura!" Jessi wailed. Now that the cat had sat down she could feel the stomach walls starting to get more active, squeezing her around and churning her body into the pool of acids. "Can't things go back to how they were? You could catch someone else and we could still be friends?" She had tried that strategy several times already and saw no reason why it would start working now. Still, she had nothing better to try and couldn't quite bear to give up the hope that Aura might yet relent.

There was a tired sigh from the feline, then "You know, that actually sounds pretty appealing. I've

missed having someone to relax with while waiting for my food to settle.” Jessi’s breath caught in her throat, the desperate rat hanging on to every word that her predator spoke. “On the other hand, you feel really good in there, so how about a deal? You give my belly a nice internal rub and, if you do a good enough job, I’ll consider letting you out before the end.”

Jessi groaned. She knew what Aura was doing. On her first hunt together the cat had given her a lesson on how to manipulate prey. ‘If you want them to do something, phrase it to include a chance of survival. Even if it’s obvious that you are lying they’ll still believe it.’ She had always been amused by how effective the trick was and had often laughed at how gullible her food could be. Only now she could finally understand why they cooperated. She knew that Aura would not let her go, no matter how good the rubs felt, but it felt so good to be able to pretend otherwise, even for a moment.

Despite knowing that it wouldn’t save her, knowing even that it would likely shorten the little time she had left, Jessi started to rub the feline’s inner walls. She hated herself for doing it, and knew that she was just confirming her role as prey, but she did it anyway. The fantasy that she would be released afterwards was too tempting for her to ignore.

A deep purr built up in Aura’s throat as her dinner complied. Resting one paw on her belly, she traced idle circles through her fur, following the movements that Jessi made inside. After a few minutes, Aura lost interest in her meal and turned her attention back to the television. For a while the cat simply surfed the channels and enjoyed the sensations of a belly full of cooperative prey. Soft gurgles came from her stomach as it worked on the stuffed rat inside, soon joined by the occasional cracking noise as periodic contractions helped to grind up her food.

Eventually Aura turned her attention back from the screen. “You’re almost done, aren’t you?” she asked.

There was a muffled whimper from her guts. By now the burning sensation had spread to every inch of Jessi’s body and grown more intense than she could have imagined. Her short fur had fallen out in clumps and the skin beneath was raw and blistering in the caustic digestive juices. Every so often a powerful squeeze would run through the surrounding walls, sometimes just strong enough to push her into a new position and ensure even coverage of the acids but, more and more frequently, contracting hard enough to make Jessi and Lannos’s bones creak. Jessi had no doubt that she would not remain conscious for much longer and was already beginning to welcome the chance to pass out.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know that I really have enjoyed your company. I’d probably have quit my degree years ago if I hadn’t had you to talk to so thanks for keeping me sane. Still, I think it’s time to bring this to a close.”

“W ... wait?” Jessi gasped. The remaining air was pretty thin and she had to focus just to form her words. “I need a moment ... to break Lannos down? I don’t want to ... to die before my prey.”

That comment drew a horrified squeal from Jessi’s own belly. Lannos had been thrashing about in her stomach quite energetically until now, and his squirms had gone a long way towards making the horrors of being digested more bearable for Jessi, but until now he had not had much to say. Perhaps he realized that there was no point in begging to be released unless Jessi also managed to escape. “Wait!” he squealed. “Please? Don’t do this! Even if you are going to get digested I could still ... Ack!”

Whatever he was hoping for was cut short as the rat’s stomach contracted hard against his body,

crushing the air from his lungs and making his ribs creek under the pressure. Jessi let out a belch then ran one paw over her belly as she felt him start to asphyxiate inside her. It wasn't much, but at least knowing that Lannos had succumbed to her belly helped her reaffirm her status as a predator. "All mine." she whispered to him.

"Except also kind of mine." Aura replied. "Actually, all the prey I've helped you catch over the years are mine now. That mouse heavy diet certainly left it's mark on your body and soon you'll get to leave your own on mine." She raised a paw to her lips to cover a small burp.

Jessi felt the stomach contract around her as a portion of her remaining air was pushed out. She was gasping for oxygen by now. Her tongue hung from her mouth and her chest heaved as she tried to sustain herself on the thin air. Every moment was a battle to keep her head above the bubbling pool of acids, but at least she was doing better than Lannos. A soft cracking noise came from her belly as the vole's ribcage caved under the pressure and, with a last little shudder, her prey fell still.

"Well, it's been nice knowing you. You were my best friend and I hope you enjoyed our time together as much as I did. I promise I won't forget you any time soon. Thanks for everything, Jessi."

"I ... thank you too." Jessi managed to gasp, but doing so used the last of her strength. Unable to hold her head out of the acids any longer, Jessi gave a defeated little sigh then allowed the cat's inner walls to push her under. A couple of bubbles rose to the surface as she involuntarily inhaled and the digestive juices poured into her lungs. The burning sensation became more intense as it found its way inside her but then faded, taking the rest of Jessi's senses along with it, and she slipped into a final sleep. The last thing she heard was a whispered "Goodbye." from her friend, and then she was gone.

Aura continued stroking the form of the unconscious rat until she felt Jessi's heartbeat flutter to a stop. Groggily, the cat then hauled herself up from the couch and staggered up the stairs to her bed. Chasing Jessi had taken a lot of energy and, although the rat would soon be replenishing that and more, Aura still needed some sleep. By morning Jessi, with a little help from Lannos, would have turned into a thick and creamy rodent soup. By evening that would have been absorbed by Aura's body and the only trace left would be a little extra padding beneath her fur. Eventually, the cat would burn that added fat away, only to replace it with the next person unlucky enough to find their way down her throat. Still, whatever else happened, Aura knew that she would always remember the predatory rat and the time they had spent together.