

The Adventures of Balrog the Cat!

Volume 2: Sinister Siblings

Part 1: Brothers and Sisters

Sparks flickered and fizzed out in the heavy air beneath London, electricity humming through a hidden, cavernous room tucked between subway tunnels. The long, narrow laboratory smelled of ozone and oil, a distinctly chemical fume that should have been repugnant to the lone plantimal shuffling in the dim light. Scattered all around the edges of the lab were heaps of mechanical waste— scrap metal, torn wire, broken machinery. No sunlight reached that room. Neither did clean water or air. But dandelions have never minded harsh conditions, have they? And Dan D. Lyon minded them least of all.

Lyon was, at a glance, a strangely yellow lion. Sinuous dandelion stems twisted together and bloomed at odd angles, bright yellow petals creating the illusion of fuzzy yellow fur. The petals were thickest around his ‘mane’, where the flowers hung lower and thicker from his face and neck. But it was only at a glance that the illusion was passable. Any closer inspection revealed him to be something else. Something more monstrous.

The flowers that covered his body were wilted, crushed things, barely clinging to life like the parched and stepped-on flowers one would find in a sidewalk. Many of them were stained with oil or grease, or singed from stray sparks and welding flames. They weren’t healthy, and it showed in the way Lyon moved, shambling from pile to pile, from tool to tool. He paid his state no mind as he mounted a welding mask to his face, crushing his snout beneath it. He gripped a torch, forcing the plantmatter of his paw to tangle around it, and stumbled on his hind legs to the hulking mass of metal in the shadowed center of the room.

“My great war machine will never be complete, at this rate,” Lyon growled, the seeding dandelions that served as his eyes shaking behind his mask. “That stupid cat... she keeps cutting off supply lines, intercepting heists... I can’t widen my scavenging range any further...”

His long green tail dragged back and forth over the ground in frustration, dandelion fluff at the very end of it leaving a trail of white fuzz. A few small clumps of petals fell from his front leg as he raised it to begin welding again, adding to the mess that coated the floor. “As much as I hate to praise anything designed by those Pawtectors,” he continued, “It’s an impressive piece of engineering. An electric vehicle... that small, but it can move so quickly... I would

love to get my hands into the engine and see how it works. Yes, yes, that would be delightful. It's too small to be nuclear... Some kind of battery? Kinetic energy? It produces no exhaust, but creates such thrust... I'd love to have it. To dissect it. Tear it to pieces...!"

Lyon suddenly tossed his head, switching off his torch as the mask ripped flowers from his mane and clattered to the ground. "But whatever I do to it, I need it *gone!*" he snarled.

"Well, you're in luck," a small voice squeaked from the shadows behind him. "My brother 'n I know a thing or two about makin' things disappear. But you haven't actually told us what 'it' is, yet."

"What else would it be?! The Catcycle!" Lyon shouted, turning around to face the darkness. He dropped to all fours as he did, his entire form trembling with his landing. "Yes, the Catcycle! The super-bike, driven by Agent Balrog of the Pawtectors. Without it, Balrog would never be able to reach me in time to stop me! I could steal from whatever junkyard, whatever human laboratory I wanted. Yes, I need it gone, gone! I need the Catcycle to disappear!"

The owner of the voice in the darkness turned to a second small form next to him, claws clicking on the concrete floor. The second figure sniffed, squeaking softly in private conversation, before the pair seemed to come to a decision. The figure who had spoken lifted their head, rising to their full height of a whole five and a half inches.

"Consider it handled."

Balrog paced the hallway next to Alexander's office door, trying to convince herself to enter. Alexander was streaming, and the chat probably missed her. The only issue was, if Balrog went in, she'd have to hang out with *her*.

Momo.

Balrog didn't know what to think about the new kitten of the household. Alexander was putting a lot of time and effort into getting Momo settled. He played with her, slept in the same room as her, and gave her lots of pets and praise. If Balrog were a lesser cat, she may have been jealous of the attention Momo was getting. But really, it was fine. It was just... awkward.

Momo was sweet, but she was young, and *loud*. She meowed and mewled about everything. Just woke up from a nap? Meowed about it. Wanted to be pet a

different way? Meowed about it. Bored? Meowed about it. Balrog was certain she hadn't been that vocal when *she* was a small kitten. Momo was also really touchy, which Balrog certainly was *not*. Momo climbed all over Alexander and kept trying to snuggle with Balrog. With no other cats in the home, it was up to Balrog to establish boundaries and teach Momo about the order of the house, but she wasn't sure she was ready for that. It was a big responsibility, teaching the new kitten cat manners.

While Balrog was thinking about responsibilities, what if Momo found out about Balrog's work as a Pawtector? That would be a disaster. Momo was so young. Did she even know anything about the Global Domestic Parliament yet? Did she know what a Pawtector was, or how important their work was to the world? What if Momo accidentally revealed the Hide to their humans, or got caught up in the dangers of Balrog's field work? Balrog didn't even want to imagine poor, sweet, defenseless Momo facing off a criminal like Monkeygrass or Toadshade. The kitten wouldn't survive!

So, Balrog wasn't sure how to feel about Momo. Alexander wanted them to be sisters, but could Balrog afford to let Momo that close? And even if she *could* afford it, was she ready for it?

Beep beep! Beep beep! Beep beep!

Balrog winced as the Cat Signal chirped from beneath the floorboards. She could hear Momo meow in confusion from inside the office, likely roused from a nap by the sharp signal. It was designed specifically to be audible to cats, and not their humans, which had been perfectly convenient when Balrog was an only cat. Now that wasn't, she and Octo would have to come up with something new.

Ugh. Families were so complicated.

Putting her inner turmoil aside for later, Balrog rushed to the secret baseboard button and pressed her paw against it, dropping down into the Hide.

Securely in the Hide, Balrog rushed to the Catputer, springing onto her black desk cushion and smacking the Cat Signal icon glowing on the screen. She could only hope she'd turned the signal off fast enough to quell Momo's curiosity. Settling on her back legs, Balrog sighed. "What've you got for me, Octo?"

The Catputer's screen lit up with Octo's purple face, the video quickly sliding to the side to make room for a map of London. A small red exclamation point was

blinking on it, on the side of a road right between two apartment buildings. “A break in,” Octo said, launching into the debrief. “Alarms were just triggered at a Pawtector storage facility in Rotherhithe, near the docks. This facility is used to store several dangerous pieces of contraband and equipment seized from plantimals. Cameras were disabled before the alarm was triggered, and any of the items there could be a target, so there’s no way of guessing who’s responsible. However, it’s worth taking note that one of the items stored there is Foxglove’s disassembled acid cannon, which was seized this past December.”

Balrog’s ears lowered against her head. Foxglove’s escape still stung, and she and every other Pawtector had been on high alert waiting for that crafty plantimal to make her next move. If Foxglove was trying to recover equipment like the acid cannon, and she had managed to produce more anti-anti-histamines, that would be bad news.

“Alright, Octo.” Balrog stood, turning away from the Catputer and trotting toward the vehicle bay. “I’m on it. I’ll make sure nothing leaves that storage facility.”

The map disappeared, allowing Octo’s face to completely fill the screen again. He flexed one of his tentacles in front of him, moving something on a screen Balrog couldn’t see. “The break-in is already in progress,” he pointed out. “Do you think you can make it in time?”

Balrog’s ears perked back up, her tail flicking from side to side in the air as she reached the vehicle bay. “The Catcycle can,” she said, hopping up on her beloved super bike. She put her paw on the control dial in the center of the handles, turning it from *Off* to *Zoomies*.

Octo’s funnels flared, lifting his central mass just enough for him to nod in the water. “Then keep your claws sharp, Balrog.”

Balrog used one back paw to press the Catcycle’s break pedal, then the other to press on the accelerator. The Catcycle revved, back tires beginning to spin in place. “I’ll keep my wit sharper!” she shouted back. Then, she turned the handles hard and released the break, peeling out of the Hide and onto the streets of London.

Part 2: Cat's Out of the Bag

The Catcycle practically flew, eating up the distance with ease. The afternoon breeze grew humid and slightly salty as Balrog drove parallel to Rotherhithe's docks. As she approached her destination, she turned away from the river and toward the nearby neighborhood, weaving through residential streets before pulling off into an alleyway, and parking just out of view.

The entrance to the storage facility was hidden in a post box, the iconic red cylinder hiding it in plain sight. Balrog hopped off the Catcycle, jogging out of the alleyway and checking to be sure no one was watching. Then, she walked up to the post box and pressed her paw against the base. A hidden door slid open, just large enough for Balrog to duck inside. The door slid shut behind her, and a secret elevator began to lower her into the ground.

When the elevator opened again, Balrog idly thought that 'storage facility' was a bit of a fancy descriptor for her location. 'Warehouse' was more fitting. Crates of various sizes and materials were arranged on pallets, wrapped with plastic, and stacked in towering rows that seemed to stretch for miles. It was probably more like a third of a mile, but Balrog was both a cat and British, so she didn't care what a mile was.

The air was dry and cool, clearly climate controlled. The lights of the warehouse barely reached the floor, creating strange shadows that seemed to melt too softly in the dim light. *Was all this really taken from plantimals?* Balrog thought as she stepped out of the elevator. She kept her footsteps silent as she began to peer between rows of pallets, looking for any sign of the intruder. *I guess they have to keep it somewhere. But how do they even get these things down here? Some of these boxes are bigger than I am.*

Balrog's ear suddenly twitched, and she froze. It was faint, but... she could hear a small sound, like scratching. Shuffling. The sound paused, and she closed her eyes, holding her breath as she listened. At first, all she could hear was her own heartbeat. She waited.

There.

The intruder started to move again, shuffling around as whatever they were handling clinked against itself. Balrog stalked forward, keeping low to the ground as she darted from aisle to aisle, slowly drawing closer to the noise. When she was just around the corner from the intruder, she pressed herself to the pallet next to her, readying her claws. Then, she leapt out into the aisle!

"Stop right-!"

Balrog's shout died in surprise. She blinked rapidly, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

That was not a plantimal. A ball of brown fur- real fur -looked up at her in alarm, round ears perking up and fuzzy pointed nose twitching. The fur on the top of his head was flat, making a squished little crest that almost gave him the illusion of eyebrows. He was sitting next to an unwrapped pallet, from which he'd carefully extracted a box and pushed off the lid. The box was full of glowing green batteries. Next to the box, a small bag had been stuffed with as many batteries as would fit. That was not terribly many, considering the bag was small enough to be worn by—

“A guinea pig?” Balrog questioned aloud.

The guinea pig and Balrog stared at one another for a heartbeat longer. Then, the guinea pig suddenly squealed high and loud, grabbing the bag in his teeth and darting away down the aisle.

“Wha- hey!” Balrog yelled. She shook her head, her ears ringing slightly from the squeal, then gave chase. Her longer legs should have made the pursuit easy, but the guinea pig was surprisingly quick, not to mention agile. He was also *small*. He darted through the gaps between pallets, even squeezing himself underneath some of them, forcing Balrog to take the long way around as she tried catch up with him. She followed him as close as she could, relentless as the chase slowly lead them closer and closer to the warehouse elevator. The guinea pig was good, she'd give him that, but did he really think he could outrun a predator evolved to hunt rodents?!

“SNIFFLE!” a squeaky voice suddenly shouted from above them. Huh? Did someone need a tissue?

Balrog looked up and found herself staring at yet another guinea pig, standing on top of a tower of pallets near the elevator. This one was white, with long fur that stuck out in all directions and patches of black fuzz on his ears. Once he had the brown guinea pig's attention, he turned and dropped behind the pallet, disappearing from sight.

The next thing Balrog knew, the pallet at the top of the stack wobbled, then fell, plummeting to the ground. The plastic wrapping keeping all the boxes on the pallet burst as it hit the floor, loose containers crashing in all directions. A wooden box of small lion robots splintered open, a few of them activating on impact and trying to stand. A metal case began to leak a purple liquid that smelled oddly sweet. Somewhere in the wreckage, something began to play a music box arrangement of the Scott Mills Breakfast Show introduction.

The brown guinea pig— Sniffle? —darted for the wreckage, just barely managing to squeeze himself through a gap between two fallen boxes. Balrog was right behind him, but was forced to skid to a stop, crouching low to reach a paw through the gap.

“Get back here,” she growled. “Come on, that’s no fair!”

Unable to grasp anything, she retracted her paw, tail swishing back and forth above her as she tilted her head to peer between the boxes.

On the other side of the chaos, the white guinea pig dropped down to join Sniffle. They had just enough space to stand comfortably behind the fallen boxes as they waited for the elevator to come down to get them.

Sniffle set down his bag and hopped in place, wheeking with excitement. “Attaboy, Sneeze! The great guinea duo strikes again! Now let’s get out of here and collect our dues!”

Sneeze? What the heck were these names?!

“Now hold on just a minute!” Balrog called out to them, kicking away a lion robot that was bumping into her hind leg. “You two aren’t going anywhere!”

Sneeze nosed his head underneath the bag Sniffle had been carrying, carefully pitching it onto his back so the small straps wrapped around his front legs. “Actually,” he said calmly, “It’s you who won’t be going anywhere.”

“Yeah,” Sniffle added on, “Good luck stopping us, haha! Oh, but hey, don’t get your tail in a knot! We’ll put in a good word for you with our client, let ‘em know you were real cooperative.”

Ugh, not just guinea pigs- American guinea pigs. Balrog would know that accent anywhere.

Before she could come up with a clever response, the elevator just beyond the wreckage opened. The guinea pigs stepped inside, the door slid shut, and they were gone.

Balrog huffed with frustration, straightening into a sitting position and inspecting the fallen crates around her. Some of them, she might be able to move, but not enough to clear a path. She could try to leave the same way the pallets got in, but she had no idea where that was. She didn’t see any doors or exits when chasing after Sniffle, and knowing how Pawtector security was, the loading bay was probably hidden in one of the walls. That meant it would also need to be opened from the outside.

Watching a mechanical lion track purple goo across the warehouse, Balrog sighed and stood up. She stepped away from the mess, giving herself some distance before raising her left paw and extending her claws. Tucked underneath a claw was a small SOS trigger, something she rarely ever needed to use. Swallowing her humiliation, she bit down on her claw and activated the trigger, sending out a signal that she needed help.

The signal was short-range, so it would only go out to other Pawtectors in London. Balrog could only hope someone would be available nearby, or she was in for a long night.

Beep beep! Beep beep! Beep beep!

Momo meowed unhappily, stretching her paws out in front of her. She'd been dozing contently in the hide near the top of the cat tree, but that strange chirping sound had woken her again. She'd heard that same sound earlier in the day, so maybe if she waited a few minutes like last time, it would go away...?

Alas, it didn't. Momo slowly pulled herself up, stretching her back with a discontent mewl. If the noise wouldn't go away on its own, she'd just have to find it and turn it off herself! Or get her new humans to turn it off for her. That would probably work, too. Careful of the height, she hopped down each level of the cat tree, slowly making her way to the ground. Then, she began to wander the apartment, searching for the noise.

It wasn't coming from anything in the living room. It wasn't coming from the computer-camera-snuggles room that Alexander spent most of his day in, either. It also wasn't coming from the kitchen. Just where was that beeping noise?!

After searching for a little while, Momo determined it was coming from somewhere in the hallway, but where in the hallway? She walked up and down the space, but didn't see anything. It almost sounded like it was underneath the floorboards. Maybe it was in a different human's space?

She stopped in the middle of the hall, crouching down to press her ear against floor and listen. Of course, being a kitten, she didn't exactly have the best balance. One of her front paws slipped, and she flopped against the baseboard next to her. As she did, she heard a small *click!*

...and then she was falling-!

"What?!" Momo meowed in alarm as the floor suddenly dropped out from

under her. She barely managed to land on her feet, her paws hitting carpet just before the trapdoor above her swung shut and plunged her into darkness. The kitten stood perfectly still for a moment, breathing heavily as she tried to make out the edges of the space around her.

“H... Hello?” she called out hesitantly. “Humans? Balrog?”

Suddenly, lights flickered on, illuminating a walkway straight ahead of her. Glass cases stood on either side, holding an assortment of strange looking objects she’d never seen before. Weird machines, some kind of big seed? And a coin that was all scratched up on one side? What was this place?

The chirping sound, Momo realized, was coming from the room at the end of the walkway. Her curiosity won out over her fear, and she stepped forward.

Balrog had been waiting in the warehouse for over an hour. At first, she tried to chase after the lion robots to amuse herself, but they proved themselves ridiculously easy to herd, which was more frustrating than entertaining. She eventually settled for laying on one of the overturned crates to wait, settling in to an odd doze to the tune of that weird BBC Radio 2 jingle.

Suddenly, a loud grinding sound from the back of the warehouse startled Balrog alert. Oh, thank goodness! She was saved!

She immediately stood and leapt from the crate, jogging toward the sound. At the back right corner of the storage facility, part of the wall had receded and started to slide to the side, revealing a loading bay just as Balrog had suspected. “Took you long enough!” Balrog called out as the loading bay came into view. She slowed her jog to a trot, tail held high as she stepped over the threshold and into a long, dim tunnel. “I was starting to worry my signal wasn’t even getting through. You’re a real lifesaver.”

She turned to properly thank the Pawtector that had come to her rescue, only for her tail to drop at who she saw, ears falling back against her head in shock.

Up against the wall of the tunnel, a small terminal was mounted, with a few different buttons for opening and closing the hidden door. The animal operating the terminal was not another London-based Pawtector. It wasn’t even a UK-based Pawtector. It was a familiar cream-colored kitten, with dark patches on her ears, legs, and face, little white toes splayed out to support her as she stood on her hind legs to hit the “CLOSE” button.

“Momo?!” Balrog gasped.

Momo dropped back down on all fours, turning around sheepishly to face Balrog as the loading bay door began to slide shut. Her tail flicked anxiously behind her. She opened her mouth to say something, maybe explain, but before she could, Octo’s voice suddenly filled the tunnel.

“Good work, Momo,” he said. It was then that Balrog realized Momo was wearing a collar. The familiar loop of black leather fit Momo loosely, a radio dangling against her chest. Balrog recognized it as the collar she wore herself when she thought she may need Octo’s support on a mission.

Octo continued, “Now, lead Balrog out the way you came in, down the tunnel. You’ll exit back out near the waterline, so be careful. If a boat is coming by, your feet might get wet, so be prepared for that.”

“What in the world are you thinking, Octo?” Balrog interrupted him. “What is Momo doing here?!”

Momo flinched, holding her ears back against her head as the tunnel went silent. Octo paused for a moment, then answered calmly. “She found the Hide, Balrog, and there was no one else to respond to your SOS. All of our nearby agents are busy in the field.”

“So you sent a kitten, who is not a Pawtector and has zero training? Into a potentially dangerous situation bad enough that I had to call for backup?!” Balrog’s fur began to stand up along her spine with fury. “Seriously, Octo?! What the-“

“We can talk about this when you’re both back at the hide,” Octo cut her off. “Yell at me all you want later, but right now, focus on getting back home. Both of you, keep your claws sharp, and your wit sharper.”

With that, the radio clicked, signaling Octo had disconnected from the channel.

Balrog stood panting in the silence, still trying to process what she was looking at as she glared at the radio on Momo’s chest. And what she was looking at, she determined, were multiple absolute disaster scenarios.

Disaster #1: Momo had found the Hide, Balrog’s secret base of operations. Formerly secret, now.

Disaster #2: Momo knew that Balrog was a Pawtector, and went on secret missions away from home.

Disaster #3: Octo had sent *Momo* on a mission in the field, involving her in Pawtector business that Momo should never have even known about.

In other words... Balrog was looking at a total cat-astrophe.

Momo's ears twitched where they were pinned back, the tip of kitten's tail sweeping back and forth across the floor as she looked down the tunnel, then back at Balrog. "Um, we should probably get moving, right?" she said nervously.

"Right," Balrog replied, but she didn't start walking down the tunnel just yet. She stepped closer to Momo, sniffing the air for blood and circling the kitten to check for injuries. "Are you okay? How did you even get here?"

"Octo helped me." Momo pawed at the radio dangling from her neck. "He told me where to go, and- and helped me sneak a ride on a bus. It was kind of scary, but also really exciting! But, um, he said- he said you were in danger and needed help!"

And what kind of help did Octo expect Momo to provide? Balrog shook her head, then turned away, beginning the walk down the tunnel. "I'll talk to him when we get back," she said. "You won't have to do anything like this ever again, I promise. Now, come on. Let's get you home."

Momo perked up, her ears swiveling forward as she began to follow. For a moment, the two of them walked in almost companionable silence. But then... Momo got bored.

"So," she said, jogging briefly to catch up to Balrog, "You're like, a secret agent?"

Balrog sighed. "I'm a Pawtector. Humans don't know about us, but other pets and animals do. Our identities are public, but our addresses and the humans we live with are strictly kept secret."

"Wow," Momo said. "How do you become that? A Pawtector?"

"You get recruited," Balrog answered. "Normally when you're young. My mom was a Pawtector, so I was scouted by the agency to follow in her pawprints."

Momo nodded along thoughtfully. "My mom wasn't a Pawtector, I don't think," she said. "But could I be scouted to be a Pawtector anyway?"

"No," Balrog snapped, "Absolutely not."

Momo was apparently no good at taking hints, because she didn't take Balrog's tone to mean the topic was closed. Instead, she asked, "Why not?"

Balrog huffed. "It's too dangerous for you. You'd get yourself hurt."

"I would? Why?" Momo asked.

"Because," Balrog answered, "The creatures I fight are dangerous. This isn't play-fighting, and there are no humans around to break things up if it goes too far. Rogue plantimals are out to seriously hurt us, or worse."

"Why?"

"Well, for lots of reasons. Every villain is different."

"Why?"

"Because there's a lot of things that are wrong with the world, and a lot of people who have been hurt. Sometimes, when people are hurt, they choose to hurt the world back."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Balrog sighed. "Because it's easier, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because breaking things is easier than building them. If you've been hurt by something, it's easier to lash back out than to really look at the situation and how you can prevent it from happening again. And it's easier to break down and lash out when you're carrying pain, than to try and heal from it."

"Why?"

"Because people aren't honest with themselves all the time, and not everyone wants help. Some people- and plantimals -won't heal, no matter how hard you try to help them, because they don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Well, the pain gets familiar." Balrog looked up at the tunnel lights thoughtfully. "If you've been carrying something that hurts for a long time, you get used to the ache. You forget what it's like to be okay, and even though you logically know that healing would be better for you... it's still an unknown. And the unknown is unsettling."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Balrog growled, "Lots of reasons. Can you please stop asking 'why' to everything I say?"

To which Momo, of course, responded, “Why?”

Balrog stopped walking, taking a deep breath in to keep herself from swatting at Momo. Oh, for heaven’s sake. How long was this tunnel?

“Alright,” she said as she breathed out, “Momo, do you want to play a game for the rest of our walk?”

Momo tilted her head in interest, ever the kitten. “What kind of game?”

“It’s called the quiet game,” Balrog explained. She had heard about the game from a human TV show, once. Human parents were geniuses sometimes. “We’re going to walk toward the end of the tunnel without talking, and whichever one of us gets there without saying anything wins, okay?”

“Okay!” Momo agreed.

“Good. Then the game starts... now.” Balrog started to walk again, and as Momo followed, she stayed blissfully silent.

At least, for the next five minutes.

“Why is your secret base under the floor?”

Balrog groaned.

After managing to make it out of the tunnel without biting Momo, Balrog lead the way back into the streets of Rotherhithe, heading back toward the red post box where everything started. The sun had started to dip below the horizon, streaking the sky with red and orange. Balrog’s ear twitched with anxiety, blinking as the sunset briefly reflected off a window and into her eyes. Alexander was out of the apartment that evening, but he’d be so worried if he came home and neither of his cats were there. They needed to get home quick.

As they turned down a side street, Momo stopped, looking back toward the main road. “Balrog, the bus stop is this way.”

“I know,” Balrog said tiredly, beyond the point of being out of patience. “But we’re not taking the bus. I parked the Catcycle just outside the main storage facility entrance. We’ll get home much faster if we drive.”

Momo jogged a short distance to catch up with Balrog, her cream-colored fur almost seeming to sparkle as the sunset started to give way to twilight. “What’s

the Catcycle?” she asked.

That was a question Balrog was actually happy to answer. “Well, it’s the most beautiful bike that’s ever been built, that’s what it is. It’s a cat-sized moped, with a souped-up engine and extra storage space under the seat. It can cross all of London in minutes if I need it to!”

“Wow, that’s so cool!” Momo gushed with a little hop. “Where is it? Are we close?”

“We sure are,” Balrog said. She rounded the corner of a building, stepping into the alleyway behind the post box. She puffed up proudly, watching Momo for a reaction. “There she is, kid.”

Momo gasped, looking around the alley. Then she continued to look around. Then she looked around the street, as well, turning in a small circle. “I don’t see it,” she said, facing Balrog again. “Can it turn invisible?”

Huh?

Balrog paused, turning to look into the alleyway. The *empty* alleyway.

She rushed forward, trying not to immediately panic. Maybe a human thought it was a toy and moved it? That happened once. Or maybe another Pawtector on the job had to borrow it? Leaning down, Balrog sniffed the pavement where the Catcycle had been. The Catcycle’s tires had a very distinct smell, one she was unsurprised to track toward the street. Mixed in to the familiar scent, though, was a faint, unfamiliar musk of... some kind of fur? And- was that timothy hay?

...no. No, they wouldn’t. They couldn’t have.

But they did.

Sneeze and Sniffle stole the Catcycle.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Part 3: Fear of Loss

Balrog and Momo did end up having to take the bus, carefully dodging human shoes as they slipped underneath a seat. The bus stopped a few blocks away from the apartment, so as the first few stars began to appear in the sky, Balrog found herself walking down the streets of London. Walking, on all four paws! Oh, the humiliation!

“How do you think a guinea pig would even drive?” Momo asked as they finally turned down Alexander’s street, walking behind the rows of houses. “Do you think one of them has to steer while the other one pushes the pedals? I bet-“

“*Momo*,” Balrog cut the kitten off sharply. “Just- shut up for a second, please? I need to think.”

Obediently, Momo fell silent. Balrog immediately felt bad, keeping her gaze straight ahead so she wouldn’t have to see Momo’s tail drooping. She knew that Momo didn’t know any better, but she also couldn’t bring herself to apologize. Instead, she pressed forward.

“Look,” Balrog began, “When we get back to the Hide, I’m going to debrief with Octo. Then, we’re going to go back up to the apartment, and I want you to promise me you’ll never go down to the Hide again.”

“Never?!” Momo rushed ahead of Balrog, jumping into her path to stop her. “What do you mean, never? Why?!”

Balrog was seriously starting to hate that question. “You’re not a Pawtector, Momo, and you’re not going to be one.” She stepped around the kitten, holding her head high, making it clear her decision was firm. “I won’t have you risking the humans finding out about the Hide because you want to get yourself into more dangerous situations. That’s final.”

“Nuh-uh!” Momo protested, turning in place to yowl at Balrog’s back. “You can’t tell me not to go someplace in our house! And you can’t tell me not to be a Pawtector, either. You could train me! I could help!”

“Absolutely not,” Balrog scoffed. “Why would I ever do that?”

“Because we’re sisters!”

Balrog stopped just outside the Hide’s automatic cat door. Sisters. That’s what Alexander wanted, wasn’t it? That’s what Momo wanted, too, apparently. But what happened to Balrog’s ‘sister’ if a plantimal like Foxglove found out about her? Or a criminal like those two guinea pigs?

An image suddenly flashed through Balrog’s mind: the pallet, falling from the top of the stack. Except in this image, Momo was there. If the inexperienced kitten had been there, she may not have recognized she needed to stop in time. She could have run underneath those heavy, falling crates and—

No. Balrog wouldn’t let that happen.

“We’re not sisters,” she said, carefully not looking back to see Momo’s reaction.

“We’re just housemates. Now, get inside. Go sit on one of the training mats, and stay there until I can escort you back up to the apartment.” Then, Balrog stepped forward. The door to the Hide opened, and she started her walk of shame up the vehicle ramp. The soft pad of kitten paws behind her was the only sign that Momo had followed.

Safely back inside the Hide, Momo went to sit on one of the training mats, her tail nearly dragging on the floor. Balrog nodded sternly, then turned to the Catputer, standing on her cushion and batting at the touchscreen. “Octo,” she growled as the screen lit up, “I’ll ask you again. What in the world were you thinking?”

The video feed of Octo’s tank filled the screen. Octo was at an angle, facing something a little ways to the left of Balrog. She could see he was blue behind his funnels and around the edges of his tentacles. Good. Ashamed was exactly how she wanted him to feel.

“Welcome back, Balrog,” Octo said instead of answering her question. “I’m glad you made it back safely. What happened out there?”

“No,” Balrog snapped. “We’re not talking about that. We’re talking about what made you think it was okay to send Momo into the field, with no training, no backup, nothing but a radio and collar that doesn’t even fit her!”

Over on the training mat, Momo shifted her weight between her paws uncomfortably. She carefully lowered her head, pawing off the loose collar and letting it rest on the mat next to her.

“That was completely unacceptable,” Balrog continued. “You told me yourself that the cameras to that facility were cut. You had no idea why I sent that distress signal or what I was up against. Momo could have been seriously hurt. She could have been *killed*. You will never, ever send her out like that again, or I don’t care what tank you’re hiding in, I will come for you and make you into karaage. Understand?”

Octo pushed against his desk with his tentacles, turning to face the screen properly and hold Balrog’s gaze. After a long moment, he relented with a sigh. “Understood. Now, tell me what happened.”

Balrog relaxed a bit, letting herself sit down on her cushion as she began to explain the chain of events that led to her having to get home on foot. One of

Octo's tentacles curled closer to his face as she finished her account, pupils narrowing.

"A brown guinea pig and a white guinea pig, named Sniffle and Sneeze," he echoed. He thought for a moment, then uncurled his tentacle to reach for another screen out of sight. "I believe I know who we're dealing with. These two have been on the Pawtectors radar for some time."

His image shrank and slid to the side. A moment later, a blurry picture of two guinea pigs appeared next to him. Sneeze was crouched next to a locked briefcase with a set of lock-picking tools spread on the ground next to him, while Sniffle had his back to Sneeze, probably keeping watch.

"Sneeze and Sniffle are career thieves based somewhere in the United States," Octo explained. "They're drawn to targets that are high-profile, high-security, and unique targets, drawn more to the challenge of their heists than the monetary gain. If they follow their usual patterns, they'll likely disassemble the Catcycle and ship it to the States to sell in pieces on the black market."

The very concept of the Catcycle being taken apart made Balrog feel like she could faint. She shook her head, taking a deep breath to steady herself. "Okay, yeah, that makes sense. But I don't think they were breaking into the storage facility just to prove they could, this time. When the guinea pigs were escaping, Sniffle said he'd tell his *client* I was cooperative. I know he was just mocking me, but that would still be weird to say unless he was working for someone, right? What if this wasn't just a challenge, but a job?"

Octo dismissed the image of the guinea pigs, his video filling the screen once more as he considered Balrog's statement. "They don't take jobs often, but according to our intel, it's not entirely outside their scope," he said. "It's certainly possible they already have a buyer. I'll reach out to the Pawtectors USA branch and see what they can find. In the meantime, let's go ahead and put in an order for a replacement vehicle."

Replacement vehicle. Balrog's heart sank, and she sank with it, laying down in front of the Catputer. "So you really don't think we'll get the Catcycle back?"

"If there is a chance," Octo sighed, "It's slim. I'm sorry, Balrog. I'll see what I can do. For now, keep your claws sharp."

Half-hearted and glum, Balrog replied, "I'll keep my wit sharper." With that, Octo ended the call, and the Hide fell silent.

Balrog lowered her head onto her legs. The Catcycle was just a bike, yes, but she felt almost like she'd lost a friend. It had been her first and only vehicle with

the Pawtectors, built especially for her, and she'd driven it everywhere. It carried her swiftly to every mission, and it always brought her home safe, whether she was retreating in fear or returning victorious. How was she supposed to just replace it?

After several minutes had ticked by with Balrog still laying in gloom, Momo spoke up from where she'd stayed obediently on the training mat, her paws tucked cozily underneath her. "I'm sorry about your super bike," she said softly. "Are you okay?"

Balrog counted to ten, then lifted her head, pushing herself up with her front paws. "No," she answered. "I'm not okay. But there's nothing more I can do about it now. No point wallowing in self-pity."

She stood the rest of the way, then turned from the Catputer, looking over at Momo. "Let's go back up before Alexander worries," she said. "I'm sure he's missing you." Without waiting for a reply, Balrog wandered toward the entrance of the Hide. Momo, for once, didn't make any comments or ask any questions. She just stood from the training mat and followed, trailing behind the cat who refused to be her sister.

"WHOO HOO!" Sniffle wheeked with glee as he steered the Catcycle into Lyon's underground hideout. The moped screeched to a halt, and he spun the control knob to *Off* as Sneeze lifted his head from where he'd been operating the pedals. Sneeze made a face as the Catcycle's momentum kicked dust and dandelion seeds into the already foul air, but said nothing, hopping off the bike. Sniffle followed, bouncing from Catcycle's seat down to the floor before scampering toward the hulking machine at the center of the lab.

"Tada!" Sniffle declared, bouncing once in place as he came to stop. He went up on his hind legs, holding his head high. "One Catcycle, as promised! Delivered hot and ready, from our door to yours in no time flat!"

For a moment, there was only still silence. Then, Lyon appeared, slowly shambling out from behind his machine. His dandelion-fluff eyes were puffed wide with surprise. "You really did it," he said. "You took it. You took the Catcycle from Balrog."

"That's not all," Sniffle boasted. He dropped back down on all fours, then turned his head to open Sneeze's backpack with his teeth. Two glowing green batteries tumbled out onto the floor, clinking against one another.

Lyon bent his front legs, leaning down to get a better look. Sneeze and Sniffle both flinched, instinctively stepping back from the large plantimal. The green glow of the batteries cast odd shadows on Lyon's face, highlighting the contorted stems that threaded through his illusionary jaw. "My seed batteries?" he said. "And more than one. My, my..."

He straightened up, showing off a mouth full of jagged-leaf teeth gleefully. "My my my my my! I admit, I had my doubts about how skilled a pair of little prey creatures could really be, yes... but I am quite pleased to stand corrected. You pigs are skilled... quite skilled."

Sneeze slid his backpack off, shaking out his fur before he spoke. "Yes," he agreed, "We are. Now, our payment?"

Lyon chuckled, a strange shuffling, rattling sound in his chest, like a stick being beaten against a bush. "Of course, of course..." He stepped away, his tail sweeping across the floor and knocking into Sniffle as he turned. Sniffle squeaked in surprise, but Lyon ignored him, shuffling over to a long plastic storage tub that was serving as his makeshift desk. "Here we are... your payment, as promised."

He grabbed the bag off the desk with his paw, bending it at the toes and wrists like a human hand. The dandelions that made up the paw squelched in protest, but he paid them no mind, turning back around and dropping the bag in front of the guinea pigs.

Sneeze stepped forward, nosing the bag open to examine the contents. A small pile of shiny, rainbow-tinted coins clinked and settled against one another. Sneeze's ears twitched and he rumbled in displeasure. "We agreed on three million domee," he said. "This is a few hundred thousand, at most. Where's the rest?"

"The rest, yes, the rest," Lyon purred. "You'll get the rest... but first, I have another job for you."

"Whoa, hold on there," Sniffle protested, "That wasn't part'a the deal. The deal was we steal the kitty-cycle, and you pay us. End of transaction. We didn't agree to take any other jobs for you."

Lyon rolled his eyes, a few dandelion seeds falling from them and sticking to his cheeks. "That was the deal, yes... the deal before you two proved yourselves useful. Too useful, too skilled to let go of just yet."

Sneeze rumbled again, pulling his hind legs in and raising his head to puff out his chest. "And you've proven yourself untrustworthy. That doesn't exactly motivate us to do anything more for you."

The plantimal just grinned at them, unphased by their defiance. He sat down on his haunches with a grunt, idly bringing one of his hind legs up to scratch at his mane. “Oh, you’ll do what I tell you to,” he said, each pass of his foot ripping petals out and scattering them everywhere. “Yes, you’ll do it... if you care for your humans, that is.”

Both guinea pigs froze. How did Lyon know about their humans?

“Yes, yes!” Lyon laughed, scratching at his mane faster. “You’ll do it... you’ll work for me, because you’re pets. You have humans... a pair of humans that look out for you... and it would be a shame if they couldn’t provide any longer, wouldn’t it? Such a shame if, let’s say... they suddenly developed an allergy of some kind? Maybe to timothy hay? Or, perhaps... guinea pig dandruff?”

He abruptly stopped scratching, his leg falling with a dead weight to the floor. He hunched forward, and his back began to slip open, dandelion stems unraveling and tearing apart. He lifted his tail with a lazy flourish, then used it to reach into his empty body cavity. When he pulled it back out, it was wrapped around a clear tube of thick, mustard-yellow liquid.

“So,” he growled, lifting his head to meet Sneeze and Sniffle’s horrified gazes, “Here are our new terms. You two are going to work for me... do as I say, steal what I say... and I’ll even pay you for your trouble. Or... turn me away, and I’ll make sure these anti-anti-histamines find their way to your humans. What were their names again? Popcorn? Yes, Popcorn, and... the other, they go by Sweetpea. But they have other aliases, don’t they? Was it... Moe? Moe and-“

“Alright!” Sniffle snapped. His chest was heaving, heart racing so fast he could feel the thrum of it in his paws. “Alright. We get it. Just... put that stuff away, and tell us what the next job is.”

Lyon’s grin widened. He lowered the anti-anti-histamines back into his torso, his body sluggishly knitting itself together as he purred, “Wonderful... I’m so glad you’ve come around.”

Are Sneeze and Sniffle stuck working for Lyon? Will the Catcycle ever be returned? And will Balrog conquer her fear of letting Momo into her heart as a sister?

Find out soon in The Adventures of Balrog 3: Dynamic Duos!

TO BE CONTINUED...

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