

After The Ending: Allie's Tail

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I cannot believe she made me wear this sweater for the party. Jessica called it “Friendsgiving” or something stupid like that. She invited seven of her people over, and now they are all oohing and ahing about the little turkeys and pumpkins covering me. It’s embarrassing, truly. I’m doing what I can to spend my time in other rooms, but Jess keeps dragging me back out into the living room to mingle. To show my displeasure, I find the one who is clearly most uncomfortable with my presence and sit on the sofa pressed against her leg. Some people just don’t like cats, I guess.

I think she called this one Rachel, but it makes no difference to me, and I rub my head on her black pants as she sneezes. I purr in satisfaction as Jessica shouts, “Allie, get off the sofa and leave her alone! I’m so sorry, Rachel, I know you’re allergic...”

Even after I meander into the kitchen, hoping someone will drop some turkey, Rachel is still sneezing. She’s really sounding quite unwell. I purr inwardly and feel somewhat vindicated for my humiliating wardrobe.

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“Marie, are you sure?” Jessica is speaking in a near whisper through the phone. The hair on my back stands on end as I listen. “She was just here a few days ago! How can she be...dead? She wasn’t even that sick when she was here! I thought she was just allergic to Allie,” she continues, horrified. She turns away from the phone and coughs into her elbow.

“How are you feeling?” she continues to Marie. After a pause for the answer, she says, “Yeah, I’m not feeling so great, either, clearly. I hope we don’t have this flu. Make sure you take care of yourself, and get to the hospital if it gets any worse!”

As she hangs up, I meow questioningly up at her. She bends down to pet my head. With a reassuring tone, she says, “Don’t worry, sweet girl. Everything is going to be okay. Let’s go curl up on the couch. You always help me feel better.”

I purr and circle her legs while she makes some tea. She settles on the well-worn sofa that definitely proves that she has a cat with the long scratch marks and the permanently embedded cat hair in the fabric. I like to remind visitors that I don’t like to share. Wrapping a blanket tightly around her, she pats her legs, the signal for me to jump up.

I know she doesn’t feel good, but I actually love it when Jess is sick. She stays home and will sit on the sofa with me for hours while she watches tv and sleeps. Any times she leaves the apartment, she tells me that she has to go “work,” whatever that means, so she can buy me more food and toys. I do like those things, but I wish she’d just stay and pet me all day. I love my human, even if the Cat Code says I can’t show it all the time.

I purr contentedly in her lap as she absentmindedly pets my head and down my back while she watches Gilmore Girls for the hundredth time. My ears perk up at the sound of her name, when I know there are no other humans in the apartment. She seems unconcerned and makes no effort to answer this voice, so I nestle in further and purr. Eventually she falls into a restless sleep, and I move onto her chest to keep her warmer as the room grows darker and those fast-talking women chatter in the background.

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I am rudely awakened and release a growl of annoyance as Jessica throws me off of her, clawing at the blanket to unwrap herself. She lurches toward the bathroom and vomits into the shiny white chair I sit on while she does her makeup in the mornings. Why is she sitting in the floor?

I butt my head into her arm. She looks up and groans but scratches me behind the ear a few times before resuming the violent exodus of her stomach contents. I wait patiently by the door while she scrubs her teeth and gets in the shower.

When she finally gets out, I meow to remind her that I haven't been fed recently. She fills up my bowl with the little dry nuggets. In her weakened state, she doesn't even close the plastic box. Score! I wait until she walks away and immediately dunk my head into the fresher food. Jessica heads to the kitchen and stares absently into the cabinets. I hear her stomach churning. She settles on another mug of tea and sinks heavily back into the sofa.

She turns on the news, and I hear them say in dramatic news voice, "The death toll of this new flu is climbing at an alarming rate. It is indiscriminately killing – the elderly and infants, but also young, healthy college students, regardless of vaccination status. Already in some communities the deaths are hitting 13% of the population. CDC experts warn that this number will likely get much higher in the coming weeks. They urge those who are sick to stay home." Jessica gasps. Another voice adds, "Hospitals are overrun with the sick. If you are sick, please stay where you are. Drink lots of fluids and minimize symptoms as much as possible. I repeat, please do not go to your local hospitals at this time."

She is petting me absentmindedly again while her eyes and attention are glued to the television. Her phone starts making the little chime sound that leads to talking. She lowers the volume and picks up her phone. She says, "Hi, Mom. How are you and Joe doing?" She sounds weak and tired. I can hear her mom's concern inside the phone. "Yes, Mom, I'm doing fine. I'm resting, drinking lots of tea, and Allie is taking good care of me. Yes, we'll be fine. No, I won't go to the hospital. Yes, I'll lock the doors and windows. I absolutely will not call Andrew to take care of me. I have plenty of food. You and Joe take care of yourselves, too, okay? I'll call you when I'm feeling better. I love you."

As soon as she ends the call, she tosses the phone on the sofa, narrowly missing me and earning a hiss. She rushes again to the bathroom and the shiny white chair.

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After quite some time, Jessica still has not returned to the sofa. I pad my way to the bathroom, where I find her laying on the floor with a towel rolled up under her head. I meow as I get close to her, and she opens her eyes and lifts her head slightly. "Come here, sweet girl. I love you. Stay here with me," she whispers. I curl up against her chest, feeling the warmth coming from her. She's too warm. She pets my head weakly and lays her head back down on the towel.

The petting stops, and her hand is resting on my back. Something feels wrong. I don't feel the vibration in her chest anymore. I don't understand, but I scoot closer to Jessica and try to sleep.

When I wake up, I know something is wrong. Jessica still hasn't moved. No vibrations still. And now, she's cold. Very cold. Too cold. I wriggle out from beneath her hand and meow at her. Nothing. I meow more with no response. I butt my head into her nose. Nothing. I paw her hand, even scratching just a little. Nothing. I'm confused and sad, but nothing I do seems to get her attention.

I stay with her as long as I can, but I eventually have to go to the litter box. When I return to the door, she's still not moving, so I go sit on the sofa to wait. Hours pass. She's missed dinner time. Fortunately, she never did put the lid back on the food, so I help myself to some nuggets and a drink from my fountain.

I check on her again. She's still not responding. What's going on? Jess never ignores me this long. I jump on her side to sit on her arm. She's not feeling nearly as soft as she usually does. I sniff the air – boy, could she use a shower. I hope she'll get up soon and take one.

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It has been many days since Jessica last moved. She's soft again, but her stench is worse than my litter box, which is almost unusable it is so foul. I don't go into the bathroom anymore.

The news on the television was on for several days after she got cold. The last thing they said was that the death toll was now estimated to be 63% in some areas, whatever that means. Then for a few more days there was only a hissing kind of sound and a mesmerizing moving pattern on the screen. Eventually, the tv just went off. Then it was dark all the time, except when the sun was in the sky. My fountain stopped pouring water like in the sink and I had to drink the still water in the bowl. It's almost gone though. I wonder when Jessica is going to fill it.

The food in the fresh box is gone. I'm getting really hungry. Jess left some of the cabinets open while she was looking for food, so I explore those. Nothing in it smells like food, and I can't seem to get anything open to eat. I jump onto the island, remembering where the treats are kept. I claw and claw at the drawer, slowly working it open. Eventually I can stick my head into the opening, and I find three bags of heavenly goodness. More biting and clawing is required before I can get any out, but I finally liberate a few pieces from a small hole. This will clearly require some work, but at least I'm eating again.

I've seen Jessica make water come from the sink before, so I spend some time trying to get more water. I finally am able to push my head up on the shiny thing enough to get a trickle of water. It's so delicious, so much better from the sink!

It takes days of clawing at the refrigerator door to overcome the suction of the closed door. Jessica has never let me in here, but she eats after opening this door all the time. There must be something inside. I push the door open farther and rear up on my back legs to inspect the contents of the mystery box. With my nose high in the air, I sniff rapidly, searching for some scent that means food. I finally catch a whiff of something that makes me meow in anticipation. Leaping onto the middle shelf, I find a whole chicken in a plastic box! Knocking the box to the floor below, it pops open and the chicken rolls across the floor. No matter, this delicious morsel is going to feed me for a week!

I spend the days playing with my toys around the house. I've raided the bathroom and found all of Jessica's hair ties, too. I keep losing them under the bookcases and sofa, so I'm running pretty low. Jess would always use this long stick to fish them out, but she can't anymore. I think she really might be dead. I sit in the window a lot, too. It overlooks the courtyard in the apartment building. I can see my friends in some of the windows across the way. There's another cat directly across from my window, and a tiny yapping dog up a few floors. I haven't heard the dog for a while, but I still see my cat friend every day. I meow and paw at the window, but I'm too far away to be heard.

I'm almost out of treats now, and the chicken is long gone. I'm starting to get hungry again. I have no idea how long I've been trapped in this apartment with Jessica's body. The smell of her and my overused litter box is overwhelming. I need to get out soon. I've clawed at the door and window, but I am not making any progress with my escape.

I haven't seen the cat across the courtyard for two days now. With no company at all now and no food left, I am beginning to despair that I will never escape and will die in this apartment. While I'm lying despondently on the sofa, I hear a person in the hallway. Freedom at last! I rush to the door and claw wildly at it, meowing as loudly as I can. As they draw closer, I hear that it's a man and that he's talking to himself, and it sounds...wrong. It doesn't seem like he can hear me at all. He's stumbling around in the hallway and mumbling, sounding scared. The hair on my back stands on end and my tail puffs up. I suddenly don't want him to find me, even if it means being free. I listen as he moves closer, and I cease my frantic scratching. He stumbles farther away down the hallway, and there is silence again outside the door. I hope that wasn't my only chance to leave this cage.

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I am starting to grow very weak. I'm not going to make it much longer unless I escape and find some food. I have opened every cabinet and drawer in the house now with very little success in my food-finding mission. I found a loaf of bread in a metal box that helped for a few days. Nothing else of use.

I lay in the window so I can at least enjoy some sunshine. I don't see any movement in any of the windows across the courtyard anymore, just the occasional bird in the trees. I chatter at them menacingly, but I think they know I can't get out. They taunt me, some coming so close as to sit on the balcony just out of reach. I hiss at the pigeon sitting outside and throw myself at the glass. As it flies away, I follow it with my eyes. Something else catches my attention while following the bird. In the distance, I see two people slowly walking my direction.

As they get closer to my window, I can hear a young girl whining to a man, "Jerry, where are we? How much farther?"

The man answers, "We're on the north side of Santa Rosa. So...only about 1200 miles to go, kiddo."

"What?!" she shrieks in reply. "There's no way we can walk that far! That's going to take YEARS." He sighs loudly and just continues walking, but the girl has stopped and glares at him, crossing her arms over her chest. As he moves farther away from her, the girl eventually trudges onward toward the man she called Jerry.

The man is completely oblivious to my presence, even as he walks right past my window. He is staring at the ground and carrying what appears to be a heavy pack on his shoulders, ignoring the whole world around him. My only chance is the girl.

As she gets closer to my window, I frantically paw at the glass. I even grab the wooden cross pieces with my claws for some additional noise. I rear back and slam my paws on the window as hard as I can, all while meowing loud enough to hurt my throat. But she is sulking, too. She's glaring at the back of the man's head and not looking around her. She passes my window.

I haven't given up yet! I keep up my barrage of noise making attempts, though it feels futile. Once she's a few paces beyond the window, she suddenly stops, turns, and looks around, clearly searching for something. Finally, her eyes see a desperate, flailing, and rapidly thinning cat clawing at a nearby window. Thank God Jessica lives on the ground floor!

"Hey, Jerry!" she yells. "There's a cat trapped in this apartment! We have to save it!" I stop my frenetic assault on the glass and stick to meowing pathetically, trying to look worth saving.

Jerry stops where he's at ahead of her and throws his head back in exasperation with an audible sigh, but he slowly turns and trudges back toward the little girl. "What, Beth?" he grumbles when he's back with her.

"This cat is trapped! We have to figure out how to save it. It has to be starving," she explained to him.

He scratches his head and stares at me. He looks bewildered as he quietly says in surprise, "How on earth has this cat stayed alive so long? The owner has probably been dead for four months now! I guess I didn't think about what might have happened to all of the pets whose owners died, locking them inside..." I meow again and gently paw the window, trying to look as sad as possible. I really need him to open the door, or I will die soon. After several beats of silence while the girl looks up at him with her hands clasped together, begging, Jerry finally

sighs, “Okay, Beth, we’ll at least let the cat out. But it *cannot* come with us. We can’t be finding food and water for anyone or anything else, you hear me?”

The little girl is jumping up and down and making a very high-pitched and ear-piercing squealing sound. Mercifully, it is short-lived as the two go around the building and try to enter. I can hear them outside of the main door in the hallway, but it sounds like the man is grouching about it being locked. The girl is rapidly offering suggestions about how to open the door with a stick from the nearby bushes, or climbing up the fire escape and entering the building through the air conditioning ducts, or seeing if there’s a manhole nearby – then they could enter through the sewage lines!

As they round the corner of the building and come into eyesight again, the man Jerry looks at the girl, exasperated, and says, “Beth. We can just break this window open. No need for acrobatics, okay?”

I hear a soft, “Oh...right...” while Jerry searches for a large enough rock at the base of the shrubs to break the window. I leap down from my sill as the rock hurtles toward my window. I hear him breaking out more of the glass with a stick. The window is high off the ground, but he can just reach inside the sill to brush the glass out onto the ground.

Before making my escape, I go one more time to the bathroom where Jessica still rests on the floor. I have to accept that she isn’t going to move anymore. I nuzzle her hand and lick her face before returning to the window, sad but relieved.

I hop onto the window and rub my head against Jerry’s hand as he tries to pick me up, purring loudly. He releases another exasperated sigh, but soon I am lifted from the window and down into the waiting arms of the young Beth. She grasps me tightly and starts babbling to Jerry, “We have to find kitty some food! And water! And a comfy bed, and some toys, and a collar in case she gets lost, and a pretty food bowl...” I watch Jerry roll his eyes to the sky, but the two start walking, continuing their apparently long journey. And I get to go with them. I am saved.

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Beth did not have all of her wishes granted, but the pair did find a vet’s office near Jessica’s place. The door had been left unlocked. I nearly clawed my way out of Beth’s arms trying to escape the horror-inducing smell of the building, but that girl has a tight grip. No amount of squirming or howling allowed me to escape. They did find some kibble for me, though. I was starving. Even though it wasn’t my usual, I scarfed every last bite they gave me. Too fast – I’m definitely hacking this up again later. But it was so good that I could not stop myself. Beth filled a bowl with some water, and I lapped all of that up, too.

I travel with them for many days. We walk while the sun is up. Our pace is slow so that Beth can keep up. I get the distinct impression that Jerry is not fond of my presence on this expedition, but he allows me to walk by Beth’s side, and he lets me curl up next to her when we stop in some abandoned building for the night.

Occasionally we encounter more of the people I heard in the hallway before Jerry and Beth saved me. People who sound wrong, shuffling through the streets talking to themselves. Some have tried to come up to Jerry and Beth. One time Jerry even scooped up Beth who was already holding me and we ran away from a group of these strange people. Sensing their fear around the wrong-people, we quickly fell into a routine where I would run ahead of Jerry, sit directly in his path, and meow when I knew that these wrong-people were near us. I could hear and smell them long before the humans could. My warnings earned very rare moments of affection from Jerry. When he reached the spot where I sat, he'd reach down and quickly scratch the top of my head in gratitude, and then we'd change paths.

Through their conversations, I learn that Beth was Jerry's neighbor "before the ending," whatever that means. Her parents both died from the same sickness that took Jess away. It sounds like their plan is to travel by foot to Colorado Springs, wherever that is. Jerry explains several times to Beth that the radio said that there was a safe area there and that all survivors are welcome to come. She asks several times a day how much farther we have to go, and she never likes Jerry's increasingly exasperated answer. He does not seem overly fond of her, but he accepts her presence. He is even less fond of me, but he allows us to take a break twice a day so I can eat and drink some water.

We move at a glacial pace, spending a lot of our time looking in abandoned stores for food, water, and anything else the humans deem necessary. Little Beth cannot cover very many miles in a day, but boy can she talk a hundred miles a minute. If we see one, cold-hearted Jerry softens a little and lets Beth run wild in a toy store for a few hours. At one store, Beth discovered a battery-powered toy car that was big enough for her to sit in. She placed me in her lap and drove that thing at a break-neck speed up and down the streets for hours, circling Jerry a million times, and squealing nonstop until the battery finally gave out and we mercifully came to a halt. It was nice to not have to walk for a while. I have never worked as hard as I have with these two.

Fortunately for me, we passed a pet store maybe two weeks into our walking. The vet's food had run out days before, and Beth had been giving me some of whatever she was eating. Some of it was good, when they found some beef jerky or canned tuna, but honestly, how do humans survive on such grotesque foods as Twizzlers and Pop Tarts? Beth seems overjoyed to have found these "foods" though.

At one of the stores we stopped to explore, I discovered a giant package of hair ties. Leaping high onto a nearby shelf, I was just able to stretch my front paw out and knock the package to the ground. Carrying the whole thing in my mouth, I show Beth my find. She opens them and tosses one in the air for me. We play for a long time while Jerry searches for useful items, and it almost feels like I have Jessica back again.

While we walk, Beth shoots a hair tie as far ahead of her as she can muster, and I dive for them, trying to catch them before they hit the ground. When I catch one, Beth jumps and squeals, usually accompanied by an eye roll or grumble from Jerry. We pass many days this way – searching stores, playing hair tie games, Beth talking, Jerry sulking, and me along for the ride. I

most appreciate the moments when we are holed up in some building and I finally get to curl up next to Beth and take a long catnap, something I have sorely missed since joining this expedition.

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Beth plays a fun-to-her game of reading every single road sign that we see on the highway we're traveling near. "Cotati? What's that? Does that mean we're close, Jerry?" she'll ask excitedly. Jerry's reply every single time she asks is, "Nope, not there yet. Keep walking, kiddo." "How about Liberty? That *has* to be close, right? I learned in school that liberty means freedom! So we're almost there!" she squealed. Jerry's reply, as always, "Nope, not there yet. Keep walking, kiddo." His disinterested tone did nothing to prevent or even slow Beth's exposition about every fact she had been taught about the Statue of Liberty, whatever that is. Jerry was not quite as enthused as Beth seemed to be about the subject.

"Petaluma. We must be getting close now. Do you think they named it that because it has flowers with petals and...um...PUMAS?! Does this place have pumas, Jerry? Maybe we shouldn't go there," Beth said, concern obvious in her tiny voice.

Jerry rolled his eyes at her and replied, "There are no pumas in Petaluma, kid. Only the shoe store. Keep walking, kiddo."

Beth launched into one of her rambling make-believe stories about the alternate origin of Petaluma, including flowers behind the ears of pumas. Jerry grumbled, "I think it was named after an Indian tribe or something," during her story, but I'm pretty sure Beth never heard a word he said. Her story was all she wanted to hear.

We were nearing the edge of the city, and a large forested area loomed in front of us. I had never been outside of my apartment, let alone outside of a city before this trip. The new scenery had hundreds, maybe thousands of new smells! The scent of trees, rotting wood, leaves on the ground, and all manner of new animals I had never encountered overwhelmed my senses, and I tried to sort out what this new sensory overload was telling me. It was thrilling and frightening all at once. I was walking around with my nose held high, taking in as much of the cloying odor of the forest as I could.

With my senses distracted by the onslaught of new experiences, I didn't notice them in time. A pack of the wrong-people turned the corner around the building behind us, drawn by Beth's incessant talking, I imagine. The hair on my back stands on end and my tail puffs up as big as I can make it. I yowl in warning, but it's too late. When they hear the wrong-people mumbling and shuffling around the corner behind them, Jerry and Beth swing around quickly and freeze. After a short staring contest, the three wrong-people point at them, shout, and start running toward my humans.

"Beth, RUN!" Jerry yells as he grabs her arm and spins her back in my direction. They take off, moving as quickly as Beth's little legs will take her. I've learned over our weeks of traveling together that Beth does not possess the skill of moving swiftly. Jerry is pulling on her arm, urging her forward as fast as she can go. The wrong-people are getting closer and will

obviously catch them before Beth is able to outrun them. I hiss and growl a threat at the rapidly approaching wrong-people as Jerry scoops Beth up in his arms and picks up his pace. When they near my previous sniffing spot, Jerry's panic is infectious, and I turn and run.

The forest in front of me has many places to hide, so I dart into the dense woods. "Kitty, wait!" I hear Beth scream. I hear them plunge into the woods behind me, but they can't see as well as I can in the darkened forest. They are slowing down. As I'm hurtling through the undergrowth, I am scrabbling on fallen leaves and pine needles, and limbs, vines, and thorns are reaching for my coat, grabbing and cutting me. I can hear Beth screaming behind me and what sounds like a catfight as Jerry grunts and cries out, heightening my panic. I feel a spike sink into the pad of my paw with a flash of pain, and it fuels my raging terror further. I am lightning as I race away from the menace behind me.

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I don't know how long I ran. Until my pounding heart couldn't make my legs move anymore. I collapsed to the ground, panting heavily. As my ragged breathing stills and my senses return, I realize that I can no longer hear the wrong-people. Or Jerry and Beth. I strain my sight, hearing, and smelling abilities to try to locate my humans. I have to find them! I didn't want to leave them, I was just so scared.

I make a wide circle in the woods, hoping to pick up their scent or hear their voices. Now that I am in the center of the forest, I cannot isolate anything – there are too many competing odors vying for my attention. Since I was running in sheer panic, nothing looks or smells familiar to me. I can't even return the way I came. And part of me is terrified of what I might find if I did. Would I have to see another girl I love lying cold and not moving? I'm not sure I could bear that.

So I do the only thing I can. I pick a direction and start moving. The thorn in my paw hinders me greatly, and I slowly and painfully limp my way through the underbrush. I have lived in an apartment with Jessica for all of my life. She brought me into her home when I was just a kitten. She fed me twice a day. She has always taken care of me. The last several weeks have been the hardest of my life so far. But now I am alone. As I hobble through the forest aimlessly, I realize that I have no idea how to fend for myself in the wilderness. The rising panic these thoughts bring spurs me to a faster and uneven trot as I fight the pain in my foot.

Just when I think my heart might explode with terror, I hear a human's voice in the distance. I pause to determine its direction. I listen carefully as I try to decide if the voice belongs to a wrong-person, to my friends, or to some other human. I warily move in the direction of the voice. It belongs to a girl. Maybe it's Beth! She calls out, "Go get it, Jack! Find the stick! Come on, boy, bring it back!"

So not Beth. But the voice does sound friendly and happy. I think I also hear giggles. Maybe Beth and Jerry escaped the wrong-people and found these new people. I decide to get closer to see if the human has my Beth and Jerry with her.

As I get closer, I hear a large animal crashing through the fallen sticks and leaves, and I halt, scared. All sound stops for a beat, then I hear a grunt, a small collision, and then the large crashing again, followed by a peal of laughter. I continue my approach until I see a young girl a little smaller than Beth in a yellow dress through the trees. The large crashing creature is a gigantic dog – much bigger than the dog in the window across the courtyard. It appears that the little girl is throwing a big stick for the dog, who is happily bounding through the undergrowth to retrieve it. He returns it to the girl, and she hugs his neck. Wary of the dog, I approach them.

When she sees me, she squeals, just like Beth. “KITTY!” she shouts, and she thankfully holds on tight to the dog. “Kitty, come here! Jack, you be nice. Kitty, come!” Then suddenly, she is speaking to me, but her mouth is no longer moving. She is speaking inside my head! I feel an instant and strong connection to this little girl.

She tells me in my head that her name is Annie, and the dog is Jack. She tells me not to be afraid, and for some reason, I am not. I limp toward her. She sees me and shouts aloud, “Oh, Kitty! You’re hurt! Let’s get you back to the farm. We will take good care of you!”

Knowing that means there are more humans, and maybe Jerry and Beth, I allow Annie to scoop me up and hold me tightly as she carries me to her home. She must have told Jack that I’m okay, because he’s bounding around us in circles happily as we return to this “farm.”

As we approach, Annie tells me about her Ability and that she can speak to people and animals in their minds and can become part of the animals and travel with them. That sounds uncomfortable, so I hope she’ll just stick to speaking in my mind. She begins to tell me all about her people (and another dog, ugh) when we hear someone calling out, “Annie? Jack? Where are you guys? Dani’s going to kill me if you’re not back in time for dinner!”

We make our way through a few more trees, and then we are in a field and see a dark-haired woman coming closer. “Zoe!” Annie squeals aloud. “Look what I found in the woods! It’s a kitty! She’s hurt, we have to help her! Then can I keep her? Please, oh please, oh please!”

Zoe chuckles, “I’m pretty sure Jason will hate the idea, but you can ask Dani, kiddo.” She softly scratches my head, and I begin to purr. “But you’ve got my vote!” she adds with a wink. Annie crows in triumph, and we all continue on our way to the buildings nearby. As we draw nearer, a large scowling man looks pointedly at Annie and says, “No way. That cannot stay with us. Put it back where you found it.”

“Jason!” Zoe scolds. “Let’s ask Dani,” she says as she turns back to Annie.

“Did I hear my name?” A woman with fire-red hair comes out of the building closest to us.

Jason says sullenly, “Annie wants a new pet. A damn cat.”

The fire-hair woman scowls and hisses, “Language, Jason!” Turning to Annie, she smooths her hair and says, “The more the merrier, I say! Of course you can keep your kitty. You’ll have to think of a good name for her, though,” as she scratches my head. I like this fire-hair woman.

In my head, I suddenly hear, “Hi, Kitty, I’m Dani. Welcome to our farm! You are welcome to stay with us as long as you’d like. Though I recommend staying as far away from

Jason as you can for while. But he'll come around eventually." She can talk in my head, too! Even in my head, she has a delightful giggle. I feel a strong connection with Dani, and it makes me want to stay. Maybe Jerry and Beth will find their way to this group of people, too. But for now, I am safe at last. Time for a good, long catnap.