

The Girl and the Rescue Hamster



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Maya skipped into the animal shelter with her mom, her red sneakers tap-tapping on the floor. The room smelled like clean hay and warm puppies. Her yellow T-shirt had a tiny paw print right over her heart. She peered into every cage, her big brown eyes wide with wonder. Today was the day she would find a pet of her very own.



A friendly woman in a teal apron waved them over. "I'm Ms. Lee," she said, her glasses glinting. "Are you looking for a small friend?" Maya nodded so fast her two curly puffs bounced. Ms. Lee led her to a quiet corner where a tiny hamster sat in a glass tank. The hamster had golden-orange fur and a snowy white belly.



"This is Pepper," Ms. Lee said softly. The little hamster twitched its pink nose and peeked out from a cardboard tube. Its round black eyes blinked at Maya. "Pepper was found in a shelter and needs a special home." Maya pressed her palms together. "Hello, Pepper," she whispered. Pepper's whiskers wiggled, and Maya's heart did a happy flip.



Ms. Lee knelt beside Maya. "Hamsters are small, but their needs are big," she explained. "Pepper needs soft bedding for digging and warm sleeping. Pepper needs hiding spots to feel safe. And Pepper needs toys for play and exercise." Maya listened carefully, her gap-toothed smile growing. "I can do all that!" she said. "I want Pepper to be happy."



At home, Maya cleared a spot on her dresser for a big glass tank. She filled the bottom with soft paper bedding, fluffing it up like a cloud. "This is for digging and sleeping," she told Pepper, who was still in a carry box. She piled the bedding high on one side so Pepper could burrow deep and stay warm. The fluffy nest looked cozy and inviting.



Next, Maya added hiding spots. She placed a small wooden house with a round door in one corner. She tucked in a curved cork tunnel and a little clay pot on its side. "Now you can hide whenever you want," she said. Pepper's tiny pink nose poked out of the box, sniffing the air. The hiding places made the tank look like a secret village.



Maya remembered the play part. She added a smooth running wheel and a ladder made of safe wood. She scattered a few cardboard tubes for chewing and a tiny ball with a bell inside. "Toys for play and exercise," she said proudly. Pepper's round eyes seemed to sparkle. Maya imagined the little hamster running, climbing, and exploring every corner.



Finally, Maya filled a small dish with hamster food and a bottle with fresh water. She added a piece of apple for a treat. "Welcome home, Pepper," she said. Then she gently lifted Pepper from the carry box. The hamster felt warm and soft, like a little loaf of bread. Pepper's white paws clung to her fingers, and Maya giggled.



Pepper landed in the bedding and froze for a moment. Maya held her breath. Then the tiny hamster began to nibble a seed, its chubby cheeks puffing out. It took a step, then another. Pepper sniffed the wooden house and disappeared inside. Maya clapped her hands softly. "Pepper likes it!" she whispered. Her brown eyes shone with joy.



The next morning, Maya rushed to the tank. The bedding was full of little tunnels and mounds. Pepper had been busy digging! The hamster popped out of a hole, its golden-orange fur dusted with white bits. Maya laughed. "You made a maze!" she said. Pepper climbed the ladder and sat on top, cleaning its pink ears. It looked very pleased with itself.



But then Maya noticed something. Pepper kept running on the wheel, then stopping to chew the bars. The hamster seemed restless. Maya frowned. "Maybe Pepper needs more to do," she thought. She remembered Ms. Lee's words about big needs. So Maya called the shelter. "Ms. Lee, Pepper is happy, but how can I make things even better?"



Ms. Lee visited the next day. She looked at the tank and smiled. "You've done a wonderful job, Maya," she said. "But hamsters love to dig deep. Your bedding is a little shallow." She showed Maya how to add more soft bedding, making it extra deep. "And try hiding treats inside the bedding. Pepper will love foraging for them."



Maya added more bedding until it was fluffy and thick. She hid tiny sunflower seeds and bits of carrot in the soft layers. Pepper's nose twitched with excitement. The hamster dove into the bedding and began to burrow, digging like a tiny excavator. It found a seed, nibbled it, and dove again. Maya watched, delighted. "You're a great digger, Pepper!"



That evening, Maya sat by the tank and watched Pepper explore. The hamster ran through the tunnel, peeked out of the clay pot, and climbed the ladder. Then it curled up in its warm nest, its white belly rising and falling. Maya felt a warm glow in her chest. She had given Pepper a home that was just right. "Small pets have big needs," she said softly.



The next week, Maya showed her friend Leo the tank. "Look how Pepper burrows!" she said. Leo watched the hamster pop up like a jack-in-the-box. "Wow!" Leo said. Maya explained everything she had learned. "Bedding for digging, hiding spots for safety, and toys for play," she said. Leo nodded. "You're a great pet owner, Maya."



Maya smiled, her round cheeks pink with pride. Pepper sat in her hand, nibbling a tiny piece of broccoli. "Pepper is my little friend," Maya said. The hamster's round black eyes looked up at her, trusting and happy. Maya had learned that even the smallest pet needs care, thought, and love. And she was glad to give Pepper all three.