

Mama Bear Part 2

What had started as a day had very swiftly evolved into a week. Despite the uncomfortable tension drawn between the two due to Melissa's, err, over expressive tendencies, the two could only grow closer together as they spent each day in each other's company. There was just something so wonderful about Melissa; Bernie couldn't explain it, but she truly seemed to fill a void in him that he was missing. Her sweet and caring nature was so very endearing, and she just had that motherly quality about her. Truly it was remarkable how she had never had children of her own, when she would have been a wonderful mother. Bernie had often thought about questioning her about why she was alone in a cabin in the woods, but an opportune moment never arose.

Which was kinda funny really, considering how much time they spent together. Every day they would go out into the forest for hours, but whatever it was Melissa was looking for, it was clear that she wasn't finding it. As many a time they returned empty-handed, and Melissa always seemed so glum afterwards. Which in retrospect is why there weren't any opportune moments now that he thought about it.

Though speaking of arising, kinda, Bernie was doing the same right now. He yawned loudly, all blurry eyed as he lurched upwards from the soft bed. He had stopped wearing a shirt at night, considering it was by far too warm to be wearing one. He scratched the small of his back, as per his wake-up ritual. He smacked his lips loudly as looked to the foot of his bed, where his clothes were neatly folded. For such a large lady, she was remarkably quiet to not even wake him up as she placed his clothes at his bed. It was almost supernatural how she did it.

Escaping the wonderfully soft mattress, Bernie staggered for his clothes, making sure everything was there. But before he decided to change, he looked himself in standing mirror Melissa somehow had lying around somewhere. Sometimes he couldn't believe he was looking at the same Otter really. His entire body seemed fuller, maybe a little plumper around the edge. His arms and legs were much more toned now from all that walking and from the housework. His face didn't have that haunted look anymore; he actually looked like a normal person now. Granted, he had to admit that maybe there was a little pudgy around his middle, considering he was eating three square meals a day now, and Melissa was certainly a firm believer of hearty eating and grease. He smiled to his reflection, and it smiled right back at him, as every day, when he woke up and stood in front of that mirror, he didn't just know he felt happier, he could see it on his own face that he was happier.

He swished his tail contentedly as he shirked the briefs he was wearing, Bernie put on today's clothes, certain that tomorrow, the other pair will be cleaned and at his bed. It was honestly pretty shameful that he didn't have any more clothes beyond the two pairs, but it's not as if he had the funds for any more.... He couldn't help but grimace at that fact, but, he couldn't sit around thinking about it. Melissa was probably already making breakfast, and it wouldn't do to keep her waiting. Which was why he quickly and concisely made his bed first.

Abandoning his room, he walked down the hallway to the kitchen, where Melissa was fussing with a small pot on the fire. Today she was wearing a lovely sunflower print sundress, with a small flower barrette hooked on the right side of her head. "Morning Bernie" she greeted absently, not even turning her head from the pot.

"Morning" Bernie replied, stifling a yawn.

"Sleep well?" she inquired sweetly.

"Always" Bernie answered with a grin.

"Jolly good" Melissa remarked as she put a lid on the pot, mumbling to herself as she lightly stepped over to Bernie.

She gently tussled his hair as she sat down, with no arguments from Bernie. "So, what are we doing today?" Bernie inquired, still a little drowsy.

"Well, there's not much on today really, not after the big clean-up yesterday. Which is why, we're going to have a picnic for lunch" she said with an excited grin.

"A picnic? Where?" Bernie smiled, rather enticed by that idea.

"Well, two days ago when we split up, I came across this darling little lake I had never found before" Melissa explained.

Bernie frowned, he seemed upset. "Why didn't you tell me about it?" he questioned in a hurt tone.

“Well, I wanted it to be a surprise for you Bernie. A reward for all your hard work you’ve been putting in around the house. Which is why we’re taking a trip to the lake, though, it’s more like a pool, as it also has a small waterfall as well. Or, is that a waterhole? I can’t remember what it’s called, but it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that we’re going to having a fun little trip. So... oh, yes, breakfast. Right. We’ll have ourselves a nice big breakfast, then we’ll make some sandwiches for the trip and then go. It’s a fair walk, but it’ll all be worth it” Melissa said brightly as she returned to the steaming pot that was rattling rather violently.

She ripped the lid clean off and wafted away the steam. “Ah, it’s ready” she called, grabbing the burning hot pot with her bare hands and thumping it onto the table.

It wasn’t a mystery as to what was in the pot, as it was the same thing every day: Porridge. It was expected to be honest, considering that she couldn’t exactly go out to get cereal or something like that. Though, it did beg the question as to why she always had milk handy for tea. A question Bernie had thought over, but then dismissed as just being that long life stuff you can store in cupboards.

Like clockwork he held his bowl up so Melissa could ladle in the thick wad of gooey oats. It had the consistency of glue, so, Bernie was rather thankful for the milk he was pouring onto the gooey mess. Following up with that, he grabbed the honey pot and gently oozed a nice thick streak of honey onto the pile, which he then mixed altogether with his spoon. Mixing the porridge with honey was a tip Melissa had given him, and it was a pretty darn good one too. “Two, four, six eight, bog in don’t wait” the two prayed in unison as they began breakfast.

They were always rather quiet when eating, aside from the general and kinda disgusting eating noises they made when, well, eating. It’s hard to tell which of them had picked up the other’s eating habits, but the two made a habit of downing as much as they could as fast as they could, whilst still somehow making as little mess as possible. It was applause-worthy on how they could make a meal disappear so quickly without a single stain on the table.

The two quite eagerly cleaned their bowls, leaving them mostly spotless as they were dumped onto the table. Melissa belched loudly, provoking a giggle out of Bernie as she held her hand to her mouth. “Excuse you” Bernie said derisively, laughing again.

Melissa gave Bernie a disapproving look, but she couldn't help but crack up a little as well. "Now Bernie, heh heh, one shouldn't laugh at a woman relieving herself" she declared like a pom, but that only made Bernie laugh harder.

Melissa burst out in giggles as well. It was pretty funny she had to admit, and Bernie's laugh felt rather infectious. It was so nice to be able to hear him laugh, considering the allusion's he made to his past. Melissa sighed after her good laugh, collecting the bowls with their spoons and just idly dumping them into the sink. A few errant chuckles escaped her, but soon all was quiet again.... It was at this moment that the two realized they didn't have any kind of follow-up right now, and the silence was growing awkward. "So uhh, a waterfall, is it pretty big?" Bernie inquired, breaking the silence.

"Oh, I uh, didn't get a good look, but I assume so" Melissa answered, grateful that Bernie broke the silence.

"Well, it'll be nice to have a swim. I'll be honest, with all your wonderful cooking I think I'm actually starting to gain weight" Bernie laughed, hiding his self-conscious cry for help.

Melissa laughed as well, gliding over to Bernie and giving him a slit prod in his belly; the Otter giggled at her touch. "Awww, not at all, you're as you should be. You were so skinny when you came to my door after all. Mmm no, you're just the right size" Melissa said sweetly.

Bernie blushed at such kind words; Melissa's tone was always so sweet and comforting, it was like sugar for his ears. "Do you need some help preparing lunch?" he inquired helpfully.

"Oh no, I can handle that. Although, what you can do is fill our canteens up with water. The waterhole might be freshwater but you never know what nasties are in it. Now, uhh, I think I left the canteens in... oh darn, where did I leave them? Oh right, I left them hanging outside to dry after being washed last night. Just go grab them and fill them up for me would you?" Melissa requested.

Bernie nodded as he pushed off from his chair and wandered outside. The morning sun was always so pleasant. He stretched upwards as far as he could go, groaning pleasurably as he felt everything loosen. Recoiling back into shape, Bernie followed around the house to find a lone push-pump by the wall, with five canteens hanging from hooks on the wall. His two one litre canteens looked like dwarfs compared to the large three litre ones Melissa owned. And

she could drain them in no time at all. Bernie started with his two first, gently aligning the open mouth of the circular bottle with the pump, and pushing down on the pump as hard as he could.

It was hard and sweaty effort working the squeaky and probably rusted bastard, even though Melissa made it look incredibly easy. Pumping as hard as he could, a steady trickle of water gushed from the pump into the open bottle. Bernie was starting to sweat profusely from the effort, small beads dripping off his forehead onto the ground as he grunted and groaned, working the pump until water overflowed from the canteen. His wrist was shaking from the effort of keeping the darn thing, and he happily screwed the lid on tight. He exhaled hard, wiping the sweat from his brow. "How does Melissa make working this thing so damn easy?" he groaned as he set to work on the other canteen.

He was really overexerting himself now, and his arm was starting to hurt as water trickled into his canteen until it too overflowed. Bernie shook his throbbing arms wildly, cartwheeling them around in the air until he could get feeling back into them. His back felt so tense now as he place his filled canteens on the hook, and grabbed one of Melissa's. Thankfully, she had had the common sense to get ones with flat bottoms, so they could stand under the pump. He squeezed the pump up and down with both arms, his grunts getting louder and louder as water surged into the canteen.

Finally, after five more minutes of excruciating effort, all five of the canteens were filled, and his arms were killing him. He wanted to complain to Melissa that he was too small to work the pump without hurting himself, but he didn't want to appear ungrateful in the face of her kindness. Though, it might've been a bit glib that she was making lunch while he was doing the heavy lifting. Her frowned at that idea as he hooked Melissa's canteens onto their hooks, their foundations creaking noticeably from the heavy loads.

Bernie wiped his wet brow once more as he rounded the house, pausing in the doorway. Melissa was cleaning up the counter, a tremendous pile of sandwiches standing proud at her side, and a pile of dishes to her left. How long had he been outside? Couldn't have been longer than five, maybe ten minutes right? Man she's a fast worker. "That's a pretty amazing pile there" Bernie complemented as he walked neatly into the house.

Melissa chuckled to herself. "Well, I pride myself on being a fast worker" she boasted proudly.

Bernie inspected the pile, noticing a rather large variety of foodstuffs crammed into them. Egg and lettuce, ham and salad, chicken and salad, some strange black tar stuff. Where did she have the time to boil eggs? "Hmm, I don't think this is going to be enough" he mused jokingly.

"Well then, why don't you go get ready, and I'll wave my magic wand and make some more" Melissa joke right back, a small twinkle in her eyes.

Bernie nodded, going off to put his boots on as Melissa removed a woven hamper basket from one of her many cupboards. "Might not be big enough" she remarked under her breath.

Melissa was waiting patiently outside, a rather large picnic basket hooked on her arm as she impatiently tapped her sandaled feet. "Sorry I took so long" Bernie called from inside the house, racing out with his backpack on. "I couldn't find my socks" he explained.

"I keep telling ya, if you leave them lying around you're going to lose them" Melissa chided sternly as the two rounded the house.

Bernie grabbed his canteens and fitted them neatly into his pack, alongside one of Melissa's large canteens. The Bear lady took the other two and somehow fit them into the hamper basket. "Shall we?" Melissa inquired, offering her hand to Bernie.

He happily took it and the two wandered off into the woods in search of a lake, or, pool, or was it a waterhole?

And they were still wandering. Bernie couldn't remember how long that particular trip two days ago had taken, but surely it hadn't taken this long. Granted, it probably felt longer because he actually had something to look forward to, rather than being on a wild goose chase. "How long have we been walking?" Bernie inquired wearily, his feet starting to ache a little in his boots.

"About an hour" Melissa answered, taking a quick glance at the position of the sun.

"An hour?" Bernie gasped.

They had already been walking for an hour? Wow, just, wow. Where did the time go? They must've walked for miles already. "How much longer to the waterhole?" he questioned.

"I don't know" Melissa answered.

"Okay" Bernie said in embarrassment.

Damn damn damn, why did he have to go and ask such a stupid childish question...- huh? He could feel Melissa's grip on his hand tighten up. Was she... worried about something? *"Is something wrong?"* he wondered.

If she was, she wasn't going to be vocal about it. It seems she was just as tight-lipped as he was, it sorta made him wonder what sort of stuff she had gone through. He had seen the large number of photos she owned, but she never wanted to talk about them. Especially not those that had a guy with her. It was kinda worrying really. Wriggling his hand gently, he managed to free it from her sweaty grasp, and Melissa seemed all the sadder for him having done so.

Birds called loudly in the treetops, and the walk just kept going. He did hope she knew where she was leading them, as it would be terrible to be lost in these woods. Melissa's ears twitched slightly, as if she was picking up some kind of message, or, she could hear something. Admittedly Bernie's hearing hadn't been good since that unfortunate ear infection, so all he could hear was the rustling of the leaves and the screaming of the birds. "We're close" Melissa informed him.

"We are?" Bernie questioned brightly.

"That's what I just said" Melissa answered brusquely.

Bernie went silent, she had gone into 'that' mood again. It was always kinda the same really. When it seemed like he was rebuffing her friendly gestures, she always went into a stiff and defensive mode. She must've known he wasn't doing it to be mean, but, it was still just strange like that. Bernie frowned quietly, trying to pay attention to nature again. Though it seemed faint, he could hear something over the breeze and the birds. It sounded like rushing water. They were almost there.

His pace quickened so much that Melissa actually had to increase her gait to catch up with him as the trees started to thin out. Eventually the trees just stopped, opening up onto a verdant field of long wild grass and ahead, a crystal blue lake. Bernie gasped from how beautiful it was. In all his travels, he had never met a sight as majestic as this; no city park could ever compete with nature itself. Even Melissa's gruff frown flipped upside-down in the face of Bernie's wonder. "Well worth the trip huh?" she questioned, elbowing him gently so she didn't knock him to the ground like the last time.

"It's beautiful" Bernie declared to Melissa and the lake itself.

"I'm glad you like it, Bernie" Melissa said as she gently dropped the basket on the grass. From with the meticulously kept insides she removed a large woollen blanket that the two gently set down in the shade of a large tree. Bernie dumped his pack on the far corner to stop it being blown away.

The two sighed as they parked themselves down on the soft blanket, Bernie already removing his boots to free his aching allys. His socks peeled off like paper, exposing his feet to the gentle breeze that blew all around. He wiggled each two gleefully as he lay back on the blanket, right by Melissa's side. "If you want to take a swim, you should do it now before you get hungry. I don't want you swimming after you've eaten" she warned sternly.

"Got it" Bernie said, twisting around so he could dig for something in his pack.

Gripping tightly, he pulled a pair of swim trunks out from underneath the canteens, even though it would've been smarter to remove them first, but eh. Getting off the blanket, he retreated behind the closest tree to get changed, leaving Melissa alone. Once Bernie was out of sight, she frowned to herself as she gazed at her right hand. The hand Bernie had rebuffed. "I can't keep him forever" she whispered to herself sadly. "Someday, he'll have to leave, just like everyone else" she added, her jaw seizing up in bitterness.

Sensing something, her smile returned to her face just as Bernie returned with his clothes in a messy armful. He dumped them haphazardly on the blanket. "Be careful. Be sure to call me if something goes wrong" she warned cautiously.

"Got it" Bernie said, waving as he ran off to the lake.

The water around the edge of the lake was quite shallow, but it deepened quite quickly about a meter out. Sticking a cautious toe in, Bernie found the water to be quite pleasant, and so beautifully clear. He could easily see the small fish that scattered around his feet as he plunged them in. Minding each step, the water quickly ran up to his waist, and then to his shoulder. Letting go of the lakebed, he just contentedly floated in the warm water, the sun beating down on him from on high. It must've been at least noon by now Bernie thought to himself as he floated on his back.

Yes, time certainly flew by, didn't it? What had started as a day had already become a week, and, he just had to wonder, how long was he really going to stay with Melissa? She offered to keep him however long as he wanted, but how long would that be before he felt like he was imposing? Though Melissa had dispelled his suspicions, Bernie still couldn't help but feel that she wanted something... 'more'. As nice as she was, there was always something beneath it. Like, some deep pain she was constantly trying to suppress. He knew it was none of his business, that's for sure. It was just, something he couldn't really ignore anymore. Sure, it wasn't really impacting their relationship, except for when Melissa became unexpectedly snippy, but, what *did* she really want out of all this?

Argh, he was thinking way too into this. She was a nice lady, and that's all that really mattered here. Whatever issues she had, she would either deal with herself, or she would confide in Bernie when the time was right. And that time probably wasn't now; there was no point ruining a good day with such heavy thoughts. He shook that thought away as he submerged himself in the water. Using his legs and powerful tail, he swam two meters down to the bottom of the lake, and he wish he had some goggles to inspect the lakebed.

His lungs suddenly started to burn, the breath he had taken hadn't been big enough. Barrelling to the surface, Bernie gasped loudly as he sucked in a big lungful of air. Slowing down to dull pants, he felt that it would probably be much better for him to do laps across the lake. Yeah, better idea.

Melissa watched him serenely from underneath the canopy. She smiled to herself as she watched him almost suffocate. He really should have brought some goggles, she had five

pairs... oh wait... she had never mentioned those to him had she? Probably should have, but no harm, no foul. He still looked so happy out there on the lake. He had been a lot happier recently once the unfamiliar air between the two had lifted. He was a good boy, but, there was always that sadness in him; a, resistance to getting truly close to someone. It just made her wonder just who exactly had burned the poor kid. Probably a parent she thought bitterly; it would explain why he travels so much. Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud gurgle. It appears it was lunch time.

Bernie was happily powering his way through the water, his flat fur allowing the water to just gel past him as he powered his way towards the waterfall. It had quite a thick rock structure, and he never would have thought there had been any uneven terrain, if much of the other forest had been any indication. Although, there was something strange with how it roared. It sounded like there was a subtle echo in the air. Like, as if there was a... oh please god let there be a cave behind the waterfall; that would be so freaking rad.

Dragging himself onto the higher rocks by the falls, Bernie edged along the slimy rocks as gently as he could, edging around until he could peer behind the falls, and his heart skipped a beat. There was in fact a decent sized cave behind the walls. "Awesome" Bernie cried gleefully.

He had to tell Melissa about this, she'd love to see it and- oh, it appears she was already signalling him. Her movements were kinda hard to make out, but, it looked like she had brought out lunch. Bernie's belly suddenly let out a loud growl; he rubbed it gently. He had been enjoying himself so much he hadn't even realized he was hungry, amazing.

Bernie swam back to the shore in record time, his body soaking wet as he dripped all the way back to the blanket. And that's when he saw it: A beach towel he hadn't even think to bring was lying folded on the blanket. "Did you bring that?" he questioned to Melissa, who was shooing a fly from the sandwiches.

"Of course, I figured you'd want to go swimming, and I also figured you'd forget to bring a towel. Hence the one right here in my hand" she explained as she handed the towel to Bernie.

"You're amazing" Bernie remarked as he vigorously dried himself off.

"I know" Melissa boasted with a proud smile as she gently grabbed a petit sandwich from the pile, and shoved the entire thing in her mouth.

Bernie wrapped the towel around his waist as he grabbed a sandwich and also chowed down. What began as a simple act of survival turned very quickly into a race as the two began to fight to see who could eat the most sandwiches. The pile was certainly quite intimidating, but Bernie wasn't giving up until sandwich #11. His stomach was already feeling pretty pained, and if he ate anymore he knew he'd probably explode.

He groaned loudly, falling to his back in defeat as he cradled his bloated belly. Melissa was happily continuing, demolishing the pile with minimal effort, idly taking a deep swig from her canteen every few sandwiches. "And to think you wanted more" she remarked snidely.

"I was kidding!" Bernie groaned, trying not cough back up any bread.

"I know you were" Melissa said with sweet sarcasm.

She picked off the last sandwich, and it practically disappeared into her seemingly endless belly. She raised a fist in victory. "Looks like Mama Bear wins this round" she declared like she had just won a title match.

"Yaaaay" Bernie droned flatly, still too full to go on.

"Aww, we fuww aweady?" Melissa teased in a baby tone as she butt-hopped closer to Bernie.

"Yes" Bernie answered, groaning from the stabbing pain in his midsection.

"I see" Melissa giggled as she gently pushed aside Bernie's hand, her own large paw sitting square on Bernie's belly as she gently rubbed it.

Tingly sensations ran to Bernie's brain as whatever she was doing, it really made him feel better. His body relaxed in an instant, he felt more like jelly than an actual person. Melissa gently hummed a small tune to herself as she continued rubbing gently, and Bernie yelped

loudly. A pained sensation was running up his throat, it felt like he was about to throw-up a rock. He pushed her hand off as he leaned forward, thumping his chest to make whatever was stuck in it move. Whatever it was inside crowned at the top of his throat before pushing his cheeks out wide, and he let loose:

UUURRRRRRPPPP!!!

His belch was so loud he could have sworn the ground beneath him was vibrating too. Birds fled in frightened flocks from the trees. Melissa snorted loudly, trying not to giggle as Bernie relaxed again. “Feel better?” she questioned.

“Much” he happily answered, the pained feeling gone now.

“Well, that’s what you get for inhaling your food rather than chewing it” she chided playfully.

Bernie chuckled loudly, staring up at the canopy of the tree high above them. “So, find anything behind that waterfall?” Melissa questioned curiously.

“Huh? Oh yeah! Yeah. I wanted to tell you about that. There’s a cave behind the waterfall. I think we should go explore it” Bernie suggested with the excitability of a four-year old.

“A cave huh?” Melissa remarked thoughtfully. “Why yes, I think we should. Although, I did say we shouldn’t go swimming after we’ve eaten. Don’t want any complications.”

“Well, we could probably walk around there, the water doesn’t seem so deep, it would be more like wadding” Bernie begged childishly.

“No” Melissa said shortly.

Bernie sighed loudly, and he just barely stopped himself from yelping out loud as he felt Melissa place a hand on his belly again. She began humming that tune again, and Bernie could feel his eyelids growing heavy. He just felt so sleepy, and the air was so crisp and warm. He couldn't help but drift away.

Bernie awoke with a start, having just escaped a dream where he was suffocating inside a giant plastic bag. He was breathing heavily as his panic died down, and, Melissa was giving him a strange look. "What?" he demanded gruffly.

"Nothing" Melissa answered quickly, suddenly very interested in something out in the lake.

"How long was I asleep for?" Bernie questioned groggily.

"About an hour and a half" Melissa answered dully.

That was, highly conveniently. "That's convenient" Bernie remarked, already realizing his stomach felt a lot emptier.

"Indeed it is, now we can go visit that cave of yours" Melissa smiled without looking at him.

"Yay!" Bernie cheered loudly, channelling his inner toddler.

Undoing a strap in the front, Melissa peeled off her sundress to reveal a one-piece purple bathing suit beneath it. It was, very flattering, as it served to show off every contour and curve of her body... EVERY, SINGLE, LAST, ONE.

Bernie turned red in embarrassment as he averted his eyes, never having actually seen Melissa in anything that made her look remotely feminine. He just, didn't know how to take that. He wasn't trying to objectify her, it was just, well, she was incredibly shapely, and it was kinda awkward for him as he wasn't wearing his briefs beneath those trunks. "Is there something wrong?" Melissa questioned, clearly knowing exactly what was wrong.

“No” Bernie squeaked loudly.

“Oh good, I was beginning to think I didn’t look good in a bathing suit” Melissa said dryly as she walked towards the lake, Bernie in tow despite still averting his gaze.

Turns out Melissa had been right all along, as there was no way to get to the rocks by the waterfall without swimming, and the water around it was quite deep indeed. Not that the rocks mattered to Melissa, as she simply forced her way past the rushing water without breaking a sweat. Bernie was pretty impressed by her fortitude, she was like a tank... in a one-piece. “See, isn’t this cool?” Bernie said in excitement, trying to take his thoughts off... other thoughts.

“It is rather lovely” Melissa remarked dimly, not exactly as impressed as Bernie was.

She was constantly feeling around the walls for something, probably a herb. She had been looking for those constantly, and hell as if Bernie knew what for. She always kept those things in jars, as the only thing she ever seasoned her food with was salt and pepper.

Great, he was having glum thoughts again, although... he couldn’t help but feel there was something right about all this. Him, her, a secluded cave cut off by a waterfall. There was just something about this cave, this moment; it made him feel as if, as if he could tell her anything. “Melissa” Bernie began hesitantly.

“Yes?” Melissa inquired in a bored tone.

“Can... can I tell you something?” he questioned, uncertainty gnawing at his voice as he could feel a knot forming in his chest.

Melissa paused from her excavation, her eyes reflecting was little light was left in the cave. He had her full attention. “What sort of... thing?”

Bernie jaw ground against itself, desperately fighting against his desire to speak. It budged an inch, before slamming down again. Budged an inch again, and slammed shut once more. He had to tell her. There wouldn’t be any other time. “You... you asked me before why... why I don’t have a last name” he said, his mind still trying to stop his mouth from moving.

"I did. But, if you don't feel comfortable telling me this, then you don't have to" Melissa said in a supportive tone.

"No... no, I... I want too. You see Melissa, ever since I was a baby, I lived in an orphanage" he finally admitted, the tension in his chest lifting.

"An orphanage?" Melissa repeated in a concerned voice, not exactly liking where this was going.

"Yes, I was abandoned as a baby, and lived in an orphanage. I... I had nothing but a name, Bernard. I lived my life in that place, hoping, no... praying my parents would come back for me, that they would come back and tell me they were sorry for abandoning me" Bernie said bitterly, tears forming in his eyes.

"I kept telling the other orphans my parents would come back for me eventually. They said I was an idiot for thinking that. I thought I was too. But I still kept hoping that they would come for me. That they knew where to find me. That hope was the only thing that kept me going" he continued, his legs shaking as he started to go weak in the knees. "That hope was crushed in an instant by Sister O'Harity. She told me what had happened... she said... she said..." Bernie cut off, the memory becoming too painful as he fell to his knees, sobbing loudly.

His wails echoed through the cave loudly, that was, until Bernie felt something warm and soft pressed up against him. Melissa was hugging him as tightly as she could without strangling him, and he just cried into her shoulder. "She said... that a police officer... he... he... HE FOUND ME IN A BIN!" he shrieked loudly, his voice breaking with every sob.

Melissa gasped in horror, a hand covered her mouth in the darkness. "I was just born... just born... and I was found in a bin... in... IN A PLASTIC BAG! MY PARENTS HADN'T JUST ABANDONED ME! THEY THREW ME AWAY LIKE GARBAGE!" Bernie wailed, his sobs barely coherent as he kept making noises like a choked chicken.

Melissa fell to her knees in shock. To think two people could have done something so vile, so utterly inhumane. People like that never deserved children she thought bitterly as Bernie kept sobbing, completely incapable of forming coherent words anymore as he kept crying

into Melissa's shoulder. In truth she was actually crying with him, just out of solidarity for the poor kid. And he kept crying for three long and painful minutes, and Melissa just patted his back comfortingly as he let it out, until the boy could actually speak normally again.

"After... after she told me that, I knew I couldn't trust anyone again. I... *hiccup* I escaped from the orphanage, and went on the run. I knew about donation bins, and grabbed what supplies I could. And, what I couldn't get from there... I stole" Bernie admitted guiltily.

"For eight years I've been on the run, hoping one day to find a home for myself. I move from town to town, getting lodgings and food from wherever I could. And, when I was ready to move on, I would pillage donation bins for items I might need, and I stole what I couldn't get from donations. I'm wanted in god knows how many cities, towns, and villages for petty theft" he explained bitterly.

"I got lost in these woods due to bad directions from a trucker who kicked me out of his truck. And... that's how I came to you" Bernie finished, feeling utterly... utterly, dead inside.

He felt so weak from finally letting it all out, he could only rest against Melissa's firm frame as let out the occasional snuffle. Melissa pushed Bernie further into her as she gently rubbed his back. "Thank you... thank you for being able to share this with me Bernard" Melissa whispered gently into his ears, kissing the top of his head as she continued her gentle stroking.

"You're the first person... I've ever talked to about my past" Bernie admitted in shock.

"You were very brave to tell me that. I can't... I can't even begin to understand what it is you've gone through. To have known such a horrible truth, at such a young age... and the fact that you're still alive now. You are a much stronger person than I am" Melissa declared in shock.

"There were, at times when I went to that dark place. To have almost leapt from high points or... stabbing myself. I just don't know what it is that kept me going. All hopes of finding my parents were dead; I don't EVER want to meet them. I was just some nobody nobody cared about. Just some piece of trash to be ignored or kicked aside. Nobody ever cared if I even existed, or if I just disappeared from the face of the earth" Bernie whispered bitterly, tears forming in his eyes again.

"You're not trash to me Bernie" Melissa whispered.

"Sometimes... sometimes I wish I could have a second chance. A second chance to grow up normally, with parents who actually gave a shit about me" Bernie wept.

Melissa suddenly went still, her eyes lost in thought. "Yes..." she said absently, her arms slowing disentangling from Bernie.

The Otter was only strong enough to keep himself from collapsing to the floor like a dirty rag. "Melissa?" he said despairingly.

The large Bear had strangely moved herself to the lip of the cave, her form laid out against the wall like Alfred Hitchcock. "It is... so touching that you felt you could share your past with me Bernie" Melissa said slowly, as if, she wasn't all there. "That's why, I think... I think I can tell you my secret."

"Your... secret?" Bernie questioned, his eyes red and puffy from crying so hard.

"Bernie, how old do you think I am?" Melissa inquired, her tone now dead serious.

"Umm... I was told it was rude to guess a lady's age" Bernie said uncomfortably.

"I won't take offence, just, guess" Melissa said shortly.

"Ummm, thirty-two?" Bernie guessed.

"Bernie... I've been a hundred and twenty-seven for thirty-seven years now" Melissa said seriously.

A hundred and twenty-seven for thirty-seven years now, that would make her... "A hundred and sixty-four!" Bernie cried out in shock.

Melissa nodded seriously. “Yes, my age is... that, *number*” she said through gritted teeth, clearly unhappy with the actual number.

Bernie scoffed derisively, was she making fun of him? “Melissa, that’s so cruel to joke about this sort of thing after I spilled my heart out to you” he cried indignantly.

“I’m not” Melissa barked, a breeze somehow blowing through the cave. “Bernie, I can bend the fabric of reality to my whim. I can command the elements and define order and chaos. Bernie... I am a witch” she declared.

Bernie was awestruck, she was making fun of him. “Melissa, I know you can be a bit strict sometimes, but I don’t think you’re a witch” he said sceptically.

Melissa sighed in annoyance. The damn kid just wasn’t getting it. “Looks like I have to demonstrate” she sighed, moving away from the waterfall.

With a raised hand and an almost silent command, the waterfall suddenly divided like a curtain, drawing in sunlight from outside. Bernie’s heart simultaneously felt like it was being squeezed whilst also trying to fly out his throat. It’s a trick, it, it must be. There was no way magic was real. Magic wasn’t real, reality told him so. So, there must’ve been a logical reason for what happened. Yes, like, she must’ve set this up earlier. She knew the lake was here, and it had a waterfall, she must’ve set this all up without him knowing, yes, that was it. He started giggling loudly. “Ah ha, ah ha ha! Ah ha ha, nice... nice trick,” he giggled, “did ya set that up a few days ago? Cuz, nice trick Melissa, nice trick”.

Melissa cleared her throat loudly, though, she might have been growling. Her open palm tightened into a fist as the waterfall flopped back into its regular formation. Her face was a barely recognizable mask of fury, her pointed teeth being bared like a savage beast. “You this **THIS** is a TRICK?!” she screamed furiously, breathing a thick wave of fire right in front of Bernie.

The flames scorched everything in front of him, leaving a thick black mark in front of him. Bernie’s mouth flapped open and shut like a fish, until, a loud piercing scream escaped his lips. He continued to scream, much to Melissa’s barely illuminated dismay. An accusing finger was pointed straight at her as he kept screaming, only taking breaks to draw breath.

He kept screaming for five minutes straight, until his throat was too sore to even go on. "Feel better?" Melissa inquired bitterly.

"You... how... I... WHAT?!" Bernie spluttered, completely incapable of forming cohesive thoughts.

He was now just spitting out whatever messed up chunks of words he could form, annoying Melissa intensely. He continued to gibber loudly, until Melissa's patience snapped. She stomped straight over to the gibbering Otter with her hand raised.

SMACK!

She had slapped Bernie brutally across the face, his head cocked in complete shock as the entire left side of his face was completely red. "You done?" Melissa demanded angrily.

Bernie whimpered loudly, which was the best she was going to get right now. Melissa sighed in frustration, why did she think this would be any different? "I'm sorry I hit you Bernie, it's just... this is the *same exact* result from everyone I tell. After the twentieth time it becomes incredibly frustrating" she sighed in annoyance.

Bernie was still really from her strike, she had really put her all into it. "I know this is hard to process, tearing down your perceptions of reality usually is. But, this doesn't change who I am Bernie. I am the same person you met a week ago. I am the same person who you have lived with, laughed with, and cried with for the past week" she explained, trying to find her most reasonable tone.

"I... I know" Bernie said slowly, still rubbing his face.

"Sorry" Melissa apologised guiltily, kneeling before Bernie. "I didn't mean to do it so hard. I'm just... kinda glad I don't have to hide my powers anymore. Trying to be subtle around you wasn't always easy you know?" she remarked, a sly smile on her face.

“That explains it” Bernie commented randomly.

“Explains what?” Melissa questioned.

“When you first brought me, when I had a shower, I... I was sure I hadn’t unpacked my towel when I went in. And yet, there it was afterwards... you did that... didn’t you?” he accused.

“Yes. Yes I did. I wanted to make sure you were on the level, so I used one of my powers to check-up on you. You were wise to be suspicious about me, but, I noticed you hadn’t taken your towel out. So, I used some levitation to place it on the sink for you” Melissa explained.

Bernie nodded thoughtfully. Suddenly, every impossible thing that had gone on in that cottage made complete and utter sense now. “This is... a lot to take in” he sighed.

“I know sweetie, I know” Melissa replied supportively.

“So, what exactly can a witch do?” Bernie questioned curiously as the shock wore off.

“Lots of things. Unlike most magic users witches and warlocks are especially talented in a large field of magic. We don’t have access to certain kinds, but we get a lot of the good stuff, like many different types of Mancies, Far Seeing, Levitation, and the ability to find unfunny movies funny” she joked.

“Oh come on, as if you could levitate” Bernie joked back, laughing loudly.

Melissa laughed with him, their laughter echoing in the cave. “Melissa?” Bernie said suddenly, amidst their laughter.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for sharing this with me” Bernie smiled in the darkness of the cave, and Melissa smiled right back.