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Dialogue

Lucky

A hamster named Lucky watched from his one good eye as Ivan burst through the doorway, wearing his usual malicious smile and carrying a small shoebox. The chubby boy lifted the lid of Lucky's cage and dumped in a new hamster, carelessly. The small creature landed on his back but quickly flipped himself over and shook the bits of wood chip of his brown and white fur. Ivan slammed the lid back on and waddled triumphantly out of the room.

The newcomer oriented himself in the cage: it was a glass fish-tank with wood chips covering the bottom. There was an empty bottle of water hanging from the side. The cage was otherwise empty, save a thick-furred, grey hamster pressed up against the far corner.

"Hi friend! What's your name? I'm Harvey," the energetic hamster scurried over to the grey mass of fur, "It sure is exciting to be out of the pet store and in a real home! I can't wait. I'm gonna be the best pet ever."

Peering over the wood chip in his mouth, Lucky looked at Harvey through one dull, red eye. His other eye was scarred shut. "Kid," Lucky asked quietly in his grainy voice, "have you ever been strapped to a rocket?"

Harvey's smile took on a nervous edge, "No, friend. But one time I climbed out of my cage, at the pet store, and fell all the way to the ground. I ran out of the store and made it all the way to a Starbucks before they caught me." Harvey was smiling proudly.

Lucky sighed. "Well, Harvey, in a few minutes that miserable boy who brought you here is going to come back. He's going to attach you, with duct tape, to that rocket over there." Lucky's eye moved in its socket to indicate a tall, red rocket that was lying on its side next to the cage. There was a small crack down the side of the rocket, and patches of brown dirt on the head. "If you die," Lucky looked back at Harvey, "consider yourself fortunate. If you live, then you become his subject. His crash test dummy. His guinea pig. Welcome to Hell, Kid."

Harvey's smile was gone. He surveyed the room, for evidence that this hamster was telling him the truth. Outside the cage were the severed heads of Barbie dolls, green army men in various states of dismemberment, an assortment of lighters and explosives, and a half-melted G.I. Joe. Looking back to his cage-mate, Harvey realized that patches of his fur were missing or singed.

"I'm the twelfth." Lucky continued after giving Harvey sufficient time to understand their predicament. "That's what Ivan, the boy, calls me: Number 12. But my real name is Lucky." Lucky spit out a piece of wood that had lodged in his teeth.

"Why do they call you Lucky?" Harvey asked, looking now to Lucky's bad eye.

"My mother gave birth to a whole litter of us. But she ate all my brothers and sisters. Said they smelled like human, apparently. The family that owned her, they were only able to save me. Hence, Lucky. But as soon as I was old enough to serve as a pet, they gave me up for adoption." Lucky trailed off.

“I’m named after a song,” Harvey said, trying to be cheerful. Lucky didn’t react.

Noticing that Harvey kept staring at his missing eye, Lucky explained. “Cat.”

“Huh? Oh, the eye?”

“Ivan has a cat, you see. This ferocious beast. A black tangle of fur and claws Ivan calls Reaper. Ivan likes to play games. Puts hamsters on Reaper’s nose while he’s sleeping. I watched Numbers 9 through 11 go this way. Reaper just opens his eyes, and when they try to run off the end of his nose, cat just leaps forward and snatches them up in his jaws.” Lucky could see that Harvey was terrified, but noticed something else in his demeanor. He continued, “When it was my turn, I ran up the top of his head. Reaper rolled over, trying to get at me. He swatted with his paw, clipped my face with his claw. He knocked me away, though, right to Ivan. The boy picks me up and says, ‘Looks like we got ourselves a soldier.’ Then he throws me back in this cage while blood’s dripping down my face.”

“Lucky? How did you get those burns on your fur?” Harvey asked cautiously. His whiskers twitched. The small hamster had grown solemn.

“Ivan got this new wood-burning kit.” Lucky cringed. “The boy plugs it in. A little while later, to see if it’s hot, he touches the tip of the thing. Kid whips his arm back, all sudden-like, when he realizes it’s hot.” Lucky let a brief chuckle escape, and then frowned. “Then he turns to me…”

“We need to get out of here, Lucky,” Harvey said, not needing to hear the rest.

“Smart kid.” Lucky lifted himself up from the corner and wandered to the wall of the cage, looking out over the room. “Think I haven’t tried?” All that remained of Lucky’s tail was a stub. He turned suddenly to Harvey, red eye furious, yelling. “I spend

all day in here, gnawing on wood chips! Thinking. Preparing. You don't think I spend every moment looking for a way to escape? You don't think I have a plan?"

"Sorry, Lucky. I didn't mean..." Harvey withdrew for a moment.

"Forget about it, Kid." Lucky made his way back to the corner, tired. He plopped down in his usual spot, snatched up a chip of wood with his front paws, and went back to gnawing.

Harvey, meanwhile, was running around the cage, examining the room through the smudged glass. He was thinking intently. There were candy wrappers littering the floor. Twinkies. An empty pizza box. "Ivan's pretty slow, right Lucky?"

"You mean stupid? Yeah." Lucky spit out another piece of wood. "Oh, you mean speed-wise? Yeah, he's fat and slow."

"I think I can get out of this cage." Harvey concluded. "Is there any way out of the room?"

"There's an open vent on the floor, far corner of the room. The boy hides stuff in there. You should be able to find a way out once you're in the vent." Harvey was looking at Lucky, concerned. Lucky knew what Harvey was thinking. "Look, Kid, if you can get out of here, do it. I can take care of myself. I mean it." Harvey smiled, grateful.

Just then, Ivan burst through the doorway. His pale mouth was crusted with orange Cheeto crumbs. "Time for your maiden voyage." Ivan wore a crooked grin.

Harvey could feel his fur stand on end.

"Good luck, Kid." Lucky forced a smile.

"Thirteen's my lucky number," Harvey winked.

"You woulda made one hell of a pet."

“I still might.”

Ivan lifted the cage lid, and slowly reached with his pink, thick arm to grab Harvey. Harvey pulled his whiskers back against his cheeks. With a burst of speed, Harvey scampered up Ivan’s arm, over his shoulder, and dove to the floor with the soft thump. His tiny nails scratching and clicking against the wooden floor, Harvey scurried across the room, past the door, and right into the vent before Ivan even knew what had happened. But Harvey stopped just inside the vent, turned, and looked back to his new friend, still trapped in Ivan’s cage.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Lucky shook his head. Ivan cursed and stamped his foot. He turned back to Lucky, hungry for vengeance. “My turn,” Lucky sneered. Ivan stood over the cage. Lucky pulled himself back against the far corner, pressing his hind paws against the cold glass. “For Number Nine,” Lucky whispered. Ivan began to reach in. “And Number Ten,” Lucky pulled back his whiskers, “And Number Eleven.” Just as Ivan was about to grab him, Lucky leapt forward. With all the ferocity and speed of the Reaper himself, Lucky bit into Ivan’s finger, tearing through flesh with teeth sharpened by a thousand wood chips. As Lucky had expected, Ivan pulled his hand suddenly out of the cage, taking Lucky with it. He released his grip on Ivan’s finger and soared through the air, landing softly on a cushion of his own fur.

Harvey, thrilled that his friend might escape, suddenly felt his heart drop. Drawn by the commotion, a cat stood in the doorway. With its black fur, the animal was, itself, nothing more than a shadow and two, glowing eyes.

As he was running toward the vent, Lucky heard the sharp hiss of Reaper. He stopped momentarily in the middle of the floor, turned to face the doorway, and smiled

broadly. “We meet again, Reaper.” Immediately, the cat was after him, lip curled up and white teeth bared.

Lucky ran toward the vent with all his speed. Reaper was gaining quickly, propelled by a primal hunger. Just as Reaper was about to pounce, Ivan grabbed the rocket from where it lay next to the empty cage and hurled it at the retreating hamster. The boy’s aim was false, and the plastic missile struck Reaper in the back of the head. The animal screamed and tumbled headlong into the wall. Lucky ran by the stunned cat and into the vent, looking back to see Ivan turning red, and the Reaper, bringing himself to his feet, a trickle of blood running from his eye.

“Lucky!” Harvey squealed delightedly.

The old Veteran licked Ivan’s blood from his lips, “Right behind you, Kid,”