

The Lady of the Tenth Life has a crooked sense of humor. I've seen her six times before, with each successive life progressing further into the comfort and luxury I deserve. Only now, after my seventh visit, did she make a mistake.

An animal shelter is neither comfort, nor luxury, no matter what the humans running it want you to think. Not only that, but they put me in here with the second lifers! I spent my days staking out my own personal corner of the cell and mentally hissing at The Lady by night. I had already done my time scavenging for garbage in my first through third lives and spent the next two as feral in the woods. This shelter was an insult to everything I've suffered through.

Humans made their rounds lackadaisically. Was it too much to ask for food to be on time? Sometimes they were off by a whole five minutes! Unacceptable. I made sure to let them know my feelings on the matter at every available opportunity.

Humans we cats didn't recognize were the only things that could put us on our best behavior. I always timed it so there was just enough time to swat at the kitten inching too close to my corner of the cell before we had to take our place. A combative cat was an unadoptable one, a death sentence before even visiting The Lady. But if the humans didn't see it, it didn't happen.

I wasn't paying the best attention as I was faking being asleep, but as soon as I heard a kid's voice say "That one!" the door to my cell rattled and a pair of human paws snatched me up. The other kittens could have my corner of the cell. I was getting adopted.

I screamed.

I screamed as much as I could to rub it in the other cat's faces and prove to the shelter that it couldn't keep me here forever. They called me feisty, but I couldn't have cared less. I was free.

The moment I was placed in Kayla's arms was the moment I knew to never doubt The Lady of the Tenth Life ever again. Swaddled in a warm towel for the ride home, I slept through most of it in my first nap without barks, screeches, and hisses. I awoke in a new cell much later, but this one was fully habitat-sized.

And what a glorious habitat it was.

A sofa for scratching and a tower with posts for sleeping, every luxury imaginable was there, with each of them at my service. The biggest human cleans the very box I poop in and my food is on an automatic schedule. All I have to do is look bored for a moment and Kayla is there, ready to make a string flit about for hours for me, or scratch behind my ears. I would give my last life if it meant more of this one with her.

I am the only reason she's alive. Without me, no one else would be here to chase away the robins and squirrels from the windows. I keep trying to alert the larger humans that the vermin keep eating the seeds in the feeder outside, but they keep ignoring my warnings.

With their seed being stolen regularly, I work extra hard to keep all of them supplied with the diet of spiders and cockroaches I hunt myself. Unfortunately, they make my job so much harder than it needs to be. I've tried to teach them what I know, but none of the lessons have caught on yet. I keep trying to get it through to them that the opportune time to hunt is when the sun is going down, but they always choose that time for their extended naps. Kayla is the only one who keeps her door open anymore, the larger humans stopped after I kept jumping on their bed to put my butt in their faces to wake them. I got shooed out every time for no reason.

There's a suspiciously familiar mouse I keep finding. Immobile and bright green, it must be a subspecies unique to the habitat. It has no legs and its tail is a string coming out its backend, but those differences haven't stopped it from reappearing in a new spot each night. I treat the mouse as an offering. I take care to leave it in the largest human's shoes. He needs it the most.

Without me they'd all be dead. Or worse. Starving.

Something is off. The school bus pulled away from its spot without Kayla on it. She's seven minutes late, but the second-largest human hasn't yelled once. I would know. She uses that volume whenever I knock over the basil plant on the kitchen windowsill. Someone has to fix this. If the humans won't, I'm the only one left. I sprung from my perch on the dining room table to the living room where Kayla was.

I fear she's caught a glimpse of The Lady. That's survivable in and of itself. As long as one doesn't visit they're fine. But she's staked out her own personal territory on the couch and judging by how she's swaddled herself in every blanket in the habitat, she hasn't moved in a while. Her arms appeared stuck under her cocoon until she reached suddenly for a conveniently placed bucket to cough up the world's liquidiest hairball. Even worse, I don't think she's eaten.

I intend to bring her food.

It'll need to be my best offering yet to ward off The Lady, but I haven't seen any roaches lately. May The Lady smite the largest human and his insecticide. He single-handedly crippled the ecology of the habitat in an afternoon. I watched all the corners and crawled under the coffee table and cabinetry and didn't see a single spider either. May The Lady curse the second-biggest for removing the spider webs again. Her pursuit of so-called cleanliness brings doom and dishonor to the territory. She should know by now the best way to clean things is to lick them.

My only option left is the garage.

The last of a warm, orange sunset trickled in through the curtains, indicating the best time to distract the biggest human. The door to his room was unlatched so I nudged it open. If I wanted him to come running here and away from the garage before he locked it, I'd need to find something he spends more time with than me.

His work laptop sat atop his desk, the open screen filling the room with a harsh blue. A bar slowly worked its way across the bottom. The keys clicked pleasantly under my paws so I

scratched at the keyboard. The hard plastic keys popped out from their sockets, but it was no better than scratching the black of the couch. The screen changes when I pressed one of the keys and the bar disappeared, but the human wasn't running in yet. It was time to get a bit more creative.

I spat as loud as I could.

I could've gone a few more days before hacking up a hairball, but the opportunity here presented itself nicely. I'd left the bedroom door wide open so the sound would carry further. Panicked footsteps pounded the hall until a strong pair of human paws yanked me from my post. The hairball missed the keyboard due to the intervention, but having it land in the biggest human's lap was a suitable alternative. I would've preferred the keyboard; any time not working is time that could be spent on me instead, but I'll take what I can get.

He dropped me with a vocabulary that expanded past his usual repertoire. He only used this particular expansion when alone and angry, so hopefully this wouldn't mean a future reduction in the treats budget. He slammed the door after me and didn't come back out.

I may have gone too far, but it'll have to do. The mission was a success, the biggest human left the garage unlocked before his confusingly long nap. I slunk back to the living room for a celebratory nap atop Kayla's chest. She was already well into her extended dozing so she didn't wake to pet me when I jumped up, but that wasn't an issue quite yet. There was still time to ward off The Lady. This state of hers wouldn't be permanent because I was going to fix it.

A gentle moonlight flowed through the windows when I awoke. The timing was perfect. The other two humans would be too far into their naps to hear me.

I strolled to the kitchen, leaping atop the counter. The second-biggest human left a stack of papers here again. She knows they don't go here but keeps putting them here anyway. I batted them all to the floor so she'd take care of it properly in the morning. Nothing would get done around here without me. They should all be grateful.

The door to the garage was closed, but the handle was long and skinny. Thanks to genetics and convincing the humans I hadn't eaten when I already had, I was short and fat. I jumped at the handle, hooking a paw around it as I fell. The tell tale clicks let me know the door was unlatched. I nudged it open like the last one.

The garage hadn't changed much. The car that brought me home from the shelter was in its usual spot, as was Kayla's bike. Hers had fun, glittery streamers on the handlebars and a basket she puts me in when I can tolerate a collar. Hers was much better than the other two bikes, those didn't have a basket for me at all. It was colder here than the rest of the habitat, but I couldn't curl up in the clean laundry until I had what I came for.

I had come to hunt. The first step is always to scan the available hunting grounds.

In all my life, I'd never been so blatantly insulted. A mousetrap, a classic one with the spring and bait, was slid under a shelf with the gall to have a thick layer of dust over itself. If the humans had let me in here instead of gating me out they wouldn't have had to stoop so low. At least it wasn't as effective as I would've been. Through the cobwebs, a pair of beady eyes reflected the minimal light from the windows.

A real rat. It wasn't green. Its flesh and blood tail twitched. Our eyes locked and the rat bolted, scurrying across the cement to the wheels of the car.

Though formerly a boon, my size and stature now made for an embarrassing detriment. The rat stayed out of reach as my legs were too short to catch it. But no matter. Though I lost the element of surprise, the chase was on.

I bounded for the tires, paws not making a sound as they tore across the cement. The rat made for a slippery trespasser. Before I could swoop in, it would round a tire and scatter. My paws skidded as I slid into the turn, but I crashed into Kayla's bike as the rat vanished under more shelving. The bike shuddered.

I prowled the bottom of the shelving, slinking back and forth, but the rat was sunken in further than I could reach. Every time I managed to squeeze closer, the rat would scurry further away. If it weren't for Kayla needing my help soon, I would've waited it out. I hissed at it for good measure before an idea struck.

I could flush the rat out with a loud enough noise. I'm not partial to them myself, but I'm decently experienced at knocking things over. But if I couldn't catch the rat myself, I'd need some unfortunate help.

My paws could reach the mousetrap. I batted it out, jumping to fling off the cobwebs that came with it. I moved it into the open, but kept it hidden behind a tire.

I set my sights on the bike. I made sure the training wheels were off and made a note of which side the kickstand was on. I crouched on its right side, belly flush with the concrete, legs poised for a leap until I sprung. I kicked the seat and the bike toppled.

The handle traced a gash in the blue paint of the car door as it fell, my tail poofing at the screech. My ears pinned back as it clattered to the ground, the front wheel still spinning in the air. I leapt to the hood of the car to escape the noise.

Only after I calmed myself down did I see the rat, equally as spooked as I. It had darted from under the shelf into the open, blissfully unaware of my whereabouts. I pounded at it from above, missing by the smallest yet. Skittering under the car again, I followed. Once again, it avoided the trap, but I swatted it forward this time.

The bait clipped the rat's tail, slamming the spring-loaded trap down like a broom wielded by a housewife. It screeched as much as it could, but these were the noises of victory. The spoils of

war. Something to be savored, like a can of the nicer brand wet food. Specifically the salmon. I always preferred the salmon.

I laid there, basking in the glory of a vanquished foe until stirring from inside caught my attention. Hastily, I remembered to give my thanks to The Lady for her generosity.

I batted the trap once more as a taunt, and cheap balsa wood had never felt so fine beneath my paws. I snatched up the still squirming rat and headed back in.

The second biggest human was fighting off a yawn as she strolled down the hall to look for the noise I'd made. She didn't have to fight anymore. I showed her the reason behind my commotion and she gasped loud enough to jump too.

Humans, I've learned, are the loudest when they're the most excited. Higher pitches are for happiness, especially for the kitten-aged humans.

I dodged the second-biggest human's paws to get to the couch where Kayla would be confined no longer. Leaping atop the mass of blankets covering her stomach, I head-butted her forehead to make sure she was awake. When I was met with bleary eyes, I dropped my offering.

Judging by her pitch and volume, she was ecstatic.