

My paws were silent as I padded against the floor, it hadn't been cleaned in a long time so my tail became coated in dust long ago, and the distant smell of rot permeated through the closed windows. The ceiling had started sinking last week, and the doors had all rotted off their hinges. My litter box was getting full so I'd started sneaking out through a hole in the back door to relieve myself. The garden was overgrown and most of it was dead, which made it quite an unpleasant experience.

However, Mother always got upset when I relieved myself inside, and even though she'd not come out of her room in a long time I still knew she was behind the door. There was the odd scuffling and groaning late at night, and she'd grasp and pat at my paws when I swiped underneath the door to get her attention. I wished she'd come out. My fur had long since matted without her brushing it. I'd always thought I hated the sensation but now I was realizing just how much worse the feeling of thick pelt was against my skin.

I shifted onto the dusty couch, huffing out a quiet sigh. Mother didn't feed me anymore, so I'd been adapting the best I could. I always used to dream of going outside and living on my own, hunting the winged demons and little red tree climbers. The first time I'd discovered the hole in the door I intended on rushing outside and never coming back. The whole ordeal felt different without her chasing after me with treats to coax me back indoors. The winged things had gone quiet by the time I got out. The tree critters had stopped scurrying around on the ground.

All I ever heard was groaning and hissing now, and the smell of rotting flesh ruined playing in Mother's gardens the way I used to dream of doing. Her peonies didn't smell as sweet when the air around them was soiled, and by now most of them were wilted without her gentle care.

I'd just come back from an unsuccessful hunt, my belly ached and I swore I could feel the energy draining from my stores with every movement I made. I'd once thought it would be so easy to sink my claws into little things. It had been easy before with the squeaky mice that Mother'd throw at me when I got restless.

I used to be a restless cat. She'd get upset with me for clawing at her furniture and rushing around with my ears up and my tail twitching. Now I was too tired to do any of what used to annoy her. I'd tried to in the beginning, tried to scream and rip up her lamps and the bottoms of her couches, hoping she'd come out and fuss at me. I would scream at the bathroom door which she was behind, even though her alarm was already going off, trying to remind her to feed me. But after the first week of it not working I'd given up.

Maybe she was mad at me?

Maybe she was scared?

I wasn't sure, but she hadn't come out to eat in a long time either, so she'll be getting hungry soon, and maybe then she'll remember to feed me, too. It'd be much easier than chasing around little hissing bugs like I had been. They tasted sour and I always had to eat so many.

The neighbors hadn't been much help. When I first got out I'd rushed over to one of the houses to beg for food, they'd always happily given me some when I'd gotten out. This time was different, not nearly as timely or filled with preening older folk. The man next door had lunged at me with snarling snapping jaws. His face was mangled and his hands were twisted eerily. I hadn't waited much longer for his wife to come around, just scrambled back home with wounded pride and some annoyance at his manners.

Even now as I sat on the decrepit couch I could hear her snarling and bumping against the door. She might have been stuck. I used to get stuck in the bathroom and whine until she could get

me out. Perhaps she was looking for me to return the favor? But I can't help her out if she's forgotten how to do it on her own. I never could figure it out either. Perhaps she would eventually. She was very clever after all.

I would encourage her later as I always did by patting my little paws under the door, reminding her.

Mother was stuck, but she'd figure it out any day now and come out and feed me, and then herself. And then she'd brush me and bathe me and give me treats, and then she'd go and fuss at the neighbor for snapping at me the way he did.

She always came out of her room eventually. She'd always manage to get up and clean me and my things.

I wasn't sure what she was ill with, but it was obvious something was wrong. I loved her lots anyway, and it was obvious she loved me, too. After all, you wouldn't care for someone else while sick if you didn't love them.

I did my best to show her I still loved her now, even when I was sick.

Even now as I was too tired to sing for her or remind her of my presence I held my little eyes upon the door as if I could will it open.

It got darker outside and she started trying again, banging against the door and hissing loudly, pleading with me for help, for reassurance.

I rolled out a mew and leaped off the couch, padding over as quickly as I could while being gentle with my weakened body. I managed out a song, which encouraged her to start hitting the door harder. With an excited purr, I pushed my hands under the door in the way that always got her in a confident frenzy.

Yes.

Yes!

The door budged ever so slightly after weeks and weeks. I clawed at the edge of it excitedly, meowing loudly to welcome her back into the hall.

Oh, she'd be so furious to see what I'd done, and what the weather had done, and what—

Wait.

The horrible rotting smell that had filled the house suddenly got worse as the door shifted open ever so slightly, allowing some of the air from the bathroom to creep out. Gnarly fingers protruded from the doorway and out into the hall, clawing and grasping at the wooden door just above where my paws had been.

I let out a weak meow, unsure if I should still encourage her to come out. The door swung open slowly, and she shuffled into the hall, but she was wrong.

Ill-mannered just like the man next door had become, and horribly disfigured. Her once kind eyes fixed on me with hunger and her jaws made a horrible clicking sound as her exposed teeth thrashed. Her arms held out to me, but not with thanks or relief. She looked fake. Like the stiff toys she used to convince me were tree climbers. As if she was being pulled by a string.

And she smelt just awful. Worse than my full litter box, worse than outside, and worse than the man sleeping out on the lawn the past few days.

Mother lunged for me and my heart nearly broke along with my neck. I managed to wriggle away before those aggressive jaws could clench around me.

I let out a pleading meow.

Begging her.

*Mother!*

*Mother!*

*Oh Mother, I let you out, Mother! You're free!*

*Why are you trying to bite me? Oh Mother, why?*

I scrambled away from her lunging writhing body, crying out pathetically as I scampered for the little hole beside the back door. She ran into the window beside the door, snapping and clawing at it like she didn't know it was there.

I curled my tail around my body and sat simply on the lawn, watching her.

Was she that upset about the furniture?

My ears pinned back and I laid down on the grass with a sigh, eyes still locked on her body as it thudded against the glass.

I wasn't welcome anymore, clearly. I understood that much.

I turned slowly toward the street, neighbors stumbling around just like Mother... but I could see some people walking normally and rushing past the neighbors. Strangers, but not sick like Mother.

I took in a deep breath and put one paw in front of the other to go after them. Mother needed to recover without me... as painful as it would be to leave her. She was ill just like the neighbors, and she didn't want me inside.

But those healthy humans could help me. And I could help them.