Musician’s Big Break Part 1

The room was dark but for muted sunbeams glowing through the thinner patches of the window’s black curtains. A soft discordant twang followed by the grinding squeak of an adjustment, then a purer note ringing the air in answer to the pluck of the cat’s claw against the vibrating string.

Jack was barely awake. But his ear twitched and swivelled to the carefully toned note, a faint curl of his lip as he fondly greeted an old familiar friend. Fur between dark brown and black, fading between the tones, covered him in a dishevelled, and less than sleek layer. But the guitar didn’t care what he looked like. He returned the favour.

Shunning a pick for the trickier but more personal touch of his own claws, the feline ran his fingers down the strings, the resulting hum carefully assessed by rotating ears. Perfect.

Carefully he set the instrument down on his bed, propped on his pillow before the cat rose, and stretched, clawed paws brushing his ceiling. Time for breakfast.

His apartment was small, but the clutter made it feel bigger, the short link between bedroom and kitchen involved weaving between a stack of dusty dining chairs and a heap of leaning boxes.

His paws found their way onto the refrigerator, opening it, squinting against the light. Trailing his gaze along empty shelves, he found his way to a small plastic box of brown, chunky sauce and specks of white rice, pulling out the leftovers and in routine motion fumbling for a bowl, pouring one into the other, shoving it through the small door of a boxy machine on his worktop, and tapping the buttons till it let out the expected whirr.

Jack flopped into a chair, sighing, feeling along the table till a smooth rectangle was under his fingers. His thumb slid till it found the cable, nudging it free before lifting the phone to his face. It was a familiar but short routine. No dates, no gigs, nothing from anyone. He rested his phone back down to its life of forgotten obscurity, and turned to stare at his breakfast. The timer had barely moved.

But, in the corner of his view, a solution had, presented itself. His eyes, narrowed, chair almost falling over with the speed he sprang from it, both paws diving across the worktop towards the small, fleeing ball of fur that had seemingly, prematurely left its hiding spot.

The shrieked squeak rose to a high pitch as the mouse dropped the pawful of dried out rice it had been foraging, darting back for the wall. Paws chasing it till it dove behind where the fridge met the tabletop. Fur, teased Jack’s fingertips, but his claws failed to hook the hide.

“Damn” he grunted before shrugging, flopping into his chair again, shooting a despondent look back to plan A. The timer had barely moved…

A fork twirled amid the leftover curry, sending plumes of trapped steam into the air as Jack manoeuvred back to his room. A dismal growl from his stomach. Damn mouse with curry sounded good. He found himself thinking. Seemed cruel though, he noted to himself. The mouse would like, get burns… but he’d be eating it right away. The rodent was a familiar presence. It had moved in… at some point. He was pretty sure there was just the one. But he’d failed to nab it ever since. One day, he shrugged to himself as his tail hit the bed, and he lifted the first fork of breakfast to his lips. Would be a nice surprise when he finally got lucky. Less so for the mouse, he supposed. But, that was life. Everything went great till it didn’t. Price of living in a cat’s home, he supposed. Didn’t begrudge the mouse really. He’d get back what it took eventually. And the mouse itself would be more appetising than strewn crumbs.

The bowl emptied quickly, and was discarded onto the untidy heap of a duvet, Jack carefully brushing his fingers along his tongue, then his fur before grasping the guitar, resting it to his leg as he played his fingers along the strings again. Still sounded, just right.

He plucked a few random notes, pondering what he felt like playing. His mind drifted with projects he was working on, melodies that needed lyrics, lyrics without a melody, feelings he hadn’t found a good way to express. A frown touched his features. Had to be marketable too… the thought had a way of taking the wind from his sails. But… he put that aside. Just play something to set the mood. So, his fingers fell into familiar patterns, the cat just humming to himself as he felt his way through a few notes.

Keen ears, twitched. There was a sound that didn’t belong. Not from his guitar, not from him. His eyes drifted up. A familiar little shape perched well out of reach on the other side of the room. An audience, just what he wanted, he mused to himself with a weak smile. He held back a laugh with a tight snort. An audience of one… how far he’d come.

“Audience of one…” he tried fitting the words to the little melody, slyly glancing the mouse’s way “till I catch you little mouse, then it’s none…”

He saw the little shape drop down out of sight again, and rolled a shoulder. Everyone’s a critic, even the mice in the walls. He let himself laugh at that… but, the burst of mirth, ebbed, his fingers halting on the strings. His, off paw lifted to his face, touching to the corners of his eyes. Damp… damn it.

As was his routine, while his mind was still a little hazy, unrestrained, uninhibited, when almost anything sounded like a good idea, he made himself be creative. He could pick good from bad when he was a little more, awake. Even now though, something irked at him. Something was missing. He’d never been a success, alone. He let the music carry his emotions for him, claws working the tight strings until hunger beckoned at him again. He had a clock, but it had fallen behind a box a year ago. His stomach said, midday, or thereabouts.

He laid the guitar down, tail brushing to the side of it as he stood, arching his back with a yawn, feeling little cricks in his back before dropping his arms and staggering around the obstacles to his kitchen again. Much as he had earlier in the day, he felt to the handle, prying it open. Right… it was empty now. He pushed the door shut, and flopped down into the chair near it, pawing to his forehead. He didn’t want to go out. Takeout again? He gave it serious consideration for a long moment. Takeout was expensive, was the argument that finally won.

Jack grunted as he rose from the chair, and stumbled for his bedroom again. Damn wallet was in there, clothes too, he reminded himself as an afterthought.

Once more… fate, tempted him with an easier solution. The mouse. It was right there on the floor of his room, peering up at his bed. His, hope of delaying the inevitable shopping trip, was edged with, mild annoyance. The damn mouse thought he was that predictable it could just, stumble right out the moment he left the room? It was right… but…

He licked his chops, crouching lower, before launching for the ball of fluff. In an instant, the mouse was running without even looking his way, the impact in the floor enough. But the damn mouse was predictable too… he reasoned, he knew where it would run. He leapt over a box with feline agility, paws landing just shy of the fleeing mouse, earning a startled cry, but the mouse ran past his landed paws all the same, making for the gap between two boxes it always went into. A last dive, and Jack’s claws only met cardboard as the mouse dived to safety. He could still see it though… a shadow in the gloom, panting. Pushing the boxes aside tempted him… but it would flee if he did, and make faster progress running than he could moving.

Sprawled on the floor, in the position his failed pounce had left him, Jack found his eyes lingering through the gap “Not today huh” he commented of their chase, head tilting some, maybe he’d bumped his brain around in the dive or something, but, a curious little thought found its way to the surface “Hey mousy, don’t run off. Let’s talk”

There was a long moment of silence, but the mouse was still there, Jack’s keen eyes kept track of the faint difference in the darkness between the boxes.

“Talk?” the voice that came back was quiet, he needed to keep his ears keen to hear it.

“Yeah…” Jack rubbed to his chin… surprised the mouse actually, replied “so… are you into music? I’ve caught you looking at my guitar… several times now, right?”

A spluttering laugh escaped from between the boxes “you want to talk about…” the mouse mumbled “I… mean, I’ve never heard it before”

“You’ve got a good range” the cat chuckled to himself, sitting up from the floor, keeping focus on the crack between the boxes “Like… you’ve got good, volume and depth, and can hit some high notes, I’ve got good ears and… you’re loud when I see you”

There was another long moment “you’re… complimenting the sound of me screaming for my life?”

“I, guess it sounds creepy when you put it like that” Jack mused… what was he even doing, chatting with the local rodent “But, like… want an, audition? No eating, promise. Got to wondering how you’d sound against my melodies”

“You’re not serious” an indignant squeak of a sound came from hiding “I’m not stupid, you’ve tried to eat me every single day”

“Yeah… it’s not personal though, is it?” the cat rubbed to the back of his head “you’re squatting in my house, you know. Did you pay for any of your meals lately? I’m saying… I’ve thought of something you might be useful for, and, if you want to try and… you know, take that leap… I won’t eat you, the day you audition, or whatever. Like, I play best when someone else is singing, always been that way”

“Not a chance” the mouse retorted, and, Jack’s tall ears heard the skitter of paws as the mouse fled deeper into the mess.

Great. He pawed to his jaw. A little mouse as his singer? Even if the rodent wasn’t that great, it would be a cool gimmick, so long as he was, ok. He paused the thought. He, was pretty sure the mouse was a he. He shrugged. No new partner, no lunch, not going great.

The cat sighed and rose to his paws, feeling to his bedside table for his wallet, before pawing through the untidy heap of clothes strewn over what used to be a chair for something that looked serviceable to wear. Dressed, money in paw, Jack plucked up a set of dark shades, sliding them over his eyes, moving to the door out to the bright world. Shopping then… might pick up something different today.

The mouse’s name was Res. Short for Resin, on account of a, decidedly unpleasant pup moment. It could have been worse, he could have been named after the look his fur had taken for weeks after the incident. He found his way back to his den from the maze of the cat’s boxes, and flopped down into the cavity made where a larger box had been, stacked on smaller one.

Not the safest nest he’d had, but it was convenient, it wasn’t damp like the walls, and the cat who lived here was a creature of habit… well, normally. The cat had, spoken at him before, but never really to him… and this attempt to lure him out was a new tactic too. He wasn’t falling for it though. The damn cat had just run out of food again… the feline was predatory, sure, but sometimes he’d just get a look, the cat would shrug and ignore him. Not when food was low, though… Still, that predictability was one of the perks of living here. He should be, too much effort to hunt again once the cat got home from, presumably, restocking his supplies like usual. Still, Res mused as he stretched himself. While the cat was away…

The towering walls of cardboard had become familiar to him. Res clambered up the yielding brown cliffs that overlooked his little sanctuary. There were few boxes he hadn’t poked his way into over his time here. Mostly the contents were uninteresting. The ones closest to the ground were mostly filled with books, some with sheets of paper which he understood to be music. One especially large box contained, what he took for an instrument. He didn’t go there anymore. One paw out of place and the contents had let out a thunderous ringing sound. That, had got the cat’s attention far too much for comfort. The upside, his nest was amid heavy boxes that couldn’t be moved easily. The downside, there was nothing he wanted in the lower boxes.

His little claws hooked into familiar places in the cardboard as he shimmied his way up. Where he could he avoided chewing his way inside the containers. He didn’t get it, but despite the fact he’d barely seen the cat even touch one of the boxes, the feline rose with, startling intensity if Res was detected inside one. The cat would paw through the contents, tutting and fretting, before boxing it back up and continuing to ignore both the box, and him. It was a duality that went over Res’s head, but he wasn’t trying to understand it really. He knew the cat’s triggers, that was enough.

At last, he pulled himself atop the box he was seeking and crawled to the folded entry point. His lithe frame wriggled easily into the gap, allowing him to drop down into a world of soft fabric. He’d found this box ages ago. Just, stacks and stacks of shirts, all the same one, far as he could tell. The cat never wore any of them either. He found his way to the one shirt he had been brutalising, feeling to the damaged edge, and taking his teeth to it, biting through strands to cut himself off a fresh section of the fabric. It made good bedding, but he didn’t exactly have the ability to wash it. Somewhere behind the box abyss was a heap of his old mattresses once they frayed too much or were, getting dirty. He bundled up the newly cut section of cloth, and hurried his way back up and out. The cat would never know.

Res found his way back down, replaced his bedding, dragged the old fabric to the pile, and set himself in motion to the other side of the house. It involved darting from the main collection of boxes in the cat’s bedroom, through the relatively sparse hall to the kitchen. He sheltered just shy of the tiled room however, keeping behind the box stack that the feline had used to make his route through into an obstacle course. It wouldn’t be too long. The cat was a creature of habit. He’d be back soon, unload his bags, carry a pouch of snacks off to his room, probably spend the rest of the day there till he got hungry around sunset… maybe some trips through for drinks. Depended if the cat went for salty snacks or not today. Either way, Res felt confident. He’d have a good window to raid the kitchen all he liked. There was only so much food he could hoard or store, but if the dried food the cat often ate in the mornings… while it lasted, was replenished, as he knew it would be, then he could get a good armful of that. Just to keep in case of, who knew what over the next week.

A familiar rattle clunked at the front door, and Res darted around the box, pressing his back to the edge that faced the bedroom, well out of any angle of sight the cat might have, instead just listening to the familiar gait, the clunking of objects in a rustling bag. The cat was humming, he did that a lot. It wasn’t a bad sound, growly and deep and had the pleasant side effect of aiding in, locating the feline.

The familiar creak of cupboard doors, the almost hissing opening of the sealed freezer door. Some, movement and clunking he couldn’t identify as easily. He hoped the cat had gotten bread this time… his stomach growled at the promise of fresh supplies, and all the time he needed to find them, make his entries and fill his stomach.

Soon the paws thumped closer, and he held perfectly still, glancing up through a crack between boxes. He got a glimpse of the feline, one paw holding a blue, crinkling bag, the other tugging those, dark glasses off his muzzle. But then the cat was past, the tail brushed against the boxes in passing, and it too was gone.

Res eased back around the box to gaze across the kitchen with a grin. He swaggered out of his hiding space, turning to gesture the raised thumbs of his forepaws to the direction the cat had gone, giggling to himself, before turning back and dropping to fours to bolt on his way “Oh, you shouldn’t… all for me?” he crooned to himself “well if you insist… I’ll just help myself. Dumb cat”

Happy with himself, he trotted along the kitchen tiles, wondering pleasantly where to go first. Maybe he’d really let himself go today. The cat owed him for the lame attempt to catch him earlier.

Really nothing was out of routine though, till his paw landed on something sticky. Res froze, looking down. Something clear, but long was spread on the floor… he pulled his paw with a grunt, reflexively pushing his other forepaw down for extra leverage. The mistake, he realised even as he was doing it.

Panic. It flooded his senses all at once. This was different, this was new… this, this wasn’t right. He tugged his paws up, but the, thing barely moved. Then it clunked back to the ground he heard a click, a snap of sound under his paws. In the corner of his eyes, the sides rose, curling up along themselves and in towards him.

“Shi…” his voice was squeezed out of him in a shrill squeak as the rolling walls of the coiling strip slammed to his chest and back, winding him, leaving him only with his panic. He kicked, flailed. He could push the strip this way and that, but his glued paws wouldn’t pull free. Worse, he heard an all too familiar sound. The distant thump, the earthquake of the paws of a giant… a giant who ate mice. Forsaking his paws, he pushed with his hind legs, wiggling himself and the trap for the safe space between the boxes. He didn’t even make it halfway before a shadow loomed around the edge. Bright amber eyes surveyed the floor, and locked on him. A furred titan crouching down. Clawed paw grasping in his direction, pads obscuring the kitchen light and throwing him into darkness before he felt a thumb press to his back, fingers hooking the forsaken trap.

Traps. Res felt his heart hammering, breath ragged as he tried to recover… the cat never used traps. Res closed his eyes as the paw closed around him… miserably realising he was going to die today.

Jack grinned to himself as he felt the warm ball of fluff against his palm, triumphantly lifting the caught mouse from the floor and turning to head back to his bedroom. Using a trap didn’t feel great though… but, he consoled himself he could catch the mouse, is he really wanted to. This had just been, faster.

One paw closed around the mouse, balling into a fist, while the other handled the trap. The cat waiting till he had sat on his bed to focus on it. It reminded him of a toy he had as a kitten. A curled up strip of, something, that would go and stay flat when bent the right way. Only this was sticky. He uncoiled the trap from its prey, and carefully tugged at the strip. Sharp squeaks escaped his fist, but he wiggled the strip till it pulled off the paws, strands of fur all it got to keep.

He discarded it on top of a box, and focussed on, his prize. He shifted his paw, rolling his thumb to trap the tail of the mouse to his paw, before letting his fingers fold back, exposing the little squeaker before his face

“Damn… how long have I been trying to catch you…” Jack wondered aloud, propping himself back on his bed, staring at the terrified little mouse… he trusted that would go away, though, his smile fell some… probably needed to pick better words “uh, right… sorry, you probably think I’m going to eat you, huh?” Jack scratched at the base of his whiskers “look… was being sincere earlier, mousy… so, a deal? You, like… give me a chance, trust me for a minute, audition. When we’re done, I let you go, assuming you, like, try” he mused “then you can consider my offer, if you’re what I’m thinking… or, if not… well, we go back to, me trying to get you on rye bread, kay?”

The mouse’s eyes flicked noticeably, up and down his figure, between the eyes and, he assumed his mouth. There was trepidation in the little figure. Reminded him of every other mouse he’d caught really. Those ones, hadn’t stayed on his paw this long.

He clicked his tongue “I get trusting a cat is rarely wise from your perspective, mousy, but, I mean… if I wanted to eat you, there’s nothing stopping me. I ain’t got an angle. Not a mouse has gotten out of this position if I wanted to eat them…” he trailed off, sighing “phrased that poorly…”

The mouse notably grimaced, a shudder running the little body “what do you want exactly?” the little voice squeaked out.

“Audition, like I said” Jack mused “but, uh… you got a name? Calling you by species is a little, blunt, huh?”

“Resin” the mouse muttered “you’re Jack… right? I, hear you speaking”

“Resin?” the cat shook his head lightly “crazy names you mice get, huh?”

“Res will do” Resin looked off

“Wasn’t trying to mock you, little guy…” Jack scratched at his whiskers again. Damn, what was he even doing… was this whole thing dumb? If anyone was watching, this whole exchange would be embarrassing. Just tossing the mouse back and discarding the idea, crossed his mind for a moment as he observed the nervous mouse. Maybe it would be better if the little squeaker did, refuse, would sure be simpler “so… you sing at all?”

“Do I make a lot of noise? No” Resin folded his arms

“I get ya” Jack rolled a shoulder “but, like, you know how? You understand the idea?”

“I, guess?” Resin cocked his head “like speaking but… throaty”

Jack frowned some “the one time I wish my no-good agent was around. Alright… let’s start with, like, the scales…” he cleared his throat, rusty voice sounding out a series of pitches, before looking at the mouse.

There was a long moment of silence.

“I mean, if it’s too embarrassing… I can make this whole thing simpler for us both” Jack shrugged, licking to his whiskers with emphasis

Res shook his head vehemently, before trying to imitate the cat. Jack’s sharp ears perked. The notes wavered, they weren’t clear or precise, but the mouse struck a nice note to his ear. He encouraged Res to try again, the notes becoming a little more defined as the mouse, trembled a bit less.

Soon Jack tried stringing together a few lines of lyrics, listening carefully as the mouse sang them back. A frown touched him. Nice notes… no emotion.

“What did I do wrong?” Res spoke up quickly, hurriedly

“Nah… you did good” Jack sighed some, leaning back to the wall “ok… let me get, into the headspace, mouse… like, you’ve lived a rough life, haven’t you?”

“I’m a mouse” Res retorted “You literally tried to eat me this morning”

“Yeah, yeah” Jack shrugged “Nothing personal, you know that. But it makes you feel, doesn’t it?” he looked up at the mouse keenly “tell me, about that. How do you, feel”

Resin looked at him blankly for a long moment, before casting his view off with a deep-set frown wrinkling his muzzle “feel? I dunno…” he spoke quietly

“Don’t think about what I want to hear” Jack chimed in “like, are you miserable? Do you, collapse with the weight of the world, do you… what?”

“I’m not, miserable” Resin cocked his head “Not normally, not unless I get into a mood. It’s terrifying…” he eyed the cat “when you’re around. But, I live a decent life all things considered. I carved my existence out despite you”

The mouse’s eyes widened some as Jack grinned, tapping a finger to the palm next to the little mouse “yes… yes, that’s it. So, tell me about that… you live, you live even when others want you to digest”

“I do” Resin spoke with a little more volume “and every time I walk back home with a stomach of your food, I think about how you’re never getting it back” The mouse hesitated, and looked off

“Nah, nah, I’m not mad… that’s great” Jack grinned “no, don’t ball up… that was fire, let it out again… Like, we’ve a complicated little relationship right?”

“I guess” Res looked off towards the kitchen “sometimes I hate your guts… and it feels damn good to take something from you”

“And it feels damn good when I catch a mouse who’s fattened themselves on my food” Jack smirked

Res grimaced, and Jack rolled his off paw “not eating you… just saying”

The cat clicked his tongue “soul… yeah, that’s what you are”

“Soul…?” Res asked hesitantly… was that a way of saying I’m going to kill you… tension, flared in the little mouse

“No… no” the cat hummed “see, ah…” he gestured to the boxes around the room “I was in a band you know… like, we got our fifteen minutes, more than that even. We were…” he paused for a long moment “I dunno, we did our own thing, but people said we played the blues, some people said we were like, a fusion of the blues and soul… cause, we weren’t out to make anyone miserable, but… to feel, deep down inside you. That’s what music can do”

“I don’t understand” Res added

“too long to explain the history of… like, everything” Jack noted “and these words change their meaning… music changes, people try so hard to fit it into their labels… but where that, soul stuff came from… energetic, emotional music, started up from cats like me, long ago, when the big cats were, everything in the world… I guess we were like the little mice to them” he tried to explain “so… I’m thinking, that’s your style…”

Jack rolled up from his bed, depositing the mouse on top of a box as he felt down into the box next to it, leaving Res in a moment of… confusion. His tail was free. He looked around the box… considering, the option that gave him. But he, hesitated.

“Let me just find some old sheets…” Jack dragged out reams of paper, tossing them onto his bedding before feeling further into the box, triumphantly plucking one out, his other paw sweeping in, grasping around Res’s middle and, removing the opportunity to dart.

The cat sat back to a region of the bed, not covered in paper, and lowered Res to one thigh, holding the sheet before the mouse “can you read?”

“A little“ Res mumbled, looking up to the.. excited cat

“Right… so, read this” Jack said “I want you to… think on the words, listen to them, change some of them in your head if you have to… see if they can, apply to how you feel… if you can do that, I want you to sing them… sing them and, put all your feeling into it. Make me, feel, how you feel”

The mouse squinted at the words on the paper. It took a little time to sound his way through them, but there was a haunting, familiarity in them too. It wasn’t perfect… but whoever wrote it, he felt they might have understood him a little. He took a moment to consider what he might change to make the sentences, line up with his experiences, before trying to say it out loud, with the emphasis the cat wanted. He kept his eyes on the sheet, not wanting to look to the face of the hungry cat… the words, faltered on his lips… what was he saying? There was an elegant subtlety to it, comparison, metaphor, but he saw it between the lines, he was calling the cat so close, a monster. He found his way to the end of the lines, before his eyes flicked up, to the grinning muzzle of the feline.

“Yeah… that’s getting there” Jack reached across his bed, down the side, drawing up the familiar instrument, plucking his claws to a few strings.

A sweeping paw unceremoniously snatched Res off his thigh, fingers hooped to the mouse’s midsection, placing the mouse on, the one thing in the house he’d never have thought to dare touching. The guitar moved, and Res wobbled, finding himself perched on the tip of the long end, gazing down the strings to the cat’s paws, those savage claws extended and ready for… something.

Above loomed the chest and muzzle of the predator “face away… and let’s go again. You remember the words enough to go without the paper?” the cat mused “ah… either way, just feel it… go mousy”

Res wobbled on the, solid wood, little claws nervously digging into the varnish… why was he up here? All the same he ran his mind back to the words… they came back to him. Just a more eloquent way of saying, what he was feeling.

The first lyrics tumbled off his tongue, then froze as, through his body he felt, much as heard the chords of the instrument below. It sent a vibration through every hair.

Keep going… something inside told him, and he sang on, flinching less when the music picked up again… soon he, found his voice leaving him in time with the vibrations running up his legs into his chest, that stirred in the air around him. It was all so much louder up close.

Despite everything, he felt himself relaxing. The cat behind was playing, and the haunting, longing notes just stirred the little flicker in his chest, driving him to sing louder, till he was on the edge of shouting, keening his high pitched voice to the notes to match them, overcome them. It, almost came as a shock when the words, stopped… he’d run out, it was so short… His fur felt, erect and fluffy, his heart was racing, but in a good way… he felt, good. Really good.

Behind him he heard a low, melodic purr. His, nerves flickered, but it was followed by a run of notes on the instrument “you’ve got some promise, Res” the cat noted “want to take it from the top?”

“Yeah” Res mumbled, nodding with emphasis. His, emotions felt high, and live, and exposed. His head swirled with confusion. But he knew he did… he really, really did

He wasn’t sure, how long it was, how many times they’d done the same, rush, before the firmly padded paw of the cat, grasped gently around his body. It felt… different. The touch of the fur, the grasp of the strong fingers.

“Enough for one day, hey?” Jack chuckled behind him “your voice won’t be used to this”

“I… yeah” Res barely knew how to respond, the sensation of, sinking as the paw simply lowered him down, was blending into the sudden, shocking silence of not going for an umpteenth round

“Get some, rest, yeah?” the mouse peered up to the speaking cat… tired, he suddenly realised… “sleep on my offer, right?”

Had he been dreaming? Reality was sinking back in so, suddenly… right, the offer, his situation. The floor was, quite suddenly beneath him. A familiar but yet, stark world. He felt, very aware of the clawed feet to either side of him… feet he’d dodged a few times in his early days in the house. Cat, dangerous, death. His mind sank away from the bittersweet elation of song into… a cold, hard to process darkness. Tired… that was all he could suddenly process.

“Scurry on home now…” the voice above he, felt himself obeying. It felt quite natural. He dropped to fours and darted across the floor to the dark shadows of the boxes. He’d done it hundreds of times. He turned once in shelter to, look back. No chasing cat… the cat… looked like he always had, looming, floor perspective.

He’d told the truth. That, fact hit Res quite suddenly. He’d been in a trap only hours ago. “what the hell was that…” Res mumbled, before moving back through the boxes for his nest.

The morning came, very normally. Light finally poured through the valley of boxes as the sun moved across its arc, bathing Res’s home in brightness, stirring the mouse to waking. His throat felt sore. That was immediate. He ached gently all over too. If not for that, the memories he woke to… might have seemed a dream. Somewhere he could hear the familiar movements of feline paws. It must be later in the day than he thought.

The mouse sat himself, and pawed his whiskers. He felt a lot sharper than last night. But his head swam with the memories he needed to unpack. He’d, been caught, sang with a cat, rode the feline’s most prized possession… what fever dream was that? Everything was so, shockingly normal. Yesterday was, unbelievable.

The moving paws thumped in closer, and he heard a box within the room be slapped “Hey Res… wherever you are, want to join me for breakfast?” he heard the distant voice of the cat… the huge, mouse eating predator he’d… spent an evening with “It’s not you, promise” the cat added as an afterthought

Of course not. The thought burst through Res’s head, but, didn’t linger with the force it would normally. He sunk his muzzle in his forepaws. Last night had to have really happened. It had been good… if he went, could he do it again? Was that wise… it was a cat after all

“Got some cereal for you” the cat’s voice chimed up “you normally chew a hole in that so… I assume you like it. Bread maybe? Don’t know if you’re considering my offer or not but… I mean, if you want to talk about it, I can promise to, like… not even try to eat you today, no matter what? Sound fair?”

Res’s ear twitched… the cat, calling for him, to him, by name. This was just… surreal. It was like his mother calling him for dinner… this just, shouldn’t be. Still… He was curious despite himself.

The mouse eased to paws, keeping low, keeping quiet as he scurried from his nest, weaving the familiar corridors between the cardboard cliffs. The cat’s paws had thumped off towards the kitchen and he followed quickly, keeping out of sight.

Within the familiar kitchen, he saw the cat. Actually preparing to sit at a small, round table in the middle of it. He never did that.

Res wavered. This was crazy… but there was hope lingering in there. What if, he and the cat could actually get along? Could he, live here forever? Sing if he wanted to, with that music thumping through his body? It sounded like a miracle, and try as he might, he couldn’t see an angle the cat had, not one that would see him eaten

The indecision rocked through him, but, he finally stumbled out, doing the insane, willingly approaching the cat. It didn’t take long for him to be spotted. The titanic feline crouching lower, placing a paw down to the floor, waiting

“Hey… there you are. Come on over here. We’ll like, eat and talk. You can have whatever you like”

“Some cereal would be fine” Res mumbled, unsure if his quiet voice would be heard, but he couldn’t force the volume out as he padded for, what should be certain death. His tiny paws, stepped up onto the thick, yielding pads of Jack’s paw, the mouse trembling… he couldn’t help it. His eyes strayed to the fingers, the curved shapes tucked into the fur, the claws waiting for their opportunity to sink into something fluffy and, resisting. A clench of this paw would be his end.

Still, the paw rose without bringing his doom, rising to the table edge, tilting enough for Res to slide off onto the more solid surface.

The cat easing around the table, flopping down into his chair. A pair of fingers plucking a few flakes of cereal from a bowl placed before himself, dropping them on a plate that made them seem miniscule, before beckoning the mouse. The vast paw moving to grasp a squat white mug, which the cat brought to his lips to sip from. A flicker of disgust flashing the predatory features before he put it back down, tongue flicking for a moment, before he shrugged.

Res for his part stumbled closer, easing onto the plate and towards the offered food. He kept the cat in the corner of his view but… apart from the natural fear, so far… there wasn’t anything, suspicious in the actions.

“Damn stuff isn’t the same without milk” Jack objected, poking the handle of his mug morosely “but that stuff spoils so fast, I’d need to like, go buy more every week”

Res sat himself. Not sure what the cat was on about, but holding his tongue, rather, taking a bite from one big flake of cereal. His eyes lingering with, confusion on the towering feline.

“Anyway…” the cat looked back to him, paw dipping into his bowl, tossing a handful of flakes into his mouth to briefly chew. The sound of crunching was enough to pin Res’s ears “thought about my offer at all?”

“I’m not sure I, fully understand what the offer is” Res countered after a moment

“Fair, fair” Jack noted “well… let me like, spell out what I have in mind” his paw gestured out, nowhere in particular “didn’t always live like this, you know. I was in a band… we got our fifteen minutes, more than that… think I mentioned that. Never, really managed to cut it on my own” he trailed off for a moment “I like to do music with, company, you know? And like… you’ve got a good voice, I was really feeling it with you last night”

Res looked down to his paws for a moment, his face twisting with, a clash of emotions… last night. Thinking about it, how stupid had he been to not bolt… but it had worked out… it had been, so good, hadn’t it? “I, felt something last night, something I’ve never… experienced”

“There’s an artist in you, mouse” Jack smiled to him “You just need to let it out… I think some of our old songs… maybe even some of the, newer stuff would really suit you… and hey, we could write our own too. So, what I’m thinking is… you, agree to, like, be my partner in this. You can live here, no eating or pouncing or traps. You can have your own, uh…” the cat glanced around “cabinet? I’m trying to think what would be a room for you”

Res exhaled slowly. Do music, which sounded great, get to actually, live in peace… sounded like a dream “what’s the catch?” he mumbled

“Not a catch…” Jack’s smile ebbed some “I guess, I’d like to, get back out there…” he glanced to the doorway “I’ve tried to get into some clubs, last few years. Maybe you’d be the edge I need”

“You mean.. out there?” Res felt his stomach lurch… there was the catch “You want to do that in front of other cats? That’s what you mean, right? Perform?”

“Well, yeah” Jack tapped his claws to the table “It feels good like you wouldn’t believe, to share that feeling, that passion, that moment. They’d love you”

“For lunch” Res muttered

“Now come on… they’d leave you be for the same reason I’m going to… you don’t, like, eat talent like you. You’d be with me too”

What was he to say? Res pawed along his whiskers. This sounded insane. This also sounded… strangely interesting. How would that feel?

“I, I was basically singing about how much I…” he glanced briefly to the cat “hate that you try to eat me every day… cats want to hear that?”

Jack scratched to his chin “well… music lovers like passion. That’s some sincere singing you were letting out. Can’t hate that. Must suck being a mouse sometimes”

“Sometimes” Res scoffed, though, he felt a flicker of… well, he liked the cat was admitting that. Was this still a good thing?

“You’d promise to protect me?”

“Course” Jack nodded “And like… I dunno, if you get some little squeaking fangirls, you can bring them home and, I won’t eat them. Promise”

Res hesitated. The suggestion brought, images to his mind “what… if I wanted to start a family… here”

Jack perked an ear “I mean… they’d not take up a lot of space, so… so long as you don’t want to overrun the place… sure. We could talk about that”

Risk and reward. Res grasped his whiskers firmly on one side, head resting to his paw. He’d been a wanderer till he stopped here. He’d done his thinking, decided the risk of living here long term was worth the reward. He figured his home wouldn’t be bothered till the cat moved or died. Now, he was being offered more… all he had to do, was trust the cat to keep him safe. And he’d get to sing… would be tire of it? Was it only special to him because it was new? He questioned such things deeply as the cat took another swig of his, apparently unpleasant drink.

“It’s tempting” Res conceded after a moment

“Yeah…” Jack smiled a bit “You remind me of me… when Charlie first roped me into joining his band… don’t regret it”

“What is a band, exactly?” Res mused

“Not a word mice use much?” Jack rolled a shoulder “just a word for a group who play music together, I guess. There were four of us. Me, Charlie, Rex and Jake. Was pretty fun, while it lasted”

“While it lasted” Res mumbled “what happens to me if, our… band, doesn’t work?”

“Not going to eat you or anything… we’d just play here I guess, still better than going solo” Jack shrugged off the, life changing question from the mouse “besides, our band worked. It just…” he pawed along his face “shit happened”

Res took a slow bite of a cereal flake “will you tell me about it?”

“I mean, if you want to know, I guess” Jack muttered, reluctantly

“I’m trying to make a big decision here” Res grunted “I want to know…”

“Shit” Jack sighed, taking a longer swig from his mug “well… like I said there were four of us. I played guitar, Jake played the saxophone… kinda kept to himself, didn’t keep in touch, think he has like, a family and kittens somewhere now… Rex was our nanny. Chemist, you know, has like, a shop now. He made sure if we, uh…” Jack smiled a little slyly “were… like, eating or drinking stuff we shouldn’t, that we were safe. Gave us these little bottles even, told us, to take one down if we felt bad, threatened to down one into our throats if he ever found us unconscious. Foul stuff would ensure whatever we’d taken would be blown right back up the way it went in. Big lion of a guy, played the drums. Kept us all sane, good guy” Jack trailed off, his face falling some “then there was Charlie… tiny little grey cat, lithe as a guy can get, so… wild though. Free spirit. But he sang so… hauntingly” Jack trailed a finger through the air “you’d never forget hearing him. We were there to back him up, he was the star. Think his family had some issues, like, going way back. I brought the blues, he brought the soul, it was like, perfect. I could have lived like that forever” Jack sank his face into his paws, Res hearing a slow, shaky sort of breath whistle through the fingers.

The mouse felt a knot harden in his stomach. He regretted asking, he didn’t dare push the cat to finish or even to stop, just wallowing in the awkward silence, till Jack drew in a slow, long breath, paws sliding from his face, which turned away from the mouse “and damn we were good… half those boxes are like, merch we had. We were hot”

Res forced the words out of himself “what happened?”

“He was hit by a car” Jack spoke the words without feeling, pawing his face again “just like that. Some, stupid, speeding jackass who wanted to get to who the hell knows where a minute faster destroyed him. And it was all over. Just like that”

“I’m sorry” Res mumbled. He felt, a certain level of shock… he, never thought he’d feel bad for the cat who’d been trying to, kill him, but he felt it in the slightly wavering voice.

“I wanted to keep the band together… it’s what he would have wanted but… I was in no state, looking back. Maybe I only helped it disperse faster… we were nothing without him. Whole lot of cats mourned for a while, but then that was over too. Nobody but, a few folk who knew us well, remembered the rest of his band. Jake left, and then Rex went back to finish his degree and I, ended up here” he sighed weightily “I should have thrown half of this stuff out, but I don’t have the heart”

Res knotted his paws together “and you want me to sing now?”

“I mean… yeah” Jack looked his way “not like… a replacement or anything. Those old days are gone… but, you keep on moving, right? You’ve got a little spark in your voice of what I liked about him… and hey, even if we’re never even half decent, if we can get a little work, I’ll feel a little surer about keeping this roof over my head”

Res let the last words sink in. There was, a new element. Would the cat be forced to move if, he didn’t help? That could factor in… he doubted the next cat would give him such an offer “I guess, we could try… if you’ll, promise me, if I… say I don’t want to perform for the cats… I don’t have to”

“I mean, sure” Jack smiled slightly, arm brushing past his eyes for a moment “no point if you’re not feeling it. Wouldn’t sound any good that way”

Res nodded, and slowly held a paw up, in the direction of the towering feline “then… it’s a deal”

He kept himself from flinching as a huge paw lowered down close, a single hooked claw sliding into view, for him to grasp and shake. Res smiled weakly. He must be mad… but, he felt it… he wanted to take this risk.