

My unintentional hostess left early the next day. The first I knew about it was when the slam of the front door woke me up. Despite the rude awakening and the hard wooden floor, I felt great. It was the first good nights sleep I had had in a long time, the warmth of the pipes was just another added bonus. Risks be damned, I was not going to leave here willingly. Still if I wanted to live undetected there were things to do, I didn't know how long the owner of the house would be gone and I would need to make the most of it.

Cautiously poking my head out the hole, I listened and inhaled. Just because one fox had left was no reason to take any risks. A few deep breaths confirmed that the only fresh scent was the vixen's and listening carefully I couldn't hear any movement from the rest of the house. Still cautious, I crept from the safety of my hole and began to explore, keeping close enough to be sure that I could get back undetected if I heard the front door open.

The room I was in was sparsely furnished. The hole I had made was in one wall beneath a window. The wall to the right had a large fireplace in it and facing it was an old armchair. Against the opposite wall was the table and chair that she had eaten her 'dinner' at last night, with the wastepaper basket beside it. To the right was the only door out of the room. I took my time exploring the room, walking round the chairs and becoming familiar with the layout from several different angles.

In part I was being thorough because I knew having a good understanding of this room could save my life someday, but I couldn't deny it was also because I was afraid to go on. The next room would be further from my hole and closer to the front door, but however carefully I inspected this one I wasn't going to find any food. If I wanted to eat, I would have to try the next.

Reluctantly, I plucked up my courage and headed through. This room was even emptier than the last. Two more armchairs, a desk with a lamp, some kind of filing cabinet, two large windows and a door leading into the hallway. After a brief inspection of the filing cabinet, that revealed I resigned myself to a day of going hungry. There was no food to be found in either of the rooms I had searched and I certainly wasn't going further just yet.

In terms of escape my search of the rooms was also disappointing, there were no good hiding spaces or other holes in the wall. There were a few places that looked weak enough for me to make more holes but I was reluctant to try this. Only having one exit point bothered me, but the more holes I made the more chance of the vixen finding them and realizing she had an uninvited guest. I was also disturbed to realize there was no easy way out of the house. I had gained entrance by squeezing through the letter slot in the front door, but it had taken both time and effort to push the heavy flap open, and doing so from the inside it would be even harder. Not an ideal situation if my life depended on a quick or quiet getaway.

The best either of these rooms offered in terms of hiding places the space

beneath the armchairs. Not a bad choice if I needed to get out of sight in a hurry as they looked like they were rarely moved, but unlikely to help much if she had already seen me. While testing these hiding places I did however find a plentiful supply of fluff. Taking fabric from the carpet or curtains would likely be noticed, and damaging the house could only make the fox angrier once she noticed. Taking the fluff was not only likely to go unnoticed, but would also arguably be making the place tidier. I dragged several large balls of it back to my hole and began making a nest.

Busy as I had been, there were only two rooms that I had been able to explore. To reach the kitchen or the stairs I would need to walk past the front door, and without knowing when the owner of the house may return I was not prepared to take that risk. Maybe in a few days, once I had learned her routine, but not yet. The only problem with that was I still had not eaten since last night's crumbs and my best chance of finding food would surely be in the kitchen. Ignoring my aching stomach, I preoccupied myself with getting my nest cozy.

A good thing I did too. With a click I heard the front door swing open then slam shut. Dropping the latest piece of fluff I was carrying I darted back inside my hole. Again I watched as the vixen entered, placed a paper bag on the table and removed a sandwich. The inviting smells of food wafted into my hole and to my delight I saw her drop a large chunk of crust. It fell to the floor, apparently unnoticed, and bounced behind her. I knew that when she stood up she would probably notice and clear it away, but there was still a chance that she wouldn't and I would be enjoying a thick chunk of rich, seedy bread before the day was over.

Having finished her sandwich she immediately began on the second part of her meal. I covered my ears and looked away, having no desire to remind myself of the fate of the unlucky rodents trapped in that bag.

Only when I was sure it was all over did I peer back out into the room. The vixen was still there, leaning back in the chair. My eyes returned to the crust, still lying on the carpet between us. Come on and leave, I willed the vixen, but she showed no signs of doing so, in fact she picked up a book from the table and began to read.

Time ticked by and I grew more and more impatient. The smell of the crust was making me hungrier by the second and all I could think about was how likely she was to notice and remove it when she left. I began to wish that she hadn't dropped it. The slim possibility of a meal felt somehow worse than no chance at all.

Finally I decided to risk it. I could have reached and retrieved the crust a dozen times since she started reading and not once had she showed any signs of leaving. Confident I could retrieve my meal in absolute silence I edged out of my hole. Slinking across the carpet I moved softly closer, ready at any moment to run. A sudden movement made me freeze, but she was only turning a page.

About halfway to the crust I heard her stomach growl and froze. She was still not moving, but I could hear every slosh and groan of her belly, indifferently turning both mice and sandwich into the same mush. I shuddered, forgetting the crust for a moment as I stared up at the enormous predator.

Slouching in a lazy position, one hand holding a book the other resting on her gut. Even so relaxed she had an air of alertness about her, the tenseness that came before a pounce. Looking higher I realized why. Though her head was tilted towards the book, through the corner of one eye she was watching me.

The moment our eyes met she reacted. Dropping the book and lunging from her chair towards me. I was faster. Dodging as her grasping fingers descended on me I darted back towards my hole. For a moment I couldn't find it and scrabbled in panic at the wall, then I found the entrance and squeezed inside.

Back in the relative safety of the wall I paused to catch my breath, panting and shaking with fear and shock. Outside I could hear the vixen moving about, but I was relatively certain she couldn't catch me in here. The light blotted out as she peered through the crack, and I backed a little further from the entrance, careful to tread silently. The darkness subsided again as she moved her head back from the hole.

"Are you okay?" the voice was very close, she must be sitting right next to the wall. I didn't answer, whatever reasons the predator had for asking, I had no desire to cooperate. "I apologize for scaring you and for trying such an underhand trick. I smelt you in my house last night but figured that as long as you didn't know I knew about you, you'd be easier to catch." I heard her move back towards the hole. One giant finger poked a chunk of bread into the wall then withdrew.

"There. That's my peace offering to you. Although if you want the rest of it you're going to have to come out for it." I remained silent. There was a few seconds pause, then "My name's Icsarla by the way..." I remained silent. "You don't have to keep so quiet. I know you're still there, I can smell you, but you're safe as long as you're inside the wall. So why not talk?" Still I remained silent. "Come on, If you're going to be a guest in my house, at least tell me your name?"

Finally I responded. Still terrified, my voice came out as a trembling whisper, "Teslin." Now that she had an answer I hoped she would go away.

"Well Teslin, you're welcome in my house, but let me make something very clear. While you're hiding in those walls, you're safe from me. But if I catch you, and you'll have to come out eventually if you want to eat, then you'll be treated no differently than any other mouse. So I advise that you take care. Also please remember that this is my house, and treat it with respect. I can accept the odd hole as you're going to need them to survive, but if you go too far, start damaging my things or keeping me awake at night with your noise ... Well, just consider who you would rather live with, a fox that thinks of you as a future snack and is

content to wait for you to slip up, or one that considers you a nuisance and is actively working towards your death.”

I heard her stand up. “I don't mean to be too threatening, just behave yourself and we should get along fine. And when you get hungry, feel free to help yourself to any food you can find. Just remember that unless I've given it to you, like that scrap of bread, then there will always be a chance that you'll be walking into a trap.” she chuckled slightly, then left.

I waited a few minutes to recover from both the chase and that conversation, then quickly retrieved the piece of crust she had poked into my hole. It was less than half the size of the piece she had dropped on the floor and made a pretty poor meal for the day, still it was better than the crumbs that had made yesterday's meal and a lot better than what I had often made do with outside. The intention was clearly to keep me hungry enough to need to venture out and provide her with opportunities to catch me.

I was also a little concerned that she may have poisoned it, but in the end, dismissed that as unlikely. She had told me it was not a trap and while she might be lying, there wasn't a lot she could gain from it. Poisoning me wouldn't get her the meal she was clearly hoping for, in fact it would ensure she would never get to eat me. Also I was too hungry to care.

While small, the bread was one of the best meals I had eaten in a long time. The crust was fresh, having been baked only a few hours ago, with the seeds on top giving it a faintly nutty taste. Despite my attempts to make it last, I was soon licking the last few specks from my paws.

I waited a few hours to be sure Icsarla was not about to return, then headed out and gathered up the crumbs she had spilled around her chair. While they certainly improved the meal, all the dry bread was making me very thirsty. Despite the pipes, there was no source of water inside the wall so I was going to have to risk venturing into the kitchen.

The whole house was dark and silent. I shivered slightly at every looming shadow, half expecting Icsarla to leap out at any moment and declare that I had walked into her trap. I also knew that I had to remain as silent as possible. Keeping her awake had been included on Icsarla's list of things I absolutely should not do if I wanted to survive for any length of time.

Entering the kitchen I looked around. Giant cupboards with doors I could never hope to move as well as a single colossal fridge loomed over me. I briefly thought about how much food it must hold. Enough to keep me going for a lifetime I imagined, yet Icsarla probably had to refill it every few weeks.

Scrambling up one of the cupboards I reached the sideboard and reviewed my surroundings. The surface was mostly clear with a few kitchen implements scattered around and just a few feet away the sink. Throat parched I headed

toward it. Now I just needed to work out how to get the water from it.

There was some water already sitting in the bottom, but unless I slid down the side there was no way for me to get it, and I couldn't see any easy way of getting back out. The sides of the sink might be climbable, but I wasn't prepared to stake my life on it.

Next I tried the taps, to my surprise I found I could just about move them. It took a lot of straining, but the tap slowly turned a few degrees and a small trickle of water emerged from the nozzle. Still that did me no immediate good as it was only filling the bowl. I sat and thought for a while for any way that I could get the water, but came up blank. Looking to my surroundings didn't help much either. There were several cups and containers that could be used to capture the water, but they were all far too big for me to lift.

Eventually I resorted to the somewhat desperate strategy of climbing up the cold metal spigot and out over the sink. The metal was slippery, but thick enough that I could keep my balance. It was nonetheless terrifying, particularly once I got to the end and had to reach down and try to cup some of the water in one hand.

After taking drinking as much as I could, I retreated back down the pipe to the safety of the sideboard. My method had worked, but it would be problematic trying to repeat it every time I wanted a drink. In the long run I would need a container of some sort to store some water in. The long term however could wait, right now I needed sleep. First I strained to turn the tap back off to prevent Icsarla from getting annoyed with me, then scrambled back down the cupboards and returned to my hole.

All things considered it had been a pretty good day. I had eaten, I had quenched my thirst and had a thick nest to sleep in. And the predator that came with these luxuries seemed friendly despite her stated intention to eventually eat me. Burying myself in the fluff I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.