

Pawtector Adventures: Lucky the Cat!

Volume 3: Partners in Crime?

Part 1: Siblings

Lucky's paws scraped against the pavement as she rushed through the streets of London, chest heaving as she pushed herself to move faster. She liked to think she kept in shape, but lately, she'd come to wish she'd been more diligent in training her endurance. Those stupid, annoying, crafty American guinea pigs!

"Take the next left, straight ahead!"

Speaking of annoying...

"I mean, left ahead!" Momo's voice crackled through the small radio dangling from Lucky's tactical collar.

Lucky turned sharply, extending her claws to dig into the pavement as she forced her momentum to abruptly shift to the left. "Need those directions— a little faster— kitten!" she snapped through panting breaths. She'd never make it at this rate!

It had been two weeks since the Catcycle was stolen, and in those two weeks, Sneeze and Sniffle had been busy. They'd started to hit Pawtector facilities all over London and nearby towns, taking advantage of Lucky's newly reduced mobility to brazenly swipe confiscated tech. They didn't even bother being stealthy about it anymore, as if they were rubbing it in Lucky's face that she couldn't respond in time.

"Take a right," another direction came. "Now straight ahead. The entrance is under a big flower pot in front of a hotel."

To make matters worse, Lucky had failed to keep Momo out of the Hide. She'd reluctantly allowed Octo to put the kitten on navigation duty, but it was only a matter of time before Momo tried to follow Lucky out onto the field, and what would Lucky do then?

Lucky skidded to a stop in front of a hotel, bracketed by two stone flower pots. "To the left or right of the door?" she asked urgently.

“To the right. How do you think they keep finding these places, anyway?”

“Not now, Momo.” Lucky pressed her paw to the base of the flower pot to the left of the door. The large stone planter scraped against the ground as it slid forward, revealing a spiral staircase instead of the usual elevator. Lucky bit back the urge to hiss. More running?! “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Hurry!” Momo encouraged through the radio. “Sneeze and Sniffle are still inside! You can make it this time!”

This time. Ignoring the sting of Momo’s accidental slight, Lucky took one heartbeat to catch her breath, then dove into the stairwell, rushing down the dimly lit stairs two at a time. The entrance slid shut behind her with the echoing grind of stone on stone.

At the bottom of the stairs, Lucky came to a stop in a warehouse nearly identical to the others she’d been rushing between since first encountering the guinea pigs. This one, however, was obviously a bit older. Aside from the lack of elevator, it was packed to the brim with pallets of gear and contraband, and the air was musty with the telltale staleness of an undisturbed tomb.

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

Sniffle squealed. “Scatter!”

The guinea pigs dropped the crate, both trying to run in opposite directions. However, as Sniffle turned to flee, the crate fell on his back paw, briefly trapping his claws under the rough wood. He squeaked and squalled as he scrambled to pull himself out, and while he was only trapped for a moment, a moment was all Lucky needed.

She leapt for the smaller guinea pig, pouncing so her front paws landed on either side of him. Sniffle shrieked in fear. “SNEEZE, HELP!”

Sneeze blamed instinct for what he did next.

Logically, he knew Lucky wouldn’t hurt Sniffle. She wasn’t a stray, starving alley cat. She was a Pawtector, with a code of conduct that kept her from directly taking the life of another animal, even a criminal one. At worst, she’d get a little rough with Sniffle, but he’d be okay. He’d spend the night in a holding facility, and Sneeze would use Lyon’s intel to break him out in the morning. 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 jump off the stack of pallets he'd been climbing and turn, running toward Lucky and Sniffle. And when Sneeze reached them, it was his heart that drove him to sink his teeth into one of Lucky's front legs as hard as he could.

Lucky jumped up on her back paws with a sharp hiss, shaking the guinea pig off. Sneeze leg go of her and fell to his back on the floor, flailing for a moment as he rolled over on his stomach. "Sniffle, run!" he shouted.

Immediately, Lucky's paws came back down. One landed firmly on Sneeze's back, pinning him to the ground as claws tangled in his fur. The other landed next to Sneeze's head, close enough that he could see his reflection in the blood dripping down Lucky's leg.

"Stay down." Lucky panted, leaning down close to the guinea pig. "Or this is going to get ugly."

Sneeze nodded frantically, his irrational little heart racing in his chest. Craning his neck to look around Lucky's paw, he just barely caught sight of Sniffle's hind legs as he disappeared between rows of pallets, heading for the stairwell.

He was safe. Good.

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

Focusing back on the paw the side of his head, Sneeze shuddered. Logically, he knew Lucky wouldn't eat him, but guinea pigs are prey animals. Right then, Sneeze's instincts wouldn't let him forget it.

Once Lucky had confirmed an extraction team was on their way with a pet carrier, she let Sneeze sit up, keeping a paw on him to make sure he didn't try to escape. His fur was surprisingly silky under her paw pads, pleasantly soft between her toes. Lucky idly wondered how often Sneeze brushed as they waited, or how a guinea pig would even brush himself.

Momo, meanwhile, chattered excitedly over the radio, having watched the entire confrontation over the warehouse cameras. "He jumped so far, like *woosh!* And then you slammed the mouse down like *bam!*"

"He's a guinea pig, not a mouse," Lucky corrected for the fourth time. "Listen, Momo— why don't you go check on Alexander? It'll be a little while before the

extraction team can reach us, and I think it's almost time for treats."

"Treats?" Momo echoed. Lucky could practically see the kitten's ears swiveling forward in her mind's eye. "Great idea, Lucky! Since you're going to miss out, I'll eat extra for you! See you at home!"

The radio crackled, then clicked as Momo disconnected. Lucky sighed into the welcome quiet that followed, making a mental note that Momo was never allowed to help with post-mission reports. Not unless Pawtectors HQ was suddenly okay with them containing a lot of onomatopoeias.

Lost in thought, she almost missed the way Sneeze flexed his own ears in relief. "She sounds young," he commented. "Is she your trainee?"

"No," Lucky replied, maybe a bit too quickly. "She's not my trainee. She's not even a real Pawtector; she's just my human's new kitten. She found out about my work after *you* trapped me in that first warehouse, so I'm just letting her help navigate for now. She's too sweet for this kind of thing, you know? A naive, fluffy kitten out in the field... ha! She'd be eaten alive."

Sneeze nodded, looking ahead again and watching the dust motes drift through the warehouse. "She reminds me of Sniffle, when he was younger. She reminds me of Sniffle as he is now."

"How so?"

"Chatterbox."

Lucky snorted, flicking each of her ears. "Yeah, I noticed that. He always has something clever to say, doesn't he?"

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

The conversation trailed off, but didn't feel quite as tense anymore. It was almost peaceful, even. The quiet of the warehouse was softened by the faint hum of old electricity, and the old wood of the towers of pallets perfumed the air.

After a long moment, Lucky spoke again. "You said Momo reminds you of Sniffle when he was younger," she pointed out. "Don't you mean when you were both younger? I mean, aren't you and Sniffle the same age?"

This time, Sneeze shook his head. "No, I'm a few months older. We don't come from the same litter, or even the same parents. We were born in a pet store breeding program and ended up housed together, then purchased as a pair."

Lucky's tail raised in surprise, swaying back and forth behind her. "Purchased?"

So you have humans?”

Sneeze squeaked out another chuckle, tucking his legs so he settled flatter on the floor. “Of course we do,” he said. “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. She leaned back on her haunches, rubbing her paw over her nose, then set her foot back down. “Are your humans not taking good care of you, then? Is that why you steal?”

“On, not at all,” Sneeze replied. “They take excellent care of us, but we haven’t always had them. I started stealing back when I lived in a pet store. I only ever got cheap pellets and hay, so I’d break out of my cage at night to steal better food, vitamins, that sort of thing. When Sniffle was moved into my enclosure at the store, he found out pretty quick and wanted to tag along. We got pretty good at it, so when we were adopted, we figured, why stop?”

“Maybe because it’s illegal?” Lucky said with a wry shake of her head. “So you two really do only steal for glory. If you don’t need food, what do you do with all the domee? My intel suggests you make quite a bit off stolen goods.”

Sneeze wiggled his ears back and forth, pleased. “Oh, we do. We’re quite spoiled for treats and new equipment. As for the leftovers... well, we normally just give it away. We’ll send it to other guinea pigs so they can purchase better food and veggies, or give it to rodents planning to run from neglectful owners and pet stores.”

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

Sneeze sighed. “Yeah, we did.”

They lapsed back into silence, Lucky contemplating everything she’d learned. Sneeze was surprisingly open, confirming her suspicions that he wasn’t the least bit ashamed of being a criminal. At the same time, though, his crimes weren’t entirely unforgivable. He and Sniffle were sort of antiheroes to the animals they helped, after all.

“Why’d you ask?” Sneeze suddenly broke through Lucky’s train of thought.

“About what you do with the domee?”

“No, before that. You asked if I was the same age as Sniffle,” Sneeze reminded her. “I’m not, but most folks can’t tell. Why’d 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 very aware of how the dust in the air scratched at her lungs, coughing once. “Well, I was just thinking about... about Momo and I, I guess. Momo is younger than me, and we’re from different litters by different parents. My humans want me to think of Momo as a younger sister, but I don’t know. Momo’s a sweet kitten, but she’s so *young*, and I’m a Pawtector. Whether I let her follow me into the field or not, claiming her as my sister would put her in danger.”

Sneeze thought for a moment, then looked up at Lucky. “I can understand that. I felt similarly when Sniffle first wanted to join my heists.”

Lucky’s tail twitched in surprise. “You did?”

Sneeze nodded, his nose quivering as he sniffed. “I did. It was one thing when I was stealing on my own, only responsible for myself. When I let him come with me, I felt responsible for keeping us both safe, and I wasn’t ready for it. I honestly resented Sniffle a bit, at first. It didn’t help that he’s so different from me. He’s loud, demanding, and as a baby he was a ball of energy.”

“Yeah,” Lucky agreed, “Just like Momo. I just... I don’t know. I don’t think I resent her, exactly. I try not to, at least. I’m just so used to guarding this secret with my life. Now that she knows, it feels like... like...”

“...like an intrusion?” Sneeze guessed, completing the thought for her. At Lucky’s nod, he continued. “I understand how you feel. It’s like a space that was yours, entirely under your control, has suddenly been violated. The bubble has been popped. Now, something that used to be freeing is riddled with routine changes you weren’t prepared for. It’s not just that it’s not safe for your sister— it also no longer feels safe for you.”

Lucky’s eyes widened and she sat up straighter, looking ahead into the warehouse as the words sank in. “Yeah... that— that’s exactly how it feels.”

“Yeah,” Sneeze agreed, “I felt that way about Sniffle. But don’t worry too much. After a while, those feelings go away.”

“They do?”

Sneeze considered the question, then amended, “Well, in a way. You never stop worrying about your sibling’s safety. You never stop feeling responsible for them. But once you stop thinking of things as *mine* and start thinking of them as *ours*, you don’t mind it so much. I liked teaching Sniffle how to steal. I was proud of him when he did something right, and sharing the victories and the losses made them mean that much more. It took time, but it was worth it.”

He paused to chuckle, drawing Lucky's gaze back to him. "Besides," he continued, "You know how younger siblings are. If you tell them no, it makes them want it even more."

Lucky huffed softly, letting her tail drop. "Yeah, isn't that the truth? I told Momo I didn't want her in the Hide, and now she's bullied her way onto the radio. She doesn't do a terrible job as navigator, though. Maybe she could be a dispatcher someday."

That thought made Lucky pause, then shake her head. She wasn't really considering steering Momo in that direction, was she? No, surely not. It was just the sentimental conversation getting to her.

"Enough of that," she decided. "I'm supposed to be interrogating you, you know."

Sneeze laughed, wiping his whiskers with one paw. "Well, I clearly don't have much I feel inclined to withhold."

"Then is there any chance you'll tell me who hired you, then?" Lucky asked sarcastically.

Surprisingly, Sneeze answered.

"We're working for a plantimal called Dan D. Lyon..."

Lucky's tail swished back and forth when Sneeze was finished, the cat mulling over his story. So it was Lyon they were up against, and he had anti-anti-histamines. Foxglove must've provided them, but why? First she was working with Snapdragon, and now she'd branched out even further. What made the solitary plant want to branch out?

Whatever the reason, it would have to wait. More urgently, Sneeze and Sniffle were being blackmailed, and their humans were in danger.

"Okay," Lucky said slowly, squinting up at the warehouse lights as she gathered her thoughts. "This... this changes things."

Sneeze clicked his teeth together in suspicious surprise, looking back up at Lucky. "It does?"

"It does," she confirmed. "It means you're not just stealing from the Pawtectors for fun; you're acting under duress. And *that* means we might not be enemies here."

She took her paw off of Sneeze, careful not to tug on his wild white fur as she did. “Look,” she 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.”

“Ha!” Sneeze scoffed, taking advantage of his new freedom of movement to put a few small steps between himself and Lucky. “And once I help you bring in Lyon, what happens to Sniffle and I? A plea deal before you send us off to jail, too?”

“No,” Lucky insisted. “I’m a Pawtector, Sneeze. I’ve sworn an oath to protect all humans from evil, including yours. You’re not evil, Sneeze. A thorn in my side when you want to be, maybe, but not evil.”

She could practically see the gears turning behind Sneeze’s big black eyes. The guinea pig was considering it, but talk was cheap, and Lucky knew that. So, she stood up and took a step back.

“You’re probably worried about Sniffle,” she said. “I’d be worried about Momo, if our positions were reversed. Before you make any decisions, go make sure he’s okay. Then, tomorrow night, both of you meet me on top of the hotel this warehouse is under. We’ll make a plan to take down Lyon together.”

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

Lucky took a deep breath, then pawed at the hard plastic radio on her collar. “Momo, are you back yet?”

A moment later, the radio clicked. Lucky could hear Momo licking her lips, probably still enjoying her treat. “Mhm! Just got back!”

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

Momo gasped. “Escaped?!”

“Kind of.” Lucky’s ear twitched and she glanced up into the corner of the warehouse, where a camera was mounted. “I’m sure Octo’s seen what happened already, but I’ll explain when I get back, alright? Until then, keep your claws sharp.”

“What?”

Oh, whoops. Lucky chuckled, standing up and crawling forward on her front legs to stretch out her back. “Nevermind. Just... see you soon.” Then, she pawed at her collar again, switching off the radio. She’d be able to get home on her own well enough, and she needed to think.

Part 2: Deliberation

When Lucky arrived back at the Hide, it was to the soft sound of purring. Momo was laying on the fluffy black cushion in front of the Catputer, dozing contently. The sight made Lucky roll her eyes. Momo could really fall asleep anywhere, couldn't she? Typical of a kitten.

Lucky wandered toward the Catputer, intent on waking her, but paused as she reached the cushion. Momo's fur was sticking out in all directions, especially on the top of her head and behind her ears. She was probably still figuring out how to groom herself, after being separated from her mother; Lucky had been through the same phase when she was first adopted. She never resented being adopted by Alexander, not at all, but humans didn't always understand those little comforts that were just unique to cats.

Stepping up on the cushion, Lucky sat down next to Momo instead of waking her. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to just straighten out the kitten's hair and make her presentable...

Before she could decide whether or not to act, the Catputer lit up, Octo's face filling the screen. His pupils were narrowed into slits, and his tentacles flexed in tight coils against his body. "Lucky," he said sternly, "care to explain why you canceled the extraction team?"

Lucky let her gaze linger on Momo a moment longer, then turned to the Catputer, sitting up straighter. "Because I let him go."

Momo stirred on the cushion next to her, the downy-soft fur of her back legs brushing against Lucky's as she stretched and yawned. "The mouse got away...?"

"The guinea pig," Lucky corrected. "And yes, I let him leave. It was a tactical decision. There's a lot more going on here than we realized."

Octo's skeptical glare didn't waver, but he gestured to the screen with one tentacle, signaling for Lucky to explain.

"Sneeze and Sniffle aren't working alone," Lucky said. Her ears pinned back against her head, and she flexed her paws in the cushion beneath her. "They're being blackmailed."

Momo sat up at that, blinking at Lucky with unguarded curiosity. "Really? By who?"

“Dan. D Lyon.”

“...a dandelion?”

Octo sighed. “Yes, of sorts. Assuming Sneeze was telling the truth, then he was referring to a plantimal that calls himself Dan D. Lyon.”

He reached for another screen out of frame, and a moment later, his image shrank and slid to the left. On the right side of the screen, an image of what was roughly a lion appeared. At least, it was shaped like a lion. It had a shaggy mane of flowers weighed down by grease, and a green body made of thick, distressed plant stems. It was standing on its hind legs in front of a broken machine.

“Dan D. Lyon is one of the more unstable plantimals that the Pawtectors have faced,” Octo explained. “With decent mechanical engineering skills, Lyon creates dangerous weapons and armor out of scraps, with his ultimate goal being to take over London through sheer force. He takes the form of a lion, but he believes he was once a human mechanic named Daniel David Lyon.”

“He thinks he’s human? Why?” Momo asked.

Lucky batted at the screen, swiping the image away to bring up Lyon’s file. “We’re not sure. According to him, the UK government put him in the body of a plantimal as punishment for illegal waste dumping, but that’s impossible. There were no humans involved in the creation of the plantimals. Humanity doesn’t even know the plantimals exist.”

“Interestingly,” Octo chimed back in, “We have been able to locate a mechanic known as Daniel Lyon. He was arrested for fly-dumping scraps along various roadways. After multiple offenses, he was sentenced to four years in prison, and served his sentence accordingly.”

Momo nodded along, her tail batting Lucky in the face once as it swayed back and forth. “So, Dan D. Lyon is just crazy?”

“Delusional, yes,” Lucky said, batting Momo’s tail away. “And definitely unstable. But he’s still pretty smart. His machines shouldn’t be taken lightly, and now he’s made connections with another dangerous plantimal on our radar.”

Octo froze in his tank, pupils widening. “You don’t mean—?”

“Foxglove,” Lucky confirmed. “She’s providing him with anti-anti-histamines, which Lyon is now using to threaten Sneeze and Sniffle’s humans. That’s why they’re stealing.”

Octo sank against his desk, his head floating briefly in the water as he

considered Lucky's claims. "So the thieves have humans..." He lifted a tentacle, running it down his face between 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 for force the thieves to turn themselves in."

"What?" Lucky's eyes widened and she stood up, the fur down her back standing up in alarm. "What are you talking about? Octo, I'm surprised at you. We're Pawtectors. We protect pets *and* their humans; we would never use another pet's huamsn as leverage. Why would you even suggest that?"

Octo didn't answer. For a moment, awkward silence hung in the air. Momo's tail dropped and her ears flattened back against her head, while Lucky remained alert, challenging.

"...I think you need to take a step back and remember what we're fighting for," Lucky finished scolding. "We can finish debriefing later, after Momo and I have had dinner."

Octo blew a few bubbles from the gills on either side of his face. "Very well," he conceded. "You may be right. Keep your claws sharp, Lucky."

Lucky didn't answer him, tapping the screen and closing the video, so all that was left was the open file on Lyon.

Next to her, Momo's tail brushed the ground nervously. "...you wouldn't really hurt another pet's humans to get what you want, would you? Even if they're not nice pets?"

Lucky turned away from the Catputer to face Momo properly, hackles falling as the tension bled from her frame. "Never," she said gently. "Ignore Octo. He gets a little too isolated in that tank, sometimes, but a Pawtector would never, ever blackmail another pet or hurt their human."

Momo relaxed, her ears swiveling forward again. "Okay. I thought so."

Lucky reached out and bopped Momo gently, her paw coming down on the kitten's head to flatten her fur. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you some dinner."

With that, she turned and lead her little sister out of the Hide.

Across London, Sneeze's nails scraped against rough concrete floors as he darted through underground tunnels, panting with exertion and nerves. He could hear Sniffle squeaking in the room up ahead, the panicked sound echoing through

the damp corridors.

“I could break him out!” Sniffle was insisting. “Just let me go back for him!”

Before Lyon could snarl back— or do something worse than scolding —Sneeze spoke up, rushing into the secret lab. “No need!” he announced himself. He jumped over a pile of wires and stopped at Lyon’s feet, panting softly. “I’m here. I’m right here. I got away.”

“Sneeze!” Sniffle squealed, hopping over to him and tucking his nose under the larger guinea pig’s chin. “You’re okay! Wait, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Not hurt,” Sneeze confirmed. “It’s alright, Sniffle, I’m okay. Right as rain.”

Lyon watched the pair from where he stood looming over them, raising fuzzy floral eyebrows. “What a touching reunion,” he purred. “And Sniffle made it sound like Lucky had you tight in her claws...”

“She did.” Sniffle took a step back to look at his brother, wiggling his ears once in confusion. “How’d you get away?”

Sneeze clicked his teeth once, then used his back paw to scratch his side, stalling. Finally, he explained. “Lucky let me go. She wants me to meet back up with her at some point and join her team.”

That made Lyon laugh— a strange rustling, crackling sound, like dry leaves in a campfire. “Team up! Of course, of course, that bleeding heart would try to appeal to your warm-blooded nature, wouldn’t she? She does so enjoy preaching her human-borrowed morals and philosophies. It’s too bad for her! Too bad, too bad. You piggies don’t speak in terms of morality, do you? No, you only speak domee! Ahahahaha!”

His laughter slowly died down, tail swaying back and forth behind him as if in some unfelt breeze. “Come to think of it,” he continued, “We could use this, couldn’t we? Yes, we could. Tell me, did Lucky say anything about how to contact her? Where to meet?” He crouched low in front of the piggies, giving them full view of his sharp leafy teeth.

Sneeze stepped in front of Sniffle, keeping himself between Lyon and his brother. “She wants to meet me tomorrow night. Of course, I’m not going,” he squeaked.

“Not going!” Lyon yanked himself upright again, some of the stems of his legs tearing and oozing. “Oh, you’re going,” he purred. “You’re going to meet Lucky wherever she asked to be met. Then, you’re going to talk. You’re going to convince her to take you to her home, her base of operations. Yes, you’re going to go to the

Hide!”

The plantimal nearly stepped on the guinea pigs as he strode toward his workbench with a purpose, rising on his hind legs to fumble with a few pieces of metal there. Sneeze heart’s hammered in his chest as the smell of oil and dandelions suddenly became overwhelming. “Why would we do that?” he asked.

“Because, you’re going to be carrying this!” Lyon raised his paw, showing off a small metal box with a tiny red lightbulb and a black button. “This here, this is a tracking device! Lucky will take you to the Hide, and when you are there, you will turn this on. I will follow your signal, and we’ll destroy that cantankerous cat and her base of operations! Yes, hahaha! One final blow, one press of a button, and Lucky will be out of my hair forever!”

He turned away from the workbench and dropped back down on his front paws, landing gracelessly. He briefly lost all form as he smacked the ground, crumbling into a pile of flowers, stems, and leaves before pulling himself back into shape again. “Trust me,” he insisted, “This will be good for us both. With Lucky out of the way, I won’t be needing your... specific counter-skills, will I? No, no, I’ll be able to operate on my own, then. So I suppose I could let you both off the hook. A win-win for everyone involved! Everyone but that wretched cat!”

Sneeze glanced back at Sniffle, then faced Lyon again, squaring his tiny shoulders. “Okay,” he agreed. “One last job. As soon as you get that signal from us, though, we’re going home.”

Part 3: The Meeting

The night had grown cold when Lucky arrived on the rooftop above the Pawtector warehouse. Sneeze and Sniffle were waiting for her, huddled as close to one another as they could be with their backpacks on. Lucky landed lightly on the rooftop ledge, tail swaying back and forth happily. “Look who’s early,” she said warmly. “I knew you’d come.”

“Yeah, we showed up,” Sniffle replied with a sniff, “But don’t count your chickens just yet. Just because we’re here doesn’t mean we trust you.”

Lucky nodded, one ear twitching toward a noise off in the distance. “Right, of course,” she said absently, glancing around the roof, out into the London night. The city glowed in the evening, the stars blotted out by artificial light as night-owl humans fluttered from place to place.

“In any case, we shouldn’t have this conversation in the open,” Lucky decided.

“Come on. I know a place that’s more private.”

Sneeze’s nose twitched in suspicion, and he lifted his head, as if he could smell a lie in the air. “What kind of place?” he asked.

Lucky puffed her chest out proudly. “My base of operations. Count yourselves lucky, piggies. You’re going to visit the Hide.”

The guinea pigs exchanged a look of surprise, and Lucky preened. It was a rare honor to know the location of the Hide, and an even rarer occasion that Lucky got to be the one to reveal that location.

“Alright,” Sneeze said, stepping forward. Sniffle fell into step just behind him. “Lead the way.”

Lucky trotted across the roof, the cold cement scraping against her paw pads as she guided them to a nearby fire escape. “This way,” she said. And off they went, one after the other, a silent parade of pets sneaking through the London night.

The trio was careful not to be spotted by any humans, aware it would be odd to see a cat and two guinea pigs moving together. Sneeze in particular stayed out of sight as much as possible, his bright white fur practically glowing in the dark. Finally, after what felt like ages of running after the cat, Lucky began to slow from a trot to a walk. She lead the guinea pigs down a side street, behind a row of apartment buildings.

“Over here,” she said, walking up to a cat door. It opened automatically, revealing a ramp into the building behind it. “My human lives in this building,” she boasted, “So the Hide was built into the dead space between apartments. Pretty cool, huh?”

Sneeze’s stomach twisted uncomfortably. The Hide was under the apartment of Lucky’s human? The dormant tracker in his backpack suddenly felt insurmountably heavy. Still, he forced his feet to move, Sniffle trailing close behind him as they walked up the ramp and into the warm building.

“Whoa,” Sniffle said as they came into a well-lit space.

Whoa indeed, Sneeze mentally agreed. 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 through a video feed, his tentacles blue at the edges where they laid on the surface around him. In front of the computer, a cream-colored kitten

sat up from where she'd been curled on a black cushion.

"They came!" the kitten exclaimed in a familiar voice. "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 with a chuckle. "Sneeze, Sniffle, this is my... this is Momo. And the grumpy octopus on the screen is Octo, my dispatcher."

Sniffle chuffed, wiggling his ears once. "Octo? That's original."

"At least my name isn't the symptom of a disease," Octo replied dryly. "Welcome to the Hide, Sneeze and Sniffle."

"R-right, thanks." Sniffle took a few more steps into the Hide, looking around the space with interest. "So this is all under your human's apartment, Lucky?"

Lucky wandered over to Momo, licking behind the kitten's ear once to straighten the fur. "That's right," she said. "Momo and I have two humans, who are asleep in the apartment above us. It's a little bit risky to keep the Hide so close, but it also means I can always make sure my humans are kept safe."

Sniffle nodded, then looked back at Sneeze where the elder guinea pig had remained standing in the entrance. Sneeze's feet felt glued to the floor. He met Sniffle's eyes, then just shook his head, certain they were thinking the same thing.

They couldn't betray Lucky like this.

Silence lingered for a moment as the guinea pigs silently communicated, and Lucky's tail slowly lowered. "What's wrong?" she asked. "You're too quiet. What's the matter? Is it Lyon?"

"...yes, in a way," Sneeze answered. "Lucky, we... we haven't been honest with you."

Sneeze immediately began to squeak to himself, hunching his little shoulders in with guilt. "We're so sorry! We really don't want to hurt you, Lucky!"

From the Catputer, Octo growled at his screen. "I knew it. I knew these two couldn't be trusted. Lucky—"

"Wait, Octo," Lucky cut him off. She carefully stepped in front of Momo, putting herself between the kitten and the guinea pigs. "Sneeze, Sniffle, explain yourselves."

Sniffle looked at Sneeze. At Sneeze's nod, he immediately began to confess. "Lyon knows we're meeting. He told us to come meet you, and get you to take us

to the Hide! When we got here, we were supposed to turn on a GPS tracker he gave Sneeze, so he could come and attack you here in the Hide. He's built a new mech suit, and he's prepared to tear this whole building down!" He rubbed his face with both hands, musing his whiskers anxiously. "We haven't turned on the tracker yet, but if we don't do something soon, Lyon's going to get suspicious! And — and our humans will— he'll—"

"Breathe, Sniffle," Sneeze cut him off. Then, he pinned back his ears, looking to Lucky again. "We don't expect any help after we betrayed you this way. But... Sniffle is right. Lyon is going to be furious. We will turn ourselves in to you, Lucky, but please help us protect our humans."

Lucky dragged a paw down her face, processing. "Okay. Okay, that... that is bad," she said. "But thank you for telling me, and for trusting me. We'll just have to work quickly to come up with a plan."

"You're still going to help us?" Sniffle asked, lowering his paws from his face.

"Why wouldn't I?" Lucky stepped forward, raising a paw and gently tapping Sniffle's head. "Yes, you were planning to reveal the location of the Hide, but you decided not to. When it came time to pick a side, you both made the right choice." She removed her paw from Sniffle, then looked at Sneeze meaningfully. "I knew you would."

Sneeze straightened up, then stepped forward, bumping into Sniffle once in comfort before he began to speak. "Thank you, Lucky. We won't let you down again."

"You never did," Lucky answered.

"This is all very touching," Octo chimed in, "But I get the impression we are now under a tight time limit."

Lucky nodded, turning and trotting over to the Catputer. "Right," she said, tapping the Catputer screen and sliding Octo's image to the side to pull up a map of London. "So, what can you pigs tell us about Lyon's secret hideout?"

Sneeze followed Lucky to the Catputer, jumping up on her desk and rising on his hind legs to boop the map with his nose. "His newest lab is about here. Like the Hide exists in the dead space between apartments, Lyon's carved out his hideout in the space between Underground tunnels and sewage systems. It's deep under London, and surrounded by security systems. There's three different exits, as well."

Octo flexed his tentacles, reaching off screen. "I'll pull up a map of London's

underground infrastructure for you to point out those access points. The location is going to be a problem, though. Lucky, I hesitate to encourage you to fight Lyon in such an enclosed space, especially with there being little chance of taking him by surprise.”

“We’ll have to draw him out somehow,” Lucky mused. “We could try collapsing some access points, but we’ll need to be careful, or else we could damage the humans’ systems...”

A map of the London Underground layered over the map of London, quickly followed by a third map of London’s sewage and waste management system. Sneeze tapped the map to place a marker at each of the entry points to the lab. “Trapping him would be tricky, too,” he said thoughtfully.

“Lyon’s as resilient as the weeds he’s made of,” Sniffle explained. “He can hide out for a long time, and he has plenty of material to upgrade his tech in the meantime.”

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

“Um, what if—”

All of the older animals fell silent, turning to look at her. Momo stopped, suddenly feeling shy. These other pets had experience in the field, tried-and-true tactical knowhow. She, on the other hand, wasn’t even a real Pawtector trainee. Who was she to interrupt them?

Momo opened her mouth to apologize, but Lucky spoke first.

“Go ahead, Momo,” she said, nodding to the kitten. “What’s your idea?”

Momo’s tail perked up. Emboldened, she looked at the map, then back at Lucky. “Well, um, what if— I mean, Lyon is waiting for the tracker signal, right?” she pointed out. “We don’t want to bring Lyon here, but he doesn’t know this is where the Hide is yet. So what if we take the tracker somewhere else? Instead of going to him, we can pick somewhere to fight him, and have him come to us. Or, well, to you guys.”

For a moment, the other pets were silent, exchanging surprised looks. Then, Lucky stepped forward, bumping her head briefly against Momo’s happily. “Sis, that’s a great idea!” she praised. Then, Lucky turned to the Catputer again. “Octo, get me a map of condemned buildings we can use. We’re going to do some weeding!”

Lyon's great mechanical battle suit shuddered as he jumped from rooftop to rooftop. The mech had turned out beautifully, a gleaming mass of iron, copper, and steel dashing through the moonlit streets. It was roughly humanoid, sharp corners of sheet metal hammered into crinkled curves where the soft edges of the human body would be. Lyon had twisted himself inside it, the dandelions that made up his body rooted into the electronics of each joint. Inside his helmet, a blinking red dot guided him through London, slowly but surely guiding him to the edge of the city as he became re-accustomed to the feeling of having human-shaped limbs.

Finally, he landed on top of a warehouse across from an apartment building, chuckling madly to himself. The apartments all had windows facing the street, though most were boarded up or dark. One, however, glowed with the flickering light of a TV screen, a rectangle of ever-shifting color framing the shadow of a seated cat. It was the window of the topmost apartment. According to the blinking light in Lyon's helmet, it was also the source of the guinea pigs' signal.

"Gotcha," Lyon said with a raspy purr. Then, he pulled his machine into motion. He leapt down and across the street, bricks cracking and crumbling as he gripped the side of the building. He swung through the apartment window, glass scattering across the room as he turned to the source of the shadow...

...only to be met with an old, boxy TV, displaying wobbling static behind a cardboard cutout of a cat.

Lyon growled. "What is this?"

"NOW!"

He had no time to react.

Two small blurs suddenly jumped down from the ceiling, biting down on the wires on the back of his suit and yanking them out of their sockets, disconnecting his legs from the control module.

"NO!" Lyon roared.

The guinea pigs jumped off the suit, rushing to a cream-colored kitten in the corner of the room. The kitten bit down on a tight rope connected to the ceiling, her sharp baby teeth slicing through it like a razor through paper. A heavy metal net fell from the ceiling, knocking the spasming mechanical suit to the floor with Lyon still trapped inside it.

Lucky rushed out from under the TV stand, leaping into the air and landing on

the net. She smacked at the mech's visor with both front paws until it opened, revealing Lyon's face just as Sneeze and Sniffle returned to Lucky with a blue spray canister.

Lyon roared again, enraged as he was sprayed with Pawtector-grade weed repellent. The flowers that made up his body wilted and withered, and he was forced to untangle himself from the mech's joints. The freed weeds came up to form arms, protecting Lyon's face.

The canister was tossed aside, and Lucky reached out, grabbing onto Lyon and pulling him out of the humanoid suit. As she tossed him onto a tarp in the corner, a familiar yellow tube of menacing liquid fell from his torn torso, clattering on the floor.

Momo rushed forward, planting both paws on the tube to stop it from rolling any further. "I've got the anta-anta-anta-mines!" she announced with a proud sway of her tail.

"And I've got Lyon," Lucky added, wrapping the tarp around Lyon's groaning form. "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 on top of the tarp, waiting for the extraction team in the flickering light of the old TV. The guinea pigs munched on some timothy hay Sniffle had packed for the road, squeaking to one another. Momo leaned against Lucky's side, slowly losing the battle against sleep.

"Thank you again for helping out," Lucky told the guinea pigs. "If you weren't here, this fight would've been a lot messier."

"Aw, shucks," Sniffle said around a mouthful of hay. "We were just tryin' to protect our humans."

"Maybe so, but that's all us Pawtectors really do, too," Lucky pointed out. "We protect the humans."

The group lapsed into comfortable silence for a moment. Next to Lucky, Momo started to snore. Lucky chuckled, fond despite herself, then looked back at the guinea pigs thoughtfully. "You know," she said, "You two are pretty skilled. I could get you in touch with the Pawtectors' USA branch, if you were interested."

Sneeze and Sniffle exchanged a surprised glance. After a moment, Sneeze swallowed and asked, “What about our criminal record? I honestly thought you’d arrest us, when this was all over.”

“Did you hear me call for a carrier, in addition to a terrarium?” Lucky chuckled at them. “You may only see a criminal record, but you know what I see? An anti-hero’s resume. You’ve never put another animal or human in serious danger, and you fought to protect us all tonight. Just... think about it, okay?”

The guinea pigs exchanged another look. Then, Sniffle nodded. “We’ll think about it.”

“Great!” Lucky cheered. “Then there’s just one more thing I need from you.”

Sniffle stepped back warily, and Sneeze sniffed at her. “What is it?” Sniffle asked.

Lucky’s ears and tail fell, and she laid down, extending her paws toward the guinea pigs pleadingly. “Please give back my Catcycle!”

Both guinea pigs laughed.

Epilogue

Lucky purred as she walked back and forth in the Hide’s vehicle bay, rubbing up against the Catcycle happily. “Oh, my sweet, sweet super bike! I’ll never let you get lost again!” she promised gleefully. “I’ll get you cleaned up and get that timothy hay smell off of you in no time. You’ll be good as new!”

Momo, meanwhile, was dashing back and forth between the Catputer and the training area as she eagerly told Octo how the mission had gone. “—and then the net came down like *woosh!* And Sneeze and Sniffle sprayed him, and he was all, AARG! RAWR!”

Octo listened to the kitten politely, nodding along on the call while clearly working on something else off-screen. Lucky chuckled to herself, resolving to give Octo a proper debriefing later.

“Good work, both of you,” Octo said, cutting Momo off. “I had my doubts about those guinea pigs, but I’m glad to be proven wrong. Now, Lucky— in light of recent events, I think it’s time to add some security updates to the Catcycle.” His image vanished, replaced by a 3D render of the Catcycle. “For example,” Octo continued in the background, “Pawprint engine activation, and a built-in tracker in case it goes missing again.” As he spoke, a few different areas of the Catcycle

highlighted with a series of beeps, various security options listed next to them.

Lucky walked over to inspect the upgraded design, flicking both ears with interest. “That’s a great idea. Since we’ll be doing some work on the Catcycle, anyway, let’s also add a sidecar.”

“A sidecar?”

Lucky turned away from the Catputer to look at Momo, who had diverted her energy to clawing at Lucky’s training scratching post. “Yeah,” she said, “A sidecar. After all, if my sister is going to become a full-fledged Pawtector, she’s going to need some field experience.”

Momo, overhearing her, froze. Her eyes widened and she looked around the scratching post at Lucky, tail lifting in the air in delight. “You mean it...?”

Lucky stepped away from the Catputer, the pad of paws against the carpet giving way to the click of claws on wood as she crossed into the training area. “Listen to me, Momo,” she said seriously. “Being a Pawtector is dangerous. I didn’t want you to follow in my footsteps, because I didn’t want you to get hurt. But you know what I realized tonight?”

She bumped her head against Momo’s fondly, then continued. “You’re a stubborn little cat, Momo, and you have a big heart. Even if you’d never found the Hide, you’d never give up on being my sister, and I don’t want you to. But being my sister comes with risks, and I want you to be prepared. So, I’m going to educate you, and train you, and give you every tool you need to keep yourself safe when I can’t be there to fight for you. You’re going to have to work hard, okay?”

Momo nodded, pressing her head back against Lucky’s. “Okay,” she agreed, “I’ll work hard. I’ll work super duper hard, and I won’t let you down, Lucky!”

Lucky purred, lifting her front let and draping it over Momo’s back. “You could never let me down, kid. Now, go upstairs and go to bed. I need to write up a tonight’s report, and you need rest. Tomorrow, the *real* work begins.”

“Rodger that!” Momo said with a happy meow. She dropped from the scratching post and bumped her head against Lucky’s shoulder, then dashed toward the Hide’s exit. “Goodnight, Lucky! Goodnight, Octo! See you tomorrow!”

Lucky watched her go, Momo’s happy meows and chirps echoing down the hall until the kitten was lifted back into the apartment.

Octo let the silence linger for a moment, then minimized the image of the Catcycle, his face filling the screen once more. “So, you’ve decided to let Momo become a Pawtector after all. I think you made the right choice.”

“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 the desk, drawing herself up as tall as she could. 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—ever—send Momo into the field alone again, there is nowhere you can go where you will be safe. I don’t care about our history together; I will hunt you down, and I will make you regret it. Do you understand?”

Octo’s skin paled around his eyes and funnel, a stressed light blue coloring the majority of his features. “Yes, Lucky, I understand.”

Lucky relaxed, then dropped down from the desk to sit and began straightening her fur. “Good. Now, let me give you a proper report.”

Sneeze typed away at the computer hidden in the back of his felt hide, the newly dubbed Pigputer, rumbling in displeasure as he opened another file. Sniffle poked his head in through the yellow flap behind Sneeze, the fur around his mouth stained orange as he chewed on a mouthful of bell pepper.

“You’re still lookin’ at the files we took from Lyon’s lab, huh?” he asked. “Find anything good?”

“Not good,” Sneeze said. “I’m not sure what I’ve found...”

Sniffle stepped into the hide properly, squishing himself in next to Sneeze to see the screen. Sneeze’s nose twitched at the smell of sweet vegetables, and he nudged Sniffle back a step to make sure he didn’t get anything on the screen.

“Who’s ‘Favia’?” Sniffle asked.

On the Pigputer screen, a digital correspondance was decrypting, slowly revealing more and more messages between Lyon and the unknown entity.

Favia: I’ll leave the canister at the drop point at 0700.

Favia: That will be the same drop point for the fertilizer.

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

Favia: Would it pain you horribly to punctuate properly, if not capitalize and spell?

Lyon: womp womp

Favia: You need the fertilizer to stay alive in your hole, and I need conditioning

supplies.

Favia: So I hope you understand how important cooperation is to both of us.

Lyon: yeahhhh fine

“They must be a plantimal of some kind,” Sneeze said as the messages continued to scroll across the screen. “But when I checked the Pawtectors database, there wasn’t anything about a plantimal by that name. And worse, look at this IP address.”

Sneeze tapped the Pigputer screen a few times, bringing up a page of information regarding where the messages had come from. Sniffle stared blankly at walls of text and numbers. “What... the heck is an IP address?”

“Nevermind,” Sneeze said with a shake of his head. “What I’m getting at is these messages are being routed through the Pawtector headquarters in Sydney. Whoever this is, they’re—”

The screen suddenly went dark. A moment later, a red box of text appeared, flashing on and off. *Access Denied.*

“...we need to reach out to Lucky,” Sneeze decided. “Quietly. I think she’s in trouble.”