



Here Kitty, Kitty...

The key declined to cooperate and Kara readjusted her grip, aiming carefully for the small slot below the doorknob. Her hand drifted unsteadily in a loose circular orbit until finally key met lock and slid inside. With a satisfying *thunk* the deadbolt retracted, granting permission to enter the apartment. *Jesus it's hot in here!* Kara wandered toward the thermostat, kicking her shoes off and losing several pieces of clothing along the way. She stumbled back toward the bedroom, removed what remained of her clothing, and lay down on top of her bed. The room was spinning. Or was it just the ceiling fan? A few moments later she realized she'd been pondering the question a tad too long and it began to sink in just how inebriated she was. Her stomach growled, hungry and nearing the end of its patience which is why she probably shouldn't have had that second vodka cranberry... and certainly not the third. Kara's gut rumbled again in protest and she laid her hand across her belly to quiet it, too tired to get up and eat. She closed her eyes and hummed quietly to herself, lifting her hand slightly and ringing her navel with her longest finger. It was an odd habit, one she'd had since childhood, something she did now without thinking whenever she had trouble falling asleep. But this time, the effects of alcohol fully upon her, she slipped her finger into the soft indentation of her middle and explored the wrinkles of skin within the tiny crevice. Her probing digit produced an unusual feeling in her abdomen that existed somewhere between pleasure and pain and she lost herself in that feeling for a while, pushing ever deeper until she realized she was up to her knuckle. But of course that wasn't possible. And then somewhere, from deep within the fog of intoxication, she felt a gentle tug upon her finger as if, ever so slightly, it were being suckled.

Kara awoke with a start, the morning sun falling harshly on her face from the high window on the far wall of the bedroom. She covered her eyes instinctively with both hands and then, remembering, abruptly held her right hand out in front of her and scrutinized her finger. Nothing out of the ordinary. Avoiding what she knew curiosity would demand of her she stared at the fan spinning slowly above her, a chill of bumps now rising on her bare skin. Reluctantly... slowly... she slid her hand down her body until the tip of a finger lay on top of her navel. And then, as if unlocking a secret door, she gently pressed on the cupped skin. Eagerly, a hungry mouth opened and drew her finger inside with a frightening slurp that made her pull out instinctively. Still too frightened to look, morbid curiosity drew her hand back toward her belly. Careful to remain at the edge, she felt the opening, still there... smooth to the touch and slightly moist. It quivered faintly as she ringed its edge but made no aggressive overtures. Kara slid a timid finger back inside the unnatural opening and allowed it to suckle.

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It was a week later that she discovered it. Sam, meowing incessantly, stepped in circles around her head. *Dammit, Sam... it's Saturday...shut up!* Kara swatted vaguely in his direction without opening her eyes, knowing full well that the cat would not leave her alone until his hunger had been sated. *Meow. Meow.* He reached over and gently pawed at her nose. *Meow.* With a deep sigh, Kara flung back the covers and rose from the bed. Bare feet shuffling across the hardwood, she headed toward the kitchen, the cat at her heels. *Hungry, are you? Well I'm tired... how about that? Doesn't matter to you though, does it selfish boy?* Kara pulled a can from the cupboard while the cat wove itself around and around her ankles. *Meow. Meow.* A quick pull of the tab and the top was off, the foul aroma filling the kitchen and further exciting the cat. She tipped the can over into a dish on the floor by the refrigerator, giving it a few firm taps to expel the contents, hoping the all of it would slip from its container without further assistance on her part. No such luck. The wet of the gravy like glue, slivers of meat – or whatever it was – clung to the bottom of the can. Being the kind of morning when reaching for a spoon is too much like work, Kara swept what remained in the can to the dish with her finger, wiped her hands on a dish towel and headed back to bed. Her stomach growled. Apparently she was hungry too. Not hungry enough to abandon the sheets just yet though, and she rolled over onto her back and spread herself luxuriously across whole of the bed. Tired but too awake now to actually fall back asleep, habit drew her hand to her belly. Fingers slowly circling her navel, a drowsy calm descended upon her like a warm blanket. She did not care when she felt it open nor did she retract her hand. Instead she slid a finger inside. Something sharp snagged the soft flesh on the underside of her finger and, surprised, she withdrew quickly and held her hand up close to her face for inspection. A tiny droplet of blood sat atop the faintest of scratches like a bright red pearl. Instinctively she brought her hand to her mouth as you might with a papercut but it still smelled of cat food and she thought better of it. Hesitant at first, she returned her hand to her belly and cautiously probed the edge of her navel. There, just inside the rim, she felt it. Not obvious at first, its jagged edge barely broke the surface of the moist flesh surrounding it. A tooth.

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Kara's stomach rumbled with discontent, loud enough for the man beside her on the subway to hear it. He threw a sideways glance at her and made a remark about skipping breakfast that Kara supposed was meant to be funny. She smiled politely but wasn't in the mood for small talk and moved toward the doors, her stop was next anyway. She hurried to work, arriving with just enough time to slip into the bathroom before the morning meeting was to begin. Inside the stall, she opened her sack lunch as quietly as possible and removed a small plastic container. Inside was a single scoop of raw ground beef from which Kara pinched off a portion the size of quarter. Quickly she lifted her blouse and pushed the meaty mass into her navel, careful to avoid its now full set of sharp incisors. Re-arranging her clothes she exited the stall and hurried to the conference room, dropping her belongings at her desk on the way and hoping that would be enough to make it through the meeting.

Over the past month it had grown more and more demanding, requiring feedings ever more often. At first, small bits of leftovers from her lunch... just a bite here and there. It was strange but simple enough and it quelled her hunger in a way that eating in the usual manner no longer did. When small scraps ceased to satisfy, a can of cat food offered in the middle of a particularly desperate night did the trick but upped the ante and the hunger grew larger again. For the moment, ground beef, raw and bloody, did the trick in smaller amounts than anything else with the added benefit of a more discreet aroma than cat food. For now, it would buy her an hour or two at a time but any longer and she'd need to either feed it again or allow it to suckle painfully, its teeth sinking into her sacrificial finger to comfort the hunger until next it could be fed. Kara did not allow herself to wonder what she would do when next the hunger graduated.

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It had been 3 days now and her sick time was all but consumed. She'd run out of excuses and still she could not leave the house. The hunger had grown steadily since last summer when first it began and now it was near constant and insatiable, having morphed into something else entirely. Again her stomach rumbled. There was nothing else to offer it that she had not already tried. Nothing inside the apartment anyway and leaving was out of the question in her current state. Sam traced circles around her ankles as she stood at the kitchen counter, he too was hungry now. *Ok Sam*, she said and she opened a can for him. Sam made a strange sound, a combination of purr and swallow as he tucked contentedly into his dinner. Kara made her way back toward the bedroom, can still in hand, and lay down on the bed. Her robe draped open as did her navel mouth in anticipation of a feeding and Kara swiped a finger against the bottom of the cat food can and drug it across her belly. She knew it would not be enough. Exhausted and desperate, tears pooled in Kara's eyes. Sam, having finished his meal, appeared to thank her as he usually did and lept onto the bed beside her. The smell of cat food across her belly drew his attention and his sandpaper tongue lapped at the trail. It tickled and Kara laughed and reached up to pet him at the very moment when his head disappeared inside her. There was yowl and a snapping sound and a crunch and his headless, lifeless body dropped onto her middle.

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Friday. With the long work-week now behind her, Kara returned home in eager anticipation of a few days to herself. Dropping her bag just inside the door, she kicked off her shoes and made her way to the bedroom after a quick stop in the kitchen. She opened the bedroom window and exchanged the empty dish on the fire escape with a fresh one containing half a can of cat food. It was not yet dark, but it would be soon and as the sun dipped behind the city skyline, a scraggly tabby cat appeared. There was no shortage of strays in the alleys nearby. Same as in any city Kara supposed. This one was cute, she thought, though it looked as if the realities of street life had perhaps been a little harder on him than some of the others. She watched him eat heartily as she stripped off her work clothes and spread herself across the bed. Finishing quickly, he peered into the open window, instinctively cautious but opportunistic by necessity. The open cat food can, still half full, sat on the bedside table. Kara swiped a finger into the can and smeared the aromatic slime across her middle. *Here kitty kitty kitty.*