

Pest Control

Wanda shoved her bag through the trapdoor, then pulled herself up after it. Once through, the numbat paused to take in her surroundings. The attic was large and cluttered, the single light-bulb was hopelessly inadequate for the amount of space. "Hello?" She called out, "Anybody up here?" Her call was met with complete silence.

Wanda shrugged and picked up her bag. She hadn't expected a response, but it never hurt to ask. Breathing in, she inhaled the smells of the attic. Old dust, decaying furniture and abandoned fabrics, all passed through her nose before she found the scent she was looking for, freshly powdered wood.

Walking forwards, she let her nose guide her to the far end of the attic. Pushing aside a worn roll of carpet then lifting a box of long forgotten books, revealed the source of the smell, a large termite nest. With a smile she sat down next to it and knocked twice on the exterior. "Found you, so you might as well come out and talk to me."

The silence was broken by a hushed murmuring, hundreds of tiny voices all speaking at once for several minutes before dying down. From a hole in the side, a small worker emerged. "H... Hello?" she glanced longingly back the way she had come, but crawled to the top of the nest to face the numbat.

"Hi there. I'm Wanda." the numbat introduced herself.

"Tichal." came the nervous response.

"Well Tichal, I suppose you can guess why I'm here."

The termite glanced briefly at Wanda's bag and shirt, both of which had the word 'Exterminator' written across them, and shuddered. "But ... Why?" she protested, "We aren't hurting anyone. We're not causing any trouble."

"According to the owners, they've found holes in several pieces of furniture left up here." Wanda interrupted.

"Well, yes." Tichal admitted "We do have to eat. But we haven't touched any of the support beams, and we've kept strictly to the attic. The only stuff we've eaten is old wood that's been lying around here for years. We couldn't have been any less intrusive."

"Maybe, but the owners are paying me to get rid of you, so it obviously wasn't enough."

"This isn't fair. We were as careful as we could be not to ..." Tichal trailed off as Wanda yawned. The numbat's huge tongue stretched to it's full length, bright pink and dripping with stick saliva.

Leisurely, Wanda slurped her tongue back into her mouth then returned her attention to Tichal. "Sorry about that, I know it's not polite, but it's a species habit. Don't let it distract you from what you were saying."

The terrified insect jolted slightly as she remembered that not only her own life, but the lives of her entire colony, depended on her putting forward a good argument "You don't necessarily have to kill us though, do you?" She tried, "If we all promised to leave and rebuild somewhere else, you'd still get paid, right?" An idea suddenly stuck her, "And even better, the owners of that place might pay you to move us again, so you'd make even more money."

Wanda seemed to consider that for a moment, then shook her head. "Sorry. It might be more profitable in the short term, but it's not very professional. I'm supposed to get rid of pests, not just foist them onto other people. Although ..." she paused for a moment, "... I suppose if I could find somewhere that termites would be welcomed, I could relocate your colony there."

Tichal looked briefly hopeful. She'd never heard of a place where her kind were welcomed by the larger species, but if it existed, then it sounded like a far better nest-site than the attic. She was a little reluctant to lose the home she had here, a lot of time and effort had gone into the construction of the nest, but it wasn't like they had a lot of choice. "And do you know anywhere like that?" she asked.

"I know just the place, I'll start transferring you guys immediately." Grabbing the nest, Wanda sank her claws through the exterior, and ripped a large gash into it.

"What are you doing?" Even if they were going to be moved to a new home and wouldn't need this one, Tichal couldn't bear to see so many months of work being ruined like that. "If you want to move us, just ask and I'll get everyone to come out for you."

Wanda didn't even seem to hear her, as she lowered her head to one of the holes. Whatever horror Tichal had felt at seeing her nest broken into, it was nothing compared to the moment the numbat's tongue shot out and wriggled its way into the damaged nest "No! Stop." But it was already too late. Wanda's tongue came back, covered in the wriggling bodies of her friends and family. Slurp. Tongue and termites vanished past her lips, then the tongue shot out again, clean and sticky with fresh saliva.

Beneath her feet, Tichal could hear screams of alarm from her colony, she could even hear the wet slurping of the tongue probing through the tunnels. She ran to try and help her friends, but stopped short of the opening.

Wanda's lips almost brushed the exterior of the nest but the slight gap allowed Tichal a glimpse of who had been caught. Each time Wanda's tongue returned there was a brief moment when Tichal could see the helpless victims before they vanished forever into the predator. Every ten or so flicks Wanda would swallow,

and the accumulated mouthful of termites would slide down her throat.

Tichal stood within arms reach of the tongue, desperate for something to do. She couldn't harm the numbat in anyway, even had she been one of the soldiers she would be useless against an enemy like this. She considered trying to grab one of captured as they shot past her, but knew that if she so much as touched the tongue she would join them. She doubted Wanda would even notice that she'd been pulled inside as well. All she could do was plead desperately for Wanda to show mercy.

Wanda barely heard Tichal's cries, she certainly didn't differentiate them from the shouts of the rest of her meal. As her tongue explored the insides of the nest she kept a mental map of which tunnels she had cleared, and which she had yet to start on. With each new tunnel she explored, she would feel the openings to other branches and her mental image of the nest would grow a little.

The nest, however, was not a large one. All too soon she found, that whichever branch she tried, only led back into tunnels she had already finished. With each lick she was having to reach deeper and deeper into the nest, to get fewer and fewer termites out. A few gulps later and she couldn't even find one. She gave a few last licks to make absolutely sure she hadn't missed anyone, then straightened up and sighed happily. "Very tasty. I told you I'd find somewhere for your friends, and I can't think of anywhere that termites are more welcome than my tummy."

"I ... I ..." Tichal didn't know how to respond to that, the full scope of what had just happened, had yet to fully sink in. "You were going to do that whatever I said, weren't you?" she accused.

"Well yes. I'm afraid that, just like you, I have to eat. Your colony made a nice meal."

"And now it's my turn." It wasn't a question, just the statement of an obvious fact. Tichal glanced briefly at the gaping hole in the side of her beautiful, but now empty, nest. She didn't really want to be spared anyway. After what had happened, digesting in the numbat's belly with the rest of the colony seemed preferable to staying her on her own.

Wanda didn't see any need to continue the conversation further. With one last flick of her tongue, she finished both her meal and her job. Standing up, she wiped some drool from her lips, then picked up her bag and headed back to the trapdoor. Her work here was done, it was time to collect her payment.