MELANIE the BADGER

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Memory

I can't remember my name. No, I do remember. My name is Melanie, and I remember my mother gave me that name a long time ago. Remember also that my mother is gone because I left her long ago to become a forest dweller, with my own burrow and territory. She used to cradle me beside her and comfort me when I cried before my eyes were even open, and now this human cradles me beside him and comforts me, and it is so hard to keep my eyes open.

He holds my graying older fur gently as the other human sitting alongside us strokes me with his own human paws. Their eyes are wet, and I do not know why their eyes would be wet, but do I know these humans from somewhere. They should stroke me because I have just saved their lives with my warning scream of rage.

Once again I am allowed to be proud predator instead of a weak prey thing. I can have pride again, and not go without the pride any female badger should have. Not crawling through the forest in pain like some lower prey creature and not trying to find anything to eat while starving slowly, instead of hunting prey on four good paws.

Kekuit waits beside me. For some reason the humans can't see him waiting patiently beside me, even though I see him

clearly. He crawled across this field today to guide me home, he crawled here once before.

The monster is dead, and I am proudest of that. I have pride and try not to whimper with gratitude as the human holding me strokes me. It is just so hard to think now. I lick his human paws as he strokes me and tries to ease the journey we both know I am going on. The humans know, as I know, what is coming for me because I am a predator. I know death when it calls. Kekuit waits beside me, and I know he is beside me to help me answer death's call.

They gave me something to eat! These humans gave me their food instead of keeping it for themselves when they saw my need for it, saw how thin my sides were, saw how impossible it would be for me to ever hunt properly again.

Both humans gave me something to eat, and it was so delicious and so wonderful to actually have meat again. I have not had enough food for so long, and am so old and useless. A prey not a predator anymore, reduced to licking the paws of humans in gratitude. Kekuit waits beside me.

I know both humans, but it is just so hard to remember. Their human scents are familiar as their stroking human paws follow the traces of the scars that have never left my face and body from the murderers of my young more than a full set of seasons ago. Their stroking human paws follow the four furrows in my side that the monster gave me in this season of warmth and new growth; four deep furrows, unable to heal properly because I could not turn enough to clean them.

Their stroking human paws follow the twisted thing that is now my back. The two humans stroke me gently, and their eyes are wet. Why are their eyes making water? Why would these humans sorrow for me? Kekuit waits beside me.

My lover Akycha strokes me, grooming me gently at sunset in the heat of this season as we sit together outside our burrow watching darkness grow around us. Waiting for it to be cool enough to hunt, as he tells me I am not too old, and he will love me no matter how strange and different our lives are now from the common habits of our badger kind.

He came to me so late in life and is younger than I, but he is the one that chose me, and I am happy with him. I remember that he came to me after the young female rabbit left.

She and I are so different, I the predator and she the prey. No, the young female rabbit left me when Akycha arrived. No, Akycha is dead, killed by this huge monster that took him from me when he was my last chance in life for love and new young, and the monster that followed tried to kill me in hate and anger for what I did.

It lays dead where they stopped its charge as it prepared to kill all three of us; and this time there will be no extra chance for him to survive, to kill again in any form. The humans are stroking me, my mind is drifting so much, I am so very old, and I have been hurt so very badly. Kekuit waits beside me.

The young rabbit strokes me with her tongue in the falling white coldness around us, grooming my injuries where my face and body are ripped and torn by the human-bred creatures that slaughtered my young, the last young I might have so late in life. She cares for me even though I am her enemy.

How can I let prey care for me? I do not know her name; how can I know her name when I do not speak the same language as prey?

But she is so small and young, and my own small young lay dead behind us, being covered by the falling snow along with their killers.

I want her to be my new young so badly, as I whimper with pain and loss, and she cares for me, her enemy. No, she is gone; she left early last spring when I found my lover Akycha. He strokes me instead of her, grooming me gently. No, he is dead. It is so hard to think. Kekuit waits beside me.

My young stroke me in our snug burrow with their little tongues as the leaves change colors and fall outside. My young show me how much they love me even though it should be impossible for me to have had them so late in the seasons, so close to the winter. They should have waited inside me to arrive in the spring, not arrived this early, not now. How can I see them through the coming winter when they should be grown and gone by this season?

No, they are all dead, and falling snow is covering them, along with their murderers. I fought so many so hard with all the fierceness that is ours and I failed to save my young. I am so useless; a poor prey creature that has to be held by humans and stroked by them and it is so hard to concentrate anymore. Kekuit waits beside me.

I try not to whimper with gratitude for the gentleness with which the two humans stroke me. I remind myself sternly that I am predator and not prey. Predators do not whimper, and I will not cry for myself!

The humans stroke me, and they seem to know this also, because their eyes are wet as they both try to help me, the predator that saved them. Kekuit waits beside me.

I remember now. I do know both humans trying to comfort me because they shared food with me in the forest after they took the deer seasons ago when we first met, and they shared with me in seasons whenever we met again. We have an understanding, these two humans and I. We are both predators

in the forest, and we are the same under the fur, or at least we would be if humans had decent fur.

I could not save my young and I could not save my lover, but I saved them. They remember me. They know me. They cry for me. I tremble in human paws as he holds me, strokes me, comforts me, and cries for me. Kekuit waits beside me.

Their human paws touch me as they try to sooth me, and I would have let few humans touch me before. But now I am some pathetic prey instead of a decent predator, and they helped me to kill the monster. No. They killed it. I had no choice; I could only wait to die and scream my rage at it from behind and below the humans as it came charging, roaring rage across the fresh spring grass of the field to kill the three of us.

I lick this human hand as he strokes me. My mind is drifting so badly. I am so old, and my back hurts so badly.

I hear my mother calling me from so many seasons ago.

She is so beautiful and fierce. No predator will dare touch us with her around.

No, she must be dead; that was so long ago.

She strokes me, grooming and cleaning me. She is calling me, and I have to go to her.

Kekuit is still beside me, waiting patiently for me to join him in our final hunt together. He grooms me gently, comforting me on this last journey while reminding me that his mother must be stronger than this. I must go with him soon.

The young rabbit strokes me in the cold, winter whiteness around us as she cleans my wounds. The humans stroke me in this new spring grass I crawled through to come here as they comfort me. My lover strokes me in the heat of summer as we love and then sit together to wait for the darkness to come. My young stroke me as the leaves change colors and fall around us.

They all stroke me as one; and Kekuit, who once could not stand, now stands up beside me while my mind drifts back to when there were no young, no lovers, no humans, and Kekuit had not yet been born.