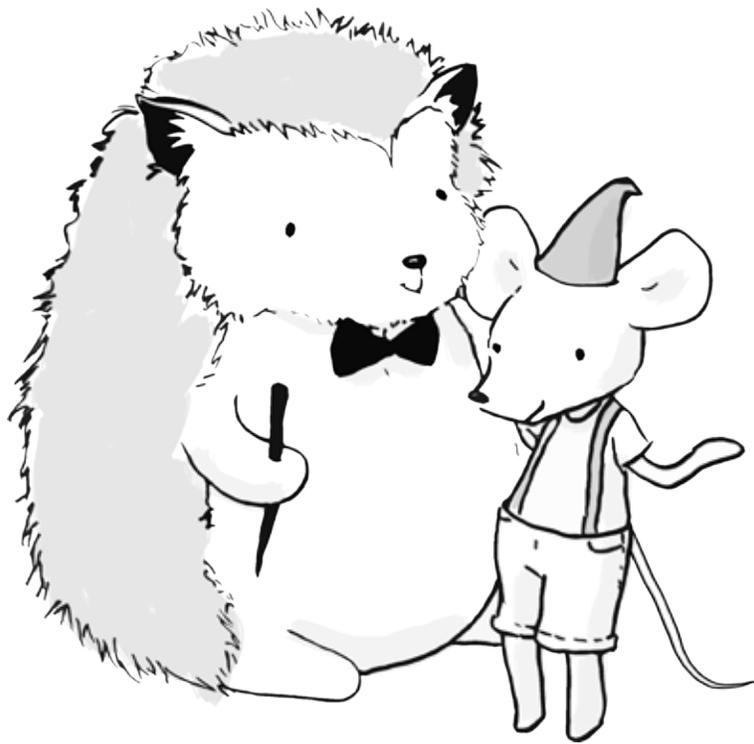


The First and Foremost

by Wendy Wilson-Wright



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Wendy Wright
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Roller Blading

It had been a major scruffle, a real skirbashem. Pentip had barely made it. If it hadn't been for his extra sharp quills, the book would have closed on the little guy's hedgehog life. One full snap of that hawk's beak and Pentip would've been a goner. Thank goodness he had quills, and thank goodness for his mother who had taught him to sharpen those quills before each nightly venture.

That hawk, its claw-sinking hunger—Pentip wanted to curl into a ball when he remembered it. Yea, OK, it'd been a baby hawk, all wobbly and bobbly and with buttery-beginner talons—so what? To Pentip, it was a vulturous predator, a hungry chomp machine. Even a baby hawk has a powerful clamp-smacking beak and a bunch of hedge-worthy talons. It just doesn't quite know it yet. Thank goodness though, that hawk baby hadn't yet toughened to the poke of a hedgehog's quills, especially Pentip's sharpened ends. Pentip was a hedgehog with extra slice-ready barbs. And that's because each and every sunrise before bed, he groomed his prickly points until they were razor-honed, prepared for the next night's challenges.

"Do I h-a-v-e tooo?" He thought about the way he used to fling out his syllables at his mother when she told him to prepare for bed, a whine flung like a spider slinging its silken thread. He knew she hated that sound.

"Pentip!" Is all his mother would say. But her eyes would become a teacher's red checkmark; the kind you don't argue with.

It's true, he didn't entirely love this chore. Can't judge him though, it did take some doing to sharpen all those quills on his powderpuff-sized body. But, obviously, the work paid off, especially now that he was out in the wild unknown, living on his own.

That scary night, when Pentip had felt himself being scooped up, a split second before being clamped down and completely snarled, he located his clever mechanism, the one his mother had assured him existed. Thinking about it afterward, he kind of felt like a superhero, the way he thrust his quills against the hawk's tender mouth corners. The way he then, having been scooped in a head-toward-hawk's-stomach position, brilliantly tucked himself into a ball of blades and rolled his little body up and down the hawk's delicate tongue. That was the day the baby hawk learned to spit.

Wake-Up Call

The sun became sleepy and inched its way to bed behind the far-off hills. A blue-gray, dusky shadow stretched its arms and yawned in the air surrounding Pentip's bedroom, a well-chosen hideout beneath the prickly leaves of a brambling berry bush. Pentip stirred, the leaves beneath his body crinkling in complaint. Without opening his eyes, he could tell: the moon would soon be looking in on him—it was time to start waking up. As always, before even lifting an eyelid, Pentip lengthened his body and began to s-t-r-e-t-c-h.

"OW!" He grabbed his leg, freezing midway. "What the comboodle?" The little guy yipped. Slowly and little by little, Pentip pulled inward, to a non-stretch position.

His left back leg was throbbing, yelping at him. Afraid to feel another knife-jab, the hedgehog remained on his back and worm-scooted his way out of his leafy, hedge-hidden bed and then slowly, cautiously tried to wobble upward.

"OWWW!" He chittered and froze in place, wishing the pain to go away. It didn't. "Scat!" He yelled. (His mother would've rinsed his mouth with pond water if she had heard this word.) His tiny teeth clenched together. *Well if this wasn't a dumbbell-doodly surprise*, he thought, rubbing his whimpering leg. *First a hawk, now this?*

Alas, there would be no venturing that night. No bite-worthy pillbugs. No prized millipedes. No thick, mouthfuls of fleshy caterpillars. The thought made his stomach's slosh swirl; its sides bent inward, searching for something solid. There was nothing. Zilch. Nada. Not in his gut, not in these brambles. Not a single cricket, not one slip-and-swallow worm in this dry, hard-packed earth. Not one way to calm the growling beast inside him. He'd been whipsawed. Pentip's little mouth crinkled like the leaves beneath him. Gloom seeped into his muscles. And just to be extra mean, the wind, his old pal the wind, went out of its way to bully him some more. It reached down and purposely stirred the hedge above him, bending the hedge's thinner twigs, making them bounce into Pentip's face, in a menacing and quite evil way. It seemed everyone was against him. Why him? Pentip's chin quivered and his eyes became watery—it hurt his feelings, the way the world was treating him. But teary eyes and trembling chins meant nothing to the earth; it had no sympathy, no compassion, because it did it again. And this time the wind really whacked him good, a much heavier branch slapped his face with a big, fat berry.

"OWWW!" He barked at the wind, and the branch, and the stupid berry...

Pentip scrunched his face into a knot, giving the berry a threatening glare.

Ugly thing just kept dangling in front of him. He stared at the berryblob, gave it a long, hard look.

You know...his mom used to try and get him to eat those stupid berry things, said they were good for him. But why eat boring things like berries when there were so many delicious goodies like worms and insects? The berry continued its dangle.

Maybe... Pentip considered, icy stubbornness beginning to melt. *Could be... worth a try... mean thing deserves to be eaten anyway...*

It was that last thought that did the convincing. Good thing too, because the wind was getting ready to teach him the true definition of a wake-up slap.

His paw felt heavy and sluggish, but Pentip lifted it and whapped at the dangling berry above. Cringing, he put it in his mouth and bit down. He chewed slowly.

Yea, alright... He sulked as he chewed. *It was—OK. Just. Fine—at least I won't starve,* he told himself, struggling to push away images of fat, juicy worms and crunchified crickets.

All those luscious insects with their crispy outsides and tender insides, just waiting for him over at the pond, an easy jaunt for a strong-legged hedgehog, but so so far away for him with his damaged leg. If only they would come to him...

"C-o-m-e h-e-r-e, little worms." Pentip worked his voice, sliding the syllables, drawing them out in a friendly song sort of way. He felt ridiculous, calling to worms like that, but he was desperate. And desperate times call for humiliating measures. So, he tried again; he tried to lasso, to spiderweb one measly, noodly meal.

"C-o-m-e on; squiggle this w-a-y," he called again; his voice soft and slippery.

Truth be told, this kind of trick had never worked on his mother. And, apparently, it wouldn't be working on a worm any time soon.

Leg-Lifts and Chin-Ups

Three whole nights—he had lived on berries for three blessed nights. If only he could get to the pond where there was sure to be a feast of insects, a buffet of choice and yumminess. He felt his quills droop, so he slumped too, folded into his grump, rolled up like a pillbug. A pillbug, a plump roly-polly pillbug—his mouth begged for a bite. If he had had the wherewithal, if he hadn't been so worn out by his own bugification, he would have kicked something, but, come to think of it, one sore leg will do—thank you very much. The perplexed hedgehog folded inward and became a puddle of gloom. He stared at the ground. He was stuck inside this hedge for who knows how long... He missed the moon. He missed the stars. He missed the worms!

And to be truthful, he was so missing everything he nearly missed a brilliant idea. As one sad, tiny quill broke free from his upper back and floated over his head, the prickly point tickled his nose.

His quills, his tough, reliable quills! The hedgehog had an idea.

He would hedge no longer. His thought pumped glee into his sharp prickles; they straightened. Pentip jabbed the fallen quill's pointy end into the ground, and then, using his good front paw to hold the quill as a cane, he heaved his body upward into a back-legged standing position.

Hobble...step...wobble. He was one step forward.

Try again, he told himself. Jab a crutch-like quill into the ground ahead; plunk a paw forward; now swing the other leg outward; hold it; sway until steady... OK. Now start again.

He was doing it. He would get out of this berry bramble, out of this inhospitable hedge. He would get to where the food was tasty. He would! Until he couldn't. Pentip had wobbled his way to the end of the berry bramble, hobbled forward under the lengthy protection of the thick, prickly leaves. But now, the next plunky step would take him into the open, into the naked night air. Isn't this what he'd been longing for, a night of travel under the stars? Moonglossed adventures like he had always had before? So why was he so hesitant? The thick night would jacket him with its blackness; the hawk would be asleep by now. So why not keep going?

He paused. He quieted his breath. And when he did, he heard the reason he couldn't go further. There was a slight rustle outside his berry bush, a whisper of movement within the branches of a nearby tree. Predators—he could smell the danger. And just when he caught a whiff of the raspy, hungry scent, the threat hooted. It was an owl, a hungry owl puffing its jazzy, hunt song into the starlight. (That's the nice thing about owls; they do give you a fair warning before the chase.) Pentip listened to the owl's breathy, ruffly tune. If there had been trouble escaping a hawk when he had had four good legs, how could he expect to make it now? Had he taken this long, wobbly hedge-covered journey for nothing? It didn't feel like "nothing." His quills probed the surrounding air for an answer. His head lifted to the moon. What should he do?

A gust of wind answered. It parted the hedge's leaves and swept through the brambles, pushing the solution toward his paw's clutches. Pentip didn't pause to puzzle it; he dropped his crutch-like quill and snatched the object with his good paw. Instantly, the wind released its grip on the delivery and disappeared. Pentip stared at the wind's gift. A curl of bark, a thin scroll, sat within his tiny paws; he examined its milky mud covering, its scalloped edges. Was it a note? A letter, for him? He unrolled the barky scroll and peered inside. Sure enough there were curving lines dancing across the bark's surface, a message! For a second, hope gushed through his body, straightening his spine. But then he looked more closely. The lines were water droplet stains mixed with sweeping patterns within the wood. He didn't know this language. He knew hedgehog language. And he knew the universal language of all animals. But he didn't know the language of the wind. He was just a hedgehog, just Pentip. He wouldn't be able to decipher this writing even if it spelled his name.

"Pentip; I'm Pen-tip," he snipped at the wind, his words hissing as he enunciated each syllable.

That's when it came to him. He grabbed his quill that had fallen to the ground and stabbed the nearest berry dangling from the prickly brambles. Its red, inky juice dripped from the end of his quill. Thank goodness he had learned to write.

Postmarked

His writing was splotchy, but legible. As he scratched the quill's point across the bark's surface, a soft feeling filled him. He remembered his sulking at the long minutes spent doing his homework, how his mother had made him practice the letters over and over.

"Now when you speak to others, they will be able to listen," she had beamed at him. If only he had smiled back.

Here's a translation of what Pentip wrote:

I'M IN A TRUE KERFUFFLE. I'M A HURT AND HUNGRY HEDGEHOG WHO NEEDS YOUR HELP. PLEASE BRING FOOD. ANYTHING EDIBLE, ANYTHING AT ALL, ANYTHING—ESPECIALLY SQUIGGLY WORMS, SOMERSAULTING PILLBUGS, OR CLACKETY-CRUNCH CRICKETS. BUT I'LL GLADLY RECEIVE ANYTHING, PERHAPS NOT BERRIES, FOR THE TIME BEING. I'VE TAKEN COVER UNDER THE BERRY HEDGE NEXT TO A BIG TREE. I'VE WRITTEN THE ADDRESS (SEE BELOW) ON THE LARGEST LEAF JUST OUTSIDE MY HIDEOUT. YOU'LL SEE MY QUILL STICKING OUT OF THE HEDGE.

THANK YOU,

PENTIP

135 PAUSABILITY SHRUB

The hopeful hedgehog pushed the scroll through the brambling leaves and held it to the wind. "Mail ready to deliver," he whispered. A gleeful gust scooped up the scroll and carried it away.

Fidget Spinner

The scrolled letter swished and swerved and scooped and dipped. It jetted through the night's syrupy air, engulfed in the safety of the wind's hand. The pair skated across the moonlight's gloss, dipping under branches and twisting around boulders. Not a moment to waste. Not a blink of hesitation. They swam through starry glitter, pulled toward destiny, until their dance suddenly ended and they stopped. They had reached their target: a small but not insignificant, homespun but not homely house made of vivid yarn braids and thick rubber bands, hues of pink, orange, blue, and purple, that stretched across a frame of twigs. Tiny wildflowers grew from the house's earthen rooftop; a silvery pipe poked its head through the roof, exhaling whiffs of smoky hellos. The wind moved a finger across the address: 135 Kismet Corner—current resident: Nibbles. Quivering as it hovered, the scroll waited for its cue.

And then, just like that, the wind whispered goodbye and released its hold of the scrolled letter. Its barky self paused midair for a full second, then swished left and right, waltzing downward. As soon as it touched the earth, it rolled up to the house's twiggy door and tapped.

"Hello Skittles," a little voice squeaked from somewhere inside the house. "Hop on in; I was just about to bring you some." The voice hollered, sounding preoccupied.

The scroll tapped again.

"Skittles, I was just about to—"

The door swung open and out popped a mouse, a little mouse holding a rather sizable knife, for a rodent that is. Its scissoring sharpness glinted in the glow of firelight that swam from the mouse's kitchen and out the open front door. The cautious scroll rolled backward.

"A letter? For me?" Nibbles reached his hand inside the door to place his knife on the entryway's bookshelf.

Immediately, the scroll rolled forward.

"Naw.. I never get mail," Nibbles rubbed his pointy nose with the back of his paw. "You must want Skittles over by the purple iris growing next to the pond," he pointed.

The scroll teeter-tottered side to side, rolled up and over the mouse's teeny toes, and spun in place. Nibbles' mouth stretched into an uncertain smile; the tips of his ears pinkened as he wiped his mush-covered paws on his apron. Large and small splats of mustard yellow, streaks of slime green, and dribbles of wildflower red covered the apron's surface.

"I never get mail," Nibbles looked half worried, half thrilled. His paws seemed clean, but he continued wiping them on his dirty apron as he muttered. His words were breathy; he sounded as if he were trying to inhale and exhale at the same time. "I thought you were Skittles, wanting some of my supper, as usual." Nibbles reached up and tugged on his red pointy hat for no good reason. "Well, his name's not really Skittles," he said in a half-giggle. "I just call him that on account of the colorful dots that sometimes cover his body." Nibbles gave a nervous chuckle to hide his whirling thoughts.

The scrolled letter just sat there, waiting.

Nibbles continued to chitter and jitter: "I quite like his jolly polka-dots. Besides, Skittles claims they attract the ladies." Nibbles' face grew hot as he spoke; he shrugged and chewed the inside of his lip, unsure he should have said what he had.

A clunky silence surrounded them. Nibbles looked left and right, as though he could see his words floating in the air, as though he wished to suck them back into his mouth. Not knowing what else to do, he straightened his already straight apron, forgetting to release his grip of the splattered cloth; his tiny claws dug into its material.

Again, the scroll tapped his toes. It wiggled its behind and then stood on end, its top corners bending outward, like two puppy paws begging for a treat.

Nibbles took a tiny step backward and peered at the scroll. Noticing his paws' clutch on the apron, he released his grip. "Uh...So...For me?" He tugged at his hat again. His cheeks burned; his throat was dry and snagged on itself when he swallowed. He wasn't sure why.

Later, he would retell this story, describing the event as a spotlight-in-the-eye, inside-out, freakish-specimen type of feeling. He wasn't used to critters begging for his attention, and he didn't know what to think of scrolls that rolled up to him like this. Critters skittering the other direction or tiptoeing out of sight—that he knew how to handle.

"OK," he whispered as he reached down to open the scrolled letter.

Out of Line

Now, Nibbles wasn't your ordinary mouse, as far as mice go. He was pretty different, a bit str—well let's just say, outstanding. Thing is, outstanding isn't always a good thing when you're speaking of a mouse. "Keep quiet; blend in; don't do anything that causes a fuss," his family always warned.

Nibbles knew why—life was safer that way. And he took their advice...most of the time...for many things...just not so much the mousy tidbit-to-do things, like: when to eat, where to live, how to act, etc. You know, just the general stuff. It wasn't his fault; Nibble's eyes saw beyond his eyesight. Food was more than food. Stuff was more than stuff. When he peered at something, he saw promise trapped inside its center.

This being the case, he couldn't help but stand out. He simply didn't think like the rest of his clan. For example, when he was little and the whole family lived together on Main Street, they'd sneak into a house and look for something yummy. If they found, for instance, a hunk of cheese that had fallen on the floor, they would—all but Nibbles would—stuff their tiny mouths until they nearly choked, stretching their cheeks with their enormous bites, swallowing their cheesy treasure faster than the flick of a light switch. Not Nibbles. Before eating, he'd sculpt patterns in the cheese, or he'd carve a statue out of the chunk and then find a ruffly leaf of lettuce to use as the statue's skirt. The family would just roll their eyes at him.

Another time, when his brother and sister found a loaf of bread, they each took position at opposite ends of the loaf and burrowed through the center of each slice, gobbling the spongy bread like sharpeners eating pencils, forming one long bread tunnel. Nibbles, instead, waited until they were done and then used his siblings' leftovers to construct a three-story mansion, equipped with a crust-style roof and furnished with doughy bedroom sets and dining room furniture. He still smiles when he remembers how his siblings scrambled up and down the mansion's winding staircase, how they tried out the furniture he had built, wrapping themselves in the bread-bed's doughy blankets, giggling so loudly that they woke the household. Yep, that art project had been worth a night's missed meal.

But even an artsy mouse like Nibbles had to admit: this creative passion of his did not always work in his favor. Far too many times, some human would stumble onto the scene and throw a screaming fit when they saw him, he'd have to drop his artistic endeavor, dive into the hole in the wall and scramble to safety before getting a decent bite of his meal.

Later, he'd cringe listening to his family's *tsk, tsk, tsk*, until he drifted to sleep, paws holding his empty stomach.

"Hey chunk chisel—you need a little cheese sense in that gooey brain of yours!" They'd tease with statements such as this.

Sometimes he knew they were right. Sometimes he knew they were wrong. Sometimes he wondered what the words *right* and *wrong* actually meant. And sometimes, the whole thing left him with an odd, toothache-kind-of feeling.

So I'm sure you can imagine that when Nibbles read Pentip's note, his heart and ears curled inward.

"This I can do! Yes indeedie!" Nibbles beamed after reading the letter.

Someone needed food. Someone needed him. They weren't saying they would put up with him—that they would try not to roll their eyes at him, that they would work hard to hide their snicker from him. Someone actually wanted him, wanted his edible creations. There was just one little thing, one tiny problem, this sweet, eager mouse did not know yet: to some, mice themselves are edible creations. Mice, whether roasted, flambéed, or gulped whole, are palatable and quite plate-worthy. And yes, hedgehogs are on the list of those who have had mice for dinner—and I don't mean pull-up-a-chair, share-a-bowlful type of dinner guests.

I See You

Meanwhile, Pentip. The three-legged, wobble-proned hedgehog continued existing in a prickly pen of berry bush, cut-off from the world, thistle-trapped while waiting for his nonfunctioning fourth leg to mend. Propping his hind paw on a clump of needly foliage above, he stared at his still-swollen stub. It looked more like a giant slug or maybe the stump of a tree. He tried not to pout. At least he wasn't trapped inside the gut of that hawk, swimming inside its digestive juices. At least he was alive and safe. At least he could eat these plump, tooth-popping berries, these liquidy, spikey-flavored, acid-in-the-mouth juice of, nothingness...

Pentip's tongue curled as he thought. His inner grit wilted at the edges. *Please, help the right creature get my letter; please—read the scroll...* Pentip squeezed his tiny eyes closed, hoping to push his wish into the velvety sky.

He tried to picture the scroll traveling through the forest, landing in the arms of someone nice. His mother? Maybe she would find his message, or maybe, if he thought hard enough, maybe she would hear his thoughts. Someone had to.

"Will you help?" He whispered aloud.

And as if answering, the wind ruffled the leaves of his brambling hideout. The leaves swayed and parted, forming a spy hole. And for a moment, he saw the twinkling stars above his head. He kind of thought they saw him too. Yet in a blink, the leaves resumed position, and he was again confined within the shrub. Again. Stuck.

Fun and happiness tumbled and jiggled for all the other hedgehogs beyond his hedgy cave. But not for him. He could smell the excitement of the night's swift-traveling critters; he could imagine the swoosh of their freedom. Just beyond this leafy entrapment was a kind of party, the kind he used to have every evening, every moon-watched, magic-stirred night. Not far from this hedge were thrilling explorations, critter encounters and delicious edibles. Well, there would be no nighttime adventures for him. His little hedgehog heart stretched into the night, aching to join the fun right outside the berry bush. How long would he be stuck here? Would he ever get out? Could he survive another night stuck in this prickly problem?

Another night. One night, this night, not all the unknown nights, just this one—this one he could do. He pillowed himself in this thought and studied the dark air around him, the tiny specks of color that moved through it.

A Racket and a Broom

Back at Nibbles' place. His house was in shock. All the pot clanging, slice-chopping, cupboard-banging, all the scrumbuddling between stove and counter, all the steam swirling and air coughing—the clatter, rattle, clank—all of that had suddenly stopped. Yet, the wall's invisible eyes remained wide; the furniture remained on edge. Poor things were unsure whether to trust this jolt of quietness. But Nibbles was done. All that was left was the garnish; he sprinkled the tiny leaves of thyme over the leafy roll and around the plate's outline.

A party on a plate, that's what Nibbles saw when he peered at it. Sitting in the plate's middle was a curly roll made of dark-green leaf; the way the purple veins ran through it reminded Nibbles of the swishing streams not far from his house, which in turn reminded him of a hedgehog's swooshing through the forest in the deep purple night air. The crunchy leaf encased rich plump worms, lightly browned mushrooms, and, for extra crunch, a few earwigs. These ingredients Nibbles painted with a delicate, silvery snail sauce. Around the roll sat hollowed-out snail shells holding ant caviar. Yum. Pure delish. For a hedgehog.

Nibbles' paw was raised above his creation; he swished his mousy fingers back and forth, showering everything with thyme, and as he did, he hoped. He wished, an even bigger wish than when he cooked for Skittles, his sometimes polka-dotted neighbor.

As he watched the tiny leaves snow upon the plate, he whispered. "I hope this helps. I hope this grows into something good, something filling."

His low-backed, puffy living room chairs leaned in, their smooth edges sharpening with interest. His kitchen utensils perked, their necks curving like question marks, lifting their faces out of the drawer and toward Nibbles. And then his walls reached out. They captured the fluttering wish and swept it under the door, into the night.

Task Before Tsk

“What next?” Nibbles thought out loud, drumming the ends of his fingers together as he did. The scrolled letter quivered in reply; it had been waiting on Nibbles’ desk this whole time, watching Nibbles’ every move. It gave a little yip and then, Pop! It tried to jump into Nibbles’ arms.

“Whoa...” Nibbles held his palms out to the scroll, keeping it in place. “There, there,” he laughed and patted the scroll, “we’re nearly done,” he said, trying to smooth its crinkles. “Just a few more things to do.”

The scroll whimper-cooed back and tightened its own scrolly roll, struggling to behave.

“I’ll hurry,” Nibbles assured both the scroll and his own frothy eagerness that was rising in his stomach’s pit.

So, quick as a trick, he dried each washed pot and slung the dish towel across the kitchen counter, mopping up any remaining grunge. There, he was almost done.

But not quite: dish-towel the stove, massaging its overheated muscles; give a quick polishing thanks to his utensils so as not to offend; plump a few chair pillows—this always loosened the frame of his stiff-backed chairs, making them a little sleepy.

Nibbles eyed the room: everything placed, everything primed, home critters happy, their focus elsewhere: finally, he could make his next move. He drew his leafy window blinds and pried apart the rubber bands that stretched the length of the window. The crisp evening air activated his sinuses, making his nose twitch. The mouse peered into the sky, trying not to sneeze. Bright stars umbrellaed his home; the moon was in full watch. Time to go.

So, Nibbles sat down. Of course he did; it was the clever thing to do. He kicked up his back heels on the chair’s stool, pretend-yawned, closed his eyes and silently counted the seconds: one, two, three, four, fi—there—the furniture exhaled; the walls yawned and rattle-stretched. When finally his chair was in full snore, Nibbles, little-by-little, rose to a standing position and, like a burglar in his own home, tiptoed through what he hoped would be his final tasks.

He wrapped Pentip’s plated meal in protective spiderweb, being careful not to make even the slightest clink of dish. Next, he carefully placed the meal in his bark-box carrier. But of course, every few seconds, the little mouse looked up from his task to survey the room. As long as napping eyes remained closed and deep huffs and puffs swirled around him, he was safe to continue, in slide-motion.

To keep everything from jiggling too much, he filled the empty corners of the meal carrier with pussy willow puffs. He then attached the carrier’s shoulder strap, his eyes bulging when it snapped a little too loudly. Frozen in place, he waited; only his eyeballs moved as they scanned the room for movement. But his pals continued their sleepy snores, so he turned to the scroll and pressed his finger to his lips, motioning that it keep quiet. The scroll jiggled in agreement, so Nibbles scooped

it up and stuck it into his pocket. Next, the mouse slowly and very quietly eased the food carrier over his shoulder. There, done.

Nibbles smiled and sighed—a bit too loudly. The walls rumbled. His chair’s sleepy armrests stirred. They whimpered.

Noooo... Nibbles cringed. *Don’t wake up; don’t wake up*, he mentally chanted.

“Where are you?” A drowsy voice mumbled from the kitchen. It was the stove; her eyelids were partially lifted.

Great, just marvelous. Guess he wasn’t done, no leaving the house yet. Not unless his ears longed for a massive wail to erupt. No, he’d better settle everything down before trying to sneak out the door. He got busy, and once again he: dish-toweled the stove, massaging its overheated muscles, plumped a few chair pillows to soften their upset at the time of his exit, raised a paw and slowly turned, waving goodbye to the semi-asleep walls. This wavy motion of his paws always seemed to thicken their eyelids and help push them closed.

At last, he tiptoed toward the front door. Immediately, the door’s eyes popped open, and, as it always did whenever Nibbles got one foot from its handle, the door’s wooden grains stretched into a wide, blubbery smile. But Nibbles was ready for him; he was already holding his finger to his lips, motioning for silence. The door copied him; it stretched one wooden panel upward in arm fashion and held a grainy finger to its own squizzle-shut lips.

Then, silently dramatizing each movement, Nibbles held one mousy finger toward the ceiling and nodded. Step one.

A secret code, the door thought, *just for him!*

Again, the door copied Nibbles, its own finger held high. At which time Nibbles gave the door a big, toothy smile and reached to its right, removing a leafy wreath from a hook on the wall. When Nibbles held it out to the door, its round eyes became the shape of raindrops. It was the same frazzle-whipped wreath Nibbles always gave the door, each and every time he left the house, but the door held the leafy gift to its face and breathed in. This is when Nibbles moved like lightning, he whipped open the door and jetted outside.

Like always, the door’s face popped onto its outside surface. But Nibbles was waiting, his finger to his pursed lips. The door understood the need to be quiet; its eyes jiggled a happy yes, and then, as always, it reached out to give Nibbles a goodbye hug. But, as always, Nibbles, instead of giving a hug, plunged his mousy paw into the door’s one hand and gave it a good friendly shake. At the same time Nibbles used his other paw to turn the key in the door’s lock. Poof, just like that, the door was asleep.

OK. Nibbles exhaled.

He was off. Finally. One mousy step toward Pentip...The carrier rubbed against his side... Two mousy steps. The carrier bounce-a-dillied... Three... It thwumped ... Four—wait-Stop! The carrier callumpdigideed against his hip, pulling a couple fine mousy hairs free from his tender skin.

Nibbles rubbed his side, his eyes glazed as he thought. *Maybe I should have—perhaps I better go ahead and...yep, best to be careful...*

Eyes slivered with determination, the little mouse pivoted and marched back to the house. The front door cooed and vibrated when he stepped onto the porch; the door’s wooden grain lines

stretched into a smile, gladdened to see him after his too-long journey. The furniture jiggled and jumped. The walls blinked with surprise.

Being polite, he nodded at their delight but then rushed into the bedroom.

I know it's here somewhere—Nibbles searched his wardrobe closet—*where, where, where*—he abruptly yanked each hangered outfit aside, scratch-scooting each one across the closet bar. His closet muffle-huffed and cringe-shuddered, taken back by his rudeness.

There it is, Nibbles sighed, patting the closet, thanking it.

He had found them, his protective bark coat and hat, a scruffy and scratchy suit of armor sort of thing. It was an uncomfortable coat for a mouse like him with sensitive skin, uncomfortable indeed but quite effective actually, a splinterfied repellent.

As he stepped into his snaggy covering, he dreamily contemplated: *this thing I'm about to do—it feels good. Right? He paused. Does it, feel right?*

He stood still and took notice. His insides did not curl. He felt a smooth wave inside him, pushing on his feet to move, the same liquidy feeling he got whenever he had an inventive idea.

Yep, I'm going. But just in case. If I'm wrong... He went ahead and wriggled into the protective barky covering, tying and clicking it into place. OK—ready! Almost.

Blow a kiss to the closet, plump more pillows, dish-towel the stove, turn and wave to...

Awkward

Tell us: what does one do when approaching a hedge-for-a house? Nibbles saw no front step whereon he could simply leave the meal and speed for cover. No door knocker. No door for that matter. He checked the address again. Yep: 135 Pausability Shrub. The address matched that of the scrolled letter. Besides, it was written in berry juice, like the letter's ink. Plus, the leafy address sign was kebobbed on the end of a hedgehog quill that poked through the berry shrub.

"Uhum..Knock; knock?" Nibbles whisper-spoke.

Doppleganger

There was a scruffling kalump, and then one tiny hedgehog eye peered between the leaves.

"He-Hello?" The tiny eyebead blinked; a black peppercorn nose poked through the hedge and twitched as it sniffed.

"Hello, Sir." Nibbles dove right in; so far things looked good. "Might you perchance be the distinguished Pentip I so solemnly seek?"

Nibbles paused inwardly, though his mouth continued moving. And as it did, he couldn't help but silently and quite politely ask his very own dear lips—*What the heck are you saying?!*

His lips ignored him. They didn't miss a beat; in fact, precious things that they were, they snobbishly decided to dial up the weirdness: "Oh, I do beg your forgiveness; my noble surname beeth Nibbles."

Huh!? He didn't even know that he knew these words—*perchance—surname—beeth. What!?*

Nibbles' ears were shocked. That's not the way he usually spoke. A wave of heat slapped his sweet face, burning his cheeks. His voice collywobbled like a lid on a pot of boiling broth. He should have reached up and manually pinched his lips closed, he should have, but he didn't. Instead he just stood there, helplessly listening to his mouth blabber on.

Pentip's eyes stared into his own. Two black eyes as small as thyme leaves, glossy like liquified midnight. His eyes were small even for a hedgehog, but they were intense, powerful. Too strong, Nibbles looked at his feet. He was in it now; he'd better say something.

"I do say, dear fellow..."

You Gollywonker! That was saying something alright, something stupid, something in a BRITISH ACCENT. What the hedgeworth was happening? Apparently, Nibbles' mouth had become detached from his brain. And he had only just started.

His jittery words drilled deeper: "Might you be the chap, the most brilliant hedgehog, of whom I would be so pleased to meet your, or a different hedgehog's, acquaintance during this most indubitable impasse you, or a varying form of the like, unjustly now encounters?"

Stop it! Stop it! His mind screamed at his lips, but they wouldn't listen. Who was this madmouse? And where did the real him go? It wasn't just Nibbles' words that were clunky; he was the clunk, the sputter, the boof. Poor mouse, he so badly wanted to impress, to look smart; instead he was ballooning into a giant airpuff.

And poor Pentip too. While Nibbles' sentences crashed and banged, Pentip's quills juddered and tinged. The few ping-ponging words that Pentip did grab hold of became mushed in his mind; nothing was making sense. Everything became a blur. He stopped listening. And strange though it be, he suddenly became overly aware of his own face. His eyeballs, those mischievous rascals, what were they up to? He felt the rascally threat of his nervous eyeballs to move upward and under his eyelids.

Stop it—get back in place, his mind scolded.

They must NOT do a somersault, no somersaulting allowed, and no—that did not give them permission to whirl in place like two windmills, no matter how much they begged.

And then there was the matter of his tiny pink ears at the top of his head—no! They were not allowed to hiphop on his skull. Then his lips. What were they supposed to do while his eyeballs stared at this jittery mouse? He'd forgotten. They kept trying to slide up his face and tickle his nose. Such trouble. Pentip tried to force his face into a blank expression. Instead, eyes and lips crumpled together and folded like a fan; it was the expression of someone listening to a choir of high-pitched whistles.

Tell us, what is a hedgehog to do in such a case? Pentip wasn't sure; he rubbed his eyes back in place; he tried adding a blink and sniff to his gawk. Didn't help. The more Pentip stared, the more Nibbles gushed, the more Pentip's face protested.

Gobbledygook, balderdash, poppycock, and even flapdoodle poured from Nibbles' mouth until, finally, his energy fizzled, his throat tightened, and his lips grew thick and stiff. And Nibbles' gibberish ceased. The stunned mouse and hedgehog both took a deep breath. The sudden quietness reminded Nibbles of the flick of a light switch, but instead of running for cover as most mice would do, the courageous Nibbles reached up and tugged at his barky hat and then started over.

"Uhum...I mean to ask, might you be the writer?"

Pentip double blinked. "Writer?" That word sparked something.

"Of this letter?" Nibbles reached into his pocket where he had placed the scroll; he held it up, tried to that is. Instead, the giddy scroll popped out of his clutch and tumbled to the muddy ground. Poor little thing sputtered and coughed. Nibbles quickly scooped it up and continued, "Could you be the fine hedgehog with," Nibbles unrolled the scroll; his eyes slid this way and that, searching for the word, "Ah yes, the hedgehog with a 'kerfuffle' is what I believe you wrote. By the way, great word, uhum...excellent choice, yes indeed."

Without thinking, Nibbles mindlessly stuffed the scroll back into his pocket, making it squeak; this squeak caused Nibbles to run a nervous paw down his barky armor, as if wanting to smooth an invisible wrinkle. Instead, he snagged his paw on the bark and caught a sliver.

"Ouch!" The mouse jumped and grabbed his finger, gawking at the sliver, its end poking outward.

"Here, let me..." Pentip said. And before Nibbles could respond, Pentip leaned toward the mouse and twisted his body just so. One sharp quill swiped at the sliver, poke-lifting it up and out, cleanly whisking it free from Nibbles' paw. Two beads of red liquid sat in the sliver's place. Nibbles gasped.

"No worries... It's fine," Pentip reassured, "just berry juice."

Nibbles lifted his finger to his mouth and tasted. "Mmmm...good," he said. He then released an undignified full giggle, half from pleasant surprise, half from embarrassment.

Pentip smiled back. "Plenty more where that came from...if you wish!" He blurted merrily, pointing to the berry hedge, forgetting to feel the throb in his leg.

The Spelling Matters

It was as if an iceberg had melted. Nibbles wasn't worried about Nibbles; Pentip wasn't worried about Pentip. And like magic, their minds' murk dissolved. That's when Pentip smelled it, the earthy, spicy, and slightly sweet scent that had all along been pushing on the carrier's lid, grunting its way out of the carrier and toward Pentip. When finally the hedgehog took notice, the scent's tendrils stretched upward and opened the hinges of his sad, lonely mouth. A thin, silvery thread of drool oozed out and spun to the ground.

No, stop ...close immediately, the I'll-say-when Pentip inwardly commanded.

But his stubborn jaws stiffened; the scent had opened his mouth, and only a bite of something delicious would make it close. Nibbles took a step backward and held his food carrier out toward Pentip.

"For me?" Pentip put his snout to the carrier's lid and inhaled.

"For you!" Nibbles sang. "Your scrolled letter mentioned the need of food, so..."

The mouse stopped talking. In fact, he stopped breathing. He actually turned to stone, watching as Pentip lifted the lid and peered inside. A simple ooh or an ordinary aah would have been sufficient thanks for the mouse. But that's not what he got. In the end, Pentip's eyes said it all, and more. They widened. They sparked. They questioned. They exclaimed. All at the same time.

A bubble of silence expanded around them as Pentip hoisted the leafy roll from Nibbles' barky carrier. The pensive hedgehog then cradled its precious, newly birthed leafy self in his arms, rocking it side to side as if it were a newborn baby. Suddenly, Pentip lifted the delicate, tender newborn upward. He held it to the night-blackened treetops, to the wind-filled clouds, to the generous smile of the moon. He had been heard, his desire had been birthed. And then—CRUNCH. His massive jaws locked onto it; his teeth ground its ingredients to a paste.

Nibbles watched the hedgehog's face as his hedgy jaw motors turned. One sloosh of the tongue, one clucksmack of the mouth and Pentip's eyeballs deepened.

The flavor! Trumpets could have sounded; cymbals could have crashed; the stars could have sung. You've never seen a hedgehog with bigger eyes or pointier ears. Nibbles stood and watched. Each time Pentip swallowed, each time Pentip took yet another and even bigger bite, Nibbles' stony exterior softened.

After the last bite had been gulped, after each morsel had been sucked from between the teeth, after his hedgy lips had been tongue swiped and all wandering molecules had been captured, Pentip thrust his hand toward Nibbles.

"Thank you; thank you," he quivered, pumping Nibbles' hand up and down, lifting the mouse off the ground and rattling his barky suit of armor.

"Where did you learn...I've never tasted...Not even my ma..." Pentip did not need to finish his sentences: Nibbles was a decipherer of all things chopped and sliced. The mouse's cheeks squeezed into two pinkened bubbles; his eyes filled with moonlight, which seemed to lengthen his eyelashes.

"So..." Nibbles said, still smiling. "Tomorrow? Same time?"

Oh the pain of those few seconds between a critter's question and the given answer, seconds when a critter waits to receive reception or rejection, a pull-in hug or a push-off shove, those seconds can turn a stomach into a knotted jump rope. Nibbles was tempted to snail inside his protective barky shell, but he didn't; he stood tall, waiting for Pentip's reply.

"Yes, yes! Tomorrow indeed!"

"Lovely," Nibbles exhaled and thoughtlessly began smoothing the non-wrinkles in his barky covering.

"No—stop!" Pentip grabbed hold of Nibbles' paws, firmly.

Nibbles' eyes jumped. "What?" His lips barely moved. The mouse looked down at his paws and Pentip's clutch around them. He couldn't move. His insides swiveled. His barky covering couldn't protect him from this. But then, looking down, he saw his rough, splintery barky covering and realized.

"Oh was I about to do it again..."

"Yes," Pentip answered, smiling, his pointy teeth glinting in the moonlight as he released his grip.

"Oh, OK," Nibbles whispered, still feeling the tightness around his paws, though they were free. "Thank you," he said, taking a few steps backward; the mouse continued smiling, although it was a looser smile than before, a campfire sprinkled by rain.

"Alright then, see you tomorrow," Nibbles puffed out his words, inching backwards while closing his food carrier.

"Thank you again," Pentip sang. "Bye-dee-dye!" He cheered so-long. He had said dye not die: but how was Nibbles to know? Pentip noticed the mouse picking up his speed, the way he arrowed into the darkness.

Haunted

Bye-dee-dye? Why had he said that? How stupid. Pentip rummaged through the event, walking his memory backwards in time. He pictured Nibbles' dampened expression, the look he gave right before he left. He had been smiling so big moments before. What a nitwit way to say goodbye. What else could cause the sudden change? Besides his ridiculous farewell, Pentip couldn't remember doing anything else. The hedgehog plucked at each memory, rolled it around and ground it into a mental paste. It wasn't long until his leg began throbbing again.

Would Nibbles return? Pentip hoped so.

Chop and Chuckle

It took two to three stars in the sky before Pentip woke the next night. He didn't usually oversleep like this, but after his encounter with Nibbles, his sleep had flipped and flopped like a fish in the bottom of a boat.

"I'm late!" Pentip huffed to himself, scruffing and scooping to sit upright.

The ache in his leg had weakened, and its puff had lost a bit of its uff; nonetheless, it still twinged and panged whenever he moved too much. He tried to be kind to his tender leg while quickly getting ready for his visitor, his hope-to-be visitor. Straighten the head quills, scrub the teeth with a fallen twig, rinse the mouth with berry juice. There. Ready.

Pentip sat under his thick berry bramble. He sat. And sat. The stars grew brighter. The sky darkened. It looked as if no one was coming to his dinner party.

Just then he heard a strange crackle. And then a soft glow peeked through the hedge. Just as Pentip was about to pop his face through the leaves to see outside—SWOOSH. A leaf, twisted into a point, jettied halfway into his hedge, its spiky nose sticking into Pentip's home. The hedgehog yanked it through the hedge and struggled with the dark to read what it said.

"Hello Pentip," the note began. "It's Nibbles. Want some dinner?"

He came! Pentip plunged his nose through the berry bramble to have a look. An orange glow filled his eyes. Not too far from Pentip's hedge sat Nibbles next to a fire he had built. Something sizzled in the pan that sat atop the flickering logs.

"Hideeho, Nibbles," Pentip said, his voice soft but bubbly.

Nibbles looked up and giggled. "Hideeho, Pentip," he returned. "Ever try pan-fried cricket cake?"

"I think I'm about to. May I join you?" Pentip was tempted to snail into his hedge while waiting for Nibbles' reply, but he didn't; he just stood there for a long second, holding his breath while waiting.

"Please do," Nibbles smiled. "That is, if your leg can handle..."

"Watch this!" Pentip bellowed as he pulled a freshly sharpened quill from his head and used it as a cane.

When Nibbles saw the hedgehog's cleverness, he tugged at his ears and laughed. Pentip noticed the mouse's tiny ears. Nibbles hadn't worn his barky hat this time, still had the splintery covering on, just not the hat.

Pentip hobbled over to the campfire. He felt good. Strong-ish, except for his leg. Happy. But then, right as he reached the fire, he wobbled and knocked the end of a log. The pan jittered and jolted. The cake jumped. Pentip and Nibbles gasped. They froze. The pan huffed. The cake sat still again. They exhaled.

"Now for my next trick!" Pentip chirped, making Nibbles laugh.

For a minute, the two critters sat quietly beside the fire, listening to each popping spark, each crackle of cake. But then the pan yoo-hooed to Nibbles, letting him know the cake was ready. Nibbles spatulaed the cake from the pan and placed it on a plate, making Pentip's stomach dance and his taste buds stand on end. But Nibbles wasn't quite ready. He lifted a bouquet of wild herbs from his carrier and placed it on a chopping board.

Pentip studied each move the mouse made. Especially when the mouse began shuffling through his carrier. Definitely when he tossed the carrier aside and rattle-banged objects in a bag he had brought. And most specifically when Nibbles plunged his head into the bag, sighing deeply as he searched its contents.

Finally, Nibbles surrendered his search and lifted his head. His eyes wilted at the edges. "I forgot to bring my chopping knife," he drooped.

"That's alright; I'm sooo happy to just have the cake, even without the herbs," Pentip chirped, meaning it.

"No, no—you don't understand. The bitter herbs offset the sweet cake!" Nibbles' voice grew intense. He stared sad-eyed at the cake. "It's a blank canvas without the colorful herbs. I was going to build a pool of herbs and this lavender sprig would be a fountain in the middle." Nibbles deflated before Pentip's eyes.

The hedgehog hadn't a clue what Nibbles was talking about, but he did know it all mattered to the mouse.

"No worries! Give me those herbs and watch this!"

Nibbles hesitated but then handed the herb bouquet over. Pentip promptly placed the herbs on the chopping block, hobbled backwards a few steps, let go of his quill-cane, then... He jumped, kind of, it was more of a plunging-falling dive. Nonetheless, he went head first into a ball of sharp quills and rolled his prickly body back and forth over the herbs, chopping them into tidbits. Nibbles could hardly believe the cleverness, the assertiveness of this hedgehog.

Yea, the jump and roll stunt he had performed on those herbs did make his leg sore-er. Guess he'd need Nibbles to keep bringing him food for a while.

Oh what a bother, he thought, smiling.

That evening as the fire's glow wrapped around them, as Pentip indulged in the crunchy, sweet cricket cake slathered in slug syrup and swimming in a pool of lemony herbs, as Pentip slooshed the sweetness and cluck-smacked the fragments within his mouth, he talked. Actually, he entertained. He shared a few stories: tales of silly, embarrassing times that now made him smile. Like the time he showed off for a pal and leap-rolled into a ball, not thinking about the fact he was standing on the edge of a hill, a hill that overlooked a pond, a pond beside which his ruler-smacking, lemon-juice teacher stood. The entire hedgehog clan had to pull Pentip and teacher, and their pufferfish-like fusion, from the sludge. So humiliating.

"No!" Nibbles laugh-shrieked as Pentip relayed the event. "Stop, I can't take it," he gasped between gurgling giggles, doubled over, picturing Pentip entwined with his scouring bottlebrush teacher.

This reaction led to more stories. Pentip shared with Nibbles the time that the other hedgehogs at school had used him as a note spindle without his knowing, sticking “Kick-me” signs through the sharpened quills on his back. And the time the same classmates used Pentip as a giant thumbtack to pin a banner above the school door that read: *Extra Sharp Quills for Super Dull Brains*. The teacher had to call the Firehog Department to get him down.

Pentip polished these stories with star gloss, adding bits that were obviously exaggerated. But those bits had made Nibbles laugh, even snort-laugh, until Nibbles had to rub his smile-stretched cheeks and pat his sore jiggle-rolling belly. And that laughter—it quilled him. Pentip was hooked.

The hint of morning crept through the forest.

“Bye-dee-dye, Pentip,” Nibbles smirked when it was time to go.

“Enjoy your sleepy-doo-dah-day, Nibbles,” Pentip replied, waving goodbye to the mouse, watching him tromp into the thicket.

Standing now by himself, the laughter still ringing in his ears, Pentip noticed a tired-happy feeling swishing inside; he pictured a baby bird when it first breaks free from its shell, the way it blissfully bobs its head up and down, so joyful to be alive, but in a wink is asleep, exhausted, its head nestled against its mother. Pentip wobbled inside his hedgy home, looking forward to his leafy bed. But before he closed his eyes, before the stars left the sky and Pentip went to sleep, he used that mouth-numbing berry juice as ink and wrote his stories down. Just in case.

Secrets

The next night Nibbles brought Pentip speckled bird eggs and carrion canapés. The jittery little mouse was dressed nicely for the occasion too: striped shirt, black suspenders connected to his red slacks, a soft blue hat. Even a bow tie. No splintery, scruffy, barky suit of armor this time. Between mouthfuls, the two chattered and chattered about this and that: about spy-worthy trails, favorite hideouts, silly habits, jokes they'd like to play on their siblings... They tossed acorns into their campfire and watched the sparks flitter like moths. They used twigs to drum the back of Nibbles' cooking pots. They chanted into the fire's glow, singing forest secrets in low, ghostly tunes, drawing Native spirits to their side. And of course, Pentip told new tales. And most certainly, Nibbles listened.

Connecting the Dots

The night after that, Nibbles was late, two twinkling stars-worth late. This hadn't happened before, and Pentip felt a little worried, just a little, about one-swallow-of-scratchy-bark's-worth worried. Pentip felt too jumpy to just sit inside his hedgy home and wait, so he climbed through the brambling vines and into the night air. Hadn't they had a good time last night? He thought they had. Had he done something stupid to scare the mouse off? Pentip's eyes squished into slits as he thought. Just then, a branch crackled somewhere in the darkness.

"Nibbles? Is that you?" Pentip whispered.

The leaves rustled, whooshed, and crackled—and something else thrumbled, thrumbled, thrumbled.

"Hi, Pentip," Nibbles' voice was hushed and breathy; his chin was tucked within the collar of his shirt, his blue hat stretched low on his head, struggling to hide his eyes. "I wasn't sure..." Nibbles' voice wilted like a thirsty plant. Even in the night, one could see the embarrassment on Nibbles' face. The mouse paused at a distance, tugged at his blue hat, gulped some air, and then continued walking toward Pentip, but something was different.

Thrumble, thrumble, thrumble... There was that sound again. Nibbles' arm was stretched behind him, pulling something. Pentip strained to see. Apparently, it was a wagon, a wagon packed with barky containers that bounced up and down as its wheels thrumbled against the bumpy ground.

"Camping out?" Pentip teased and then immediately regretted his comment; it had obviously made Nibbles more embarrassed.

"No," Nibbles voice curled. "I, ah, overdid it, I guess. Um, I know it's kind of weird of me, but... uh, I couldn't stop making things so..." Nibbles twisted his bow tie as he spoke. It twirled 'round and 'round; Pentip tried not to laugh.

"Don't be silly; this is great! Completely hooptiedoodah!" Pentip chirped, making Nibbles sigh; Pentip's nonsensical comments always seemed to put the mouse at ease.

Quietly and moving like a tiny wildflower, Nibbles parked the wagon and opened the top container. Whoosh...a feathery tablecloth blossomed into the open air. And it was indeed a feathery tablecloth.

"Wow, that's...that's..." Pentip struggled for the right word.

"Weird?" Nibbles filled in the gap.

"No," Pentip muttered, "completely amazing." He brushed the tablecloth's soft, colorful feathers. "Did you make this?"

"Uh, I uh, yes...?" Nibbles looked away.

Pentip stared at Nibbles, not saying a word, trying to figure this all out.

The quietness forced Nibbles to look at him. "I mean...uhem...yes, I did. I made it." He felt his shoulders starting to shrug, a shrinking shrug that tucks him into himself, like a turtle. But he caught

his shrug, forced his shoulders down, and stood up straight. "Before going to sleep after the campfire, I...well, I've been wondering what to do with all the feathers I've been collecting, so, I..."

"It's beautiful."

Nibbles wasn't used to this type of critique; he was use to his siblings shooshing his art; he was use to teachers saying, "Do it over; you didn't follow the directions!" But this was, new. He forced his eyeballs to look at Pentip; he forced himself to do the grown up thing—he said, "Thank you." And that's all. He didn't tug at his hat, didn't bat away the compliment, didn't point out the flaws in his work (though they kept pointing at him, snickering). No, Nibbles just said "Thank you," and, believe me, that was tree-trunk hard to do.

One by one, Nibbles unpacked each container and placed the intricacies on the woven-feather tablecloth: polished plates with shiny smiles, silkworm napkins folded into fans and bow-tied with strands of wild green onions, twiggy chopsticks with leafy vines etched into their wooden surfaces, a vase filled with flouncy ferns, tiny white flowers, and orange nasturtiums to set in the middle of the table setting. And then the food: unbelievable. Nibbles had prepared a three-course meal.

1. For the appetizer: pillbug puffs topped with—

"Skittles!"

"Skittles?" Pentip said. "I've never heard of them are they..."

"No, Skittles," Nibbles pointed into the foliage.

Pentip and Nibbles stared into the brush a few yards from their table setting. A quick creak and slush-whoosh of leaves and then, out jumped a big 'ole frog—red, yellow, and orange dots spotted his body. The colors looked faded, like spring flowers on a hot summer day, like color-coated candies soaked in water. Staring unabashedly at Nibbles, the frog blinked twice; his throat began to balloon.

"Waaaaak." Skittles cleared his throat. "Hello Nibbles," he said.

"Hello Skittles," Nibbles politely responded, a question mark hidden beneath the greeting's surface. "Oh," the mouse twirled toward Pentip and then smiled, "I'd like you to meet Pentip. And this," he motioned to the frog, "is my neighbor, Skittles."

"Nice to meet you, Skittles," Pentip chirped, nodding respectfully.

"Waaaaak, Hi Porkyip," he blurted, his eyes jittering, stapled to the pillbug puffs.

"Actually, it's Pen—" the mouse began, but didn't get to finish.

"So sorry to bother. I...I..." the frog was clearly thinking. "I wanted to make sure you were alright.

"I'm fi—" Nibbles tried to say.

"Haven't seen you in a bit, and..." Skittles' words screeched to a stop; he paused and then while his blurry eyes stared at the pillbug puffs, his tongue popped in and out of his mouth.

"And..." Nibbles continued Skittles' thought, "you were hungry?" The mouse smiled.

"Don't mind if I do!" Skittles leaped into the air and plopped himself between mouse and hedgehog. "Besides, the 'ole colors could use a bit of brightening!" The frog croaked.

Pentip looked at Nibbles and blinked, his head tipped to one side, his peppercorn nose twitching once. But before Nibbles could explain Skittles' comment—WHOO—Skittles' tongue had whisked up two puffs from the platter. And just like that—GULP—they were gone.

Stunned, Nibbles and Pentip picked up their remaining puffs and took a bite. Pentip closed his eyes as he chewed. Flaky, moist, saucy...the puff packed a wallop of flavor, a burst of orange in a garden of white.

"Nibbles," the hedgehog's mouth stretched into a smile, "this is won..."

"You gonna finish that, Pannip?" Skittles said, eyeing the half-eaten puff in Pentip's clutch.

"I...well...Ya know...uh actually...OK...why don't you go ahead and..."

Flick—Skittles' tongue licked it up. "Well, Nibbles," the frog's neck stretched his head out and over the nearby wagon; his slivered eyes twinkled, searching the unopened barky food carrier, "what we got here? Main course?"

"Yes, let me just..." Nibbles picked up his serving spoon; the silvery server smiled and cooed when he did.

"Oh, please, let me!" Skittles snatched the spoon from Nibbles' hand and scooped a gulumping mountain of slug spaghetti onto his plate, making sure he got an extra spoonful of the rich sauce but avoiding the peppery-tasting wildflowers that sprinkled the noodly worm spirals.

"Wooooa, you're a hungry frogger," Pentip cheered.

"Don't worry; I'll save some for ya, Poolfip. I know how much a mouse and porcupine eat!"

"OK," Nibbles' spine straightened; he leaned over and placed his hand atop the frog's, resting it there over the froggy clutch of the serving spoon. The spoon looked up at Nibbles with raindrop eyes, its lips squiggling. Skittles stiffened and then, slowly, lifted his noodle-pointing face to look at Nibbles.

"Why don't I? My dear neighbor," Nibbles whispered, his hand still secured to Skittles'.

Skittles gulped. "Waaaaak, I did it again. Didn't I? Waaaaak, so sorry," the frog deflated.

"Thank you, Skittles," Nibbles whispered in a maple-syrup way. "I so appreciate the fact that you appreciate my work!" The mouse bubbled.

Skittles smiled, really big. "I do; I really do." His voice was like melted ice cream. "I just get a bit jumpy," the frog paused to flick a tongue-scooping full into his mouth, "a bit," Skittles gulped his swallow, "jumpy about it—sometimes," the frog admitted, making Nibbles and Pentip chuckle.

"All the time!" Nibbles said, laughing.

"All the time?" Skittles asked, shock in his eyes.

Nibbles simply shook his head up and down as he laughed.

"Well, here then," Skittles lifted his plate and began to tip noodles onto Pentip's. "I'll just give Palsip here some of my..."

"I'll help," Nibbles chimed, taking the serving spoon and scooping a few noodles from Skittles' plate. "I believe I forgot to mention...Pentip...my friend, Pentip," Nibbles made sure he enunciated each syllable, "is a hedgehog I met not too long ago." Nibbles smiled as he spoke, continuing to scoop a few more noodles from the mountain on the frog's plate.

"Hedgehog?" Skittles shrunk into himself. He had heard about hedgehogs. And their meals of barbecued frog legs.

Nibbles noticed. Pentip was busy chewing and clucksmacking his food.

"Pentip here," the mouse looked straight at the frog, "loves my cooking too," Nibbles said, eyes moving in a do-ya-get-what-I'm-saying sort of way. "Happy with slugs, worms, herbs—stuff like that."

Skittles sighed and grinned, his skittle-dotted colors brightening.
“Yep!” Pentip chortled with mouth full. “Yoodely-doodely yumified stuff like this!”
They all laughed. They were having a good time after all, a nibble-skittle-hogdoodle time.

Puff-But Do Not Blow

After their third course of millipede pie, Skittles cheered a thanks to each of his dinner hosts and then hopped into the night toward his iris-dotted pond. "That was fun; let's do it again!" The frog's words bounced as he leapt into the forest.

"The more, the merrier!" Pentip happily but thoughtlessly cheered.

Nibbles turned to Pentip. "Really?" The mouse said, half smothering a giggle.

"Oh," Pentip's shoulders drooped, "more frogs..." He realized what he had said.

"Means more food..." Nibbles semi-finished the thought.

"Well," Pentip rubbed his tiny paws together, "I'll do the chopping, all of it!"

"Sounds like a deal!" Nibbles agreed to the plan.

Suddenly, Pentip got a strange expression, his nose twitching, his eyes looking through mental files rather than straight ahead.

"Y-e-s," Nibbles said.

"I was just wondering," Pentip tapped the end of his own nose; he might have tugged at the hat on his head if he had had one. "Did you notice Skittles' dots, how bright they became?"

"Oh," Nibbles reached into his shirt pocket, "I saved this puff for you, grabbed it as soon as I saw Skittles."

"That's nice. Thank you, but...what does that have to do with..." Pentip's voice was scalloped with confusion.

"Just take a bite; go on..." Nibbles friend-shooshed Pentip. "OK, good," the mouse twinkled as Pentip chewed. "Now, make a wish. But," Nibbles paused to scratch his face. "you might not want to think too much about Skittles' dots when you do."

Pentip's expression arrowed; his disbelieving eyes squeezed into slivers, edges stiffening like checkmarks.

"Come on now," Nibbles coaxed, looping the hedgehog into this whimsical-seriousness. "Just play along; pretend the impossible can happen," Nibbles chirped, rosy cheeks drawn into buds, elfin eyes percolating with sparkles.

Pentip smiled back and closed his eyes as he chewed. He'd play the silly game. He'd go along with Nibbles' kooky rules; he didn't want the friendship whisked away by this first gust of windy difference.

Looking back on the event, we all now question: this game of Nibbles', was it really so silly? OK. Perhaps. It's arguable. However, the wish, Pentip's eye-squishing secret request—there most definitely was not an inkling of silly to it.

Newsbites

The evening following, Skittles returned. This time with a few froggy friends, a number of which wore lily-pad skirts, some with lips stained wildflower pink, others painted berry-red. Their eyes framed with fly-leg lashes that waved up and down whenever they looked at Skittles and his bright candy-pop dots. But all this croaking and crooning at the handsome Skittles ceased the moment they saw the food: a rich, sweet earwig casserole.

"Food's ready!" Nibbles sang, removing a sturdy pan from its place over the campfire, its handle so hot even Nibbles' hot pads yipped.

When the frogs heard the pan's crackling laugh, when they saw the the way the peppery pan sizzle-hugged the crispy earwig concoction, when their noses detected a savory change within the air, their girlish fanfare turned into a complete frognado. The hungry frogs started hopping and leaping and pinging in front of each other, all working to be first in the food line. As soon as one leaped to the front, another plopped itself atop that one; then another plunked itself atop the last; two more skyrocketed on top of those, making it a five-pile frogwich. Then the bottom frog leapt to the top of the pile. Bottom to top, middle to bottom, under and over the silly frogs went, all working devilishly to be the first to taste the casserole.

Poor Skittles and his handsome dots didn't stand a chance. "Ladies! Ladies!" Skittles tried to regain their focus and calm his clan, but it was no use. All he got was a mouth full of leap-fresh dust.

All this frog-jumping commotion spun the air around them so much that their croaks for earwig casserole and waaaaaks of me-first whirled right out of there and into the vast forest. This news of earwig casserole whirled, and twirled; it tumbled; it spun into fragments and bumped into critters.

It plunked into the pond, and the turtles caught some of it, a just-big-enough bite of casserole news to rattle their dinner-ready stomachs. They knew they would love a taste of this unknown treat. They began swimming to the pond's edge.

Other bits of the news batted back and forth between the trees and then rolled over to a family of mice. But by the time they caught their news bite, the phrase *earwig casserole* had eroded into something called "cheese-chunk large 'n whole." The mice came a scampering.

And when the forest squirrels caught their chunk of the news, they motor-mouthed the facts so thoroughly that the news no longer proclaimed *earwig casserole* but "mouth-big nutter roll." The squirrels began branch-vaulting over to the campfire.

A few tidbits of news caught wind and attached themselves to the wings of hummingbirds, story tidbits not of *earwig casserole* but of a "juice-filled punch bowl." The hummingbirds snatched their swimming gear (floating devices included) increased their flight speed from flutter to rip & roar, and turbo-jetted to the campfire.

A rat family scooped up a dollop of the news that rolled past their home; two sniffs later, the mom and pops and their twelve baby rats were darting toward the campfire. The family had no idea

what a “Food-That’s-Big Super Bowl” could be. All they knew was anything with food was everything good, so count them there.

Two owls perched a fair distance away on a night-painted tree branch were pelted with a news nugget. They decided to wingwap their way over to the campfire. They had always wondered what fast food tasted like.

And just as the news was thinning, just before it skated out of the forest and over the creek, and just when Pentip’s mama leaned out her bedroom window and blew a kiss to her grown child who was making a life for himself out in the forest, at that precise moment, a remaining wisp of the news twirled past her window. Like magic, the kiss and wisp twirled together, braided themselves in the moon-dipped air and ribboned upward into the starlight. Pentip’s mother understood. Casserole, Super Bowl, punch bowl or fishing pole—didn’t matter. She heard the whisper in the starlight; she knew the meaning of the moon’s expression. She grabbed her purse. She knew what to do.

Meanwhile, the turtles crawled from the pond into the star-polished air. They callumped onward, toward the campfire.

When Pentip’s mother reached the campfire site, things were roaring, crave-crazy animals were everywhere. They were buzzing; they were croaking; they were yipping; they were barking (chittery, chizely squirrel-barking to be precise). Pentip had jumped onto the tree-trunk table and was holding out a sharpened quill, jabbing the air around him, warning the savages to keep back. Meanwhile Nibbles raised his voice and lowered the boom: “Now, let’s be civil,” the mouse hollered in as deep a voice as he could find. “There won’t be any casserole for anyone if we can’t get organized,” he belched the words as loudly as possible. But the critter noise only increased.

Meanwhile, moving at sticky-honey speed, the turtles continued their forest callumping—through fallen leaves, around mossy rocks, over toppled tree branches. The stars lit their path; their grit moved their feet.

Back at the campfire, things had only grown worse; mice, frogs, squirrels, rats had become entangled into one greedy mass, a ball of rubber bands twisted and tied, nearly impossible to undo. The hummingbirds safely sat on top of the critter ball; their ropey tongues whirling above them, trying to lasso their promised punch bowl, or whatever was in Nibbles’ pan—at this point, they hardly cared.

The owls watched from above; this critter-ball idea was looking pretty good.

Suddenly in the middle of the campfire’s whirl and blur, in the center of critter combat, “SWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!!” Pentip’s mother blew on her acorn whistle. The oak trees shuddered and covered their ears. The balled mass of tangled animals exploded into separate critters. The owls ceased debating whooo would catch whom for dinner and shuffle-flapped themselves into the distance, away from the whistle’s shriek.

“Listen up!” Pentip’s mother bellowed, her plump body puffed, her sharp quills prickened. “Pull it in,” she whirled around pointing at the critter crowd. “I mean it, pull those tongues in—NOW!”

It took a little longer for the hummingbirds to get their tongues back into their mouths on account of being so long, but they did it. All the critters closed their mouths; there wasn’t a sound.

"OK, that's more like it," she nodded approvingly, her eyes remaining glued on the critters, daring them to move. That powerful look of hers could freeze a hummingbird wing, and it did. The birds crash landed on top Skittles' head.

"Hi, mom" Pentip whispered.

"Hello, son," she whispered back without looking at him, her glare still fastened on the critters, intensity still hardening her expression. "Now, who's in charge here?" she barked, not taking her eyes off the critters.

"He is," Nibbles and Pentip both said, pointing at each other.

"You're the artist who does all the creative..." Pentip's words were cut short.

"But you're the storyteller, so I think..."

"That's enough," Pentip's mother said. "Who does the dishes?"

"Nibbles," Pentip answered.

"Then, tonight Nibbles is in charge." Pentip's mother decided. "Nibbles, tell us what you want done."

Everyone stared at the little mouse, whose throat felt very dry, so dry his tongue wanted to stick to his teeth. But his thoughts were tickling his toes, pinging to get out. Nibbles looked up—the moon was smiling right at him. The mouse opened his mouth. "Dinner will not be served tonight." His words rolled from his mouth.

The crowd deflated. Nibbles' utensils perked, each one smiling.

"Instead, Pentip here will be allotting you tickets, telling you the time to come tomorrow."

Nibbles looked over at Pentip, who nodded and smiled.

"Rodents arrive at one-star's twinkle," Pentip boomed over the crowd's shuffle into line. Poking hedge berries with a quill, he fashioned his pen and began scrawling out times on hedgy leaf tickets.

"That's right; we look forward to serving you tomorrow evening," Nibbles tried to cheer the sulking, but calmed group.

"Excuse me, kind Sir," a turtle stretched her neck out toward Nibbles and tapped the brim of her feathery hat, moving in a slow, jaunty way. Three other turtles stood in a line behind the feather-hatted first.

Stunned, Nibbles simply stared.

"Might this be where we line up for a serving of earwig casserole?" The turtle blinked. The line of turtles blinked too, waiting. This politeness caught Nibbles off guard.

"We plan to contribute," another turtle said, a scarf of wildflower colors wrapped her head and framed her face.

"A payment of flowers, irises from our pond over yonder." The turtle's words were shaped somewhat differently than Nibbles, but each were carefully carved, polished with hope. One bow-tied and top-hatted turtle behind her nodded his head; purple flowers bounced, their stems clutched between his teeth.

Nibbles lifted his head and raised one paw. "All turtles are to be served this night!" He bellowed, microphone not needed, no jittery hat-tugging urge showing its rascally face.

The critter group groaned in unison, still line shuffling along toward Pentip and the tickets. Disappointment sat on their tongues; it tasted like pond scum.

"Don't worry," Nibbles continued, "tomorrow's menu will be wish-worthy; I promise. Prepare your wishes," the mouse twinkled, merriment lifting his words and floating them throughout the critter crowd.

Patch and Resew

That night around the glowing fire, while flames jigsawed across campfire logs and towering trees whispered secrets: a family of gracious turtles, a dish-tired mouse, and a star-wise mother gobbled casserole and listened to Pentip who unfurled his latest story, told between clucksmaking bites.

And then, just as everyone was about to take their last bite, "Stop!" Nibbles check-marked the moment. "Chew this bite slowly," Nibbles' words softened and slowed, each syllable stretched, now that he had their attention. "Close your eyes this time and," he sang the next line, "make a wish."

The turtles blinked, staring.

"But," The turtle's feathery hat flickered in the breeze, "we already did." She stared and blinked some more.

"And," the bow-tied turtle spoke up, "we received it."

The trees' whispering grew to a raspy rush, leafy heads bending toward their neighbor's, excitedly sharing thoughts.

"What did you wish for?" Pentip blurted.

"You," the lady turtle chortled, in her turtlish way.

"Me?" Pentip responded.

"Yes, all of you. We wished for artful friends." She said, blinking.

"Friends, with a taste for what's slow and sturdy," another turtle added.

Pentip lifted his acorn cup. "And to that, this slow and (he patted his tummy with his un-raised paw) rather sturdy hedgehog says, friendadidlydoodahday!"

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In the Thick of It, Onion Thick

The night after that, the animals returned for dinner; they scampered; they branch vaulted; they hummdiggidied; they leapwaaaakadooed; they callumped. But this time, they came in ticket-checked portions. Nibbles made Pentip wear a bow tie for the occasion, which he found to be quite scratchy and completely unnecessary, but he went along with the program, Nibbles' program. Pentip would serve the food, jolly the guests, and tell the story; Nibbles would remain semi-hidden in their outdoor, makeshift "kitchen," immersed in cooking-pot steam. And semi-hidden is accurate because one could see, if one really looked, two pink, rounded mouse ears bouncing over a tall, steamy pot. One critter did see them, and when he did, he sprung from the line, into the air, and then flopped down right beside the busy mouse. Green polka-dotted skin up against Nibbles' whiskers.

"How ya doing?" Skittles croaked, sticking his face over the pot, his tongue getting ready to flick a taste.

"Hi Skittles," Nibbles sounded almost out of breath. "Excuse me," he strained to reach around Skittles to grab a cup of chopped worms that he planned to add to the concoction in the pot. A cloud of steam rose from the boiling broth; moisture beads gathered on Nibbles' snout; he snatched a cloth that he'd tucked into his apron's tie and dabbed at his heated face. The steam was pushing on his chef's hat again, making it want to slip. He tugged it back into place and kept cooking.

"Ooh, smells pretty good there," Skittles eyes bulged as he lowered his head into the pot.

"Uh, Skittles," Nibbles gave him a tiny push backward, which surprised the frog.

"Huh?" Skittles stared mindlessly at Nibbles.

Nibbles arrowed his eyes and raised one paw to his hip. That mousy move did it. It's like it woke Skittles up. And when Skittles saw what he was doing, he sunk into himself, his face flattening like a cowpie. "Oh, I'm doing it again."

Nibbles tried not to smile and encourage more bad froggy behavior. "Tell you what," flames danced in Nibbles' eyes, "If you, my dear neighbor," his snout bounced, punctuating his words, "help me in the kitchen, you can have your meals any time, ticket not needed."

Skittles mouth popped open, and for a second, no waaaaak came out. "Thank you; thank you!" Skittles finally croaked, a giant smile spreading.

"But you eat when I eat!" Nibbles commanded. "So get chopping!" He held up a bouquet of wild onions, their long green stems releasing a pungent scent. Nibbles secretly hoped their powerful fragrance would diminish the frog's hunger.

Skittles cringed. "Certainly this job earns second helpings?!"

"We'll see," Nibbles' voice held little warmth or care.

Reluctantly, Skittles took the onions and held them out and away from himself, looking scared of the creepy vegetables. Nibbles would have laughed had he not been under such pressure. “OK, fine—seconds. Probably.” He caved. “Now get chopping!”

Skittles jumped to it. This did make Nibbles smirk.

And just like that, Nibbles was back in focus. He danced between pots; he whirled his hands from one platter to the next. He worked like an orchestra conductor, keeping each brothy bubble and each noodly whirl cooking in time—all while keeping one mousy eye on the big frog off in the corner, the big polka-dotted frog and his clunk-clumsy onion chopping. This little mouse with his big goals was carving and crafting, sculpting and bouqueting, braiding and molding, polishing and finessing—art for eyes and taste buds. Nibbles worked non-stop, pausing only when Pentip rushed over to re-pile a platter with appetizers or pick up the next dinner course. During which time Nibbles would inevitably see a bit of leftover green stuck to Pentip’s herb-chopping quills, making him snicker. He’d then pluck the herb from Pentip’s back quills and make some sarcastic remark about Pentip being a green, inexperienced waiter.

Together, Nibbles and Pentip created a tremendous event:

1. Snail shells filled with insect caviar and swimming in tree sap were offered guests upon arrival.
2. A barky fountain that sat on one table propelled nectar into the night air, shooting petal-pink droplets above the fountain, spraying the event with its rosy perfume. This nectar fell like confetti into a punch bowl in which hummingbirds floated, flittered, and flapped. The birds’ teeny whoops mixed with nectar splashes. And all this tittering fun—hummingbirds cannon balling off the punch bowl’s sides and holding bubbly “tea parties” at the bowl’s bottom— it tickled the sides of the punch bowl, making it giggle and carbonating the nectar.
3. Millipede souffle was served, which was as light as a cloud within the mouth and as savory good as cotton candy is sugary sweet.
4. Wild strawberries were dipped in nectar and rolled in seeds. Unfortunately the squirrels ate each and every one, leaving not a speck for the rats and mice. Nibbles made a mental note; next time he’d invite the rats first, the squirrels last.
5. Mosquito toast delighted the frogs, along with worm ribbons from which dangled dragonfly ornaments.
6. And, of course, to top off the evening for each group, Pentip served a wallop of story adventure, which in Nibbles’ opinion contained a little too much suspense for critters with bloated, over-stuffed tummies. Every time Pentip’s voice shrunk to a low, steady drumbeat, the suspense pulled the guests to their log’s edge. Their eyes widened; their ears turned toward Pentip; their throats tightened, prohibiting sound or swallow. Nibbles noticed how the tension was apparently messing with their

digestive juices, based on the way they kept clutching and rubbing their stomachs; Nibbles kept worrying he'd see his dinner re-served, upchuck style. Yuck.

After dreamy-eyed guests had waddled into the night, Nibbles and Pentip looked at the party evidence: stacks of dirty acorn bowls reached above Nibbles' head and food-crusting pots and platters were wilting at their exhausted edges, struggling not to pout. Everything needed scrubbing. Pentip and Nibbles didn't know how tired they really were; their happiness of the evening's events dulled their ache. Still, there was a lot of cleaning up to do. They looked at each other and smiled.

"Hipdiddley job, Mr. Nibbles," Pentip said, his paws resting on his hips.

"And a hipdiddley job to you, Mr. Pentip," Nibbles happily whispered, smiling. "Well," Nibbles surveyed the mess, his lips twisting into concern.

"Well," Pentip joined Nibbles' thought, "The sooner we start, the sooner we finish."

"A turtle truth!" One lady turtle said, standing amidst the shell-shaped acorn bowls.

"Oh, hello!" Nibbles chirped. "Didn't know you were still here!"

Suddenly, several heads popped out of what looked to weary eyes as acorn bowls. The turtles stood there, necks stretched, eyes blinking.

"We're here to help," another turtle said, his bow-tie now lopsided.

"Friends indeed!" Pentip bubbled.

"Friendadidlydoodahday," the top-hatted turtle agreed in his flat and gravel-low voice.

"Oh," Nibbles suddenly realized, "Where's Skittles?"

"Skittles?" Pentip sang out.

"Wa-a-a-a-k." The frog's voice sounded the color of all his dots mixed together.

"Skittles?!" Nibbles rushed toward the croak. "Where are you? Are you OK?" Nibbles looked everywhere, under bowls, inside barky carriers, and finally, under a dish towel that covered an empty cooking pot.

"WA-A-A-Ak." The frog looked slightly yellowed. "Too full," he sadly croaked.

"Oh no you don't, Mr." Nibbles scolded. "You," Nibbles paused and looked over at the five remaining onions yet not chopped. "You'll feel better if you work it off," Nibbles huffed. "Here—use this dishtowel. We'll wash; you dry."

"Wa-a-a-akk." Skittles sadly said, taking the towel and moving very slowly.

Together, everyone—all but one overstuffed frog—scrubbed, polished, and straightened, putting the forest back in place. When finally they had finished their cleaning and had propped the sickened Skittles atop the biggest turtle's back, the turtle caravan began their trek, each turtle lugging pots, pans, and utensils, back to Nibbles' home of vines and rubberbands. (In no way would Nibbles' belongings agree to being left behind.)

"Hooptiedoodah, Nibbles," Pentip waved to Nibbles who was fading into the darkness as he led the turtle caravan.

Nibbles half-way turned, his arms wrapped around his giant punch bowl. "Hooptiedoodah, Pentip." The mouse gave a sliver of a smile and then stepped into the thickly blackened forest, the turtles following his lead.

When the last turtle was out of sight, Pentip took a moment to look into the star-spattered sky. He stood there, quietly, soaking himself in moongloss. And before hobbling to his home within the hedge, he gave a grateful nod to the moon; of course, the moon smiled back.

The Idea

News spread. Instead of the one expected line of ticketed dinner guests, the next evening saw two lines—the longest of which was a tittery-jittery line of un-ticketed critters eager to get the next evening's ticket. This noisy, zigzagging line ran the length of Pentip's hedge and snaked beyond the surrounding trees. It was amazing. Pentip and Nibbles felt as if they were caught in a dream's whirlwind. They actually liked Nibbles' artistic and most edible food. They wanted to hear Pentip's stories. There was no snickering or eye-rolling. No bullying. They liked them, well, they liked their art, that much they knew—and it felt weird. Amazingly wonderful. But weird. A few frogs had been so eager for a ticket that they had come before one star could even peek through the dusky sky. They sat in lily-pad lawn chairs at the front of the line. This line of guest wannabes was so long that those in the back hoped the tickets didn't run out. Seeing the line and hearing the commotion, Nibbles quickened his pace, chopping, scooping, drizzling... His spoons and knives quivered in his paw.

Meanwhile Pentip welcomed the guests; he chortled (a bit louder than usual) and ballyhooed (a bit fuller in bally, a smidge higher in hoo). At the same time, the caravan of turtles worked the ticket-craving line, distributing the highly prized dinner passes for the next event. Desperate to get their paws on a ticket, the critters had trouble standing still. They pinged up and down; they fluttered and flapped, and sometimes they pushed. The ever-proper turtle family took "special care" with these impatient critters.

"It's turtle time around here," the top-hatted turtle said in his flat, low voice, moving even slower as critters grew impatient.

When the cane-propelled Pentip hobble-rushed into Nibbles' outdoor kitchen to refill his platter with more cricket-cake bites, he didn't even stop to look at Nibbles. There was no time. The rowdy crowd required his hustle. That's what he told himself anyway. But really? It only takes a second to look at someone. Maybe, the true reason was he was kind of, or a lot of, unsure he should say it, when he said what he said. Huffing with hurry, piling the cricket cakes as fast as he could, he went ahead and spoke his thought, he said it almost like a passing notion, a dream, a fantasy. But it wasn't; he didn't know that yet, but it wasn't. "We're busy as a business, Nibbles," he said then teeter-tottered away, platter in one paw, cane in the other.

Nibbles' paws continued moving, sliding a pan off the fire, sliding another in its place, stirring broth, spooning pudding, sprinkling herbs. But the whole time he was stirring and chopping and sizzling and carving, he was thinking, about something else. It's like his mind was resting in the palm of the wind. The entire time, during dinner and during the story, Pentip's words rolled like a scroll over and over in his head—*busy, business*.

Ingrown Quills

Last night's critters, the ticket wannabes, weren't too happy when they later found out that their tickets were not for the very next night. Pentip had decided that Nibbles needed a break; all that lugging of supplies to the campfire and back to his home, all the cooking and cleaning, all the hopdoodling was starting to fray his whiskers. No, the next night would be a quiet dinner for the two of them. Unfortunately, a few critters did not quite comprehend this. One could only guess a misunderstanding was why they showed up unannounced.

"No dinner tonight," Pentip waved his arms as he stepped out of his hedge.

"Yea but... How about just a little of that yummy..."

"Tomorrow evening, come back tomorrow," Pentip forced a smile. He kind of felt like a beehive, oozing with sweet gratitude but buzzing with annoyance.

Hmmm...where was Nibbles? When three full stars glimmered through the leaves above Pentip's shrubby shelter, the hedgehog began to worry. When a fourth peeked in at him, he got a bit tizzy-tipped and decided to wait for Nibbles outside his hedge. When star number five appeared—and still no Nibbles—things got serious. During the last few days, the swelling in Pentip's leg had subsided; it finally looked more like a hedgehog leg and less like a tree trunk. There were things to be thankful for, a lot of things. But standing there alone, he didn't seem very impressed. He remembered Nibbles' barely-there smile when they said goodbye the night before. Had he said something wrong? The more the hedgehog thought, the lower he sunk. Gone were last night's joys. After all, he still wobble-wobbled when he walked, and he still needed his quill as a cane. Pentip started feeling pretty crumbly, as crumbly as the campfire ash. Without Nibbles, nothing seemed right, and his list of negatives grew. His old tipsy-turvy fear started swelling inside him.

Not knowing what else to do, Pentip hippity-gitched his way over to the scorched remains of last night's campfire. He stared into the ash. There were no thoughts—no words sat on his tongue's tip. There were only feelings. He eyed the campfire remains, its mostly eaten logs. His spine's needles no longer needled but curved like question marks. He looked above the oak trees that surrounded the campfire, above their freshly inked outlines, up into the shadowing sky: two more stars, Hunky and Dory, were twinkling down at him—as if nothing were wrong, as if everything were completely wonderful.

Nitwits, Pentip mentally grunted, annoyed at the empty-minded stars. *Go away already*, his lips twisted as he glared at their perky selves. One star-twinkle later, he took it all back.

Maybe there's a good reason he didn't show. Maybe I overworked him... Pentip thought, tossing the possibilities back and forth. *Maybe if I go ahead and start the fire myself*, he thought some more—but not much more. He'd rather do than think. He'd rather deal with an aching leg than surrender to the belief that Nibbles wasn't coming tonight, and possibly, never again.

Nope, you close the door on that thought. Could be everything was fine...he simply wasn't ready to think otherwise. So, the hope-soaked hedgehog bipidy-blumped his way over to a fat log that lay at the base of an oak, took a deep breath, and dove into a ball. The prickly hedge-ball then

rolled forward and into the log, scooting it an inch closer to the campfire spot. Next, Pentip rolled backward, building his runway, or more precisely in this case, a rollway. Creating space between the log and himself, he then rolled forward again, scooting the log not quite a quill's length. Roll back. Roll forward. Back. Forward. Again. Again. Until finally, the log sat amongst the campfire ash.

There. One log's ready for the campfire, he thought, ignoring the devious ache that began pricking his leg.

OK, next log. Pentip unrolled himself to take a deep breath before hibble-hobbling over to another log. It was during this slight pause that he felt it—someone was watching him.

Signs

"Nibbles, there you are!" Pentip exhaled relief; a slight smile reappearing.

But Nibbles didn't respond as he tromped over to Pentip, a barky food carrier slung over his shoulder.

"OK, let's do it," Nibbles' words hammered a nail into his mouse-made decision.

"Huh? Do what?" Pentip stared at Nibbles, unknowingly holding his breath.

"The business!" Nibbles blurted.

Pentip simply stared at him, blinking.

"Here, I've written it all down." Nibbles pulled out his own barky scroll and unrolled it.

"So now you're the writer," Pentip joked, scanning the plan, his peppercorn nose twitching as he did. As he began reading, a huge smile stretched his hedgehog face.

That night they dined on simple forest sandwiches, wild leaves crunching between their teeth, slug sauce dripping out the sandwiches' sides.

"When I saw you trying to build the fire, hurt leg and all," Nibbles explained, "that did it. I knew we should be business partners."

Pentip was speechless. How could he have felt so mud-hole sunken just moments ago?

And then, just before Pentip took the last bite of his sandwich, "Wait!" Nibbles squeaked, making Pentip jump. "I want you to sign this scroll before your last bite. And this time," Nibbles eyes slivered with sneaky twinkle, "follow the directions I've written here," Nibbles pointed to a line in the plan, his tone sounding like popping corn kernels.

Pentip's head tipped to one side in question-form.

"Go on," the mouse shooed him, as if he could paw-sweep Pentip's sight toward the scroll.

Pentip read the directions aloud: "When eating, I will never, in any circumstance, wish for so many strangers to come to one dinner."

"You need to sign this part of the plan—please." Nibbles smiled.

How did the mouse know?

"Do you read minds too?" Pentip laughed.

"Yes! Now sign!" Nibbles said.

"Well, hold on now. That wish I made before was private," the hedgehog placed a paw on his heart, pretending to be insulted.

"Just s-i-g-n," Nibbles' voice was maple syrup, with a splash of lemon juice.

Pentip's smile grew snakish and his eyes sparked. He signed the plan alright. But then, staring intently at Nibbles, he popped the last bite of forest sandwich into his mouth. He closed his eyes and chewed. Slowly. He thought of the moon. Its smile. Its starry pals. And he wished even harder and more deeply than before.

All in Good Time

Ooh, you cannot imagine the things that can happen when a hedgehog wishes that deeply. That honestly. A wish like this starts in the toes and works its way up, vibrating the brain. It's the kind of wish made with open paws, not tight fists. To be this kind of wish, you gotta release the wish's starry tail and follow its kite-ish path. And that's exactly what Pentip did. And it really stirred things up.

Wormholes aligned themselves with his dream; invisible forces began turning gears and pulling levers, shifting obstacles from his path. It worked like magic. But let's be clear about magic. Truth is, magic doesn't equal a wear-your-pajamas-all-day easy; it doesn't mean forever splish-splash days filled with sparkly unicorn glitter. Sorry. There is some of that. But, not in the way one might think. There's a lot of grit and grime thrown into the mix. Fact is, Pentip had no idea what he was in for, not really.

"What are you up to, you foxillian you?" Nibbles threaded his eyes, making them splinters; he turned toward Pentip who sat beside him on a log.

"Ah!" Pentip laughed, shaking one finger in Nibbles' face. "That's a good word. 'foxillian.' Good going. Think I'll write that down," he said, shuffling through his pack, looking for his barky journal.

"Hold it. You're avoiding an answer." Nibbles' paw went to his hip. "I want to know what you wished for!" He stared, waiting. But Pentip just stared back, smiling.

"I'll have you know that this contract," Nibbles unrolled the scroll, "is a legal document." Nibbles' lips twisted into a knot, the same way his mother used to when he'd been naughty.

Pentip's smile remained. "Uh huh," he muttered, nodding.

"And," Nibbles' voice grew fuller, "it says right here," Nibbles tapped the contract with a finger-punching force, "you will never wish for so many strangers to come to one dinner!"

"Ah," his hedgehog forehead squished together, forming rolls, "yes, indeed, and I kept my promise." He lifted his tiny finger to the sky. "Notice, however, my dear friend," Pentip's excitement haloed his face; Nibbles, however, bit the inside of his cheek—here we go, he thought while plunging inward to scrape up as much patience as he could find, "please notice," Pentip began in teacher-esque style, "you can plainly see that the contract says 'so many,' implying the same number of dinner guests I wished for in the past. I most definitely did not wish for 'so many.' No, no," Pentip shook his head and gave a breathy laugh, looking rather puffed in the moment, "I wished for many, many more than that."

"Pentip!" Nibbles' mouth remained open; his paws flung over his heart, dramatizing his cringe, pretending to pretend.

"And," Pentip continued, "notice it says 'strangers.' Those nocturnal critters who enter our business will not be strangers, but friends—once they enter."

"No..." Nibbles folded in two. "The work, the work..." the little mouse repeated to himself.
Drama real this time.

"Be not scaret afraid, dear Nibbles," the hedgehog's voice was solid, the thud of a judge's gavel, "You must also notice the contract's phrase 'one dinner.' I wished for many, many dinners.

Nibbles lifted his head. "So the guest numbers will be spread out, over many dinner events?"
His mousey eyes searched Pentip's face.

Pentip smiled.

Realizing he'd been bamboozled, Nibbles slivered his eyes, giving the hedgehog a sinister look. "You..." he said.

"You..." Pentip returned the look.

And so they began. Together. With mousy strength and sharp know-how. They created a place to nourish night-loving critters. It was an enchanted business with Nibbles' wizardly menus and Pentip's adventurous stories, a place that nourished taste buds and fed hungry minds. They called it Story Thyme, a critter-quaint restaurant with pinprick windows, a wheeze-huff chimney, and a vine-wrapped frame, all built into the side of a giant oak. Pure enchantment.

Still, even with its magic and charm, a lot of grunt and grunge have been involved. That's why now, after all this time, a light is nearly always on; somebody's usually working late. In the early hours of the morning when all the other nocturnal critters have tucked themselves into their leafy beds, Nibbles will often be found steeped in a storm of steam, his pine-cone snout bent over a tall pot of bubbling sauce, his nimble mousy paws sprinkling each dish with freshly chopped thyme. And Pentip, he is often seen immersed in the fireplace's glow, hunched over his desk, scrawling out stories with a sharpened quill.

An excursion by starlight is recommended 'cause that's when you'll see the crowds of crave-crazy critters gathering at the restaurant's front door, their feverish voices rumbling, their springy legs hurdling to the front of the line, their clawish paws clamoring, their screwball manners manicing. You'll see and hear Pentip's mother and her acorn whistle, forming straight, well-behaved customer lines. And you might remember the turtles; they've been promoted from ticket-taking to table-twisting. This is the perfect job for one who's slow and steady. Each dinner, each turtle takes its place in the middle of a dinner table, its head and legs tucked into shell. Various condiments—sauteed pillbugs, caramelized worms, chopped herbs—are placed on top its shell. This way, when critters across the table need something, they just spin the shell and—Voila! The need is at their pawtips. Genius, those turtles. But the turtle's favorite part of the evening is the slow dance; that's when they pop out of their shell—fancy hat on head, dancing stick in paw—and perform a sort of soft-shoe dance in the center of the table. It's quite lovely, their dance. Lately, however, there's been some trouble, on account of Skittles. And his bad timing. They keep telling him to clear the plates before the turtle dance. Yes, yes, you're bound to encounter Skittles during a visit. Can't escape it. Actually, he's become fairly well-known at the restaurant.

Be forewarned, however—he's not quite the frog he use to be. Gone are the days of his candy-pop dots. Nope, these days he's traded dots for dish towels. Seems all that onion-chopping messed with his senses. Lately, the frog's claiming to be a new, improved, and highly disciplined creature,

claims he's got bigger plans than to use his wishes on candy-pop dots, though he's not yet sharing what those froggy plans of his might be. So, if you want to see him, look for the frog with red, orange, and yellow dish towels tied to his warty knobs. He'll be the one leaping from guest to guest collecting dinner plates, his superhero dish towels streaming through the air as he does, sometimes flapping against the tops of critter heads or wiping their mouths after they've eaten. But this new-lease-on-life thing Skittles has going, his I've-grown-beyond-my-candy-pop-self attitude doesn't fool Nibbles. Skittles' fan club has only increased since he substituted the dots for dish towels. Nibbles sees the way his waaaaks vibrate when the crowd applauds his dish-towel routine. Plus, no one is fooled by his sudden pronouncement of self-discipline; they all see the way he tongue-flicks the leftovers off their plates when he thinks no one is looking. As far as those secret plans of his, who knows? The frog's definitely got something tucked under those dish towels of his, so to speak. Be assured, Nibbles is keeping a scissor-snapping eye on him, as any friend would.

As you can see, life has truly changed for Pentip and Nibbles. No more loneliness, no more lack-of-direction. Yup, it's a good life for a hedgehog and mouse. Good but, lest it hasn't been said enough, not easy. It took a while to learn to work together. There was the one time when Pentip grabbed the spoon right out of Nibbles' paw, thinking he would show the mousy chef a better stirring technique. Didn't go over so well. And the time when Nibbles thought he'd simply edit Pentip's story for him. Uh...hello, not a good idea. Plus, a hedgehog's prickles might make good herb choppers, but they can also jab a mouse when an unfocused hedgehog is hibble-hobbling through a small kitchen. And, Pentip has discovered, an extra ambitious mouse can nibble at your brain with all the plans they tend to cook up. Yet, with all their rumbles and tumbles, their starry highs and quill-cane lows, Pentip and Nibbles, first and foremost, are friends. Still.

"Well, my dear friend Nibbles," Pentip propped his feet on top of his desk and stretched his front paws over his head, a yawn hidden beneath his words, "has it been worth it? Would you do it again?"

Nibbles paused, his time-to-go coat already buttoned, his paw on the doorknob. A serious look took over his face. It had been an extra long week, little time to close his mousy eyes and drift to moonglossed thoughts. He thought of his vine-covered, rubber-band home, his appliances and comfy pals, the way they were now quiet and unimpressed when he entered the house, his door giving him an echoey, hollow yawn rather than a grainy, wide smile. Nibbles' eyes then shifted to the first barky scroll with its berry-ink note, its curved sides huffing in and out as it slept in its special place on a restaurant shelf.

"You bet your hibbeley-doodahs I would." Nibbles' words rang. The restaurant utensils smiled and turned on their sides; the sleepy walls softly giggled.

"You're sure?" Pentip wanted to hear his mousy knot-tied decision again.

"Slug-sauce sure," Nibbles said, his eyes splintering as if getting ready to launch a laser beam at Pentip.

"You..." Pentip returned the look.

Nibbles' eyes widened, his features became stubborn boulders. "No, you!" Nibbles said, pointing his little finger in a big check-mark way. "Its you that made it happen, Mr. Pentip. You'll always be to blame!" Nibbles froze for a second and then smiled.

"I believe the word is we, dear friend. We did it." Pentip's voice was like an unlatched belt, low and loose, unrestricted, that of an unbound hedgehog, even one with a hipidty-gitch in his walk.

"Oh, you academics, always correcting one word or another," Nibbles' eyes slivered again.

"Bye-dee-dye, Nibbles." Pentip pretend-tugged at an invisible hat atop his head; he winked.

Nibbles threw back his head and laughed. "Bye-dee-dye, Pentip!"

A special thanks to a student who—with firecracker eyes and the wisp of a smile—called me out, blew her own acorn whistle:

“And don’t stop writing!” she said to me, standing in the classroom doorway, her podium-sturdy stance laced with student shyness. “You’re supposed to write. And I’m psychic!” You, Meryl Zhang, are the beginning of this story.