

OTTER SENSE



by Toni L. Rocha

Otter poked her nose out of her den and tested the warm night air. Smelling nothing to alarm her, she wriggled outside and turned to face its narrow opening. Otter uttered a low, sharp bark, warning her cubs to stay inside. Nighttime was no time for little otters to be outside the safety of the den.

Satisfied that they would mind, she slid silently into the dark river and swam a few yards offshore. Otter began her hunt by using her keen nose. At first she did not scent anything of interest. But as she followed the shoreline into a small lagoon, a tantalizing aroma made Otter's nose twitch. Mmmmm, chicken—one of Otter's favorites.

Slinking through the shadows that edged the marshy shore, Otter crept close to a wooden structure surrounded by wire fence. The fence was no barrier to Otter, who used her powerful claws to dig a hole in the soft earth beneath it. The hen house was more of a challenge. Otter nosed around its base, looking for a way inside. Aha! - a loose board.

Using her strong muscles and every bit of her twenty-two pounds, Otter pried the board out enough to let her squirm inside. The noise awakened a few of the hens, which clucked nervously. Otter didn't hesitate. She grabbed a freshly laid egg from beneath a sitting hen, broke the shell, and gobbled it whole. Otter found more eggs in a nest near the floor and ate those as well.

The chickens didn't take this sitting down, of course. Feathers flew as the birds thrashed around, squawking loudly. A light went on outside the hen house, alerting Otter to danger. Deftly grasping one more egg in her powerful jaws, Otter dashed to the opening and wormed her way outside. She ran across the pen and dived under the fence.

Once through, Otter paused and looked behind her. A man came out of the house, making loud noises and waving his arms. When the man stooped to pick up a rock, Otter wasted no more time. She bounded through the marshy sedge, happy to reach the water and safety. Otter swam straight home to her pups, her



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tummy full of fresh scrambled eggs.

The next night, Otter swam back to the same house. But this time, something was different. Sneaking under the fence at the same place, Otter bellied across the pen. It was too quiet, and the scent of chicken was not as strong. Otter found the loose board and eased inside the hen house. The chickens were gone; only feathers and broken eggshells remained to show they had been there. Otter was keenly disappointed. After sniffing all about the hen house, she wriggled out into the soft moonlight.

Outside in the pen she spied something new—a square box made of thick wire. Otter's nose told her there was food inside the box. But Otter's instincts warned her this box was not as safe as it might seem. Like her cousins—the weasel, ferret, and wolverine—Otter was naturally wise to many dangers. Still, she was tempted.

She crept closer to the box. One side was open, inviting Otter to come in and eat. Otter paced back and forth in front of the opening, curious but very cautious. It stank of human scent. Otter edged closer and tried to stretch a front paw in far enough to hook the food. It was out of reach. Otter took a tentative step

closer, then decided to try grabbing the food from the side of the box instead. She reached through the wire and was just able to touch the food.

SNAP! The box opening slammed shut with a loud clang. Otter leaped backward and stood quivering, her heart pounding. A light came on at the house.

Otter scrambled under the fence and streaked back to the lagoon's edge. Without hesitation, she dived into the warm, dark water. Otter's ears and nostrils closed automatically as she swam deep underwater, safe from the man and his tricky box. No chicken tonight.

When Otter felt safe once more, she began searching the bottom of the lagoon for food to take back to her cubs. All the while, Otter relied on her whiskers to alert her should the man or any predator enter the water hunting for her. After eating her fill of crawfish, Otter headed back to the den to check on her pups.

As she swam closer to the den, Otter caught a scent on the wind different from chicken, but equally welcome. Rabbit!—every bit as delicious as chicken. Tomorrow night Otter would hunt again. ◀