

## Getting to Know Dinner – Preview

By: Indi

Vex breathed in, and then out. The gray snake had his ping pong ball at eye-level. His focus shifted between the ball and the single plastic cup left at the end of the table. The first few shots of the beer pong game had been easy. He'd only needed to aim in the general direction of the mass of cups. The stakes didn't feel so high then. With only one cup remaining on each side, though, any miss could mean a loss.

Vex rolled the ball around in his fingers.

Silence would've been nice, but the party all around him wasn't going to stop for a beer pong shot. It was the first official party of the year at Randal Hall, one of the freshman dorms at Columbia State University. Music blared from rented speakers set up around the rec room. Food and beer filled the tables. The flyers in the halls had labeled it the "2016 Survivor's Bash". The party was some tradition where freshmen at Columbia State University celebrated making it through the first month of classes without getting eaten.

As if none of them could possibly be consumed during the rest of the year. Vex didn't doubt the statistics on the school's website asserting the first month as the most dangerous for freshmen. He also knew a hungry predator didn't care about your probability of getting eaten after.

With the liquor flowing freely, quite a few of the "survivors" had already ended up in the stomachs of their peers. Vex could spot the bulging bellies from across the room. Some still shook from panicked prey, while others had calmed. If he missed his shot, he could very well join the unlucky ranks of prey.

In hindsight, playing a voracious game of beer pong hadn't been Vex's smartest decision. He was half-decent at it but didn't know if his roommate Lane were any good. It was a Hell of a risk to take, risking his life against people he knew nothing about. Lane and him could've gotten wrecked and sent on one-way trips to the stomachs of their foes. At least now if they lost, it'd have been close.

Vex glanced over at Lane. The overweight owl didn't look nervous at all. He had his talons in the front pockets of his red school hoodie and was bouncing to the beat of the music. His two greatest passions were video games and eating people. Vex suspected the owl would've eaten him in the first week if they hadn't gotten along so well. Despite being a bit of a dork, he was also the sort of person eager to treat college like one huge buffet.

Vex planned to indulge a fair amount himself, of course; he just didn't treat it like a hobby.

The snake majored in creative writing. His preferred genres were horror and paranormal, with a focus on unspeakable beings and frightful hauntings. In general, he wrote a lot about ghosts eating people. And monsters eating people. And sometimes people eating people. So whenever he swallowed someone whole, he liked to think of it as writing inspiration.

A shame a single missed shot could end his bright writing career before it even had a chance to begin. The brown lion with the wavy mane on the other team had been doing well,

despite the fact he was drunk. Or maybe *because* he was drunk. Some people played better inebriated, plain and simple. They were less prone to overthinking their moves. Toss and forget, toss and forget. The lion had only started pausing before shots once they'd gotten down to two cups left.

Vex hated to admit it, but the lion was cute. He was a bit on the chubby side, with a face that'd begun to soften. He smiled a lot. He brushed at his mane any time a curly strand fell over his eyes. They shared a couple of classes together—an English lecture and math—but Vex didn't know if the lion recognized him. Both classes were big, and they didn't sit near each other in either. He'd only caught Vex's eye after coming to class in a small shirt that didn't cover his paunch and pants he clearly couldn't button up. The result of an unexpected meal, if Vex had to guess.

If the snake was about to be eaten, he wouldn't mind ending up in the lion's stomach. It'd be better than getting fed to the mouse he was with.

Having run out of distractions, Vex finally took his shot. The ping pong ball left his claw, heading straight for the plastic cup. It landed perfectly.

Vex let out a nervous chuckle. He wouldn't be prey that night.

Lane pumped his fist and let out an obnoxious cheer of victory. The small audience that'd gathered met his enthusiasm, hollering and clapping. They would've done that no matter who won. None of them had any allegiances to the players. They were strangers, only there to see someone get swallowed. Not that Vex minded getting cheered.

The mouse on the opposing team appeared horrified. Overwhelmed by dread, no doubt. Not a surprising reaction from someone doomed to digest. The lion looked more disappointed than afraid. Too drunk to realize the gravity of the situation.

"Dibs on the mouse!" Lane bellowed. His eyes locked onto the mouse. They were one of Lane's favorite prey.

"Go for it," Vex said. He didn't mind having the cute lion for dinner.

"W-Wait!" The mouse shouted. He pointed at the lion. "He's drunk; the game wasn't fair!"

"He scored better than you did!" someone yelled from the crowd. The declaration immediately got support from others.

"Stop being a wuss, snack!"

"Feed the owl! Feed the owl! Feed the owl!"

Paws reached out and grabbed the mouse, preventing him from running away. The chant dissolved into laughter and scattered teasing.

"Didn't you say I was gonna be the best meal you'd ever had?" Lane asked. He walked up to the mouse with a giant grin on his face. His glasses didn't make him look any less intimidating. "Should've played better if you didn't want to be bird food."

The mouse struggled, but the crowd held him firmly in place. Vex thought it must suck having so many strangers clamoring for your demise. That was just a part of life.

Lane pulled at the mouse's shirt collar and tore it apart with a talon. After a flurry of tugs and slashes, he tossed the shredded remnants to the floor. He grabbed the mouse's belly and squeezed it, causing them to squeak. "Good, you've got a bit of fat on you. You'll go a long

way to helping me gain the Freshman One Hundred.”

The crowd laughed while the mouse whimpered. Vex felt Lane was being overly dramatic. It'd be outright silly if it weren't about to end with someone digested. The owl could be a bit of a showman.

Vex glanced back at the lion. He hadn't made a move yet.

“Dude, come on, give me a break,” the mouse begged. “I'll give you a hundred bucks if you don't eat me!”

Lane hooted and his belly shook. “I'm not giving up a free meal for that little. I can't be bought, treat.”

“What if I found you someone more filling? You could eat that monkey, he's way fatter than me!”

All eyes turned towards a plump monkey in the crowd.

“If I wanted to eat that monkey, then I'd just eat him after I finished with you. I'm always up for a second course,” Lane said.

“I'd like to see you try.” The monkey crossed his arms and glared at Lane.

“Well now I'm gonna have to. Just need to pack away this snack real quick.” Lane swiftly shifted his attention back to the mouse.

Lane grabbed the mouse by the arms, opened his beak wide, and lunged. A quick gulp swallowed the mouse's head. Another, his shoulders. He ate aggressively, ignoring the fact his meal was supposed to be willing. The mouse, in turn, kicked and squirmed, doing everything in his power to free himself from the owl.

The consumption looked chaotic, but Lane remained in full control the entire time. He shifted his grip as he scarfed down the mouse, impeding any struggles that could do actual harm. In a matter of seconds, he'd reached the mouse's soft middle, which his beak eagerly stretched over. He grabbed his prey by the waist and lifted him into the air, legs flailing. The mouse's legs shook as he plunged deeper into the belly of the owl, pulled in equally by gulps and gravity.

Lane's belly swelled, the soft and feathery mass pushing out from under his hoodie. It wobbled and bulged from the mouse's struggles. The legs vanished swiftly. Lane pulled off the mouse's sneakers and tossed them away, then snapped his beak shut around their feet and swallowing. He raised his head and belched.

“Campus food is fucking great!” Lane smirked and rubbed his shifting belly. A few from the crowd were bold enough to slap the stuffed owl's gut, hoping he'd been lying about wanting a second course. Vex saw his roommate eyeing them all up, though.

In most cases, the safest preds to be around were the full ones, but a single mouse wouldn't be enough to sate Lane's appetite.

Vex shook his head and smiled. He walked over to the lion. “Guess we should probably get this over with. I promise I won't be as rowdy as Lane. He tends to go overboard with the whole predation thing.”

The lion nodded along, but his gaze was still on Lane's gut. “Oh. Thanks. Um, mind if I have a drink before I go?”

Vex didn't see a problem with the request. If he were about to get eaten, he'd want to

be drunk as well. Anything to get his mind off the messy confines of a stomach. He escorted his meal to the nearest table, tail poised to trip them if they tried to bolt.

The beer at the party was free but cheap. Cascade-brand. Barely better than Gold Medal. Vex doubted anyone there had drunk enough beer to have any real opinions on it, though. He certainly hadn't. It only needed to ease nerves and make potential prey easier to snag.

The lion grabbed one of the bottles and twisted the cap off. He chugged the beer down fast, not stopping until he'd drained it to the last drop. He went into a coughing fit when he finished, covering his mouth with a paw while placing the empty bottle on the table. Once he was over it, he smiled. "Never thought I'd become a heavy drinker." He let out a short laugh.

Vex laughed along with him. "I don't think anyone's gonna blame you for it. Not with how college is." He gestured towards a lizard cramming someone's wiggling paws down her gullet.

"Guess I don't have to, uh, worry about that anymorrrrrp!" The lion's paw didn't clamp over his muzzle until after the belch had already escaped. "Excuse me."

"Yeah." Vex didn't know how else to respond. He'd never had a chance to chat with a meal before. Dragging things out could make the situation awkward fast. "Paw-first will be the easiest way to go. That way you won't faceplant into the stomach. Won't have to listen to anyone cheering your demise, either." Eyes were still on them. People wanted a show.

"I'm cool with that. Thanks." The lion held out his paws palms-up, before turning them around. His arms were shaking a little.

Vex reached forward and gently grabbed the lion's wrists, steadying them. "Hope the ride's a smooth one." He swallowed the lion's paws, then began working his way up their arms.

The lion looked away, their gaze occasionally returning to Vex. Eating the lion was so different from his past experiences. No shouting or squirming. His heart wasn't racing. He didn't get the same rush, but the lingering fear wasn't there, either. It was almost intimate.

Vex picked up his pace. He reached the lion's elbows and moved a claw behind their head. He opened his maw wider and nudged them in deeper. The first squirms began. It was instinct, something you couldn't control unless you'd been swallowed before. Vex kept eating.

The snake's jaws stretched over his prey's shoulders and chest with ease. A boon, albeit only useful when eating people. He felt like he could swallow a stuffed elephant just as easily as he could the chubby lion. He'd prove it one day, if he were lucky.

As Vex swallowed the lion's belly, he felt his own starting to bulge out. His shirt grew tight. He worried it might rip, but thankfully it gave up trying to contain his growing gut and retreated upward. Vex lifted his meal to take advantage of gravity. The lion didn't kick, but his legs still wobbled as he adjusted to being upside down.

Feeling his belly balloon out as the lion descended, Vex grinned. He moved a claw down to his middle, rubbing the bulging side. He was gentle in removing the lion's sneakers, dropping them to the floor. With the final swallow, Vex let out a satisfied sigh.

He glanced down at his gut. He looked—and felt—huge. The lion probably weighed as much as he did. His smile grew. Eating his body weight in food filled Vex with euphoria. He

hadn't even been hungry; it was pure indulgence.

The lion shifted within him. He didn't struggle or kick, he only settled. Vex returned to rubbing his belly, feeling the bulges of his prey. He didn't get much enjoyment out of squirms, so a willing meal was refreshing. He was grateful for the lion's cooperation.

Lane came waddling over, his gut swaying like a wrecking ball. The bulges on his middle were more pronounced than those on Vex's; the mouse clearly hadn't accepted his fate.

"I've got a kicker!" Lane gloated. He smacked his gut and belched. "Dumb snack still thinks he can bribe me into letting him go."

Shouts echoed from the owl's middle, but Vex couldn't hear them well over the sounds of the party.

"Can you blame him for not wanting to get digested?"

Lane scoffed. "He knew what'd happen if he lost. Didn't ya, snack?" He squeezed and wobbled his belly. Even the music couldn't drown out the loud "fuck you" from within.

"Yeah, but you're gonna be dropping feathers all over the place if you keep riling up your meals." Vex saw a couple of them already on the floor.

"Being nice to food doesn't make it cooperate, dude." Lane's gut bounced and the owl let out a burp, laughing afterward.

"Then explain my pleasantly behaved belly," Vex said, pointing at it with his tail.

"He's just too drunk to realize he's not in a sauna," Lane said.

"Or he's not kicking up a storm because I treated him with a bit of dignity when eating him." Vex gave his belly a soft pat.

"I think you had the hots for him."

Vex blushed, his jaw opening in frustrated shock. "Did not! He was sort of cute, but in a tasty way, nothing more."

"I was just fucking with ya, but now I think you really *did* like him," Lane snickered. "Was it love at first swallow?" He elbowed his roommate in the gut.

"Oh fuck off, he's just dinner, that's all." Yet the snake couldn't quite brush aside the mental image of the lion's drunk smile.