

Pawtector Adventures: Lucky the Cat!

Volume 3: Partners in Crime?

Part 1: Siblings

Lucky's claws scraped against the pavement as she rushed through the streets of London, chest heaving as she pushed herself to move faster. Those stupid, annoying, crafty American guinea pigs! Ever since they'd stolen the Catcycle, they'd been hitting Pawtector storage facilities all over London and nearby towns. It was like they were rubbing it in her face that she couldn't respond in time to catch them without the Catcycle. And it was so freaking irritating!

"Take the next left, straight ahead! I mean, left ahead!"

Speaking of annoying, Momo's voice crackled through the small radio dangling from Lucky's tactical collar. Try as she might, Lucky couldn't keep Momo out of the Hide. The kitten insisted she wanted to help recover the Catcycle, and with no option but to appease her or risk the humans discovering the Hide, Lucky had reluctantly allowed Octo to put Momo on navigation duty. Lucky was far more used to driving than walking, so she needed the guidance to make sure she was taking the most direct route to each facility. Momo had taken to the task surprisingly well.

"Take a right," another direction came. "Now straight ahead. The entrance to this one is under a big flowerpot. How do you think they keep finding these places?"

"Not now, Momo," Lucky said with a growl, panting as she skidded to a stop in front of a hotel. She pressed her paw to the base of one of the large stone planters at the front. The planter slid forward, revealing a spiral staircase instead of the usual elevator. "Seriously?!" Lucky whined.

"Sneeze and Sniffle are still inside!" Momo encouraged her, the radio crackling as she moved, probably tapping something on the Catputer screen. "Hurry, you can make it this time!"

This time. Ignoring Momo's accidental insult, Lucky took a deep breath, then began to bound down the dimly lit stairs. The entrance slid shut behind her with a

heavy-sounding stone and metal grind.

At the bottom of the staircase, Lucky came to a warehouse nearly identical to all the others Lucky had been rushing between. This one, however, was obviously a bit older. It was packed to the brim with pallets of supplies, and instead of the hidden loading bay Lucky was used to, it had clear-as-day rolling doors on each wall but the wall with the stairwell. The air was dusty and musty, marked by that particular cloyingness that comes from lack of movement.

And Sneeze and Sniffle were standing right in the center of the warehouse, balancing a thin wooden crate between them in the central aisle.

Lucky's ears flicked forward, her eyes bright and alert as she snarled. "I've got you this time!" she yelled, rushing into action.

Sniffle squealed. "Scatter!"

The guinea pigs dropped the crate, both trying to run in different directions. However, as Sniffle turned, he dropped the crate on his front paw, briefly trapping the ends of his sharp claws under the rough wood. He squealed and squalled as he tried to tug himself free, but while the crate wasn't heavy enough to hurt, it was just barely too heavy to easily move on his own. He was only trapped for a moment, but a moment was all Lucky needed.

She focused on him immediately, leaping for the smaller guinea pig. Sniffle shrieked in fear. "SNEEZE, HELP!"

Sneeze blamed instinct for what he did next.

Logically, he knew Lucky wouldn't eat Sniffle. Heck, she probably wouldn't even hurt him. She wasn't a stray, starving alley cat. She was a well-cared for pet, and a Pawtector on top of that. Her code of conduct forbid her from directly taking the life of another animal. At worst, she'd get a little rough with Sniffle, and he'd be okay. With Lyon's intel, Sneeze would just break Sniffle out of whatever containment he got put into, and they'd resume stealing from the Pawtectors. Everything would be okay. Sneeze knew that.

His heart didn't.

His heart saw Sniffle cornered by a predator, wide-eyed with fear. His heart made him turn around and jump down from the stack of pallets he'd been climbing. And when Sneeze reached Sniffle, shoving the box that was trapping him as hard as he could, it was his heart that made him bite down on Lucky's leg as hard as he could.

Lucky jumped back, hissing in shock and pain. She went up on her back paws, trying to shake the guinea pig off. Sneeze let go, falling to the floor and yelling, “Sniffle, run!” just in time for Lucky’s paws to come back down on either side of him, boxing him in. He squeaked, looking up at the cat standing over him.

“Stay down,” she panted, blood dripping from her leg onto the floor next to Sneeze, “Or this is going to get ugly.”

Sneeze nodded frantically, his little heart racing in his chest. Craning his head to look around him, he just barely caught sight of Sniffle’s hind legs as he disappeared between the rows of pallets, heading for the stairwell. The other guinea pig must have escaped. He was safe. Good.

...and now Sneeze was in the grasp of the Pawtectors. Not so good.

Looking back up at the cat standing over him, Sneeze shuddered. Logically, he knew Lucky wouldn’t eat him. But guinea pigs were prey animals, and right then, Sneeze’s instincts wouldn’t let him forget it.

Once Lucky had confirmed with Momo that an extraction team was on the way with a pet carrier, Lucky let Sneeze sit up, keeping a paw on him to make sure he didn’t try to escape.

As they waited, Momo excitedly chattered over the radio. “He jumped so far, like *woosh!* And then you slammed the mouse down like *bam!*”

“He’s a guinea pig, not a mouse,” Lucky wearily corrected for the fourth time. “Listen, Momo- Alexander will be on break soon, won’t he? Why don’t you go check on his stream and see if it’s time for a treat break? It’ll be a little while before the extraction team arrives with the carrier, anyway.”

“Treat break?” Momo echoed. Lucky could practically see the kitten’s ears twitch in her mind’s eye. “Great idea, Lucky! Since you’re going to miss it, I’ll eat extra for you. I’ll see you back home!”

The radio clicked as Momo disconnected, and Lucky sighed in relief. She wasn’t sure she would have been able to keep her cool with Momo much longer. She made a mental note that Momo was never allowed to help with reports, unless Pawtectors HQ was suddenly okay with them containing a lot of onomatopoeias.

Next to Lucky, Sneeze flexed his ears, tilting his head up to look at her radio. “She sounds young,” he commented quietly. “Is she your trainee?”

“No,” Lucky said, maybe a bit too quickly. “She’s not my trainee. She’ll never

be a Pawtector at all, if I have anything to say about it. She's just my human's new kitten. She found out about my work and wanted to be involved, but she's too sweet and naive for this kind of thing. Momo, out in the field? Ha! She'd get eaten alive!"

Sneeze nodded, looking ahead again. "She reminds me of Sniffle, when he was younger. She reminds me a little of Sniffle as he is now."

"How so?"

"Chatterbox."

Lucky snorted. "Yeah, I noticed that. I bet that mouthy piggie always has something clever to say, doesn't he?"

Sneeze chuckled in response. "That, or something to whine about."

The brief conversation trailed off, but despite the dynamics at play, it wasn't so tense anymore.

After a long moment, Lucky spoke again. "Let me ask you something," she said. "You said Momo reminds you of Sniffle when he was younger, but aren't the two of you the same age?"

This time, Sneeze shook his head. "No, I'm older than him. We don't come from the same litter, or even the same parents. We were born in a breeding program to supply pet stores. Both of us were the last member of our litter to be sold, so when we ended up alone, the pet store housed us together. Then our humans bought us as a pair."

Lucky's tail raised in surprise, swaying back and forth behind her. "Your humans? You have humans?"

"Of course," Sneeze squeaked. "Do I look like a wild guinea pig to you? We're pets. We live with a bonded pair of humans, back in the States."

"Huh," Lucky mumbled. That was a surprise. As far as she was aware, pets that were provided for rarely turned to crime, so... "Are your humans taking good care of you? Is that why you steal, because of them?"

"Oh, they take excellent care of us," Sneeze replied. "But we didn't always have them. I was a teenager, in guinea pig years, by the time I was moved in with Sniffle. I'd been alone for a while, and the pet store didn't always take great care of us. We were only ever given cheap pellets and dusty alfalfa hay, so I would break out at night and steal better hay, food, and vitamins for myself. When I was moved in with Sniffle, I didn't stop, so he found out about it pretty quick. He

started to come along with me on heists, whether I wanted him to or not. He fell in love with the freedom and the thrill of it, and even after we were adopted, he wanted to keep honing his skills. So, I help him do just that.”

Lucky chuckled at the mental image of a younger Sniffle pestering Sneeze into letting him tag along to steal food. “So you two really do only steal for the glory,” she mused. “What do you do with the domee, then? My intel says you have connections for selling stolen goods.”

“We do,” Sneeze confirmed, “And we’ll use the funds we earn to buy treats and new equipment, but the rest... well, we normally just give it away. We’ll send it to guinea pigs in other pet stores that need funds for fresh vegetables, or give it to rodents planning to run from neglectful owners. We don’t really need it, and we don’t want to store it in a traceable account.”

“Like little piggie Robin Hoods,” Lucky said, shaking her head. “Stealing from the fortunate and giving to the needy. Well, I’m afraid you picked the wrong score this time.”

“Yeah,” Sneeze said with a sigh, “We did.”

They lapsed back into silence, Lucky musing over the new information she’d learned about her adversaries. As far as crimes went, Sneeze and Sniffle’s weren’t actually too terrible. They were kind of antiheroes to the animals they helped in their own right, weren’t they?

“Why did you ask?” Sneeze suddenly asked, breaking Lucky’s train of thought.

“Huh?”

“You asked if I was the same age as Sniffle,” Sneeze reminded her. “I’m not, but we’re about the same size, so most folks can’t tell. Why did you ask?”

“Oh.” Lucky lifted her back leg, careful not to put too much weight on Sneeze as she scratched her ear awkwardly. She was suddenly aware of how heavy and scratchy the dusty air was in her lungs, coughing once. “Well, um, I was just thinking... about Momo and I, I guess. Momo is younger than me, and we’re from different litters by different parents. My human really wants us to get along as sisters, though. I don’t know if I can risk letting that happen. Momo is a sweet kitten, but I’m a Pawtector. Even if she didn’t already want to follow me in to the field, claiming her as my sister would put her in danger.”

Sneeze thought about that for a moment. Then, he looked up at her and said, “I can understand that. I felt similarly when Sniffle first wanted to join me in my heists.”

“You did?” Lucky asked, surprised.

Sneeze nodded, nose twitching as he sniffed. “I did. It was one thing when I was stealing on my own, but when I let him come with me, I suddenly felt responsible for us both. I wasn’t ready for it, and I resented Sniffle for that at first. Especially since he’s so different from me. He’s loud, and demanding at times, and he was a baby ball of energy.”

“Yeah,” Luck agreed. “Just like Momo. I just... I don’t know. I don’t resent her exactly, I don’t think. I’m just so used to guarding my secrets with my life. Even now that she already knows, it feels like... like...”

“...like an intrusion?” Sneeze guessed, completing the thought for her. “Like a space that was yours, entirely in your control, has suddenly been violated. And now something that used to be freeing is riddled with responsibility and new routines that you weren’t prepared for. It’s not safe for her, and now it no longer feels safe for you, either.”

Lucky’s eyes widened and she sat up straighter. “Yeah... yeah, that’s exactly how it feels.”

“I felt that way about Sniffle,” Sneeze shared. “But after a while, I started figuring out how to work with him, and the feeling faded. Heists stopped just being my thing he was intruding on, and started being *our* thing, that we did together. I started to share my skills and felt proud of him for learning. I realized, then, that I didn’t mind being an older brother. Being able to share the victories made them sweeter, and sharing the losses made them hurt less. Even after becoming a team, though, the anxiety of worrying Sniffle will be hurt... it never went away. But it’s worth it.”

He chuckled, then, and looked away. “Besides, you know now how younger siblings are. If you tell them no, it makes them want something even more.”

Lucky huffed softly, looking up at the ceiling of the warehouse and letting her tail drop. “Yeah, isn’t that the truth? I told Momo I didn’t want her in my secret base, and now she’s bullied her way onto the radio with my dispatcher. She doesn’t do a bad job as navigator, though. Maybe she could be a dispatcher herself someday. That wouldn’t be the end of the world, I guess.”

Wait, was she... actually considering steering Momo that direction. She shook her head. All this stupid sentimental conversation was getting to her. “Enough about that,” she decided. “If I’m talking to you at all, you know, I’m supposed to be interrogating you.”

Sneeze squeaked in amusement, rubbing his nose with one paw. “Well, I don’t

have a whole lot to withhold.”

“Any chance you’d tell me who Sniffle was talking about when he said you have a client, then?” Lucky asked.

And surprisingly, Sneeze answered.

“We’re working for a plantimal called Dan D. Lyon...”

Lucky’s tail swished back and forth again, her mind racing as she mulled over Sneeze’s story. Dan D. Lyon had anti-anti-histamines? Foxglove must’ve provided them, but why? First she was working with Snapdragon, and now Lyon? That didn’t make any sense. She was always a solitary plant, so what made her want to branch out?

More urgently, though, Sneeze and Sniffle were being blackmailed.

“Okay,” Lucky said slowly. “Okay, this... this changes things.”

Sneeze clicked his teeth, suspicious as he looked back up at Lucky. “It does?”

“It does,” Lucky confirmed. “It means you’re acting under duress, not out of malice. And that means we might not be enemies here.”

“What do you mean?”

Lucky took her paw off of Sneeze, and the guinea pig looked up at her in obvious surprise. “Look,” Lucky said, “You know where Lyon is hiding and what he’s planning. I have the resources to stop him. If we team up, he won’t stand a chance. We could bring him into custody so he isn’t a threat to either of us anymore!”

“Ha!” Sneeze scoffed. “And how can I trust you won’t turn around and apprehend Sniffle and I once you have Lyon? Or that you wouldn’t get Lyon to tell you about our humans, so you can weaponize that information, too?”

“You said you believe in what the Pawtectors do,” Lucky insisted. “Well, we don’t betray others. We protect all humans, including yours, from evil. And you’re not evil, Sneeze.”

She could practically see the gears turning in Sneeze’s head. The guinea pig was considering it, but talk was cheap, and Lucky knew it. So, after a moment of consideration, she stood up and took a step back.

“I know you’re worried about Sniffle,” she said. “I’d be worried about Momo, if

our positions were reversed. Go make sure he's okay. Then, both of you meet me on top of the hotel this warehouse is under tomorrow night. We'll take down Lyon together."

Sneeze stayed still for a long moment, staring up at Lucky. Then, without replying, he turned and ran, a blur of white fur as he darted toward the exit.

Lucky took a deep breath, then pawed at her collar. "Momo, you there?"

A second later, the radio clicked. Lucky could hear Momo licking her lips, probably still enjoying her treat from Alexander. "Mhm! I'm here!"

"Good. I need you to tell Octo to cancel the extraction team. Sneeze escaped."

"Escaped?!"

"Kind of," Lucky said, one ear twitching. "I'll explain when I get back, alright? Until then, keep your claws sharp."

"Huh?"

Oh, whoops. Lucky chuckled. "Nevermind. Just... see you soon." She pawed at her collar again, switching the radio off. She'd be able to get home well enough on her own, and she needed to think.

Part 2: The Meeting

When Lucky arrived back at the Hide, it was to the soft sound of purring. Momo was laying on the black cushion in front of the Catputer, dozing contently. Lucky rolled her eyes. Honestly, that kitten could fall asleep anywhere, once she stopped complaining.

Lucky wandered toward the Catputer, intent on waking Momo, but hesitated as she reached the cushion. Momo's fur was sticking out in all directions behind her ears. Lucky remembered when she was first taken from her mother, and she had to figure out how to clean her ears and face. She never resented her humans from taking her from her litter— it had been the right time for it, after all —but the adjustment period had been rough. Humans didn't always understand what she needed, and there were certain comforts that were just unique to cats.

She stepped up onto the cushion, sitting next to Momo and pawing at the Catputer screen. Momo would figure things out eventually. Lucky had.

the Catputer screen lit up, Octo's face filling the window. "Lucky," he said sternly, clearly displeased. "Care to explain why you canceled the extraction team

after capturing Sneeze?”

Lucky let her gaze linger on Momo a moment longer, then turned toward Octo, sitting up straighter. “He got away,” she said.

Momo stirred on the cushion next to her, yawning and stretching her front paws. “The mouse got away...?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Octo said, his pupils narrowing into slits. “Based on what I saw, I would say he was released.”

“Okay, yes, I let him go,” Lucky admitted, “But it was tactical. I was talking to Sneeze, and he told me that he and Sniffle aren’t stealing from our warehouses because they want to. They’d being blackmailed into it.”

Momo sat up at that, pushing her front paws underneath her so she could stretch into a sitting position. “Really? By who?”

Lucky’s ears lowered, and she flexed her paws against the cushion beneath her as she said, “Dan D. Lyon.”

Momo blinked at Lucky, tilting her head. “...a dandelion?”

“Close,” Octo sighed. “Assuming Sneeze was telling the truth, he was referring to a plantimal who calls himself Dan D. Lyon.” He reached for another screen out of frame, and after a second, his image slid to the left. On the right side of the screen, the plantimal’s file appeared, with their best image of Lyon at the top. Lyon was shaped roughly into the form of a lion, but his mane was shaggy and weighed down with grease, and he was standing on his hind legs like a human in front of a broken machine.

“Dan D. Lyon,” Octo explained, “Is one of the more unstable plantimals Lucky has faced. Skilled at building machines, Lyon will create dangerous contraptions out of scraps, with his ultimate goal being to take over and occupy London with sheer force. He is a group of dandelions taking the form of a lion, but he believes that he was once a human mechanical engineer named Daniel David Lyon.”

“He thinks he’s a human?” Lucky echoed. “Why?”

Lucky batted at the screen, scrolling down in Lyon’s file. “We’re not sure,” she said. “According to him, the UK government put him in the body of a plantimal as punishment for his crimes against nature and other humans. But there were no humans involved in the creation of the plantimals, so what he believes is impossible.”

“Interestingly,” Octo chimed in, “We’ve been able to locate the *real* Daniel

Lyon. He does exist, but he's not a plantimal. He's a human mechanic that was arrested for fly-dumping scraps in the woods along various roads. Having been caught more than once, he was eventually sentenced to four years in prison. During his sentence, he was involved in a fight that went bad, and sustained serious injuries that put him into a coma. He's still in a hospital on life support to this day."

Momo nodded along thoughtfully. "Huh," she said. "So, the plant Dan D. Lyon is just crazy?"

"Delusional, maybe," Lucky sighed. "And definitely unstable. But he's still incredibly smart. His machines aren't to be treated lightly, and he's apparently connected with another dangerous plantimal."

Octo froze, his pupils widening again as he paled around his funnels and eyes. "You don't mean-?"

"Foxglove," Lucky confirmed. "She's provided him with anti-anti-histamines. Why, I'm not sure, but Lyon is using them to threaten the guinea pigs' humans. That's why they're stealing for him. Sneeze and Sniffle are pets, and they're just trying to keep their humans safe."

Octo sank back against his desk, his head floating in the water briefly as he considered Lucky's claims. "So the thieves have humans, and the humans are being used as leverage..." He lifted a tentacle to his face, running the end of it across his face beneath his eyes. "This could be advantageous for us, too. If we find out who these humans are, we could take the guinea pigs into custody when they return home. Or, once Lyon is taken care of, we could use that information to force the guinea pigs to turn themselves in."

Lucky's ears flattened back against her head. "What are you talking about?" she asked, annoyed. "Absolutely not. Octo, I'm surprised at you. We're Pawtectors. We protect pets *and* their humans. We would never use another pet's humans as leverage, and I'm shocked you'd even say that. Seriously, what's gotten into you lately?"

There was a long beat of silence.

"I think you need to take a step back and remember what we're fighting for, Octo," Lucky finished scolding him. "We can finish debriefing Momo after I meet up with Sneeze and Sniffle tonight. I'm going to bring them here, so we can discuss a strategy for dealing with Lyon."

Octo curled his tentacles back toward his body, blowing a few bubbles out from underneath himself as he sighed. "Very well," he conceded, "But I hope you're

right about this. Keep your claws sharp, Lucky, and your wit sharper.”

Lucky didn’t answer him, tapping the screen and closing the video.

Next to her on the cushion, Momo flicked her tail across the ground anxiously. “...you wouldn’t really hurt another pet’s humans to get what you want, would you? Even if they’re not very nice pets?” she asked.

“Never,” Lucky answered immediately. “Ignore what Octo said. He gets a little too isolated in that tank, sometimes, but a Pawtector would never, ever threaten somebody’s human. That would make us no better than the plantimals.”

Momo relaxed a bit, pushing up her rump with her hind legs so she could stretch her back. “Okay, good,” she agreed. “So, can I be on the radio again when you meet the mice tonight?”

Lucky reached out and bopped Momo gently, her paw coming down to flatten some of the fur sticking out on the kitten’s head. “They’re guinea pigs,” she corrected again, “And, well, we’ll see. If you can even stay awake that late, maybe.”

“Hooray!” Momo cheered. “I’ll stay awake, no problem!”

Somehow, Lucky doubted that.

Across London, deep underground, Sneeze rushed toward Lyon’s secret lab. His nails scraped against the rough concrete floors as he darted through the entrance, panting with exertion and nerves. Echoing in the strange space, he could hear Sniffle rumbling.

“I could break him out,” Sniffle insisted at Lyon’s feet. “Just let me go back for him!”

Before Lyon could snarl back at him- or worse -Sneeze spoke up, scampering forward. “No need,” he announced himself, panting, “I’m here. I’m here. I got away.”

“Sneeze!” Sniffle squealed. He rushed over, tucking himself against Sneeze’s side and putting his nose under Sneeze’s chin. “You’re okay! Wait, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m not hurt, I’m okay,” Sneeze said. “I’m alright. It’s alright, Sniffle, I’m okay. Right as rain. Just breathe, little brother.”

Lyon watched the pair from where he stood next to his machine, looming over

them. “What a touching reunion,” he purred. “It’s good to hear you’re not hurt, Sneeze. Sniffle made it sound like Lucky had you tight in her claws.”

“She did.” Sniffle took a few steps back, confused as he looked at his brother. “How did you get away?”

Sneeze considered his answer for a moment, then explained, “Lucky let me go. It was a sign of good faith after trying to talk me into joining her team. Of course, I’m not going to, but I let her think I might.”

That made Lyon laugh— a strange rustling, crackling sound. “Team up! Of course, that bleeding heart would try to appeal to your warm-blooded nature, wouldn’t she? Always so passionate about everything. She does so enjoy preaching about her human-borrowed morals and philosophies at me. It’s too bad for her you piggies only speak domee!”

His laughter slowly died down, his tail swaying back and forth behind him as if in some unfelt breeze. “Come to think of it... we could use this to our advantage. Did Lucky say anything about how to contact her? Where to meet her?”

Sneeze lifted his head in surprise at the question, taking a step to put himself in front of Sniffle as Lyon crouched low on his platform. “She- she wanted me to meet her tonight,” he squeaked.

Lyon leapt from his platform, hopping down to the ground. He landed gracelessly, smacking the floor and briefly crumbling into a pile of flowers, stems, and leaves before pulling himself back into shape again. “Yes,” he said with a purr, “Perfect. You should meet her. Yes, meet Lucky wherever it is that she asked to be met. I could follow you there and lay in hiding... or- no, wait! I’ve got it!” He crouched low on his front legs, letting his chin press against the floor as he got down on Sneeze and Sniffle’s level. “Get Lucky to take you to the Hide! Yes! Hahahaha, that’s it! Once she takes you back to her hide, I will follow you. We’ll destroy that cantankerous cat and her base of operations all in one blow!”

Sneeze’s heart hammered in his chest as Lyon jerked himself back into a standing position. The plantimal nearly stepped on the guinea pigs as he turned around to face his hulking mechanical project. “Thanks to you pigs, I can have my glorious war machine finished by tonight. Once we take care of Lucky and the Hide, London’s greatest protector will be gone! I’ll be unstoppable!”

“Wait,” Sneeze interjected. “Your plan has holes in it, Lyon. Lucky would notice you before she got to our meeting spot, especially in one of your machines. How do you plan on following us all the way to the Hide without getting caught.”

“Oh, she won’t notice a thing!” Lyon cackled. “I’m going to be right here while

you meet her! But you- you're going to tell me exactly where the Hide is. You'll give me the signal."

Sniffle sniffled. "Signal?"

"Yes!" Lyon continued gleefully. "A simple GPS signal should do the trick. I can whip up a transponder in a moment. I may actually have one laying around. Yes, yes, just a simple press of a button when you're in the right place will make it the right time. Then, with Lucky out of the way, I won't be needing your specific counter-skills, will I? So I suppose I'll be able to let you both off the hook. A win-win for everyone involved!"

Sniffle perked up, hopeful, but Sneeze wasn't so reassured. Who was to say that Lyon would keep his word? And it would all come at the cost of destroying Lucky's base of operations... but what other choice did he have?

"Okay," Sneeze agreed. "One last job. As soon as you get the signal from us, we're going home."

The night had gotten a little cold, Sneeze and Sniffle huddled close together when Lucky arrived on the rooftop above the Pawtector facility. Lucky's tail remained lifted as she landed lightly on the roof ledge, swaying back and forth happily. "You're early," she commented warmly. "I knew you'd come. So, do you think Lyon noticed you sneaking off?"

"He didn't," Sniffle answered. "He doesn't care what we're up to, so long as we do the jobs he wants when he wants. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Yes, we showed up. That doesn't mean we trust you just yet."

Lucky nodded. "Right, of course." She glanced around the roof, one ear twitching toward a noise off in the distance. "In any case, this isn't something we should discuss out in the open. Come on. I know a place that's more private."

"What kind of place?" Sniffle asked. His nose twitched in suspicion, and he lifted his head, as if he could smell any trace of deception on Lucky in the air.

Lucky puffed out her chest proudly. "My base of operations," she said, "The Hide."

The guinea pigs exchanged a look of surprise. Lucky preened. It was a rare honor to know the location of the Hide, and it was clear the pigs both knew that.

"Very well," Sneeze said, stepping forward. Sniffle fell into step just behind his brother, and Lucky lead the way off the roof, a train of silent pets sneaking

through the streets of London.

They were careful not to let any humans see them traveling as a group, aware that it would be odd to see a cat and two guinea pigs moving together. It would be odd to see stray guinea pigs in London in general. Sniffle in particular stayed out of sight as much as possible; Sneeze didn't need to be quite as careful, since he could be mistaken for a tailless rat at a glance. Finally, Lucky began to slow down, leading the guinea pigs down a side street and behind an apartment building.

"Over here," she said, trotting up to a cat door. It opened automatically, revealing a ramp up into the building behind it. "This is where my human lives," she explained. "The Hide is built in the dead space between apartments."

Sneeze felt his stomach twist uncomfortably. The Hide was under the apartment of Lucky's human? So if they lead Lyon there, Lucky's human would be hurt, too. That wasn't part of the plan. Still, he stayed silent as he followed Lucky into the building with Sniffle.

"Whoa," Sniffle said as they came up into the Hide.

The space was impressive. They were standing in what appeared to be an empty vehicle bay. Straight across from them was a training area, and to their right, a large computer on a curved desk. On the computer screen, a purple octopus glared into the camera, his tentacles blue at the edges where they were coiled against him. In front of the computer, a cream-colored kitten with dark patches on her ears, face, and legs sat up from where she'd been curled.

"Are you Sneeze and Sniffle?" the kitten asked. "Hi! I'm Momo! Wow, you're smaller than I thought you'd be! How'd you steal so much stuff when you're so small?"

"Momo, that's rude," Lucky chastised gently. "Sneeze, Sniffle, this is my... this is Momo. And the grumpy octopus is my dispatcher, Octo."

Sniffle chuffed and chuckled. "Octo? That's original."

"At least I'm not named after symptoms of a disease," Octo replied dryly. "Welcome to the Hide, guinea pigs. I trust that I don't have to explain you are two of the privileged few that now know the Hide's location."

"R-right," Sniffle said. "And... Lucky, you said this was under your human's apartment, too?"

Lucky wandered over to Momo, pawing at the kitten's fur to straighten it. "That's right," she said. "Momo and I have two humans. Keeping the Hide close is convenient for me, but it also means I can make sure the humans are always safe."

Sniffle nodded, then looked at Sneeze. Sneeze didn't have to ask what he was thinking, because he was thinking the same thing.

They couldn't betray Lucky. Not after she had trusted them, offered them a way out of their situation, and brought them to her Hide. Not just the Hide- to her *home*. Where her human and her little sister were, so she could keep them safe.

"...Lucky," Sneeze said. "We haven't been honest with you."

Sniffle immediately began to squeak to himself, feeling horribly guilty. "We're so sorry! Lucky, Lyon knows that we're meeting up!"

"What?!" Octo growled on the screen. "I knew it. I knew these two couldn't be trusted! Lucky-"

"Wait, Octo," Lucky cut him off. She stood up, walking closer to the guinea pigs. "You two, explain."

Sniffle looked to Sneeze. At Sneeze's nod, he immediately began to confess. "Lyon knows that we're meeting," he said again. "He told us to come meet and get you to take us to the Hide. He gave us a GPS to turn on when we got here, so he could come and destroy the Hide with this awful mech suit he's been working on. But- but we haven't turned it on! We haven't done it yet. If we don't do something, though, he's going to get suspicious and- and our humans will- he'll-"

"Sniffle, breathe," Sneeze quickly cut him off. "But... he's right. Lyon is going to be furious."

"Okay," Lucky said. "Alright, that's bad. But it's not the end of the world. Thank you for telling me, and for trusting me. If Lyon is expecting a final battle tonight, then we'll just have to make sure he gets one."

Sniffle sniffled, rubbing at his face with his paws. "You're still going to help us?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Lucky asked. "Lyon asked you for help finding me, but you didn't tell him where we are, did you? When it came time to pick a side, you made the right choice. I'm not going to hold that against you. Now... what can you two tell me about Lyon's hideout?"

Sneeze stepped forward, bumping into Sniffle once to comfort him before he

began speaking. “Like the Hide is built in the dead space between apartments, Lyon’s lab is carved out of the dead space between Underground tunnels and sewage systems. It’s deep underground and surrounded by security systems. There’s no way we’re going to sneak in without him noticing us.”

Octo reached a tentacle off screen reluctantly. “I’ll pull up a map of London’s underground infrastructure for you to point out the location and access points. This is going to be a problem, though. If Lyon has a new battle suit, in an enclosed space with no element of surprise? I don’t know that the Hide is currently equipped for such a threat.”

“We’ll have to draw him out somehow,” Lucky said. “We could try collapsing some of the access points, but we’ll need to be careful not to destroy anything that the humans of London are using.”

Octo’s image minimized to the corner of the screen, the Catputer displaying a map of the London Underground. Layered over top of it was a map of London’s sewage and waste system. Sneeze cast a wary glance at Momo, then walked up next to her, balancing on his hind legs to nose at the map and begin marking the lab’s location and each of the access points.

“That’ll be tricky, too,” Sniffle said thoughtfully. “From what I saw, Lyon is resilient as the weeds he’s made up of. He can hide out for a long time, and in that time, he’ll be free to use whatever materials he already has to keep upgrading his mech.”

As Lucky, Sneeze, and Sniffle talked strategy, Momo listened, watching the map curiously. Her ears twitched, and after a moment, she shyly spoke up.

“Um, what if-“

All three older animals fell silent, turning to look at her. Momo stopped, suddenly feeling shy. These other pets had experience in the field, tactical know-how that was tried and true. Who was she to contribute, really? She opened her mouth to apologize for interrupting, but Lucky spoke first.

“Go ahead, Momo,” she said. “What’s your idea?”

Momo’s tail perked up. Emboldened, she stood up, looking at the map and then back at Lucky. “Well, um, what if- what if we lured Lyon out using the tracker?” she asked. “Sniffle said that Lyon would come destroy the Hide when the tracker comes on. But it’s not on yet. We could just take the tracker somewhere else, and turn it on there. He wouldn’t know that he was going to the wrong place until he got there, and we could lay a trap for him!”

For a moment, everyone was quiet. Then, Lucky stepped forward, bumping her head briefly against Momo's. "That's a great idea!" she praised her. "Great thinking, Momo! Octo, get me a map of condemned buildings we can use. We're going to turn the tables on that crazy plant!"

Lyon's great mechanical battle suit shuddered as he jumped from rooftop to rooftop. The beautiful mech was roughly humanoid, sharp edges of sheet metal hammered down into crinkled curves where the soft corners of the human body would be. Lyon's form was twisted inside it, the dandelions that made up his body rooted into the electronics of each joint. He slowly but surely made his way toward the blinking red dot on the screen inside his helmet, getting re-accustomed to the feeling of having human-shaped limbs.

The Hide was, apparently, within an apartment building that sat above a small store, right near where Sneeze had nearly been apprehended. Of course, it was so obvious! That's how Lucky had been able to reach the guinea pigs so quickly during their last heist! She probably kept her supplies in the warehouse below, so she could be near her arsenal of gadgets at all times! Well, not for much longer!

Lyon laughed madly to himself as he landed on the building across from the apartment complex. The apartment had a window facing the street. It was mostly dark, but Lyon could see the glow of a TV screen coming from the left, casting the shadow of a sitting cat. Lucky's humans must have put on the TV for her. Well, if they got in Lyon's way, he'd just have to take care of them, too!

"Gotcha," Lyon said with a raspy purr. Then, he pulled his machine into motion. He leapt down and across the street, smashing through the window. Glass scattered across the room as he turned to the source of the shadow...

...only to be met with an old, boxy TV, displaying static behind a crude cardboard cutout of a cat that had been pressed to the screen.

Lyon growled. "What is this?"

"NOW!"

He had no time to react.

Before Lyon could turn to face the source of the voice, two small blurs leapt down on him, biting down on the wires connecting his control module to the rest of the mech and yanking them out of their sockets.

"NO!" Lyon roared.

The guinea pigs jumped off the suit, then, rushing out of the way. Across the room, a cream-colored kitten Lyon had never seen before sliced through a rope with her sharp baby teeth. A heavy metal net fell from the ceiling, taking the twitching humanoid suit to the floor with Lyon still trapped inside it.

Lucky rushed out from under the TV stand, leaping into the air and landing hard on top of the net. She sat down and smacked at the visor of the mech with one paw until it opened, revealing Lyon's face just as Sneeze and Sniffle returned with a blue spray canister.

Lyon roared again, enraged as he was sprayed with Pawtector-grade weedkiller. Immediately, the flowers that made up his body began to wilt and wither.

Lucky sank her claws through the net and tugged open the chest of the humanoid suit, then clawed at Lyon's body within, revealing a familiar tube of menacing yellow liquid. She pushed the tube out and away from Lyon, allowing it to roll toward the edge of the net. Momo hopped forward and guided the tube the rest of the way out, laying on top of it once it was free.

"I've got the anti-anti-histamines!" she announced with a proud sway of her tail.

"And I've got Lyon," Lucky added, tightening the net so it would wrap securely around Lyon and his broken suit. "Good work, team. Let's call for extraction."

Just like that, it was over before it began.

Well, almost over.

Lucky, Momo, Sneeze, and Sniffle all sat in the light of the old TV while they waited for an extraction team to come collect Lyon. The guinea pigs munched on some timothy hay Sniffle had packed for the road, and Momo had curled up against Lucky's side, falling fast asleep.

"Thanks again for your help," Lucky told the guinea pigs. "If we didn't have your help, fighting off Lyon would probably have been a lot messier. And who knows if we could have apprehended him."

"Aw, don't mention it," Sniffle said bashfully. "We were just doing what we needed to, to protect our humans."

"You know," Lucky continued, "You two are pretty skilled, on your own. The Pawtectors could use a pair of agents like you. I could get you in touch with the

Pawtectors' US branch, if you were interested."

The guinea pigs looked at one another, thoughtful. After a moment, Sneeze swallowed his hay and asked, "What about our criminal record?"

Lucky considered it for a moment. "Well... treat it like a resume," she suggested. "It's not like you've ever put any humans in danger or done any serious harm to another animal, right? And my report from tonight is going to be at the top of your file, so anyone who looks you up will see that you gave up crime for heroism. Just... think about it, okay?"

Sneeze exchanged another look with Sniffle, then nodded. "We'll think about it."

"Great!" Lucky cheered. "Then there's just one more thing I need from you."

Something else? The guinea pigs stiffened, Sniffle stepping back warily. "What is it?"

Lucky's ears and tail fell, her expression becoming pained. She laid down, extending her paws toward the piggies pleadingly. "Please tell me the Catcycle is still in one piece."

Back at the Hide, Lucky purred as she rubbed herself up against the Catcycle, weaving around the front handlebars happily. "Oh, I'm so happy to have you back! I'll never let you get lost again!" she promised the super bike gleefully.

Momo was further into the room, dashing back and forth between the vehicle bay and the Catputer as she eagerly told Octo what happened. "-and the net came down like *whoosh!* And Sneeze and Sniffle sprayed him, and he was all, AAAARGH! RAAWR!"

Octo listened to the kitten politely, knowing he'd get a proper debriefing from Lucky later. "Good work, both of you," he praised. "I had my doubts about those guinea pigs, but I'm glad to be proven wrong. Still, perhaps it's time to get the Catcycle some security upgrades. A built-in tracker, for example?"

"That's a great idea," Lucky agreed. "Since we'll be doing some work on the Catcycle anyway, do you think we could also add a sidecar?"

"A sidecar?" Octo asked.

Lucky stepped away from the Catcycle, tail held high and curled slightly

behind her. “Yeah,” she said, “A sidecar. After all, if my sister wants to become a full-fledged Pawtector, she’s going to need some field experience.”

Momo froze, eyes wide as she looked at Lucky. “You mean it...?”

“Yes,” Lucky chuckled. “I mean it.” Her expression, though, became more serious. “Listen to me, Momo. Being a Pawtector is dangerous. Our fight with Lyon went exceptionally well tonight. Normally, it’s a lot harder than that. I might get hurt. *You* might get hurt. But I’m going to train you, so if you ever end up in a bad situation and I’m not there to protect you, you’ll have the best fighting chance possible. Okay?”

“Okay,” Momo said, nodding quickly. “I understand. I won’t let you down, Lucky!”

Lucky’s ears lifted again, and she stepped forward, bumping her head against Momo’s and licking the fur behind her ears to straighten it. “You could never let me down, kid,” she purred. “Now go ahead and go up to bed. I need to write up the report for tonight, and you need your rest. Tomorrow, the *real* fun begins.”

“Rodger that!” Momo said happily. “Goodnight, Lucky! Good night, Octo!”

With that, she rushed out of the Hide, purring with glee the whole way.

Octo let the silence linger for a moment, then spoke. “So, you’ve decided to let Momo become a Pawtector after all,” he commented idly. “I think you made the right decision. She’s sharp. I think she’ll make a great agent.”

“I think so, too,” Lucky said, turning around and facing the Catputer again. “But Octo...”

She walked onto her cushion, then put her paws on her desk, drawing herself up as tall as she could manage. Her back arched as she glared into the Catputer camera, a ridge of fur down her back rising and standing on end.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately,” she growled, “But if you ever -send Momo into a dangerous situation with no backup again, nowhere will be safe. I will hunt you down, and I will make you regret it. Do you understand?”

Octo’s skin paled around his eyes and funnel, turning a stressed light blue. “Yes, Lucky, I understand,” he told her. “Trust me, I regret my mistake. I won’t be doing that again. Not while Momo is just a kitten.”

Lucky relaxed, dropped down from the desk to sit and begin straightening her fur. “Good,” she agreed. “I’m glad we’re on the same page. Now, then. Let me give you a proper report.”

Epilogue

Sneeze typed away at his banana hide's secret computer, rumbling in displeasure at what he found before opening a new file. Sniffle poked his head in, chewing on a mouthful of bell pepper their humans had given them before they went to sleep.

"You lookin' at those files we took from Lyon's lab?" he asked. "What'd you find?"

"I'm not sure," Sneeze said. "I was hoping to find more information on Foxglove, and how she got in contact with Lyon to give him the anti-anti-histamines. But if I'm reading this correctly, Lyon wasn't contacted by Foxglove at all."

Sniffle stepped into the banana hide properly, squished up against Sneeze to read the computer screen. "Who is 'Favia'?" he asked.

Sneeze followed his gaze to a digital correspondence he'd decrypted, which contained messages between Lyon and an unknown entity called Favia.

Favia: I'll leave the canister at the drop point at 0700. It's the same place where I leave the fertilizer.

Lyon: ur awfully trusting. what if i dont leave payment?

Favia: Would it kill you to at least punctuate properly, if not capitalize and spell?

Lyon: womp womp

Favia: Fine. Just leave the payment if you know what's good for you. I need conditioning supplies.

From the way Favia spoke, they appeared to be a plantimal. When Sneeze checked the Pawtectors database, though, his newly granted access didn't provide him any information about a plantimal with that name.

"I don't know," he said. "But look at this. It was hard to trace, but the messages appear to be coming somewhere from Pawtector headquarters in Sydney. Whoever this is, they're—"

The screen suddenly went dark. A moment later, a red box appeared, with flashing text inside. *Access denied.*

"...we need to reach out to Lucky," Sneeze said. "I think she's in trouble."