

What Fluffy Knew

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Fluffy knew she was a princess. Her person told her so. And Fluffy herself could see it, in her white, white fur, her long elegant whiskers, and her dainty paws. Fluffy had a soft bed that smelled of cedar. She had as much food as she wanted. People came to her house, and when she presented herself, they all spoke in awe of her beauty and petted her gingerly, as if they couldn't believe they were allowed to touch her sacred body. She bumped them gently to let them know that petting was preferred in her kingdom, and they usually responded with a laugh and a good ear rub.

Life was good. It didn't even matter that her people occasionally took in other cats. There had been other cats in her life as long as she was alive. She knew, however, that they weren't as great as she was. No other cat was as beautiful or as soft or as well loved. Other cats lived with her, and she tolerated them. She would have put up a large fuss, but her people had found a new palace, one with many rooms, and she rarely saw the other cats, except at feeding times.

Her routine was perfect in its simplicity. She spent her mornings in the kitchen waiting for someone to brush her, her afternoons sprawled on the couch in the warm sunshine, and her evenings on the nearest lap. Sometimes she watched the water droplets in bathtub after her people took showers.

Nights were her special time. She prowled and explored, took food her people sometimes left near the sink, and occasionally slept on their soft bed. She was in her cedar bed at dawn just to make sure no one else used it, and then she was up, beginning her routine all over again.

Yes. It was a very good life.

Until they came.

* * * *

"Please give the boys a thorough examination. I'll pay you extra. I know your time is limited when you do your housecalls, and I appreciate the fact that so few vets do such a thing, but this has me bothered."

"Mrs. Winters, what's happened is tragic, but not uncommon. These adorable creatures are miniature lions. We think they're civilized, but they're not. And occasionally they remind us, often in particularly unpleasant ways."

* * * *

They seemed to know who the weak ones were. Later, Fluffy found herself wondering: if she had known what they were going to do, would she have crushed them on that first day? Would she had stopped them? They were, after all, little bigger than a flea. But even fleas were hard to kill, weren't they? She had had fleas as a kitten, before she was elevated to her proper position, and she remembered the sudden sharp pain of the bite, the uncontrollable urge to scratch, the impossibility of catching a flea between your teeth. So perhaps she wouldn't have been able to do anything even if she had been paying attention. Even if she tried to stop the problem on the day it had started.

They went for her littermate, Streaker, and his little friend, Rook. Streaker's royal blood was diluted by his street tough father, a swaggering Tom that Fluffy barely remembered from her kittenhood. Her own father was a sweet white cat, a little on the fat side, just as her mother was. A "Pedigreed Pair," her former people used to say. The litter, they said to the people who would become her people, was ruined by the black-and-white kitten. A Tom had gotten to their precious girl at the right time. So they had to

give the kittens away, unable to prove the purity of their bloodline.

Her people didn't care. They liked the black-and-white kitten with the impish streak, and they named him Streaker because he liked to run from one end of the house to the other for no apparent reason. He refused to show her the proper respect, slapping at her when she got in his way, or demanding that she give up her food. His little friend Rook, a long-haired tabby, showed many of the same behaviors. Rook was a stray her people had rescued, and to them he was kind. To her, he was as insensitive as her brother.

But she could avoid them—and often did. Streak and Rook spent most of their time together, sleeping, eating, playing. She spent most of her time with her human companions, as it should be.

So the afternoon they appeared, she thought nothing of it.

* * * *

"Yes, but they've never done anything like this before. I'm beginning to wonder if something's wrong—"

"Trust me, Mrs. Winters. We get complaints like this all the time when housecats show their animal natures. There's nothing wrong."

* * * *

It was summer. Her favorite window was open, the one overlooking the garden and the birds. She could smell flowers, which sometimes made her sneeze; other cats, which always made her curious; and birds, which usually made her want to slightly energetic, in a wholly disgusting way. She, as her people always told her, was a princess, and didn't have to kill her own food. The boys, as her people called Streaker and Rook, didn't quite understand that, but the other two cats, Starlight and Cupcake, did. They preferred to sleep and eat, just as she did, and fortunately for her, weren't as good at attracting pets.

She had been asleep in the sun below her favorite window when they arrived. Rook and Streaker were sprawled in the door, playing their nasty little game: Trap Fluffy. If she hissed at them, they would jump on her and pull at her fur. If she pretended not to notice, they would leave her alone and eventually grow tired of the game. She had decided not to notice, and the hot sun had put her to sleep.

A slight whirring sound woke her up. She sat up, stretched and saw a tiny machine, rather like the ones her people watched on the box in the living room, a round machine that had doors and windows too tiny for any cat to use.

The fur rose on the back of her neck and she felt a hiss start in the back of her throat. But something warned her not to hiss. She didn't want to call attention to herself. Instead, she slipped beneath the couch, and watched.

The little door opened, and tiny human shaped creatures emerged. They were no bigger than ants. They spoke a strange language, stranger than the one her people used. It was much harder to understand. The creatures had other creatures held by silver threads—leashes as thin as spider webs and nearly as invisible. Fluffy watched as the bigger creatures unhooked the leashes, snapped their fingers, and pointed toward the door.

The smaller creatures flew across the room, like tiny flies on a mission. The larger creatures went back through the door. Fluffy heard a whirring sound, and the tiny machine was gone.

She adjusted her position under the couch, and saw the small creatures fly into Rook's left ear. Another group of them flew into Streaker's right ear.

And then the terror began.

* * * *

"What about the alien virus?"

"Mrs. Winters—"

"Don't use that tone with me, Doctor. I've been doing some reading—"

"Tabloids."

"They mentioned it on CNN. They said that ever since those tiny spaceships landed—"

"There's no proof that those are spaceships, Mrs. Winters."

"—animals have been acting strangely. You told me yourself last month, when you gave Cupcake her shots that all sorts of strange things were happening to the animals in town."

"I was talking about illnesses."

"Well, so am I. Rook and Streaker haven't been acting normally, and I'm really worried about the other cats..."

* * * *

Rook let out a yelp like a cat in severe pain, and Streaker shook his head as if something were biting him. Then they ran in opposite directions, and Fluffy didn't see them for the rest of the day.

Of course, she had to go back to sleep. The spot under the couch, despite the dirt, was much more comfortable than she had expected.

She didn't see the attack on the dog.

It was, or so her people said later in very excited tones, extremely strange. Their neighbor had brought his dog over when he came to get a package one of her admirers—the one who drove the loud brown truck—had left. Rook and Streaker bit the dog's legs and made him bleed before her people could pull them off. Her people apologized, but the neighbor got upset. Fluffy never did understand that part. It was just a dog, after all. She was more concerned about the smelly blood all over the kitchen floor.

Rook and Streaker licked it up, and smacked their lips as if they'd had a particular taste treat. Her male person had said it was fortunate the boys were up to date on their shots or the entire experience would have been a costly one.

The other cats chalked it up to Dog Phobia, but Fluffy didn't. She saw the look in their eyes. She had been their target many times, and she had never seen them look so sad after an attack. Usually they were gleeful. Instead, they smacked their lips and scratched their ears, and when they finally fell asleep, they whined.

A lot.

She made sure they were nowhere near her as she prowled and snacked later that night.

* * * *

"One article, in the local paper, said a university researcher thought that the aliens were experimenting on mammals as test cases before they started experimenting on humans."

"Mrs. Winters, really."

"I know it sounds silly, but after what the boys did, I'm looking for any explanation. Please, Doctor. Take just a few moments. Examine them."

* * * *

For the first three days, they tried to get outside, but her people were too fast for them. The boys were getting older and were well fed and didn't move as fast as they used to. Their people stopped them at the door, every time, usually with a foot blocking their way. And then they turned their attention on the other cats.

Cupcake, the obese Persian who wanted Fluffy's spot as princess of the house, found a hiding spot behind the dryer. Fluffy stayed close to her people because she knew the boys wouldn't attack her in public. But Starlight, the black and gold stray, wasn't so lucky.

The boys cornered Starlight behind the toilet, and had ripped out her throat before their people could stop it. Their male person took the boys and threw them in cat carriers. Their female person tried to save Starlight. She bundled her in a towel and took her to the Emergency Vet, a place Fluffy had—fortunately—never seen.

The boys spent the night in cages in the garage. Their people promised a Mobile Vet visit in the morning. Cupcake slept well for the first time in a week.

Fluffy woke once and shivered. The boys were wailing as if they had seen the end of the world.

* * * *

"All right, Mrs. Winters. I'll examine them. But before I do, let me be blunt. Starlight was a very old, malnourished stray. She wasn't part of your cat family."

"Yes, she was."

"Not to the cats. And it might not have mattered even if they had known her well. Cats live in prides and have hierarchies. And one rule that exists from lions to barn cats is that the alpha male destroys the weak so that the rest have enough to eat."

"They have enough to eat."

"It doesn't matter. It's in the genetic code."

"We've taken in strays before and they've never—you know. Killed the cat."

"Maybe the other strays weren't as sick."

"You don't think you'll find anything, do you?"

"No."

* * * *

Fluffy hated puzzles, and she really didn't like the boys. They harassed her and didn't give her the respect

that royalty deserved. But she didn't like to hear anyone cry either. And her person was right: they hadn't killed Starlight. Those creatures inside them had.

She had to get those creatures out of the boys. And she had to do it without infecting herself or Cupcake.

The creatures had gone in the ear. The Mobile Vet had cold wet stuff that went in the ear. She had seen him use it on Starlight just last week. Maybe that would be enough to get the creatures out.

But how to tell her person and the Mobile Vet what she knew? They would think, if she wound around their legs, that she wanted pets. And even though they thought themselves superior, they never had mastered Fluffy's language, not like she had mastered theirs. The problem was she couldn't speak it; she hadn't seen the use for it until now.

Her person had brought Streaker in from the garage. He had dried blood on his muzzle and his eyes were wide and dark. He looked like a cat in pain to Fluffy.

Her person put Streaker's cat carrier on the kitchen counter, and started to open the gate. Fluffy had to act now. She took a flying leap—something she hadn't done since she was a kitten—and landed on the Vet's medical bag.

He made a small sound and her person spoke her name in that sharp reprimanding tone. Fluffy ignored her. Instead she scratched on the top of the bag until a corner of it pulled back. She put a paw under it, and clung as the vet tried to lift her off.

Instead, he helped her open the bag.

There were rows of needles inside, and lots of little vials. She tried not to watch when he worked on the other cats, and she could barely remember what he had done to Starlight's ear.

He hadn't used a needle. He had used a bottle. A small white bottle that liquid dripped out of.

She only had a moment. She batted a bottle aside, and it rolled along the floor. Then she wriggled out of the vet's grasp and jumped on the counter.

Her person reprimanded her again. Fluffy stopped in front of Streaker's cage and scratched her ear. He frowned at her. She scratched her other ear, and her person shoved her on the floor.

She landed with an unceremonious thump, and she had to pause to lick herself. No princess ever allowed herself to be shoved like that, not even in the name of justice.

From above, she heard the sound of a back foot thumping against a plastic cage.

Streaker had understood.

* * * *

"They're too big to be earmites."

"Then what are they?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to take them to the lab with me and investigate. I'll leave this vial with you. If you see any more of them, scoop them up and bring them to me. Don't let them near the cats."

"Should we do the other cats?"

“Probably. Yes. Get them. We'd best make sure this is taken care of. Something this big in your ear would be painful. We don't want it to happen again.”

* * * *

For her troubles, she was grabbed, held by the scruff of the neck, and had cold liquid shoved down her ear, with instructions to have the same procedure repeated until the liquid was gone. Both the vet and her person were pleased to see that no creatures came out of her ears.

And then they went off to find Cupcake.

Streaker looked at her from his cage. She looked back. His eyes closed slowly. She had never seen a cat seem so exhausted—and so relieved.

* * * *

"Doctor?"

“Mmm?”

“Are those bugs what made my boys kill Starlight?”

“I can't answer that for sure, Mrs. Winters. I don't know what these bugs are or what they do.”

“But the boys, will they hurt my other cats?”

“Cats aren't like dogs, Mrs. Winters. Once dogs get a taste for blood, they usually must be kept outside or destroyed. Cats—the thing that your cats did—is natural. They hurt things one minute and cuddle with their owner the next. Will your cats be the same loving creatures you've always known? Of course. Will they hurt Cupcake and Fluffy? Not unless they get so sick that they're a threat to the pride. I would say that you separate your cats in the future when one of them gets ill. That'll ensure something like this will never happen again.”

“So I can let them have the run of the house, and they won't hurt anyone again?”

“If you follow my instructions.”

“I will. Oh, Doctor. How will I ever forgive them for Starlight?”

“Realize they're not human, and that human laws don't apply. What they did was right in the feline world.”

“That doesn't work for me.”

“Then blame it on the bugs.”

* * * *

Three days later, Fluffy was asleep in the sun beneath her favorite window. The boys were cuddled on the couch, still exhausted from their ordeal.

A whir woke Fluffy up. She rolled over and saw the tiny machine on the windowsill. The little door opened and the bigger creatures came out. They held tiny whistles in their hands.

The high pitched sound woke up the boys. They glanced at Fluffy. She glanced at them. Then she reached up with one paw, and knocked the machines—and the bigger creatures—off the sill.

The boys jumped down beside her, and the hunt began.

It was Rook who discovered that if you bit one of the creatures halfway between its head and its feet and then threw it against the wall, it didn't move again. Streaker discovered that a paw through the door crushed the little machines.

But Fluffy was the one who figured out how to knock down machines mid-flight; Fluffy who figured out how to dodge the tiny rays of light that hurt more than a needle's prick; Fluffy who figured out how to flush the machines down the toilet so that they would be gone for good.

Because Fluffy knew if the creatures and their tiny machines succeeded in taking over Rook and Streaker, they might take over her. And if they took over her, and discovered how wonderful her life was, it wouldn't be long before they sent for more little machines and sent bugs into the ears of her people. And once they had control of her people, they had control of the entire world.

And Fluffy couldn't let that happen. In this world, she was a princess. And she would remain a princess—even if it meant dirtying her paws to do so.

The creatures hadn't known what they were up against.

But Fluffy knew.

And Fluffy won.

Just like she knew she would.