

## The Last Catch

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The trees are ghostly in the dark, branches laden down with snow like winter's fruit. The cold air is sharp, but the hunger in my stomach cuts me like thorns. Catching prey is a skill to master and comes with many fails. But despite how hopeless it gets, I never come back empty-handed. My paws do not feel the cold, but my nose does. My stomach is empty, as are three little ones. We will survive to see another winter, I promised. I always do, and so will they.

The woods are so very dark and deep, but they grow smaller with each passing year. For they take it all away, the humans do, the edges of the woods curling in like burning parchment. There is no night where they live. It is as if they have made the stars fall from the sky, and now they live amongst them! It is not ideal for hunting. I dread the thought of what the world will be like for my children, and my children's children.

The blackbird no longer sings the way he used to. The rabbits are growing thin, so much so that I am eating mere skin and bones. Too many I have caught that have a horrid disease in their eyes! It is as if they cannot move, and are already dead by the time I catch them. The moon is my only constant in this changing world. Maybe that is what

the world will look like, in a few summers' time? A grey land, devoid of life. Where weeds sprout through the cracks in concrete, and the only birdsong is the crows' ugly caw.

I pause. My breathing goes shallow, and my heartbeat quickens. I hear something. A rustle in the undergrowth. My nose smells prey, perhaps a rat. Yes, definitely a rat, with a stench akin to bird droppings and urine. Not my favourite thing to eat, I admit. Rats are nasty things. But I am hungry, and it is better than nothing.

Now, watch me closely, take some notes. Catching prey is no laughing matter. It's all a game, and I am the best player. I hide in the direction that the wind flows towards, so my scent is concealed as much as possible. It may be useful to be covered in muck and grass, too. However, the most important thing is silence. That is your key to secrecy. My feet are light, and I walk without a sound. I hear some more rustling, and though I cannot not yet see him, I can pin exactly where he is. My instincts urge me to pounce, but I am still a distance away, and if I lose him, my chances of catching him are slim.

The silence stretches. It is deafening. The night is dark but alive.

I am very much alive.

My muscles tense up, my ears and eyes are sharp. And there I see him, so close, and blissfully unaware of me.

Perfect.

The ground begins to vibrate, and a deep, rumbling sound disturbs the silence. My attention slips, and the rat jumps into a bush. I run to catch it, but come up empty. Damn it. The car drives down the nearby country road, the driver oblivious to the fact that my night is now ruined and that was the only source of food that I had seen all evening.

Humans on their own are such measly, pitiful things. They run on two legs, with no fur, no claws, no speed, no teeth worth talking about.

And yet, they have these tools that make them the most dangerous animals alive. Too many of my family have been shot. There's no

escaping it, just hiding and hoping for the best.

And so, I plod on. My cubs are at home, safe and sound. I won't come back with nothing, I told them. I always come back with something. The hunger is beginning to take its toll on me, but I do find some berries. They are not as good as rabbit, but they will do to keep me going. The ditches are full of burrows of all kinds, so there I go. There is a path that threads through the ditch. It is older than me. I am not sure

when it began, but it is convenient for me now. I pass by a badger burrow. They are larger than any belonging to a fox. Badgers are so different from us though, so don't loop us all in together just because we are both predators. Foxes do not associate themselves with badgers.

Strange animals, they are. Though I must admit, I do admire their homes. Some even have underground tunnel systems.

A pair of green eyes stare out at me through the darkness. A cat, its tail curled around a branch. It hisses at me, as I walk past. I ignore him. I have no time for house pets. Or any cats, really. Foxes are solitary creatures, I'll have you know. I am not being antisocial for the sake of it.

After some time, I come across a house. I have seen it before. An old couple live there. It is a quaint little bungalow, with a well-kept garden. Rabbits are drawn to their vegetables, and I have nicked a hen from their house once or twice. They used to keep chickens, but only eat the eggs. Very clever, I must admit. When I took a hen, they would just get another one. It was good while it lasted, until they never brought another chicken home again.

This night, however, I notice something new. A timber shed at the corner of the garden, painted copper. I creep closer, noticing signs of bird droppings on the grass.

Then, I sense them. The humans had brought chickens again, but this time they have a new shed, with a door that is locked and a window that is sealed. Hunger claws at my stomach. I circle the shed, looking for crevices. There are none, save a small hole close to the ground,

scarcely big enough for a mouse. There is no hope there. I try to look underneath the shed. There is just enough room for my nose. I crouch lower and squeeze my way in under the shed. I can barely move, but the wood is damp above my head. I draw myself back out again. I can dig. And so I do, as quietly as I can. For if they wake, they will alert the humans of my presence with their shrill cries and stupid clucks.

The burrow itself took little time, but now I begin scratching at the wood. There is no way of getting around the noise now. It is tiresome work. I use my teeth to tear away at the damp wood. It is painful work: I can feel my claws wearing down, and the harsh timber brushing off my skin. With bleeding mouth and claws, I finally make an opening, and I am in.

I will leave out the details of what happened next, but a fox in a hen-house is like a buzzard flying over a field of rabbits.

I make my way back out, a hen in my stomach and another between my jaws. I leave the rest of them alive; I'll save them for later.

The path back home is longer than I would have liked. I cannot run fast enough, my paws are bleeding and my jaw is sore. I am sure I leave a trail of bloody footprints in the snow, black in the dark like ink stains on a white page. The road should be quiet in the night.

With ginger steps, I head back along the road, as it is easier. The snow is getting heavier now, and the hen is already growing cold. Through the snow, I can make out a small, dark shape up ahead. I approach with caution. If it is a cat, I can deal with them, a badger too, but I still don't want to cause any trouble. It is probably dead.

My stomach lurches. A small, limp form is sprawled on its side. I would know it anywhere. The unmistakable scent. His fur the colour of autumn leaves. I would know him blind. For he is my child. Cold, alone, and dead.

At some point the hen must have fallen out of my mouth, for I let out a cry that shakes me to my bones. It is a raw, animal cry. I can hardly

process the reality of it, the lifeless body at my feet. The tire tracks are fresh on the road. It could not have been too long ago. My child must have been out looking for me. And that car must have been the only car to pass this road all night. I have had it with humans, and their infernal machines. Death follows wherever they go. They never give back to the land, only ever take. And he was just collateral damage, caught in the cogs.

He looks like he is sleeping, but he is flatter than he should be. His eyes are open, but unseeing. My beautiful boy is gone, and never coming back.

I cry until my throat runs dry. I remind myself that I still have two more kids, who need me. They are depending on me staying alive. I take the hen in my mouth once again, and head back home with a heavy heart. It pains me to leave him there. I placed his body in the ditch, away from the road, before I said my last goodbye.

At long last, I reach the burrow.

It is empty.