

## Chapter 1

*Future technology will, in all probability, allow people and objects to move from one part of town to another, from one country to another, from one planet to another, as easily as walking through a gate.*

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The sounds of early morning were just beginning to get louder than Chuffer's crunching footsteps through the frost-crisp grass along the horse path. Alexandra had taken Chuffer down this path so many times that she knew every tree, bush, and rock along the way. She even knew where she was likely to scare up a rock rat to skitter through the thick leaves and disappear into a hole or to see a glider launch from a high tree limb to maneuver around the tree trunks and get further into the cover of the woods. She was watching now as one that had launched from high over her head had finally run out of glide space and was forced to flair up, grab the bark on a jully tree's trunk, and race up towards the high branches to either hide or launch again.

Chuffer was on automatic, just walking at an ambling pace, her head occasionally flicking up and letting out one of her signature chuffing sounds. Alexandra had only one eye on the woods around her. The other eye was turned inward, thinking about her conversation with Taylor the evening before.

From Taylor's description of the feelings in her head, Alex knew that she was getting the same feelings from her new kitten as Alex did from Tipper. It wasn't like talking; it was more like feeling what Tipper did. If Tipper was hungry, Alex knew it without even being in the same room. If Tipper wanted to go out, this image of Tipper going out just came into her head, and she would come down from her room and let him out into the back yard.

And it worked both ways. When there was a break between virtual lessons on school days, Alex would just make an image of her petting Tipper, and in a flash, Tipper would be pawing at Alex's door to get in. She could even get Tipper to bring her things, like when she had left her study pod on the kitchen table and needed it for her lesson. She just had to make a picture in her mind of Tipper coming to her with it in his mouth, and in a minute, Tipper was at her door.

When Taylor said that she was having feelings about her Misty just like Alex and Tipper, Madeline said she thought they were putting too much into coincidence. After all, she had pointed out, cats need to go out a lot, and they want to be scratched all the time, and they carry toys around when they are feeling playful. She insisted that what Alex and Taylor were talking about was nothing special.

Megan had been quiet through all the chatter about mind-linking with cats. She didn't have a cat. She did have a dog though that had come with the family from Earth when they all came to Shangri-La. It was a Great Dane, and she hadn't ever had anything in her mind that seemed like it came from him. In fact, according to Megan, Harley was dumb as a tree.

Alex's parents just said that it was not unusual for kids to get very closely attached to their pets. In fact, the feelings were so intense that it might sometimes feel like they were reading each other's minds. As far as her parents were concerned, that was all there was to

it.

Alex kept going over all these same memories, but they were gradually being pushed aside as a feeling of anger and pain slowly pushed its way in. Once she recognized that she was getting these feelings, Alex turned her attention to them and tried to sort them out.

It wasn't Tipper. She was certain of that. This was a stronger image than she had ever gotten from him. The image seemed to be flickering from just a feeling of pain to a cat's leg being grabbed by something hard, to wanting to run but being held back, and then just a blackness of pain again.

As she tried to focus on these images, Chuffer kept up her steady rhythm, one foot and then another swishing through the grass and leaves along the path. But through the noise of Chuffer's gait, Alex thought she heard a different noise ahead. She urged Chuffer into a trot and moved her head from side-to-side, her shoulder length blond curls swishing back and forth while trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound.

A couple of minutes into the trot and Alex could hear the snarling cry of an animal that was angry, frightened, or both. Slowing back to a walk, she took Chuffer carefully off the horse path and into the woods toward the cries. Chuffer was acting a little skittish, but she kept going with nervous swings of her head and frequent chuffing. Chuffer walked into what looked like a small game trail and Alex turned her to walk along it. In a couple of minutes, they broke into a grassy clearing in the woods where the game trail wound through a patch of grass and across a small stream.

There was her animal in pain. On the slope down to the stream, a bandit cat laid thrashing on its side, pulling against a metal thing clamped on her right hind leg. As Alex took Chuffer into the clearing, the bandit cat looked up with the dark mask of fur around its eyes that gave it its name. The rest of the burnt umber and beige, striped and spotted body kept moving to pull against the metal on its leg.

Alex jumped down from Chuffer, who immediately tried to pull the reins from her hands and get away from the fifty kilo cat. Tugging, Alex walked to the nearest bush and firmly tied the reins to a stout looking branch. She turned toward the bandit cat thinking that this was a good time to see if there really was anything to her idea of mind-linking with animals, and she worked to project an emotion of calm and her willingness to help.

Alex walked slowly toward the cat. The cat's eyes followed every move without blinking, and the crying stopped. The cat was panting, but its labored and raspy breathing was its only sound. Alex could see the saw-toothed, half-circles of steel clasping the cat's leg, and she noted that the leg was bent at a slight angle that didn't look natural. More than likely, it was broken.

While she had never seen one before, Alex thought that this was probably a spring-loaded, leg trap used by hunters to catch fur animals on Earth. She had read about them in some of the adventure stories about Canada and Alaska that she had downloaded from the colony's database.

She knew that whatever she did to try and get the trap off the cat's leg would probably hurt the cat, and that meant she could get clawed, if not bitten, for trying to help. But that didn't slow her down a bit. Her mind turned to the problem at hand. If a spring caused it to clamp around the cat's leg, then she ought to be able to find a way to force it back open. She needed something strong to pry open the jaws of the trap and had just the thing.

Alex walked back to Chuffer at the edge of the clearing and pulled the knife out of the sheath clipped to the back of her saddle. It was what Dad called a field knife. He was a big

believer in never going into the woods without one. Well, it certainly was going to be handy today.

She walked back to the bandit cat, still projecting calm and helpfulness. The big cat seemed a bit more relaxed than when Alex had first arrived in the clearing. She even thought there was a feeling of hope along with the anxiety that had come through the mental link from the beginning.

As she knelt down to decide just how to put the knife into the trap to get the most leverage, and while her brain analyzed the problem, she unthinkingly reached up to stroke the head of the bandit cat. The soft fur slid under her hand as she scratched behind its ears and rubbed down its back. The beginnings of a rumbling purr startled her and she jerked her hand back, realizing what she had done. She could have been bitten by those long sharp teeth that were showing under its snarling, pulled-back lips when she first knelt down, but the teeth were nowhere in sight now, and its eyes seemed to be slightly closed. There was a mix of contentment and pain coming from the cat.

Alex looked carefully at the trap and saw where she could put the knife for leverage. She raised one knee so she could get her foot on the ground and gradually moved it over until she had the tip of her riding boot in the mouth of the jaws. This would allow her to hold one jaw against the ground with her boot sole while she pried the other jaw open with the knife. Using the brutal looking teeth on the top jaw to keep the knife from slipping, she pulled sideways on the knife, forcing the jaws open.

As she gradually opened the jaws, she projected an image of the cat pulling its leg free. She was as steady and gentle as she could be but a couple of times there was a sharp flash of pain in her mind. The cat, on the other hand, never moved a muscle until the jaws were open enough to pull her foot out. With one more mental blast of searing pain, the foot was free, and Alex started to pull out the knife.

Just before yanking out the knife, Alex realized that her toes were in the trap where she had been holding one of the jaws open. If she removed the knife, the other jaw would spring closed on her boot. Alex rolled her eyes. "Really brilliant, knucklehead," she thought.

Looking around, Alex saw that the stream edge was lined with lots of rocks, and she could just reach a pretty big one that looked like it would fit into the jaws beside her foot if she put it in on its edge. When the rock was jammed into place, she slowly pulled out the knife and let the full force of the trap down onto the rock. Then she moved her foot back out of the jaws, but in doing so, caught the back of the rock with her boot toe. The pressure of the jaws and Alex's boot toe caused the rock to twist, and the jaws closed on the rock in its new and flatter position. The jaws weren't completely shut, but they were shut enough to have mangled her toes if she hadn't been lucky.

Alex sat down hard with an "oof" and a mumbled "stupid." She looked at the cat, which was standing while holding its damaged hind leg just off the ground. It was staring right at her and within reach, so she reached out and petted it again. The purring resumed.

"I guess if you were going to scratch and bite, I'd already be ground meat." Alex could still feel the pain in the cat's mind and resisted her urge to pull the cat close where she could hug it as well as stroke it. Instead, she stood, backing a little bit away from the cat. She could feel the cat's mind wanting to be petted with a little bit of pain in the background.

The cat gave a little half-walk, half-hop toward Alex and she could feel a sharp pain

with each hind-foot hop of the cat. She wanted to pick the cat up and cradle it in her arms, but she knew it probably weighed more than she did, so that was out. She went down on her knees instead and gathered the cat close where she could feel as well as hear the purring.

They stayed just like that for quite a few minutes before Alex started talking again, like the cat could understand every word. "You know your leg's broken, don't you? We're going to have to get you to the vet to get that fixed up."

As Alex's mind formed the image of a stranger doing something to its right hind leg, the cat's mind flared with anxiety and fear. "Now don't get all upset. The vet knows how to do this sort of thing, and they have drugs that will keep you from feeling anything while they do it. We just have to get you there, and you're too big for me to carry. I have to figure something out."

Alex's mind drifted again to those same outdoor adventure stories she had been remembering before. If she remembered right, the hunters use to tie long poles on each side of their saddles so they would drag along behind the horse when they needed to carry heavy loads. And they had a piece of leather between the poles where they put the load they needed to carry. She had her field knife and plenty of small trees, so the poles were no problem, but she didn't have any leather to put between the poles.

Well, what did she have that she could use? Her mind whirled. She had the saddle which she could fasten between the poles with the girth. It was no problem for her to ride bareback, but it didn't seem like a very secure place for a cat with a broken leg to ride.

She had the saddle blanket too, and she might be able to use the cord in her kit to tie it on the poles some way. That would work great, and it would be cozy for the cat.

Then it came to her. She had her long riding jacket with a nice fuzzy lining that the cat would just love. If she stuck the poles through the arms and then zipped it up, she'd have a perfect nest for the cat—if she could get it to crawl inside. And even if she couldn't get the cat inside, it could ride on top. Perfect. She put a picture in her mind of the cat lying down in the thick grass and resting along with feelings of quiet and love.

Chuffer was standing as far into the bushes as she could get and Alex had to coax her out to where she could get to the small emergency pack clipped to her saddle. "You're coming in handy today, Dad," Alex thought. "You always tell me never to go riding without my emergency pack." She felt around in the pack and pulled out the coil of polycord but left the little medical kit, the fishhooks, and the clear fishing line. She had seen the cat licking the little blood that was still oozing from the bite of the steel teeth on the trap rings, so she didn't think anything she could do with the medical kit would be a help. She just needed to get to the vet as soon as she could.

It took her about thirty minutes to find the right size saplings, cut them down, and trim their branches smooth enough to let her get them through the sleeves of her jacket. Even though the field knife was big and bulky, it was hard work trying to use it like a hatchet. The hour it took was long enough for the morning to have warmed up considerably, and she was comfortable in just her pullover.

Alex stood back and looked at the zipped-up jacket lying on the ground. The poles were pushed from the bottom of the jacket up through and out of the arms, which were stretched above the neck like it was a stick-person with its hands over its head. She planned to tie the end of the poles sticking out of the jacket's bottom to the saddle, making a jacket-sack that the cat could crawl into and ride, but as she looked at the jacket she knew

that something had to be done about the neck hole or the cat would slip right through with all the bouncing that was bound to happen as Chuffer pulled the poles down the horse path.

Then she remembered the storm hood that was folded down and zipped into its own little pouch in the jacket's neck. She unzipped the neck pocket and pulled out the storm hood, twisting it into a short rope, which she tied a knot in. Then she took a piece of the polycord and tied it between the neck and the knot, letting it slide up to the knot in the hood. She tied the two ends of the polycord to the poles just above the bottom of the jacket, and that took care of the neck-hole problem.

Alex tied a length of cord around the end of each pole and secured them to the saddle horn. Thank goodness she had been out on her western saddle and not her English jumping saddle. She wouldn't want to jump in a western saddle, but when it came to work, cowboys had the right tools.

All this time the big cat had been lying quietly in the grass, occasionally licking at her leg and watching every move Alex made. Leaning against Chuffer's rump, which she had pointing toward the cat to keep Chuffer from looking at it and getting too spooked, she made a clear mental image of the bandit cat crawling into the jacket. At first, the bandit cat just blinked at her, but as she kept the image in her mind, the cat finally got up awkwardly and started hop-shuffling over towards her and Chuffer. Alex patted Chuffer's rump and made soothing sounds to her as the cat got closer and Chuffer got more fidgety.

When the cat was at the bottom of the jacket, its head was just high enough to see down into it with Alex holding it open. The cat gave a little jump with its three good legs, going head first down into the jacket. Curling around inside, the cat's head emerged with the nose just sticking out and its eyes back in the shadows. Alex reached in and rubbed the cat's head, which pushed against her hand. The rumbling started up again, and Alex got mental feelings of warmth and safety.

Patting down Chuffer's flank and talking to her quietly, she moved toward the saddle and swung up onto the horse. Reins in hand, she nudged Chuffer into a slow walk, and they headed for home.

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Alex's mother and father were both on the original survey team that explored Shangri-La. They had been brought through the jump-gate that the New Frontier Development Corporation had set up on the planet. Her mom was a biologist and her father was a geologist, and the survey team was small, so there were a lot of field trips that they went on together. The stories Alex heard about exploring the new world of Shangri-La were always fascinating, and she was always prompting them to tell more.

The way Alex's mother told the story was that eventually, Sharon Nygarth fell in love with and married Jim Martin. They stayed on the Shangri-La survey team for another year and then Sharon found out she was pregnant. Sharon wouldn't risk exposing the baby to any type of possible alien contamination and decided to stay on Earth for a few years until Alexandra had grown up a little. She was there for the next ten years, enjoying her daughter and leading a pretty normal, one-income family life, since Jim elected to pay the jump-gate costs that allowed him to come home most evenings after work—even from another planet that was more than three thousand light-years from Earth. Mom said it didn't take that much more energy for someone to gate from Shangri-La to Earth than it

took for them to gate from their house to the Colonial Town Center.

But Alexandra became more self-sufficient with the passing years, raising a child got more expensive, Sharon got more bored with being a house-mother, and college expenses loomed in the not-so-distant future. This pileup of circumstances prompted Sharon to consider going back to work.

Looking around at job possibilities led to the discovery of Shangri-La being opened to colonization. When the planet was first certified to be free of possible Earth contaminants and lacking any local bacteria or viruses that would seriously affect humans, workers went through the gate on a weekly basis to mine the various mineral deposits that had been discovered on the planet. These workers lived in temporary apartments that were designed to pass through jump-gates and be quickly erected on the other side. But as large numbers of people on the Earth started migrating to the new planets being discovered, the corporate managers of New Frontier Development Corporation decided to add land as another resource they could sell. After almost ten years of conducting an extensive exploration of the planet, they felt they knew where most of the geological resources were, and they would keep that land safely in their control.

Sharon told Jim about the job opening she had found in the Bio-safety Department of the Shangri-La Colonial Administration. Then she told him about the colonization effort and that she didn't want to be a jump-gate commuter. Finally, she told him that she had inquired about a possible geology job for him from one of the old survey team members that now headed up the geology department at the corporation. Jim had liked the idea, the job possibilities worked out, and Alexandra and family had moved into their new house on Shangri-La with more acres of woods and open prairie than she could ride Chuffer to the edge of in a single day.

Well, that was how her Mom and Dad had met, married, had a baby, and had come to live on the planet Shangri-La. And while she was remembering all this history and Chuffer was dragging a hurt bandit cat slowly towards home, Mom and Dad had already gated off to work, so Alex wouldn't have any help getting the cat to the gate and on to the vet. She decided to call Taylor. "Buzzy, netlink me to Taylor."

Buzzy was the name she had given to the personal computer she had worn on her left wrist as a bracelet since her fourth birthday. Taylor's voice sounded in her earbud. "What do you need, Alex? I've just started my virtual math lessons for today. Can we talk later?"

"This is really important, Taylor."

"What?"

"I found a bandit cat in a leg trap while riding Chuffer this morning. I got it out of the trap and I'm bringing it back to my house, but I think its leg is broken. I need you to help me get it to the vet."

"What's a leg trap? And why can't you take the kitten to the vet yourself?"

Alex let out a little sigh of irritation. "Taylor, a leg trap is a thing with a big spring that closes these metal jaws on an animal's leg when they step on it, and it's not a kitten. It's as big as I am and probably weighs more than I do. Can you just come over and help me get it to the vet?"

"A full grown cat? Are you crazy? That thing can rip you to shreds and then eat you, if it has a mind to do it."

"I know they're dangerous, but not this one. I can mind-link with it, and the link is a lot stronger than with Tipper. It didn't run away when I let it out of the trap, and it let me

pet it.”

“You’re crazy. Do you have any fingers left?”

“Taylor, are you going to help or not?”

“Okay, I’ll be right over, but I’m not sure how close I’ll get to a full-grown bandit cat.”

“Buzzy, set the home gate to let Taylor through and get Mother for me.”

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In ten seconds, Alex’s mother spoke in her earbud. “Alexandra, what do you want? I just got to work.”

“Well, Mom . . .”

“You’re not hurt are you?”

“No, Mom, I’m okay but . . .”

“Anything starting with ‘well, Mom . . .’ and ending with ‘but . . .’ is not going to be good, so just get on with it, Alexandra.”

“It’s nothing bad, Mom, it’s just that I found this bandit cat in the woods when I was riding Chuffer this morning, and it had a broken leg, so I brought it home with me to take to the vet.”

“Hmm . . . a broken leg can be life threatening for a wild animal, and kittens are so darn cute you couldn’t just leave it in the woods to die, so I guess you did the right thing.”

“So I can take it to the vet?”

“Yes, if you’re careful not to hurt it getting it there. Even a bandit cat cub can probably give a serious bite if it tries.”

It was apparent to Alex that her mother had immediately jumped to the conclusion that the bandit cat was a kitten or a cub or whatever they were called. After all, like Taylor said, I’d have to be crazy to mess with a full-grown bandit cat. She’d just let Mom go on thinking it was a kitten until she got it fixed up and back home. Then she’d deal with the truth. “So I can take it to the vet?”

“Yes, just be careful. I’ll call the vet and tell her you’re coming.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mom. Bye.”

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Alex, Chuffer, and the bandit cat had made slow but steady progress while Alex was talking to Taylor and her Mother so it wasn’t long before she came out of the woods and into the pasture just north of the house. She could see Taylor sitting in one of the porch chairs and she headed Chuffer toward the barn. It had occurred to Alex while heading home that she could use the garden cart to get the cat to the vet, if it would just stay calm going through the jump-gate at home and riding in the cart for the two blocks between the town jump-gate and the vet’s office.

When she pulled Chuffer and the travois she had made without knowing its name through the barn door, Taylor was standing there waiting for her. She looked curiously at the bandit cat and the bandit cat looked at her.

Taylor broke into a smile. “I can mind-link with it. It’s hurting, but happy. Can you feel that?”

“Yeah. That’s what I’ve been getting all the way home. Help me get these poles undone and on the ground. Then we’ll see if it’ll let you get close enough for a little petting.”

“Well, I’m not sure I want to do that just yet, but I’ll help you with the poles.”

Alex climbed down off of Chuffer and started untying the polycord. Taylor worked on the other side. When they both had the poles untied, Alex signaled for Taylor to lower her pole. The bandit cat watched while the poles were lowered gently to the ground but didn't make a move to get out of the jacket.

Alex bent down and ruffed under the big cat's chin while she slowly pulled the zipper down on the jacket. The cat just stayed on the jacket and Alex went to get the lawn cart that was leaning against the barn wall.

"Taylor, I'm going to send an image to the cat of getting off the jacket and into the garden cart. Can you grab the jacket when it gets up and put it in the bottom of the cart?"

Taylor's eyes went wide. "If it doesn't bite me when I get that close. Does it really do what you tell it?"

"Well, it's not like telling it. It's more like making a picture in my mind of what I want it to do."

"Okay, I'll try."

Alex concentrated on sending the cat an image of it getting up off the jacket, Taylor taking the jacket off the ground and putting it in the cart, the cat jumping up into the cart, and the cat then lying back down on the jacket. Alex really focused, and in less than a minute, the cat got up and moved off the jacket while Taylor picked it up and put it in the cart. When the jacket was in the cart, the bandit cat gave its little three-legged jump again and settled onto the jacket.

"Is that what you were telling it to do, Alex?"

"Exactly. Now we have to get the cat through the gate and into the vet's office. Let's go."

Alex started pushing the four-wheeled cart slowly toward the barn doors. She smiled while glancing back over her shoulder toward Taylor. "Now we see if the cat freaks out when we take it through the gate and into the center of town."

Alex told Taylor to mind-link with the cat and think gentle and calming thoughts. Alex had Buzzy open the big outside door to the home jump-gate room that they used when something big and heavy was going through the gate. The gate itself was right on the plascrete floor, so there was no problem rolling the garden cart right through when the green light came on.

Getting out of the town's gate center and down the street to the vet's with a full-grown bandit cat in a garden cart wasn't quite so uneventful. Bandit cats weren't known for being friendly, and people couldn't help being both curious and frightened by the sight of two young girls pushing one through a jump-gate and then down the street in a garden cart. Alex actually heard Mrs. Murphy mumble "curiouser and curiouser" as she passed them on the street.

The vet was waiting for them as Alex pushed in through the front door while Taylor held it open. Ms. Marler's eyes went wide as she saw the full-grown bandit cat in the cart, but she didn't say anything, just motioned for Alex to go through the double doors into the examining room. The bandit cat continued to be as calm as it was throughout the whole trip. Only its eyes moved, not missing anything that was going on around it. That is, until the vet moved up to it.

As Ms. Marler moved close, the cat's lips curled back and a low but audible snarl filled the room. "A little jumpy out of the woods I see. Your mother said it was a kitten, but this is a fifty-kilo, female bandit cat. I'd say only about a year old, but full-grown. She'll be

having cubs in the next season. It's amazing you got it through the gate and all the way here without it jumping down and running off, broken leg or not. At least that's what your mother told me—a broken leg."

Alex sent a message of calm to the big cat and an image of the vet petting it.

The cat calmed down with Alex's soothing images and the vet moved toward the cat again with a hypo-spray in hand. "I'm just going to give her a little tranquilizer to calm her down and put her just under consciousness while I set her leg. You were right, it's definitely broken, but it doesn't look bad."

As she was talking, the vet got her hand around to the back of the cat's neck and Alex could hear the hypo-spray empty into its skin. The cat flinched when the spray went off, but Alex kept sending her calming feelings through her link. Almost like an image on a computer's view-screen that just got turned off, the mental link between Alex and the bandit cat just faded away.

The vet watched as the cat's head drooped onto her forepaws, and then she reached over and pulled the lid up on one eye. "She's out for a while. Let's get that leg set and into a quick-heal cast before she wakes up." The vet called the attendant to help get the bandit cat on the examination table and then went to work with Alex and Taylor watching every move.

As the vet finished with the cast and stripped off her gloves, Alex came out of her watch mode and into her questioning one. "Ms. Marler, why would someone set those horrible traps in the woods to catch wild animals? If they wanted to catch them, why wouldn't they use a trap that wouldn't hurt them so much? How can we find out who's setting these traps and stop them? Will the Colonial Administration do anything to stop the people from setting the . . ."

"Whoa there, young lady. That's a lot of questions. First, it's no mystery about why the traps are being set. There've been a series of lamb and calf kills by local carnivores over the last few months, probably by one type of wildcat or another, and the Colonial Council has declared a bounty for all Shangri-La bandit cats, lanthers, and Shangri-lions killed in the eastern section of New Dakota."

Alex looked confused. "What's a . . . a bounty?"

The vet smiled, looking first at Alex and then at Taylor. "That's where the Administration pays hunters to kill certain types of animals that are preying on livestock or are damaging the environment. The bounty's been in place now for almost two weeks."

Alex was clearly disappointed with this information, but she was far from defeated. "Do they have to use such cruel traps? Why can't they catch the cats and take them to some other part of the continent where there isn't any livestock?"

This time the vet looked a little upset when she answered. "You certainly are full of questions. The council considered just that approach. In fact, your mother was the one who brought it up. But when the council found out that it would cost ten times as much to have a catch and release program than to just have the marauding cats killed, and that the citizens of Shangri-La and not New Frontier Development would be paying for whatever plan they chose, they voted for the bounty."

Alex responded immediately and strongly. "That's just not right."

Taylor chipped in to add her vote. "Yeah."

"Well, that's the way it is, girls, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Alex didn't respond with words but the vet sure got an icy stare—from both of them.

After a minute of silence with the vet checking the monitor that was on the wall above the bandit cat's examination table, Alex asked, "When can my cat go home?"

The vet looked surprised. "Home? Surely you don't plan to try and keep this cat at your house. It's a wild animal and dangerous at that. It could have killed you, you know. You'll have to put it back in the woods, and the quick-heal cast I put on her will drop off in a few days all by itself."

Alex's icy stare continued. "I won't let her go back in the woods until I'm sure she's well and can take care of herself. And I'm going to do something to stop those cruel wildcat hunters."

This time the icy stare came from the vet as she walked out of the examining room in a huff. "The cat will be awake in a few minutes. Take her wherever you want. I have other patients to see."

## Chapter 2

The trip home had been less eventful than the one into town. When the bandit cat had shown signs of waking up, they went out into the waiting room and got the vet's assistant to help them move the cat off the table and back into the garden cart. Taylor was quite a bit smaller than Alex, and Alex wasn't sure even she could lift her half of the cat off the table and safely into the cart. The cat had been groggy all the way home, staying curled in the bottom and almost completely covered by Alex's jacket. Most people didn't even notice her, but they did think it strange that two girls were pushing a garden cart through the town jump-gate.

Alex hadn't been sure what to do with the bandit cat when she got her home, but she knew that putting her in the barn with the horses wouldn't work. She decided that she would keep the cat in her room until Mom and Dad came home from work and they could figure out something.

They had to wait almost an hour before the cat could get out of the cart and walk. Even the two of them together couldn't lift her. She and Taylor got some old blankets and built a little nest in the corner of Alex's bedroom, and the cat finally showed signs of being alert again. They took turns petting her, and she never seemed to run out of rumbles to reward them for their efforts.

Alex had been concentrating hard on trying to pick a name for the cat, but whenever she tried to convey the concept of a name over her mental link, all she got was an image of blowing trees and grass. "When I try to ask her what her name is, I keep getting the same image. You try, Taylor, and see what you get."

Taylor stopped petting the cat and concentrated just like Alex had done. After a few minutes, she said, "All I get is pictures of the wind blowing trees and prairie grass. What did you get?"

"The same thing as . . . I know, I'll call her Windy. That must be what she's trying to tell us."

"How are you there, Windy. Are you feeling better?"

Windy just rumbled and pushed her head harder into Alex's hand, her eyes half closed.

"Windy," Taylor said. "I like that. I'll bet she can run like the wind when she's well."

About that time, there was a knock on the door and Alex's Mom stuck her head into the room. She gave a little start when she saw the full-grown bandit cat lying on a heap of old blankets in the corner, but Alex's Mom wasn't afraid of animals, even wild ones. She

came in and sat on the edge of the bed. “Alex, you know you have a dangerous wild animal in your bedroom, don’t you?”

“Mom, she’s not dangerous. Listen to this and tell me if you think she’s dangerous.” Alex reached down and scruffed under Windy’s chin, and Windy responded with a purr loud enough to be heard in the next room.

“Well, she likes to be rubbed. That’s for sure, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t dangerous.”

“I can mind-link with her Mom and know what she’s thinking, and she knows what I’m thinking . . . sort of. That’s how I got her to come with me to the vet. Ask Taylor how nice she’s been. Not a bite or a scratch or a snarl, except at the vet. She didn’t seem to like Ms. Marler very much, but she really likes me and Taylor. And Taylor can link her mind with Windy too. It’s not just me. I told you Taylor said she was linking with her kitten just like me and Tipper. I know you and Dad just think it’s some kind of bonding, but it’s real and when I . . .”

“Alex, I’ll be honest with you. To see two girls in a closed room with a wounded wild animal that is bigger than they are and that acts like nothing unusual is going on when they pet it is very, very strange. I’m very confused, as well as concerned.”

“She, Mom, not it. The vet said she’s female, about a year old. And now she has a name, Windy, because that’s what both Taylor and I see when we link with her and ask her name—the wind blowing trees and prairie grass. Isn’t that right, Taylor?”

Taylor nodded her head in the affirmative but didn’t enter the conversation between Alex and her mother.

“Can I keep her in my room, Mom? Just until she’s well? I know I have to let her go when her leg is well. Can I, Mom? I can’t put her in the barn with the horses. Even Chuffer gets spooky when she’s around.”

Alex’s mother looked at the apparently contented bandit cat and back to Alex’s eager face. “We’ll talk with Dad about it when he gets home. It ought to be a family decision.”

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Alex was the first to start the dinner conversation, because she wanted to keep it focused on the only thing that mattered to her now. “Mom, the vet said the council had voted to put a bounty on the big cats and that you had recommended using traps that didn’t hurt them and moving them someplace else.”

“I did. After we had seen the pictures that Ms. Marler presented showing the half-eaten lambs and calves and telling how she had tracked the blood trails from the pastures to the woods, we had to do something. The ranchers were insistent that they couldn’t take those kinds of losses and still make a profit. And I knew, even if the rest of the council didn’t, that a few livestock-killing cats could become all the cats if they weren’t stopped somehow. The same thing happened to pioneer ranchers when they moved into new, wild country on Earth. Of course, on Earth, the ranchers also learned that you couldn’t just kill all the predators, either. If you did that, the wild grazing animals, like deer, would grow in numbers until they were eating all the grass that the sheep and cattle needed. You have to maintain a reasonable balance in any ecology. And I know you’ve been studying that this last year in school.”

“I know, Mom, but how could you and Dad vote for a bounty without any rules on how the animals were to be killed. I know we kill animals like cattle, sheep, and pigs to eat.

We're not vegetarians, and I like meat. But that's different somehow." Alex looked up at her Mother, "Isn't it?"

Sharon reached over the table to grab her daughter's hand. "Yes, it's very different. Killing any living thing has to be judged right or wrong based on the reason for the killing, not on the act itself. Nature is the living and dying of all things in a pattern that supports life. Some things have to die so other things can live. That's the pattern of life on all the planets."

Jim added his less scientific explanation to the conversation. "And while it's necessary to thin the population of big cats in the woods surrounding the settlement so they can have enough food to live just by hunting the other wild animals they've always hunted, it doesn't mean it's right to kill them in a way that makes them suffer. Your mother and I were elected to the council, and we should have been firmer in our opposition to an unrestricted bounty, even if it does cost more to use humane methods for getting rid of the bandit cats. There's a council meeting tomorrow night, and your mother and I will do our best to get some restrictions put on the hunting."

"You know, Jim, there's a rumor in the Bio-safety Department that the hunters brought in by the ranchers are getting more than just the bounty on the big cats they kill. According to Liz Beamer in exports, the hunters are paying an export tax on the furs that's a lot more than they get from the bounty. That means they're selling the furs somewhere for a lot of money."

Jim Martin pushed back in his chair. His face was stern and worried. Alex had seen it many times before. It was his "I'm being your responsible father now" face. It was not a face Alex was ever happy to see. "First, we'll do what we can at the council meeting tomorrow night. Second, I know you didn't lie to your mother, but you led her to believe that you were taking a kitten to the vet, so . . ."

"I didn't led . . . uh, lead Mom to believe anything. I just didn't correct her when she assumed that I was talking about a kitten. That's not the same as lying to her. I wouldn't do that."

"That's a lie of omission, where you avoid telling the truth although you don't tell an untruth. We've talked about that before."

Alex's head was down, looking at her plate. She shoved a piece of broccoli around with her fork. "It's just not the same," she mumbled.

Sharon jumped in before Jim could respond to Alex's comment. "She's right, Jim. It was my fault for jumping to the conclusion that she could only be talking about a bandit cat cub. Alex was totally focussed on getting me to let her take the cat to the vet. She probably wasn't paying any attention to what I thought, only that I said it was okay."

Jim looked across the table at Alex. "Is that the way it was?"

Now Alex was in a box. If she was really going to lie, this is where she'd have to do it. But she couldn't, even though Mom was sticking up for her. She'd have to take her chances. "No, Mom, I knew you thought it was just a kitten, but I was afraid you'd say no if you knew it was a full-grown bandit cat. There was no way you could know how sweet Windy was and that she wouldn't hurt me for anything. I'm sorry."

Jim looked questioningly at Sharon and she gave a little assenting nod. He turned to Alex. "Well, honesty does pay. You can keep Windy until she's well and if she continues to behave, but then you have to let her go back into the woods."

"In my room?"

Again Jim looked to Sharon for an assent and got it. "Yes, in your room. Your mother's the biologist and she seems to think that the cat is safe to be around for some unknown reason. I'm not quite so sure, but your mother seems to think there might be something to this mind-linking thing with animals that you keep talking about. It sounds weird to me, but I'm just a geologist."

Alex jumped up from her chair and ran to her father, grabbing him around the neck. "Oh, Dad. Thank you."

Then she ran over to grab her mother. "And you too, Mom. I've got to go tell Windy."

As she started running toward the dining room door, her mother called out. "You've hardly touched your dinner."

"I'm not hungry, Mom. Just happy."

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The next afternoon when she had finally finished with on-line school for the day, she took off her virtual visor and had Buzzy get Taylor, Madeline, and Megan on a four-way, visual netlink. Buzzy brought Taylor on line first. She was propped up in her bed by a stack of pillows with a reader in her lap. Then Buzzy pasted in images of Megan and Madeline still sitting in their study-desk chairs. Alex knew that all three of them could see her through her computer camera just like she could see them, but she didn't know how they had told their personal computers to set up multiple visual links, so she didn't know exactly what they were seeing.

"Hey, I want to remind you that school's over for this week, and I know you must have been finished with lessons before I was today. I just couldn't concentrate for thinking about having to put Windy back in the woods. She likes it here with me, I can tell. And I sure like her with me, but her leg's almost well now. Mom told me that a quick-heal cast only takes about four days for people and that wild animals on Shangri-La heal even faster than animals on Earth."

Taylor was quick to try and make Alex feel better about Windy. "I'll bet when you let her go, Alex, she'll just stay in the woods around your house and always be there whenever you want to see her. Besides, you said yesterday that you could still mind-link with her when you went to town with your mother, and that's thirty-two kilometers from your house, according to Rosebud." Rosebud was Taylor's personal.

"I know, but I'd rather have her in my room with me. Mom says I have to take her back to the vet tomorrow for a checkup before I let her go. She also said that Windy was losing weight because she didn't eat enough for a big cat. When I asked Windy why she didn't eat more, she told me that Earth animals didn't smell right and that bandit cats would never choose to eat Earth animals when there were plenty of la-deer and hoppers in the woods."

"Well, some of them must like sheep and cows," said Megan, "or they wouldn't be killing them and dragging them into the woods."

"It's got to be a lot easier than trying to chase a hopper through the woods for dinner," added Madeline. "They're just standing there in the pasture."

"Well, Windy says that bandit cats don't eat Earth animals, and I believe her. But even if they did, it's no reason to kill them, and it's certainly no reason to put those cruel traps in the woods. I'm not going to let Windy back in the woods while those traps are out there. We've got to go out there and find them all and take them to the recycler in town.

“Are y’all up for a little scouting expedition tomorrow to find all the traps in the woods around here?”

Megan answered first. “If, when we get your woods clear, we all come to my house and get the traps out of mine.”

“Same for me,” Madeline said.

“And same for me,” said Taylor.

“Cool. Everybody gate over about nine o’clock, and we’ll pet Windy a little and then go in the woods. See ya.”

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The girls were sticking close enough to the edge of the pasture so that they could see the fence posts from time to time. They couldn’t see the two strands of wire that were enough to keep the livestock from wandering into the woods and getting lost. Alex had asked why they didn’t put up fences that were tall enough and had small enough holes to keep the bandit cats out of the pastures and she’d gotten the same answer from her father that she got about the traps. It would cost too much. So she asked why they didn’t use electronic fences like they used for sea farms, and she got the same answer again. The grown-ups, or “grups” as the kids called them, really seemed into the money thing.

They were all walking slowly and keeping an eye open for traps. They were all on an audio link and Alex could hear Megan through her earbud, mumbling to herself about getting soaked from the still dew-damp branches she was brushing through. Madeline had her camera out and seemed to be taking pictures of everything they passed. Taylor had her head down and her mind focused on the ground immediately in front of her.

Alex was a little in the lead and stopped as they came out on top of a little hill that looked across a finger of pasture that poked into the woods ahead of them. As she looked at the woods on the other side of that finger of pasture, she thought she saw movement along the fence line. She spoke softly to the girls. “Slow it down and work your way over to me. I see something moving ahead of us.”

As she watched, two people came right up near the edge of the woods. One of the hunters was carrying a big pack on his back that looked heavy from the way it sagged and made his shoulders droop. In a minute, the hunter carrying the pack turned his back to the other hunter, who reached into it and took out one of the leg traps just like the one that had caught Windy. He set it on the ground and put his left foot on it. Then he pulled the jaws open with both hands until there was a snap that she could hear faintly across the finger of pasture. Placing the open trap carefully on the ground, he then whisked some leaves over it to make it blend into the background.

The hunter that had placed the trap pointed down the fence line and said something to the other hunter that Alex couldn’t hear. Then they both moved back a little way into the woods and started in the direction that had been pointed out. When the men started moving away, Alex motioned for the girls to pull back from the edge of the woods.

Safely back where they couldn’t be heard, Alex spoke, but softly just to be sure. “It’s got to be the hunters. All we have to do is follow them and pick up the traps as they put them down.”

“You make it sound so easy,” said Megan. “We don’t have a pack to put the traps in, and those things are heavy.”

“But there’s four of us,” Alex responded, and Megan gave her a cold stare.

“Yeah, and they’re twice as big as we are. It won’t be easy.”

Alex ignored Megan’s last comment and called for Madeline, who was taking pictures of the hunters walking away, to follow them. She struck out to the right so they could go around the end of the finger of pasture and still stay hidden in the woods. It was also the most likely place where the hunters had placed traps before they saw them. They were all watching closely where they stepped.

Megan chipped away again. “What we need is a bottle of Shangri-lion pee to spray around the traps. The bandit cats wouldn’t even go close to them then, or anything else you sprayed it on. That way we wouldn’t have to go to all the trouble to spring the traps and carry them out. The hunters would never figure out why the traps didn’t catch anything.”

As usual, Alex was getting to her Megan limit. “Great idea, Megan. Just where do we go to get some Shangri-lion pee. You got some at home just sittin’ around?”

Taylor found the first trap. “Over here. I’ve got one.”

The girls converged on Taylor who pointed to a pile of leaves in the middle of a small game trail. There was just a corner of a leg trap visible. This time Alex was prepared with a few tools. She took out the hearth brush she’d taken from beside the big fireplace in the living room. It had been banging her leg in the deep cargo pocket of her pants since they had started walking. She knelt down and carefully brushed away the leaves. When the whole trap was clear, she straightened her other leg and fished a heavy screwdriver out of the other cargo pocket. She had gone back into the woods the day after she had found Windy in the trap and brought it home to her Dad. He had spent some time looking at how it worked and then showed her the little tab that triggered the spring without closing the jaws.

Alex put the tip of the screwdriver on the spring tab of the trap and they could all hear the spring snap, but it wasn’t nearly as loud as the jaws flying shut. Alex reached down and picked up the trap. “Taylor, you carry the first one. We can all take at least two.”

Taylor picked up the trap with a visible strain, but she didn’t say anything, and Alex motioned for them to move on, but Madeline stopped them with a question. “What’s that little button up there on the tree where the trap was?”

Alex walked back and tentatively put her finger on the gray button, jerking it away quickly in case it bit or shocked her. When nothing happened, she tried to pull the button off the tree so she could look at it close up. There had been a long thin pin behind it that was holding it on the tree trunk, but it came off easily in Alex’s hand.

Alex turned the button over in her hand, carefully not to stick herself with the pin in its back. “Looks like an electronic sensor, sort of like the ones they put on the cow’s ear so you can find them if they wander off.”

“It’s a locator for the traps,” Megan said. “That’s how they find the traps when they come back to see what they caught.”

“Right on, Megan. I think you got it. Buzzy, can you tell what frequency the sensor in my hand is operating on, and can you tune to it and locate any others in the area?”

Buzzy answered through Alex’s earbud. “It operates on the ultra-high frequency band, and I have already tuned to the frequency. There are nine other transmitters within a half kilometer radius. I can provide directions to guide you to them.”

“Buzzy, you’re the best.”

Alex filled the others in on her conversation with Buzzy and Megan had another idea.

“What if we just take their electronic locators and then make sure the traps are covered up real well. When the hunters come back to check their traps they might even step in one. They’d think twice about putting out traps again after having one of their own traps smash *their* leg.”

“It would serve them right, and we wouldn’t have to carry these heavy traps,” said Taylor.

Madeline and Alex joined in the general conversation urging justice for the hunters, but after a few minutes of excitement, Alex brought them back to the reality of the situation. “If we leave the traps, we might catch a hunter, which would be good. But we might also get a lot of bandit cats caught too, and that’s what we’re out here trying to stop.”

That quieted them all down, and they started off again, but this time following Buzzy’s directions as translated by Alex’s hand signals. In no time, they had nine traps in hand, but Buzzy had informed Alex that three more transmitters had been activated as they were picking up traps. That meant that the hunters had set a dozen traps, and Buzzy hadn’t indicated any new transmitters going on line in the last ten minutes.

As they neared the twelfth trap, Alex told the girls quietly through their earbuds that they needed to be silent and stealthy, because the hunters might be nearby.

The last trap was also on a hill that overlooked the pasture and there was a large flock of sheep grazing contentedly near the fence. Alex came up behind a thick bush at the edge of the woods and looked around. About a hundred meters down the hill and to the right along the fence line, Alex saw one of the hunters creeping up to a big tree, right near the fence. He had something in his hand that looked like a rifle, but it had a little bow on the end of it.

Madeline was standing right next to her taking videos with her camera and Alex got around behind her where she could see the screen through the zoom setting that Madeline was using. Megan had moved up behind Alex where she could also see the screen. Rising up on her tiptoes, she whispered in Alex’s ear. “That’s a crossbow. I read about them. The old knights in armor used them to attack castles. They shoot short little arrows.”

As the last words came out of Megan’s mouth, a little crossbow bolt flew from the end of the crossbow and a lamb fell without a sound in the pasture close to the hunter. As soon as the lamb fell, the other hunter, that Alex hadn’t even seen, came out of the woods a few feet from the hunter behind the tree. He bent over at the fence and went between the two wires and over to the fallen lamb. He gave a small push with his foot in the lamb’s belly, but there was no response. The hunter pulled a knife from a sheath on his belt and cut the lamb around the neck, then picked up its two back legs, one in each hand, and started dragging it back to the fence. The picture from the camera made the blood trail spilling from the cuts on the lamb a bright red on the pasture grass.

When the hunter had the lamb at the fence, the other hunter took one leg and they dragged it back out of sight into the woods. The girls could hear faint laughter from the hunters.

Alex sat and was soon surrounded by the other girls. “That’s how the livestock are making blood trails into the woods. It’s not the bandit cats, it’s the hunters. They must be eating the lambs and calves, collecting the bounty, and selling the fur.”

All the girls had looks of disbelief on their faces. “That is *so* wrong,” Alex said.

“I’ll bet the cats haven’t killed any sheep at all,” Taylor said.

“The hunters are killing the sheep and probably the calves, and I’ve got it all on a video chip,” Madeline said.

“We can’t let them get away with this,” Megan said. “We have to do something.”

They all nodded affirmatively to Megan’s comment, but Alex put their thoughts into words. “Yeah, but what can we do? We’re just four girls against two mean hunters with a crossbow. If they see us, it could get dangerous.”

They all shook their heads again, and then there was a silence. Finally, Alex got up and turned to the girls. “Come on, this polycord I’ve got my traps tied to is cutting into my shoulder. We need to think about this more and decide what we can do. Maybe we should show Madeline’s videos to our parents and get them to do something. I just don’t know.”

There was a general agreement with Alex’s uncertainty about what to do as they walked back towards Alex’s house, and nobody came up with any good ideas all the way there. There was, however, a continuing stream of comments about how heavy the traps were, and how the polycord was cutting into hands and shoulders, along with a lot of shifting around of the traps.

When they finally arrived, Madeline uploaded her pictures to Alex’s home computer and then Alex downloaded them to Taylor’s, Megan’s and her own personals. They were all kind of quiet as the girls gated back to their homes, but they had promised to get back together again in the morning with whatever input they got from their parents.

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The trip back to the vet was pretty uneventful. Both Alex and Taylor were linked to Windy and projecting calm and her staying under the blanket where no one could see her. They made it all the way without anyone guessing there was a fifty-kilo bandit cat in the garden cart. Of course, just the garden cart got more than a few stares of wonder.

The attendant at the vet’s took them back to the examining room, where they parked the cart right next to the examination table. In a few minutes Ms. Marler came in. That triggered the only sound out of Windy since the trip started—a low-pitched snarling. Alex sent her a shushing thought and she quieted.

Windy was on her left side with the blanket pulled back, so the leg with the cast was right where the vet could run the portable scan over it. She glanced up at the screen over the examining table. “Looks completely healed. That was fast. I can take the cast off now.”

Ms. Marler started to reach for the cast but Alex could sense Windy’s mood and quickly said, “Oh no, I can do that after we get home, when she’s quieted down again.”

The vet looked around at Alex and stopped moving toward the cat. “Okay, if you prefer. Just peel those two red strips back and the rest of the cast pops right off. Do you have any questions?”

Alex looked at Taylor and then back to the vet. “Well, we were in the woods this morning and we got some videos we’d like your opinion on, if you have time.”

“Videos of what?” the vet said in a disinterested way.

“Of the hunters that set the traps like the one that caught Windy—that’s the name I gave her.”

The vet’s interest definitely perked up when Alex told her who the videos showed. “Yes, I’d like to see them.”

“Can I stream them to your screen?”

The vet reached over to a keyboard beside the table and touched a few keys. “Go

ahead.”

Alex told Buzzy to do the upload and the pictures started running on the screen over the examination table. It took a little more than five minutes to run, even for the edited version Alex had made. She could tell while it was playing that the vet was getting agitated.

“Mom and Dad told me that you had presented the council with evidence that the livestock animals were being killed by the big cats, and it certainly looked like that with the blood trail going into the woods. But you can see that the hunters were the ones killing the lambs, and we guess they killed the calves, too. It looks like this whole thing was a trick by the hunters to get the bounty put on so they could get paid for killing the bandit cats and then selling their furs to make even more money. We wanted your recommendation as to what we could do to convince the council that it isn’t the cats that are killing the livestock, but the hunters.”

The vet’s face was really screwed up, and Alex could feel that she was very angry, but her words were carefully measured. “Well, you can certainly prove with these videos that the hunters are killing the lambs, probably to sell them and make even more money while making sure the council still keeps paying the bounty and letting the hunters kill the bandit cats. I’ll show these videos to the council, and that should convince them that the hunters have invented this whole scare about the big cats killing the livestock.”

“That’s great,” said Alex. “Those traps are too heavy and dangerous for us to be going through the woods trying to find them all. We’d sure appreciate you doing that.”

“You said you took these videos just this morning?”

A “yes” came out of Alex and Taylor at the same time.

“Who else was with you? I want my report to have all the right facts.”

“It was me, and Taylor London, and Madeline Monet, and Megan Wynn.”

“Has anybody else seen these videos?”

“No, but we all plan to show our parents when they get home from work today, so we can get their advice on what to do.”

“Okay, girls. I’ll do my best to convince the council, and it should be easy with these videos.”

The girls pushed the garden cart back to the town gate and got the usual stares. Taylor stayed behind so she could go directly back to her house from there and save a jump fare. Alex rolled Windy through the town gate in the garden cart and then headed toward the barn. She pulled the blanket off of Windy when she got to the barn doors and peeled the red strips back on her cast. Just like the vet said, the cast just fell right off and into the bottom of the cart.

As soon as the cast was off Windy’s leg, she jumped down out of the cart and walked around in a big circle like she was checking out her leg. After two circles and putting out happy feelings on the link to Alex, Windy walked over and rubbed the length of her body against Alex’s leg. Then she just stood there waiting for Alex to move.

Alex told Windy to stay right where she was and sent a mental picture of her doing just that. Then she pushed the cart into the barn and into its spot along the wall. Grabbing the two pieces of the cast and the blanket, she walked out of the barn and headed for the house. “Come on, Windy, let’s take a walk until it’s time for Mom and Dad to get home. You need the exercise, and I need to think.”

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Max and Bart had come running when they got the message from the vet. It was clear that she wasn't happy, but they didn't know why. They came in the back door of the veterinary hospital so nobody would see them, just like they were told. They were waiting for the vet in the storeroom behind the examination room. Bart was really nervous. "What do you suppose the vet wants with us? She sure sounded like she was upset at something, but we ain't done nothin' we weren't supposed to do."

"Just shut up and wait. She's so spooky it's no tellin' what's eatin' her. I told you when we first talked to her about this wild . . ."

The conversation, such as it was, got interrupted by the door from the exam room opening. Ms. Marler strode in, and it was clear that she was as angry as a laverine with a knot in his tail.

"You idiots can't even put out a few traps without getting tracked by a bunch of adolescent girls? What kind of great hunters are you, anyway? I thought you two were supposed to be the best hunters on Adam's Planet."

That got Max's dander up a little. "Yeah, we were . . . are the best on Adam's and any other planet. We're doing pretty good here on Shangri-La, too. I hadn't noticed you refusing your cut of the bounty and fur sales either. And your freezer must be stuffed with meat by now, all that lamb and veal we been bringin' you."

That got a small lip curl out of Bart as he shook his head during Max's speech, but Marler wasn't through with them yet. "They not only tracked you while you were setting the traps, they picked up the traps and took them out of the woods. Then they got videos of you killing a lamb with the crossbow and dragging it into the woods. You guys aren't big hunters, you're big jerks."

"Uhh . . ."

"Just shut up and listen. I got a hacker friend of mine on Earth whose going to wipe all the videos off the girl's personals and their home computers if they put them there, but the direct gate-link from Earth to Shangri-La is costing me a fortune, all of which will be coming out of your part of the profits. That's taken care of, but if these girls come back for more videos, your job is to scare them so bad they'll forget all about trying to save a few bandit cats. Is that clear enough for you idiots?"

"Uhh, we got it."

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Alex and Windy got back home from their walk just after Alex's Mom, who was early because of the council meeting scheduled for that night. They found her in the kitchen popping packages in the microwave for dinner. "I see the leg's all healed, and I see you haven't let her go in the woods yet."

"We just got back from the woods, Mom. Windy doesn't want to leave me and go away. Do I really have to let her go?"

"I think that maybe Windy wants to be with you right now, but sooner or later, she'll want to be back in the woods. Even though she has a special feeling for you because of the mental link, she's still a wild animal with very strong instincts that will be hard to ignore. This spring will probably be her first season for having cubs, and she needs to be in the woods with the male cats for that."

"Cubs? Really, Mom. That'd be great. How many would she have?"

"The research I've done since you brought Windy home says that they usually have

two, but they can have as many as four.”

“Four is perfect, one for each of us.”

Sharon gave a chuckle. “Not so fast, Windy will probably have something to say about that. And none of you will be able to keep full-grown bandit cats as pets. They’re just too big, and most people think they’re just too dangerous.”

“I don’t care what other people think. Windy’s not dangerous, and her cubs wouldn’t be either.”

“Well, you’ll just have to wait and see what nature brings in the way of cubs, but first things first. Tomorrow, you have to let Windy go back into her natural habitat. If for no other reason, she needs to gain some of the weight back that she’s lost. If you and Windy have a special link, then my guess is that Windy won’t go far.”

Alex thought about that for a minute. She already knew that her link with Windy was still solid even when she was at Taylor’s house, and that was more than fifty kilometers away. Maybe Mom was right and Windy would be there whenever she wanted to go into the woods and see her. Maybe it would work out all right. “Okay, Mom, I’ll let her go tomorrow morning. Come on Windy, let’s go to my room until Dad gets home. I’ve got to get in as much lovin’ as I can before tomorrow morning.”

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When her father came home, also a little early, Alex got him and her mother to sit and watch the video that Madeline had made that morning. Both her mother and father were really upset seeing the hunters shoot the lamb and then cut it so that it made a bigger blood trail when they dragged it into the woods.

Sharon spoke first. “That certainly makes it clear that the livestock killing is being done by the hunters and not by the bandit cats or any other wild animals. It’s hard to believe the whole council was scammed by a couple of hunters into paying a bounty, not to mention allowing them to export the pelts and make even more money.”

“Don’t forget the lambs and calves,” Jim added. “They couldn’t leave them in the woods where they might be found, so they probably found someone that would buy them. These guys are real scum-balls.”

“Your father’s right, young lady, these are bad characters, and you and your friends were in a lot of danger just taking these videos. There’s no way to know what they might have done if they had caught you at it. You’re not to do anything that silly again. Is that clear? You do not go into the woods so far that you can’t still see the house until we get the council to clear this all up and have those two hunters sent to a Colonial Administration detention center.

“And your Dad and I want to see the video again before we show it to the council. Have Buzzy run it again.”

Alex dutifully told Buzzy to run the video again, and they all watched while the lamb fell silently in the pasture. And then there was a blank screen. “Buzzy,” Alex coaxed, “what happened to the video?”

Her earbud was silent for just a couple of seconds and then she heard Buzzy’s synthesized voice. “The video file is no longer available for viewing.”

“What do you mean? Why isn’t it available?”

“Both the original upload file and the edited version you showed to the veterinarian have been erased from the home server where they were stored.”

“Who could have erased them right while we were watching?”

“I gave no authorized access to the files that would allow erasure; therefore, I am not able to answer that question. The file was erased during an unauthorized system access.”

“You can’t tell who did it?”

“There is no longer any trace of the unauthorized access. Responsibility for the erasure cannot be determined.”

Both of Alex’s parents had heard her side of the conversation with Buzzy, but they hadn’t been able to hear Buzzy talking in her earbud, so Alex filled them in.

“A hacker,” Alex’s Dad said. “It has to be a hacker and a darn good one to get into the home system and not leave a trace. Not the sort of sophistication you’d expect from a couple of hunters.”

Sharon looked at the time on the upper right of the screen. “Well, we’ve missed dinner, if we’re going to make the council meeting on time, but I’m not hungry anyway, just mad. We know what we saw, but it will take some doing to convince the council without the video.”

Alex was quick to add a piece of new information she hadn’t thought to give her parents before they had started watching the video. “Well, Megan, Madeline, and Taylor were supposed to get their parents to watch the video tonight, too. I know they’re not on the council, but they could come to the meeting and tell the council members what they saw, couldn’t they?”

“Great idea, Alex. You call them and see if they saw it or if their copy was deleted like ours before they got to it. We’ll gate to the council meeting and get things rolling. Come on Jim, we’ve got some convincing to do.”

With that, both of Alex’s parents were up and gone to the gate room. Alex had Buzzy try for a four-way netlink. Taylor and Megan were on quickly, but according to Buzzy, Madeline’s link was in use. Alex had just started to tell Taylor and Megan what happened when Buzzy added a fast talking Madeline with the message that she had been trying to get a netlink with Alex.

“Alex, my video’s been deleted off my home system server. I started to show it to Mom, but it had hardly gotten started when the screen went blank, and when I checked with my personal, I found out that the video file had been deleted. Somebody hacked us.”

“I know, it happened to me, too, but only after Mom and Dad saw the whole thing through. They’ve gone to the council meeting to get the council to have the hunters arrested, but without the video, they don’t know if they can get the members to believe them. They were hoping some of the other parents had seen the video before it was deleted and could come to the meeting. What about your parents, Taylor? Or your parents, Megan?”

Taylor answered first. “I hadn’t been able to get my parents to even try yet. They keep telling me “later.”

“And you, Megan?”

“My parents aren’t home yet, they went to some friends for dinner. It’s just me and my brother here, and of course, I didn’t bother to show it to him, he’s always too busy for anything I want anyway.”

Alex really felt discouraged. “With Mom and Dad just talking about the video they saw, I doubt if they can convince the council to do anything. And Dad’s said more than once that even when the council decides to do something, it takes a month for it to

happen. That's not good enough. We just have to get another video and this time put it on a laser backup chip or even a chip for each one of us. That ought to be safe from hackers, but it doesn't help us now. We have to get out in the morning and take another video. Who'll go with me?"

A loud chorus of "I'll go" boomed in Alex's earbud, and Alex smiled in spite of the situation. "Okay, let's make it an hour earlier, say eight o'clock. Mom and Dad told me I could go into the woods to let Windy go, but not so far I couldn't see the house. So when you guys come over in the morning, remember, we're only going to let Windy go. Got it?"

She got another chorus. "Got it."

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Alex waited as long as she could for her parents to come home from the meeting, but Windy snuggled up on her bed making a steady purring rumble that must have finally put Alex to sleep.

When Alex woke up, the low morning light was slanting through her window and across her bed. As soon as she realized she was awake, she asked Buzzy what time it was. "The time is seven twenty-three in the morning."

"Are Mom and Dad up yet?"

"Your mother and father have been out of bed since six forty-five, when they were awakened by their own personals."

Alex knew from Buzzy's information that they must have been out late, because Dad was usually up a good half hour before Mom. She scratched Windy a few times to stop her from butting her chin for attention and rolled out of bed. She went right into the kitchen with her pajamas on and Windy trailing along behind her.

"Did the council decide to put the hunters in prison?"

Sharon and Jim looked at each other and Sharon started talking. Evidently, they had decided she was going to be the one that gave Alex the bad news. "No dear, we had some members that believed us, but no matter how much or long we tried, we just couldn't convince enough of the council to take any action without the video. They did decide that they would formally request the Colonial Administration to assign a digital forensic team to determine if someone hacked into Shangri-La computer systems. And if they find that there was a security breach, the council said it would take 'appropriate' action—whatever that is."

Jim reached over and took Alex's hand. "We're sorry, sweetie, we did all we could."

Alex wasn't really disappointed. It was exactly what she thought would happen. Adults always seemed to take forever to make decisions and get things done. Kids always went right to taking action.

"Well, thanks. You tried." Alex kept talking, changing the subject so she wouldn't give away the plans the girls had made to get another video. "The girls are coming over this morning so we can let Windy go. They all wanted to say goodbye with me. They'll be here in a few minutes, so I'm going to get some clothes on. Just send them to my room."

### Chapter 3

Alex put on her woods-walking cargo pants and a sweater and got her jacket out and ready to go. She and Windy flopped in the middle of her bed and had about a minute of hugging and rubbing before Taylor came in. Two minutes later, Madeline and Megan came

in together.

“We’re all here, so there’s no sense in putting it off. I hope we can get some more videos today of them shooting another lamb, but then I really can’t stand the idea of them shooting another lamb, and all that leaves me so confused I can hardly think. Oh, let’s just go.”

Four girls and a bandit cat trooped out of Alex’s room, through the living room, out the front door, and into the woods. They all had a look of determination on their faces, even the cat, from whom Alex could feel not one bit of sadness or upset coming through her mental link about having to go back into the woods.

This lack of feeling from Windy upset Alex even more than she already was. How could Windy not care if they were going to be apart from now on? Alex was about as distressed as she could get, but as these thoughts were going through her mind, she felt Windy rub against her leg. She could feel that Windy was purring, and soothing thoughts of the wind in the trees and prairie grass came through her link.

Alex stopped on the edge of the woods and knelt down in the scatter of leaves. She grabbed up Windy and gave her a big hug and then patted her on the rump like she was encouraging Windy to go on out into the woods. And off Windy went moving at a trot that soon had her disappearing in the underbrush.

Alex had a big smile on her face that puzzled the other three girls. Taylor was the first to say anything. “You’re happy that Windy’s going away? I thought we had to be here to cheer you up; that you’d be crying your eyes out.”

Alex looked up at Taylor and got back on her feet. “Nope. No crying. I just figured out why Windy wasn’t upset about leaving me and going back in the woods.”

“And why is that?” Madeline asked.

“Because she’s not leaving me. She’s going to always be in the woods close enough to have me in her mind and for me to have her in my mind whenever we want. Just like right now, I can’t see her, but I know she loves me and would come right to me if I asked her to do it. And she knows I would come to her if she needed me. Windy isn’t a pet; she’s a real friend, and I love her *so* much.”

With a swish of her head, Alex seemed to leave the subject of Windy altogether. “Okay, girls, let’s get on with the mission. Madeline, you walk behind us and take videos of everything we do and see. Megan, you walk on the right, a little deeper in the woods but not out of sight of me. Taylor, you walk on the left, along the fence line and just inside the woods. I’ll go in front and stay deep enough in the woods so I can just see Taylor. That’s about where we found all the traps yesterday, but Buzzy tells me there aren’t any trap locators active at the moment. And don’t forget, all of us need to keep our eyes on the ground as well as to be looking for the hunters. We don’t want to step in a trap.”

The girls spread out to their assigned places and Alex started a slow enough pace to give everybody plenty of time to be cautious about the traps. They were heading back to where they had removed the traps the day before. Alex thought the hunters might be there setting new traps.

It was quite a ways to the little hill where Madeline had taken the video of the hunters shooting the lamb with the crossbow, and it was about an hour of steady walking before Alex recognized that they were getting close. She spoke quietly over the netlink that Buzzy had maintained. “Slow up and move in towards me. We’re getting to the hill where Madeline took the videos.”

Just when Alex got close enough to the edge of the woods to be able to see down on the little finger of pasture that stuck into the woods, there was an explosion of sound as two big shapes jumped up in the brush and started toward her. It was no doubt that it was the hunters, because they were close enough that she recognized them. The smaller one was the fastest, and he caught up to Alex before she had hardly moved.

She had just enough time to get her feet planted properly, get her balance just right on her feet, lower herself into a little bit of a crouch, and bring her focus to the job at hand. Master Po Ling would be happy with how quick and natural it all felt when she needed to use the Karanji she had been practicing for the last two years.

As the fast closing hunter went to grab her, she ducked under his arm while reaching up and grabbing his wrist with her right hand and just below his elbow with her left. She twisted immediately to her right and shifted her weight to her left foot, ready to take the body-blow of the hunter moving toward her. When she felt him slam into her braced left hip, she pulled quickly down on his right arm, shifted her weight to her right foot, and tried to speed him up in his roll over her hip and into the air. As she felt his weight start to leave her hip, she let go of his arm and he sailed smack into a small jolly tree.

It was perfect, and Alex was just beginning to feel proud of how good she was when the other hunter caught her with a whack on the side of the head from the crossbow. She went face down into the leaves, with things growing dimmer as she fell.

Megan had seen the whole thing, since she started moving towards Alex as soon as she heard her tell them to close in. When she saw Alex throw the first hunter over her hip, she gave a whoop and started running as fast as she could through the brush. She desperately wanted to try her own Karanji on the other hunter. When she saw him hit Alex with the crossbow, she ran even faster.

Taylor, like Megan, was running toward Alex, but the brush was a lot thicker along the edge of the woods, and she knew she wouldn't get there as quick as Megan.

Madeline had stopped moving toward Alex as soon as the hunters sprang up and braced herself against a tree. Her video camera was getting every detail.

The first hunter was showing no signs of getting up any time soon, but Megan, Taylor, and Madeline watched in horror as the second hunter drew back his arms holding the crossbow. They all had visions of the bow coming down again on Alex's head.

Without a snap of a twig, a crunch of a leaf, or even a snarl, fifty kilos of bandit cat rose off the ground in one fluid motion, almost a blur because of the speed she was traveling. Jaws every bit as dangerous as the steel ones in the traps and capable of snapping the neck of a la-deer stopped just short of the hunter's neck and sank into the collar of his heavy hunting jacket. The speed and weight of the cat flipped the hunter's feet right off the ground, and he fell flat on his back with a crackle of brush. Windy sat right on his chest, and now she gave a loud and clearly threatening snarl through the bite she still had on his jacket collar.

Megan had finally gotten to Alex, but she was too late for any Karanji. As she slid to a stop beside Alex, she reached down and grabbed a hefty tree limb that must have come down in a recent storm. She looked past Windy, right into the hunter's dazed looking eyes, arms and tree limb over her head. "Just try and get up. Please, just try to get up."

As soon as Taylor had seen Windy take the second hunter to the ground, she had slowed down and told Rosebud to send out a mayday with the satellite coordinates of their location. As she watched the display of Alex, Megan, the two hunters, and Windy, she got

confirmation from Colony Emergency Response that the mayday was noted and help was on its way.

Madeline was still shooting video. Nothing was going unrecorded as long as she was there, and since things were calming down a little, she told her personal to send all the video she had shot this morning to Shangri-La's central server in her name. Under the circumstances, she didn't think her Mom or Dad would object to the storage charge.

Alex's dizziness finally faded, and she got to her hands and knees where she could see Windy sitting on the hunter's chest and Megan standing over him with the tree limb in her hands. As she started to get to her feet, Alex felt a hand on her shoulder. "Just sit right there for a while. No need to get up. I sent a mayday to Emergency Response and they're on their way. I also had Rosebud send a message to all our parents that told them the emergency team was on their way, but that none of us were hurt. I lied about you, but I didn't want them to worry, and you look like you're going to be okay."

"I don't know. My head really hurts, and I feel all wobbly just sitting here. I wish I could hug Windy, but she looks busy at the moment."

Taylor smiled. "Yeah. I think we need to let her concentrate on what she's doing until the emergency people get here."

It took about fifteen minutes for the Emergency Response team to show up and another ten minutes for both her Mom and Dad to ride up on their horses. Jim and Sharon had come through the pasture and jumped off the horses at the fence. They were kneeling beside Alex a minute after their feet hit the ground.

Alex was sitting propped up against a jully tree with her right arm around Windy, and she started talking as soon as her parents got close enough to hear her. "I'm okay, Mom, the medic says I just got a big bump on the head, but it doesn't look like anything serious."

"Alex, I thought we made it clear you were not . . ."

"Not now, Jim. How did you get the bump on the head?"

"The hunter hit me with the crossbow."

"Hit you?" Jim jumped up. "Where is he?"

"The emergency team tied them up and put them in the big lenscar. They're taking them back to town. Madeline showed the team leader the videos she took, and Megan just kept on talking about the hunters shooting the lamb yesterday and hitting me, and setting traps, and on and on. You could see that the leader and the whole team were really mad. I guess that scared the hunters because they said that the whole idea was the vet's, and that she was getting most of the money."

"Of course," Sharon said like a switch had turned on in her head. "The vet was the only person except for the girls and their families that knew about the video. She had to be the one that hacked the files or had someone else hack them. Nobody else knew they existed. Why didn't we think of that last night?"

"You were probably too upset to think straight, Mom. So was I. But everything's okay now."

Her Dad looked down at Alex and then at Windy sitting still with Alex's arm draped over her broad shoulders. "I see you didn't let Windy go back into the woods."

"Oh, I did, Dad. She just didn't go far, and it turned out to be a good thing. Wait 'til you see Madeline's video of Windy coming to the rescue. I just saw it a few minutes ago. She was awesome."

Alex hugged Windy close. Windy rumbled.