

Live Feed

There can be little worse than sitting around, waiting to be killed. Immediate danger was scary, but I'd lived most of my life knowing that one mistake could end my life. This was different, there were no mistakes to make, nothing I could do that had any chance of saving my skin. The only thing left was to sit and wait until I was chosen. I just wished there was something I could do to distract myself.

I paced to the other end of my prison cell, a plastic carton with air holes cut into the sides and looked out into the shop. On every wall there were jars, boxes and cages full of unhappy looking creatures. I could see rats, squirrels, a cage full of sparrows and many others. Against the far wall there was even a cage with a young hare inside. When they had first brought her in she had screamed and kicked at the cage bars making as much noise as she could, now she was huddled silently in the corner, waiting to become somebody's dinner, just like the rest of us.

Beneath and to either side of me there were mice. Each had their own carton, with a tightly sealed lid and vertical air holes cut into the sides, just like mine. There had been boxes of mice above me as well, but they were gone now. Apparently, mice were popular, as we had been selling steadily since the store opened. In theory, being on the top of the pile should be a good thing. It meant the fear and the waiting would soon be over. It also meant that I would soon die in someone's stomach. Dissolving in gastric acids and being broken down into nutrients, I wondered how much it was going to hurt.

Shaking my head furiously, I pushed the thoughts aside. I had been round this a thousand times since the store opened, nothing good could come of thinking about it any more. Seeking a distraction, I peered out at the customers walking past and soon noticed something different. I had seen a large variety of species walk through since opening time, there had been foxes, cats, stoats and weasels, as well as many others all choosing their preferred prey. This was the first time I had seen a rabbit though.

Even for a rabbit he was short, although still many times my size, mostly white with black patches down his arms and over his ears. I wasn't the only one giving him odd looks, he acquired a variety of mixed looks from the other customers, from puzzled to openly hostile. But as he was clearly not part of the shops stock, and Hunting Hours would not begin until late evening, so there was little they could do to him.

Passing by the trapped hare and after inspecting several cages of voles he came closer and stopped at the mouse display. He walked back and forth for a bit, peering in the boxes until he reached mine. "H... Hello?" I ventured, "What are you... eep!" I lost my footing and tumbled into the sawdust as he picked up my box and walked away.

I glanced back at the stack of mice boxes. Every other time someone had been taken, we had all looked away. Nobody wanted to watch a fellow mouse being carried off as food. This time I had a small crowd staring after me, some even called for the rabbit to come back, to take them as well. It took me a moment or two to realize that I was being rescued. The only reason I could think of for a rabbit to be buying prey was to set them free, and in a pretty huge change to my recent luck, he had chosen me. Whether he could only afford a single mouse, or he felt that he had already done enough for the day, he paid no attention to the pleading behind him and carried me straight to the counter.

Thud. Again, I lost my footing, as my box was dropped beside the till. "How much for this?" I looked up, the rabbit's question was directed to a large cheetah that stood at the opposite side of the counter. The cashier snarled, expressing his displeasure at having to serve a rabbit.

"Half a Terrim." he growled without looking at me.

The rabbit slid three coins across the counter. "There you go." he said brightly, clearly enjoying the cashier's anger. Moments later my box was picked up, dropped into a thin plastic bag and handed to the rabbit. "Thank you." the cheerful tone only elicited another snarl from the cheetah, but by then the rabbit was walking away.

The bag swung from side to side as the rabbit walked. I picked myself up for the third time and started to brush the sawdust out of my fur, adjusting my balance to the sway of the bag. There was a blast of cold air as we stepped under the shops air conditioning system, then the pleasant smells of the outdoors on a summer morning. Warm sunlight beamed down through the opening of the bag and filtered through the sides. I couldn't wait to get out of the confines of the box and enjoy it properly. "Hey," I called out, "Thank you so much for getting me out of there. You saved my life. I'm Arris, by the way."

The rabbit didn't reply or give any indication he had heard me. "Could you tell me your name?" I tried. Still no answer. This was beginning to feel less and less like a rescue. "Um ... I'm really grateful. If you let me out here, I'll be fine. And I promise I'll take more care in future, to avoid getting caught again." I was starting to get nervous now, the idea that he had purchased me to release was very appealing, but seemed unlikely given my recent luck. Even if a kindly person had decided to save one of the prey in that shop, it didn't seem believable that they would have picked me out of the hundreds of others.

"You're just being paranoid." I whispered to myself. "Rabbits are herbivores. His digestive system wouldn't be able to cope with meat." Not that that would make his stomach any more survivable if he tried. I would probably just taste unpleasant and make him feel ill for a while. I wasn't sure if knowing that I'd make my killer ill made me feel better or worse. It would be nice to get a little bit of revenge, I guess, but it would also mean that my death was completely pointless. "No. He can't want to eat me. There's no reason why he would." I

assured myself.

"Hey? Where ever it is you're taking me, you really don't need to. Thanks again for the help, but I'll be fine if you put me down here." I tried again. Still no answer, but I did hear him rummage with some keys and a door being unlocked. Next moment the warm sun was gone and the door slammed behind. This really didn't help convince me that I was going to survive.

The bag was put down and a huge paw reached in and removed my box. Finally able to see my surroundings I looked around with interest. The room was small with a desk near the window. The bag I'd been removed from was crumpled on the desk next to a computer, and there was a large glass tank on the windowsill. I didn't have time to look closer at anything as the rabbit popped the sealed lid off the carton and reached inside to grab me.

"No!" I tried to dodge out the way, but in a plastic carton my options were limited. His fingers closed round my waist and lifted me up. "You can't eat me. You'll be sick. Please? Just let me go." I begged.

The next moment he had opened the lid to the tank on the windowsill and dropped me inside. "There you go, Ouroboros." he announced, clipping the grating back in place.

I glanced around in confusion. The bottom of the tank was full of wood chippings, and several branches were sticking up in the air. I also noticed a large bowl of water, near where I had been placed. Was he planning on keeping me as a pet? If so, should I repeat that my name was Arris, not Ouroboros? I wasn't at all sure I wanted to be his pet, but it was definitely better than being eaten. Then I saw it. Under a heat lamp, at the far end of the tank, was the worst thing possible.

It was only a corn snake. Small, docile, and perfectly harmless to anyone more than a few inches tall, unfortunately that did not include me. I backed away as it raised it's head and the cold reptilian eyes focused on me. In moments it had uncurled, sliding round the tank to investigate. The forked tongue flickered, tasting the air, and no doubt tasting the terrified mouse as well.

"Isn't she beautiful?"

"I'm not really fond of snakes." I replied. I didn't look at the rabbit as I spoke, not daring to take my eyes of the advancing serpent for even a second. I took another step back and felt the glass wall of tank press against my back. I was sure the tank had been bigger when I hadn't known there was a snake in with me.

"Come on, you have to admit she's beautiful. Look at her patterns." he pressed.

I was looking. It was impossible to look anywhere but the snake. Black and red patches ran down her orange body, with a single white stripe starting beneath

her chin and covering her whole underside. I guess the pattern might have been appealing, had it been on anything other than a horrible, limbless, mouse-eating reptile. "Please?" I whispered, "Anything but this."

The rabbit gave no indication of relenting, but to my surprise, Ouroboros did. Having investigated the newest arrival to her cage she gave one last tongue flick in my direction then turned and headed back to her lamp.

"Ouroboros?" the rabbit's voice was full of concern as he lifted up the lid and scooped her out. I was so relieved that the snake was gone, it didn't even occur to me to escape until he was already fastening the lid back on. "Aren't you hungry?" he cooed, winding her round his arms and letting her climb up to his face. I shuddered as the rabbit brushed his nose against the snake's snout and continued whispering to it. Coming within a few inches of her was bad enough, I couldn't imagine letting the creature touch me, particularly on the face.

After a few minutes of playing with her, the rabbit brought her back to the tank. I backed into the corner as he removed the lid, afraid that Ouroboros might have worked up an appetite since she had been removed. Thankfully, she went peacefully back to her heat lamp without even a glance in my direction. I braced myself, this was the first real chance I had of escape. As soon as the rabbit reached for the tank lid, I would run up one of the branches and try to jump out from there. With any luck, he would have his hands full with the lid and wouldn't be able to catch me before I could get away.

He didn't pick up the lid. As soon as Ouroboros was settled his hands came straight for me. I screamed and struggled and tried to bite him, but it made no difference. Trapped between the glass walls there was nothing I could do to save myself from being scooped up and lifted from the cage. I wriggled as hard as I could in his fingers but he only held tighter, crushing me until I could barely move. Ouroboros's lid was put back in place and the lid to my previous box was taken off.

His grip was so tight, that when he let go, I could only gasp. That second was all it took for him to clip the box lid back on. "Never mind. We'll just have to try again later." he told me, placing my box on top of the tank.

Trapped again, I curled up in the sawdust and started to cry. The thought of going back in with the snake was too much. My brain just couldn't cope with the idea. All I could do was cry and wish that I was back in the shop. The rabbit, for his part, sat down at the desk and switched on the computer.

It was a long time before I felt able to deal with my situation in any kind of constructive way, but eventually I sat up and crawled to the side of the container closest to the rabbit. "S... S... Sir?" It was almost impossible to keep my voice steady, "If you like, you could take me back to the store. You could exchange me for a different mouse that your snake might like better." It wasn't a brilliant plan. I would still be eaten, but at least it wouldn't be by a snake. Of course that left

some other poor mouse who would be eaten by Ouroboros, but who knows, maybe it would be someone who liked snakes? It wasn't really my job to look out for them anyway.

The rabbit didn't even look round. For all it mattered I could have just been another part of the background noise.

"Please." I continued, "I'm not even asking for you to let me go. Just that I get eaten by something other than your snake." Still no response. "Come on. How can you even do this to me? You're a rabbit, so you know what it's like to be low on the food chain. Is your stupid snake really worth all that to you?" For a moment I regretted the outburst, there were a lot of nasty things the rabbit could do if I upset him, but again he ignored me.

I was beginning to get desperate, "Look, I'm sorry I insulted her. She's a very beautiful snake, and I can tell you care deeply about her. I know you think I'm just food for her, but please can we discuss this, just for a minute?"

With a deep sigh he turned to face me. "Fine mouse, here's the one and only deal I'm going to offer you. If you can keep quiet, and by quiet I mean not a single word of complaint from you, from now until feeding time. Then if Ouroboros still doesn't want you, I will take you outside and you can go free. Deal?"

After so long waiting to be eaten, the prospect of being released was tantalizing. I was even prepared to face Ouroboros again if it meant I would be let free. Assuming of course that she had not changed her mind about me. I nodded quickly, not daring to give a verbal response for fear of breaking the no noise rule.

"Good." the rabbit said and turned back to the screen.

It felt like time had never passed slower, even the stretch I had spent in the shop went quicker than this. I sat and stared out the window, watching the world go by, and wondering whether I would soon be a part of it again, instead of part of a pet snake. I breathed in and out as softly as I could, trying to keep even that noise to a minimum and listened to the clock. The pause between each second seemed to last a frustratingly long time, every so often I would glance up to see the hands had barely moved, I might have felt better if I knew when he would try to feed me to Ouroboros again. Despite my fear I was desperately looking forward to the point when I would know whether I would live or die.

Several hours later the sun was beginning to set, and Ouroboros finally stirred from under her heat lamp. I shuddered as I watched her glide sickeningly round her cage, curling her way up one of the branches to rest just beneath me. Peering up at me through the wire grating of her prison and the plastic of mine.

The horrible lidless eyes made me start to feel sick, as important as it was to keep quiet, I couldn't just ignore her. "Shoo, snake." I whispered, hoping this

wouldn't count as breaking my part of the deal, "Just go back to your lamp. Good snake."

I really should have kept quiet. On hearing my voice the rabbit turned and smiled. "Hello, girl. Do you want your mousy now?" the snake flicked its tongue at me, "Looks like you do." he lifted the cage lid off, and placed my box inside before removing that lid too.

I stood up, trying my hardest not to tremble. "Just face the snake." I muttered, "It doesn't want to eat me. If it did, it could have done so last time. Just face the snake and then I can go home." I looked up at Ouroboros. She was slowly unwinding herself from the branch, head keeping perfectly still as her body folded into zigzags in preparation for the strike.

I staggered backwards, scrambling out of my box as fast as I could without taking my eyes off her. She followed steadily, keeping an equal distance from me at all times, until I'd backed myself into a corner.

"I just love watching her feed." came the rabbit's voice. "I'm sorry, but it really is just amazing to watch."

I struggled to think of some way out. The cage lid was still off, but I couldn't climb the glass walls, and they were far too high to jump. Even if I ignored the problem of the rabbit watching me, I would need to climb one of the branches to have any hope of escape and currently Ouroboros was taking up most of them. She moved a little closer, her body tense and her tongue flickering as she judged the distance. My priorities quickly moved from escaping the tank, to surviving the next few seconds.

Grabbing a chip of wood from the bottom, I lobbed it as hard as I could at the snake. "Bad, snake! Get back!" the rabbit made an angry noise, but Ouroboros dodged the chip easily, ducking her head back as it passed her. I bent down to pick up another, but before I could throw it, she struck.

I didn't even see her move. All I knew was that I was now lying on my back, her fangs digging into my shoulder and my arms and legs pinned by the heavy coils. I tried to scream, but her grip on my chest was so tight I couldn't even draw breath. All around me I could feel the hard, smooth scales shift and tighten against my body.

Feeling sick, I turned to the last hope I had. The rabbit had never shown even the slightest compassion for me, but now that he could see what was happening to me, maybe, maybe there was a chance that he would relent.

The rabbit's face was a mix of fascination and admiration for his pet. Even if I had had the breath to scream for help, I knew I wouldn't get it. I only had a second to stare at him before Ouroboros unhooked her teeth from my shoulder and brought her head in front of mine.

I stared into her face. The reptile's eyes were incapable of any kind of expression. Her mouth curled upwards in what would have been a smile if it hadn't been fixed in place, a feature of her jaws rather than any display of emotion.

She looked back at me. The terrified mouse in her coils. Too weak to put up any real fight. Trembling in fear and pain. Hopelessly opening and closing my mouth in and instinctive but useless attempt to breathe. The tongue flicked gently against my nose, then she opened and unhinged her jaws.

I caught a brief glimpse of the insides of her mouth, the rows of tiny backwards pointing teeth. The elastic ligaments that connected upper and lower jaws, the dark opening to her gullet. Then my eyes filled with tears and everything became a pink blur.

I couldn't see much anymore, but I could feel everything. The wet insides of Ouroboros's mouth worked their way past my nose and over my head. I had expected her insides to feel cold, after-all she was supposed to be cold-blooded. To my surprise, her innards were warmer than I was. She had after all, spent the majority of the day under a heat lamp, and after the initial chill of her saliva soaking into my fur, her mouth was quite warm as I entered it.

Even though there was no chance of the rabbit seeing, I continued to mouth the word "Please?" as her head slid further over mine. Maybe it was meant for the snake, I wasn't thinking very clearly. Just as I was about to give up, I felt Ouroboros unwind her coils. The crushing pain was gone, and suddenly I could move, suddenly I could breathe. I took a deep gasp of the air, filling my lungs and bracing myself to struggle back out her mouth.

Gulp. The snake pushed sharply forwards, taking my shoulders into her mouth and my head into her gullet. I scrabbled to back out, but the esophageal muscles had too tight a grip. She began twisting her head from side to side, forcing me to bend with her, and with each movement working me a little deeper inside.

"I told you, her feeding was impressive." the rabbit's voice was muffled by the walls of muscle round my head, and almost drowned out by the soft thud of Ouroboros's heart, but I could just make out the words. "I wish I could see what it's like from your perspective. Being worked down her throat."

"No you don't! It hurts!" I would have shouted if I'd had any breath to spare. I wasn't completely without air in the snake's throat. If I arched my body at just the right moment, I could force enough of her throat open to grab a quick gasp. The only problem was that I couldn't hold it for more than a second, and each time I relaxed I would slip a little deeper inside her and the next time it would be a little harder to do.

The muscular walls were like a vice, squeezing almost as tight as her coils had

done. This was made all the more painful by her constant twisting from side to side. Her spine was a lot more flexible than mine, but whichever way she bent, I was forced to follow. The rhythmic undulating waves bent me into agonizing positions as they forced me down.

The entirety of my upper body was rapidly pulling down her gullet. I kicked helplessly as my feet left the ground and found I could no longer get any air at all. What little I had in my lungs was all I was going to get. Baring some increasingly unlikely rescue, I had taken my last ever breath. Somehow, through the esophageal walls, I heard the rabbit chuckle to himself. My feet probably looked very comical to him, twitching uselessly as they slid towards the snake's jaws.

Ouroboros wasted little time, after swallowing my paws she nodded her head up and down, pushing me deeper with each motion. It should have been pitch black inside the snake, but instead my vision flashed with light and bright colors, a final hallucination as I asphyxiated. My tail, the only part of me still unswallowed, the only thing I could still move, jerked and twitched spasmodically. Curling round the snake's jaws in what might look like a final effort to hold myself back, but was truly just random contractions, before following the rest of me down her throat.

Ouroboros gave a few last nods to push my body from her throat to her stomach. Her upper body was now comfortably swollen and with a small yawn she closed her jaws behind me. Satisfied, the snake moved lazily to her heat lamp and coiled into a spiral beneath it. The rabbit paused for a minute to admire his pet, then replaced the lid and left her to digest her mouse in peace.