

*Phoenix Krol*

## **The Man Who Feeds Me Has Died**

**T**HE MAN WHO FEEDS ME HAS DIED. His body remains, slumped over on the sofa. His stiff body and discolored skin tells me that he had to be quickly complacent with death, welcoming almost. I am angry with him. He has left me without food in my bowl and too much waste in my litter. His bed is left unmade and there are dirty dishes in the sink. Soon, they'll begin to attract the bugs I am to kill. I will stare at their sticky bodies wondering if they also left their bed unmade.

There is nothing left in the world that will treasure me. I cannot be too somber about this, as I have been the one who has been rather cruel. Before there was the man who feeds me, there was no one. I was despicably feral. I had raided nests for food when my stomach was already full. I clawed their throats clean off, finding comfort in knowing that I have taken away one of the world's most sacred lullabies. I preferred the birds as they held tightly to a beauty I did not. Their screams are harmonious and they can fly away from the ground that holds me down. I had once thought that if I could capture enough for my meals, I would be able to morph into something just as beautiful. I never did.

Although I had taken as much as I could, I was never victorious against the birds. When the air turned thick and cold, I was left shivering alone while they flocked away together. I wanted nothing more than to rip their wings clean off so that they had nowhere to fly. With no other choice, I'd imagine they would stay in my company. My hunger and my hatred of cold air had driven me to try my best to deprive the world of what I am lacking. Every night as I slept in the cold under harrowing trees, I would look up and hope that they were just as miserable as I am. I hoped every leaf that would rot and drift to the ground would be fearful of falling.

As I stare at the body that is slumped over on the couch, I share the same fears of those rotten, falling leaves. I think of how the leaves would look down just before falling. I had always hated the wind that would howl on dark nights, yet now I am wishing for just a slight draft. Something strong enough to catch me as I am falling. Something to help me reach the ground more slowly. I wonder if the pit in my stomach could be mistaken for hunger, or if it is the same feeling birds would have as I chase them down. I am ashamed that this thought brings me comfort, as perhaps I am not as alone as I think I am.

The smell emanating from the body is familiar, yet distorting. There has been no room in this small house for such a stench. It was a smell that belonged to the forest floor. It would linger between the blood on my claws as I licked them clean. It's not a smell that belongs to the man who feeds me, yet he had taken it for himself and now it was mine as much as it is his.

The day I first met the brethren of the man who feeds me was an unfortunate turning point in my life. As I left the prison on the forest floor, I was introduced to another life of captivity. As much as I hissed and fought, I was no match for what awaited me. I had been prodded and stuck with

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needles until I was left defenseless. Their language was unlike those birds I had hunted, rather I found the unfamiliarity to be harsh and distorting. The words they spoke were not ones I could decipher. Without those soft whistles of birds or the chirping of grasshoppers, I found myself vacant.

I was confined to a small cage. The walls were of cold metal. I no longer hunted, as food was given to me already lifeless. There were animals that shared my experience, although I could never see them. I could only listen as they barked and hissed throughout the day, likely suffering to the same extent of loneliness as I was. As quiet as life was, it was much more painful.

I am sure that the man who feeds me would not want his body to be left like this. His back is contorted unnaturally forward as his head rests on his legs. He's sitting in his own excrement. I know that he is gone, yet I wish he could see how unfair this is. When he had found my waste in the living room, he had grown quite angry, yet when he does it, there is no one to yell at him. For the first time since I had met the man who feeds me, I wonder if there had once been someone to take care of him. Maybe there was someone who would yell at him when he would claw the furniture or kick the litter out of the box.

Throughout my life in the woods, I never found myself feeling any way paternal to the world. I never quite understood. I had never wanted to understand it, but I unfortunately came to as I was accompanied in my cell. A kitten, small and fragile, was shoved right in. Despite my protests as I hissed at her into a corner, no one came to take her out. She could barely stand up by herself, unfamiliar with the world beyond the cell she never seemed afraid.

When I hiss and scream at the world, the world doesn't seem to care. Much was the same with her. The fits I had never scared her away. And when I would begin to wake up with her snuggled against my fur I was livid, yet there was something about the warmth that emanated from her that kept me in place. It was bizarre. I discovered that there was something I had been hunting for that I didn't even realize it; something beyond just filling the void in my stomach. My world was small, yet, as I found comfort in her frail body snuggled next to mine, I knew that there was no turning back. She was mine to care for, despite the grey in her fur that contrasted my own, she was mine to hold.

I wanted nothing more than for her to escape and see the world in ways I have always failed too. After all of the pain I forced the world to endure under me, I was a father. She grew to be all that I cared about and all that I knew. I had never loved before, yet the role felt natural. I knew when to make sure she ate, to clean her and hold her in hopes of easing the isolation in any way I could.

In the small confined cell, I found myself content. I had loved my kitten, but just as quickly as she came into my life, she left. I had no preparation for when she was simply scooped out of my arms and carried away. I had no means of hope, but I waited for her everyday. There was no possibility of simply never seeing her again. I had always felt sure that I would meet her again, I just had no idea when. I promised myself that I wouldn't stop thinking about her until I know where she is.

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I'm sure I'll see the man who feeds me again, although now, I am not naive enough to think that it'll be as simple as him walking straight through the door and greeting me just as he had hundreds of times before. I am conflicted, checking every crevice of the house just to make sure that he is not here. I am tortured not knowing where he has gone. I cannot leave him until I know. As the sunlight reaches over the window, I can see how pale his skin is becoming. I cannot understand why his body must lose its color when it's already lost him. The house has never felt this empty. I have never felt this alone.

I did not like the man who feeds me when I first saw him glaring into my cage. I had become nearly immobile, wishing not to greet anyone until my kitten returned. I no longer screamed at passing visitors, so when he reached in and grabbed me, I had no will left to fight. Unexpectedly, his touch was gentle on my fur as he carefully patted my head and whispered soft words into my ear. As he took me away from the cage and guided me into sunlight, I could hear the chirping of birds for the first time in a long time.

Comfort was not immediate as I was brought into his house. I felt just as miserable even though I was no longer confined to just four small walls. Although I found myself to be quite comforted in the misery I was sulking in, I slowly integrated into this new life. It began with looking at the flying birds on window stills. Although I could never fly like the beautiful beasts I am forever tortured by, watching them was the closest I could get. The food I was fed tasted much better than the animals I used to hunt. Maybe it was the softness of the blankets I had not known before, but I began finding comfort in falling asleep next to him.

I don't think that I'll ever get rid of this anger that guides me. I am furious; although not with the nature of death. If I had been the dreadful creature that drags the living away, I would've taken him too. Rather, I am angry with the man who feeds me, as he had invited death so warmly into our home and as the two left, he didn't take me with him.

My carrier sits abandoned by the door and I can't possibly imagine how troubled he would've been to place me in and carry me alongside him. There was never a time where I wished to avoid death, although life did become enjoyable with the man who feeds me. I had always presumed we would leave together, when we were both ready. I'm not sure if I'll ever forgive the man who feeds me but if he decides to return for me, I won't protest.

I never stopped missing my kitten. I never stopped thinking about the birds. I never escaped the pleasant thought of death. Yet I found myself in his arms every night. This comfort was like no other. As I stare at the vacant body that left me, I know that the world didn't defeat me. I am still angry. I am still bitter. But I am not the same as the cat that stared up at the trees on the forest floor. My fur has grown thick, there is fat that wraps my bones and I've experienced the warmth of something other than the pride I felt by tormenting those smaller than me. I have no doubt that it wasn't supposed to end like this. He wasn't supposed to leave me this soon.

There is a slight draft that squeezes through the cracked open window. I stare at the ground under me and I am scared of falling. I think of those

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birds that left me, and I picture their wings between my teeth. If only I could've taken the man who feeds me's wings off before he ventured into the day without me.

As the sun is setting, I stare at the window that's left open. I could fit through it just fine. I could run off and live a life like I once had. Despite this, I lay my head down next to the man who feeds me. I am hungry and the wind is cold but I don't move. I watch the world outside continue without me as I have no interest in joining. And I wait to return to the man who fed me.