

Wood

by mwalimu

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Dedicated to George and Francis.

The young, lanky skunk clambered through an opening in the weeds and shrubs that more or less comprised the back boundary of the yard. She looked down at the patch of clover, enjoying the smell and the feel of it on her feet. In front of her was the back of the house, a couple of lights visible in the kitchen window despite the daylight. To her left was the whitewashed shed from which no lights could be seen but some loud sounds and familiar smells emanated. She scrambled over to the open window on the side to peer in, stepping up onto a cinderblock to get a better view.

At that moment, the loud screeching of the table saw cutting wood caused her to fold her ears back. Squinting slightly, she watched curiously as the Siberian tiger pushed a piece of wood through the blade, guiding it carefully with his paw. As the cut was completed and the screech gave way to the airy whine of the blade rotating freely, the skunk bounded off the cinderblock and around the corner to the doorway.

Reaching under the table to switch off the saw, the tiger lifted the piece of wood to his face. With a sharp exhale he blew the sawdust off, then ran his fingers along the freshly cut edge. He sniffed the wood, letting his whiskers trail along its surface as he did so, and smiled as he glanced over at the skunkette. "Hello, Tonya."

"Hi, Grandpa."

"What have you been doing this morning?"

She stepped through the door nonchalantly. "Oh, nothing. Just exploring the neighborhood, climbing trees and stuff." Her eyes wandered over the place, stopping on the piece of wood he was holding. "Whatcha doin'?"

The large tiger, quite imposing despite graying around the edges, squatted down to bring his face level with hers. "I'm making a bedside table."

Her paw reached out to caress the freshly cut side of the wood. "Feels kind of rough."

"Careful! You don't want to get any splinters. Yes, it does," he explained, "but I'm going to sand it next, and then the edges will be nice and smooth."

"Oh, okay."

"Then I'm going to use another tool called a router to give it curved edges."

"That's neat," said Tonya, stepping beside him. She studied the pattern on the wood surface, trying to think of the kind of question that would make her sound smart. "What's so good about this piece of wood?"

The tiger looked down at the skunk and gave a little chuckle. "It's cherry wood. It has a very good color for bedroom furniture." His fingers followed hers in tracing the pattern on it. "Sometimes it's almost like a piece of wood has a destiny. Like this one. I like the wood grain on this piece, which is why I selected it."

The young skunk studied the piece. "I like it too."

Holding the board with that paw, he reached across with his other paw and began tracing the patterns in the stripes on both their arms. "I like nice patterns. Like the stripes we share..."

Her face twisted with mixed emotions. "Sometimes I hate my stripes. The other kids at school tease me about them."

"You know what I think?" he retorted. "I think they're just jealous. Because they don't have stripes as nice as yours."

Tonya pondered on this a moment, then nodded and stepped back as her grandfather stood up. "Are you going to use the sander now?"

"Yes, I am," he replied, stepping over to it.

"Okay if I watch?"

"Of course. You can help me as long as you can follow a few rules. Tools can be dangerous if you're not careful."

Her eyes opened a little wider as she pondered this, then she nodded. "Okay."

"Just follow directions and it will turn out right."

"What happens if you make a mistake?"

He stopped, putting a paw up to his chin. "Depends on the mistake. If I can hide it well or fix it, I'll just use the piece of wood anyway. I just have to adapt a little. If I can't, I'd just

have to set this piece aside and cut another one for the bedside table and find something else to do with this one."

She glanced at the cherry wood in his paws. "I like that piece."

He smiled at her. "Well, then, I guess I'll just have to be real careful not to make mistakes with this one, won't I?"

The tiger turned on the sander which he then used to smooth the rough edges. "Much nicer," he said when the job was finished. "Now you can run your fingers over it," he continued, holding the piece of wood out for her.

She touched it, running her paw along the edge. "All nice and smooth," she observed, studying the fine dust from the sander it left on her fingers.

Over the next couple of hours, the tiger routed the edges and measured, cut, and sanded more pieces for the sides and a low shelf. All the while he talked with his granddaughter, pride and joy to him that she was, who helped him as he worked and watched with fascination at the pride and joy he took in the craftsmanship he put into his woodwork.

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With a large glass of lemonade in each paw, Zig Zag stepped into the workshop. She stopped to watch as James cut a piece of wood on his table saw. Upon completing the cut, he switched it off, then lifted the safety goggles off his eyes to study his handiwork. So intent was he that she began to wonder if he had even noticed her entrance, but she kept quiet.

Finally, he looked up. "Hey, Zig."

"Hi, James. I thought you might be thirsty."

Seeing the expression on her face, he paused. "Why are you looking at me like that? What's with that smile?"

She laughed gently and padded over to him, handing him a glass of lemonade. "Oh, nothing. I was just watching you and thinking about my grandfather."

James took a long pull from his glass. "Your grandfather?"

"My only relative who could make me proud of my stripes when I was young," Zig Zag reminisced as she sipped her lemonade.

"Ah, I see," James replied. "I wish I could have met him. Sounds like he was a great guy."

"You two would have gotten along great," Zig Zag replied. "Remind me to tell you about my bedside table next time we're over at my place."
