

Survivor's Sprint - Varra's Story

Hunting Regulation Code – 1-A

This building is considered a public space for the purpose of hunting law. Predation is unrestricted between the hours of 10pm and 4am. Predation is fully restricted between the hours of 4am and 10pm.

Varra looked up at the sign on the door. It was not an uncommon sight. All commercially owned buildings both open to the public and with a Hunting Regulation Code more permissive than an outright ban were required to display a notification somewhere on their entrance. It wasn't even an uncommon choice of notification. 1-A was the standard choice for companies that wanted to keep their buildings open all night but didn't want to get flooded with fearful prey looking for somewhere to hide till morning. Varra had entered hundreds of buildings with similar notifications in the past ... but she had never entered one at half past nine in the evening.

The little vole tore her eyes away from the sign in order to look up at her far larger rabbit friend. “Anya ... this ... this is going to be okay, right?”

The rabbit smiled and chuckled. “You'll be fine, Varra. Quit worrying. I've done this five years running now and can promise you that we almost never lose anyone, and when we do it's usually their own fault for taking stupid risks. The organization always picks quiet areas so it's very unlikely that anyone will be trying to hunt around here. Even if someone just happened to wander through at exactly the wrong time, there are what ... three dozen of us doing this challenge. Odds are they are going to pick someone else. You do want to be in the Sprinters' League, right?”

Varra nodded, but part of her wished she had shaken her head instead. Truth be told, she had always felt those who could brag about completing the Sprinter's challenge tended to be a fairly arrogant bunch. Still, Anya was a clear exception to that rule, and Varra desperately wanted to prove that she could do something that brave as well. Even if she never managed to match Anya's accomplishments, just taking part in the challenge would help prove wrong all those who felt that she was a timid little thing that would never amount to anything.

At any rate, it was too late for her to back out now. She had told Anya she was up for this. She had begged the rabbit to change her plans and team up with her, and had spent the last week or so talking about how awesome it would be once they were both members of the Sprinters' League. Backing out at this point would do more than just prove her detractors right.

Anya pushed the door open and Varra followed her inside. The interior of the building was brightly lit, with several sofas and beanbags spread out around a table. There were snacks provided and a few leaflets of strategy guides detailing the different routes they could take. Several fellow rodents and lagomorphs were gathered around the central table discussing strategy and talking among themselves. Nervously, Varra stepped closer, but she was quickly outpaced by Anya who dived straight into the group and somehow seemed to have made a dozen new friends before Varra had even reached the table.

The vole slipped into a sofa beside Anya, then picked up one of the strategy guides and checked where they would be going. To prevent predators from setting up ambushes on the Sprint, the start and finish locations were kept secret. She had only received the email telling her to come here a couple of hours ago, and the address of the finish line was something you had to turn up in person to discover. As she checked the leaflet, she breathed out a sigh of relief. The end was not far from here and the more direct routes were fairly simple to memorize. The thought of getting lost on the way and ending up wandering around during hunting hours without any idea where to go had been

her biggest fear, but this actually looked pretty simple.

Varra skimmed through the leaflet, doing her best to memorize the relevant street names and studying the list of pros and cons that the organizers had provided for several of the more obvious routes. Not that it was likely to make much difference. Anya would almost certainly pick which way they would go, but understanding the choices at least made Varra feel more included.

Of course, her rabbit friend had not bothered with the leaflet, but was instead getting all that information from the other sprinters and already debating the accuracy of the information with them. Still, that was the advantage of having a friend like Anya. She diverted attention away from Varra, while still allowing the little vole to feel like part of the group.

Every few minutes Varra would glance up at the large clock on the wall, the knot in her stomach growing steadily tighter as she watched the time until hunting hours slowly tick down. No matter how confidently the strategy guide boasted a less than two percent fatality rate over the last five years, she couldn't dismiss the knowledge that she was in a 1-A building and that hunting hours was rapidly drawing nearer. Part of her badly wanted to call this whole thing off and head home. The only problem was that she had already left it too late. Even if she ran, she would not be able to get back home before hunting hours. By now, her safest way through this would be to wait for the Sprint to start, then get to the safe house at the end as fast as possible.

The door opened again as two more prospective members entered the room and a chill ran down Varra's spine as she turned to look at them. One was a fellow mouse, small, unobtrusive, and with a light brown coat that suggested she belonged to one of the harvest genera. The other was a large stoat who towered over her companion, as well as almost everyone else in the room. Only the rabbits were larger, which admittedly made the stoat one of the smallest predators Varra had ever seen, but that was not as comforting as it could have been.

All chatter stopped. All eyes turned to fix on the pair. Someone made a spluttering noise as they started choking on their drink. Everyone else just stared.

"Told you this would happen." the predator commented to her companion.

"Nonsense. They just weren't expecting to see someone like you." the mouse replied confidently. Stepping forward she nodded to the assembled crowd. "Hi guys! I'm Yen and this is Kliss. We are here for the run?"

Her introduction was met with a stony silence. One of the other rabbits got up and headed over. "I ... I'm sorry." she stated. "But this event is for the smaller species only. We don't take carnivores ... for obvious reasons."

Yen glared back at the far larger creature and firmly put herself between the rabbit and the stoat. "You take rats." she pointed out. "They are omnivores. Where's the difference?"

Varra shuffled closer to Anya as the argument began and gently nudged her friend. "Still confident this is a good idea?" she checked.

Anya tore her eyes away from the stoat long enough to give Varra a brief nod. "Yeah, I mean ... I've never seen a stoat turn up to one of these before, but the fact that she has a friend willing to speak out for her does say a thing or two in her defense. Besides, she is pretty small and, even if it turns out that she isn't trustworthy and that we can't simply outrun her, I'm pretty sure I could take her in a fight."

Varra still looked doubtful. "I'd ... really prefer it if things didn't come to that." she protested. "I don't think 'hopefully we could fight off a carnivore during hunting hours' is the most reassuring plan you could offer when our lives might very well depend on just that."

The rabbit shrugged. "That would only come up if she wasn't trustworthy, she decided to target us out of the entire group for some reason, and we then couldn't outrun her." she pointed out. "That gives us four separate safety measures that would all have to go wrong before we would be in any actual danger. Besides, isn't the whole point of this to take some carefully measured risks? If anything, her presence just adds a little extra thrill to the event."

Varra nodded uncertainly, she still wasn't at all sure about this but, from the looks of it, they weren't going to get much choice. The argument between the rabbit and the new arrivals had reached its peak with the mouse shouting the rabbit into submission, before the two marched into the group and sat down on some of the beanbags. Varra glanced around the room hopefully, but no one else seemed willing to challenge the stoat's admission to their group, and Varra could understand why. She had a horrible suspicion that whoever objected the most to the weasel's presence might well earn themselves top place on the menu once hunting hours started.

She turned back to her friend, but Anya was already getting out of her seat. "I'm going to go over and say hi." the rabbit announced as though approaching a stoat this close to hunting hours was an everyday decision for her.

"What?" Varra demanded. "You can't ... Anya ... she's obviously sitting there trying to pick who she wants for dinner." she continued in a hushed whisper, relying on her friend's over-sized ears to allow Anya to understand her while ensuring that the stoat definitely couldn't. "The last thing any of us should do is attract her attention."

Anya shrugged. "If she really is looking for a meal then we are already potential targets." she answered. "Personally I'd like to get a better idea of who she is and what she is like before coming to any conclusions, and I really doubt that a few friendly words will increase my chances of becoming dinner. If anything, showing that we don't mind her joining seems likely to make us safer and, if she really does turn out to be that kind of person, at least I'll find out now instead of during hunting hours." and with that she turned and left, leaving Varra staring after her in horror.

Feeling almost sick with worry, she watched as her best friend sat down beside the mouse and stoat and started talking to them. Not having a rabbit's exceptional hearing, Varra couldn't make out exactly what was being said from this distance, but she could catch snippets from the tone.

The stoat smiled, and Anya and the mouse seemed to be getting along well after an initially shaky start. Unfortunately, something in the mustelid's expression put Varra's fur on end. She was smiling quite politely, and nodding as Anya spoke, but there was something in her eyes that didn't quite match the rest of her expression. The longer Varra watched, the more convinced she was that Yen was deliberately distracting the rabbit while her carnivorous friend sized her up as a meal.

She really hoped that she was wrong ... but her stomach still twisted itself into knots each time she glanced in their direction or caught a snippet of the conversation. Unable to stand it any longer, Varra got up from the sofa and headed over to the window, lifting the blinds to stare out into the deserted streets. It was a mistake to come here. It was a mistake to think that she could ever compete in something like this. She had just wanted to be like Anya, relaxed and confident even in the face of danger, but in her gut she knew that such a take on life could never work for her. Even in something that was supposed to be a very controlled risk with little chance of so much as seeing a

predator, things had already gone wrong. A predator had arrived before the contest had even begun, and Varra could just feel that things were going to get worse from here on. If she was lucky, she would get to look back on this night with regret and wonder how she could ever have been so stupid. If she was not ... well, at least there would be little time for her to regret her choices.

Not for the first time she considered backing out, telling Anya that she simply couldn't do this and that she was going home. Completing the Sprint had seemed the safer option before the stoat had turned up, but now she was not so sure. The only problem was that, by leaving the safety of the group, she might just attract the stoat's attention. If she stepped outside and the stoat decided to follow her, that would likely be the end. Not to mention the danger that even if she could avoid that predator, she would still have to make it all the way home without running into any others. Varra didn't know what the odds of that would be, but they didn't feel good.

Her worries were all but confirmed as she watched a large wolf stroll past, walking casually down the otherwise deserted street, then pausing to check his phone. Her heart leaped into her mouth. Normally predators did not provoke such a response in her... but she had literally just been considering going outside. If she had acted on that impulse... well, there were still a couple of minutes before hunting hours started so she would not have been in immediate danger, but she doubted she would have been able to get to safety in time. Nor would running back inside have saved her if she had been spotted. It would only have led the wolf to an even larger feast.

Shivering, she stared out at the wolf, waiting for him to move along, and trying to remind herself that she was in no real danger. The start and finish points of the Sprint were changed every year to prevent predators from catching on, and Anya had promised her that the organizers were always careful to ensure that no one found out ahead of time. There was no way the wolf could know how close he was to what could easily be the biggest meal of his life. He likely didn't even realize that the building he was passing had a 1-A hunting code on it. With the blinds down, there was no way he could spot any of them, and once he had finished looking at his phone he would no doubt continue on his way.

Varra watched as the wolf pressed something on his phone, returned it to his pocket, then turned to look straight at her and slowly licked his lips.

The next thing Varra knew she was on the floor and half the room was running in her direction, while the other half stared at her as though she had gone completely mad. Anya was the first to reach her. "What is it? What's wrong?" The rabbit asked, catching Varra's hands and holding them to stop her wailing.

"Wolf ... wolf!" she managed to gasp between screams. "Saw me! Just out there! Waiting for us!"

If her screaming hadn't attracted the others' attention, that certainly did. Within a heartbeat, almost every contestant in the room was gathered at the window, trying to peak through the gaps in the blinds, while also attempting to ensure that there was no way anyone outside would see them doing so.

"Yeah ... he's definitely waiting for us." one of the rats commented, with a flat note to her voice as she stepped back from the window. "And that's not much of a surprise. If he didn't know we were in here earlier, then your scream definitely tipped him off." she added accusingly.

"I ... I didn't mean ... I ... he'd ..." Varra gasped. She had never been good at getting words out and, with half the room now glaring at her she found she could barely speak. Still, if she didn't say something soon, she suspected that she might find herself thrown out the front door in the hopes

that that would placate the hungry canine. She was definitely not getting very friendly looks right now. "He already knew." She insisted. "He ... he just stopped there and stared at his phone and ... and then he looked straight at me. He knew this was the place."

"He might not have known if you hadn't been pressing your face against the glass!" a rabbit shouted at her.

Fortunately at this point Anya came to her rescue. "And if she hadn't been looking out the window then the first warning we would have had about this was when the wolf came bursting in here in ..." she glanced up at the clock, "about ninety seconds from now." she snapped. "Besides, everyone else has taken a turn to peer out the blinds. Come on, what are the chances that he would have spotted one tiny crack in the blinds unless he already knew where to look? Don't you dare blame Varra for this when she may have just saved the lives of everyone here."

"And how could he have known where to find us?" someone protested. "This is supposed to be a secret event. The organizers are the only ones who know the address and, given how seriously they take keeping that secret, I doubt they have suddenly started giving it out to random wolves."

"Well, the organizers ... and us contestants." Varra pointed out weakly. She flinched slightly as even that small statement seemed to bring all eyes towards her again. "I ... I mean ... if this isn't just bad luck ... if that wolf really did know where to find us ... then ... isn't the most likely explanation that someone here told him where we would be?"

That brought up a few angry protests about how no one here would do something like that but they quickly trailed off as all eyes turned towards the stoat who was still sitting near the back of the room.

The mouse had she entered with was quick to defend her and jumped up, advancing on the rest of the group and starting to berate them for even thinking that her carnivorous friend might do something like that. Unfortunately for her, it did not work as well against an entire group as it had against a single rabbit and, instead of backing down, those around her stood their ground against the angry rodent.

One brave mouse from the crowd stepped forward, risking bringing the stoat's attention to himself in order to protect the group as a whole. "Yeah, I'm sure you are willing to defend her." he replied. "What exactly was the price she offered for getting her in here? Is she paying you to do this or did she just offer to spare your life in exchange for ours?"

The mouse protecting the carnivore gave their group a look of pure hatred and opened her mouth, likely to say something that would get her into real trouble, but at this point the predator leaped forward and covered the mouth of her accomplice. A little shudder ran through the group as she did so. Even if the mouse was a traitor, watching someone get grabbed by a carnivore still provoked a strong reaction for a group consisting entirely of prey species.

"I did not tell anyone about this." The stoat snarled at them, her hard brown eyes fixing on Varra for just a second before darting away. "I did not bring the wolf and I am likely in as much danger as the rest of you right now. If you want my help getting out of this then you can have it. Still, if any of you take another step towards me or Yen, right now, then I promise that the wolf will be the last of your worries."

Her body language was threatening, but the tone of voice betrayed just a hint of fear to the crowd. Normally it would take more courage than most prey could muster to defy a snarling predator's

demands, but catching that little glimpse of weakness and knowing that they had each other to back them up was enough for the huddled rodents. Refusing to be intimidated by the stoat's display, the crowd took a measured step forwards.

Varra was quick to get to her feet and lend her support to the others by working her way to near the front of the crowd and staring down the predator.

The stoat winced. Not much, but it was enough to confirm to Varra that she did not really believe she could win this fight. "I mean it," she swore. "I'm not hunting, I came here to compete in the Sprint and don't want to hurt anyone, but if you don't leave me and Yen alone..."

The threat was an empty one and Varra could see the panic starting to rise in the stoat's face. She joined the others in taking another step forwards, the crowd starting to fan out a little so their target would not be able to escape. The words did cause a little trace of doubt for Varra though. That was twice the stoat had specified her mouse ally in her demands to be left alone, that and the fury with which the rodent had been willing to defend a carnivore made her suspect that the two really were friends, and that the mouse was not working for her out of selfish desires after all.

Still, leading some predators to the building for friendship was not much better than doing so for profit or to save your own life. Varra advanced a little more on the stoat, who was now baring her fangs and showing off her claws in a last ditch effort to defend herself. Still the act was becoming less and less convincing each second. Varra was sure that the stoat would be absolutely deadly had she run into her alone but, if Anya thought that even a rabbit might be able to fight her off, then the creature stood no chance against the whole room.

She glanced up towards her larger friend in search of some comfort, only to realize that Anya was not actually in the group. Suddenly, Varra's confidence started to slip away a little and she glanced around to try to locate her friend, before realizing that the rabbit was still standing by the window and peering out through the blinds.

Letting the metal strips fall back into place, Anya turned to the group with an almost smug expression. "Guys?" she called out, somehow managing to get the attention of almost everyone in the room with that one word. "I just thought you should know that the wolf is coming this way. And ... well ... given that we have just over sixty seconds until hunting hours starts, I thought that might be a slightly more important issue to deal with." Her eyes then fixed on the stoat. "Kliss, was it? You look strong. I don't suppose you could help me barricade this door shut?"

Varra looked around in confusion, a sick pit starting to build up in her stomach again. For just a moment it had been possible for her to forget about the wolf at the door. For a moment, life had seemed simple. There had only been one problem that needed dealing with, and she had felt confident that, with the support of the other runners, she would be able to do so. Anya's words had been a harsh reminder that the traitor was not the real threat. That, however good it had felt to briefly have power over a member of the carnivorous species for once, the real danger was still outside and that teaming up would not be enough to protect them from something as deadly as a wolf.

Despite knowing that Anya refocusing the group onto more practical matters might well save their lives, Varra couldn't help but feel a little betrayed by the rabbit's interruption. For just a moment the situation had felt manageable and under control. Now it was back to feeling like an utter catastrophe that would almost certainly result in numerous deaths and quite possibly her own as well. Still, she also knew that she couldn't really afford to indulge in the emotional response and hurried to help one of the rats shove more furniture against the door.

Working as a group, particularly with the help of the alarmingly strong stoat, they soon managed to get a reasonable pile of furniture stacked against the entrance. Once the majority of the easily movable things were stacked in place, Anya took charge again, leading the group through the door in the opposite wall. "Okay, one door blocked but that won't hold him for long. There are four ways out of here so we should split into three groups and each take one of the other exits."

Varra had to admit, the organizers had picked a good location to use as the starting point, with plenty of ways out for this exact circumstance. "That way, even once the wolf notices we've left, he will only be able to follow one of the groups. We can all meet up again at the finish line." her friend continued.

Varra nodded and stepped closer to Anya to make it clear that she would be in whichever group her friend was. Unfortunately, most of the rest of the room did the same. People might have been willing to run this event on their own or in small groups prior to the wolf's arrival, but with the predator at the door they all wanted the security of traveling with someone who had run the challenge multiple times before and was willing to take charge.

"Hey Kliss?" Anya called over the flurry of voices begging her to let them join her group. "Would you and Yen like to come with Varra and me? I know a lot of people still don't trust you so it might be best if you stuck close to me."

In the space of about half a second, Anya's group went from the most popular one to the least. Varra still stepped closer to her large friend, trusting that Anya had a good reason for what she was doing and considering the stoat's presence to be a relatively minor price to pay in order to stay with her best friend.

Dividing into groups was an awkward and hurried process. Some people had strong opinions on who they wanted to travel with, and it was clear they were not all going to get their own way, but they also all knew that every moment wasted brought them closer to hunting hours. Anya allowed the debate to last for only a few seconds before snapping her fingers. "Right! That's enough. You guys are coming with me out the back door." she stated, gesturing at the seven closest to her, a group that included both Varra and the stoat. "You lot are going with Rishe and taking the side road. Listen to what he tells you. And you lot can follow Emmia out the emergency exit." And with that, she turned and led the small group that had decided to follow her to the building's back exit and out into the night.

The temperature had dropped a few degrees since they arrived and Varra puffed up her fur as she stepped out into the street, her small size making her feel the cold all the more keenly. Glancing up at Anya, she waited for her friend to give her some further instructions, or at least tell her which route they were supposed to be taking. Anya, however, seemed frozen to the spot, with a horrified expression on her face.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Varra followed the rabbit's gaze and spotted the large fox standing under a nearby streetlight. He wasn't even trying to stay hidden and was grinning at them all with a calm, amused expression. There was no hint of the surprise that a predator might normally show at spotting a group of prey bursting out of a building during hunting hours, and he was carrying a large canvas sack over one shoulder, perfect for storing any unfortunate meals that he could not fit in his stomach. There was no way she could pretend that he was here by chance, he had known they would be here and had clearly been waiting for them.

Already knowing what she was going to see, Varra turned her head to look in the other direction, at

the only other way out of the street. Sure enough, a large feline was already walking towards them, licking his lips and unfolding a canvas sack of his own as he approached.

“Back inside!” someone in the group screamed, and Varra hurried to obey. After all, they still had a few seconds left before hunting hours began. Maybe that would be enough for them to join one of the other groups and escape that way instead.

“No!” Anya's command brought an instant stop to the flurry of movement that had broken out. “If they have blocked two exits they'll have blocked all four. We can't let them trap us in the building or there won't be any survivors at all!”

Varra swallowed nervously. The decision made sense. If they all tried to rush past one of the predators, then at least a few of them would likely make it, even if the majority ended up in either a sack or a stomach. If they allowed themselves to get cornered then even that hope would be lost. Still, the thought of actually running towards a carnivore during hunting hours instead of away made her fur stand on end.

“Then ... then this is a trap!” another member of their group suddenly shouted, before turning to the stoat. “You ... you never wanted to join at all. You came here to set this up!” he accused.

The stoat, of course, started protesting her innocence and why it would have made no sense for her to have done that. Varra barely listened to the repeat of the argument starting up again. Perhaps the stoat had had a hand in setting this up, or perhaps not, but it didn't seem to matter much right now. Sure, their chances would be even lower if the stoat was going to help her friends round them up, but it made no difference to their strategy so there didn't seem much point in worrying about that anymore. All that mattered was that, in another twenty seconds, the carnivores would legally be allowed to eat them, and their only hope would be to try to slip past while others were being devoured. Varra stared as the second hand on her watch edged its way towards the twelve. “Fifteen seconds ...” she stated aloud as it reached the nine. In just fifteen seconds she would have to run for her life. It didn't seem real.

As she stood in silence, watching the last few seconds tick away, she was dimly aware of the conversation changing tone. The stoat's protestations of innocence seemed to be confirmed as the second rabbit in their group stepped forwards and started talking to the predators, outright admitting that she was the one who had sold the group out. Varra found she didn't care much about that either. Arguably it was a good thing as it meant that the stoat had not sold them out and would therefore probably not start rounding people up the moment the time ran out ... but she also couldn't bring herself to feel much hatred towards that rabbit either. From the sound of it, her 'employees' had double crossed her and her payment was likely to be a stay in someone's stomach instead of the money they had offered, but really, what difference did it make at this point? In ten seconds she would be running for her life and would likely not make it. That was the only thing that mattered anymore.

Anya nudged her shoulder gently. “When it starts, we run for the cat. Stick close to me and try to stay on my left. I'll try to pass him on my right. Hopefully he'll be more interested in the smaller species and not want to bother with me.” she offered.

Tears welled up in Varra's eyes. Even now, with everything at stake, Anya was still trying to protect her, putting their friendship even above her own safety. She wished she could have said the same and offered to protect Anya in some way, but all she could do was nod gratefully and try to wipe the tears from her eyes. Once her vision was a little less blurry, she glanced down at her watch again. Six seconds ... five ... four ...

A murmur of alarm broke out through the group, and Varra looked up to see the stoat had broken into a sprint towards one of the predators. At first it looked like desperation had caused her to attempt to get past him, even before the time ran out, but it soon became apparent that that was not her intention at all. She made no attempt to dodge the fox and instead leaped straight at him, scrambling up the larger creature then biting down hard into his ear.

The canine wailed and thrashed, throwing back his head in an attempt to shake the smaller creature off. It was evident that actually getting attacked was not something he had expected when he came out this night, and certainly not by something that had sharp teeth.

Varra stared as the large predator thrashed about, with the far smaller one being tossed from side to side but still keeping her ferocious grip on the vulpine's head. The scene was oddly fascinating and it took Anya tugging on her sleeve for Varra to realize that this made the perfect distraction for them to escape.

Breaking into something that was not quite a run but was definitely faster than a walk, the rest of the group made their way past the pair of fighting carnivores, doing their best not to attract any attention as they went.

Kliss's attack bought them all enough time to get past the fox, and into the relative shelter of a nearby alley but, inevitably, the fight ended in favor of the larger and far stronger creature. Finally managing to catch the flailing stoat, the fox tore her off him, then slammed her brutally against the pavement. Varra winced at the sound of the smaller creature hitting the concrete. Carnivore or not, Kliss had just saved their lives and it was not pleasant to watch something like that.

She was not the only one concerned by what was happening. Several other members shuddered as they watched the fox advance on the stunned weasel, and Anya had to grab hold of the mouse that had come with her. "Let me go! She needs help!" the rodent cried, twisting in the rabbit's grip but not able to escape.

"She is doing this to protect you!" Anya shot back. "She doesn't want you running back to help her. Having you there would likely prove a distraction she can't afford right now, and the chances are you would just get yourself killed, undermining everything she sacrificed herself to achieve!"

Varra flinched, hoping that the shouting match would not attract the vulpine's attention, but thankfully he seemed utterly engrossed in Kliss right now, reaching down to lift her from the pavement.

"Screw that, Anya." the rat member of their group swore. "That stoat just saved our lives. I'm not going to sit back and watch her die for it."

"She made her decision." Anya snapped. "She will always have my gratitude for what she chose to do, but I'm not going to insult her sacrifice by rendering it meaningless. Certainly not for the sake of providing what little help any of us could offer against a fox." she shifted her grip as the furious mouse tried to bite her to escape.

"What little help you could offer, bunny." the rat shot back. She then glared at the struggling mouse. "Yen right? Don't think I didn't hear your rant about how rats should be considered as dangerous as stoats. Well, I guess you are about to find out just how right you were."

"Surran! Don't you dare ..." Anya got no further than that before the rat turned and ran back

towards the struggling predators.

By now, the fox had unfolded his canvas sack and was starting to lower the terrified stoat inside. The rat barely slowed down in her run, diving towards the fox then wrapping her whole body around his left ankle and sinking her teeth in deep.

The predator howled and let go of both the stoat and the sack, then turned and delivered a savage kick to the rat. He would likely have followed it with much worse but Kliss was fast to react and dived around him, managing to pull Surran out of the fox's reach before breaking into a sprint back towards the rest of the group. Fortunately, instead of giving chase, the fox knelt down in the street, clutching at his ankle and savaged ear and groaning miserably to himself.

A wave of relief ran through the group as they returned and Anya let go of the mouse, who ran forward and buried her face in Kliss's fur. The stoat returned the hug a little awkwardly and looked around at the group, seemingly less sure about how to deal with their gratitude than she had been with hatred.

Varra felt a little pit of guilt fill her stomach. A few of them might have survived if they had all run at the fox together, but she suspected that more than half would have ended up in that sack. Without hesitation, Kliss had put her own life in danger to protect them all, and yet just a few minutes ago Varra had been a part of the group threatening to kill her. She couldn't meet the stoat's gaze, or Anya's for that matter.

Walking a little further from the group, Varra hung her head in shame. The others were still talking about how lucky they were to have got through that, and how grateful they were to the stoat, while a couple still peered out of the alley to make sure the fox was not coming after them. Varra, however, just wished that they could stop wasting time and get a move on. The immediate danger may have passed, but she still wanted to get to the finish line so she could put this whole miserable night behind her.

Her moment of introspection came to an abrupt end as she reached the end of the alleyway and a sudden blur of motion almost knocked her off her feet. "Stand still you wretched rodent!" a voice snarled.

It took Varra about half a second to realize that her attacker was the cat who had been blocking the other side of the road. She had assumed that the feline had given up after seeing what happened to his partner, but it seemed he had instead taken the opportunity to loop round and lie in wait at the other end of the alley. If Varra had not come too close, he would likely have remained hidden until he had a chance at catching several of them at once.

Unfortunately, by the time she had worked all of this out, the feline had lunged at her again, and Varra screamed as she threw herself out of the way, dodging his outstretched arms by a fraction of an inch, but ending up sprawled on the tarmac for doing so.

Cries came from the other end of the alley and several members of the group started in her direction, while others did the opposite and attempted to put some hasty distance between themselves and the attacking feline. Varra scrabbled backwards, attempting to get to her feet and hoping to at least buy herself some time for the others to reach her. Unfortunately she was not so lucky. The feline's paw tightened around the collar of her shirt and she found herself being lifted into the air.

"Urg! You couldn't have stuck with the group a little longer?" he growled at her, but then also

noticed the rescue team on their way. "Never mind, I guess dinner is coming to me after all." he chuckled.

"Let me go!" the vole screamed, twisting in his grip and trying to kick at him. Seeing how well Kliss and Surran had done against a creature vastly stronger than them inspired hope within her that she could do something similar, but it turned out to be a lot harder than it looked. The cat ignored her attempts to break his grip and simply raised her to his jaws.

Varra's eyes went wide as she stared into the dark tunnel lined with pink. "No! No, no, no, no, no!" she wailed. "You don't want to do this, you don't! You saw what happened to the fox. The stoat will tear you apart if you hurt me. You don't want to Mmph!" her words were cut short as she was crammed inside and the feline's rough tongue grated over her face.

Varra's legs flailed frantically as the reality of her situation finally started to sink in. She had had nightmares about things going this badly before signing up for the run but had told herself she was just being silly and that nothing would go wrong. Well, things had now gone about as wrong as they possibly could. "Any! Save me!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "Please! Someone? I don't want to die here! I should never have come out here! Please? Get me out!"

The only answer she received was to feel the cat run a sharp claw through the fabric of her shirt. The thin polyester jogging shirt offered almost no resistance against the feline's claw and divided neatly in two at his touch. The strap of her bra provided slightly more resistance but that too was quickly sliced in half. Despite that, the predator was careful not to put a single scratch in her skin. Not that that would do Varra much good if she was not rescued soon, of course.

Fortunately, help was on its way and Varra felt the world around her lurch sharply as the cat turned to try to fend off the smaller assailants. A moment later, someone caught hold of her tail and began to pull. Varra's heart leaped despite the pain, but then sank again as the cat jerked his head back and whoever it was lost their grip on her.

The movement sent her sprawling forwards and her head slid over the back of the feline's sandpapery tongue and then down into the slick confines of his esophagus. "Guys! Save me! He's swallowing me! Get me out!" Varra cried in blind panic. The surrounding muscular walls clenched around her head, muffling the words and half smothering her.

Someone got hold of her feet again and, for just a second, Varra thought that they were going to have another go at pulling her back out. Then she felt her shoes being worked off her paws and realized that the person holding her feet was the cat. "No! Let me go! Don't do this!" she wailed, kicking her legs but soon finding that the motion only helped drive her deeper into the feline's gullet.

The predator made short work of both her shoes and socks, still twisting and turning to prevent her friends from being able to mount an effective rescue. Someone did get hold of her leg for a second, but, once again, they were thrown off before being able to pull her out.

Unfortunately, Varra then felt the cat's fingers sliding under the hem of her jeans and panties, then starting to drag them down her hips, revealing her bare butt for the whole world to see. Not that anyone would get to see it for much longer if her friends didn't step up their efforts fast.

"Grab my legs!" Varra wailed, kicking furiously in a desperate attempt to help the others reach her. She could hear them around her, running back and forth, ducking out of the way whenever the cat lunged towards them, yet never quite able to get close enough to rescue her. Unfortunately, with her

head in the cat's gullet, she couldn't see where any of them were and had no idea if her flailing was making her easier to reach or not. As she thrashed about, her right foot made contact with something hard but she couldn't tell if it was the cat, a friend, or something else. Without any information to go on, she kicked at that spot again, hoping that if it was a friend then they would catch hold of her, or that if it was a part of the cat then she just might be able to hurt him a little.

Unfortunately, whatever it was seemed to have gone again and, in the constantly shifting fight, she could not even tell if she was kicking at the right place. Sliding down a cat's esophagus would have been disorientating enough had he not been dodging about but, as it was, Varra could only flail around and hope the others could find a way to save her. Unfortunately, the time for that was fast running out. Bit by bit, she could feel herself slipping deeper. Every lunge the cat made seemed to jostle her a little further down his throat and every inch lost was one that she could not regain, and that would make it harder still for her friends to reach her.

And then the worst happened. After getting her pants rolled down to her ankles, the cat roughly shoved her butt into his mouth and began gulping her down. "No! No! Get me out!" Varra screamed, but the cat tilted back his head to make swallowing her easier and, even with her limited information about what was going on, Varra could tell that this would put her legs well out of the reach of any aspiring rescuers.

"No! Please! I'll do anything!" she wailed. The slick walls of the esophagus parted below her, keeping a firm hold on her body, but also allowing her to slide down with almost no resistance. She continued kicking at the empty air until her knees entered the gullet and she found she could only wriggle her toes and tail anymore. She could feel the cold night air on her calves and feet, but everything below that was surrounded by soft, warm muscle.

As her ankles entered the feline's mouth, she felt her muzzle push through a slightly tighter part of the esophagus, and then it opened up ahead of her. Varra's nose prickled as she breathed in the acrid fumes and she had no doubt at all that she had reached the cat's stomach. "Pull me out! Pull me out now!" she screamed in desperation, but there was barely anything left of her to pull on even if her friends had been able to.

The predator closed his mouth around the vole's twitching paws, then rolled them over his tongue and, with an immensely satisfied gulp, washed his squirming meal down. Varra cried in horror as more and more of her body entered the feline's waiting stomach, the wrinkly walls stretching out to accommodate her. Just a few seconds after her feet passed the carnivore's lips, Varra found herself forced to curl up as the last of her was squeezed into a ball in the cat's belly.

Her first action was to wriggle about and try to right herself so that her feet were no longer over her head. Fortunately, the surrounding muscular walls were relaxed and quite stretchy, allowing her to reposition herself with ease. Once upright, Varra scrabbled at the surface above her, trying to find the opening through which she had just passed, but it was impossible. The inside of the feline's stomach was pitch black and the soft folds of his inner walls felt the same all over, wet, warm, and squishy but with no sign of any way out that she could find. "Guys! Get me out of here!" she screamed in the darkness, but no answer came.

Varra froze, her ears pricked up as she listened for any reply from the others, but could hear nothing but the sounds of the cat's body. In the cramped, organic prison, the feline's heartbeat reverberated through her, louder and far steadier than her own racing heart, but the sound of hurried paws seemed to have stopped altogether. Not only that, but the cat's body was no longer jerking from side to side as he tried to dodge her friends.

“Guys?” Varra screamed, much louder this time. “Guys! I'm still here! I'm still alive! You could still get me out?” she begged, although right now she couldn't begin to work out how they might go about that. It didn't really matter much anyway as there was still no reply from outside the stomach. “Guys! If you're still there ... if you are still trying to get me out ... please? Say something?” she wailed.

Still no answer ... or, on second thoughts, not quite none. Pressing her ear to the stomach walls she realized that she could hear something, but it was not the sounds of an ongoing rescue attempt. Although quiet and further muffled by the feline's thick inner walls, she could definitely make out the sound of someone pitifully sobbing to himself.

“Quiet mousie,” the cat's voice stated, sounding less muffled. “or you will end up joining that vole a little sooner than planned.” There was a grunt of effort and the stomach muscles tensed as the feline's body lurched around her. It might be pitch black inside the cat, but Varra didn't need to be able to see to work out what was happening. The cat had swung the rodent-filled sack over one shoulder and was now carrying them both away.

“Please? Someone? I'm in here! Get me out! Please?” Varra screamed until her voice started to give out but it did no good. There was no one around to hear her but the cat and whoever was unfortunate enough to have been captured along with her. The others had either abandoned her to her fate or, in the worst case scenario, were all currently inside the sack. She doubted it was the latter though. The terrified pleading coming from outside the stomach was only one voice and she couldn't imagine that the others would have been keeping quiet if they had also been captured. Furthermore the cat had called his other victim 'mousie' which implied that it was not Anya, at least.

She wasn't sure if that made things better or worse, actually. While she didn't want anything bad to happen to her friend, the thought that Anya had given up trying to save her and left hurt almost as bad as knowing that she was likely going to die soon. “Anya? Anya, please? Answer me?” she cried, pressing one paw into the yielding walls around her. It did no good, of course. She knew perfectly well that her friend was long gone but she still called out for her all the same.

There was the click of a door opening and, not long after that, Varra felt the cat bend down and the protests from his other victim grew a little louder. “Please?” the other rodent's voice cried. “I know it was a mistake to go out during hunting hours. It was just going to be this once. I just wanted to prove to myself that I didn't have to live in fear all the time, but I swear I will never do it again. Can't you just make an exception this one time?” he pleaded.

“Shush.” the cat instructed. “I'm sorry, but literally every meal I have ever caught has begged me for just one exception. You made the choice to go out during hunting hours and it ended badly for you.” There was a scrape of metal hinges and an even louder wail from his victim, but it only got an irritable sigh from the feline in response. “Sorry, but that's how things go. Now just sit there and keep quiet. I'll be back for you once I've finished with the vole.” there was another scraping noise, then the sound of a key turning.

Varra let out a little sob. 'once I've finished with the vole' the words seemed to echo in her head, reinforcing the knowledge that she was utterly doomed. There was no rescue coming and no way for her to get out of this alive. She could hear the mouse wailing for the cat to come back, then a door closed, and then there was a horrible moment of weightlessness as the world seemed to drop out from under her.

“P... please?” she began once the sensation ended. As far as she could tell the cat was now sitting down, likely in a very slouched position given the angle of his stomach, but that wasn't something

she really had enough experience to comment on. "Please?" she repeated. "Can we talk about this? I just want to talk?"

"Mmh hmm." her predator grunted. "Well too bad, I don't. In my experience food generally always wants to talk about the same thing. I'm sorry, but I'm not letting you out. I need to eat, just the same as anyone else."

"But ... but it was just supposed to be a one off thing." Varra cried. By now she could feel the skin beneath her fur starting to tingle gently and knew that she was being digested. "I never normally go out during hunting hours, never. This was just a one time mistake. Please?"

The only answer she got was a sigh from the cat, then a little clicking noise and someone else's voice rose up in the room, although too distant and muffled for Varra to catch more than a few words. The vole's first thought was that the cat's partner or room mate must have entered the room, and she briefly considered directing her pleas to them instead in the hopes of finding a more sympathetic ear, then she realized that the sound was coming from a television. The cat had actually ignored her pleading and started watching some soap opera instead.

The thought filled Varra with a sudden burst of rage. "You ... you wretched creature. How can you treat me like this?" she screamed, kicking at his inner walls with all her might. "You can't even answer my question can you? You know what you are doing is wrong, but you're just going to do it anyway."

In response to her struggles, the feline ran one paw over his belly, gently pushing the squirming rodent back into the center of the acidic pit. "Shush." he commanded. "I already told you that I don't want to talk. I've already heard every possible excuse my food can give and I promise you it isn't going to change anything. Besides, I usually catch prey that have actual reasons for being outside, such as caring for a sick relative or being forced to stay out late if they want to keep their job and therefore their apartment. Honestly, catching someone who was out because they wanted to take part in a very silly game, one that goes out of the way to advertise the risks involved, is something of a treat for me. Now settle down and stop whining."

Varra shivered in terror. The cat's stomach was secreting more and more digestive juices and her fur was now sodden with the horrible stuff. It made her skin itch and prickle everywhere and she couldn't imagine how much worse it would get if she didn't manage to talk her way out of this soon. "But you cheated!" she cried at him. "Yes, I knew I was taking a risk... and if you had found us by chance that would be one thing, but bribing that wretched bunny to betray us ... This isn't fair and you know it. This isn't the risk I was willing to take."

Another sigh came from the cat and his stomach walls contracted around her, squeezing the little vole into a tight ball. "First off, that rabbit was nothing to do with me. I just got a call from a friend to let me know where I could find an easy meal, and that he'd appreciate it if I could catch a certain rabbit as it would mean he'd get the whole meal for free instead. Secondly, why should I agree to play by the rules of some game you set up? To be honest, I don't really approve of you guys making a game out of hunting particularly as, for me, it means the difference between going to bed with a full belly or risking starvation. Sorry, I don't really care if you thought the odds would be more in your favor, or if you feel I cheated in a game I was never playing. All that matters to me right now is that I won't have to go hungry tonight. Urg! And I'm going to have to explain all of this from the start when it's that mouse's turn, aren't I?"

"But ... but I ... I ..." Varra tried to refute the cat's argument but her protests soon dissolved into tears. The worst part was not the knowledge that she was likely going to die soon, but that, deep

down, some part of her accepted that this was what she deserved. However unfair the means of her capture had been, she could not deny that she had brought it upon herself. She had begged Anya to let her join, and ignored every warning sign that this was a bad idea along the way. She was nothing but a meal now, and it was entirely her own fault.

The stomach gurgled and churned around her, and Varra shivered in terror as she felt her fur starting to fall out in clumps. Desperate for some way of distracting herself, she focused her attention on the sound of the television instead. It was not a show she had ever followed, and the periodic rumbling from all around her drowned out large chunks of it, but Varra did her best to listen anyway. The chance to distract herself from her fate was the only thing of value she had left now.

The feline's media binge lasted about an hour, although it felt far longer to Varra ... and far shorter as well. Eventually, however, she heard the show's theme tune start up and then come to an end with a little click. Moments later, her world lurched as the cat stood up again, making the pool of acids slosh around her.

Varra whimpered to herself as she felt him start walking, then heard his light footsteps on the stairs. She knew that it was nearly over now. The sleepy movements and purring yawn from her predator left her in no doubt that they were on the way to the feline's bed and that, once the cat was asleep, there wouldn't even be anyone left to hear her protests.

The hum of an electric toothbrush could be heard briefly through the walls, and Varra burst into one final plea, offering the cat anything and everything she could think of in exchange for her life. This time he didn't even bother to acknowledge her words.

There was the sound of spitting, then of running water, then the feline started moving again, carrying his protesting meal back to the bedroom where he could take a nice long nap and digest it.

Varra went ballistic. She screamed, she punched the stomach walls, she thrashed and kicked and cried her little heart out, but the cat simply undressed then snuggled down among his blankets with a purr. For a couple of minutes, Varra could feel his hand running up and down against the stomach walls, giving her one last adoring stroke. Soon, however, the movement's slowed and the feline's breathing softened.

With no one left to hear her, Varra's screams died down to a pitiful sobbing. This was it. No rescue was coming for her and she would not live to see another day. Of course, the worst part was not the knowledge that she was going to die soon. It wasn't even her acceptance that the situation was entirely her own fault. The real worst part was knowing that Anya had not come to save her. When her life had been at stake, the one person she had trusted more than any other to keep her safe had turned tail and fled. She was going to die soon, but the knowledge that she would do so alone and abandoned by her friends cut deeper than any other pain.

Fortunately, Varra was not left feeling sorry for herself for long. Once asleep, the feline's body was able to devote more and more of its resources towards processing her. The cat's sleepy purr was soon drowned out by the constant slosh and gurgle of his stomach at work. Varra wriggled for as long as she was able, but the carnivore's digestive tract was perfectly adapted to breaking down small rodents and she soon succumbed to the lack of oxygen and the bubbling juices. By morning, there was nothing left of the little vole but a pool of meaty sludge.