***The Adventures of Max***

 **A tree for Christmas**

My name is Max, short for Maximilian the Magnificent. I have the heart of a lion, but I was the runt of the littler, and on the small side even for a cat.

 Today I smelled something suspicious. I’d met it before, outside in the garden, but that day it was coming from the cupboard which houses the washing machine.

 I tried to show the missus that something was wrong, but she was on the phone talking about this Christmas thing that was coming with presents for everyone and she didn’t have time for me. I clawed the door hiding the washing machine open, and yes! The smell flooded out.

 The missus called me a naughty boy and slammed the door shut.

 Human have no sense of smell. Or of danger.

 I hunkered down in front of the cupboard door, and waited. The missus told me to move but I stayed put. She said, ‘Be like that, then!’ She shut off the lights and went up to bed, still talking on her phone about buying presents. I wondered what she’d got for me . . .

I stayed on guard. I didn’t even leave my post to eat the food the missus had left out for me.

The smell intensified. A could hear him moving about under the floorboards in the cupboard behind the washing machine. Scratching and scrambling this way and that.

The cupboard door sprang open, and something big and black sprang out! I reared up to fight him off but he knocked me over and went for my food bowl.

I crouched, ready to attack. He bared his teeth. I wasn’t afraid of him. Of course not. Even though he is above my weight.

There was a bump from above. We’d disturbed the missus?

The rat heard, too. He leaped for the cupboard, and the door shut behind him. Surely the missus will have heard and come down? No, apparently not.

I hate rats. I know that now he’s found his way into the kitchen, he’ll be back and it will be up to me to deal with him.

I love to climb trees. I can climb all the trees in the garden. And today she brought a tree into the house for me to climb. What a wonderful surprise! It’s in the front room and she keeps the door shut but I can wait till it’s time for me to have it.

 I’m good at waiting. At night I sit by the cupboard in the kitchen, and listen. The rat’s still there, scuttling about under the floorboards. Last night I heard him move across the hall and on into the living room. He’ll be after the chocolate presents the missus has collected there.

 I’ve tried to follow him. I can open cupboard doors, so why not he door to the sitting-room. It’s not one you can push open with your head. It’s not a round knob. It’s a lever. I ought to be able to master that.

 I practiced taking running jumps at it. I nearly managed it last night.

 Another night. All was quiet. I heard the rat arrive and scuttle away under the floor to the hall and onwards.

 I fixed my eyes on that door handle. I crouched, weaving to and fro until I had enough momentum and took off . . . flying through the air. I landed in a heap at the foot of the door.

 I shook my senses back into their place and tried again. I powered up. I took off. I flew through the air and connected with the lever. . . which dropped and the door swung open.

 Yes, I could smell the rat. He was out in the open, nibbling chocolate.

 I forgot the rat. I was transfixed by the tree, the Christmas gift the missus had bought for me. It smelled just as it should, earthy and fresh even though it was in a bucket and not in the ground. There was enough light from the street lamp outside for me to see glints of silver all over. I walked under it and my tail caught something which went Ting! The missus had hung the tree with bells for me to ring!

 Was that a bird over my head? I leapt up to give it a swipe with my paw, and it fell at my feet. I sniffed at it. No, it wasn’t real. A pity. The silver icicles were better. I batted one to and fro. How delightful!

 What was this, a silvery chain to pull? I tugged it and it came away. I was half way up the tree before I knew it. There was another figure with wings on the top of the tree. Another bird? Or a moth?

 What fun this was! I leapt for the winged toy and managed to wrench it off, only to spit it out. It wasn’t a bird or a moth. It tasted horrible.

 Uh-oh! The rat had followed me up the tree. Tail twitching, ears flattened, he bared his teeth and snapped at my tail. I screeched and swiped at him.

 He dived for a branch directly under me and landed heavily.

 The tree shuddered. I clung on with all my might. He scrambled for purchase on the bark. The whole tree shuddered. His weight unbalanced it. I clung on for dear life. He squeaked for help, in vain. The tree tipped over . . .

 He dropped to the floor and the tree crashed down on top of him. Bang! I felt the jolt in every bone of my body. A forlorn tinkle came from broken ornaments. I sobbed with fright and with thankfulness that I was still alive.

 A horrible smell drifted up to me. One of the silver icicles has skewered the rat to the carpet.

 I tottered along the branch and dropped off onto the carpet some way from the mess. I desperately needed a drink, and a wash and brush up. I went back to the kitchen for both.

 Angry steps plodded down the stairs. The missus had woken up.

 She called my name. And then, she spotted the dead rat! You should have heard her scream! Then she started frantically calling for me. I ran to reassure her that I was still alive. She picked me up and cuddled me. She was SO glad that I hadn’t met the same end as that nasty stinking rat, who had wrecked the tree.

 She put the tree back together after a fashion the next day but I don’t bother with it now. Instead I play in the big cardboard box that contained the tree ornaments, which she left out for me. It has lots of tissue paper in it. Wonderful! Now that’s what I call a present.

 I am Maximilian the Magnificent, Wrecker of Rodents, and Defender of Christmas trees.