

Escape

By Hailey Chan

Stella stopped one of her cubs from scrambling away with her paw. "Clover! Not again!" she snapped impatiently. Stella's two cubs kept making attempts to escape and run free through the jungle in which many dangerous animals lived. A cheetah barely twenty-four hours old would make no match for a python or even a piranha. Stella became even more irritated when a piece of moss fell from the branches of a willow right onto her face below. "Can I go down to the river?" Clover asked hopefully. "No! How many times do I have to tell you that you are too young to go down to the river by yourself?" Stella hissed. "Grandmother Sunflower always lets me down to the river. She lets me go anywhere I want to go!" Clover reasoned. "But she goes with you. I am too tired to go anywhere now. I need to save my energy for hunting," "You let Katie go," Clover said breathlessly.

"I never let...Katie? Katie!" Stella propped herself up with great difficulty and looked around the gnarled, damp tree trunk but saw no sign of her missing cub. The cheetah padded daintily out of the tree trunk, mouth clamped around the scruff of Clover's neck, slick tail high up in the air. Katie was about as big as a baby monkey and would be practically impossible to find in such a large jungle, so Stella decided to ask for help first before taking off to find Katie. The first person she thought of to ask for help was her own mother, Sunflower, who was full of clever schemes. When Stella finally arrived at the cave behind a waterfall where Sunflower lived, she was so bothered with

anxiety that she almost let Clover struggle to her freedom. “Stella! Katie’s gone missing!” Sunflower was in the middle of the cave, getting ready to sprint outside. Her hind legs were steady on the ground and her eyes were staring straight ahead. Stella carefully set Clover on the ground and said she knew that Katie was missing. When Sunflower spoke once more, her voice had a tremble that her voice usually had when she was frantic but was trying to stay calm. “I was just about to go outside and look for her too. Just a few minutes ago, Katie came and visited me, but when she was about to leave, a rumbling sound made me dive back into my cave. The last thing I saw before I flew back into my cave was two humans rattling around in a box with round disks at the bottom. On the box was a symbol of the zoo right across from this very cave. I think the humans took Katie to the zoo.” “Sunflower, please babysit clover for a bit!” This was all the help Stella needed. She lingered for only a fraction of a second before whisking off to the zoo.

Stella crouched behind the bushes in the flower box at the zoo’s front gate. “Come on, someone, anyone, open the gate...” as if it heard Stella’s whispers, the front gate burst open so violently it almost flew off its hinges. A zookeeper was barreling through the gate, a frightened look on his face. Stella flung the piece of meat she had collected from the leftover of her breakfast earlier directly into the zookeeper's face. The slippery meat caught it’s aim but was struggling to stay on. The cheetah shot into the zoo gates just before they closed. The cheetah blinked at the bright light reflected from the silver gates. Her eyes immediately reduced into slits. Stella gulped and looked

around hurriedly. She knew she was a big animal and would get noticed easily if she didn't act fast. Stella decided that the broom closet would be her best choice.

Midnight came and went. Tired and squished, Stella had accidentally fallen asleep inside the broom closet she was currently hiding in. When she finally awoke it was almost dawn. "No, no, no! I really need to hurry. By the time dawn arrives, everybody will be awake and I won't have a chance of finding Katie!" Stella muttered to herself when she finally awoke. It was not an easy journey to the baby animal's room. With every step she took, Stella thought she heard animals stirring and awakening from their night's sleep. It wasn't exactly a picnic to actually find the baby animal's room, either. First, Stella had to find and read a direction sign in pitch black, which was pretty hard even for a cheetah. Then, Stella had to follow the direction the sign was pointing at.

When the great cat finally arrived at the baby animal's room, golden shimmering light was peeking in from the glass windows, indicating the sun's arrival. "Katie? Where are you? Katie?" Stella hissed in her quietest voice. No response. Each of the cages holding the baby animals had name tags on them, bearing the animal's name and species. There was no tag that read "Katie, cheetah," however. "Well, they won't know her name, but they'll know her species," Stella thought, turning from the baby bunnies cage to the other side of the room to check that Katie really wasn't in there. A fiery blaze of light was now streaming in from the windows. All the customers and workers would

soon be filing in from the front gate and the zoo would be buzzing with activity. The baby animal's room door closed as Stella left the room feeling exhausted and hopeless.

She decided to stay one more day and weigh her chances. "Yay. Another night in that broom closet. How wonderful," sighed Stella sarcastically. But just as she was walking down the halls to the broom closet, a shimmer of hope caught her eye. The cheetah enclosure was settled in the main part of the zoo, just beside the owl enclosure. "If I find a way to get into that enclosure," whispered Stella, thinking fast. "They might let me see Katie to ask if she was mine...then I will run far away from this place with Katie!" She checked in her leather bag she had found on the side of the road if there was enough food to last another two days.

Stella made up her mind about staying at the zoo after long minutes of wondering if she should just turn back and go. "All right, I just need to sneak up on a zookeeper," Stella muttered. "Which might be hard," Maybe a piece of meat might solve this problem again, or maybe even the staff room. "But that's extra work," thought Stella. "I have to get the staff room key before I can get the cheetah enclosure key," Clink. Although the sound of the key turning in the lock was not louder than Stella's gasp, it seemed to attract every eye towards it. The zoo gates were being unlocked. Dread filled Stella as quickly as water pouring from a waterfall. "What took me so long?" the cheetah thought, scrambling away into the hallway and skidding on the shiny polished marble floor. Unfortunately, a zookeeper was coming out of the staff room just as Stella came dashing into the hallway. Stella's journey would have to end there if she didn't think fast.

The great cat dodged out of sight behind a large potted plant that was conveniently sitting right beside the entrance from the main part of the zoo to the hallway. After the hallway was clear of any zookeepers, Stella hurried into the staff room through the gap the zookeeper had accidentally left open in the door.

The staff room was completely pitch black except for the sliver of light coming in from the gap in the door. Footsteps sounded all around the staff room. Stella snatched a key labeled "Cheetah enclosure" from a glass box on the wall. "I might need to get into the staff room a second time," thought Stella, grabbing the spare staff room key. The cheetah backed out of the staff room as quickly as possible, not wanting to risk the chance of getting caught by a zookeeper. Stella had seen a human using a key to unlock the door of a house, she knew almost exactly how to unlock the cheetah enclosure. There was only one problem; Stella did not know where the keyhole was.

Stella eventually found the keyhole of the cheetah enclosure hidden on the back of a fake ladybug, attached to the glass door of the enclosure. "Okay, here it goes!" thought Stella, pushing the key into the keyhole gingerly. The key got stuck in the keyhole and no matter how hard Stella tried to tug the key back out, the key remained stuck. Hopeless and out of decisions, Stella abandoned the key and slipped back into the staff room. The sly feline eyed a key labeled "Clinic room" and quickly grabbed it. Stella remembered seeing "Clinic room" on the direction sign the night before. It was three floors above and two corridors across.

Stella was slightly out of breath by the time she had reached the clinic room. There, she hoped to find Katie being checked over. All of Stella's worries and doubts were swept away when she saw Katie curled up in a cage on a cabinet. She stood up on her hind legs and flicked the latch on the cage open. The moment the latch had been flipped open, Katie awoke and purred happily at the sight of her mother. "Come on, Katie. We don't have all day to be here. We could get caught!" Stella hissed. The two cheetahs padded out of the clinic room and into the corridor, but just as mother and daughter were happily reuniting, a zookeeper walked around the corner and spotted Katie's tail. "Did somebody bring in a furry snake?!?" she shrieked, spilling her coffee all over her jacket. Then she ran away waving her arms wildly and screaming.

"Uh-oh," thought Stella, lifting Katie by the scruff of her neck and barreling towards the stairs. Stella wasn't used to running on stairs and she tripped halfway down, tumbling down the stairs, three at a time. She tore through the corridors and bumped into quite a few zookeepers, causing even more chaos than she had originally planned. At long last, she finally reached the zoo gates and literally flew through it, longing for safety. But even in the wild, she couldn't be in more danger because now, all of the zookeepers had called animal control and dozens of news reporters were already hurrying to the zoo. Stella streaked across the swamp and arrived at the cave behind the waterfall a few minutes later. "Sunflower! Help!" she called.

Sunflower poked her head out of the cave and broke into a smile when she saw her daughter and granddaughter, tired but safe. "How did it go?" asked

Sunflower, headbutting Stella. "I...was seen by a zookeeper." Stella mumbled nervously. Sunflower's smile dropped. "We'll be fine, trust me," she said, trying her hardest to console Stella. At that very moment, Clover peeped out of the bedchamber. "Mom! When were you back?" she asked. "One minute ago, Clover. I got your sister Katie back from the zoo." Stella replied, hurrying over to the kitchen to prepare the delayed breakfast she was supposed to have two hours ago. She threw the spare staff room key out of the window on the way to the kitchen.

By nightfall, when the family had finished eating their dinner, Sunflower announced that she was going outside for a stroll. "It always refreshes me," she explained to Clover and Katie, who had never gone on a night stroll before. Fifteen minutes later, Sunflower returned with a newspaper in her mouth. "I nicked this from a waste bin," she insisted when Stella asked her if she had stolen it from a shop. The headline read, "Zookeepers have given up on trying to find runaway cheetahs", and below it read, "We have no point in trying to find the cheetahs if they have not done harm and are not one of the cheetahs from the zoo," the zoo manager said." "So we're safe-" "Does that mean I'm not going to have my punishment anymore?" Katie interrupted Stella. Stella looked at Sunflower and they both said, "Sure!"