

Freddie was utterly bewildered by what he saw before him: it was true that the cat he had known was tall for her age and, as he hadn't grown in the slightest since he had moved away, the chances were that she would have become taller than him. However, the girl that stood before him now was far more than just tall, he doubted the top of his head would grace the point of her shoulder!

"Melissa...?" he asked tentatively, a slight creak to his voice after several hours of accompanying his favourite tunes. She beamed down at him in response, his uttering of her name seeming to set her eyes alight with a fresh sparkle entirely unconnected with the rays of the setting sun cutting through the kitchen window.

"Freddie!" she practically squealed, flinging out her arms to give what she felt was the only proper greeting for her long-lost crush. 'Crush' was quite an apt word in the circumstances, as the fox found himself squeezed against her towering figure with his cheek pressed firmly against a well-developed chest. He returned the hug, his arms finding their way around her waist in a light embrace. His reciprocation of the gesture appeared to be exactly what the feline had wanted, as the grip she had around his shoulders tightened, pressing him firmly against her.

With the smallest hint of a wheeze, he spoke again in an attempt to distract her as he tried to extricate her from her embrace: "So, how have you been?"

"Pretty good!" she responded with the same bounce to her voice as before. Changing her grip to holding a shoulder in each hand, she allowed him to back up a couple of paces so her glittering eyes could drink him in a bit more. "It's so good to see you again!" she continued, the old air of struggling to contain her excitement about something seeming to buffet Freddie as he stood before her. A mere second later, her self-restraint caved: "You're just as cute and tiny as I hoped!" Before he knew it, the fox was back to being squashed against her in a hug whose tightness seemed like it was being powered by the glee so evident in her voice.

"Nice to see you too," he coughed, seeing himself as having little choice but to let Melissa vent her feelings even though the softness on which his head was resting brought a flush to his already red-furred cheeks.

Melissa held him close for what felt like a long time to the fox, little squeals and purrs of delight meeting his ears until her eyes fell upon the boxes sitting on the counter.

"Oh yeah! We were unpacking," she recalled, letting go of him at long last, "You carry on in here and I'll unload the stuff out of your car: don't want anything getting stolen, do we?" She beamed down at him once more, then bounced back down the hall. "Anything you can't reach, just leave it on the side for me," she instructed from over her shoulder as the tip of her tail flicked out of Freddie's sight.

Not wanting to seem ungallant by having her do the lifting of boxes and bags, the little vulpine shook off his temporary bemusement to hurry after her. "I'll help with that!" he offered as he approached the front door.

"Don't be silly," she admonished with the hint of a chuckle as she passed him with one of the larger boxes in her arms. She set it down near the foot of the stairs, no doubt with the thought of forming a central hub from which they could unpack, then turned back to him, "I saw you struggling with what you brought in earlier, so you go back to sorting out the kitchen." Freddie had to admit that she'd made much lighter work of the box at his feet than he'd managed with his efforts, and the hand on his back which pushed him back down the hallway made it clear that there were to be no arguments.

The vulpine wasn't about to let her do all the work: he was an intelligent, resourceful fellow who wasn't going to let a minor thing like lacking a bit of height get in the way of the task at hand. Marching back into the kitchen with his face set and a purposeful gleam in his eye, he returned to where he'd left off.

*Okay, perhaps she should deal with these*, he thought as the shelf on which the wine glasses were due to reside stared him down, almost waving the lone vessel Melissa had placed upon it tauntingly. Not wishing to rise to the bait, he turned his back resolutely on them even as he imagined the glasses still standing on the counter sniggering at his expense. He showed them no weakness however, as he strode back to the open box and began to retrieve item after item, finding each a sensible home in the many storage locations dotted about the room. With one box pleasingly empty, it was onto the next.

Time passed. The thudding and puffing coming from the entranceway halted shortly before the clattering and clinking that was filling the kitchen.

"All unloaded!" Melissa declared from the doorway, appearing to be the slightest bit out of breath but still no less jovial. Her eyes fell upon the rather sheepish figure stood next to a pair of now-empty boxes. "All done?" she asked, then she noticed the collections of various objects situated strategically around the room, all of which were below cabinets containing high shelves, "Got a few things for me to help you with?"

Nodding embarrassedly, Freddie looked on as she stepped out from under the lintel which her head was very nearly in danger of colliding with and strode past him to begin putting away what he had left out for her. He'd tried his very best to be the independent man he considered himself, but there were just some places his diminutive frame couldn't reach without the danger of smashing the very things he was trying to keep safe.

"Oh! Leave those ones," he requested, hurrying over to where she was about to slide a pair of glass tumblers onto the shelf they'd occupied when he was young, "it's time we had a drinks break."

She set them back down on the counter without hesitation, her expression nothing short of adoring. "So thoughtful!" she beamed, stooping low to press a kiss to his forehead before she moved away to continue the task at hand. His cheeks aflame, Freddie scooped up the glasses and, not having anything else to offer, filled them from the filtered tap. She accepted her glass graciously when it was offered, a satisfied gasp-like sigh following a long gulp of water.

"Thanks for helping out," Freddie murmured after he too had taken a good swig of his drink.

Melissa flung an arm around his shoulders to pull him against the side of her chest. "Gotta help out my favourite little man!" she trilled as he blushed and squirmed in an embarrassment she seemed not to notice. "Speaking of..." she continued, lowering her glass so that she could consider him better, "how tall are you these days?"

"Umm..." the fox wasn't all that keen on discussing his height with anyone, but the confident and authoritative attitude that had built itself in a fashion that wasn't unattractive on her already boisterous and inquisitive nature suggested that avoiding such a topic was going to be difficult, "about five-one at last count."

"Mmm!" she purred delightedly, squeezing him more firmly against her side in approval, "The perfect size for my little boyfriend!"

“Wait, what-“ Freddie’s concerns were soon drowned out as the cat raised her arm so that it was parallel with the floor, resting it on the top of his head.

“Ideal height to be an armrest too!” she noted with a soft laugh. Her point made, her arm flopped back down to press him to her side once more. “We ought to measure ourselves: I haven’t for a while and I *know* I’ve grown since last time,” she told him matter-of-factly, then a thought struck her, “You should come over for dinner tonight! You’re probably tired from the drive and it doesn’t look like you’ve got any food in. We could hang out and measure ourselves and stuff!”

She certainly had a compelling argument. Indeed, Freddie hadn’t invested in any food yet and had been intending to order a pizza or something like that. Home-cooking sounded far more enticing to his distinctly empty stomach, particularly as he remembered Melissa’s parents making a formidable team in the kitchen: her father a wizard at main courses, her mother a genius in the arts of baking and desserts.

At the first sign of his agreement, she seized his hand to pull him around the fence to her house. Stumbling along in the wake of her long strides, the fox only just had time to pull the front door closed to obscure the temptation of a pile of moving boxes from any would-be thieves.

Freddie had only just begun to notice that the hand he was holding onto seemed to engulf his own when he found himself tripping over the doorstep to another house he’d visited many times and heard Melissa’s increasingly familiar voice call out: “Guess who’s moved in next door!”

The first thing that struck the fox about his neighbours’ home, apart from little change from the décor he remembered, was the smell wafting through his nasal passages: something was in the oven for sure. He sniffed the air as Melissa tugged him along behind her, able to detect the scent of chicken on the air. Yes, definitely chicken but the other elements of what the towering cat was inviting him to remained a mystery.

“What was that, Mel?” asked the cat at the stove, stood with his back to them, his fur flecked with more grey than Freddie remembered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed movement by the fridge. “My goodness! It’s Freddie!” cried Mrs. Chambers, nudging the door closed before swooping down to bestow a welcoming hug and cheek-kiss on the fox who once again looked a little embarrassed. “Don’t you look all grown up now?” she observed as she straightened up again to let her better see the vulpine she hadn’t laid eyes on in a full decade, “So, is it true that you’re back to being our favourite neighbour?”

“Thanks, Mrs. C,” Freddie said, nodding in response to her question, “Yeah, it’s great to be back.”

He suddenly felt a presence close behind him, making him start. Then two long arms reached around him, one draping itself over each shoulder so they could pull him back against a soft chest with which he was already becoming quite familiar.

“Can Freddie stay for dinner, mum? *Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease?*”

Chuckling, the older cat smiled as her daughter held the little fox in a distinctly intimate embrace. “Of course he can!” her eyes travelled from Melissa’s visage down to the red-faced young man trapped in that affectionate prison, “You don’t need to ask about things like that: just turn up and there will be a seat at the table for you.”

Freddie had craned his head back to look vertically up at the feline in whose arms he now found himself, then turned his attention back to her mother. "Thanks, Mrs. C," he said again, smiling at her in gratitude.

"Nice to see you back in town, Freddie," Mr. Chambers had turned away from the stove now and had a meaty hand held out towards his visitor. The fox took it, gladly sharing a brief moment of masculine contact in the form of a firm handshake. The man of the house was taller than his wife who had become a little plumper in the years since Freddie had last seen her, but he looked to have been matched by Melissa for height. He also had a hint of a mane about his head, suggesting that there was some lion heritage in the family.

"Thanks, Mr. C. It's good to be b--"

"How long until dinner's ready, dad?" Melissa's voice once again drowned the fox's out as she addressed her father, looking clean over Freddie as he stood between the two felines.

"About ten minutes," he responded, looking at his daughter a little quizzically, "Was there something you wanted?"

As soon as she'd heard that there was still time to spare, she'd seized Freddie's wrist and started to drag him back towards the stairs. "Won't be long!" she called, the vulpine tripping over his own feet in his attempts to regain his balance. Up the stairs Melissa dashed with her companion stumbling along in her wake.

The Chambers' abode only had two bedrooms rather than the three Freddie was used to. However, far from limiting the appeal of the building which was otherwise identical in construction to its neighbour, this allowed the rooms that did comprise the upper storey to be somewhat larger and more accommodating. Freddie particularly envied the fact the cats had room for a bathtub, whereas his bathroom barely had space for its shower cubicle.

Melissa's demeanour and appearance had led Freddie to form a hypothesis as to what her bedroom would be like beyond the essentials: quite girly but for shelves full of sporting trophies. As such, the brief chance he got to examine the room surprised him: the posters adorning the walls were a far cry from the bubble gum pink pop singers he had envisaged, instead the prevailing colour was black and the names of each band conjured up images of pain, suffering, and misery; apparently they did have something in common after all. The shelves too were a surprise: various photos of the cat and her parents populated them, along with a number of what seemed to be prized possessions, childhood toys, and a solitary trophy which looked not to be for sporting achievement, but for chess.

Freddie hardly had time to notice these few details from a brief visual sweep before being not-so-gently shoved against the wall adjacent to the doorway through which he'd just stepped.

"Stay still, stand up straight. There we go," Melissa's face appeared in the fox's vision, obscuring the chest he'd become used to enjoying (as much as he felt embarrassed to admit it) as she focused her attention on marking a spot on the wall with the pencil she'd magicked into her hand. He'd barely had time to settle into the pose when she was drawing him away from the wall to make room for herself. "Now do me," she requested, thrusting the pencil at him.

"Umm..." the fox began uncertainly, his eyes travelling up the figure before him until they alighted on the spot between her ears where he would be required to make use of the implement in his hand, or rather where he imagined it to be were it not for the disadvantage of his low angle.

When she noticed the lack of movement in her peripheral vision, Melissa dropped her gaze from the eyelinered visage in the poster opposite her to frown at the diminutive figure before her. "What's the matter?" she asked, but she grasped his predicament before he could reply, "Oh! You can't reach, of course." Smiling fondly at him as if this endeared him to her, she pushed passed him and rounded her bed, returning with her desk chair being wheeled in front of her. The fox stood patiently in place, allowing her time to raise the seat to its highest extent. With the maximum potential boost achieved, he'd raised one foot to step up onto it only to feel a pair of hands under his arms. His other foot soon left the floor too and, after a second's surprised flailing, he was stood on his new perch.

"There we go!" she said brightly, returning to her position against the wall and dragging him a little closer to make his job that bit easier, "All set?" He nodded in response, his eyes now roughly level with the top of her head which made marking the wall a cinch.

The graphite barely had time to settle on the plaster when Freddie found something else being stuffed into his hand. "We'll measure you first." Once the tape had been pulled taut, the fox stooped to compare its graduated markings to the one on the wall Melissa had made moments earlier.

"Five-one," he announced, drawing a delighted giggle from below. As he blushed he lengthened the tape's extent up the wall, not requiring the feline keeping the other end in check to tell him what to do this time. Without needing to do any more than straighten up, he goggled at the digits that presented themselves beside Melissa's mark. "Wow..." he muttered quietly to himself, then raised his voice so that she could hear him, "six-four!"

She bounded to her feet with glee, eager to inspect his end of the tape for herself. "I did it! I'm as tall as dad!" she turned to beam at the fox, having to tilt her head back a touch to do so. They were close to each other, practically touching. Casually, she raised a foot to operate the lever which brought him down until they were level, a soft hiss accompanying his descent. He swallowed as those blue eyes which he'd become so accustomed to during his adolescence gazed into his, the balance of power in such an exchange which would once have been so equitable now tipped firmly in her favour.

"P-Probably time to g-" for the third time that evening his voice was stifled by the feline, but this time it wasn't a battle of vocal chords. One large hand came to rest on the back of his head, preventing him from pulling away as the tender moment began. Her eyes had closed, undoubtedly in pleasure, as she drew him closer, the fox able to feel the swell of her chest pressing against his upper tummy.

Even as the seconds passed, Melissa made no move to introduce anything more than her lips to the embrace. There was no lust in her affection, no kind of childhood infatuation manifesting itself in teenage need. This first kiss was purely a signal that she truly and deeply cared for him, adored him, loved him. No more, no less.

Her eyes opened only as she drew her head away from his, their lips parting with a soft crackle. She looked deeply into his own golden gaze as they remained close, held together by her own hands which still cradled his head and back. "My little man?" she asked, her expression shifting almost imperceptibly as she spoke to display some small fear of rejection. Freddie considered for a moment, his own eyes flickering about within those blue pools that seemed to fill his entire vision; the welcome he'd received upon his return could not have been more friendly or helpful, and those last few moments had been filled with a tenderness he could not remember receiving beyond vague recollections of times of upset as a child when his mother would hold him in her arms to soothe

whatever ill had befallen him with words of comfort. She didn't squeal, shout, or celebrate in any exuberant fashion when he nodded, she merely smiled and, with the utmost care, lifted him from his mobile pedestal for their lips to reunite.