

The Adventures of Balrog the Cat!

Volume One: Pollen and Perfumes

Part 1: The Cat Signal Calls

Balrog yawned, stretching her paws out in front of her before settling down into her soft, warm bed. The London office of her favorite human, Alexander, was positively serene. Sunlight warmed the black desk her bed rested on, glinting off the fruit logo on Alexander's propped-up laptop. Multiple vining plants soaked up the light eagerly, climbing the wall behind the desk and spilling over the top of the bookshelf behind Alexander's chair. The brown fluff of Balrog's bed tickled her face as Alexander typed away on his keyboard, working on whatever it was he worked on during the day. Balrog wasn't quite sure what he was doing, but she liked to listen to him, quietly proud of him for putting in so much effort to provide her daily comforts.

Turning her head a bit, Balrog idly looked across the desk. Across from her, a camera was mounted, streaming her afternoon nap to hundreds of humans across the globe. When Alexander first set up the camera, it took her a little while to figure out what it was for. At first she thought he'd started talking to himself, but much to her surprise, she discovered there were actually other humans listening somewhere. They were also working on mysterious things—things, she assumed, that were also to keep her warm and fed and catered to, considering how much interest these humans had in watching her nap. It was strange, but humans rarely ever made sense.

Balrog closed her eyes again, letting herself relax back down into her bed with a content sigh. Yes, it was a peaceful day, perfect for catching up on some much-deserved rest...

Beep beep! Beep beep! Beep beep!

A series of short, sharp chirps abruptly cut through the quiet office. Balrog's ear twitched. Ugh, the Cat Signal? Really? Now?

Mourning her comfy desk nap, Balrog pushed her torso up with her front paws in a slow stretch, then stood the rest of the way. Her movement caught

Alexander's eye, and as she stepped over the edge of her fluffy brown cat bed, he reached over to scratch her neck, right where her ears met her head. *Oh, that felt great. Maybe the emergency could wait just a few more minutes...?*

But alas, the Cat Signal chirped again. The scratches were immaculate, but duty called.

Balrog reluctantly turned from Alexander, taking a few steps to the edge of the desk and hopping down. She wandered out into the hallway and, after a quick check to make sure neither of her humans were watching, pressed down on the hidden switch near the baseboards. The floor beneath her opened, dropping her feet-first into her base of operations: the Hide.

The floor- now ceiling -snapped shut above Balrog as she fell into the entry hall, landing gracefully on her feet. A stone walkway stretched toward the main room in front of her, lined on either side with illuminated glass cases. Each case held a trophy from a past battle. Balrog squared her shoulders as she padded down the hall, her gaze lingering on some of her proudest accomplishments: a large, mutant daffodil bulb; the paw of a mechanical lion suit, covered in dandelion fuzz; and a silver dollar that was 'heads' on both sides, one side scratched and disfigured. Well, that last one wasn't actually Balrog's trophy, but finders keepers!

She paused as she reached the last trophy case in line, a recent favorite of hers. Inside the case was a disabled listening device tangled in coconut fibers. Foxglove, that sneaky leafy fox, thought she was clever when she tried to hide it in one of Alexander's plants to learn Balrog's weaknesses. Well, Balrog sure showed her. After rendering the device useless, Balrog used it to track Foxglove down and thwart her latest attempt to take over London before it could truly take root. Foxglove managed to get away, but Balrog knew it was only a matter of time before she came out of hiding.

The Cat Signal chirped again, and Balrog turned away from the glass case, striding into the Hide's vast main room.

The Hide was an impressive feat of architecture, a feline command center nestled discreetly in the dead space between apartments. The main floor was carpeted, giving Balrog a nice, soft pad for her feet as she moved. On the lefthand side of the room, the carpet gave way to harder wood floor- essential for the laid-out training mats and the tactical scratching posts mounted there. To the right of the main space, a rounded stone platform was slightly raised, forming a vehicle bay. There was only one vehicle there at the time, spotlit with pride- the Catcycle. The Catcycle was a miniature, highly modified, three-wheeled moped. It had gas and brake pedals on the floor to make up for Balrog's tragic lack of thumbs, and a

small cavity beneath the seat to create extra storage space. It was also able to go far, far faster than necessarily legal for a vehicle so small— one of Balrog’s favorite features.

Continuing forward through the Hide, Balrog approached the back center of the room, where the crown jewel of the Hide was perched on top of a curved wooden desk. As she settled on a black, plush cushion nestled in front of the desk, the mighty Catputer came to life, lighting up in greeting.

Impressiveness of the Hide aside, the Catputer was a marvel of modern technology itself. It had more computing power than most top-of-the-line human computers, and was designed entirely for a cat’s use. It had built in meow-to-speech and ear-flick-tracking software for the mouse pointer. It was also fully touch screen, the large screen itself able to withstand Balrog’s claws without a single scratch. It took up a third of the back wall, and it was Balrog’s greatest tool in monitoring London’s safety and communicating with her dispatcher.

In the center of the screen, the red silhouette of a cat’s head pulsed in time with the Cat Signal’s chirping, outlined in orange as if the symbol itself were smoldering. “Right then, Octo,” Balrog said, pressing her paw to the screen, “What’ve you got for me?”

The Cat Signal silenced, the pulsing icon melting away. In its place, the screen filled with the face of Balrog’s reliable dispatcher, Octo. He was floating in his aquarium tank, more waterproof screens blinking with lights and information behind him. One front tentacle was curled close to his body, while the other stretched off-screen, the edges of his suckers flexing as he moved something Balrog couldn’t see. The normally purple octopus was turning blue around the funnels on either side of his head, eyes squinted slightly at the screen.

“A good afternoon would be polite,” Octo griped. Despite the complaint, he continued, “A few minutes ago, a silent alarm was tripped in Belgravia. The location is a perfumery called *Fiore Eterno*, an Italian-owned store located in the heart of the district’s busy luxury shopping area. The wealthy neighborhoods and high-end hotels nearby attract a lot of international business, and *Fiore Eterno* in particular is known for their exceptional service and wide variety of scents from around the globe.”

“I’ll be sure to recommend them to my humans,” Balrog replied dryly. “But you wouldn’t use the Cat Signal for a run-of-the-mill robbery. What tripped the alarm?”

“Moments before *Fiore Eterno*’s alarm was triggered, their cameras were suddenly disabled, along with and all other security cameras on the street. However, a traffic camera on the adjoining side-street caught a brief visual that

put the Pawtectors network on alert.”

Octo’s image shrank and slid to the left, making room for a video to appear on Balrog’s screen. The video was short and grainy, a zoomed-in, looping nine-second clip of the sidewalk near a Belgravia intersection. A four-or-five story building stood at the corner, painted white and decorated with fancy plaster molding to imitate the classic look of carved marble accents. Humans in expensive clothing walked in every which way, carrying shopping bags sporting the names of various luxury stores. The video had to cycle a few times for Balrog to catch what was off.

There, right at the corner, a pixelated length of red and green slid out from between two shopping bags, dropping to the ground before slinking around the edge of the building and out of sight like a snake. On the next loop, Balrog tapped the screen with her paw, pausing the video and leaning in closer.

Her ears pinned back as she recognized the blurry form. “Snapdragon,” she growled.

“That’s what we suspect,” Octo confirmed, his curled tentacle flexing closer to his body. “But if it’s him, this is a deviation from his usual patterns.”

Balrog swiped the video down, dismissing it and allowing Octo’s face to fill the Catputer screen again. “A deviation, or an escalation?” she mused. “Stealth may not be his usual style, but even old dogs can learn new tricks.”

“Whichever it is, the Pawtectors need more information.” Octo retracted his extended tentacle, the funnels on either side of his head flaring briefly as he focused fully on Balrog. “I’m sending you to Fiore Eterno, but I want you to hold off on engaging for as long as you can. Try to figure out what Snapdragon is up to, what motivated him to change tactics. I want to know if he’s becoming a bigger threat to London than he already is, and if this change in behavior warrants putting together a bounty team.”

As Octo spoke, Balrog licked her paw a few times, then used it to rub her head, ridding her fur of any potentially distracting debris. “Or,” she proposed, pausing to shake her head and loosen the dampened fur, “We could put a bounty team together either way and nip this problem in the bud.”

Octo’s eyes narrowed into stern black stripes, the blue around his funnels flushing into his face. “I mean it, Balrog,” he warned. “Your primary mission is to gather information. Don’t engage until you have to. If you can avoid it, don’t engage at all. Right now, it’s more important for us to know what Snapdragon is planning than it is to contain him.”

“Okay, I hear you,” Balrog sighed. “Information is my top priority. But if I can

gather the information *and* bring him into containment, I'm going to.”

Octo's tentacles relaxed slightly, some of the blue receding. “That works for me. Keep your claws sharp, Balrog.”

“I'll keep my wit sharper,” Balrog replied.

With that, the screen went blank. Balrog pushed herself to her feet and turned in one fluid motion, darting across the room to the vehicle bay. As she settled in the seat of the Catcycle, she pressed one of her back paws on the break pedal and pawed at a dial between the steering handles. The dial turned from *Off* to *Park*, from *Park* to *Neutral*, then from *Neutral* to *Zoomies*. The bike began to purr, and Balrog purred back in response, draping her front paws on the steering handles and pressing her other back paw briefly on the gas. The Catcycle's engine revved.

Out on the street, an unassuming cat door at the back of the apartment building suddenly swung open on its own, the cat flap suspended in the air. A moment later, Balrog emerged on the Catcycle, tires squealing as she swerved down the back alley and out onto the streets of London.

Part 2: Fiore Eterno

The streets of London were a blur of red, brown, and white-painted brick as the Catcycle flew past shops and through neighborhoods. It was pleasantly sunny for a ride, though heavy grey clouds in the distance promised that would change. If the circumstances were different, Balrog might have taken a detour through Westminster to sunbathe near the Victoria Memorial. Sadly, the latest crisis didn't allow any time for lounging on sun-warmed marble steps.

As Balrog moved deeper into the city, the buildings got taller and shinier, more modern and industrial. Then, a flash of greenery, and they suddenly dropped away entirely as Balrog sped onto a bridge. The Thames stretched out on each side, the rippling, green-tinted reflection of the sky broken by clusters of small ships. On the other side of the bridge was a whole different world, the wealthy borough of Belgravia.

White-stucco facades supported wrought-iron balconies on buildings styled like classic royal homes. Colorful-yet-minimalist storefronts lined the roadway, boasting all manner of luxury products. Mannequins posed stylishly in the windows of every other building, dressed to the nines in outfits that probably cost more than one of Balrog's lives. Passing close to the heart of the district's shopping centers, Balrog turned down a side street, eyes alert for the deep red storefront of Fiore Eterno.

When the storefront came into view, Balrog slowed the Catcycle to a prowl, pulling up onto the sidewalk. She parked behind a large stone planter sitting in front of a tableware shop, across the street and a few doors down from the perfumery. Fiore Eterno had a large front window checkered with regular and frosted glass, and a small set of stairs leading up to the front door. The door was simple, but emphasized by a fresh floral display that climbed the side of the building and draped over the door's molding. Large, beautiful blooms of all types, colors, and shapes were woven into an arrangement to create the illusion of a magical tree. The base of the arrangement, however, caused Balrog to hesitate as she hopped off the Catcycle to cross the street.

At the bottom of the floral tree, the metal supports for the display were hidden behind a thick bouquet of stark white and peachy orange-pink foxglove stalks. It was an unusual selection of colors for that breed of flower, and the flowers were slightly bent askew, as if something had trampled through them recently.

“Foxglove,” Balrog growled, thinking aloud. “Since when did you work with Snapdragon?”

Her first instinct was to rush in to apprehend Foxglove straight away, but she restrained herself. Octo had told her to find out what Snapdragon was up to, and as much as Balrog didn’t like it, he was right. They didn’t just need the two Plantimals to be brought into custody. They also needed to know what they were working on, and *why*.

Balrog took a deep breath, then darted across the street, slipping down a back alley to get behind the row of stores. Turning the corner at the back of the alley, Balrog jogged past back doors and loading zones, until she came to a raised door that read, *Drop Off - Fiore Eterno*.

The back of the store was far less impressive than the front, plain brick that was once hastily painted white and never touched up again. The back door was metal, with a sturdy key-operated lock and a keypad to deter break-ins. There were no scratches or scuffs to indicate entry had been forced through the door. Balrog turned her attention instead to the fully frosted two-pane window on the door’s right. She hopped up on the window ledge, and was unsurprised to find the latch was already broken.

So Foxglove snuck in through the floral arrangements, but Snapdragon just forced his way inside. That was likely what tripped the alarm, too. *How typical of him*, Balrog thought to herself, rolling her eyes.

Well, at least that made her job easier. She pressed her front paws on the window and leaned into the pads of her toe beans until the base shifted upward.

Then, she slipped through the gap and dropped inside the store.

Balrog found herself in the back corner of the store, with a locked storage room to her left and the rest of the store ahead of her. The space was partially closed off by a floor-to-ceiling wooden divider, creating a small space likely used for employees taking a quick break. The air was fragrant, but not cloying as Balrog had anticipated, the floral sweetness likely being subdued by an air filtration system somewhere. Seeking cover and a better vantage point, Balrog dashed forward, pressing herself against the divider and peering around it into the central space.

The store itself wasn't very large. A small room was lined with glass shelves on all four walls, which reflected the sunlight that illuminated dust motes drifting through the air. Beneath the shelves, white cabinets created a counter space at about the height of a typical human's waist. In the center of the room was a large, round wooden table, holding an equally round tiered perfume display. Three levels of chrome showed off the store's most elegant and expensive perfume bottles, glittering in the light of a glass chandelier with several hanging decorations styled to look like flowers. Oddly enough, there were a few other perfume bottles lined up haphazardly on the table, at the base of the display.

A flicker of movement on the lefthand side of the store caught Balrog's eye. Snapdragon floated up near one of the glass shelves, his body a serpentine length of deep red blooms layered to look like scales. Narrow green leaves jutted out from his body like dorsal spines in two dotted lines, trailing all the way up to his draconic head. Two green flower buds moved in the hollows of his eyes as he looked over the bottles on display, too fluid and slightly out of sync. That was one of the issues that Plantimals had. Most of their features were just for show; Snapdragon didn't 'see' so much as the plants that made up his body sensed changes in the light around him. Their imperfect simulation of an animal- or in this case, an Eastern-style dragon -often ended up flawed and uncanny.

Balrog hardly noticed the asynchronized eyes, more focused on Snapdragon's *length*. He'd definitely gotten longer since the last time she'd seen him, stretching out nearly eighty centimeters from tip to tail by her guess. It wasn't uncommon for Plantimals to grow larger or wither smaller, but wherever Snapdragon had been hiding, he'd *flourished*. That wasn't good.

"Oh, would you hurry up and just grab one?"

Balrog couldn't see where the voice had come from, but she didn't need to. She would have known it anywhere. *Foxglove*.

“If you’re in such a rush, you *could* help,” Snapdragon complained. Still, he obeyed, selecting a bottle at random and floating forward to wrap his body around it. He rose carefully, lifting the bottle from the shelf and bringing it to the table to set it with the other out-of-place bottles. “I still don’t understand why we can’t just open ‘em where they are. We’re putting ‘em back when we’re done anyway.”

“Because, you fool,” Foxglove replied coolly from her place out of sight, “The Anti-Anti-Histamines in this compound will start to activate as soon as they’re exposed to air. We need to dose and re-seal as many bottles as quickly as we can if we want maximum effectiveness.”

“Sure, right.” Snapdragon uncoiled himself from the bottle safely on the table, then floated back toward the shelves to pick another one. “That makes sense.”

It didn’t sound like he actually understood at all, but in his defense, Balrog didn’t get it either. What in the world was an Anti-Anti-Histamine? Was that not just... the same as a histamine? Like, the compound the body used to fight pollen?

Whatever it was, Balrog needed to get eyes on Foxglove to see exactly what they were doing. She lowered her body close to the ground, cautiously peering further around the divider. Snapdragon was struggling to get a grip on a particularly round perfume bottle, completely focused on the task. Foxglove was still nowhere to be seen, which meant she likely couldn’t see Balrog either. But where was Balrog supposed to find any additional cover? All the shelves were flush against the wall. Her only choice would be to try to get into one of the white cabinets on the floor, and that would be a terrible vantage point.

Unless...

Balrog wove around the divider, making a beeline for the righthand wall. Once she’d reached the base of the nearest cabinet, she braced her weight on her back legs and leapt, landing silently on the counter. Then, she slipped between and behind the bottles of perfume, pressing herself to the wall.

Most of the walls of the room were red, like the storefront. However, the right wall was an accent wall, painted black to give the room more dimension. They didn’t call black cats ‘voids’ for nothing. As Snapdragon carried the round bottle to the table, Balrog pinned back her ears and squinted her eyes, keeping perfectly still.

Snapdragon set the bottle down and carefully released it, uncoiling his body and rising into the air. As he did, he idly looked over the shelves across from him... and his imperfect gaze slid right over Balrog. He turned around like she wasn’t even there, floating back to the shelf he’d been working to clear.

With her camouflage proving itself effective, Balrog slowly crept forward, careful not to bump into the glass bottles next to her. As she did, the other side of the central table slowly came into view. There, reflection warped in the chrome of the perfume display, was Foxglove.

Foxglove paced a short circuit next to the display, the apricot-colored flowers that made up her body shifting with each step in an mimicry of Balrog's own gait. Her faux fluffy tail swayed weightlessly in the air behind her, and her white-petal tipped ears occasionally twitched toward Snapdragon as he worked. Sitting on the table, right in the center of Foxglove's path, was a bottle unlike the others. It was a simple glass tube, as tall as a water bottle but only half as wide around, filled with opaque, dijon-yellow liquid. It had a dull metal cap with a black clamp on top, closing off a thin rubber tube that ran from the top of the bottle nearly down to the tabletop.

That had to be the Anti-Anti-Histamine compound Foxglove was talking about. But what did it *do*?

Balrog needed to get closer. She took a few steps careful steps forward, and Foxglove suddenly froze.

From Balrog's position at the back of the store, the shelves had looked like they were all mounted directly to the wall, but that was apparently not the case. The black wall she was hidden against was interrupted in the center by a tall, counter-to-ceiling mirror. Balrog's warped reflection stretched on infinitely in the surface of the chrome perfume display, visible to Foxglove even with her back turned. Recovering from her shock, the facsimile fox whipped around with a snarl.

“Balrog?!”

Busted.

Snapdragon abandoned the perfume bottle he'd been wrapping around at Foxglove's shout. He knocked it from the shelf in his haste to find the threat, the thick glass bottle briefly refracting light around the room before hitting the floor hard. It cracked on impact, the sound echoing uncomfortably through the store. With the element of surprise forfeit, Balrog used the distraction to slip out from behind the row of perfume bottles. She pulled her back paws to the edge of the counter, lifting her tail in the air as she prepared to jump.

Foxglove darted forward, putting herself between Balrog and the glass tube of Anti-Anti-Histamine. “Don't just float there, stop her!” Foxglove shouted.

Snapdragon jerked into motion like a fishing line suddenly pulled taught. He roared as he darted through the air, heading right for Balrog's perch. Just before

he could intercept her, Balrog jumped, sailing through the air and landing on the table as Snapdragon crashed into the counter where she'd been standing. The floral dragon twisted around, throwing himself across the store in her wake. The table shook as he dropped directly in Balrog's path, sliding briefly on the polished surface before finding his footing.

"Not today, pussycat," he snarled, a threatening wisp of yellow dust curling around his mouth as he gathered his pollen breath. He opened his jaws wide, then fired. Balrog leapt, barely managing to dodge the stream of allergens at such close range. She landed squarely on Snapdragon's head, snapping his mouth shut and using him as a springboard to leap onto the second tier of the perfume display.

"I thought the line was 'what's new'!" she quipped, dashing around the curved fixture and using her body to knock bottles from their shelf. The heavy glass bottles fell on Snapdragon's body, crushing stems, stamen, and styles. Snapdragon tried to roar again, but it was cut off with a pollinated wheeze as a particularly large bottle fell on his snout and squished it shut.

"You fool!" Foxglove screeched in fury. She turned to the tube of Anti-Anti-Histamines and tucked it underneath her. As she did, the base of her torso opened, petals unfolding and roots untangling until she had just enough room to store the bottle in her empty body cavity.

"Oh, no you don't!" Balrog jumped down from the display and on top of Foxglove, sinking her claws into the plants that made up the fox's back. She pressed her whole weight on her front paws as she landed, the glass tube clinking against the table as Foxglove was effectively pinned.

Balrog's tail swished back and forth as she caught her breath, glaring down at her prey. "That's a neat new trick," she panted, "But you should have used it earlier. Before I hand you over for containment, I have some questions about these Anti-Anti-Histamines. What are they, and what were you planning to do with them?"

Foxglove chuckled dryly, the glass tube semi-inside her clicking against the table with the movement. "And what makes you think I would tell you that?"

In response, Balrog just tilted her head, then lowered it, biting into the flowers of Foxglove's ear and pulling. Plant fibers immediately started to tear, sharp kitten teeth slicing through them like scissors through rubber bands.

"Aaaagh! Alright, alright!" Foxglove snarled. "Anti-Anti-Histamines are exactly what they sound like, you simpleton. They neutralize anti-histamines, the substance humans take for pollen allergies. The compound I've created, derived from Snapdragon's pollen breath, will not only worsen existing allergies in

humans, but give them new allergies they didn't have before! Pollen, dust, dandruff- the world will become a minefield of sniffles and sneezes! Allergies will no longer be seasonal, and with the humans of London weakened, I will finally be able to take over and rule!"

Balrog growled, leaning closer to press her weight harder into Foxglove's back. "You monster... so how does perfume factor into this scheme? Why target Fiore Eterno?"

Foxglove grinned, all too eager to explain now that she'd gotten started. "The compound works best when it's aerosolized. Humans are constantly spraying themselves with pungent perfumes and odorous oils that stick to their clothes and skin. Fiore Eterno is one of the most popular luxury perfumeries in London, and sees hundreds of wealthy international customers a year. This store will not only help the Anti-Anti-Histamine compound spread over London, but also over the greater UK, and eventually the world!"

"So, you have greater aspirations than just London now?" Balrog's left ear flicked twice in exasperated frustration. "Even the UK isn't enough for you? Now you need the whole globe? This is madness, Foxglove. Surely even you can see that!"

"Maybe it is," Foxglove conceded. "Maybe I'm mad. But it will take more than a pretty pet kitty to stop me!"

Balrog suddenly found herself airborne, Snapdragon barreling into her side and knocking her off of Foxglove. Her claws, still buried in Foxglove's back, ripped away flowers as she fell from the table. Foxglove yowled, and the tube of Anti-Anti-Histamines fell from the hole in her side before she could pull the marred stems back together. It joined Balrog on the floor with a clatter, the glass bottle thankfully intact. Balrog pulled herself up and rushed forward, standing over the compound defensively.

Snapdragon, still flat in some places, raised himself into the air. His body swayed clumsily behind him like an old kinked hose, yellow powder leaking from between his teeth as he prepared a gust of pollen breath. Before he could fire, though, Foxglove's paw snapped out and smacked the side of his face, leaving a fresh dent in the still-repairing flowers.

"Just leave it, you clumsy oaf!" she hissed. "Our plan's been ruined anyway. There's no way the humans that run this store won't notice the mess and investigate. I can make more of the compound later. You, just get us out of here!"

Snapdragon growled, glaring at Foxglove for a moment, but obediently moved. He wrapped himself around Foxglove's torn body, floating them both off the table.

Balrog tensed, ready to give chase, but... chasing after them would mean leaving the compound alone. Foxglove could try to retrieve it, or worse, an unsuspecting human could expose themselves to it.

Forced to stay where she was, Balrog called after them as they darted across the store. "Count yourself lucky today, weeds! I'll have you next time!"

With that, Balrog watched helplessly as Snapdragon forced the front door open, disappearing with Foxglove into the growing-cloudy sky.

Part 3: A Gloomy Return

The drive back to the Hide felt appropriately gloomy. Heavy grey clouds had finished gathering over London, the air becoming humid with the looming threat of rain. Balrog guided the Catcycle through the streets at a pace that felt practically sedated, the confiscated tube of Anti-Anti-Histamines rattling between her legs on the vehicle's floor. As she navigated home, she couldn't help but brood.

She'd almost had her. She'd almost had Foxglove, that horrible plant! If only Balrog had taken the time to make sure Snapdragon was restrained, or if she'd held on to Foxglove a little bit harder, or hadn't stepped in front of that mirror...! If only she'd paid closer attention!

Well, Balrog's hindsight wouldn't change the outcome. What was it that Alexander was always telling his chat? Something about looking toward the future you want to build? Right. Dwelling on what-ifs and kicking herself wasn't productive. She needed to recenter, and focus on what came next to build the future she wanted. A future where the world was no longer threatened by Plantimals.

As Balrog reached the apartment building, the cat-flap to the Hide swung open. She drove the Catcycle in and up the ramp, slowing to a standstill and parking in the vehicle bay. She hopped off the moped, then carefully pawed the Anti-Anti-Histamine down onto the carpet, resting it on its side so she could roll the tube across the room. She pushed the yellow compound toward the Catputer, using her nose and front paws to leverage it up into her cushioned seat. Then, she stepped forward and sat down next to it, tapping the Catputer's screen with a sigh.

The screen lit up with Octo's purple face, the octopus turning away from something in his aquatic office Balrog couldn't see to focus on her. "Balrog, welcome back," he said. "What do you have to report?"

"A lot," Balrog sighed.

“You make me nervous when you say that. Go ahead, then. What happened?”

Balrog’s tail swayed back and forth behind her as she began her report. “Well, to start, Snapdragon was at Fiore Eterno, but he wasn’t alone. Apparently, he’s started working for Foxglove.”

Octo’s face flushed blue around his eyes and funnels in alarm. “Foxglove?!”

“Affirmative,” Balrog nodded. “And whatever Foxglove has been feeding him, it’s been nutritious. He’d grown since the last time I saw him, a good twenty centimeters at least. Foxglove has somehow convinced him not just to be her muscle, but also the main ingredient in her latest chemical concoction.”

She stood up, then, and braced her paws on the base of the Anti-Anti-Histamine tube, using the uneven surface of her cushion to tip the glass bottle upright and into view. Octo leaned closed to his screen, eyes narrowing. “What is that?”

“Foxglove calls it Anti-Anti-Histamines,” Balrog explained, taking a short series of steps with her back paws to sit down on her cushion. “According to what I was able to get from her, they not only worsen a human’s existing allergies, but also give them new allergies they didn’t have before. It also neutralizes anti-histamines, so the allergies become much harder to treat. I was able to confiscate this tube, but I overheard Foxglove say she could make more when she and Snapdragon were escaping.”

Octo gave Balrog a short nod, the back of his head floating briefly in the water. “They got away, then,” he noted.

Balrog lowered her head, looking away from the screen and letting her tail fall to the side. That was all the answer that Octo needed. He leaned back from his camera, settling more comfortably on the surface of his desk. “Don’t beat yourself up over it, Balrog. No Pawtector has been able to apprehend Foxglove yet, and it sounds like she’s made Snapdragon even more formidable than he was before. You confiscated the compound, and we know they’re up to. That’s progress.”

He had a point, but still...

Balrog shook her head, pulling her gaze back up to the screen. “There’s more,” she stressed. “When I was interrogating Foxglove, she wasn’t just interested in taking over London. She told me that she wants the entire UK, and eventually the world. She’s escalating, possibly planning to go international.”

Octo pulled his front tentacles tight against his body, coiling them beneath his face to push himself up straighter. “I’ll make sure our Pawtectors across the globe

are alerted,” he confirmed grimly. “I’ll also send someone from the labs by to collect that compound right away. We’ll get an analysis going, and see if there’s anything we can do to counter it.” His tentacles then relaxed slightly, some of the purple returning to the skin around his eyes. “Good work today, Balrog. Go get some rest. Keep your claws sharp, and your wit sharper.”

With that, Octo’s face disappeared, and the Catputer’s screen went dark.

Balrog sighed, lowering her head and kneading the cushion in front of her, taking just a moment to soothe herself. Between hopping around Snapdragon, wrestling Foxglove, and the lingering sting of a half-victory, she was exhausted. Luckily, despite everything, the situation was handled fairly quickly. Alexander would probably still be streaming in his office, which meant Balrog’s favorite office perch was still available. She stopped kneading the cushion and stood, turning away from the Catputer and walking back to the entry hall of the Hide.

When Balrog stepped into Alexander’s office, he was turned toward his camera instead of his computer, probably taking a break from work. Balrog meowed once in greeting, wandering over and hopping up on Alexander’s desk.

“Well, hello, Balrog,” Alexander greeted her in return, smiling warmly and reaching around his laptop to scratch her back. *Oh, that felt nice, just what she needed after a long day.* As she leaned into the scritches, Alexander continued, “We were just talking about you. Did you hear your name and decide to come say hello?”

Balrog hadn’t heard him, but she wasn’t surprised. Of course, Alexander’s chat would be talking about her. The poor viewers probably missed their queen of the stream, didn’t they?

Alexander turned to look at his chat, reading aloud as messages scrolled through. “It must be so nice to be a cat.’ You are so right, Kitdofu. I see UK_Andrew agreeing with you, too. You know, I think almost every stream we all agree that if we could live our lives however we want? We’d live like Balrog. Everyone wants to be Balrog, to be able to play and nap all day. No worries, no responsibilities... yes, that would be the life, wouldn’t it? The stress-free life of a cat.”

Balrog huffed and stretched her back paws out behind her. Sure, just play and nap *all* day. If only her human knew everything she did to protect him and his viewers from evil. Oh, well. Balrog didn’t mind the lack of acknowledgment, so long as she got her treats on time. Finished stretching, Balrog turned away from Alexander and his laptop to step into her bed. She pawed at the cushion for a few

moments, finding the perfect spot to lay down. As she finally settled, Alexander said something really strange.

“We’re hoping to have a new playmate for her, pretty soon,” he told his chat. Then, looking back over at Balrog, he asked, “Isn’t that exciting, Balrog? Yeah? Are you excited to meet Momo?”

Huh? Who the heck was Momo?

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