

Basic Hospitality (Part 1)

It was midwinter and the snow was piling up outside the windows. I spared only a glance for the outside, as relieved as I was to be out of the cold, I could not afford to waste time. I was a trespasser in this gigantic house and if the owner found me I would most likely become a snack. If I was going to survive, I would need to find a good hiding place fast.

Climbing down from the windowsill, I crept along the wainscoting looking for cracks or signs of weakness. Despite the size of my surroundings, I quickly found what I was looking for; a part of the wall where the wood was rotten and decayed. A little work and I had made a hole just large enough to squeeze through, out of the dimly lit room and into the hollow space between the walls.

The gap between the living room wall and the exterior of the house was only a few inches wide, but for someone my size, that was space enough to walk unhindered. Several metal pipes ran down from some upstairs room, reached the floor and branched horizontal. Looking up I couldn't see the top of them, they disappeared into the fading light above me. Neither the darkness nor the narrow confines bothered me though, if anything these were concepts I associated with safety and it was a relief to be out of the open.

Not a moment too soon either, I had barely been through the gap for a minute, when I heard the front door open and slam. Keeping still and holding my breath, I watched the owner of the house, an enormous vixen, as she brushed the snow from her jacket. Moments later a bright light flooded into the hole as she flicked on the lights to the room. I hastily backed away from the entrance, hoping she wouldn't notice the new crack in her wall.

"Please don't see it. Please don't see. Please just keep on going." I whispered. It seemed unlikely that she would see such a tiny hole in one corner of the room but on the off-chance that she did, things could go very badly for me. To my relief she didn't even glance in my direction, just headed to a table at the far end of the room and dropped a brown, paper bag on it.

Peering through my hole, I watched as she sat down, pulled a sandwich from the bag and begin to eat. The smell of cheese and pickles wafted through the room, soon reaching me and making my stomach growl in complaint. Just a corner from that sandwich would be a feast for someone my size, but I could only watch in envy as she rapidly devoured the entire thing. She wasn't finished there either, reaching back into the bag her fingers snagged something, there was a squeal of despair, then she drew out a live and terrified mouse.

He was much like me. Male and with darker fur, but in all important respects, that could just as well have been me, dangling by my tail out there. A brief movement and he was gone. The slight bulge then ran down the vixen's neck then disappeared beneath her collar bone, the last sign of his existence. I felt sick. Just thinking about how easily that could have been me sent chills through

my body. Worse, I could see the vixen already reaching for the bag again.

Another squeal. Another mouse dragged out, female this time. Again, I barely had time to look at her before she was tossed into the fox's mouth. The casual motion showing no concern for the life that was being taken. Another twitching lump slid downwards and already the vixen was reaching for a third.

I turned away, unable to watch any further. I still heard the squeal though. And the gulp. And the satisfied belch that followed. Looking back I saw her run one paw over her belly, licking her lips. She stood up, rolled the empty bag into a ball and threw it into a wastepaper basket then walked back out the room.

Click. The lights flicked out and the door slammed behind her as she left. For a while I sat in the dark, thinking about what I had just witnessed. Maybe this whole thing was a mistake. I could slip back outside in the night and abandon my plans. Then I thought of the snow and the wind and reminded myself that there were worse ways to die than in a predator's belly, at the very least it would be warm. And that was assuming she could even catch me. So far she had shown no signs of noticing my hole and a predator that had to buy her prey pre-caught might not be the most observant or agile.

Resolving to stay, at least a little longer, I crept very cautiously back out from my hole. Ears twitching as I listened for any sign that she might return, but apart from the natural creaking of the house, all was silent. Moving softly to the table, I soon found a few crumbs that had fallen from the sandwich. They were nothing to the vixen, and very little even to me, but compared with another night spent starving in the snow, it was a vast improvement.

Belly still groaning for more, I retreated to my hole. Back inside the walls I tried to plan my next move. First I should scout around a bit, get to know my surroundings and any potential escape routes, then I should gather some material, anything that wouldn't be missed and start building a nest, then I should try to find a source of water and maybe even some food. Instead of doing any of that, I curled up beside a hot water pipe and fell immediately asleep.