

The door slammed, Icsarla was out for a while and it was time for me to get up. Amazing how after only two full days in this house I already associated that sound with those things. I woke up slowly, still ravenously hungry then realized with disgust that today was the midwinter solstice. The longest, darkest, wettest, coldest most horrible day of the year. Despite the fact that I now lived with a fox who wanted to eat me and constantly tried to starve me, just waking up somewhere warm made this a better winter solstice than most I had had. Deciding that there was simply no point in trying anything today, I closed my eyes and tried to get back to sleep.

The front door slammed again, waking me up once again. A tantalizing, mouth watering smell, wafted into my hole even before Icsarla entered the room. I buried my nose in my nest fluff to try to blot it out. Anything that smelt that good in Icsarla's house would either be for her or bait to lure me into a trap. As she walked into the dining room, the smell became too strong to ignore. Whatever horrible game she wanted to play this time, I would have to join in to get some of whatever that delicious smelling food was.

Reaching my hole, I was just in time to see Icsarla place a plate on the floor near the entrance, she looked up and grinned when she saw I was almost half way out already. "Here, this is for you." she said. As well as the plate she had just put down, she was also carrying a very large squirming bag and a box containing some kind of board game.

"Great." I said mistrustfully. "And what do I have to do for it?" The plate contained a thick slice of meat pie, a slice of carrot cake and a miniature (my sized) cup that smelled strongly alcoholic. What ever she asked would have to be very dangerous to stop me trying to get at least a bite out of them.

"Nothing." Icsarla assured me. "It's yours, you can come out."

I still remained mistrustful, "Yesterday you tried to lure me out of my hole for a few crumbs, and today I'm supposed to believe that I can come out and eat all that and you won't even try to catch me?"

She grinned and shrugged "It's Solstice, Teslin. Best day of the year, so I'm calling a truce. You can come out as much as you like and I promise I won't hurt you today."

I looked uncertain. I really, really wanted to believe that was the case but at the same time I couldn't shake the feeling that trusting her was a very bad idea. I withdrew back into my hole. "Thanks, but I think I'll wait a little." I told her.

"Suit yourself, but it will be a shame if it goes cold." she nudged the plate a little closer to my hole then retreated to the dining table. "If I'm sitting all the way over here would you risk it?" she asked. Very timidly I stepped out of my hole and onto the plate. Keeping both eyes on her the whole time. She was watching me back, but she didn't seem about to pounce so I continued.

Just as I was about to take a bite out of the pie a truly nasty thought occurred to me. "You aren't trying to poison me are you?"

She gave me a surprised look "Why would I possibly want to do that?" she asked. "Any other day I'd probably be trying to eat you, but unless you made such a nuisance of yourself that I could not stand living with you and couldn't get rid of you any other way I would never try to poison you."

"But you have a bottle in your kitchen, under the sink." I protested. I instantly regretted it, I had no idea how she would respond to me going through her cupboards.

She simply shrugged. "Must have been there when I moved in." she replied "I don't use that cupboard much and haven't bothered to clear out all the past owners junk yet. But I promise you, I have never bought or used that bottle in my life. Now seriously, your pie is going cold, either trust me when I say that I'm not trying to kill you today, or panic about it until you run back into your hole, and spend the one day of the year when hot food is placed in front of you staving yourself."

"Thank you. I do trust you." I responded "Just one last thing though." I pointed to the slice of meat pie, "It isn't um..."

"It's beef, I assure you. I don't even know of anywhere around here that makes mice pies."

The last of my fears finally at rest I quickly tucked in to the delicious pie. Warm, thick and meaty it was quite possibly the best thing I had ever eaten, Not that it had much competition, the previous best had been a packet of fries a passing cat had discarded half empty.

For several minutes I was so engrossed in the delicious flavors I completely forgot about the predator sitting a few feet away. Coming sharply back to reality I looked up to see what she was doing, but it seemed she had also lost interest in me and was focused instead on setting her board game up.

The last of the pieces in place she reached into the wriggling bag and withdrew a struggling mouse. "Hello there." she toyed, winding his tail round her fingers.

"Please don't eat me." He begged, "there are loads of others in there. They're honestly all fatter and tastier than me."

"It's Solstice, mousey. One of the best days of the year, for the next half a year the weather is going to get warmer, dryer and sunnier, and that is something worth celebrating. Solstice is the one day when everyone should have a chance to enjoy themselves. So, if given the choice, how would you like to spend this Solstice?"

The poor mouse, who had been desperately nodding at everything she said, stammered for a second or two over the unexpected question. "Back home? With my girlfriend? Anywhere but here really." He responded.

"That sounds like a good choice, but unfortunately for you, my favorite way of spending the solstice is relaxing by a hot fire with a whole belly full of squirming mice. We can't both get our way now, can we? And as I'm bigger than you, I can easily force you to spend it my way." the mouse gave her a despairing look. "Fortunately for you mousey, it's Solstice, so I'm going to give you a chance to spend it the way you want instead."

With a quick move she dropped him on the opposite side of the board. "Do you know how to play, mouse?" he shook his head. I listened, intrigued as she explained the rules to him. There were quite a lot of rules and details to be remembered but the last one clearly caught his attention the most. "If you can beat me, or if we tie, then you are free to go and enjoy the Solstice however you wish. If I win, then you will be helping me enjoy Solstice." she licked her lips to give emphasis to the threat.

I stopped eating the pie. It didn't taste as good when there was a fellow mouse risking his life only a few feet away. Getting off the plate I nervously approached the predator. "Icsarla?"

She looked round at me "Yes?" The moment her eyes were off him, her opponent made a sudden break for freedom. He almost made it to the table edge. Slam. Icsarla's hand came heavily down, pinning him to the table. "I suggest you use your time thinking about the game instead of hopeless escape attempts." she snarled, "Try that again and you forfeit the game and your life." then she turned back to me "What was it you wanted, Teslin?"

I shuddered at how fast her face could turn from furious and terrifying to polite interest. "I ... I was hoping I could watch your game." I asked. "As long as you aren't going to make me play it." I quickly added.

"No. As I have already assured you five or six times by now, nothing bad is going to happen to you today. You're welcome to watch as long as you don't interfere." she reached down her free hand to lift me to the table, but I backed quickly away.

"I can get up on my own, really, I'm fine." I told her, dodging away from her fingers and towards the leg of the table. Quickly scurrying up the leg I pulled myself onto the table top and approached the board. Unfortunately in order to do that I had to walk straight past the enormous struggling bag. A tight loop of string held the entrance closed and from the inside I could hear the frantic scrabbling of claws on the laminated paper as well as the tearful moans from the occupants. From the sounds and size of the bag I guessed there were about a dozen still trapped inside. Disturbed, I hurried past the bag and towards the

equally morbid board game about to take place.

Icsarla offered the mouse a choice of colors to play with. He looked at me, hopeful that I might know the answer. I shrugged, "Don't ask me, I promised I wouldn't interfere. Even if I hadn't I'm as new as you to this game." Downcast he chose white at random and was informed that he could go first.

Stepping onto the board, he selected a piece at random and tried to move it to an empty square, only to be informed he could not make that move. Icsarla re-explained the rules and this time I thought I had a clearer idea of how the game was played. My companion however, looked only more confused, but did manage to make a correct move this time. After he had finished his move Icsarla instructed him to press a button on a weird clock device she had set up beside the board and one of the numbers started counting down.

One thing struck me as odd, in a game where everything else seemed perfectly equal, she had given her opponent almost twice the amount of time as herself. Questioningly I pointed this out.

"I gave him extra time because I can move my pieces like this." she moved one of her pieces to a different square then hit the button on the timer. "While you mice have to drag them about, then walk to the timer."

I nodded. But to me it seemed she had still been generous with the amount of time she had added. I wondered if some part of her actually wanted to lose, or if she was just being careful to compensate for any unfair advantages she had.

The mouse moved, pushing another of the pieces forwards, then running to the timer. Icsarla moved another piece. For several turns both of them just advanced their pieces at random. Then the mouse got lucky, pushing one of the black pieces off the board and replacing it with his own. Icsarla glared at him bitterly. It was clear that while she may have memorized the rules, this was her first or nearly first time playing and she was uncertain how to react to the lost piece.

She took a long time deciding her next move and her opponent began to fidget nervously. "I'm Sernal." he announced, turning to me.

"Teslin." I replied. He looked like he needed some encouragement so I added "I think you're winning."

"Thanks. But I really don't understand how to play this game."

"Don't worry, neither does she." I suddenly wondered if I had overstepped a boundary by telling him that and glanced up at Icsarla. Her ears flicked in annoyance but she remained focused on the board.

"Thank you, so why are you here? I didn't see you in the bag and ..." He paused, glancing at the half eaten plate of pie and cake on the floor. "Are you and her

friends?" he asked, although his expression more clearly said "Why am I risking my life while you get fed cake?"

I hesitated to answer. I still wasn't sure what Icsarla thought of me and I didn't want to offend her by presuming too much or too little. Fortunately, Icsarla answered for me, "She is a guest in my house and has avoided my attempts to eat her. Because it is Solstice, she is allowed out without fear of being eaten. Unlike her, you have already been caught. You are my food and for Solstice are being given a second chance to survive." she moved one of the larger pieces into the center of the board and hit the timer. "Your move mouse."

Sernal swallowed nervously as he looked at the board, and after a little thought moved one of his own pieces. Icsarla grinned nastily and took the piece with hers. I had to bite my tongue to keep silent, Icsarla had just placed her most powerful piece into an extremely vulnerable spot. Sernal could take it. Unfamiliar as I was with the rules, I could tell that would give him a huge advantage.

I wondered what Icsarla would do if I mentioned this. She had promised not to eat me, but then, I had promised not to interfere with the game. If I broke my promise would she break hers? Even if she didn't there was still plenty she could do to me while keeping to her word. She could throw me out of her house, or block up my hole. Even if she did nothing to me she could decide the game was forfeit and eat Sernal anyway. Gritting my teeth, I hoped he would notice it on his own.

Sernal walked round the board, eyeing the powerful enemy piece in the middle of his army warily, then moved the equivalent piece forward to threaten it. At first glance looked like a good move. What better piece to drive away an attacker than one that was its equal in strength? The moment he pressed the timer, that was proven very wrong. Quickly removing his 'queen' from the board and replacing it with her own, Icsarla grinned down at him. "Ouch, not a good move, mousey?" she teased before hitting the timer and ending her turn.

Sernal whimpered fearfully and set about trying to repair his broken defense, each turn moving more pieces to keep a barrier between her 'queen' and his 'king'. Unfortunately, without a queen of his own the rest of his pieces fell quickly to the single aggressor. Realizing he was going to lose, Sernal swapped tactics, rushing his last few pieces across the board in a desperate attack on the enemy king.

For a few rounds the strategy was quite effective and Icsarla lost several good pieces of her own before finishing off the last of his. Alone, Sernal's king was forced to run as her pieces closed in on it. After staring at the board for several minutes in silence, Sernal finally gave in. Instead of making a move he just sat down and waited for his time to run out.

I put an arm round his shoulders in an attempt to comfort him, I could feel him

trembling, and every few seconds he would glance back at the rapidly decreasing timer. He still had another ten minutes until he lost but as the numbers ticked lower his trembling was getting worse.

Icsarla on the other hand seemed to think ten minutes was too long. "Hurry up and move." she insisted, poking at him irritably.

Sernal glared at her. "No! You said you'd play by the rules so either break your word and eat me now, or let me spend the rest of my time in peace." After his sudden outburst he sank back down, head in his hands and trembling.

I decided it was time to intervene. "Icsarla? Could I help him?" I asked.

She gave me a suspicious look. "He's pretty much lost by now, hasn't he?"

I shook my head "Probably, but he does still have a chance. If you let me tell him it would get the game going again."

She stared at the board for a moment or two longer. "Alright, tell him." she consented, I got the feeling her agreement was as much due to curiosity about my plan as it was desire to speed up the game.

By now Sernal was staring at me with desperate hope. Bending down I whispered my plan in his ear to keep Icsarla from overhearing. The plan was pretty simple, Sernal still had ten minutes, well nine now, left before he automatically lost, but Icsarla had only three. If he could avoid capture while keeping it on her turn for just a little longer he would automatically win.

The realization that he might still win reinvigorated Sernal. Getting back up he quickly moved his king into the nearest safe space then rushed back to the timer. Icsarla moved quickly too, having had some time while Sernal was refusing to play, she had already decided her move and pressed the timer within seconds of Sernal's click.

Now the difference in size became a real disadvantage. Each turn Sernal had to run onto the board, drag his king to another square then get back to the timer before any more of his precious time was wasted. Unfortunately, in his haste, he had little time to consider his moves. Three rounds later the game was over. With a smug grin, Icsarla placed her queen in line with Sernal's king. "Checkmate." she declared.

For a second or two, Sernal stared at the pieces, still looking for some way out, then Icsarla's massive hand closed around him. Gulp. She swallowed him so fast I barely had time to register what had happened. One moment he had been standing beside to me, watching the clock and planning his moves, the next Icsarla was licking the last of his flavor from her fingers.

I could feel my fur standing on end from the shock. With her friendly manner and

strict obedience to her own rules, it was easy to forget that Icsarla was a predator. She seemed harmless enough, right up to the moment she reminded me that she wasn't. I forced myself to relax again, the unlucky mice in that bag might be going down her throat, but I believed her when she said that I would not be. At least for today. Stepping a little closer I peered down at her midsection, the single mouse inside did not even make a bump through all the layers of skin, fur and clothing that separated him from the outside world.

Icsarla was too busy resetting the board to notice my morbid line of thought "One down, another nine to go." she commented happily as she put the last piece in place. Sure enough, after resetting the clock she removed another unhappy mouse from the bag and dropped her in front of the board.

"Did you hear me explain the rules from in there?" she asked.

The new mouse nodded, "Yes." Despite her fear she seemed determined to face the fox on as equal level as she could.

"Well, I'm adding a new one. You can't take more than three minutes on a single move." she insisted, "I won't enforce it unless I feel you're wasting my time, but it will stop you from trying to delay like the last guy." The mouse did not look happy about Icsarla adding new rules but did not protest.

Icsarla grinned at the opposition, "Color?" she offered.

Again there was a pause before she answered. "The previous one chose white?" Icsarla nodded, "Then I'll take black." she decided.

Icsarla turned the board to reflect this decision, made her move then started the timer. The mouse sat and thought for a while before dragging out one of her knights and the game began. Encouraged by the success it had brought her in the first game, Icsarla rushed forwards with her queen, and promptly lost it.

From then on the game was slow and tedious. The mouse made little effort to bring her pieces into the game, instead waiting for Icsarla to come to her, brutally dispatching any piece that came too close to her side of the board. The whole time the mouse barely spoke or even moved except to take her turn. All I learned from her was that her name was Missel and that she didn't want to talk while playing.

After losing her queen, two bishops and a knight, in exchange for only a knight and a handful of pawns, Icsarla finally lost patience. Instead of making a move she pushed the board aside with a frustrated snort. "Well played, you win." she announced, then reached to pick up the Missel.

Unsurprisingly, the frightened mouse scrambled away from the descending paw. "You said you'd let me go if I won." she protested.

"I'm trying to." Icsarla explained. "Let me pick you up and I'll take you outside." Very reluctantly Missel allowed Icsarla to pick her up and carry her away from the table.

Left behind, I briefly considered opening the bag that held my fellow mice. If we all ran for it at once, we each would have a good chance of escaping. Unfortunately, betraying Icsarla's trust like that would likely mean I would be homeless again in the middle of winter, and that was the best case scenario. At worst she would single me out of the escaping crowd for revenge. I felt sorry for my fellow mice still trapped in that bag, but I was not the heroic type prepared to sacrifice my own life for theirs.

Instead I decided to go make sure Missel got away safely. So far I had never seen Icsarla go back on her word and she seemed trustworthy, but if she wasn't then I really wanted to know about it. Scrambling down the table leg I quickly followed Icsarla and Missel out the dining room.

Despite their head start, I managed to catch up with them as Icsarla approached the front door, then walked straight past it, going into the kitchen instead. My heart sank sharply, apparently winning the game of chess only meant you would be carried out of earshot of the rest before being devoured.

Missel seemed to have the same idea. "Where are we going? You said you were going to let me go. Please, let me go!" her voice rising into a high pitched squeak as she began to panic.

"Shhh." Icsarla comforted, "I'm not going to eat you. You're safe and will soon be on your way." Despite her reassuring tone, Missel still continued to plead for her life.

I ducked into the shadows of the doorway to avoid being seen as I listened to what happened next. I heard Icsarla open the fridge door and Missel's frightened voice begging not to be placed inside. To my relief I could still hear Missel's voice even after the sound of the door closing again. Then I heard them coming back my way.

I shrank back into the shadows as Icsarla walked past me, opened the front door and deposited Missel, who was now holding a large piece of the carrot cake in both paws on the step.

"There you go." Icsarla told her, "and if you're ever unlucky enough to find yourself in my paws again, try to mention your name before I swallow. At the very least I'll be willing to give you a rematch."

Missel gave her a tearful look. "Thank you, miss fox. I'm sorry I doubted your word. And thank you as well for the cake." she chuckled to herself and added "When I got caught and realized I was going to be sold as food, I didn't expect it to result in being given cake."

Icsarla smiled brightly, "You are welcome, but take care not to be caught again. Very few mice get a second chance and you don't want to rely on a third."

Nodding obediently, Missel thanked Icsarla once more, then turned and hurried into the hedges. As soon as she was out of sight, Icsarla closed the door and headed back to the dining room. Feeling a little ashamed at having doubted her I hesitated before following.

By the time I entered the room, Icsarla had reset the chess board and a third mouse was already playing the game. I waited for her to finish her move to minimize my interruption. "Icsarla?" I asked.

She glanced in my direction "I wondered where you had gotten to." she commented.

"I... I'm sorry for following you, and for not trusting that you would let her go." I announced "You've let me stay here, been kind to me and done nothing to give me reason to mistrust you."

Icsarla laughed at my comment, "Firstly, I didn't so much let you stay here as come home one day to find you'd broken in. Secondly, if I've been welcoming or encouraged you to stay, it's only because I might get a free meal out of you someday. Thirdly, in the three days you've been here I've tried to eat you on several occasions and even tried starving you to force you to come out." She paused in her speech to make a move and flick the timer. "And fourthly, the fact that I'm a fox should be reason enough for you to mistrust me. Lots of predators would think nothing of lying to their food, either to ensure a meal or just for entertainment at seeing their hopes dashed. So I'm neither upset nor surprised that you didn't trust me." The mouse finished her move, and switched the timer again.

I headed over and climbed back up the table leg. "I still feel ashamed for being wrong." I replied, "Besides you have been kind to me. If you had left that pie somewhere I could smell it then sat in wait, I'd be in your belly by now."

She shrugged, "It's Solstice. I'm always nice today. By tomorrow I'll happily be as cruel as I like in luring you back out that hole." She made another move.

I sat down to watch the rest of the game. A few minutes later it was over and a second mouse was wriggling in Icsarla's belly. The next game was even shorter and also ended in a swallow. Sucking her fingers clean Icsarla left the table then returned a minute later with a large glass of milk. She took a gulp before selected a fifth opponent from the bag and placing him opposite her.

This game was different, the mouse selected white without hesitation and made each of his moves within seconds of Icsarla finishing hers. Just four rounds in he announced a checkmate leaving Icsarla staring at the board in disbelief.

"You've played this before haven't you?" she demanded. Looking angry enough to eat him despite her promise.

Suddenly he looked a lot less confident now he was dealing with an angry fox instead of just a board game, he nodded meekly.

With a sigh she let herself relax, "Well I guess I still owe you cake and your freedom, so hop on." She held an upturned hand towards him.

Backing away from her hand, he glanced in my direction. I shrugged, "She kept her word last time," I told him, "and she's never lied to me." still a little reluctant he stepped onto her paw and allowed her to carry him away.

While she was out I started resetting the pieces to be helpful. A few minutes later she returned and smiled as she saw the ready board. I stepped back off and watched as the next game started, it never hurt to prove yourself helpful particularly to someone who could eat me in a single bite if she wanted.

The sixth game started well for the mouse, Icsarla lost her queen in the first few moves, giving him a quick upper hand of which he took full advantage. About half way through the game however, Icsarla's stomach began making loud groans as it started work on its contents. A combination of the noises and the hungry looks she gave him between sips of milk were enough to completely ruin his concentration and the game eventually ended in a stalemate.

Although clearly frustrated at losing two mice in a row, Icsarla still remained polite as she offered him a paw then carried him away. The next mouse Icsarla fished out was not so lucky. Instead of placing him on the other side of the board she lifted him very close to her lips and asked him his name.

"Sirron" he whimpered trying to squirm a little further from her jaws.

"Well Sirron, before we begin let me tell you that I have no intention of losing another meal so you will have to play very, very well if you want to avoid..." Instead of finishing her sentence she licked her lips. Huge tongue wiping round her lips and leaving a thin smear of milk and drool in its wake. She then dropped him on the other side of the board and sweetly asked if he would prefer to be black or white.

Not surprisingly he lost. After his initial treatment the hungry stares and sounds of her belly at work were scarcely necessary to ensure that he could not even begin to focus on the game.

Easily forcing a checkmate, she grabbed him and dangled him over her mouth. Sirron squealed miserably as he stared in at the milk smeared walls, then her fingers released his tail and he tumbled helplessly onto the tongue. He stared fearfully down the dark entrance to her throat and scrambled away. He had

almost made it back out her muzzle when she raised the glass to her lips and took a long draft.

Gulp. The fur around her neck rippled outwards as she swallowed, followed by a horrid slurp as mouse and milk poured down her esophagus. I winced a little at the sound, although the constant groaning of her belly was beginning to desensitize me to the noises of her body. There was a barely audible splash from her belly and Icsarla let out a small burp as the latest arrival was added to the mix inside her.

"That was mean." I commented.

"Putting him off the game, or eating him like that?" she asked, wiping a thin smear of milk from her lips.

"Both really, but mostly the fact that you distracted him from the game." I replied.

"Yeah, I know I was being a little unfair, but I didn't have to give him any chance at all. Besides I've already let three of them go, which is pretty generous as this is my Solstice treat."

I shrugged, "I wasn't telling you not to. Just that it was a cruel way to get an advantage."

"Alright, I'll give the next two an advantage to make up for it." she promised. I didn't really see how that would help Sirron in any way, but decided not to mention it.

Fishing two mice out at once this time Icsarla explained the amended rules to them. "You two can play as a team and confer about which moves you want to make, just remember that if you lose, you will both be going down there. Agree?" The two mice glanced at each other before nodding and the eighth game began.

Two brains against one gave the pair a considerable advantage, Icsarla however had clearly been learning from her previous games. While the pair were better at spotting potential captures or mistakes, their actual strategy was lacking compared to Icsarla's. Coupled with the fact that their constant whispered conferences between each move wasted precious seconds and they were soon behind in both time and position, although slightly ahead on pieces.

Icarla's belly was not helping them either, while she made no deliberate attempt to distract them, every muffled slosh from her midsection was a reminder that four of the previous players were already dissolving inside her, and they would follow if they weren't careful.

While Icsarla was considering her next move I tried to ask them their names, but both just glared at me. "If you're friends with the fox, we want nothing to do with

you.” one responded. The other nodded, “We’re not falling for that, anything we told you, you’d just pass on to her.”

Which was a pity as neither of them seemed to have noticed, they had left a gaping hole in the middle of their defense. Feeling suddenly vindictive I was momentarily tempted to point the error out to Icsarla, who was still staring thoughtfully at the board. Of course I didn’t. Unfriendly as the pair had been I didn’t really want to get either of them killed.

In the end it made little actual difference. Spotting the critical move, Icsarla licked her lips then slid her queen across the board, coming to rest directly in front of their king. “Checkmate.” She purred, then reached out for the two horrified mice. One stood frozen to the spot and was grabbed, the other ducked under Icsarla’s paw and darted towards the table edge.

Unfortunately for her, it was too high to jump without risking injury and she had to first run to the corner in order to begin scrambling down the table leg. Half way down Icsarla’s paw plucked her easily into the air. “I know you’re scared and don’t want to be eaten,” she said, her victim dangled helplessly from her fingers, “but all running is going to ensure is that you go down first.”

The mouse’s pitiable whining was cut short as Icsarla tossed her into her jaws and gulped her down. One hand rubbed her belly as the latest victim slid into her place. “Now what about you?” Icsarla considered the second of the duo. “Five is quite a filling meal and I would feel kind of guilty, stuffing myself on live prey after I’ve already had my fill.” A faint glimpse of hope flickered in her eyes, but was quickly snuffed out as Icsarla lifted her over her head. “Then again, one of the best things about mice is how easy it is to squeeze just one more in.”

Frantic protests, sobs, threats and pleas were all ignored as Icsarla lowered her into her jaws, then cut off entirely as the lips sealed shut leaving only a few inches of twitching tail to hang from her jaws. Her cheeks rippled from the movements within before she slurped the tail in and lazily swallowed.

By now I was becoming acclimatized to seeing my fellow mice going down her throat and watched the bulge slither downwards until it vanished under her collar. Lifting her glass Icsarla gulped down the last of her milk and finished her meal with a blissful belch and a milky lick of her lips. One hand resting on her overfull gut she reached out and tweaked open the bag to reveal the final cowering mouse. “Don’t look so terrified.” she said, “I’m far too full to even consider of eating you.” she gave her belly a contented pat for emphasis. “And I’m sure you won’t mind if I forfeit our game and let you leave.”

The frightened mouse nodded eagerly, then paused, suspecting some kind of trick. Icsarla leaned back in her chair, putting her feet up on the desk. “Teslin? Could you show our guest the way out. I’m sure she’s very eager to leave, but just at the moment,” she rolled her shirt up, so she could rub the fur around her rounded middle. Even through the layer of muscle and fur I could see the shifting

lumps under her skin. "I'd rather not move until my meal gets a little less squirmy."

I nodded and offered a hand to the cowering mouse. She took it reluctantly, clearly not trusting me, but having no other choice.

Leading her to the front door, I climbed upwards to the letter slot. Bracing myself as best I could on the vertical surface I managed to lift the metal flap for her to climb through. It wasn't easy, and it would have been even harder had I been the one trying to get through. It would have been much less effort for Icsarla to have simply come to open the door, but I was pleased to have an opportunity to prove myself helpful.

The other mouse gave me a doubtful look as I gestured for her to climb through. "You're not coming?" she asked.

I shook my head and gestured more urgently for her to move through. "Crazy as it sounds, I'd rather take my chances in here. Now would you get in there? This is heavy."

Hesitantly, she climbed inside and I let the flap swing shut behind her. I listened until I heard her climbing down the other side, then climbed back down myself.

Icsarla was leaning back in her chair when I returned, eyes closed and looking very pleased with herself. I moved back to the plate in front of my hole, the string of games had lasted several hours in total and I was getting hungry again. I finished the last of the meat pie and tried a sip of whatever was in the cup. Whatever it was it was very alcoholic and tasted strongly of almonds and some kind of fruit. Within seconds I had finished the entire cup.

The sound of movement made me look round, but it was only Icsarla standing up and stretching. She glanced briefly at the clock, "I'm going to meet some friends now," she announced, "I'll be gone a few hours." I nodded and moments later the door banged shut as she left.

The first thing I did was move the slab of carrot cake into my hole and set it beside my nest. Icsarla might be friendly today, but she would be back to trying to starve me again soon. My chances were better if she didn't know I had food stashed away.

Next I took a drink from my pen top. Whatever had been in that cup was making me feel slightly giddy and I needed my wits if I was going to take full advantage of this time. Running back to the kitchen, I managed to refill the pen lid. Finding a way to get water without having to crawl along the tap was high on my priority list, but at the moment I couldn't think of one.

Setting the pen lid back in its place I paused to consider my next move. With the fox gone and the promise that she wouldn't eat me even when she came back,

this was a perfect opportunity to get any number of things done without risk. After a minutes thought, I decided that exploring was my next priority. The better I knew the house, the better my chances of surviving any future problems.

The one area that I had not yet been able to explore without risking being cut off from my hole was the upstairs. Going back to the hallway I stared up the long flight leading upwards. There were no lights on upstairs, and on the shortest day of the year the sunlight was already fading, but I was good at navigating in the dark.

Climbing the steps, however, proved a challenge. Each was slightly higher than me, forcing me to scramble up each one in turn. In the end it proved easier to climb onto the railing and walk up that instead. A fine solution if I just wanted to go upstairs, but if I needed to do so quickly it would be a problem.

Finally reaching the top, I looked around. The landing was short, with four doors leading off it, only one of which was open. Peering inside I found it was the bathroom. Enormous porcelain structures surrounded me, but there was little in here that was of any interest to me. The plain white surroundings would make it difficult for me to hide in here and there was nothing that looked useful or that Icsarla wouldn't miss.

Going back into the hallway I chose one of the closed doors at random and squeezed under the crack beneath it. It was pitch black inside, with neither windows or lights and even my night vision was useless. Unable to see, I was forced to rely on my other senses to find anything out.

The sound of my footsteps on the wooden floor told me that the room was small, at least in comparison to the others I had been in, and the smell of dust and stillness told me it was rarely used. More sniffing and I could tell that there were piles of fabric lying on shelves. This room would be really good for hiding in. If I buried myself under some of the cloth, then even if Icsarla knew I was in here, she could probably search for hours without finding me.

Crawling back out under the door, I made a note of that room then picked one of the remaining two doors at random. A bedroom, neat ordered and completely unlivd it. I presumed that this room was for guests and that the remaining one would be Icsarla's room.

There were a few good hiding places if I ever got stranded in here. Under the bed would do in a pinch but was perhaps a little obvious. Behind the chest of draws or between two books on one of the shelves would be better.

I climbed onto the bed sheets and looked around the room. It seemed nice, the window was positioned to catch the morning sun and the whole room had a soft and tranquil feel to it, much nicer than my little hole between the walls. For a moment I felt intensely envious. It just didn't seem fair that I had so little in comparison to Icsarla. She had a whole house full of beautiful rooms, while I had

to hide away in one dark corner, collecting the junk that she threw away. She had never had to run from a predator, or hide away in fear of being eaten, but such experiences made up the majority of my life. I couldn't even imagine what it must be like to be her, the concept of never having anything to fear was simply too alien for me.

It wasn't even like I needed very much, I could survive on a fraction the resources she could. Any one of her meals would last me for weeks, yet I was the one who had to hide behind the walls and steal what little I could while she had far more than she could ever use.

There was no point in continuing that line of thought. I had less than Icsarla. I had less than pretty much anyone of her size. But it was far more than I had a week ago. I was warm, and for the day at least, well fed and safe. Comparing what I had to with others was futile, if Icsarla had a nice house, then at least I got to stay in it for a while. Standing up I pushed the emotions away and resumed my search. I couldn't suppress my envy completely, but I wasn't going to let it spoil the one day a year that I was completely safe.

The next place to explore was clearly the bookshelves. I could see the books from below, but if there was anything interesting hidden among them I would need to get onto the shelves to look. Fortunately the wallpaper provided me with an easy purchase and I was able to scramble up to the shelves with little more difficulty than walking the same distance.

It proved something of a disappointment. The books were packed closely together, with nothing of any interest on the shelves and no room to squeeze between them if I needed to hide. I was on the verge of climbing back down again, when it struck me that the books themselves might be interesting. From a distance I had watched larger creatures reading them, and had heard that they were supposed to be incredible, but had always assumed they were the kind of thing best enjoyed by people who neither had to worry about where their next meal was coming from, or whether they would be someone's meal.

Today however, I didn't have to worry about either of those. Pulling a book at random from the row I opened it at the first page and decided to see what all the fuss was about.

I was disappointed. My reading skill weren't even close to being able to understand it. I knew the names of different shops, I could read directions and timetables, but I couldn't make any sense of the mass of tightly packed words that covered the pages. After several minutes I had barely made it past the first line, an introduction explaining what the rest of the book would be about. Frustrated I shoved it back into place and drew another.

I repeated this several times before giving up. Either none of the books that Icsarla kept on her shelves were worth reading, or this entire reading thing was vastly overrated. Pushing the last book back in place I climbed back down the

wall and was weighing my options of what to do next when I heard the front door slam.

That decided the question for me. Friendly as she seemed today, I would rather Icsarla did not know I had been snooping in her rooms. Squeezing back under the door I peered downstairs. Icsarla was standing at the bottom, shaking the snow of her coat before draping it over a hook. Her movements were slightly hampered by the large and struggling bag she held under one arm. Somewhat to my relief, the struggles seemed to be coming from one large creature, rather than several small ones. 'Sorry, rabbit.' I thought, 'but I'd prefer that she eats you than several of my fellow mice.' Without noticing me, Icsarla carried her dinner back into the dining room, and I headed downstairs after her.

By the time I entered her dining room, Icsarla had got the rabbit unwrapped and was fighting to hold him still. Seeing me enter the thrashing rabbit stopped screaming and immediately pointed me out to the fox. "Look, mouse." he managed to get one paw free in order to point at me, "Eat her instead. Please? She'll only make a mess if you don't catch her now."

This did very little to endear him to me. It didn't seem to help him with Icsarla much either. "Hey, Tes." she commented, as she struggled to pin his arm back against his side. "Sorry about my dinner, it's not being very polite."

Finally managing to get a good grip on her prey, she licked her lips in anticipation. "But it's not going matter much longer." she added, then raised the frantic rabbit to her open jaws.

"Aren't you going to give him a chance?" I protested, "I though you did for all you prey on Solstice."

"Mice yes, but rabbits are expensive, and I only have one and I'm hungry." she responded. The delay did give the poor rabbit time to break free of one hand, allowing it to twist round and try to bite her other hand.

Icsarla shifted her grip and tried again to hold the struggling rabbit still. "That and this one is being such a pain, it doesn't deserve any second chances." She regained her grip, holding the rabbit's paws in one hand and gripping the scruff of its neck with her other.

This time there was no escape. Her jaws opened and the rabbit's head and shoulders were forced inside. The bunny let out a defeated squeal as her teeth pressed into his back, holding him in place and freeing a hand to help shove him inside. Gulp. Icsarla's throat widened as the start of her meal was pulled inside. I watched the ripples run down her neck as she repeatedly swallowed, each one pulling the rabbit deeper and leaving a little less sticking out her jaws.

Finally, she tipped back her head and with one last swallow, slurped the still kicking bunny's hindpaws inside her. Her throat returned to its normal size as

the food slid down and a moment later she placed one hand over her belly with a sigh.

"You put up quite a struggle there." she noted to her midsection while licking the last scraps of brown fur from her lips. "Still, I got you down in the end and that's all that matters." She belched contentedly then stood up.

I stopped staring and quickly ducked into my hole. I was pretty sure she wouldn't eat me by now, but after seeing the rabbit's fate, I had no desire to get too close. Looking through the gap, I watched her move to the fireplace and begin stacking logs into the center.

"Did... um, did you have a good time with your friends." I asked from my hole.

"Oh," she glanced round as if she had forgotten I was there, "Yeah. I should try and make time to do that more often."

I grinned, "That would certainly suit me." I responded.

"I bet it would. I'd never get my chance at a free dinner if I let you have the run of the house every day." She stepped back from the fireplace, and I could see the faint flicker of flames rising up through the wood. "Just wait there for a moment." she told me, then walked out, leaving me to contemplate her previous comment.

I sat and waited for a few minutes while I could hear Icsarla moving about in the kitchen. Shortly afterwards she returned holding an armful of packets and pulled one of the armchairs in front of the fire.

There was a heavy 'fumpth' as collapsed into it, facing the fire and with her back to me. "Come on over here." she called.

I stayed put. "No thanks, I'm fine in here."

"Come on mousey. I promise I won't hurt you and it'll be worth your while."

A little curiously I emerged from the hole and climbed up the side of the chair to sit on the arm. Icsarla was busy opening one of the packets she had brought.

"Here." she offered a sweet smelling brown lump to me. I took it in both hands, sniffed it, then carefully nibbled the corner. The ball was extremely sweet and filled with some kind of dried fruit. Within seconds I had finished the entire thing and was looking at her expectantly for more.

She laughed at my eager expression, "I guess there's no point in asking if you like it, then?" She picked up the packet, tipped a dozen of them into her hand then dropped the packet next to me on the arm. "Help yourself." she offered.

I had just pulled another lump out the packet and begun eating, when a loud rumble ran through the fox's belly. Looking down, I could see faint twitches through her shirt as the unfortunate rabbit kicked inside her. I shuddered, for a while it had been possible to forget about him and to think of this as two friends sharing food by the fire. But there were three people here, and one was being digested alive. At least one, I had no idea what state the six mice she had eaten for breakfast were in and whether they were contributing to the twitching in Icsarla's middle.

I glanced up at her, but she showed no signs of noticing the wriggling in her belly or the liquid noises it was making. Instead she was busy chewing up another mouthful of sweets. "Icsarla?" she glanced down at me, "The ones that lost at your game... they aren't still in there? Are they?"

"No, they're all long gone." She rolled up the shirt to expose the slight bulge the rabbit made in her form and gave him a brief pat, "That bunny's not going to last long either. Sorry if that makes you uncomfortable."

I watched as a few more ripples ran through her belly fur, followed by an even more insistent gurgle. "No. I think it's better that it's fairly quick. It must be pretty terrible in there."

For a moment she looked slightly guilty, then shrugged. "The way this one struggled going down, I've no idea if he's actually any worse or just still making a fuss." she opened another of the packets and offered me a peanut. "Here, try one of these."

It was a fairly blatant attempt to change the topic, but I accepted the nut and took a small bite. A moment later I was sputtering and spitting the pieces back out, whatever it had been covered in was incredibly salty.

Icsarla laughed as I spluttered. "Not a fan of those then?" she noted, then when I continued to make faces, "I'll get you a drink of something to wash it away." she stood up, causing a faint slosh as the rabbit was swirled around inside her. Heading through to the kitchen she returned with a cup in each hand.

Sitting back down she placed the smaller cup beside me. Despite being the smaller cup, I still had to lean over the rim to take a sip of the milk inside.

"Maybe these will suit you better." she handed me a large and pink marshmallow. This was something I had tried before. I had once found a discarded pack with three of them left inside and had almost made myself sick in eating them all. That wasn't going to happen this time, I slowly nibbled one end while Icsarla ate them by the handful.

For a while we both sat in silence, both eating our respective snacks, then Icsarla stretched and picked up the book I had seen her reading on my second day. I glanced inquisitively up at her as she started to read. I didn't want to interrupt

her, but I couldn't quite contain my curiosity.

Instead of answering when I asked her about it, she flipped back to the beginning and started to read aloud. For a while the story was a good distraction, but as she continued, the gurgling from her stomach grew louder. I could see the movements in her tummy getting frantic. Her digestive system was becoming steadily more active and the poor rabbit was getting more and more desperate to escape.

Icsarla paused in her reading and covered her lips as she belched, prompting violent series of kicks from her middle. The rabbit was clearly running out of air in there, but Icsarla didn't seem to notice and continued reading without any sign she could even feel her dinner thrashing. I guess from her point of view this was a perfectly normal experience after a meal and far less interesting than the book. It was, however, pretty uncomfortable for me. Getting up, I climbed up the back of the chair and moved to sit on her shoulder.

For a moment I expected her to shove me off, but she seemed quite pleased with my new location and carried on reading. From up here the digestive noises were fainter, and easier to ignore. Not that it mattered much in the end, a few minutes after I had changed spots the wriggling in her tummy died away and her belly quietened down a little.

Icsarla still showed no signs that she had noticed her dinner going quiet, and while I felt sorry for the rabbit, I was glad that he wasn't suffering anymore. I was also very relieved that I didn't have to listen to him digesting anymore. Curling into a ball in the crook of Icsarla's neck I closed my eyes and let the sound of her voice and the warmth of the fire lull me into sleep.

I soon found that actually getting some sleep was harder than it should have been. Despite knowing she wouldn't hurt me, Icsarla was still a fox and smelled of one. Each time I started to drift off, I would notice her scent and jerk back to consciousness in a panic. Frustrated, I uncurled and yawned, then glanced at the clock. Eleven fifteen, I noted sleepily and closed my eyes again.

Something about that time struck me as important. For a minute or two I tried to push it away and get back to sleep. The next moment I was sitting bolt upright in alarm.

"Icsarla?" I tugged nervously at the fur of her chin.

She paused in reading. "Hmm?"

"It's almost midnight... You said you wouldn't eat me on Solstice, but does that..." I trailed off as Icsarla's face split into a wide grin.

"Well done Teslin. I didn't think you'd notice that." she laughed disturbingly. "Another forty-five minutes and you'd have joined the bunny and those raisins as

a literal midnight snack.”

I backed off her shoulder, away from that cruel smile. “I think I'd like to go back to my hole now.” I told her nervously.

“I'm not going to stop you.” she assured, “Like I said, I won't hurt you on Solstice. I won't eat you and I won't hold you captive until I can. If you want, you can safely have another half an hour by the fire, but you had better be careful not to lose track of time.”

I continued backing away until I reached the edge of the arm rest. From here I had a good view of her midsection. I could see that the rabbit's bulge was already less distinct, well on its way to being completely liquidized. “No thanks. I'm not staying any longer.” Climbing back down I reached the carpet and was soon back within the safety of my hole. At least I had learned an important thing about my host; she kept her promises, but only exactly as she had worded them.

Relieved that I had got through another day safely, I returned to my nest and curled up in the warm fluff.