

WildWorld Chapter 6

Ash had a rough night's sleep. Worries and fears had her tossing and turning well into the early hours. They've been at the house for almost a week now, setting up all the necessary equipment to mount a search and rescue. It had been much more difficult than expected, and Warren eventually had to shell out for some high-end technicians to assist. The clatter of rambunctious cats certainly didn't help. Most large cats were active during the night hours after all. They reminded her of her days back in college, where she'd mistakenly taken a room in one of the campus's major party dorms. She'd had to sleep in the science building due to the raging, drunken parties frequently going on. She shuddered at the idea of the cats with hard liquor. The cats themselves hadn't realized it, but they seemed to be adapting to their new bodies much better than anticipated. And Ash's sleepless night could prove it. Now she stared sleepily at the first rays of sunlight peeking through the silk curtains, cheerily announcing the arrival of a new day.

Groaning, she pulled off the covers and walked into the great room, where she found the cats all lazily splayed about watching cartoons. She wondered who had turned the TV on, likely a maid or one of Mr. Gould's entourage. The artificial glow of the TV bounced over their pelts as they rose and fell with each breath. A few of them poked their heads up as Ash walked in.

"Good morning you little lightning bolts." Ash grumbled. "I'd ask if you slept well, but you clearly didn't sleep."

“Talk about it”, Flash grumbled to himself as he groomed his forepaw. He was on the couch, his lower body pinned somewhere underneath Brock and Abigail. “At least you had your own room.” Ash skulked past the lying cats to the adjacent kitchen, the mahogany furnishings dwarfing the woman. The kitchen was equipped enough to operate a Michelin star restaurant, but Ash only needed one thing. Like a robot she made a beeline for the instant coffee maker, one she’d brought herself. She mechanically prepared herself a cup and swiftly downed it.

“Hey, that’s not fair! Where’s my cup!” Flash yowled after her. Ash turned at the sound, the coffee not yet fully active in her system.

“Huh, what? Who said that?” Flash groaned again. Unlike most other cats, mornings weren’t really his thing. He flailed his forelimbs, unable to free himself from the pile. Unsuccessful, he growled in dismay and enviously watched Ash brew another cup. She drowsily carried the steaming hot mug to the dining table, which offered the only vacant seats in the room.

“Now here’s the true crown of civilization.” She muttered to nobody in particular. “Almost makes humanity worth it.” This one she drank slowly, savoring each and every sip. When she finished the transformation was almost instantaneous. She waltzed over to the sleeping pile of cats, her face curling into a frown.

“Now what’re y’all sleepyheads doing here?”

“You tell me”, Flash grumbled. “I’m not here by choice.” Ash tilted her head curiously. She could tell Flash was talking, but without the morse code system they’d worked out she couldn’t understand what he was saying. He sure looked angry though. The others were fast asleep, tucked out from whatever antics they’d gotten into overnight.

Ash pulled out an air horn and gave 2 short blasts. The resulting chaos revealed one shredded couch, several upturned pieces of furniture, and a pile of very scared-and very awake felines. Ash smirked as she eyed the new pile. Somehow Flash had once again wound up on the bottom.

“Ow! Get your claws off of me!” Danielle squirmed as Flash tried to scratch his way out of the pile. “Okay okay I’m moving!” That was easier said than done, however, as she had to crawl over Abigail and Brock, who were also trying to squirm their way free. It wasn’t long before it had devolved into an all-out brawl, with slashing claws and fur flying everywhere. Ash cleared her throat and tried to address them, but to no avail. It took another blast of the air horn to get them all finally paying attention.

“Come on guys, get it together.” Ash scolded. “Today we start the search for Cecil and Brittney so I need you all on your best behavior.”

“What?” Brock asked. “Is that today?” Ash nodded, as a flurry of tails twitched excitedly. “We finally have everything set up. It’s go time. So I need everyone up and ready ASAP.”

“How exactly are we doing this?” Josh rubbed his face with his paw, smoothing out the ruffled fur. “I must confess I’ve been kept out of the loop lately.”

“We all have”, Abigail responded. She turned towards Ash with a quizzical look on her face. “So what’s the big deal?”

“Has nobody really told any of you?” Ash replied, perplexed. “I could’ve sworn I told everyone at some point. At least, I planned to. But I guess things got busy and...”

“Just get to the point already.” Josh’s taps on the floor were angry. Ash snapped stiff like a wooden soldier.

“Oh yes, of course. So, I KNOW I’ve worked it over with Flash, but I believe it’s time we went looking for your friends.”

“Yup,” Flash chimed in, having finally wiggled out of the jumble. He was glad to finally have blood pumping through all 4 limbs. “We’ve... well, mostly me but we’ve gathered sufficient research to get a general idea of where they might be.”

“What do you mean?” Abigail chirped inquisitively.

“Well, a basic internet search says that clouded leopards have a base range of about 15 square miles. So they can’t be that far away from the lab.”

“Is that it? Danielle snorted. “How did that take you so long?”

“Well Ash spent several hours just trying to adjust the language settings to English.” Flash quipped, eliciting several chuffs of laughter. “But really, it’s more complex than that. We had to track clouded leopard patterns across the area, see if any local conservation groups had picked them up, and analyze the news from the past couple months to see if there were any suspicious sightings. In other words, a whole lotta work.”

“Wow.” Danielle responded, “Sounds cool.”

“Didn’t you want to be a reporter when you grew up?” Brock asked, tilting his head towards her. She nodded.

“That’s what I wanted to do ever since I was kid. Unearthing crime, covering wars around the world, I wanted to fight for the truth and bring real life bad guys to justice. I wanted adventure and excitement.” She glanced back at herself. “I have to admit ‘leopard’ was not high on my list of career choices.”

“Eh, it’s not as fun as you think.” Flash interjected. “It’s mostly just long interviews and research. I started out covering local farmer’s markets and bingo nights for a two-bit town in Nebraska. It’s very rare to actually get something entertaining.”

“You don’t get here by investigating farmer’s markets.” Danielle responded suspiciously. Flash laughed, a chuffing snort.

“I wasn’t investigating them. It was more like an almanac. I’d just go down there, list what they had for sale, what looked especially ripe, and interview some of the farmers each week. It was boring, but at least it was safe and the old ladies from bingo were nice. I had so much free fruit and baked goods I never needed to go shopping.”

“Then what happened?” Flash’s expression darkened.

“Well, I got my first big case. And it was completely by accident. Turns out there was a chemical plant several miles down the road that was polluting the waterways. Poisoning all the

crops. People were dying...” He paused a moment, his eyes lost in reflection. “I can’t remember all of it. But long story short, I found myself in court against the plant’s owners, an internationally syndicated corporation with a net worth of billions. I’m pretty sure they were fortune 500. And they had these fancy lawyers from New York come in and bust up my butt.”

“And?” The cats were on the edge of their seats with anticipation. “Did you win?”

“Actually no.” Flash responded with a chuckle. “I’m a better reporter than a lawyer. They got me on some BS technicality and made me promise to stop snooping around. But it was enough. The case made national news. The resulting media frenzy proved disastrous for them, with their reputation and stock plummeting. Other groups got involved who were more equipped to handle these sorts of things. Long story short, after that case all the big networks wanted me.”

“Wow! That must have felt amazing!” Danielle chirped.

“Well, I guess...” Flash responded despondently. “ My memory’s still foggy so I can’t remember how it all felt. But I know it was still a shock. I went into college wanting to change the world. But somehow I’d grown fond of that little town. It took a lot of courage to leave after all that.”

“Wowie wow wow” Danille purred, her face brimming with wonder. “How many bad guys did you bring to justice?”

“Not as many as you think.” Flash chuckled before his expression turned more serious. “Danielle, you have to realize one thing about being a professional journalist. It’s a business just like any other. Your only goal in the biz is to get as many viewers for your network as possible.

I've had cohorts use misleading language, false reports, and manipulative rumors to garner as many clicks as possible. I've seen corruption, lies, and higher-ups bending the truth to force a narrative. I've pursued many stories in my day. I've covered wars, celebrity crimes, and crooked companies. And if I've learned one thing in the industry... It's that there's no such thing as good guys and bad guys."

"But that's ridiculous!" Danielle objected. "Surely journalists aren't worse than terrorists, right? You're still bringing people to justice!"

"Journalism's a cut-throat world. If you're hell-bent on ideals you'll be thrown out quicker than a used sheet of toilet paper the moment your ideals disagree with your boss's. And your boss's ideal is to make money. Hell, look at me. I'm a fricking oversized cat now because I overstepped my boundaries. It's a fact of life that if you want to truly make a difference in this world, you have to swallow some nasty pills. You can't pay rent with lofty ideas."

"But..." Danielle rebutted, more hesitantly this time. "You're making the world a better place, right?"

"Depends on who you ask." Flash responded. "Some believe we make the world a much worse place. And they have perfect reason to believe so. One of your "terrorists" I interviewed lost his daughter when an American shell landed on a civilian apartment block. Does that mean he's a good guy? No, he blew up a school bus filled with kids. But that doesn't make us the good guys either..." Danielle looked downwards sadly, her shoulders melting downwards.

"Oh..." Flash looked at her apologetically.

“That doesn’t mean you have to be evil. Just don’t assume you’re better than everyone else. Search for the truth, not whatever reinforces your ideology. And not just out in the world, but within yourself as well.” Danielle nodded, perking her head back up. The others looked on with interest.

“Are you done yet?” They all turned towards Ash, who was tapping her foot impatiently. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but we need to step up the pace here. Don’t forget we’re on a search and rescue mission. Every second counts.”

“Sorry.” Flash typed out apologetically. Ash let out a short huff.

“We need to get moving. The plan is to get our teams to the search zone by the end of the day, set up a base, and begin searching around nightfall. Clouded leopards are nocturnal so it’s more likely they’ll be active.”

“But how will you see in the dark?” Danielle quipped.

“We won’t need to.” Ash responded triumphantly. “That’s where all of you come in. It takes a cat to find one as they all say.” This caused a murmur of surprise to echo amongst the felines. The air itself in the room seemed to change. “What better way to find a cat than with their own kind? You’d be way better at tracking them than we could ever be.”

“Are you sure?” Danielle looked apprehensive, tail wrapped closely around her body. “We’ve never had to find anyone before. We’ve never even been out in the wild. How would we know what to do?”

“ I have faith that you can figure it out.” Ash’s smile was meant to be encouraging, but did little to reassure them. “You won’t be alone, though. We’ll have teams on standby, and you’ll be tracked every step of the way. And Flash will be here with us in case you need anything. He’ll be back at our command post, and you’ll all be linked with walkie talkies... er, Meow-y talkies.” Nobody laughed at Ash’s joke. Flash simply nodded.

“She’s right. Anything you need, or if you find them, you let me know back home. I’ll relay your information to the humans. You’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“But how will we survive out there?” Abigail asked nervously. “There’s probably a whole bunch of scary things waiting there.”

“You’re all animals, right?” Flash responded, pointing his front paw at them. “You’re much more capable of surviving out there than the humans are. You’ve got fur and claws to protect you. You can hunt for food. You can be out there indefinitely if you have to, unlike the humans. We live by different rules than they do.”

“Too much fur if you ask me.” Josh mumbled under his breath. Unfortunately it wasn’t quietly enough.

“Oh relax you big cub.” Flash retorted. “ Our search zone is up in the mountains, so it’ll actually be cooler up there than down here. Weather reports project 50-70 degrees fahrenheit over the next couple of days. It’ll be warm but it won’t kill ya.” Josh frowned. “Besides, the extra fur helps block out any branches. You won’t get scratched with a coat that thick.”

“I just don’t know...” Abigail stammered. “I’ve just never done anything like this before.”

“Think about your friends.” The others perked their ears up as Flash’s tone started to grow more agitated. “You think they’re still alive, right?” They all nodded. “Well they’ve had to survive out there in the wild for months! If they can do it why can’t you?”

The question brought on a bout of silence as Flash glared at them angrily.

“Sheesh. The zoo really spoiled you all. We’ve got a whole bunch of whiners....”

“You’ve told them the plan, right?” It was Ash who interjected. She looked like a balloon about to burst. “Cause the van’s here. We have to go.” Flash looked between both her and the others uncertainly. He glanced back towards the others.

“You all ready?” A yowl of confirmation arose from the group. Flash gave a sigh of relief. “Looks like we’re all on board. Let’s roll out.”

The optimism faded quickly once the group left Camelot and hit the long winding roads that branched out into the Indonesian jungle. Road trips as a human back home could be long, boring, and tiring. A road trip in a backwater part of a developing country however, was on a whole different level. When you’re trapped in the back of a livestock truck and unable to see each bump and pothole you hit, for a jungle cat with very sensitive senses it proved downright terrifying. For Josh, Abigail, Brock, and Danielle, it was the stuff of nightmares.

The first issue was the smell. Whoever had used it last had clearly not cleaned it out beforehand, and the people who went before him likely fared no better. The hay littering the floor, despite a hastily applied fresh coat, did nothing to freshen up the cabin. The musty old scents of chickens, cows, and urine assaulted their noses for the entire journey. This itself wouldn't have been so bad if it didn't remind them constantly of food, something they'd neglected before they left. They could only dream about McDonald's, steak dinners, and other tantalizing meals of home.

The second issue was the view, or rather the lack thereof. A typical road trip would normally involve staring out the window at the different ecological formations as they passed them by. For Ash, Ethan, and the humans coming along, this was more or less the case. But for secrecy's sake, the four-legged members of the group had to ride in the back of a closed-off cattle truck with a canvas roof that blocked out any chance for a scenic ride. Being hot, stuffy, and only able to view each other's backsides for several hours made for a rather jarring ride.

"Now I know what getting mailed feels like." Josh griped as the truck hit another pothole, sending them all bouncing like springs.

"Seriously." Danielle nodded her head in agreement. "They need to slap a 'fragile' label on us or something. 'I'm surprised all my bones haven't shattered already.'"

"At this point I don't care where, I just want to get off," Brock growled. He looked like he was trying to melt into the floor. "I'll walk the rest of the way if I have to."

“Well we might not have to wonder much longer.” Abigail chirped hopefully. “I think we’re slowing down!” The others poked their heads up encouragingly. Indeed, it seemed the roar of the engine had dimmed down to a crawl, like a cat about to settle down for a long nap.

“Can you see anything?” Abigail asked, scouring the edges for any cracks to peer through.

“Uh.... I’m not sure” Dannielle replied, squinting as hard as she could. “Maybe a couple of trees, maybe a building, I’m not sure. I can’t quite make them out.”

“Well, we’ll find out soon enough.” Brock said. “We’ve stopped.”

Almost as if he’d summoned it with those words, the back doors flew open and the room was bathed in blinding light. It was dusk, but it made no difference. To the cats’ sensitive eyes, you may have well shone a high-powered searchlight directly in their faces.

“What the hell? Last time I heard screams like that I was watching a documentary on medieval torture.” Ethan stood by the doorway, hands wedged into his side. He was met by a barrage of angry glares, eyes sparkling like diamonds in the shade of the truck.

“That whole trip was torture!” Josh yowled angrily. “I should sue you all for animal rights violations!”

Ethan shrugged, having no idea what Josh just said. "You can complain all you want, but we're here." He motioned for the cats to step outside, but nobody budged. He frowned.

"What? Don't you all want out? Ash is waiting for you at base camp. We don't have much time so I'd advise you all to get moving." Begrudgingly, the cats slunk out one by one, shooting angry glares at him as they passed by him. Squinting in the sunlight, they padded out onto a muddy embankment where several other vehicles were parked. The clearing was tucked into a narrow valley, surrounded on 3 sides by lush green jungle. Looking a small distance to their south they could see rice paddies clinging to every inch of flat land, the occasional hamlet or bungalow perking up along the mountainside. The tops of the mountains were shrouded in dense fog, like a child tucked into bed. They all looked around in amazement before Josh finally broke the silence.

"You mean we have to find them in all this?" The other cats started nodding in agreement. He padded towards the tree line, muzzle close towards the ground. His expression looked confused, like he wasn't quite sure what he was looking for. The tips of his nose flared out and back again. Finally he glanced back up towards the others.

"There's so many scents I can't make heads or tails of it." He stated matter of factly. The others joined him, going as near the forest as they dared. They could hear a variety of noises, and a battery of scents assaulted their noses. Half of them were scary, but a small number of them were tantalizing, almost drawing them in. Danielle had to resist leaping in and chasing whatever in that forest smelled like a hot steak dinner. She turned to see Josh right next to her.

“After you.” He said, nudging her forwards. “You’re the jungle cat, right? You handle this.”

“Leopards are savannah cats!” She cried out, nipping his shoulder. Josh yowled in pain and jumped back. Ethan chuckled, drawing angry glares from the snow leopard. “We should’ve brought some tigers or something. Someone who actually knows the jungle.” She turned towards Ethan angrily, paw tapping on the ground. “Why are we here? We can’t go in there?”

Ethan merely shrugged. “They’re your friends. Our tigers and Jaguars wanted to stay at the zoo. Besides, they haven’t seen a real life jungle either. Your guess is as good as theirs.”

“What the hell do you expect us to do?” An angry yowl accompanied Josh’s tapping. “I’ve got a fricking 2 inch thick coat of fur here and she’s a flat land cat! We can’t go in that mess!”

Ethan shrugged again. “Leopards are know to live in India, China, and central Asia. You realize you’re not THAT biologically different, right?”

“B-but..” Danielle stammered, glancing from the undergrowth to Ethan and vice versa.

“Listen.” Ethan said, his tone of voice not fluctuating in the slightest. “YOU wanted to come here and find your friends. We’ve bent over backwards to bring you here. If you

absolutely want to, we can turn right around and go back to your stupid little enclosure. But then Cecil and Brittney are stuck in that mess forever. It's your choice."

A long pause erupted, the only sounds the distant clamor of the jungle behind them. The cats stared at Ethan uneasily, then each other.

"A- are we... is there nobody better who can do this?" Abigail piped up meekly. Ethan sighed, a long, drawn out affair.

"We humans don't know much about clouded leopards. They're endangered, mostly solitary, and *very* hard to gather data on. We're mostly firing blind, even for intelligent ones. I reckon cats can do as good a job at finding their own as anyone. But yes, you're our best shot."

"Fine." It was Danielle who spoke up, bravely plodding a few steps forwards. "What do we have to do?" Ethan smiled.

Only a few hours had passed, but the camp was ablaze with action as the sun began to dip below the horizon. The sky looked like someone had spilled a box of paint, the fog clearing enough to reveal bright streaks of pink and orange dancing through the warm humid sky. In the midst of the fervor sat the cats, tugging at the bulky black collars now encased around their necks.

"They each contain a gps, camera, and a communication system so we can be updated of any progress you make," Ash had explained as the cumbersome devices were

latched on, taking care not to pinch any fur. “They shouldn’t impede your movement, and they’re built to survive the apocalypse. Soon you’ll forget they’re even there.”

“I doubt that”, Josh grumbled, shaking his head. He felt like a small dumbbell had been hung around his neck. His powerful neck muscles could bear the strain, but it wasn’t comfortable. It ruffled his fur and he could swear it made him feel hotter. As he pawed at the collar he glanced up to see Ethan standing by him with his arms folded.

“I can’t breathe!” He gasped, “Get this thing off me!” Ethan laughed.

“For someone who can’t breathe you can sure complain.” Nevertheless, he knelt down and adjusted Josh’s collar so it was looser. “Better?”

Josh grumbled and plodded over to where the other cats stood with a mix of scowls and apprehensive expressions. They saw Ash coming up to them enthusiastically, like a school girl on prom night.

“Are you all ready?” She asked, her voice bubbly and fresh. “We’ve got mission control all set, so once the sun sets we’ll be ready to go.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Danielle asked nervously. “Shouldn’t we wait till morning?” She shook her head.

“Most cats are nocturnal, you’re better equipped for searching at night than during the day. Human search methods aren’t that applicable here. Besides, it’s colder at night, so you snow leopards won’t overheat. ”

“ B-but... Abigail stammered, “We’ve never done this before! The zoo’s always been well lit at nights. We’ve ever been completely on our own before.”

“They’ve been like this ever since I let them out.” Ethan rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Well we’re asking a lot of them. I think we could allow them some leniency.” Ash scolded, patting her son on the shoulder. “Anyways, you guys should grab something to eat before you go. You never know how much food will be available out there.” She pointed in the general direction of base camp. “But don’t eat too much, it’ll tucker you out before you even get started.”

A half hour later, the group found themselves trudging through the undergrowth, brushing through the dense variety of tropical plants that filled the forest floor. The departure from base camp was unceremonious, a final hug from Ash for each of them and they’d set off into the jungle. They weren’t quite sure what they were looking for, but luckily Ash was still there to guide them. Her voice sizzled in jagged spikes from each of their collars.

“Testing testing, Base camp to Pursuit Team. Do you copy?”

“Pursuit team? Really?” Josh meowed.

“It’s like Pursuit but with fur!” Abigail explained as Josh rolled his eyes. “I think it’s cute.”

“I can hear growling on the other end so it must work.” Ash stated confidently. “Anyways, I’ll hook you all up with Flash, who can relay anything you say to us. You’re not exactly in morse code territory anymore so he’ll be corresponding with you all from now on.” There was a flash of static from each of the collars before Flash’s voice broke through the radio.

“Flash to Fur-suit team. You all there?”

“Et tu, Flash?” Josh huffed in annoyance. Flash laughed through the coms.

“Listen up buttercups. You’re on the prowl for 2 clouded leopards, some of the most solitary and elusive animals on the planet. You’re about 20 miles from the laboratory, and you’ve got around 50 square miles to search... provided they haven’t attempted some crazy “Homeward Bound” scheme and have actually settled in the area. Hopefully they know that the best thing to do when you’re lost is to stay put.”

“But we’re lost!” Josh whined.

“Well we would be, but we don’t even know what we’re looking for.” Danielle chimed in.

“Hardee har har,” Flash responded, the sarcasm dripping through the radio links. “Like Ash said, you all will be fine. If you get hungry, you can hunt. It’s a rain forest so I’m sure there’s plenty of water. And if you somehow manage to hurt yourselves, we’ll send in the recovery team and pick you right back up. Just be warned, you have 7 days to find them before our budget runs out. You can feed yourselves but the humans sure can’t. We don’t have unlimited time here.”

“Seven whole days?” Josh asked, a lump forming in his throat. “We have to be out here seven whole days?”

“Not if we find them first,” Danielle responded, a look of determination on her face.

They continued to walk, searching for any signs that clouded leopards may have visited the area. By this time, it was well dark out, the stars in the sky barely visible through the thick canopy. It was nearly pitch black on the forest floor, but for the cats it was no trouble. Their eyes specialized for hunting at night made it possible to keep going without delay. Flash kept them company the whole way, giving them a crash course on their environment as they walked.

“Sumatra is the 6th largest island in the world, and the 5th most densely populated.” He said chipperly through the radio. I’m in Medan, the island’s largest city, while you all are about 100 miles northeast of me in the province of Aceh. The island’s second largest city is-

“Will you be quiet!” Danielle hissed, brushing away a leaf with her forepaw. “If they’re out there no doubt your rambling is scaring them off.” Flash spat out a quick “Sorry”, but it wasn’t long before he was at it again.

“Did you know that over 50 languages are spoken here?” He chirped enthusiastically as ever. “And those are just the human ones! If we include animal languages, I bet that’d be over-”

“Flash if you keep going I’m gonna sever your jugular when we get back.” Flash audibly gulped.

“Well fine,” he huffed, “If you don’t need me I’m going to get some sleep then. I’ll see you all tomorrow.” There was a click on the other end of the line and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness he’s gone. If I had to listen to another fun fact of his I was gonna vomit.” It was Brock who piped up. He’d led the way for most of the trip, as the largest one amongst them. They stopped to take a water break, lapping up water from a nearby stream. All around them the jungle bristled with life, but none of the constant shrieks and calls sounded remotely feline.

“Anyone got any clues?” Danielle asked over the sounds of tongues smacking against water. “I haven’t caught anything yet. How are we supposed to find them in this jungle?” There were a couple head shakes but she found herself largely ignored. She huffed, the feline equivalent to a haughty sigh. “Guys we need a plan. We can’t go wandering about the jungle willy-nilly.” Brock poked his head up from the row like a whack-a-mole-game.

“Sounds fine to me.” He chuffed before going back to drinking. Danielle did not take that kindly. She smacked his backside with her paw, causing him to yowl out in shock.

“That’s not fine!” she snapped. “We’re only here 7 days. Including sleeping, hunting, and eating, that’s not a lot of time at all. We need to maximize our efforts to get them home safely. They could be anywhere out there!”

“Well what do you suggest?” Abigail murred, licking her lips. Danielle plopped down on her haunches. As much as she hated to admit it, she really didn’t have much of a plan. She was a doer, not a thinker. She almost wished Flash was back. Almost. He’d probably have a solution.

She swatted at some mosquitos with her paw. Her fur mostly protected her, but somehow some were still getting through. Apparently being top of the food chain failed to frighten off the smallest members of the ecosystem. Already parts of her were starting to itch. Brock must've felt the same way, scratching furiously at his side with his back legs. Abigail simply sat there, pondering. Danielle assumed her 2 layered pelt kept the bugs at bay. She almost envied her, she'd take being hot over being itchy.

"I- I don't know. But we need to come up with a plan together." She shrugged, defeated. "Unless someone has a scent we can follow."

"Actually, I think I do." Josh had padded up to the group, looking excited for the first time since they'd arrived. "Do you smell that?" Everyone paused and pressed their muzzles along the ground where scents were strongest. It wasn't long before a particular scent crawled into everyone's nostrils. Cat urine. It was too faint to pick up the particulars as it had likely drifted from far away, but their noses couldn't lie. Everyone was buzzing about the lead, and they soon set off through the jungle, following the scent. They called out their names as they went, adding their yowls to the jungle cacophony that surrounded them.

As they neared the source of the smell, it became clearer and stronger. It wasn't long before they had found it, an old, wide tree with very distinct yet familiar markings. The smell was overpowering, no doubt left no later than several hours ago. A clear territorial marker by some kind of cat. The message was clear- keep out. But the messenger was nowhere to be found. However, something was wrong.

"That's not a clouded leopard." Josh said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. He leaned in and took a big whiff. The smell was pungent, yet appealing to the feral parts of his

mind. If he got close enough he could sort out a whole library's worth of information from one sniff. Unfortunately, he didn't like what he had found. They had all gotten a whiff of clouded leopard musk before they left. This scent was entirely different.

"W-what other cats are here on the island?" Abigail asked nervously.

"I don't know, but judging by the size of the stain it's bigger than a clouded leopard."

"It's a tiger." Josh's words had them all frozen like ice. He slowly stepped forward. "I'm an idiot for not realizing this earlier. When I was with Ethan he taught me all about animals, including big cats. And there's several kinds of tigers. The ones I remember are Bengal, Amur.... and Sumatran." They all looked at him in hushed silence. They were big cats, but not nearly as big as a tiger. Even all of them combined might not be able to take down a full-grown adult male. And judging from the scent, this was a big one.

"That's not good." Brock murmured, his tone a whisper despite no imminent threat.

"Actually, it helps us a lot." Josh stated. Everyone else turned to him in surprised silence. "There's no way Cecil and Brittney would venture into tiger territory. They're too smart for that. This reduces our search area by a lot."

"Well, he's right..." Danielle replied, twisting her head as if pondering something. "But won't they avoid us too? They don't necessarily know we're on their side."

"That's true." Abigail seemed optimistic. "We'll just have to hide our markings whenever we do our business so they can't smell us. And call out loudly so they can hear us."

“But the tigers will hear us as well.” Josh shook his head. “The only way to find them is to treat them like prey. We’re gonna have to hunt them down.” The others looked away, as if they didn’t want to acknowledge his statement. But soon Danielle stirred them to action.

“Well unless someone’s got a better plan, we better get moving.”

Five days into the journey, the cats had about as much luck as a black cat walking under a ladder. Every bit of jungle looked like every other bit. An endless tangle of vines, bushes and trees and more shades of green than they ever thought possible. Two days ago they had tried to, with numerous failures before Brock finally managed to nab a wild boar. The pickings were slim, and ripping fresh meat off of bones was a much different experience than eating the zoo’s nutrient-infused dietician approved meat. Nevertheless, it had managed to hold them over, with Brock dragging the remains with them for a bit till it finally ran out. Fortunately for them, most wildlife seemed to have avoided them. And as of now no tigers had shown up.

“I’m not doing that again.” Brock stated as they padded through the jungle, keeping ears and eyes alert for any signs of the missing pair. “It was like dissecting an animal in class, and that was without killing the thing.”

“Well, we might have to. I’m starting to get hungry again.”

“Sorry, what was that?” Flash’s voice broke through the radio. He’d been off and on throughout the journey, advising them on jungle life and checking in occasionally. He’d also never quit relentlessly bombarded them with fun facts. “I was busy wrapping up my t-bone

steak. It was pretty delicious.” The sound of chewing could be heard over the comms and everyone was livid.

“Just give us an update. Where the heck are we now?” Danielle snarled. She heard a yipe on the other end and the sound of paws scrambling.

“Actually, you’re not that far from Bluestar labs. Their main complex is about a mile to the south. I’d suggest you turn inwards and head towards-”

“Wait, what’s that?” Brock asked, lifting his paw and pointing towards a clearing. The other cats turned their heads, eyes locked on a small building bordered by tall grass and wrapped in vines. Unlike most buildings in the area, the one story structure was built entirely out of concrete, with a sloping weathered down metal roof. There were no windows and no visible door, but several slits in the walls allowed the light through, and a giant cooling fan was nested in the side. The strange thing was, despite the building’s worn down appearance, the fan blades were spinning.

“What? What the hell are you all talking about?” Flash sounded agitated, like a child who couldn’t open his christmas present.

“There’s some sort of structure.” Danielle responded. “Can you get any sort of reading on it?”

“Uhhh... let me check.” The sound of paws clacking against the ground was heard, followed by a yowl and then expletives.

“What happened?” Danielle asked, as the other cats listened in.

“Deleted the browser window by mistake. Stupid paws. How hard would it be to genetically modify some thumbs in here?” They heard more clacking and grumbling, before he finally responded.

“Ok, I’m looking over the area and I don’t see anything. What are you seeing?”

“An old abandoned looking building that’s not abandoned.”

“Well, google Earth isn’t showing anything. Are you sur-”

“Wait, you’re using google Earth? I thought you had some high tech CIA software! No wonder anything’s showing up. Screw it, I’m gonna go check it out.” Before the cheetah could object Danielle sauntered out into the clearing, followed by Brock. Josh and Abigail stayed behind.

“It’s the middle of the day, I’m just gonna stay in the shade. I’d melt before we get there.” Danielle turned around to see Josh had already fallen asleep on the grass, and Abigail gingerly lounging beside him, tail flicking lazily as she looked on encouragingly.

Rolling her eyes, she trekked through the tall wild grass that led towards the old structure. They crept low to the ground to avoid being spotted by any potential humans, making use of their natural camouflage. As the two got closer the mechanical hum of a generator filled their ears, on its last legs by the sound of it. Finally Danielle and Brock reached the outside walls of the facility, and could get a better look at the building.

Nothing looked newer than the Nixon administration. Any identification markings had long succumbed to erosion and the vines that draped the place like Venetian curtains. Dripping pipes sprung out from the roof, and in a pale imitation of the plant growths snaked down the side of the building and into the ground. Brock going one way and Danille the other, they crept around the sides of the building, keeping their senses peeled for anything unusual. They met on the opposite corner, where there was a door and the only brand new addition to the building: an electronic padlock with a 4 digit code. Danielle could also see a faded path that led into the woods, barely big enough for an ATV. But the padlock drew a special interest. Danielle walked up the door, swiping at the lock with her paw.

“Danielle.” Brock stated, fidgeting nervously.

“What?” She responded while still pawing at the lock curiously.

“D- do you smell that?”

She paused, stopping her playful swinging for a moment and inhaled deeply. It took her several whiffs before her eyes widened. She could tell that many animals had passed through here before. But one scent in particular stood out above the rest. It hung over the others like a heavy blanket.

“That, that...” Brock nodded.

“That’s the scent Ash gave us back at base camp.” He turned his head towards the door. “And it’s coming from in there.” Just then the radios cackled and Flash’s voice piped through once again.

“What’s going on? You find anything?” Danielle and Brock turned towards each other, eyes wide.

“Yeah.” Danille said solemnly. “We found them.”

