

The monster called “roomba” was off today.

Like clockwork, at 9pm the monster would come roaring to life in a fury of fur and dust and chase me across the house, reveling in my fear and refusing to give up chasing until I leapt up onto a counter to safety. Usually, she would come from the couch or her room and give me a soft pet on my frizzy tail when the monster got too close, and whisper something that should’ve been soothing. I hated that “roomba”.

Tonight though, the monster was quiet, set in its cage and blinking red while awaiting its release. But as my stomach growled at the 9pm mark, dinner time, the monster did not wake. She had been locked in her room for most of the night, arguing with the smelly creature that followed her into the house every week who never pet me. I hated that. His energy was off.

The roomba played every night though, regardless of if he was here or not. I would have to wait outside her door patiently to be let into my food bowl, which refilled every night at 9 to distract me from the demon that rushed around the house and sucked up all of my loose fur that decorated the floor like a second carpet. Every night recently that he came through into my territory, they would scream at one another, locked in her room that I wasn’t allowed to be in when he was here. I looked over at the roomba in the room behind me, and it still didn’t stir.

Suddenly, her door opened and I rushed to the doorway, slipping on my paws as I startled to a halt by her legs. They shook violently, like two tree trunks swaying in a hurricane. Peering past her, I saw the smelly creature laying on the floor in a pool of wet stuff.

“No, don’t go in there,” She murmured to me, picking me up and cradling me with her wet hands. The sticky substance stuck to my fur like the water that splashed out of the shower from behind the white curtain. I struggled out of her arms and she dropped me to the floor. Shaking out my fur in an attempt to get the stickiness off, she shrieked, “Don’t spread it!”

I sat next to the monster and stared defiantly. It had not won tonight, since she turned it off. I suppose it couldn't clean up wetness like it did fur. I sat there, fluffy paws stuck together as she wrapped the smelly thing in multiple plastic bags, yellow rubber gloves riding up her elbows and collecting the dark substance that covered the floor. My house had smelled terrible ever since he had dared to come into it, but tonight it was different. Metallic and disgusting, I vomited in the corner next to the roomba. Take that.

"Peppermint!" She howled. "Really? Now of all time?" One hand gripping the plastic bag, and the other gesturing from me to the corner.

I licked my paw carefully, then walked into the kitchen and away from the mess.

I watched from the doorway as she scrubbed the floor naked. A thick cloud of bleach permeated above her head and sunk into the ceiling. My eyes watered each time she passed by me with a bucket of dark soapy water and dumped the contents into the toilet. At some point tonight, her clothes had disappeared into the huge rumbling creature that smelled like her sheets when they came out warm and soft once a week, and she hadn't bothered to get dressed again.

"Watch out." She muttered, using her foot to shove me aside, toppling through the hallway with a full bucket. My eyes followed her body down the hall, with blossoming bruises ripening against her skin like the browned bananas on the counter I jumped on often. When had she gotten those?

The smelly creature's stink was getting worse. I tiptoed around the crinkled black trash bags, pointing my nose as close as I could to the source of the smell. He didn't smell like he usually did though, this was putrid, rotting. She came up behind me, took hold of the bags and dragged the thing

across the floor before swinging open the door to the backyard I wasn't allowed to go out into. Was this a chance?

I trotted towards the door and peered out from behind her. "No Peppermint!" She yelped, and took hold of my underarms to fling me gently inside. "You know you're not allowed out there."

The door closed, and a light thumping noise came from outside. She must've been taking him down the concrete stairs that felt grainy on my paws when I would sneak a peek outside.

I slept on the pillow next to the roomba, waiting for her to come back. I slept lightly, one eye open, watching the monster sleep next to me, wondering if it would wake up and spread the wet stuff that still lingered on the floor around the apartment. I wondered if she had turned it off on purpose. Was it before or after he came over?

Finally, the back door swung open and she trudged inside, dirty and wet with mud from this morning's rain. I had watched the thick pellets fall from the sky and hit the window I sat in front of most days. Jumping up from the pillow, I wove through her legs, purring and hoping she would bend down to pet me. It had been a long night of minimal petting time. Alas though, she ignored me and led herself into the bathtub. The water crashed down from the sky as she sank her head to the knees that were pulled close to skin. I sat by the bathtub watching and waiting.

Her head turned up and she looked at me, eyes wide, bloodshot still. When had she last blinked? "Come here sweetie," She reached her dripping hands to me. "It's your turn."

Reluctantly, I let her bring me into the bathtub I knew so well, and wash my long white fur with the warm water and a scrub brush I saw only once in a while. It must've at least been a year since the metal tangles swept through my soaping fur and washed away that signature metallic scent. The water ran dark off my body, and it swirled and gurgled down the drain.

Shaking myself out on the freshly bleached floor, I waited for her to step out of the shower and wrap a sunrise yellow towel around her new skin. The bruises were prominent now, blooming against her ankles and wrists. She wrapped her hair in another towel and went into her room, closing the door behind her.

Rain clattered on the metal roof above us, and I rushed to the kitchen window where I could watch the droplets stack against the window pane and bleed down into the soil. Perching on the sill, I stared out into the night filled backyard, and watched the rain patter down on the new lump of dirt behind the oak tree. The yard was becoming flatter again, the lumps of ground blending into the rest and forming a hill, only noticeable if you tore down the confining fence and compared our yard to everyone else's. I remember how the first lump looked huge against the flat surface of the backyard, but now among the others, it was normal. Unsuspecting.

A loud whirr came from the living room, and my tail fluffed up. The monster roared to life and came rolling into the kitchen, switching and turning and sucking up all of my fur and everything else that was left. On edge, I stood on top of the counter and watched for her door to open and to be collected. This was routine. Ritual.

The door opened and she came through, dressed in pajamas with my face on it, hair tied up in a loose messy bun. Eyes calmer, she picked me up and **cradled** me against her chest as we made our way above the monster and into her room. The floor was sparkling clean, and we laid in the fresh black sheets of her bed. For the first time all night, we were alone.

"He just wasn't the one," She explained, hand caressing my newly dry fur. "Maybe the next one will be. Plus, he never even pet you. That should've been red flag number one."