

Water droplets seemed to freeze in the air as Mel's paws splashed through the puddles marking her way home. The last rain left, much to her delight, several more than usual scattered over the well worn path through the woods. Well worth the worry ignited by the strong winds of the previous night. She had thought, at the time, that she might not see that magnificent oak still standing come morning.

Stopping in front of her hovel, feet still resting in a pool of murky water, her eyes were drawn toward the now parted clouds. Golden rays, as deliciously appetizing as honey, poured down onto long branches that desperately reached out to meet them. Drops of rain littered across the new buds practically begging to be freed from within. Proof of new life and new beginnings.

The bruised door screamed with effort as she pressed in, the swollen floorboards halting its progress but leaving just enough space for her small body. The familiar, comforting, and slightly musty smell acted as a welcome as well as permission to leave the door ajar.

"A bit of fresh air couldn't hurt."

Although it was very sweet of Duncan and Flora to let them stay when confronted by the surprising change in weather, as her eyes passed over the dimly lit space filled with piles of books, paints, and two Ladder-back rocking chairs, a familiar warmth spread from her toes up to the tip of her long, floppy ears. In all of its old, musty, I'll-get-around-tofixing-that-eventually glory...this was hers.

"Hello, home."

She waited the appropriate time for an inanimate object to respond before walking to the other end of her one-room home, setting down the small bag on the kitchen table, and examining the contents. Two cabbages, seven carrots and a pouch of dried cranberries. Mel's nose twitched as the beginnings of a small

smile reached the corners of her mouth and her eyes, alert yet gentle piles of onyx, searched for a place to hide the unexpected treat.

Mel would not normally accept charity from another. Although, in her mind, she knew that everyone came upon days where they felt the impossibility of the world pressing around them, in her heart, she never wanted to believe that to be true for her. Thankfully, Flora was equally stubborn in their generosity as Mel was in her pride. If not more so. Flora's unrelenting voice played through her mind, "You started with your family, found your friends, and then met your partner. You've never been independent! It's absolutely nonsensical to pretend to be now."

A tall shelf, barely even accessible to herself, proved a perfect spot for the treat. Mel took a deep breath and released it as slowly as she could. A moment of surrender. Something she required more and more often with each passing week. She looked up at the clock then down at herself, immediately finding a need for yet another moment.

Mud. Lots of mud.

Doing her best to clean just enough not to embarrass Alis, Mel kissed her fingers and laid them gently on the photo hung beside the door. She left. Closing her stubborn companion with the same resistance as when she opened.

This was another day.

Part 2

"Alis! It's time to get up, sweets!" Mel did her best to maintain a level and gentle tone that would suggest this to be the first time she'd called and...not the fifth.

Though she would like to claim the frequency with which she

wanted to kiss her surplus-adolescent-clone far outweighed the urge to throttle her with a carrot stick, on mornings like this, she couldn't really be sure. A quick turn of her head would reveal her usual neat stack of books spread across the hardwood floor, bottles of her favorite paints left open to dry, and a trail of clothes strewn all the way to the door leading to where the most-adorable-little-shit, still lay sleeping.

A glance at the clock hanging in her small-but-satisfactory kitchen told her that their 15 day streak would be continued. Late. Again.

"Well," she said with a sigh "I suppose being consistent is a feat in itself."

Mel set a plate of assorted vegetables, prepared for the exasperating-love-of-her-life, on the dining table just outside the kitchen. She liked to believe they were two separate rooms but, discounting the bedroom and small bath, the whole home would hardly count as just one.

On the plate there were button mushrooms, still dirty from yesterday's picking, bits of cabbage and one small carrot, the last of Duncan and Flora's generosity.

Her whiskers tilted up slightly as she examined the feast that awaited her most-peculiar-creation, speaking softly to no one in particular, "That should be enough for her I think." She'd just filled a glass of water to be positioned above the dish only to be halted by her own stomach's very vocal contention.

"Oh, shut up you! You'll get yours later. Probably."

Placing her paw on the soft fur of her belly, she hoped the stern rebuke mixed with a small fib and gentle pats would tide her over until lunch. So long as you weren't spotted by Mr. Donnelly, or as she and Tyg would call him when they were young, Sir Nibbles, there were always scraps to be had at the

orchards while you worked.

Mel's ears drooped at the reminder of a memory from so long ago. Before he was the father of her distracting-but-lovable-rodent, Tyg was a lifelong friend. One whom it would be difficult to find any memory that didn't bare any attachment. Her mind wandered briefly to days spent running through fields with Tyg trailing just behind, hopping over fences while Tyg searched for a gate instead, and snatching fresh strawberries while Tyg reluctantly acted as the lookout.

The reminiscence was cut short by another cry from her belly. Looking at the clock again, she placed the cup on the table and strode resolutely to the bedroom door.

She knocked once.

No answer.

Then once again.

No answer.

Her annoyance at the freeloading-fuzz-ball peaked when she opened the door only to find a small lump in the corner of the bed. Still. Judging by the change in position since Mel had left the room to prepare breakfast, It looked as though they'd stirred at one of her calls, and pulled the blanket over their head along with a pillow for good measure.

Mel said nothing. Instead, she walked back to the kitchen, filled another cup with water and, with a grin both mischievous and vengeful, she entered the bedroom again.

If they had neighbors close by, there would probably have been questions regarding the angry howls and cackling laughter that followed. As it stood, there were only two witnesses to this childish display. Mel, running up, over and around the small hovel. And one mop following close behind.

"Oh, my rambunctious-soggy-friend, If you moved this fast every morning we'd never be late!" Mel forced the words out between fits of giggles as she circled the table, stopping so

that they were each on either side.

“If you didn’t kick so much while you slept, maybe I’d be more inclined to wake up!” Alis shot back while attempting to wipe the wet fur from her eyes.

As Mel took in this wet-but-speedy-child she was pleased to see that, along with the obvious outrage, there was a slight gleam in the Onyx eyes that stared back at her. A gleam that quickly transformed into a familiar mischief as she looked to the cup of water still at the table and the back at Mel.

Oh, yes. This is my daughter.