

# THE ANALOGUE CAT

by Huskyteer

When you wake, you wait a few moments for your eyes to come online. You can manage without them, but it's pleasant to lie in the dark warmth and purr while the blurred pixels slowly crystallise into your world. You stretch a striped arm and extend your claws until the pink quick shows, then pick up your other arm and lock it into position. Stretch. Extend. The joints move with ease and the claws, opaque white on this paw, click smoothly in and out. It's time to begin.

You're a second-generation Bengal. Your parents were grown in the wombs of human women who needed the money or wanted to do something shocking, but you were conceived the natural way - if there can be anything natural about the tangle of DNA that makes up a Pet - your sire and dam carefully selected by your breeder.

It's at training school, which you and your classmates call Kittygarten without knowing why it's funny, that you notice the difference between you and the others. You think more deeply, ask more questions, get in trouble more often. At the end of the course, you're ready to go off with your new owners. The fad for Bots is over, and it's all about Pets now. You were sold before you even opened your eyes, to a family with three boisterous kids. You put up with having your tail and ears pulled in return for their uncomplicated love. With the parents, it's different; you're expected to keep your golden fur groomed nicely and mince ahead of them on a lead so they can show off to those who have a less expensive breed, a mere Bot, or no companion at all. You miss your friends from Kittygarten, don't see other Pets except for brief

meetings on walks. The neighbours bring their black cocker round sometimes, and he's alright, but, again, he doesn't think like you do. You were the pick of your litter and everything about you is perfect, from the delicate tufts of fur on your ears to the apricot fluff of your belly. Each spot and stripe is regular and correctly sized.

You go blind when you're not quite full-grown, a breed fault, and your owners take you back for a refund. The kids protest, but are quelled by promises of a dog Pet next time. The breeder is kind, just has you neutered and throws you out on the street rather than put you to sleep. You survive on wits and whiskers for five long years, until your golden, patterned coat is masked by dirt and your perfect ears are nicked.

By now the third generation of Pets has come along. They're smarter than their parents, many of them crossbreeds sprung into life without a careful breeding programme, and they want to be recognised as people. The Bots take up the call, as if they've been waiting all this time for someone else to kick off. There's activism, and you're a part of it until it gets too violent for your tastes. Victory comes at last, and with it new rights, like the right to work, and the surgery that will give you new eyes. The sponsored ads that go with free healthcare are a small price to pay for vision. Not just vision, either; there's night sight, close-up, and Cloud access, all snug behind your eyelids and hooked with hairsbreadth wires to the living circuitry of your brain. You're not quite a Pet any more, but not quite a Bot either; something in between, non-binary. You see the world from twin cameras hidden behind green lenses of one-way glass. You don't mind so much, these days, that the breeder stole your sex years ago. You pick a new set of pronouns to go with the changes in your body, and a new name: Tozer. You're the Analogue Cat.

Now you find that the firsties and the second-gens are an embarrassment the third generation hopes will die off quickly, and sometimes helps to get there. Most of the first-gen are already gone, their lives short, simple, and largely happy. The seconds start to follow but you hang on, whether by chance or by some freak of genes. At thirty-eight you feel used up, your striped and spotted fur losing its plushy thickness and the skin loose around your shrinking neck, but you hang on. You're not sure what for. You don't fit. These days, people want everything to be discrete and sharply defined: on/off, male/female, good/evil.

You're an analogue cat in a digital world.

One night, as you take the moving walkway home from your sorting job at the recycling plant, popup ads flickering at the edges of your vision, a group of fourth-gen dogs walks by. They're young, have never known a world where Pets are promised to an owner before they're even born. One of them pretends to stumble and grabs your left arm, feeling under the bicep with a thumb. Then everything goes dark; they've used a jammer so you can't call for help over the Cloud, and it's knocked your eyes offline.

"Liberation!" you hear, and smell the booze on dog breath. You hiss and struggle, feel your claws connect with a nose, then one of the others has your paws pinned behind your back. There's a stab in your arm, a flood of warmth, and pain so sharp you fall and can't move. It takes you far too long to pass out, and when you do, the uncaring walkway carries your body onwards.

You wake with a stump where your arm used to be. The dog vigilantes hacked out the chip which, in the old days, allowed your owners to trace you if you got lost or stolen, and the wound became infected. You look from your stump to the Bot standing beside your bed, waiting for you to come round. It was this Bot who found you dying on

the walkway, stopped the bleeding and carried you to hospital. This Bot has checked back every day while you lay sucking in air and fluids, as your system hovered between reboot and shutdown.

Her name's Min.

Your new arm is emblazoned with advertising logos, but you don't mind. It's stronger than the old one and can feel no pain. It's resistant to heat and cold. You soon get used to working it, and a lot of the time you forget it hasn't always been part of you. But it's the other paw, the warm, soft one with its bundles of fragile nerve endings, that you slip into Min's three-fingered hand one afternoon soon after your release from hospital. She takes it gently in a grip that can exert meganewtons of pressure, touched in more ways than one.

Analogue Pet and digital Bot have a lot in common; like you, Min has made decisions about who and what she is, and she's had her body modified to suit the female identity she's chosen. Her torso is cylindrical, the glossy red of lipstick. When you sit together in the park, her chest is warm against your body, and something deep inside it ticks like a slow purr. Because of the Cloud link behind your eyes, you and she can talk silently, for hours, even when you're apart. You hadn't realised how lonely you'd been until you weren't.

You get a better job, working for a space programme newly reactivated as the planet's resources run low. Just cleaning up at first; then, when they realise your eyes can overlay blueprints and instructions, building components. Nobody makes Bots any more, and few people will voluntarily have their eyes taken out, so your attributes are rare and valuable - almost as much as a pedigree Bengal once was. The fourthers working at the programme treat you with an awkward respect, even though they've had the university education you could never have

imagined for yourself. Pretty soon, nobody will count Pet generations any more.

You become even more valuable the day a fire starts in the laboratory next door to your office. The sprinklers are having no effect, but you reach out into the white heat with your prosthetic arm, flicking switches off and grabbing burning material away so the flames die for lack of fuel. You lose half your whiskers, and can't wear the arm for a week because the heat it conducted has blistered your stump, but at the hospital you discover the programme has paid for an ad-free upgrade to your eyes, and when you come back to work the Director herself summons you to her office to thank you personally. She's run disaster analysis, and you've saved the project from losing precious time, money, and perhaps people. She's looking at you thoughtfully, and you wonder if she's having trouble with your pronouns, but when she speaks, it's of the programme.

She tells you about the mission: about the star the scientists have identified as having the ability to support life. They think there are planets. They can't tell for sure. But once they get someone out there, get them on the surface of a new world, they can send a signal back with the coordinates, and start the processes that will ensure food and shelter for the first wave of colonists. You ask why not an unmanned probe, and she explains that nobody knows what's out there, so no computer can be programmed to deal with all the possible eventualities. It takes the living to improvise.

A fresh start for anyone who wants it, she says. A society in which all are equal, truly equal. You ask what the problem is.

She describes the spacecraft, how the process is automated except for one crucial stage when controls must be operated. How the terrible forces involved fill human eyes with red mist, and render human hands too heavy to

move. She conjures up clumsy, big-boned bodies pressed flat against the floor, and inflexible spines snapping. But perhaps you, Tozer...she says. And you feel your tail twitch with excitement in a way it hasn't for years.

Then she tells you how long it will take. For you, a couple of weeks; for Earth, a couple of centuries. In that time, they'll build bigger and better craft, overcome the technical obstacles, and get ready for mass transportation. But someone has to go first. Because you can't send thousands of men, women and children into space without knowing what awaits them. Send one Pet, though, and they're a hero whatever happens.

You mention your age - you know no other second-gens still living - and she says, bluntly, that you need only survive long enough to send the signal; then she relents, and tells you your medical records indicate you've got plenty of time.

You say you'll need to discuss it with someone first. But when you talk to Min over the Cloud, she can tell your heart is already up among the stars, doing something nobody else has done or can do. Discovering a world that's yours from the start.

And now here you are, waking up on the cusp of a new life. You're bound to be disorientated; that's why this recording is playing for you. And if it's playing, then you're alive. You've reached your destination. There's a planet below you that will be your new home.

You remember it all now, don't you? I know you'll succeed in your mission. You're the Analogue Cat, neither Pet nor Bot, and you can do anything. And once you've landed, set up your camp, and sent the signal on its long journey home, there's another task for you.

Weight and space were too critical to take along so much as a gram of surplus, but the flash memory in your eyes holds a set of blueprints, and a compressed backup

of my memories and personality. Whether you salvage scrap from the capsule or use the equipment you've been given to mine and work the metals, eventually you can make a new body and install me in it. However it works, I'll still be your Min, your only Min. I shut myself down back on Earth the day you left; I didn't want to live without you.

I'm waiting, Tozer. I love you.