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Abstract

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Chapter 1

I Find Friendship in a Garbage Bag

I have no idea what I'm doing. I mean in an existential sense. I know what I'm doing right now; I'm walking the back roads of rural California because I decided to go for a walk the one day of the month there's going to be a thunderstorm. I actually like the rain, but I still hope to make it home before it starts tonight. From the look of the clouds, it's going to be nasty. Really, I'm out here trying to clear my head.

My family tries to be nice about it, but I can hear it in their tone. Wade, have you figured out what you want to do for a living? When are you going to do something with your life? Trust me; I'm as concerned as anyone about my lack of direction. Well, that isn't totally true. But then I think about how I'm a twenty something who still secretly wants to be a superhero and I just feel sad. Maybe I should take that internship Aaron's mom offered me. But just the thought of sitting at a desk all day bores me to tears. A commotion up ahead finally pulls me out of my pity party.

A pickup truck comes barreling down the road towards me, jerking to a stop atop a small bridge. The driver hops out and begins frantically heaving black trash bags from the truck bed over the railing and down into the drainage canal below. I'm amazed that someone besides me is dumb enough to be out in this weather. But I guess this guy really wants to get his littering in before the storm hits. Probably hopes that the rain will wash his garbage out to sea.

Something about this guy ticks me off. Some combination of my already crappy mood and his blatant disregard for the environment is making me irrationally angry at this random litterbug. Thus, before I can even consider all the myriad reasons why I shouldn't, I'm marching over there to call him out. He's nearly done by the time I reach him.

"Hey, does that look like a trash bin to you?" I say. Finally able to get a good look at him

now that his headlights are not blocking my vision, I see the shocked expression on his face. I wonder if maybe I look a little shady myself standing there in my dark grey hoody. Before I can speak again a realization hits me. I know this guy.

“Mark?” I ask in a more unsure voice. His eyes slowly light up in recognition and the shock on his face metamorphosizes into horror.

“Shit!” He flings the final bag from his truck bed before sprinting to the cab and peeling out, back the way he came.

Was it something I said?

I stand there a little bewildered and a lot grateful that it was just a guy I went to high school with and not a crazed murderer that triggered my ecologically inspired outburst. Some hero I am; can't even chew out a litterbug with authority.

I didn't really know Mark that well even when we went to school together. He was just another face in the crowd back then, but I had enough classes with him to get to know him in that passing way you know people you see often but rarely speak to. All I can remember about him is that he was kind of a jerk. He never seemed like the brightest guy, which is why I'm surprised when his truck makes its turn onto the main road and I can just make out the name stenciled on its side, Elysium Tech. That's the big R&D company that's been in the news lately promising some kind of new renewable energy source. I let the irony of that one just sort of pass me by. At least he's doing something with himself.

Leaning against the railing, I look down at the collection of black plastic lumps that sit gracelessly among the large stones lining the bottom of the ditch. The thunder in the sky tells me

they won't be there for much longer. I need to head back before the storm hits in earnest, although getting struck by lightning would be just the perfect capper to this day.

However, before I push myself off the railing, a strange sound grabs my attention. Below the rumble of the thunder, there's a low rustling and what sounds almost like chirping coming from the ditch. At first, I chalk it up to birds come to take their pick of the spoils below before the water washes it all away, but one glance shows that nothing else is down there. Then I see it move. In the low light I can barely tell, but one of the bags is definitely moving, if only slightly. I really listen and the chirping is also coming from that same bag. What the hell was Mark trying to throw out here?

I can't let whatever's in that bag be washed away. I know a person couldn't fit in a bag that small, but still, it's alive and it sounds hurt. Carefully, I slide down the bank into the dry riverbed. Tearing through what ends up being several layers of plastic, I finally break through to the struggling mass. As what is now clearly some sort of animal wriggles free, I stumble back in surprise.

There are no two ways about it, the thing inside that bag looks like a dinosaur. I stare at its beaked head. Or, at least something pretty close to a dinosaur. Blue eyes meet stormy grey slits and we collectively let out a shriek of surprise. The little creature tries to bolt, but barely gets a few hobbling steps before it collapses into the dirt. Still frozen by my shock, I realize that this thing is hurt, bad. There are burns all over its body, black chars like you see on overcooked barbecue. It also has a nasty gash in one of its legs, if the trail of blood from the bag to its current position is any clue. After struggling to move for a few moments, it just seems to give up, curling into a quivering ball and letting out whimpering chirps.

It suddenly hits me that this thing is only a baby, can't be more than a few days old, and already someone has tried to torture it to death. This amazing, impossible creature that shouldn't even be here, something I have dreamt about seeing since I was a little boy. Wonder pushes the fear out, but is soon tinged itself with a deep sadness. My heart aches for this little guy, so I reach out, ignoring everything I know about handling injured animals, and gently stroke down its head and neck. It freezes, but makes no move to break the contact, so I do it again, and again; I keep doing it until its breathing relaxes. Cautiously its big grey eyes move to look at me.

"I'm sorry I scared you before. But you're ok now; nobody's going to hurt you," I say continuing to stroke his head. He chirps a bit more lightly at this and nuzzles his head into the touch. It's all I can do not to start squealing in delight. I'm basically petting a dinosaur, and it's letting me. Despite everything that people presumably put him through, he seems to trust me. That simple fact feels so much more gratifying than it should.

A crack of thunder draws our attention skyward. I look down at the little guy who's now chirping nervously as he sweeps his head from side to side. Am I really doing this? I could just drop him off at a vet or a zoo and be done with it. For some reason, that idea doesn't sit well with me though. I feel oddly protective of him even though I don't really know what he is. He seems to have been through so much, I'm not sure I would trust anyone else to take care of him. I sigh; this isn't getting us out of this ditch.

"What do you say we get out of here before my pants get all wet?" I say as I scoop him up into my arms, careful to avoid his injured leg. The little guy squirms a bit in surprise, but soon seems to settle himself into my embrace. Climbing up the embankment and out onto the road proves to be a challenge with an arm full of baby something or other, but eventually we make it

back to where I started. The more frequent booming of thunder hurries me along as I hastily work to zip the creature up within my jacket. He twists around at first, and I worry for a moment that he's going to rip out of my chest a la Aliens. But once he finds purchase on the arm I'm using to support him, he seems to settle down. Looking up at me from within my collar, he chirps happily and snuggles into the fuzziness of my shirt. I can barely stop myself from cooing.

“You're going to have to stop being so adorable or we're never going to get you inside before the rain-” A defining boom, seemingly directly over my head is followed swiftly by a deluge.

“...starts.”

Let me tell you something. Running half a mile at night in the pouring rain with a large reptile stuffed down your jacket isn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. I thought about Mark and exactly what he was doing. The shock and horror on his face makes a whole lot more sense now that I know I caught him dumping a body. For, I can only assume, Elysium Tech. They're the only ones I can think of capable of creating something like this guy. Though, I haven't heard of them developing anything close to this. They play with bacteria and develop bio fuels, not create monsters. Neither do I know why, after creating him, they would want to get rid of him so badly. I mean, this is the discovery of the century, an animal completely unique, never before seen on the planet. Why would they want to just throw away something like that? The thought that he might be dangerous crosses my mind, but it doesn't seem right. Not only does he seem really docile, but if he is a threat to the general populous, why dispose of him so haphazardly? No, if he is a danger, it's only to that company. I'm glad to finally reach my neighborhood because I'm starting to run my mind in circles.

I live in a pretty upscale development, even though it sits alone in the middle of miles of barren nothing. I wave hi to my next door neighbor, Miss Greta, the only person I know who would still be sitting on her front porch in weather like this. She waves back, like I'm just returning from a Sunday morning stroll, while slightly jouncing the tabby in her lap.

Finally making it to my own front door, I push my way inside. I live in a modern two story home that has way too much space for a single guy in his early twenties, like me. But technically, I'm only housesitting for my best friend Aaron. He insisted because, and I quote, 'Wade, we need to get you out of your parent's attic so you can start causing trouble.' He's a great friend and a decent landlord; he only asks me to pay for my utilities while I'm here. Benefits of befriending the rich and lazy.

I make my way through to the kitchen. The little guy reemerges from inside my hoodie and takes stock of his new environment. I unzip and set him down gently in my sink. As I rinse him off I notice several peculiar things. Most of the blackened patches are coming off on their own, revealing perfectly fine skin underneath. While I'm relieved that the damage isn't as bad as it initially looked, I have no idea how it's possible for him to just shed off this burnt skin. The cut on his leg also looks a bit smaller than it did back by the bridge, but I suppose I could chalk that up to my imagination. Yeah, even I'm not buying that one; though something weird is going on with this little guy's healing. But he still has a cut, so I run to the bathroom to get my first aid kit. When I come back, he's climbed out of the sink and is stalking his way over my countertop, exploring. As I watch him move about freely, I can really get a good look at him and confirm that he truly is unlike any animal I've ever seen or heard about.

Superficially, he looks like a theropod dinosaur, walking on his back feet with his arms

pulled to his chest. But then when he wants to look at something higher up, he can rear back on his haunches till he's almost vertical, like a kangaroo. Then there's that head, adorned with a rounded beak instead of teeth. He has light blue scales on the top of his body and cream ones underneath and, as I move close to bandage his leg, I notice that he has weird red patches on his shins and forearms. Mostly, they remind me of the pads on a dog's foot, but leathery and hard instead of spongy. From his back down to the tip of his tail he's covered in bony bumps, a lot like a crocodile. He's about the size of a large cat.

As I finish the final check of his bandages, it occurs to me that at some point I started considering him a "he". I can't see any equipment of either kind, although I know some reptiles keep their stuff inside of them until use. But something about his mannerisms just gives me the feeling that he's a guy. Wait, back up, do I even know for sure he's a reptile? He seems pretty warm for something cold blooded. What about his diet; he has a beak, so do I feed him bird seed? I don't even know how big he's going to get. And since he's technically not a domesticated animal and I did kind of just take him, legally I may be screwed if anyone finds out I'm keeping him.

I let out a sigh and rest my head in my hands. He comes over, tilts his head quizzically at me and chirps in question. I pat his head.

"I don't even know what I should call you, little guy." Before he can reply there is a knock at my door. I look at him.

"You didn't invite any friends over while I was gone, did you?" He manages a pretty good deadpan stare.

"Just thought I'd ask before shooing them away." I leave him in the kitchen and make my way over to the front door. I'm really not in the mood for visitors, so I just shout through the door,

“I don’t want any!” and hope they get the message. Then it occurs me that not many salesmen go around hawking their wares in thunderstorms, so I decide to actually look through the peephole. I never make it that far.

I recognize the sound even over the din of the rain, a sound that I have heard in a hundred movies and TV shows. The sound of a gun being cocked.

Chapter 2

I Run Away From My Problems

Fight or flight has me diving back around the corner, but when bullets don't rip through my door in the next few seconds, I peek my head back around. The pounding continues.

“Uh, I think I left the oven on, give me a second...” I half shout at the door, my voice a lot higher and squeakier than I would like it to sound. Scampering back to the kitchen I grab for the home phone to quickly dial 9-1-1. The little guy's head rises in alarm as I frantically fumble with the buttons. But all I get for my trouble is silence. I try again, but nothing, not even a beep. Did the storm knock out my phone line? Or did the guy out front?

I don't think I want to stick around and find out. Before I can reach for my cell phone, the banging starts up at the front door again, harder this time. Looks like whoever is out there got tired of waiting for me. I begin rushing towards the back door and almost trip over the little guy, who has hopped off the counter and begun making his way towards the source of the noise. The realization hits me almost as hard as the tile. They're after him. Mark must have called them after he bolted. Or maybe he stuck around and saw me rooting through the 'trash'. Whatever the case, I can't leave the little guy all alone here. I said I was going to look after him, so that's what I'm going do.

While I've been thinking, he's been squawking up a storm over my clumsiness.

“Ok, I'm sorry already. I was a little distracted by the dude with the gun.” He seems to mull this over. This feels a little ridiculous; he's just an animal, right? A weird, totally unique animal, but still an animal at the end of the day. Why am I bothering to humor him? But the look he gives me next, like he's unsure whether he wants to buy what I'm selling, is so reminiscent of my fourth grade teacher whenever I told him I was sick in order to get out of his math lesson, that it sends a

chill up my spine. The noises coming from the door may have something to do with that, too.

Now, how the hell am I going to carry a two foot reptile while fleeing for my life? A quick glance around the kitchen isn't proving promising until my eyes fall on an empty felt grocery bag, the one I usually use to carry stuff home from the convenience store. Quickly scooping the little guy up in my arms, despite his protests of surprise, I make my way over to the bag.

"Don't be a brat. Now stay in there and hold on; we're going to have to move." I deposit him in the bag and slip the handles around my shoulders like a make-shift backpack. The center of gravity is a little low, until he stands up and wraps his arms around my neck as if I were giving him a piggy-back ride. He rests his head on my right shoulder. The pounding has gotten louder again and it seems to be echoing all throughout the house as I make my way hurriedly to the back door. Then I realize there is someone banging on that door, too. But I don't slow down. I have committed to this, so I might as well go through with it. Besides, there is one important difference between the front and back doors. The back door opens outwards.

Putting my full weight behind my shoulder, I slam into the door. Luckily, I catch whoever is standing behind it off guard and he gets hit full in the face, stumbling over into my back yard. Before he gets the chance to make any moves, I rush over and slam my foot into the side of his head as hard as I can. The person, who I can now tell is a guy not too much older than me, goes limp. He is wearing a dark hoodie and loose baggy pants, almost falling off with the added water weight from the rain. He certainly doesn't look like a professional hit man; more like somebody who would try to steal your wallet in the street. Could it all be a coincidence? Is this just my night of weird firsts? First time seeing a dinosaur in a trash bag, first time having my house robbed?

A sudden sound of wood splintering drives me to move again. Sounds like the first thug has

finally busted down my front door. Hesitating for only a split second, I reach down and grab the unconscious man's gun, slipping it into my back pocket. I've never even held a gun before, but better I have it than the guys chasing me. I just hope it doesn't go off and shoot me in the leg as I'm running or something.

In a full sprint now, I reach the fence that divides my back yard from the house next door. Jumping up, I begin to pull myself over the fence and into the neighbor's yard. Adrenaline is helping me make a move that would otherwise have landed me in an embarrassing heap on the ground. As it stands, I land in only a semi-embarrassing heap, which is an improvement. At least I kept from falling on the little guy, though he still squeaks in protest and tightens his grip on my neck like he doesn't have complete confidence that I know what I'm doing. He's a smart little reptile.

"Hell, what happened to you, man?" echoes the voice of the man who presumably just kicked in my front door. I don't wait around to hear if his friend replies, before dashing across the yard and hopping into the next one.

"Damn it!" again from my back yard.

I really hope that's a sort of general statement and not directed at my escape. After the third fence hopped, I am starting to wobble a bit, my arms aching. I decide to cut across over the much smaller fence that divides this home's front and back yards and out onto the sidewalk. Pumping my legs as hard as I ever have, I take off down the rainy sidewalk. I need to get away somewhere with lots of people. Everyone here is hiding inside from the rain. It is past midnight, so they might even be mostly asleep, if the number of houses with no lights on is anything to go by. I contemplate the idea of stopping and trying to wake someone for help, but that would involve slowing down, and I

know if I do that I'm liable to collapse into an exhausted heap.

The nearest gas station is about a thirty minute walk from the development, with not much in between. That seems like my best bet at a time like this. My mind made up, I check to make sure my passenger is still secure in my 'backpack'. He is, even if he looks a little greener around the gills. Does that expression work if your face is normally blue? Maybe if I ponder that I can forget the fact that I am being chased by men with guns. I push myself a little faster at the thought, despite my lungs' protest. The rain is coming down in sheets now and the thunder sounds like it's directly above me, but that's the least of my problems.

Despite the deafening noise, the little guy doesn't seem to shrink back from it; in fact, he stands taller, craning his neck up to peer into the storm. A small rumble ripples through him in response to a new thunder crack. And then another and another. It's like he thinks he can scare the storm away if he makes himself look big and scary enough. I can't help but smile, despite myself; I'm glad he's on my side. Lightning flashes somewhere behind me, illuminating the barren road ahead. I've passed the limits of the development and it's just a long stretch of lonely road between me and hopeful salvation. That is, if I don't get struck by a bolt of lightning first. It would be just my luck to escape the gunmen only to be killed by something that claims fewer lives annually than falling vending machines.

The flash from the lightning behind me still hasn't faded. In fact, it's actually gotten brighter, illuminating the stretch of road in front of me. It's almost like it's not actually coming from lightning, I muse, as I turn to glance behind me. But instead I see a car's head lights. I hate it when I'm right, sometimes.

I mean, it could just be a random car that's speeding towards me at midnight in the middle

of a thunderstorm on the wrong side of the road, but somehow I doubt it. I veer off the road, but the car follows. It's all flat scrubland for miles and there's nowhere for me to hide. At the last second, as the light from the high beams becomes blinding, I turn my body to the side in hopes of sparing the little guy the brunt of impact. But then the headlights pass me as something much thinner, but still very much made of metal, knocks me ass over tea kettle into the dirt. Asshole smacked me with the open car door.

I spiral into a heap a few feet in front of the now stopped car. My body aches all over, but whether it's from the running or the full body contact I just made, I'm not sure. The driver hops out of the open door leaving the motor running. Obviously he doesn't expect this to take long. As he moves from behind the blinding light of the high beams, I notice the glint of a revolver in his hand and I remember my own piece. By some miracle it's still in my pocket, so without much thought, I pull it out and point it at my attacker.

I can barely see straight, but at this point what the hell? If he's going to shoot me, he should expect me to shoot back. I can tell my move surprises him, the shock is written plainly across his face along with more than a little bit of fear. I can finally get a good look at him; the man who has driven me running from my home in the middle of the night. Boy is more like it; he looks barely out of high school. Already though, he has an ugly scar across one cheek and some inky symbols tattooed across his other. But his eyes are soft and human and totally terrified. No one has ever looked at me with such fear before. It makes me sick. My mind tells me to pull the trigger, to get him before he gets me, but those eyes hold me in place. They have the same look I know I must have had when I realized who was at my door. I make my choice and so does he. In an instant, his eyes harden to those of someone much older and he snaps his gun up and fires.

The bullet rips through my upper arm. It feels like someone has injected me with molten metal and I scream, dropping my gun. I barely notice that he's standing over me until the heel of his shoe is digging into my wound. I writhe around trying to get free, but he presses the barrel of the gun to my head. He's squatting down, one foot still pressing into my bleeding arm. The muzzle of his revolver feels hot against my scalp as he presses it forward forcing my head back so he can look into my eyes.

"You couldn't just open the fucking door, could you? No, no, no, you had to bolt, dragging me all the way out here in the middle of a god damn thunderstorm!" He accentuates his point by belting me across the head with his gun.

"Tell me you at least saw something juicy enough to be worth all this trouble."

"So you really did chase me all the way out here over some garbage bags." I try to sound confident in my previous deduction but it comes out in more of a pleading groan.

"Garbage bags? Man, you really are retarded if you think somebody is going to waste all this over some trash."

"So if it's not trash, then what is it?"

"Why would I tell you? In a minute you're gonna be dead." Damn, that always works in the movies. I would really prefer him to keep talking as opposed to shooting me. My arm is killing me and I can't feel my fingers. My vision is starting to blur, probably from the blood loss or the head trauma or both. Then I get another idea.

"So, you don't know either." It's a statement, not a question.

"Shut up." Then he hits me again, which is really all the affirmation I need. He stands up,

cocking back the hammer, and I need a new idea fast. Aw hell, who am I kidding? I'm screwed.

Just then, a screeching growl manages to drown out the thunder above us. It suddenly occurs to me that in all my pain and fatigue, I've neglected to notice the empty bag I've been laying on this entire time. Both of us turn our heads toward the car still idling in the rain, with a very small, very blue, and very pissed off looking reptile perched on the hood. Then he leaps, closing the distance like it's nothing, and crashes into the gunman's chest, bowling him over. Obscenities are shouted, arms flail, and a shot rings out, up into the wide sky of the night. But nothing dislodges the little guy from his hold. Then the man abruptly locks up, freezing almost solid, except for the occasional twitching, like he was just hit with a stun gun. He goes limp for a moment, only to start twitching again a second later, the little guy still clinging to the fabric of his shirt. This time when he goes limp, he stays that way, shocked into unconsciousness.

Some animals can use electrical discharges to stun their food. Maybe the little guy is one of those? Although, I can't think of any reptiles that can do it. Then again, I can't think of any that have beaks either, so what does that matter? And I suppose I'm only bothering to contemplate that in order to avoid thinking about the fact that I could have just died, if not for the intervention of an electrical reptile.

Said reptile is now sitting beside my wounded arm, licking it clean, very much like a cat would. I choose not to think about the myriad reasons why this could come back to bite me because, honestly, it feels really good. A warm tingling is spreading from my arm all throughout my entire body and it suddenly hits me how tired I am. My whole body feels like one big bruise just put under a warm compress, and even the rain hitting my face doesn't feel so bad. As my eyelids get heavier, I swear I can see some kind of paste or foam or something on the little guy's

tongue as he's licking my wounds, but at this point I could be hallucinating. My eyes fall closed and I listen to the splatter of the rain as the warm numbness nudges me into unconsciousness.

Chapter 3

My Pet European Water Iguana

It's not raining when I come to. In fact, I can actually see the stars in the sky as I stare upwards, still spread out on my back. For a while I just lie there and stare, watching as the occasional cloud passes by to disrupt my view. I still don't really feel like moving, my whole body feels numb. Maybe I have hypothermia from sleeping in the rain all night. Wait, all night? The sky is looking a little pink for midnight.

I turn my head to glance at the horizon and notice the barest edge of the sun peeking up over the horizon. I also notice the little guy, head resting on my shoulder, eyes focused, alert, fixed on the still unconscious gunman. They remind me of a coiled snake, waiting for the slightest hint of movement before striking. Those eyes lose some of their intensity once they notice mine. Before I know it I have an excited bundle of scales burrowing its way into my chest. I shakily raise my good arm and pull him closer to me.

"I guess we're even now, aren't we? We've both rescued each other, haven't we? Though I'd say your rescue was a lot more impressive than mine." The little guy looks up from nuzzling my cheek, tilting his head.

"Thank you," I whisper, gently stroking the underside of his beak with my index finger. He coos back something that I think amounts to 'of course, you dummy.'

"So you kept watch for me while I was asleep?" He chirps in the affirmative.

"Well, I'd say it was in that guy's best interest that he didn't wake up then." Once again I get a squeak of agreement and what I would almost call an affirmative nod, if I was just a bit crazier than I am now. But only just a bit; it's been a weird night, after all.

I sit up now, the little guy hopping off my lap as I do. My whole body begins to ache in protest. Well, that at least tells me I'm still alive. The arm where I was shot is particularly sore, but the bleeding has stopped, which surprises me. Looking at it closer, I was only grazed by the bullet, but it carved a good sized gash in my upper arm. Just like the gash on the little guy's leg, there's a trail of dried blood, but nothing fresh. I rip off the remainder of my sleeve and tie it around my wound in a make-shift bandage. Ok, I'm still alive; what next?

"Watch him." I point at the downed gunman and the little guy growls in response, locking his eyes on the unconscious body. I don't think he's going to be getting back up, but it never hurts to be careful. Staggering over to the car I'm surprised to find that it's been idling in neutral all night. The thought briefly crosses my mind of just taking the car and driving the hell out of here, going to stay at Aaron's or something until this whole mess goes away. Maybe if I keep repeating that to myself it will eventually come true. Still, going to Aaron's doesn't sound like a half bad idea; I definitely can't stay at my house anymore.

A shifting motion draws my eye to the back seat where the snoring form of the other thug lies. Jerk is sleeping like a baby. Quick as I can, I lean in the open driver's door and pull out the keys. Using my good arm, I toss the keys as far as I can in a random direction. That should keep these two busy when they wake up. I debate searching these guys' pockets for some ID or something but decide against it; I don't trust myself not to wake them up. Looks like, if I want to go anywhere, I'll have to head back to my place and get my car. I don't love the thought of going back to the place I just escaped from, but I don't think whoever's after me would try anything in broad daylight in an upscale subdivision.

Glancing around one last time before I head out, my eyes fall on the gun I picked up last

night. It may come in handy but, no, I don't want anything to do with something like that. I think my experience last night proved that I'm just not cut out to take someone's life. So carrying something like that would just slow me down. Besides, stealing anything from these two probably isn't the best idea, even if it is in recompense for trying to kill me. I need to get out of here.

"Come on, let's go." I gesture with my good hand for the little guy to follow me. He quickly leaves his vigil and is at my side by the road.

"I can't carry you with my arm like this, so it looks like you're walking. Just stay close, ok? I don't need you getting hit by a car." His grunt of reply is almost indignant.

"Aw, can it; I carried you all over last night. If we're keeping score, it should really be your turn to be carrying me around. I mean, I'm the one that's injured now." He tilts his head up haughtily and plods a few feet out in front of me.

"That's the spirit! You'll be there in no time." I can't help but grin.

As we walk, I compile a list of all the things I am going to need before we can leave. It isn't that much, but that's mainly because I didn't bring a lot of stuff with me when I moved here. I've basically been living out of my bedroom; all the furniture and appliances belong to the original owner. This was just supposed to be a temporary thing, a few weeks while I found a job and got my feet under me enough to move into a place I actually earned. That was four months ago. Maybe I was being too optimistic, but I just hate feeling like a leech. If I wanted to live like that, I would have just moved into Aaron's pool house. Although it looks like that may be where I end up anyway; great going Wade.

But this isn't about me, it's about him. I glance down at the little guy where he has finally

fallen in step beside me, his head darting all around, taking in the sights of the world, reflexively snapping to whatever new thing has caught his attention. I need to keep him safe and Aaron's place, or more specifically his mom's, is the closest thing to a fortress I know. That, though, reminds me that we aren't exactly out for a leisurely stroll and I dart my eyes around looking for any signs that we are being followed. Luckily, it's still just pre-dawn and nobody is out and about yet. Although, I should probably pick up the pace. I need to get the little guy inside and out of sight before people start heading to work.

Fortunately, after about a half hour of walking, we are almost back to my block. But low and behold, who is sitting on her front porch, tabby napping in her lap, but Miss Greta. Does this lady ever sleep? She smiles and waves at me again before her eyes flick down to the reptile that's following me and I know that I won't be getting away with just a casual wave back.

"Why, hello, dearie! You're certainly up early. Who's your little friend there? I don't think we've had the pleasure of meeting." Pausing to adjust her glasses on her pointed nose, "My! What a strange thing. Pray tell, what exactly is he?" Wouldn't we all like to know?

"Well...he's new, yeah. I just got him the other day. He's a rare... European water iguana." Goddamn it.

"Ooh, sounds so exotic," she says wistfully. I feel almost insulted that worked, though I should probably buy a lottery ticket while I'm at it.

"He definitely is. I was just taking him for an early morning walk and I slipped in a puddle and fell. I really need to get back and clean myself up."

"Of course, dearie, but feel free to bring him by anytime. I'm sure the girls would love to

meet him.” I nod and am about to walk off when a thought occurs to me. I need a phone. I was assaulted; I need to call the police but my line was cut. I could use my cellphone, but who knows if they’re listening. Whoever ‘they’ are; at this point I’m not willing to take the risk. But, maybe...

“Hey Greta, the storm knocked out my power and I forgot to charge my cellphone. Could I come in and use yours? I really need to make a call.” Her face instantly lights up. I don’t think she gets many people asking her questions.

“Why of course, dearie; yes, come in and bring your, what-did-you-call-it? I’m sure the girls would love a new friend.” I look down at the little guy, who is now staring at the old woman with curiosity.

“Well, are you ready to meet the girls?” His eyes go back and forth between us suspiciously like he’s wondering what I just got him into.

The décor in Greta’s house is a lot like her; well put together, but old. I don’t think there’s a single thing in the whole building that was made after the Reagan administration. Along one wall sits a row of six pink double dishes, each containing food and water, and each inscribed with a different cat’s name in flowery calligraphy. Their owners are soon darting out of every corner to inspect the new arrivals.

“Let’s leave them to get acquainted while I show you the phone.” She all but pushes me out of the room leaving the little guy surrounded by an enclosing ring of fur. This may not be the best idea, but all of the reasons I could bring up would probably get me thrown out of the house. So I just let her lead me into the next room where she keeps her phone. I should be glad that it doesn’t have a rotary dial, but on some level I think this is actually worse. Her phone is shaped like Garfield.

I really have to call the cops with a fuzzy tail pressed to my ear? My finger just finishes pressing the last number when the realization hits me and I slam the receiver down. I can't call the cops. What will I tell them? 'Yes, I picked up a strange creature while rooting through a company's garbage and now I think they want to have me killed for it.' Even if they believed me and came down here and found the two guys knocked out in the field, it would most likely mean that they would take the little guy away. It seems strange, I only just met him last night, but the thought of letting him go, of never being able to see him again makes me so sad. So if it means I have to deal with this myself in order to get to keep him, then I guess that's what I'm going to have to do. I dial a different number and wait. I know he isn't going to pick up on the first ring; he probably only went to bed a few hours ago. But he does eventually pick up.

"Whatever you're buying, I'm not selling it."

"Morning, sunshine! I wake you up, Aaron?" I know I did.

"Wade, what the hell are you calling me so early for? It's five in the morning."

"I had a long night but now I, well I need something from you Aaron." That wakes him up.

"What do you need?" his voice is quiet, shaky. I almost never ask him for anything. I know how it makes him feel when most people do that.

"Your help. I need to stay with you for a while. Is your pool house still free?"

"Of course it is; what happened, what do you want me to tell my mom about why you're staying here?"

"Tell her my house got broken into and I don't feel safe staying there anymore." It's some of the truth.

“Holy hell, is that what really happened Wade? Are you ok?”

“Partly and no, but it will be easier to explain the story in person. I’ll be there soon. I just need to pack my stuff.” I pause before finally deciding to add, “And Aaron, if this is what I think it is, it’s big, super extra-large size big.”

“Why does your saying things like that never make me feel any better?” I smirk before hanging up to find that I am alone in the room, Miss Greta having wandered off while I was engrossed in my conversation. I hear oohing and aahing coming from the direction of the living room. This can’t be good.

Chapter 4

What's in a Name?

When I reenter the living room, I find Greta sitting in a large reclining chair staring adoringly down at her 'girls' playing with the little guy. Or, more like him toying with them. He's raised up on his haunches so his back is almost vertical; he's holding in his hand one of those cat wand things that they like to jump at and try to chase. Three of them are leaping and pawing at the wand that he's keeping just out of reach. Two more are lying on their bellies behind him, absent mindedly swatting at his tail as it swings back and forth. The sixth is sitting back a ways, clearly too proud to play. Damn, if it isn't the cutest thing I've seen in my frigging life.

"He's so smart," Greta praises, once she notices I've entered the room.

"He watched me using the wand with them and, once I put it down for a different toy, he picked it right up and started using it himself; now he's better at it than me. I can never keep up once all of them get involved, but with that tail of his he's already a master." All I can do is nod as I contemplate what she's just told me.

"There's definitely something special about him, that's for sure," I say almost to myself.

"Does he have a name?" Now that I think about it, if I'm going to keep him I should think of something to call him besides 'the little guy'.

"No, I haven't thought of one yet."

"Oh? Well, how about something regal, like Bartholomew or Cornelius?" I can't suppress a grimace and the little guy, see I'm already getting tired of calling him that, almost loses his tempo and drops the wand.

"Those are certainly, er...impressive. I'll keep them in mind." Not on your life, lady.

I return my attention to the scene in front of me just in time to see the sudden motion. The cat that was sitting on the sidelines has decided to take action. Walking confidently up to the little

guy, the cat sits on its haunches and swats its paw across his face. The impact snaps his head to the side, although even with its claws extended the cat doesn't break the skin. The shock does make him drop the wand; the playful felines scatter sensing a confrontation.

The attacker clearly doesn't share their feelings as it sits calmly giving the little guy a, 'why are you still breathing my air?' look. Reptilian eyes narrow followed quickly by a blur that sends the confident feline sliding across the floor on its smug butt. I can't help but smile when I realize what's happened. The little guy gave as good as he got and smacked the pompous pet right back. My smile fades when I notice the little guy advancing on the downed cat, a growl rumbling in his throat. I rush to intercept him, putting myself between him and his target.

"That's enough of that; this fight is over, relax."

He obviously doesn't agree with me, actually growling up at me even as he stops advancing. I hold my ground.

"Don't get snippy with me; I'm not the one who hit you, she did." I gesture to the disoriented cat. "And she got her instant karma for it, end of story. Anything more and you become the bad guy. Is that what you want to be?" I glare right back down at him taking a step forward. The little guy holds to his guns and I wonder if I'm going to have to make a move to restrain him, something I'm not even sure I can do, when he finally gives in and lowers his head in submission, suddenly looking very put upon and guilty. My heart melts and I crouch down to stroke under his beak eliciting a chirping purr.

"Hey, it's ok; I know you don't want to hurt anybody, at least not anybody who doesn't deserve it. You're a nice little reptile bird thing. Good boy." He chirps in happiness at this and nuzzles his head deeper into my hand.

"Besides, I think your message more than got across just fine." I gesture to the cat who has

recovered enough to bolt under Greta's easy chair, quivering in abject terror. The little guy squeaks in approval at this development. The sudden sound of clapping reminds me that we're not alone.

"You make an excellent guardian, Wade. I certainly won't have to worry about that little fellow giving me or my girls any trouble in the future with you there to keep him in line. Bravo!" Aw shucks; now I'm blushing.

"Thanks, Miss Greta. Coming from you that actually means a lot." The comment about the future gives me pause; I really need to get out of here. I'd hate to bring any trouble to this sweet old lady.

"On that note, I think we'd better be going. We're going to be taking a little vacation and I need to get packing." Pausing to examine the room and its numerous pet centric accessories I say, "Could I actually ask another favor?" She eagerly nods.

"May I borrow one of your pet carriers? I haven't had a chance to pick up one and I want to hit the road as soon as possible."

"Why of course, dearie; in fact, you can keep it. I have plenty of spares," she says as she opens a closet that is stacked full of pet carry cases. Of course.

*

A few hours later, after a quick dash into my house to toss everything I own into the trunk of my car, I'm finally sitting parked in front of the Pierce family mega mansion. The Pierces and the Carpenters are old family friends on my mother's side. She and Olivia Pierce used to live next door to each other. Of course, that was before Olivia went on to become the head of one of the top ranked pharmaceutical companies in the country. Being a corporate super power is hard work and doesn't offer a lot of time for family, especially when said family is unexpected. Enter my mother, conveniently taking a break from college thanks to yours truly. Olivia, in much the same

predicament but unwilling to slow down, basically offloaded baby Aaron on my mom while she focused on getting her career started. So I essentially got a brother, although from another mother, and Aaron got some human interaction not predicated on how much he could affect the other person's bank account. Everybody wins, kinda.

I don't like to take advantage of having a rich best friend, mainly because I know how much Aaron's money bothers him. But I can't think of a single place I could be safer than in this fortress of a property. The main house is something ridiculous like 9,000 square feet and sits on ten acres of land. There's fencing and hedges surrounding the entire property and Ms. Pierce keeps the security state of the art. Nobody's getting in here without her approval. I don't know if taking advantage of all that counts as nepotism, but it's got to be a close cousin at least. And it makes me feel more than a little bit dirty, but this isn't just about me.

Reminding myself of my passenger draws my attention to the passenger seat where a large kitty carrier sits, an old shirt draped over the cell like door to hide the occupant as best as I can. I remove it to reveal the disgruntled form within. The little guy grumbles at me.

"Give me a break. It's not like I could have some cop pulling me over asking if I have a pet license for that beaked dinosaur." Though, as I look at it now, I have to admit that case is a bit small for him. It really shouldn't be, though. I carried him around in something smaller last night with no problem. But maybe things look smaller in the dark? I really hope my half assed rationalization is right this time because, if it's the other option and the little guy is going to grow up to be not so little, then I have one more problem to add to an already too long list.

Calling him the little guy again makes me remember what I was thinking about on the drive over here. He's past overdue for a proper name. But I can't just give him a regular name like Bob or Tim. Those aren't nearly weird enough for something like him. Scientists name things in a dead

language like Latin; that way, the names can have a hidden double meaning and nerds like me can feel superior for knowing what they actually mean. That could work.

Off the top of my head, I think hunter is something like venator. That sounds pretty good even if it isn't very accurate for the little guy. Since he shocked that thug last night, something to do with lightning or electricity would be better. I think that's cera or kera, maybe. So, what if I stick them together?

"Keravenator. How does that sound to you boy?" He just looks at me cockeyed.

"It is a bit of a mouthful, isn't it?" Keravento, kevena, kerator, no, maybe...

"Ker-av-no. Keravno. Your name's going to be Keravno. How's that sound?" He seems to pause like he's rolling the sound around in his head. Then he chirps in what I'm going to take as approval. Keravno it is. This is nice. Ever since I took that walk last night I haven't had a chance to really relax. But I feel safe here; nothing's going to get me.

"Smack!" The loud noise of knuckles rasping on my window has me jumping so high my head hits the ceiling. I quickly throw the shirt back over the case eliciting a surprised squeak from Keravno. Turning to glare at whoever broke my peace of mind, I find the concerned amber eyes of Aaron Pierce. Sighing to try to calm my pounding hear, I climb my way out of my car.

Aaron is a few inches shorter than me, skinny as a rail despite eating like a linebacker. Something I will forever hold against him. His dark black hair is trimmed short, an almost military style buzz cut. But the most striking feature about him is the clear Asian heritage apparent in his face. Specifically where in Asia is as much a mystery as everything else about his father. A one night stand for his mother back in college, she withholds all but the barest general details about him and even getting those is a battle not for the faint of heart. It's a touchy subject for him. Aaron has a lot of those. But right now he seems more concerned with me.

“Shit Wade, you look like you got hit by a car.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.” I nod solemnly.

“You’re screwing with me.” I am not. “Shit, you’re not, what the hell, Wade! Are you ok, do you need a hospital?”

“Well, I figured somebody here could help me with that and I wouldn’t have to wait in line.” I can see Aaron starting to panic a little bit.

“My mom can get you someone of course but, your arm! What’s going on Wade?”

“Look, I’m ok, you’re ok, everybody’s ok.” I’m not sure for how long, but he doesn’t need to know the fine details yet. “I promise I’ll explain everything as soon as I’m settled in. I figure I have to see the lady of this castle before I can make things official?”

“Her majesty is in her office waiting for you. She told me to go fetch, so you don’t keep her past her afternoon appointment.” Aaron’s eyes harden as he speaks about his mother. But at least he isn’t freaking out about me anymore. I know how to handle this situation.

“Careful there, your tone gets any colder and you just might give me frostbite on top of everything else.” He smirks despite himself.

“Well, it sounds like you could probably handle it; nothing else seems to have slowed you down.”

“Now you’re getting the picture. Come on; let’s get this over with because I really need a shower and a good nap right about now.” I begin walking across the broad driveway towards the front entrance. Without me blocking his view, Aaron can finally see the kitty carrier on my front seat.

“Since when do you have a cat?” he inquires, jogging to catch up with me after a moment of pondering.

“All secrets will be revealed in due time; patience youngster!”

“You’re only five months older than me!”

“Sorry, I stopped listening after the part where you admitted I was older than you, kid.” He playfully slaps me on the back laughing. I’m only too happy to join in.

Chapter 5

Meeting Monsters of All Kinds

The inside of the Pierce household can best be described as pragmatically opulent. Every piece of furniture or choice of decor makes it apparent that whoever lives here has more money than most people could ever dream about having. But it's never tacky or in your face about it. There's a sort of genuine quality of taste that ties the place together. It makes it feel like everything, from the tables to the crystal chandeliers, even the paint on the walls, belongs right where it is. Taken all together, every individual piece needs to be right where it is or the entire whole would look off. When taken together, it is truly beautiful. But it all clashes horribly with my own mud caked appearance, like a stick figure drawn overtop of a famous painting.

Aaron leads me up one of the two grand spiraling staircases in the foyer. His mother's office is the first room you come to at the top of the stairs. It has everything you would expect from the office of a business tycoon, bookcases, a desk, large windows that allow the occupant to survey the whole of her domain. And like the rest of the house, it's all tied together with that particular unification of style. Olivia Pierce is standing with her back to us as we enter, gazing out one of the floor to ceiling windows that line the back wall of her office. Obviously aware of our entrance, she still takes a few moments before turning to face us.

A woman in her mid-forties, Pierce is wearing a dark gray pantsuit. Stout and fit for her age, she exudes an aura of command, like she could order a tiger to roll over and, not only would it do so, it wouldn't stop until she gave it permission. It's all in her eyes, sharp and predatory as she looks me over, sizing me up. Am I useful, a threat, an asset? I can't tell which she is leaning towards, but I don't like being dissected.

"You wanted to see me?" She regards me like I'm in the same room with her for the first

time.

“Not even a hello for your ‘Aunty Olivia’? I haven’t seen you since you graduated.” She says this with her warmest tone, which stops just short of melting ice.

“Sorry ‘Aunty’, I’ve had kind of a rough night.”

“Yes, my son tells me you got scared out of that place I’ve been letting you stay in. Pray tell us, what ever happened to you? You look like you slept in a mud hole.” No too far off, actually.

“I got mugged this morning. They roughed me up a bit. After that I didn’t feel like being on my own very much, so I figured I could crash here for a while. Like when I was little, relive old times.”

“You must have been up awfully early for something like that to happen?” Stupid CEOs and your stupid observations.

“Couldn’t sleep, actually, so I went out for an early morning walk.” Please buy that. I really don’t feel like talking about strange beaked reptiles right now.

“Your job hunt going that poorly?” I want to talk about this even less. “I don’t see why you are having such difficulty. You have had plenty of offers that are more than most first timers could expect; just pick one of those.” So I guess we are talking about this.

“From my perspective, I haven’t been offered anything that I would want to do for a living.” Pierce makes a noise of derision at this.

“You sound like such a child. Honestly, when my son asked if you could stay in one of our properties, I thought you finally had things together. You’re smart, unlike some people your age,”

a pointed glare at Aaron, who has been fixedly staring at nothing since she started talking. “But it seems like you have yet to start living in the real world. Unlike my son, you do not have the luxury of being able to leach off others’ successes. He may be able to get away with slumming his way through life, but you cannot.” I look over at Aaron and my heart sinks. He seems to have deflated. His face shows no hurt or anger, but the hollow look is a hundred times worse.

Anger flares through me like a lightning bolt. I had heard this all before. It was impossible to have these two in the same room without hearing something to this effect. Early on I learned to just ignore it and try to cheer Aaron up quickly afterwards. But this time something snaps. If it wasn’t for Aaron, I would be out in the cold, on my own without anyone to turn to. He had allowed me sanctuary when he didn’t have to, not to mention the thousand other things he has done for me over the years. Besides, I’ve had just about enough shit today. I don’t need this.

“Are you stupid or something?” You could hear someone blink, it becomes so quiet. Aaron’s face looks like I just asked if the moon is square. But I think Pierce has the better reaction. Her expression actually shifts into shock, open and honest, if only for a second. I think I must look about the same, but at this point I’m not climbing out of this hole so I may as well keep digging.

“Does someone who can fly a helicopter sound like he's slumming it to you? How about a speed boat or a drag racer? Hell, if it has an engine, Aaron can probably drive it somewhere. If you bothered to check in on him once in a while, you might know that. Just because he isn’t doing what you want him to be doing, doesn’t make him worth any less than you.” I pause here for a moment to catch my breath, just now realizing that I have been basically growling at her. She looks like she’s going to say something but I cut her off.

“And another thing, I’m sick of people telling me what I should do with my life. If I want to

do something impossible or stupid, well then I'm damn well going to do it; it's my life, not yours, not his, mine. So keep your very expensive butt out of my business...please." I turn to walk out, gesturing for Aaron to follow me. When I hear the laughter, it's a sharp pretty sound like shattering crystal.

"You also have quite the backbone, although you hide it too well. A word of advice; be careful who you show it to. If they don't know you as well as I do, they may take something like that personally." She chuckles again to herself. "Make yourself at home Wade." I can only nod as I make my way out. It feels like I just made it out of the lion's den with a stake tied to my butt.

Back outside Aaron finally finds his voice.

"You called my mom stupid." He sounds like he still can't believe it.

"Yeah, sorry, I've had a long day. Hope I didn't offend or anything."

"How are you still alive? People don't do that, they just don't." He pauses for a moment to let it all sink in. "I think you're my hero," he whispers.

"Come on, you have to have better taste than that. Now, are you going to help me carry my stuff or keep gawking?" He nods sheepishly.

I open up the passenger door first to check on Keravno. This is a mistake. The t-shirt is lying in a heap on the seat and half of the metal door of the carrier is lying next to it. It looks like somebody took bolt cutters to it. The worst flashes through my head; did they follow me and take him? Did he run off and get lost? What if I never see him again? I should have realized it's none of those things since the car windows are still in perfect condition. But panic is not the best mental

state in which to make obvious observations.

Motion catches my eye from the direction of the back seat, a tail sticking straight up in the air. I follow it down to the rest of the blue body that sits crouched, ready to strike, in the foot space behind the driver's seat. I feel like that guy from Jurassic Park, clever boy. Two and a half feet of scaly power slams into my chest sending me toppling backwards out of the car, landing gracefully on my rear end with a most dignified "aaah!" that same bundle of scales in my lap happily chirping and nuzzling my face. If I didn't know any better I would swear that he's laughing and honestly, at this point, I'm starting to doubt if I really do know better.

The thought crosses my mind that the same beak that's currently parted so its owner can lick my face can also apparently bite through metal bars, but then it starts to tickle and I can't really think about anything much at all. Rolling around on the ground I finally manage to divert Keravno's attention to my hands by stroking under his beak. He purrs affectionately.

"Ok, enough! I wasn't even gone that long." He murmurs and gives me the doe eyes, which is pretty impressive, him being a reptile and all. I amp up my petting and murmur back, "I missed you too, boy." He moves up my chest and presses his forehead to mine, shivering in pleasure.

"Um, Wade, why are you petting a baby dinosaur?" Aaron asks that like I'm going to have a perfectly rational answer if only I will share it with him. Oh yeah, I totally forgot about this part.

"Keravno, this is Aaron, my best friend. Aaron, this is Keravno, a... well I don't know really." Keravno squeaks in greeting and cocks his head to look up at Aaron in curiosity.

"Oh, hello Keravno, it's nice to meet you." The look on Aaron's face says that if he just goes along with this it will hopefully make sense. I hate dashing hopes.

“Look, can we have this whole introduction thing somewhere more private? Keravno here is the real reason I came.” That seems to snap Aaron out of it and he quickly begins gathering what few things I have packed into my trunk. I, on the other hand, work to corral Keravno. Without any options, I pull up my shirt and stuff Keravno under it. He feels surprisingly warm to my skin. Supporting his feet with my arms, when his little head pops out of my collar, I can only bop it with my chin. He squawks in protest.

“Quiet you; this is your fault for breaking the carrier. You should have considered the consequences.” He nuzzles his head into my collar bone and wraps his arms around my torso.

“Just like old times, right?” I notice Aaron staring at me as I stand in the driveway.
“What?”

He just shakes his head and mouths ‘later’ before making his way around the mansion towards the pool house. I quickly follow suit. Aaron’s pool house is about the size of an average home. Which is good, considering that he, and now Keravno and I, are going to be living in it for the foreseeable future. It, like the rest of the buildings on the property, is built with a modern aesthetic. The pool itself is a large rectangular affair partially obscured by the overhang of the pool house.

When we reach our new home, Keravno finally squirms his way out of my shirt and drops to the tiled patio. He looks around in wonder before finally zeroing in on the water. I gesture him to go ahead and he tentatively steps toward the pool. He cautiously puts one foot in the clear water, and seeing that nothing bad happens, he goes to put his other foot in and falls into the deep end. This will be a lot less funny if he drowns. I rush over to try to fish him out but he has already figured this swimming thing out. Doggy paddling at first, he soon is gliding around the pool

propelled by his tail, moving his body back and forth like a crocodile. I can't help but smile; he looks like he was born to be in the water.

A sudden sound draws my attention. Aaron has dropped all my stuff unceremoniously at his feet.

“Ok, we're here. What the hell, Wade?” He gestures between me and Keravno. I give one more look to the little guy still enjoying the water before turning back to face Aaron.

“Well, I was out for a walk last night.”

Chapter 6

I Teach a Dinosaur to Nod

“So you just decided to bring it here!”

“It’s not like I had a lot of other options; where else was I supposed to hide a baby whatever he is?” I spoke from one of the comfy padded chairs that surround the Pierces’ giant pool.

Reclining back, I’m the most relaxed I’ve been since I decided to take that walk last night. Aaron, not so much.

“How about not taking him with you! I mean, shit Wade, you said that it looked like that, thing-“

“Keravno.” He pauses his pacing to glower at me.

“Keravno electrocuted some guy last night. What’s to say you won’t piss him off at some point and he’ll fry you?” It is a fair question. Keravno has proven himself to be dangerous several times over, potentially deadly even. But still, it just doesn’t seem right to consider the possibility that he may hurt me. It’s almost as if...

“We have an understanding,” I say almost to myself. My eyes drift to the water where Keravno is happily darting around. He seems a natural born swimmer, deftly moving about thanks to powerful strokes of his tail. Suddenly he dives down to the deepest point and I lose sight of him for a moment. Then before more than a second passes, he shoots up out of the water, breaching the surface like a dolphin and soon falls back to earth, or sea in this case, with a joy filled screech. I can’t help smiling. It’s good to see him having fun; he hasn’t had a break either. My smile soon fades once I notice Aaron still glaring between Keravno and me.

“Alright, you want proof, I’ll give you proof. Besides, I’ve been meaning to test this out.” I

pull my sore body out of its cozy reprieve and drag it towards the door to the house. But first, I point between Keravno and Aaron. “Watch him.” I leave before they can figure out which one I’m talking to.

The inside of the pool house is really just one big room with a combined kitchen and dining room tucked into one corner, stairs leading up to the second floor bedroom in the other. It’s in much the same style as the main house but, instead of Ms. Pierce’s intricately beautiful sense of design, this place looks a lot more like a college dorm room. Everything looks cheap, but well loved. Aaron’s own little way of protesting against his mother’s use of money. It still works in its own bless this mess kind of way. Everything has a place, it’s just that the place might be in a heap on the floor. I make a bee-line for the only walled off room on the first floor, the bathroom.

Once there I try not to go blind from the neon Hawaiian shirt pattern shower curtain. Not wanting to linger lest I sustain permanent damage, I quickly roll up the rubber bathmat before stretching up to unscrew one of the light bulbs. As I am lowering it down I happen to catch my own eye in the mirror and pause. I really do look like crap. Storm blue eyes shaded by dark bags blink back at me in dull surprise. A shaggy mop of black brown hair is plastered against my forehead by a combination of rain and mud. The same mud that cakes t-shirt and sweatpants making the normally loose fitting garments show off a rather unflattering figure. I really need to hit the gym. But still, there is something in my eyes that I haven’t noticed before, something a little wild. I wet a cloth and scrub the grime from my face before tossing a hand through my hair for that devil may care look. With my eyes and overall disheveled outfit combined, I seem positively feral.

A high pitched shriek snaps me out of my self-reflection. Gathering up my supplies I rush back outside. It looks like Keravno finally decided that I was talking to him and so has taken up a

vigil over Aaron who, for his part, has taken the sensible action of leaping up onto the chair I had been sitting in and poking at the watchful reptile with his foot. Keravno looks almost insulted by the gesture. I should probably intervene before things get any more dire. This is embarrassing for everybody involved.

“Can’t I leave you two alone for five minutes?” Keravno’s head snaps towards me, seeming to take that as a cue that he can abandon his post and come bounding over to me. I turn my attention to Aaron who seems reluctant to get off the chair.

“Get over here; this is partly for your benefit.” He still seems hesitant. “Oh look, if he wanted to get you he could have just jumped up. He has like a six foot leap, right boy?” To prove my point Keravno pops up into the air nearly reaching my shoulder and lands deftly on his feet. I gesture ‘see’ to Aaron and he begrudgingly moves over to join us. Handing the stuff to Aaron I crouch down so I’m at eye level with Keravno.

“All right, remember that thing you did to that jerk with the gun last night?” Keravno chirps in what I think is agreement, but I’m not really comfortable risking this on a maybe. But this may actually let me test out another idea, one I’ve had ever since I saw him playing with the cat wand back at Miss Greta’s.

“Ok boy, can you do me a favor? If I ask you a question and you agree, then can you nod like this?” I nod my own head for him before gently moving his head up and down to demonstrate the motion.

“And if you don’t agree or don’t want to do something, then shake your head like this.” Again, I shake my head and then his side to side.

“You think you can do that for me boy?” I can barely suppress a manic giggle when Keravno tentatively nods his head and then after witnessing my reaction gives a much more vigorous nod.

“Yes! Just like that, it’s not so hard.” He shakes ‘no’.

“Ok, you don’t have to do it for every little thing.” A slightly harder shake.

“Really, stop that.” A very vigorous shake.

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?” A nod.

“Little smartass.” More intense nodding.

I’ve created a monster. Part of me wonders if he soaked up sarcasm from me like everything else. That’s a scary thought. Aaron’s mouth opens and closes like one of those singing prop fish, only less eloquent.

“Did...that...just... happen?” I try not to give Keravno the satisfaction of acknowledging his nod of response. Aaron does.

“Aah! Now he’s doing it to me! This is freaky man, how is he so smart?”

“This is what you’ve got to understand. Keravno isn’t just some weird animal; he’s something else, something more. I don’t know exactly what, but he’s different. He can think, learn and I’d say even understand, maybe not quite like you or me, but close. So if we treat him like a friend and not a pet, then I think we shouldn’t have to worry about him freaking out on us. Just give him the respect we would give to anyone.” Aaron considers this.

“This just all seems too strange. I still can’t really believe that this is real. I keep waiting for

someone to yell out and for it to turn out to have all been some big joke... but it's not, is it? This is big Wade. Why was that guy Mark just throwing him out like that? Who would have something like this and just decide to get rid of it?"

"I don't know either, but I intend to find out."

"I've heard that tone before. No! Wade, no, you cannot be a superhero about this!"

"Says who? There aren't supposed to be any super smart blue dinosaurs either, but you're standing right next to one. So I don't really care what they say can and can't happen anymore."

"So that's it? You're going to put on tights and go storming the evil corporate headquarters?"

"Well, maybe I care just a little bit. I was thinking more about protecting this little guy. He can be the first innocent citizen that I save. Once we have a handle on that, then I figure we can take a swing at the head honcho."

"We can, huh? So you want me to be your side-kick?"

"I was thinking more partners. It sounds less demeaning. And you are rich and screwed up enough to be a superhero."

"Well thanks for the support!" he says in mock scorn.

"Come on Aaron, you're my best friend. I wouldn't want to do something like this if I didn't have you backing me up on it, especially because, if you really are opposed to doing it, it's probably not worth doing in the first place. So, what do you say, up for saving the world with me?"

"Aw hell, Wade..."

“Are you really going to say no to this face?” I nudge Keravno with my foot and he gives Aaron the puppy dog eyes. He tries to resist, but better men than him have tried and failed. Finally, he lets out a sigh of defeat, or victory depending upon how you look at it.

“I’m in; I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to know where the hell he came from. No way would I be able to sleep with that question zooming around in my head.

“Alright!” I celebrate but Keravno manages to top me by jumping up into Aaron’s chest and bowling him over, licking and chirping in his face. What starts out as protests quickly devolves into laughter as Keravno hits a ticklish spot. He finally manages to pry the little reptile from his chest, sitting up panting.

“Ok, enough already, I like you too, jeeze.” It’s actually a real surprise that Aaron managed not to break that light bulb he’s holding while on the ground and, oh yeah, I almost forgot about that part.

“Well, since we’re all in agreement, let’s do that test.” I grab the bulb from a confused Aaron and hand it to a curious Keravno.

“Hold it with both hands like this.” I show him what I mean with both his red hands gripped around the metal screw bottom of the bulb. Then I lay out the mat a few feet away. I corral Aaron over to stand on it. This is more complicated than I originally anticipated, considering that it’s only slightly bigger than a foot across. But we finally manage by leaning back, holding onto each other for support like we’re doing a trust exercise.

“Ok, now Keravno,” I speak, back arched at an awkward angle. “I want you to do that same thing you did last night to the guy with the gun, but to the light bulb this time.” He nods in

affirmation and seems to concentrate. Before long a low growl rumbles in the back of his throat. The sense of power in the air becomes almost palpable. It feels very much like in a thunderstorm, that prickling static tension that makes the hairs on your arms stand to attention.

Then the bulb flickers before finally coming to full light, glowing brighter and brighter. Actually, I don't think it's supposed to glow this bright. Oh no. Almost as soon as it lights up, the charge becomes too strong for the bulb and it bursts. The sudden noise shocks Keravno into dropping it. Aaron and I jump simultaneously, losing our grip and falling gracelessly on our behinds. But I have more important things to worry about.

“I knew it, it was electricity! Keravno can generate a charge like an electric eel. I wonder how- No, Keravno, that's sharp, you'll hurt yourself!” But I'm too late and he's already picked up a shard of the shattered bulb. He turns it over in his hand, examining it from all angles before closing it in his hand and crushing it to powder.

“I guess not.” Aaron puts in his two cents from his position on the ground.

Chapter 7

I Call Giant Monster Tech Support

Aaron goes to get a broom while I distract Keravno by letting him tackle me into the pool. My idea, really, or at least that's my story when Aaron finally gets his butt back out here. Well, I needed a shower anyway. In the spirit of cleanliness I start peeling off my water logged clothes; they trail dark brown clouds as I pile them on the lip of the pool until I'm in my underwear. The coolness feels good on my aches and pains, although I would expect the chlorine to sting a bit more in my wounds than it does. But hey, I've never been shot before so what do I know? And it is nice to finally, final-fricking-ly be able to just relax for the first real time in nearly a full day. I stretch out on my back, eyes closed, almost asleep, save for the occasional nudge to my foot or hand by a playful Keravno.

This is how Aaron finds me when he emerges from the house with a broom and bucket. He doesn't look nearly as Zen as I do. He stands there pondering for a moment before sighing and turning to start sweeping up the glass shards. Though he does speak over his shoulder,

“You better not be bleeding in my pool.”

“Wouldn't dream of it.” Though, he did bring up a good point. I'd been shot through the arm; why wasn't I bleeding right now? That train of thought crashes and drowns when Keravno pops out of the water next to me using my chest as a springboard to shoot himself at Aaron. To his credit Aaron only lets out a slightly undignified shriek before extending fumbling hands to catch the rambunctious reptile. I think that's how it happens anyway; it's a little hard to tell specifics while hacking up a lung full of water. That settles it, Keravno is definitely getting bigger.

A few hours of cleaning and corralling later, Aaron and I are sitting around his coffee table eating dinner. Keravno is occupied picking the living room apart, exploring his new turf. I'm not

really paying him too much attention. The once frozen pizza in front of me is the best thing I have ever tasted. That may have something to do with me not eating since before I went on my walk last night, but only maybe. As I pause to inhale something besides my food, it suddenly occurs to me that Keravno hasn't had anything to eat for just as long, possibly longer since I don't know how well those Elysium Tech guys fed him.

I focus my attention on Keravno who is currently gazing intently at the cover of one of Aaron's giant monster movies, which was in a stack that he 'accidentally' knocked over. He doesn't look starving, but what exactly are electric beaked lizards supposed to look like? Better safe than sorry, so I call him over to us.

"Here boy, you should eat too." I hold out a piece of pepperoni to him. He looks at me funny. I pop it in my mouth, exaggerating chewing and swallowing. But even I know that part shouldn't be necessary. I hold out another piece. He sniffs it before turning his beak up at the offering. So I guess he's not a carnivore.

"Maybe he has better taste," Aaron says smugly before holding out a piece of onion, one of the many toppings on his veggie lovers' pizza. He has this dumb idea that putting some roughage on top of his fat and carbs somehow makes it all even out. I don't try to lie to myself, pepperoni all the way.

Keravno again sniffs the offering; this time he gently accepts it, chewing slowly.

"Ha! See, he's obviously into healthy living, unlike some of us." I roll my eyes and Aaron goes to offer him another piece but Keravno has already walked away, back to his pile of DVDs.

"Yeah, he's a real health nut." Aaron glares at me. I smile to myself, but it's only by half.

Keravno's behavior is worrying me. He doesn't seem interested in food, yet he hasn't eaten anything. I make a mental note to try more food on him later; I know some animals can be pretty picky. A little voice in the back of my head whispers an alternative. There is the theoretical possibility that Keravno doesn't need to eat. But that's impossible; everything has to eat something, even if it's sunlight. Impossible, like an electric dinosaur that nods. I really hate that my life has gotten so complicated.

After dinner I stretch out on the couch, which is my acting bed for the foreseeable future. I try to pay as much attention to the TV as Keravno is. He has that intense curious look he gets whenever he's observing Aaron or me doing something he doesn't understand. Suddenly my mother's words flash before my mind, 'I won't let television raise my child.' I shudder and switch it off so as to protect his innocent mind. Besides, the noise was just about all that was keeping me in the land of the waking. My eyes fall closed and soon I'm in a very deep sleep.

I have strange dreams.

The next morning I awaken, visions of beaks and lightning bolts still dancing behind my eyes. My shirt is soaked through with sweat which has cooled in the early morning air chilling me to the bone. Well, except for my feet which have a scaly heated blanket wrapped around them. I sit up and immediately regret it. I know that aches only really hit you the day after but, jeeze; it feels like I slept wrong on my everything.

Sitting up with considerable difficulty, I go to move Keravno so I can stagger to the fridge and down a gallon of water. When my eyes finally focus on what I'm actually trying to move, I sigh and seriously contemplate smothering myself with my pillow. It's seriously too early for this.

Keravno has grown over a foot, easy. This is stupid, and more importantly impossible. That little voice inside echoes that the word may not mean exactly what I think it means but I ignore it. But beyond the how, is the when. If Keravno keeps growing at this rate we won't be able to hide him here for long. Hell, he may not fit in this pool house before long. My freaking out is interrupted when a zombie lurches down the stairs.

“Coffeeeeeee...,” it croaks out before becoming aware of my presence.

“Have you been up all night?” I ask. He nods his head, the most effort he can apparently spare for conversation. He lumbers into the kitchen, before chugging the remains of a pot of coffee; turning to the sink he dunks his head under the running water, on cold. Finally, gripping the edge of the sink for dear life, he turns bloodshot eyes in my direction.

“That should keep me awake for this conversation but after that I'm going down like the Hindenburg.” He pauses to gather his thoughts. “I was doing research on our new friend there.”

“Did you find anything?” He groans before dunking his head in the sink again.

“I spent hours, combed through every picture I could find of unusual reptiles, even drawings and shit; nothing even remotely like him. Wait, is he bigger than before?”

“Yeah, I was going to bring that up. We may have to look into alternative housing possibilities sooner than I thought.”

“How big do you think we're talking here?”

“I'll get back to you when you can give me a species name.”

Aaron growls. “I even looked up Elysium Tech, but there was nothing even alluding to a

hint of anything in the same ballpark as this.” He gesticulates wildly in the general vicinity of Keravno.

“You should’ve told me you were going to do this. I know just the person for this kind of thing; in fact, why didn’t you call her?” He pauses for a moment, his sleep deprived brain struggling to connect the dots. Then his eyes widen in realization, and horror, there’s a lot of horror there too.

“No, no, no, not her, I refuse to ask for her help.”

“What happened between you two? We used to hang out all the time as kids. You know, before she developed her whole ‘thing’ with outdoors.”

“One time I asked for her help configuring the Wi-Fi for my laptop and she’s still holding it over me. That was back in high school!”

“Ok, that’s a bit much, but you were kind of an asshole about her phobia.” He looks at me incredulously. “You called her a basement dwelling shut-in.”

“Because it’s true! She hasn’t left her room in what, five years?”

“Six.”

“Hell Wade, cousin or not, even you have to admit that’s not normal.”

“Look, I think we’re getting off topic; if you didn’t find anything then I certainly won’t. So if you have a better idea I’m all for it.” All the fight just drains out of him like deflating a balloon. He even seems to start sliding down, as if the righteous indignance was the only thing keeping him standing.

I jump up off the sofa, Keravno fortunately having moved himself off my feet during the course of our conversation. Rushing over to the kitchen I manage to catch Aaron just before he slides all the way onto the floor. His auto pilot lets me walk him over to the couch I was just sleeping on. He's out almost immediately, although he manages to mumble a few more 'don't do its' before passing out. Keravno immediately takes up his position on Aaron's feet. I'll admit I would be a little jealous, if they didn't look so darn cute.

One morning routine later and I'm sitting in one of the big comfy chairs in Aaron's living room. It occurs to me that I haven't actually spoken to my cousin in a while, but we're family, we're contractually obligated to care about one another. It might be a little awkward at first, but before long I'm sure it'll be like we never lost touch. Gripping firmly to this belief, before logic can tear it apart, I dial her number.

"Hey T, been a while, how are things?"

"You don't get to call me that." Wow, this is already going great.

"What? But T...eagan, did I do something to lose the privilege?"

"That's a nickname, friends use nicknames, but someone who hasn't called me in four months is obviously no longer my friend. Now tell me what you want; some of us actually have work to do."

"Ouch, low blow T."

"Don't call me T...and sorry."

"Well, since you brought it up so tactfully, I'm actually calling you to ask for help with a little job."

“What?” That got her attention; Cousin Wade with a job, stop the presses.

“I need you to look something up for me, something rare, hang on a second.” I put her on hold moving over to the sofa where Aaron and Keravno are still sleeping. Trying to angle the shot so the location stays as vague as possible, I snap a shot of Keravno curled around Aaron’s feet. I text it to her before picking the call back up.

“I just sent you a photo. I need to know what this is.” No need for her to get more involved in the specifics of this whole mess. I just need to know if Keravno really is one of a kind.

“Why is it cuddled around Aaron’s feet?” Oh, God damn it.

“How can you tell? They’re just feet!”

“If you remember, I wasn’t always as enlightened to the dangers of the outside as I am now. I’ve been to Aaron’s house and I made that big stain on the couch in the picture. Where did you find this thing Wade?”

“That’s a long story, but the short version is that I found him and I need to know if he’s one of a kind. Aaron already tried looking up info through normal methods and it knocked him out.”

“Shame. But what makes you think I’d have any better luck?”

“Are you fishing for compliments? You coded your own search engine in eleventh grade because, and I quote, ‘Google is too frigging stupid to know what I’m looking for.’ The way my last couple of days has been going, I’m in need of something not stupid like you wouldn’t believe. You’re my girl T.

“Stop calling me that...and I suppose I could add it to my to-do list.”

“Great! Oh, and one last thing, be careful nosing around any file associated with Elysium Tech while you’re looking. We’re pretty sure that they made the little guy and really don’t want people to know. If you could get any idea why, that would be great.”

“As in the leading R&D company, Elysium Tech? Wade, what the hell are you caught up in?”

“Well look at that, I gotta go, call me if you get anything, thank you, love you, bye-bye.”

“Wait, Wad-” I’ll admit I probably should have been more delicate with that little bombshell, but better to ask forgiveness than permission and all that. Keravno’s head pops up, drawn to the commotion on the coffee table where my phone vibrates furiously. I look between him and the phone before pointing at it and shaking my head. He nods somberly.

Chapter 8

I Talk to a Big Wiener

It was afternoon by the time Aaron finally managed to drag himself off the couch. I kept myself busy by teaching Keravno new things. He instantly took to numbers and I had him counting things off on his fingers in no time. Reading and writing was a little trickier, complicated by the fact that Keravno definitely doesn't have the vocal cords for verbal speech. But he could understand what I was saying pretty well, even if I couldn't quite figure out how he did it. Over the hours we practiced he got better at figuring the exact meaning of my words. I also learned how to read him better. The tilt of his head, the angle of his tail, and air of his posture all began to fall into place for me to paint a picture of exactly how he was feeling. Part of me probably should have wondered at the speed of our collective progress, but by this point I think I've just come to expect this kind of thing with him. Besides, we were learning to understand each other. I'm ok with taking something like that at face value.

So by the time I hear Aaron banging around in the kitchen, I figure it's time for a break and leave Keravno trying to figure out what two and two makes. Inside the house I find Aaron just about to splay out on the couch again, remote in one hand, package of mini doughnuts in the other.

"So which part of a balanced breakfast it that?" I speak from behind the couch.

Aaron jumps, nearly sending his treats flying. He glares at me after collecting himself.

"The quick and easy part."

I snicker until a strange tickling feeling rubs against my legs. I yelp in surprise and pop over the couch in fright. Keravno hops over after me landing on the coffee table, looking almost as satisfied with himself as Aaron.

“So boy, did you figure it out?” I feel slightly less teacher like with my legs sprawled up in the air, but Keravno doesn’t seem to mind. He nods, enthused, before glancing around for some sort of visual aid. He settles on Aaron’s doughnuts; like a flash he swipes a couple right out of his hand. Aaron makes a noise of indignant surprise but settles back to watch the display. Keravno holds up the two snacks, one in each hand. Two.

“Right, two, and two more would make?”

In two quick snips of his beak two doughnuts turn into four pieces. He holds up his answer proudly, pausing for a second to lick his lips. Curiously he pops a piece into his mouth. I wait with baited breath before letting out a sigh at the look of indifference on his face. Oh well, it’s probably for the best. I don’t know if I could have taken the dinosaur’s favorite food being doughnuts.

“You got it boy!” I reach out and give him a good scratching under his beak and he chitters in happiness.

Aaron stares dead pan at all this. “You took him to first grade?”

“More or less; he’s like a little knowledge sponge, just soaks up whatever you have to show him. You want to give it a try?” He seems excited for a second before evidently thinking better of it.

“Naw, I don’t want to give him any bad habits or anything. Besides, I don’t think there’s much I could teach him in the first place.” He’s looking really down now as he clicks on the TV. A series is queued up, one of our favorites, Japanese show about a giant monster. Scowling at his put-down I reach over and smack him upside the head.

“Ow! What the hell man?”

“Well, don’t say stupid stuff and you won’t get hit. Do I have to give that speech again? Because, I will!”

“Come on, it’s not like I could teach him to drive or something. I just don’t think I have anything to bring to the table here.”

“What about computers? You know way more about that stuff than I do.”

“You really think he can learn to use a computer?”

“Why not, it doesn’t even have to be educational; it could just be fun stuff.”

“You mean like this?” He mockingly gestures to the screen only to be interrupted by an enthusiastic cry from the table. Keravno’s cheering on the main monster as he fights away the baddie of the week. He looks back at me, eyes nearly sparkling.

I look over to Aaron. “See, you’re helping already. I think you just gave Keravno his first career goal.” We both start laughing as Keravno goes back to cheering, jumping up and down and mimicking the big guy on the screen. I fall onto my side from laughing so hard and my cries turn to those of pain, my wound sending hot arcs of pain boring through my whole arm. Aaron is at my side in an instant. Keravno even pulls his attention away from the battle on screen.

“Shit Wade, you really need to get that looked at. We shouldn’t have waited this long as it is. I mean, you got shot!” Oh yeah, that did happen.

“Fine, call your doctor and tell him to get out here.”

Aaron pauses, looking sheepish, “Yeah, about that...”

“Stupid Aaron and his stupid making sense,” I grumble to myself as I make my way from my car. He said it would be impossible to get a house call without his mother finding out why I need one. And I refused to let him come because it would mean leaving Keravno home alone. So here I am in the middle of the city all by myself. However, we both agreed it would be better to park a couple blocks away from the office so I have some chance of identifying potential tails. Also, the doctor’s lot is always full this time of day anyway.

I try to keep my head up and eyes scanning around, but there are people everywhere and I don’t really know who I’m looking for. I’ve never been a wanted man before. Maybe Aaron’s right and I’m freaking out over nothing, but if that’s the case then I don’t even need to be going to the doctor in the first place. But he’s right about the fact that they don’t know where to look for me. I mean, are they staked out at all the hospitals in the area just on the off chance that I show up at one? Not even mega corporations have people with that much spare time. Right?

I’m so caught up glancing around that I almost get run over by a hot dog cart. Wait, a hot dog cart? In Southern California? The guy pushing it seems to notice me for the first time as I stumble around him, staring. He looks older than me, but not by much. He has one of those faces that just make you want to trust him, which already has me uneasy. His shirt reads, ‘treat your wiener right’ and he has a red apron tied around his waist. He smiles like we’re already good friends.

Something about him just tickles me the wrong way; something doesn’t feel authentic. As if he’s trying to dupe me and he’s smiling, not because he’s happy to see me, but because he thinks that I’ll be just stupid enough to buy it. I try to leave but he’s already brandishing a wiener at me.

“Careful pal, I’d hate to lay you up before you have a chance to taste the best street food in

So Cal.”

“Unless you’re hiding empanadas in that cart, somehow I doubt it.” He pauses looking confused for a moment, wiener returning half-heartedly to its rotisserie rake.

I try to continue walking around him but he just turns the cart and follows, apparently intent on hashing this out. “I feel like you’re trying to insinuate something, but I got to tell ya that I did my research and there isn’t a single other purveyor of fine meat products such as mine. I’m exploiting a hole in the market here.”

“And how’s that working out for you?” I try walking faster but he seems undaunted.

“I may not be doing as well as I hoped but that’s just temporary; people out here aren’t used to such high quality meats. Once word gets out I won’t be able to beat them off. “

I debate commenting on his phrasing but think better of it. As unpleasant as this guy’s company is, I have to admit that I don’t think he’s really a threat, unless Elysium Tech is trying to target my cholesterol. And walking with him is probably lowering the chance that they would try anything around a witness like this. Just the same, I’m more than a little relieved to see the hospital on the horizon.

“Well, as enlightening as this little chat has been...”

“Nick, pleasure’s all mine,” he says with another stock photo smile.

“Charmed, but this is my stop; I have to get looked at for a bullet hole.”

If he figures I’m baiting him, he handles it like a champ. “Good luck with your hole. Make sure to tell your friends, best wieners in So Cal!” Doesn’t even miss a beat. This guy is good.

The doctor's office is like any other, clean, quiet, and boring. I page through medical magazines and try not to look around at the other patients too obviously, but there's nobody who stands out. I suppose that's how it would be, not like the men in black are going to suddenly show up gunning for me. They would look just like everyday people; that's how they'd get me. But I just can't imagine anyone in here being a strong arm goon. There are a couple of old ladies chatting it up, a dad and his son who looks like he really doesn't want to be here, a guy in a wife beater and jeans, a woman with a huge purse and a tiny bawling baby. Maybe it's my optimism, but I just don't like assuming that any of these people are my enemies. It feels weird to try.

After about an hour of waiting, and my fourth read through 'Chronic Pain and You; Conflicted Bedfellows', right around when I'm wishing the bullet had hit me a few inches to my right, I finally hear,

"Mr. Carpenter, the doctor will see you now."

Oh, thank the Lord. I was about to see if that article was any better backwards; it couldn't have hurt. I get up and follow the nurse to a small white room. An older woman, probably about fifty, is waiting for me with a smile. Aaron thought it would be best if we used his physician, but since I'm not technically part of his plan, I still had to wait. She doesn't look so bad; I think I could take her if she turns out to be working with the bad guys. I hope anyway.

"So, Mr. Carpenter, you said that you cut yourself?"

"Shot actually, my friend was fooling around with his gun and didn't realize the safety was off. The bullet just nicked me, hurt like hell but it didn't seem as bad as on TV." She gives a shocked chuckle at this. "Still, he felt bad and insisted I go in to get it checked out, at his expense even."

“Well, I would hope so!” She seems to catch her outburst before gesturing for me to take my shirt off. “You were incredibly lucky a gash was all you received.” Don’t I know it? I finally pull off the makeshift bandage I tied around it the other morning. Her face suddenly seems a lot less sympathetic.

“Is this some kind of joke?” I’m too busy gawking at my arm to answer her. My wound is gone. Maybe gone is the wrong word. The area where the bullet ripped through me looks just a bit lighter than the rest of my arm, like I covered it up while I was getting a tan. But aside from that it’s perfectly normal. Not even a scar. I press my hand to the lighter area and wince. It’s tender, and it stings like I slapped it with a rolled up towel. That must be why it hurt back at Aaron’s place.

I look up at the doctor in astonishment. “It wasn’t like that when I looked at it before,” I say simply. She doesn’t look too convinced.

“And it just got better, on its own?” When she says it like that it sounds so impossible and stupid. But then I think back to Keravno and the week I’ve had so far.

“Yes, I guess it did. Look, I wrapped this around my arm after I was shot; it still has blood on it.” I offer her the red stained rag and she confirms that it indeed isn’t ketchup. “There aren’t any other cuts on my body, you can check; and that really is my blood, you can check that too. I know this sounds impossible, but I’m not lying to you.” She still doesn’t seem like she’s buying me. “Look, if this is even a little true, wouldn’t that mean something amazing for medicine? If I’m bullshitting you then just sue me or whatever, but don’t you owe it to science to see this out; run tests and stuff?”

She considers me for a few moments before finally seeming to sigh in resignation. “Your friend is going to be charged extra for this.”

I smile in relief. “Don’t worry, he’s good for it.”

Chapter 9

Saved by a Wiener?

After about an hour of poking and prodding the doctor finally booted me out the door. She said that even with a rush on the lab she still probably wouldn't know anything for at least a week. As for possible causes, well she was stumped. There was nothing known to medical science that would account for such rapid healing, not even something hypothetical. I reminded her that it didn't exactly feel healed but she wasn't exactly convinced, though she did wonder if it may have something to do with the nerve endings not being used to the new tissue, leading to a sort of phantom pain. She said all this the same way someone might describe the cultural practices of sentient shrimp, as something interesting to think about but so totally out of the realm of reality that it was almost funny.

I've become very thankful for Aaron's offer to foot the bill because, as near as I can figure, that's about the only reason I'm getting examined at all. I seriously hope that the doc can get my results back soon because, if my symptoms are caused by what I think they are, then they're likely only going to get worse.

I figure that since I haven't found any magic artifacts or been bathed in unstable chemicals recently, then the only explanation that could account for my sudden strange abilities is that weird dinosaur thing I found. But if my weird powers really do come from Keravno, then what? That still doesn't answer the how question. If this is some kind of deadly disease he's carrying then it has some counterproductive side effects. But I suppose I shouldn't rule anything out at this point. I should check with Aaron to see if he had any cuts that suddenly aren't there anymore.

Still, it just doesn't make sense for this to be some kind of bug that you pick up from contact with Keravno. If that were the case then Elysium Tech would only have two possible

motives behind throwing him out, exposure or containment. But if they wanted to spread some kind of virus, why toss him out at such a remote place, and bound up inside a bag no less? If they were trying to dispose of a contaminated subject, then there would be a hundred better ways to do that before the idea to ‘throw it out with the garbage’ should come up. So, good or evil, Elysium Tech would still be grossly incompetent.

Maybe I’m overthinking this whole thing. What about Mark? This could all be his mistake or plan or whatever. That settles it, I guess. Whichever this is, Mark is my only link to Elysium Tech, to Keravno, to any of this. I need to track the guy down, have a chat with an old classmate. He’s probably in the phone book...or I could just Google him like somebody not living in a bad detective movie. Yeah, I bet Keravno would love to ‘thank’ him for how they parted last. Probably a good way to get him to talk, ‘spill or be electrocuted by my pet European water iguana!’ I can’t help giggling at the mental picture.

God, maybe whatever is wrong with me finally made it to my brain.

All this thinking has taken me halfway back to my car already. It suddenly dawns on me that I haven’t been keeping as close an eye on my surroundings as I should have been. So, quickly glancing around, I notice that Nick guy across the street mercilessly accosting some poor passerby with his wieners. He notices me looking at him and waves enthusiastically; despite my better judgment I find myself waving back at him. No, don’t start walking this way, damn it! Me and my big hand. I start power walking to see if I can avoid him.

Huh. That’s strange. I notice that a couple of the other people in the crowd start matching my pace. I wouldn’t have even noticed them if it weren’t for the fact that one of them is the guy in the wife-beater from the waiting room. I really hope I’m being paranoid. To suss that out I abruptly

stop right in the middle of the sidewalk. I pretend I'm looking ahead of me at something. The people powerwalking don't stop, and go right past me; good. Except that they soon stop as well, all apparently suddenly transfixed by various features around them, a newsstand, a sign on a building, a phone call; not good. Last chance; I start walking back the way I came. Sure enough, before too long the three pursuers have lost interest in their distractions and decided to go back as well. Damn it, this is really happening, I'm being tailed.

Is it hot out here or am I just panicking? I wipe the sweat from my brow and try to keep to an average walking pace. Every bone in my body tells me to just up and run, but I know that will only make me an easy target. They won't try anything while I'm in public like this, surrounded by the other people on the street. But as soon as I'm even a little bit separated, I figure I'm fair game. I know I'm really desperate because I find myself glancing around for Nick's hotdog cart. Because life can never give me a frigging break, someone is actually accosting Nick for a change. A skinny guy in khaki shorts is busily chatting him up about something or other. Though, if I didn't know any better, I'd say that Nick's forced smile looks just a bit more forced than it did before. Still, he seems pretty well pinned by the conversation.

Even so, I figure my best bet is to make it over towards him. I can probably steer him back in the direction of my car whenever he gets done with the khaki shorts guy. Even if I can't, my tail won't try anything with him around, and if they do I can always kick the cart at them and make a run for it. So I make a bee line for the nearest crosswalk in the most nonchalant way somebody who is trying not to dead sprint can. The timer is ticking down; nineteen, wife beater is out of my sight somewhere behind me. Fifteen, the second tail, a skinny woman in sunglasses is to my right, fast closing the distance between us. Eight, the third one, an older man with salt and pepper hair, is actually ahead of me waiting at the crosswalk despite there being time for him to make it across.

Three, I'm not going to make the light, crap.

So here I am, waiting at the crosswalk with my three pursuers. Soon other people join us but I have a jerk on each side of me and one behind for good measure. My chest hurts from almost hyperventilating. I wipe more sweat from my brow; it feels like I'm melting. But I don't have any effort to spare for that. It takes every ounce of my control to keep from freaking out and running or screaming or announcing what's going on at the top of my lungs and... wait, why should I not be freaking out again?

I feel a hand brush against me. I have no idea if it's one of theirs or just some random bystander but it's the last straw. I whip around, fueled by terror and righteous indignation, in mostly equal measure, my sweaty finger jabbing into wife-beater's nose. His eyes widen in shock.

"You! I know who you work for! Thought you could follow me? Well, let's see what the cops think!" Still holding wife-beater at finger point I pull out my phone and dial. I purposely shout at the top of my lungs, all eyes in the vicinity are on me but none are wider than the pair at the end of my finger.

"Yes, officer? These people are following me; yes, the ones I told you about earlier! I have all their physical descriptions!" This gets the other two's attention. "You want them now in case something happens before the squad car gets here? Ok, well the guy in front of me is white, about average height-!" This seems to do it; wife-beater bolts, just turns and sprints in the opposite direction. The older man and the woman are more discreet about it, but they also high tail it out of my sight. As if on cue, the signal dings and the mass of spectators I was hosting suddenly realize the show's over and begin streaming across the asphalt. I wait a moment, watching wife-beater's back disappearing into the horizon just to make sure it's not some ruse. Aaron's confused voice

faintly trickles up from my phone's crappy mike. Satisfied, I take off across the street.

By the time my shoes hit the cement of the sidewalk on the other side I am in a full sprint. I don't stop until my car is in sight. Screw Nick, screw subtlety. I lost my tail so get me out of here as fast as I can. Hopefully before whomever I didn't notice figures out what the hell just happened.

I'm more than slightly unnerved by how empty the lot is but I don't let myself dwell on it. My keys are out and I all but slam into the door, I mis-time my stop so badly. But that doesn't matter; I made it, I actually made it.

"In a hurry there, pal?" My face turns toward the smug sound. The fist seems to be coming at me in slow motion. I can make out its travel in disturbing clarity, but my body just can't keep up. By the time I'm starting to move my hands up to do, well anything, it's already connecting with my face. Then the world seems to go back into normal speed and I'm sprawled out on the pavement before I can even feel the hit. But that part happens soon enough.

My entire jaw is on fire, a fire that soon spreads throughout my entire body, anger, pure and simple. I was so close, I had made it, but this asshole had to just pop out of my trunk and make things difficult. I won't stand for it; even if I'm currently lying down. The guy is in his fifties with dark slicked back hair and a perpetual smug grin. He's currently massaging his right hand with his left.

"Dang kid, you got one heck of a jaw on you. Still, I wouldn't give me such a scary look if I was you." He pulls aside his jacket to reveal his holstered gun. Not again, why do I have to deal with this again? Who almost gets shot for a hobby? He must have noticed my look of recognition.

"See kid, I'm actually being gentle with you. Now, my employer wants a word. But before

that I believe you have a certain product that doesn't belong to you, so we're going to go on a little drive and retrieve it. How's that sound?"

"You'll never find him without me, and I'm not moving, so why don't you shove that gun where the sun don't shine?"

He just sort of sighs. "Don't make this hard kid; you really think you'll be talking so tough after a bullet in your knee? Do you really want to get blood all over your shitty car?"

No, I really don't think I will but I'm too angry to care about that. Besides, he hasn't shot me yet, in fact he hasn't even drawn his gun. And then it hits me, there are still people around. Not close enough to tell what's going on but definitely close enough to hear a gunshot even with a silencer, especially if I scream as loud as I expect I will.

With my car's help I manage to pull myself to a squatting position. Despite, or maybe because of everything, I can't help but grin back just as smugly at the guy.

"You people already shot me once and that one barely left a scratch, so I'm good for double or nothing." My grin shifts into a grimace as, before I know it, a growl that would make Keravno proud rumbles from my throat. The guy eyes me in bewilderment. I'll think about that later; right now I have a smug grin to grind off on the pavement.

"Hey, mister! Want some hotdogs?"

I sprawl out on the pavement, the power of cognition leaving me mid-lunge at the sheer implausibility of that statement. The smug guy nearly gives himself whiplash snapping his head around to gawk at Nick, yes that Nick, or more likely gawk at Nick's wiener cart which is currently barreling down at him. He's evidently frozen in disbelief, too.

The cart smashes into him, pinning him to my car's back door like a bug on a piece of corkboard. The impact sends hot oil and half cooked wieners everywhere. Nick finishes running up to us, huffing and puffing, as I stare for a few moments. A soft thud breaks the silence; the not so smug anymore guy slumps to the asphalt, knocked for a loop by the power of wieners. Nick casually strolls over and pats him down pulling the gun from his pocket. He holds it up and gestures toward it.

“Think this will pay for my cart?” Maybe if you use it to rob a bank. But no, what I actually say is much more astute.

“You... don't really sell wieners, do you?” He rolls his eyes at me

“Well, I don't anymore, obviously. Weren't you paying attention?” He binds the guy's hands with a cable tie he pulls from behind his apron, where he then proceeds to stash the gun. The guy is surprisingly limber, or at least he looks like it when he's crammed into the hollow bowels of the wiener cart, which Nick proceeds to clumsily flip upright. He gives me a mock salute along with the first genuine smile I've seen from him, or at least his closest facsimile.

“You stay out of trouble now; me and my cart might not be there to help next time. See you then, Wade.” And with that he's gone. Well, ok, it takes him awhile to actually walk away pushing that cart, especially since one of the wheels went a little crooked in the crash, but you get the idea.

As I sit there staring at the dent in my car that is definitely not going to buff out, then down to my keys now soaked in wiener oil, only one question is going through my head. Who was that, how the hell did he know my name?!

Chapter 10

I Kidnap an Old Acquaintance

When I finally make it back to Aaron's pool house safe and sound, I don't have the wherewithal to do much else besides stagger through the door and crash onto the couch. I want to chock it up to stress zapping my batteries, but somehow I doubt it. Ever since this whole thing started I haven't felt right. Not necessary bad, but just off, not normal, like I have a cold or something, but different. I can still taste food alright and everything. Though, come to think of it, I haven't really been very hungry since this thing started either. I didn't eat anything all day yesterday and Aaron had to remind me to eat dinner. Am I making connections that aren't there? I sort of hope so.

I wake up a few hours later, Keravno semi-comfortably sprawled over me. He's almost the size of a German shepherd now and not showing any signs of slowing down. Where is he getting it all from? What hits me first after I roll him off my chest is that I'm still sore all over; in fact I would daresay that it's worse than when I went to sleep. Even my bones feel sore. I didn't even know that was a thing I could feel. As I'm lying on the couch aching, Aaron comes in wanting to know what happened. I'd sort of just grunted obscenities at him when he'd tried to inquire after I got home.

So I fill him in, making sure to stress how much my almost being kidnapped at gunpoint by a goon is totally his fault. He doesn't know what to make of Nick any more than I do, so he latches onto the healing thing. After staring very intently at my 'scar' and some poking and prodding that earns him a smack on the shoulder, he reveals that he definitely hasn't experienced anything close to that since he met Keravno, so it's probably a 'me' problem. Oh joy. But since it hasn't spread to him, he asks me to think if there was any time when Keravno did something to me that could have led to this. That got me thinking and then it hit me, the gun shot. After I was hit and he dealt with

the gunman, Keravno came over and licked my wound clean. I didn't think much of it at the time, but what if he was doing more than taking stuff out of the wound? What if he put something in it, too?

I don't think it was a one-time thing or limited to that area since, after the first one was pointed out to me, I realized that all of the other cuts and scrapes I got from that night are healing just as fast, little more than scabs at this point. Of course that raises the question of what and how and why and a million other things that I can't even begin to give the answers to. But I know who might.

Mark. Aaron agrees with me; he's our only link between Keravno and Elysium Tech. He was dumping Keravno that night and he knew it, I'm sure of it. Unless I want to spend the rest of my life hiding in my best friend's pool house, I need to figure out exactly what I've gotten myself into and how to get out. He's the only person I can put a face and a name to who I can ask.

Especially since Teegan isn't returning my calls. I hope it's because she's gotten wrapped up in doing research and doesn't want to be distracted, and not that she's decided to blow me off. About a fifty-fifty chance of that; I don't like those odds and I like waiting even less. So I guess the phone book it is. There can't be that many Mark Jacksons in the immediate area.

Twelve, there are twelve Mark Jacksons in our area. This is number ten. It's been a long day. Aaron pulls his car up to the curb across the street from number ten's house. We decided to take one of Aaron's cars since we figured the bad guys already have a description of mine. And Aaron has enough for them to be disposable; we could take a few dozen road trips and still not have used them all. His cars are actually one of the few things Aaron owns that show his true

wealth, this particular one being the sort of high end muscle car that stands out like a sore thumb in this sort of run down, second hand neighborhood.

Aaron puts the car in park and sighs, looking almost as haggard as I feel; entirely his own fault.

“Can I come with this time?” Another sigh filters through his teeth and he shakes his head.

“No, same as the last nine times.” I groan and press my forehead against the passenger window in desperation.

“What was the point of risking leaving Keravno home alone if one of us isn’t even going to do anything while we’re out here?”

“I recall offering to let you stay home with him if you were that worried.”

“No offence, but you’re about as threatening as my grandma. Now, I’m not much better, but at least together we have numbers on our side. We can watch each other’s back.”

Aaron reaches across me and points a finger at the front door of number ten’s house. “Well, you can watch my back just fine from here, and with a lot less chance of some goon spotting you.” I roll my eyes and push his finger away before asking,

“What are you going to do if he actually answers the door this time?”

“I’ll think of something. I’m sure I can keep him talking long enough to figure something out. If all else fails I can always bribe him.”

“You know, I’m honestly surprised your mom still lets you use her card.”

“I normally spend so little that I think she just forgets I even have it most of the time. Everything else, she just writes off as daycare expenses.” I look at him. “Not even kidding. Sometimes I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. ”

“How about using some of that money to pay for therapy?”

“Sure, just as soon as you throw out that cape you have.”

“I don’t have a cape! It’s a suit, and it hasn’t fit me in years...”

“You want in on that therapy session?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Sorry, I already know all I need to about your mommy complex.” He snorts in derision and opens the door, making a bee line for the front door.

I go back to pressing my head to my window. It’s already past noon. We started before the sun came up, mainly because neither of us could sleep very well last night with something like this to plan. But even after driving around all day I don’t feel any closer to knowing anything. I wonder what will happen if we don’t find him. Back to waiting for Teegan to call and watching TV with Keravno I guess. As relaxing as that sounds I’m sick of reacting, I want to be proactive. But sitting in the car isn’t exactly what I pictured.

I focus my gaze for a moment on Aaron. He was right; I do have a pretty good view of his back from here. So good in fact that it actually blocks out the doorway so I can’t see who answers it. Whoever it is, Aaron seems to be more animated than before. Then in the course of his gesticulations he steps to the side briefly. My eyes scan up pajama pants and a baggy t-shirt, past hands holding a bag of what I presume to be fish food, settling on short, spikey black hair perched atop a pudgy pale face. My entire body stiffens in recognition; that’s our Mark, no doubt about it.

He glances past Aaron and our eyes seem to meet briefly for a moment. I can't tell who's more surprised. He definitely acts on it first, though. The bag of fish food smacks into the side of Aaron's face, knocking him off balance and Mark bolts back into his house. I'm out of the car and sprinting for the fence that separates the street from the backyard. From experience, I figure he's probably making a run for the back door. Vaulting over the short fence I have the weirdest *deja vu* right now.

I reach the back door just after Mark throws it open and before it can sink in that I just made it across the street to here in less time than it took him to get through his house. Sore as I am, I'm not even out of breath, which is not normal, especially for me. But now's not the time to contemplate it. Instead, not slowing my pace, I say the first thing that pops into my head.

"Hey, asshole!" I was on a time crunch, ok? But it seems to do the job. Mark's face snaps in my direction, his eyes about the size of dinner plates. Now comes the next step of my plan. I swing my fist, putting the full power of my momentum behind it. The hit is solid, my fist connecting with his cheek. I expect to stagger him, maybe knock him off balance so I can hold him until Aaron comes to back me up. What actually happens is that he crumbles to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

At first, I'm freaking out. Did I just kill this guy? That really doesn't feel good. But after checking his breathing I'm relieved to find that he's just out cold, albeit with a nasty bruise on one cheek. Ok, this is getting out of hand; last time I checked, I couldn't knock a guy out with one punch. Is this related to whatever Keravno did to me? It seems like a lot to pin on one common source but all these weird side effects can't be unrelated. How far does this all go?

I glance down. That's why I'm here, so he can answer that. Well, whenever he wakes up,

that is. Suddenly Aaron bursts through the back door and nearly trips over Mark's unconscious body, stumbling a few steps into the backyard. Only when he's regained his footing does he finally seem to take stock of the situation. He looks at me sheepishly.

"Sorry I'm late."

"What took you?"

"Have you ever had fish flakes in your eyes? Not a good feeling. The bastard really caught me off guard. One second I'm schmoozing him up and the next, bam, bag to the face. I didn't know which way was up for a minute there."

"Sorry, I think that's my fault. He made me from the car and panicked."

"So you just ran him down and what?"

"I knocked him out." I pause for dramatic effect. "With one punch."

Aaron seems to ponder this fact for a moment, glancing at the unconscious body. "Remind me not to make fun of your cape anymore."

"It's not a cape!"

We carry Mark back into the house and lay him out on the couch. It then occurs to us that we should probably bind his hands and feet with something and that we didn't bring anything. You know, first time hostage taker problems. Aaron also goes looking for something like smelling salts so we can wake him up on our own time. Just so we're not waiting around the whole afternoon. These really aren't problems I expected to have when I woke up this morning.

As Aaron is checking the garage and bedrooms, I pass down the hall figuring it's not worth checking the bathrooms for a rope, unless maybe there's a toilet snake in there, but even I don't think Mark deserves cruel and unusual punishment. The faint splashing sound startles me. Was somebody taking a bath through all this? I knock on the door and when the noise doesn't stop, I enter. What I find inside answers a few questions about all this and raises just as many new ones. And putting all that aside, it makes dealing with Mark a hundred times more complicated.

Chapter 11

I Threaten Someone with a Trash Can

So, suffice it to say, fifteen minutes after Aaron knocked on Mark's door he was cable tied to one of his own chairs. We decided to do this in the kitchen since we didn't know how threatening we'd look on a couch. After my discovery in the bathroom, I never managed to find any smelling salts but Mark had a bottle of vinegar in his pantry so, close enough. I sit in a chair across from Mark, Aaron stands behind him, ready to subdue him in the event that he starts panicking once he wakes up. In his hand Aaron holds a rolled up magazine, one of those thick ones about stocks or something that only rich and boring people actually bother to read. It was sitting in a pile of junk mail on Mark's coffee table, Aaron tells me. It's his deterrent because he's playing 'bad cop' ... there are some battles that just aren't worth fighting. Let's get this over with.

I hold the uncorked bottle of vinegar up to Mark's nose, wiggling it back and forth just a tad for good measure. His nose twitches a bit and then he slowly begins to stir. I return to my seat and wait for him to get his bearings. It only takes a few moments before he starts screaming. So Aaron whacks him on the head with the magazine; I glare at him. He gives me a look that says 'well, he stopped.' I have to give him that, he did in fact stop. Mark's gone from looking horrified to more like just confused really, and he's sitting in silence seemingly waiting for whatever happens next. So I best not keep him waiting.

I toss him an ice pack, jury rigged from stuff around his kitchen, which he catches in his right hand, the only limb not zip tied to something. I point to my own cheek and only then does he seem to register the injury on his face, cringing a bit before quickly applying the ice.

"Sorry about your jaw, I don't seem to know my own strength lately. You still ok to talk?" He nods hesitantly after a moment, so I go on. "Hi, Mark. I'd say long time no see but that's

not exactly true now, is it? What were you doing that night Mark?"

He seems to finally be coming to terms with the fact that we aren't trying to kill him. And with that realization comes a shaky kind of confidence. I can see it in his features, they fortify, close into defensive ranks, flimsy ones but the intent is clear. "I don't know what you're talking about; I haven't seen you since high school."

I bury my face in my hands so I only hear the cry of pain as Aaron whaps Mark again. "Don't do this. Look, just tell me what I want to know, I'll hand you a pair of scissors and we'll never see each other again. But if you want to do this the hard way then I'm game, just be aware of what you're getting into. So I ask again, what is Elysium Tech doing and why do they want to kill me because of something I don't even understand."

Mark's face remains aggressive, the desperate defense of a cornered animal. "And what are you going to do Wade? The second I get free you're going to wish those guys shot you. I'm sure Pierce's mother will love hearing about how you got her only son arrested for kidnapping!" Aaron looks shocked that he's been made, since he hasn't shown his face to Mark so far.

"How'd you know?" Aaron says accusingly.

"You knocked on the door! Of course he'd think the other guy is you. Just hang on for a second." I get up, leaving Aaron to abuse our prisoner some more in retribution. I need to get my secret weapon, although I didn't expect to find it in the bathroom.

I return dragging a large plastic trash can. I have to slowly drag it across the floor because water is so frigging heavy. The pair in the kitchen look confused, but Mark catches on quickly. Once he realizes that the can is full of water I can practically see the color draining from his face.

Bingo.

“It’s funny; I don’t remember mentioning anyone trying to shoot me. Care to tell me how you know that? The resistance in Mark’s face is gone, crumbled to dust under his fear. He’s much more cooperative all of a sudden.

“I’m sorry! Ok. I panicked when I saw you going down into that ditch; I knew you’d find it. So I called a couple of guys I know who get rid of people. Had to give them near all of my savings but they promised they’d handle you. Stop you from saying anything.”

“All I’m hearing is that you put a hit on me; not exactly building my good will here.” I tip the bucket forward, just enough for him to get a good look at what’s inside. A giant tadpole Salamander, I’d guess, given the feathery gills on each side of its head. But this thing is already two feet long. From the second I saw it swimming in the bathtub, I knew; Mark is like me, he has a creature like Keravno, too.

“Gee, I wonder what Elysium Tech would do if they got an anonymous tip that one of their specimens has been found?” Mark goes pale with terror. “But no, I won’t put it back through whatever they did to it.” I see him relax a bit at this, which is a mistake. “How about animal control? I’m sure they’d find a nice home for it. Of course they’d also have some questions for you. I mean, and correct me if I’m wrong here, but I don’t think you exactly have a license for a giant tadpole, do you?”

Mark’s face is fallen, resigned, he’s done. Aaron stops gawking at the tadpole to give me a disbelieving look. The irony of the situation is not lost on me. If Mark is even half as attached to this tadpole as I am to Keravno then this must be torture to him. I would understand that better than anybody, but I also understand that he tried to kill Keravno and me. I try to tell myself that justifies

what I'm doing. My inner conflict must be showing because Aaron's face softens with understanding. Mark doesn't seem to pick up on it.

"I'll do whatever you want, just don't take her away, she's all I've got."

I tip the makeshift tank back up and sit down again, trying to mask my disgust at this whole situation. "Talk. Now. Tell me everything you know about Elysium Tech and what they're doing. Start at the beginning." Mark nods solemnly.

"It started about half a year ago. I began working at Elysium as a lab assistant, on a new potential biofuel. Something the head of the company had come up with."

"Alexander Maxwell, the prodigy philanthropist?" Aaron asks. "Whenever I've met him he didn't exactly strike me as the scientifically minded type." He trails off when he realizes both Mark and I are staring at him impatiently. He smiles sheepishly, "Sorry, go on."

"Well, as I was saying, I'm hardly there a week before my entire team gets split up and sent all over. I end up in the biology department. They tell me it's because they found some possible medical applications for the fuel and they need my experience. What experience? I barely had a chance to study the stuff. But I do like I'm told and it's not like it's a hard job. I just have to monitor the embryos the lab cranks out and terminate them when they reach a certain stage of development." He gets a sort of faraway look in his eyes.

"It didn't stay simple though. At first, a lot of the embryos didn't even make it a few days, totally lost their structure. But then, I guess the boys in the lab got the hang of that stuff because they started to make it further and further, and the termination dates got later and later. I started to see all kinds of crazy things, animals that don't exist in nature, hybrids."

“You mean like the goats that are part spider so they make spider silk in their milk?” This time I’m the one who interrupts him. I think I already know the answer but I want confirmation, I need it.

“No, way beyond that; I’m talking true chimaera here, total genetic hybridization of multiple species. Science says that it should have been impossible, but they did it; don’t ask me how. I just took notes and killed them before they reached maturity. Of course, that got harder than it should have. They started growing too fast, months’ worth of growth in a matter of days. It seemed like the more advanced the specimens got the faster they grew. Then one day I went in and found a specimen that was supposed to be only a few days old had reached full maturity, way past when I was supposed to terminate it. I panicked and tried everything I could think of to kill it, overdose, incineration, I even slit its throat but it refused to die. So I knocked it over the head and took it to the ditch. You saw this part.” He’s paused for a moment to look at me, suddenly wilting in submission.

It takes me a minute to figure out what he’s so afraid of, but then I realize it’s me. My fists are coiled into tight balls of rage at the thought of him doing all those things to Keravno. I think I may even be growling. I can’t really hear myself over the blood beating in my ears. This bastard, I should reach over and throttle him. But then I think back to that tadpole and how this must have been what he felt like when I threatened it. As fast as it came my anger leaves me, replaced with a hollow distaste.

“Keep going. What happened after you hired the hit men?”

He looks back at me quickly, seeming to accept what he sees. Mark continues, “After they found out I took company property off the premises without permission, my higher ups were not

happy. Even less when they realized I used outside resources to cover it up, especially when they heard that it failed and spooked you into hiding. I got fired is what I'm saying, but they swore that charges would not be pressed as long as I keep quiet. An agreement I'm breaking by telling you all this, I might add."

"Well, at least I had to twist your arm." Mark doesn't look particularly comforted. "What about this?" I gesture to the tadpole.

"She was in the same batch as the one you found. By the time I got back it was just as developed. I didn't even bother trying to kill it. I had just loaded it into the car to make another trip and was signing out when security confronted me. After I was fired I didn't much feel like returning her to them. As far as I see it, a cool pet as a severance package isn't half bad. Since then she's really grown on me."

"I know the feeling." Mark looks at me funny for a second before his eyes grow wide in realization.

"No, you...kept it?"

"Let's just say you aren't the only one who got a 'cool pet' out of all this; although I don't think I'd call him that to his face." While he's still trying to process this, I stand, but I pause for a second, "You never heard about any experiments having to do with people, did you?"

"No, just animals. Nobody I spoke to ever alluded to any human testing, present or planned. Why?" I consider my options before deciding, to heck with it.

"When I was pulling your buddy out of the tub she bit me, pretty bad too. That was about half an hour ago. Look at it now." I hold up my hand to him. There are fine prick marks in a

semicircle on my palm and the back of the hand. But they look like they've been there for a few weeks, not a few minutes.

“And you think that specimen I threw out has something to do with it?” Mark asks this a little too excitedly. Something about the way he's looking at the tadpole now makes me uneasy.

“I guess I'll just have to ask Alexander Maxwell.” I slam the pair of scissors down on the table, breaking Mark's gaze in the process, before gesturing Aaron to start heading for the door. Mark stretches his free hand out but can't quite reach them.

“Come on Wade, this isn't funny! You said you were going to hand me the scissors.”

“I said if you cooperated I would hand you the scissors. As it stands, I think you can work for them; look at it as payment for almost getting me killed. See you never, Mark.”

“Damn it, you-” but I'm already out the door.

“So what's the plan now?” Aaron asks as we reach the car.

“I already said we need to talk to Alexander Maxwell. Earlier, you sounded like you know him.”

“It's not like I have his phone number or anything. I just ran into him a couple of times at some of my mom's social events. You know all the big corporate types love to show off and the rest of them show up and pretend to be unimpressed.”

“Then I guess we'll have to talk to Teegan about it if she ever calls us back.”

“Great.” He pauses for a second, looking uncertain before finally looking me in the face. “Wade, about what you did in there, are you ok? I know you were just bluffing about the whole animal control thing, but that must have hit a little close to home.”

I can’t bring myself to look at him, but I nod. “I don’t want to talk about it right now; can we go? I want to get back and see Keravno.” Aaron nods in silent understanding and starts the car. As we drive, the weight of my thoughts soon drag me into sleep.

I’m awakened by a startled exclamation.

“You have got to be shitting me!”

The sun is low in the sky, casting Aaron’s property in an eerie orange glow. I follow his eyes to a pickup that wasn’t parked there when we left. The words California Animal Control are stenciled on the side. I’m seriously done with irony today.

Chapter 12

I Get Beat Up by a Girl

This can't be happening. I mean, it obviously is, but a guy can hope, right? This is the exact worst case scenario I was describing to Mark just an hour ago. The thought that this could be his doing flits through my mind, but I dismiss it almost as quickly. Just because Aaron was with me when we shook him down doesn't mean that I would be stashing Keravno at his place. It would be a pretty big gamble on Mark's part; if he was wrong, it could backfire and draw attention to his own secret 'pet'. No, Mark is running for the hills, or at least jogging toward them very quickly. This is just the universe's idea of a sick joke, instant karma for my hypocrisy.

Aaron shakes out of the shock sooner than I do and is out of the car in a flash running in the direction of the invading truck. Next to it stands a rather shaken looking employee of Ms. Pierce. Answers, this guy will have answers; that will make this better somehow. Thoughts like this one drive me out of the still idling sports car and after Aaron. The guy isn't much older than Aaron or me, with gelled up hair and an expression like he just saw a ghost. Dread settles like a lead weight in my stomach because I have a pretty good idea what he saw and it wasn't anything as harmless as Casper.

"Oh, Mr. Aaron, it was horrible!" The conversation is already underway by the time I get there.

"What happened?" Aaron asks, obviously trying to keep a lid on his own dread.

"Well, as you know, Ms. Pierce has standing orders for us house staff to go and check up on the pool house whenever you're not here." I balk, wide eyed at Aaron; this is news to me.

A grimace spreads across his face and he massages his temples. He glances at me while

muttering “oops” under his breath.

Oops? Oops! I think we’re a little beyond oops here. Before I can reach across to start throttling my friend the servant starts talking again.

“So I go in there and then I hear the TV running. I just figure you didn’t care to turn it off so I go to do it and then, right there, in front of the TV, there’s this little...thing! As soon as I see it, it whips its head around and stares at me; I can barely move I’m so scared. Then it makes this terrible sound and that’s all I can take. I run all the way back to the main house and call the authorities.” No, changed my mind. I think I’ll strangle this guy instead, but he’s saved by the fact that he’s not actually done talking.

“I had just finished directing the animal control officer when you showed up, Mr. Aaron.” That peaks my attention, the mansion is big enough that they probably haven’t even made it to the backyard yet; we can still save this. I feel like my mind is running a mile a minute as a halfcocked plan comes into shape.

“Good work!” I shout abruptly. “Exactly what I would have done, but we need to check if there are any more of these things around here. There could be an infestation.”

“We...?” he squeaks out looking towards Aaron with pleading eyes.

“Yes, ah, good idea. Wade and I will check the main house; you start on that side of the property.” He points in a random direction furthest away from the pool house. “And be sure to keep this quiet, we don’t need anyone to panic before we have things under control.” Aaron speaks with all the pomp and authority he can muster before all but shoving the trembling guy in the direction of choice. As soon as he’s out of earshot I put the rest of my plan into action.

“Take the long way, get to the pool house first and hide Keravno. I don’t care if you have to stuff him down your pants, but he has to be gone before the animal control guy gets there. I’ll buy you as much time as I can.” I’m moving now but Aaron is still in place evidently processing my orders. I put all my frustration into my best drill sergeant voice, “Run, oops man! Go!” That does it and off like a rocket Aaron shoots, already around the side of the house by the time I enter the front door.

I’m moving through the mansion in the calmest sprint I can manage so as not to draw more attention to myself. Room after room I pass with no sign of any officer until I enter the final grand seating area of the house, where giant windows bathe the whole place in the orange-red of the sunset. There, silhouetted against the glare, I can make out the light brown shirt of California Animal Control. And just in time, too, cause by the looks of it, the officer’s hand is just about on the knob of the back door.

Breaking into a full sprint I shout out, “Wait!” I intend to say more but I’m so focused on the hazy back in front of me that I fail to notice I’m a little too close to the edge of the coffee table. It catches me square in the shin, but the momentum of my other leg causes me to spin out rather spectacularly, if I do say so myself. By the time my tumbling comes to a halt I’m a few feet in front of the officer. Of course my head is spinning too hard to really tell me much else.

Rapid barking draws my attention and a medium sized Doberman begins sprinting in circles, yapping around me. Last time I checked, the Pierces didn’t own a dog, so I’m guessing it probably belongs to the officer.

“Oh my god, are you ok? Harry, sit.” Distinctly female voice with the slightest hint of a

Latin accent speaks from above me. The dog slides to a halt and plops itself down a few feet from my head, still eyeing me like I just did the bestest thing ever.

The officer kneels down next to me. She's pretty. I realize that isn't exactly her most important quality, especially in this situation, but it's still the first one I notice; blame my 'y' chromosome. Her rust colored hair is pulled back in a tail hidden beneath a baseball cap bearing the logo of California Animal Control. By the definition in her arms as she checks whether I broke my head, I can tell she keeps herself in good shape. The worry in her dark green eyes seems genuine and I'm touched. She's actually upset that I hurt myself; the concern feels nice even from a stranger.

As I relax my body my head lolls back and I catch a glimpse of Aaron's back as it enters the pool house. Maybe almost killing myself, like an idiot, was the best move I could have made. Still, the fact that she's actually bothered by it makes me want to down play my injuries. Besides, now that Aaron's made it to the house unseen, I just need to keep her from exiting the mansion for as long as I can; shouldn't be too tough. I begin to sit up. The officer moves to help me but I brush her off.

"I'm ok. Oooh, mostly." I grimace at the new bruise that is no doubt already forming across my shin.

"Are you sure, that was quite the tumble."

"Well, my parents would tell you I've never been one to do things the easy way." She chuckles at that. Making a pretty girl laugh is always good for the old self-esteem; maybe this won't be as bad as I envisioned.

“As long as you’re sure. So, what was so important that you needed to nearly break your neck to tell me?”

“Uh....” Could I just go back to writhing in pain now? I stand up and begin dusting myself off as slowly as possible to try to buy time for my rattled brain. What is it they say about lying? The more truth in a lie the easier it is to believe. I can do that. I shoot a glance back at the officer, still looking at me with expecting eyes. At least I think I can.

“I’m Wade Carpenter, a friend of the family. They’re letting me stay in their pool house for a few days. I brought along my pet.” Ok, that might be too much truth. “It’s a big lizard, a monitor. We didn’t think anyone would go into the house while we were out today but I guess Aaron forgot to tell everyone about the big guy.” I pause to gauge her reaction. It seems alright, I mean she hasn’t started yelling for me to get down or anything, but something about her eyes has changed. I’ve only ever seen that look before on Animal Planet when the big cat is about to jump out and kill her prey.

“Oh, Mr. Carpenter, I love big lizards, they’re so beautiful, mind if I have a look? I’m sure Harry would like to say hello too, wouldn’t you boy?” The dog gives a rushed yip. He clearly doesn’t want to interrupt, the show is about to start.

“I appreciate the sentiment but he really doesn’t like strangers, and I’m sure you have better things to do officer...?”

“Mondragon, but you can just call me Sara, we’re friends after all.” We are so not friends. “Now let’s go; if you don’t feel up to coming I’ll just go without you.” Crap. She begins to reach for the door. I panic, reacting on instinct my hand shoots out to beat her to the handle. It’s my last mistake.

Faster than my eye can see, her hand has changed direction? Grip latched around my wrist like iron, she pulls me off balance and before I know it I'm back on the floor. Even more uncomfortable than before, if that's even possible, with my arm twisted up behind my back.

"Now Mr. Carpenter, you should know that assaulting an officer is a federal offense. If I didn't know any better I'd say there's something you don't want me to see." The previous warmth in her voice has transformed into a smoldering fire that threatens to turn me to ash if I say the wrong thing again.

"I was reaching for the door!" She twists my arm higher on my back sending an arc of pain shooting up my arm. I consider my options, as best as I can, given my current situation. This is stupid, I haven't done anything! But I'm about to go down like I'm the bad guy here. Well, they say honesty will set you free, guess I'll see how literally I can take that. "Ok, fine, my pet isn't a monitor lizard." The pressure on my arm relents just enough so it's only mildly excruciating.

"Then what is it?" Uh... Good question.

"I don't know." The pressure lets up fully from my arm, but I can tell by the tone in her voice that it's mainly from confusion.

"So you kept this thing, tried to care for it, without even knowing what it is?" Sara starts out loud but gets quieter as she goes along and I swear I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck starting to smolder under her gaze. Not good, come on Wade, think, you talked yourself into this now talk your way out of it. Aw screw it, all in it is. Twisting around as best as I can to meet her gaze I put all of the emotions I can wrangle into my reply.

"He was hurt when I found him; I just wanted to help, to take care of the little guy. Please,

he hasn't hurt anybody, don't take him away or put him down or something." To my own surprise my vision begins to blur. It's been a heck of a week. I blink the wetness out of my eyes, doing my best to keep focused on Sara. Her gaze is still intense but it's no longer scorching.

"I'm not going to put him down." She seems to almost be talking to herself. Her grip is no longer painful, but it's still ironclad.

"Look, before you do anything, can I just show him to you? I think this whole thing will make so much more sense if you actually meet him." She's quiet for a beat.

"Alright Mr. Carpenter, I think I can at least do that much." I can't help smiling, in fact I'm grinning ear to ear like an idiot.

"Thank you, but I thought we were friends; you can call me Wade." I swear the ghost of a smile slips across her face, but that may just be my ego talking.

We aren't friends.

"Are the handcuffs really necessary?" I ask, the thin circles of metal already firmly around my wrists.

"You broke the law so you get handcuffs," Sara answers simply, finally fully releasing her grip on me now that I'm properly bound. "You seem like you are genuinely trying to help so I'll see this out for you. Besides, I need to see exactly what I'm dealing with before I can know who to call to give this animal a proper home." Good luck with that lady. "But," and suddenly her demeanor becomes stern, "you'll still have to face the consequences of your actions." Ouch, everyone's favorite thing to do. Still, if this goes how I imagine it will, I may wiggle out of those consequences yet.

Finally standing back up fully myself, I give my soberest nod. Sara's gaze softens just a hair and she gestures toward the door. "Well, lead the way Wade."

I look down at where my hands should be, if they weren't bound up behind me, and then I glance over at the door handle. I throw a raised eyebrow at her which she catches fairly well lobbing back a roll of her eyes and opening the door with one hand. The other hand pushes me through the open door before being raised to her mouth to whistle for her dog, which joins us on our trek across Aaron's backyard.

We reach the pool house before too long. "We've been keeping him back here hidden from everyone. He seems to like the water, so I think it's worked out pretty good," I say pointing awkwardly to the nearby body of water.

"How big is he?"

"About three feet last time I checked, but with how fast he's growing it's probably a bit bigger by now."

"You said he's a reptile?" I nod. "That should narrow it down; there aren't too many semi-aquatic reptiles that large. What have you been feeding him? An animal that big must have quite the appetite."

"You'd think, right? But no, he really hasn't been eating much of anything. Not for my lack of trying," I add quickly when she starts glaring at me again. "He seems to like plants more than meat, but even then he only takes a few bites before turning his nose up at it. I'd honestly be a lot more worried if he didn't seem every bit as energetic as when I first found him." Sara looks at me funny as if she's deciding whether or not to call me out again. Before she can decide Aaron finally

steps out of the house.

He takes one look at me standing there in cuffs and the color drains from his face, but he stills tries for his best friendly smile with Sara. You have to give him points for trying even if he's terrible at it.

“Officer, please reconsider, whatever my friend did I'm sure he didn't mean it. He hasn't been in his right mind lately.”

“Gee, thanks! Tell me what you really think.” Aaron looks toward me eyes half pleading, half exasperated.

“Would you be quiet for once? I'm trying to get you out of this!” He gestures wildly at my entire person.

“I think that ship has sailed.” I look at Sara who's trying very hard not to look amused. I turn back to Aaron. “Don't worry, I still have a plan.”

“And what exactly would this plan be?” Sara asks with false innocence.

“Yeah Wade, what plan could you possibly have to get out of this?” Are they really double teaming me right now? I glance between the two who don't seem to realize they're now on the same side. I try to keep all the sarcasm from my voice when I reply.

“I'm going to show her Keravno. So Aaron, would you please bring him out here so he can meet the nice lady?” If any more color leaves Aaron's face he'll be transparent.

“Ah, yes, about that...” Of course, it couldn't be that easy, of course not.

“What?” Aaron suddenly looks very self-conscious.

“I, uh, I can’t find him anywhere.”

“What?” This is Sara in business mode now.

“I looked everywhere but I couldn’t find him. Maybe he got scared when he was spotted and ran away?”

“This is serious; we have a potentially scared and hungry animal out there. It’s possible he could hurt someone and that would be very bad for both him and whoever he hurts.”

“Don’t you think I know that? But he was here not too long ago so he couldn’t have gone far. Trust me; someone would have spotted him by now if he’d tried to leave the property.”

“If he isn’t here and he hasn’t left the grounds, then where is he?”

“I don’t know, maybe-”

I’m not really paying attention at this point, too deep in my own thoughts. It doesn’t make any sense. Keravno isn’t scared of people, even ones that are scared of him. He had no real issue when he met Aaron, so why would he now? Just because I wasn’t there with him? I don’t buy it. But then, where is he? Even if he did run, he wouldn’t go far because he knows that I’ll be coming back here looking for him.

I start walking forward, no real destination in mind, as Aaron and Sara continue to bicker behind me. Before I know it I’m standing beside the house. I peer around looking for some clue, the final piece that will make everything click into place. Then I see the rain gutter. The pipe that descends from the roof looks funny, crinkled like a soda can after you grip it too hard, but every few feet like someone was using it to climb- oh, you have got to be kidding me.

Stepping back to get a better view I see the tip of a blue tail peeking out from behind one of the arches in the roof. First thing I feel is an overwhelming sense of relief, the exhale of a breath I wasn't even aware I was holding. If my hunch was wrong it could have meant a great number of things, none of them good. But now, none of that matters because Keravno is safe and sound. I should probably tell Sara before she calls in the cavalry and I lose my chance to talk to her one on one.

“Hey, guys- hey, listen- yo, oopsman!” That last part seems to at least get Aaron's undivided attention.

“That's not my new nickname,” he demands firmly.

“I don't know. You seem to be on a roll with it today. But you two can stop having an aneurism, I think I found-” a sudden movement draws my attention to the roof and a Keravno who looks like my yelling woke him from a nice catnap. And by the twinkle in his eye he wants to make me pay for it. The realization hits me far, far too late. But just before Keravno himself does.

As a mischievous bundle of scales hurtles into me from over one story up, I really only have one thing going through my head. He's definitely bigger than three feet now, much bigger. Oh, and ouch, that crosses my mind in there too, you know, in passing. His surprise attack successful, Keravno presses the advantage by barraging me with licks and nuzzles. But after a few moments he abruptly stops, noticing that I'm putting up an even less worthy fight than I usually do.

Able to finally catch some of my breath, even though still mostly pinned under him, I manage to croak out, “Sorry buddy, I'm a little tied up right... now.” My sentence is cut off as Keravno steps off me and rolls me over onto my stomach. Turning my head as best I can to see, I get a pretty good idea of what he's thinking. But before I can protest I hear a resounding snip and

my hands are no longer restricted. I flip back over just in time to see him spit out the small bit of metal chain he bit through. Guess I don't need a can opener any more.

I barely have time to become reacquainted with full range of motion before Keravno's head is pressed up against my palm, almost moving my hand himself to make me pet him. I can't help smirking.

"And here I was about to thank you for your kindness, but now I see it was entirely self-motivated. Well, fine, but be careful what you ask for." With that, I turn the tables using the relaxed state he's worked himself into to give me leverage. I flip Keravno onto his back and go for the kill, his belly. After a few moments of my counterattack all he can muster is a contented chitter. "That's for jumping off roofs onto unsuspecting people, you big dummy." I pause for a moment so he can gather himself; this next part is important.

"You have to be careful; you're getting too big to do that to other people. I can take it, but don't try something like that with Aaron, ok? You could hurt him. Do you understand?" Keravno nods somberly, looking a little ashamed of himself. We can't be having that now. "Hey, I know you didn't want to hurt anybody, you're a good boy." I continue scratching his head which he brings into my lap for better access. That situation at last squared away, I finally remember that we've had an audience this whole time. Looking back at them I do what I feel like, smile and say, "I found him."

Chapter 13

Somebody Competent Takes Pity on Me

Aaron just seems relieved that we don't have to go on a lizard hunt. But Sara's reaction actually surprises me.

"That's a very nice scaly dog you have there, what kind is it?" I start laughing until it hits me that I can't tell if she's being serious or not. The look on her face says she doesn't quite know herself; like she hasn't decided if she should be trying to wake herself up yet or not. I can't resist the opportunity.

"So, am I still going to be arrested?" That seems to wake her up a bit if only by making her think critically.

"Well, you still don't have a proper license," she says almost automatically.

"So then, what kind of license should I get to care for a... What exactly is Keravno again?"

"How should I know?" She seems more upset by the fact that she can't easily answer the question.

"But if you can't tell me what law I'm breaking, how can you expect me to follow it?"

"You, I, this... isn't normal." She's getting pretty exasperated at this point and it's actually quite endearing. She looks almost pleadingly at Aaron, as if he could somehow make sense of it all. Sympathetic to her position he tries to send me a disapproving look, but he doesn't try too hard.

"Are you saying that there are extenuating circumstances? 'Cause that sounds like the kind of thing that lets a guy off the hook." I know I'm being cheeky but it's been a long day. Sara, though, seems like she's had enough.

“What the hell is going on? What is that thing?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.” I pause because I’m just a tiny bit evil. “But I do have a few theories. Why don’t you make yourself at home and you can tell me what you think. It’ll be nice to get a third opinion.” Sara hesitates a moment before giving up, her whole form sagging into one of Aaron’s deck chairs. The dog seems to take this as a sign that it’s on break and dashes towards Keravno to introduce herself. Keravno looks quizzically at the yapping thing.

Seeing the opportunity to make a demonstration, I grab one of the sponge pool balls lying around.

“Hey, does she fetch?” I ask Sara. She brushes it off with a nod.

“If you’re still playing with me, I’m really not laughing anymore.”

“Just check this out.” I turn to Keravno drawing his attention from the hyperactive canine. “Try this,” I instruct, demonstrating throwing the ball and having the dog bring it back. After the first success, I hand it to Keravno who looks eager to try it himself. The dog seems happy for the excuse to run about.

“Did you just teach him how to play fetch? Just like that?”

“Basically, the little guy’s like a knowledge sponge. I rarely have to show him something more than once before he’s got it. It’s not even limited to things that I purposely show him. It feels like he’s always watching and trying to understand what he sees, always learning.” Sara nods, she seems to be looking better now that she has something tangible and grounded to focus on. As grounded as the learning habits of a beaked blue dinosaur thing can be.

“The rate’s extreme but the behavior itself isn’t totally unheard of. There are plenty of

examples of animals copying behaviors from other members of their species or even being taught something by people. The monkeys that learn sign language, for instance.”

“I’m not so sure. If I’m being totally honest, the reason I think it’s ok to keep Keravno here is mainly because I think he’s smart, at least as much as you or me.” There it is, all out now; this has been something I’ve been thinking about for a while now. Still, it’s the first time I’ve mentioned my impressions to anyone, even Aaron. It takes them a moment to grasp what I’m saying, but then Sara starts shaking her head, her face hardening into cop mode just a bit.

“I don’t buy it; intelligence is one thing, but sapience and sentience, especially on a human level? No, I don’t think so.” Aaron, for the first time, decides to enter our conversation.

“Yeah Wade, I mean there’s no question that Keravno’s special, but I don’t know man, doesn’t that seem a bit much?” That one hurts; Sara I can understand, she’s only known about Keravno for a few minutes now, but how could Aaron say something like that, after everything he’s seen Keravno do? Is it me, am I looking too deeply at this trying to personify him? I don’t think so, but then again I suppose I wouldn’t be the best judge of that, now would I? Still, there is just something about Keravno; something that makes me feel like there’s more to him, more going on in his scaly blue head than he lets on most of the time.

“What would you consider proof of sapience? What would Keravno have to do to prove to you that he’s as smart as I think he is?” She pauses, thinking for a moment.

“Write his name, read a book, I don’t know, do something that only people can.”

“You’re limiting your definition of sapience to humanity. Just because Keravno communicates differently, hell he probably perceives the world in a totally different way, but just

because they're different doesn't mean his thoughts are any less complex." Sara looks about ready to fire back but Aaron interjects, drawing our attention.

"Does watching TV count?" Both of us turn our attention to Keravno, now curled up with the dog in front of the flat screen. Bright colors dance their way out through the glass and into the now darkened sky of post twilight.

"You taught him how to work a Blu-ray?" Sara asks slightly stupefied.

"Are you kidding? That show's only on streaming, he used the internet." It seems to take Aaron a second to register exactly what he just said, but soon he's just as dumbfounded.

Suffice it to say, this makes no sense. Sure, we left the lap top plugged in while we were out, but it definitely would have turned off after all the time that's passed since this whole snafu went down. That notwithstanding, Keravno can't use a mouse and keyboard; we already tried that. There's no way for him to have selected the show and hit play, unless- aw this is stupid.

"Electronic interface." Sara looks at me like I'm crazy but Aaron's eyes widen. I continue, "The mouse and keyboard are just a means by which we interface with the electronic systems of the internet." Aaron picks it up from there.

"They're a way we interpret the electrical signals we send to the computer. If we were able to understand and create those signals ourselves we could cut out the middle man." He almost doesn't believe it himself. "Shit Wade, are you saying that Keravno queued up that show with his mind?"

"Well, he probably had to at least touch the computer. I haven't ever seen him transmit electricity remotely before."

“Wait, hold on, back up! You distracted me with the whole fetch thing, but no more. Enough vague inside talk; you still owe me an explanation, full disclosure, right?” Sara draws my attention back to her. Damn, I did promise that, didn’t I? Here’s hoping the truth really can set me free, or at least keep me that way.

“All right, but strap in, I’ve had a busy couple of days.”

“So let me see if I have everything. You found a baby blue beaked electric lizard a couple days ago, and you think one of the largest biotechnology companies in the world is now trying to kill you because of it. Since said beaked lizard is actually some kind of top secret chimera which you only learned after you assaulted and threatened a guy you knew from high school.”

“Hey! He sent goons with guns after me; I just tied him to a chair...”

“Right, oh, and let’s not forget the best part. Thanks to medical attention from the electric lizard you healed a bullet wound in a couple days.”

“That sounds about right. Did I leave anything out Aaron?”

“You didn’t mention the guy with the hot dog cart.”

“I don’t even want to remember that part.” Sara’s head turns between the two of us, like she’s trying to figure out if we’re messing with her or not; I don’t think she can tell.

“I’d say you’re under arrest if I didn’t know you’d get off on an insanity plea.”

“Gee, tell me what you really think.”

“That this is insane!”

“Are you familiar with the rhetorical question?”

“Gahh!” She bursts to her feet and storms around the tile patio. Working off steam I suppose or maybe she’s trying to distract herself from having to process her day. Either way, I feel like it’s best not to leave her alone too long, lest steam starts leaking out of her ears.

“Look, you’ve already seen Keravno, not much more I can do for proof there. If you want I can get a light bulb and he can show off with a light show.”

“Can you not, I’m almost out of spares,” Aaron interjects.

“Oh, God forbid mister hundred million dollars has to go shopping.”

“Hey, that’s cheap.”

“Not as cheap as you.” He gives me the stink eye and I turn back to Sara, whose lip is quivering, though if she’s holding back laughter or tears I can’t quite tell; best not to let her decide.

“I guess I could cut myself or something so you can see me heal fast.” Even I don’t like how that sounds.

“Great, he’s a self-harming, crazy person.” Her voice trembles with an emotion I can’t identify.

I should be more concerned about my image, but really I’m just slightly offended. “Hey, that’s cheap!”

“Not as cheap as you,” Aaron throws from the sidelines.

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” I shout, exasperated. My attention is quickly drawn by laughter, not just any laughter, but high pitched, gut busting, uproarious laughter.

Sara is almost doubled over, clutching her stomach in guffaws. I don’t think she’s even breathing anymore. This goes on for some time, to the point where I start to get worried. Did we break an officer of the law? Damn it, now I’m giggling too. Nothing’s even that funny! But a few minutes later the laughing turns into gasping and before long even that’s just heavy breathing punctuated by the occasional after-shock of chuckles. Sara finally stands up straight again and looks at me, something other than confusion sparkling behind her green eyes.

“Better now?” I question.

“God! I needed that. This whole situation and then you two acting like-oh, I can’t take it!” she manages to get out, almost relapsing. I can feel a slight heat rising to my cheeks. I like to make a girl laugh but this is a bit much. It’s another few moments before she’s calmed down again. “Ok, I’ve decided, I won’t arrest you.” I take it back, laugh all you want.

“Alright! Thank you, I promise you won’t regret this-“

“Whoa, hold up, you aren’t getting rid of me this easily.” Say what?

“I don’t know about that, there’s not much room left on the couch.” She rolls her eyes.

“I’m not moving in, but I am going to be back. I definitely want a demo of the other parts of your story, except for the healing one; I’ll take your word for that.” Aaron beats me to the burning question.

“Not that I want you to reconsider not arresting us, but why come back?”

“That’s it. I’m responsible for this now. You guys still being able to run around free are now my direct fault, so I’ll be sticking around to make sure I don’t end up regretting my decision. From what I’ve heard so far, you boys could use the help.”

“Hey, I think we’ve done ok so far,” I can’t help but add. She looks at me like she can’t decide whether I’m endearingly naïve or just pathetic.

“And that’s exactly why I’m worried.” Everybody’s a critic.

Chapter 14

Exposing Corporate Secrets in the Living Room

True to her word, Sara returns the next day. I can tell, now that the danger of imminent legal repercussions has passed, Aaron is trying to leave a good impression. He actually changed out of the shirt he slept in. To be fair, I probably would have too, if I had any other clothes to change into.

Sara pulls up in a different vehicle this time, a canvas top jeep. When she gets out it becomes clear why; she's going incognito. Instead of her light brown animal control outfit, she's wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, very normal, like any other woman going to see her new friends and their pet one of a kind science miracle. She greets us with a wave, friendly enough, but I can still see that hardness in her eyes, still in cop mode.

Over the next few hours we show her some of Keravno's tricks. The little guy isn't so little any more. In fact, he seems to have gone through another growth spurt and is now nearly six feet long. Even with our new friend covering for us, I'm beginning to wonder how much longer we can keep him hidden here. But for now, he can still be inconspicuous. He's just tall enough to open the doors by himself.

The trick with the light bulb goes a lot better this time. Last night Aaron grumbled his way to the store to buy more bulbs; I didn't go with him. After yesterday, I'm not planning on leaving Keravno's side for the foreseeable future. This time Aaron and I don't have to embarrass ourselves on the rubber mat. I've figured out that Keravno's current doesn't leave his body unless he wants it to. Don't ask me how he does it. After the whole internet thing, I'm done trying to figure out how he works for a while.

It's actually nice to have someone new to hang out with. I can't remember the last time I

really spent time with a friend who isn't Aaron. Saying that makes it seem a lot lonelier than it feels, most of the time, but still. Once she relaxes and loosens up the whole cop thing she's actually a lot of fun, even if she does get entirely too much enjoyment out of seeing Aaron and me bickering.

It's during one of these argument induced laugh riots that my phone rings.

"Turn Aaron's computer on." I blink. It takes a second before my mind can place the curt tone on the other end of the line.

"T-Teegan?"

"Aaron's computer, turn it on." Then she hangs up. She'd never been much of a one for tact, always speaking exactly her intentions regardless of the circumstances. But the way she sounds, I mean she didn't even pause to complain about me wasting her talents. That means she wasn't wasting her talents, which means this is big, way big. Oh goodie.

All eyes fall on me after the abruptness of the call, some holding more curiosity than others. Even Keravno pauses his giant monster show to pay attention. I'll be more concerned about how he did that later. I can see the question forming on Sara's lips but I wave her off.

"It will be easiest to explain all at once," I say, getting up to go fetch Aaron's lap top from his room. Over my shoulder I hear his first bemoanment.

"Took her long enough-" I'm out of the room before the rest makes it to my ears.

A few minutes later I'm back with Aaron's set-up. Yanking the Ethernet cable out of the

TV over Keravno's squeak of protest, I boot up the computer. Almost immediately a notice pops up indicating someone's calling for a video chat. I guess she wants to tell us whatever it is she found face to face. As I click it I hear Aaron mutter behind me.

"Careful not to point the camera at a window, don't want to make her uncomfortable." I swat at him and he shuts up, begrudgingly. Soon after, the video opens and Teegan's face fills up the window. Not that that's really saying a lot, her room being so dark I can barely make out her features, the only light on her end appearing to be coming from other monitors. At first glance it seems intentional on her part, but I know better. She just doesn't like to waste electricity, and isn't a big fan of the sun.

"So is your friend part of Anonymous or...?" Sara asks, referring to the shady look of the video. Teegan beats me to a response.

"Wade, who the hell is this? I thought you were in trouble and that's why you wouldn't stop pestering me all week, but now you're perfectly fine to hang out with this, this-"

"Sara," I cut her off. "Sara this is Teegan, my cousin. Teegan this is Sara, my-." I pause here because I'm not sure exactly what to call her, my acquaintance that almost arrested me, exotic reptile babysitter, lady who bent the law for me? Sara seems to have it covered though. She gives Teegan a warm smile like she's an old friend.

"I'm Wade and Aaron's friend. I only met them the other day, but they've been nice enough to show me around the mansion." That's not exactly what we were doing but it's a pretty passible excuse and it's actually nice that she thought to cover for us just in case Teegan isn't in on the whole secret beaked reptile thing.

“Well, piss off; I have some actually important things to talk to them about.” Teegan’s head is in the same place but somehow I don’t find it as endearing. Sara’s mouth falls open in shock; it reminds me a little of when we showed her Keravno for the first time. Aaron sputters between apologizing to Sara and stating his ill will towards Teegan, who I can tell even through the dark, has the biggest self-satisfied grin on her face. I can’t help it and just start laughing.

“It’s good to see you haven’t changed since I last saw you.” Teegan nods in agreement. “But Sara can stay, she already knows about the whole Keravno thing.”

“Wait, who’s Keravno?” I almost smack myself in the head, of all the things to forget to tell somebody.

“Keravno is what I named the little guy,” I say slightly sheepishly.

“Maybe you’re the one who needs to be caught up on important information,” Sara adds with acid in her voice. Aaron snickers unobtrusively.

“Well, with that ou-ah!” I gasp as a now familiar scaly mass slams into me. I’m just not supposed to get a complete sentence out today, am I? Keravno must have picked up that we’re talking about him and decided to insert himself into the conversation, literally.

“Yes, well say hello to Keravno,” I say slightly croaking from the weight of the reptile on my back. I really need to come up with a new nickname for him; I don’t think little guy is going to cut it for much longer. As it is, Keravno is already almost a head taller than I am when I’m sitting down. And I’d probably put him on a diet if he ate anything, though that might just be my back pain talking.

“Oh! He’s so cute! How could those Elysium Tech jerks want to hurt anyone as precious as

this? You are precious, aren't you? Yes you are!" Well, that's a new reaction. Keravno shifts his weight off of me to get a better look at the monitor, allowing me to move around freely again.

Sara is smiling, but it's that uncomfortable smile that people put on when they don't really know how else to respond to a situation. Aaron knows how to respond though, he's gaping in horror. Keravno himself seems rather nonplused by the attention, more perplexed I think by the video chat itself. He's never seen a video on one of these things that talks back to him directly. Glancing back to me he tilts his head in confusion. I don't think he totally comprehends what she's saying either, but that's hardly his fault. Giving him a shrug I pull myself back up to a sitting position.

"Stop that; you're patronizing him," I finally say to the screen. I grasp onto the still standing Keravno with both arms and try to pull him down into a sitting position; see how much he likes being manhandled. But he doesn't even budge, not an inch. The only indication that I'm even there being the slightest flick of the eye that tells me he knows exactly how much his non-reaction annoys me. After a moment I let out a puff of surrender which is exactly when he plops down onto his haunches, cocky brat. I wrap my arms around his torso and rest my chin atop his head, getting a hum of compliance from him.

"Come on, you can't say that and then do something so adorable, it's not fair," Teegan whines and suddenly I'm reminded of the girl I used to spend so much time with growing up. Someone who I miss spending time with. It's almost enough to distract me from the fact that she just called me adorable, almost.

"Well, now that everybody's here, can you finally fill us in, please?" Aaron says desperately trying to steer this whole conversation back onto some semblance of a track. At this,

Teegan seems to sober up and she nods solemnly, although it's soon replaced by a self-congratulating smile. Ah, here comes the bragging.

“Do you know the hoops I had to jump through in order to get anything out of what you gave me? A picture and a name, really? I've had more solid info to go on looking up things that literally only exist in my own head.”

“So you didn't actually find anything?” Sara asks, understandably confused. Poor innocent soul hasn't had to go through this same conversation a dozen times before.

“Of course I found something! I just want you all to appreciate the effort it takes; finding a backdoor into a system like this isn't easy, especially if you actually want to take anything out with you once you leave. I had to tweak a lot of laws to get in. You owe me big time Wade.”

I glance at Sara awkwardly, wishing Teegan had a bit more tact in this particular aspect of her work. It would really suck to get arrested for the second time in as many days, and by the same person no less. Sara notices me glancing at her guiltily and flashes a wicked little smile.

“Relax Wade, I'm not in cybercrimes. As long as your cousin didn't take out her hacking frustrations on any animals, you're all good. Besides, if I was really bothered by it I would have to turn myself in every time I downloaded a new movie.”

“Lightweight.” Teegan murmurs.

“Fight me, neo!” Sara shoots back with her own cocky simile. This actually gets a laugh out of Teegan.

“Damn it, Wade, I think I'm actually starting to like her.”

“Join the club,” Aaron adds and I nod in agreement. Sara flushes slightly at all the attention and suddenly finds Keravno’s tail very interesting. Deciding to cut her a break I once more try to circle this wagon back to where it started.

“So, Teegan, your talent duly recognized, what specifically did you actually find out? Aaron and I ran down an insider informant, but all he could tell us is that Elysium Tech is indeed making a bunch of theoretically impossible hybrids. Why or for what, unknown.”

“Take all the fun out of this, why don’t you... ok, fine.” She reluctantly agrees, beginning to type into her keyboard while looking at one of her other monitors. “When I finally got in, I found a ton of material relating to a lot of different projects. The one that seemed the best fit was code named Project Re-awaken. From what your insider told you, that definitely seems like the one. It was odd though. All files related to that project were kept on a completely different server than everything else and I had a hell of a time getting into the damn thing. Though I did, of course.”

“Of course,” I add with a slight roll of my eyes. But this is great news; I finally have a name to put to this whole thing, Project Re-awaken.

“I couldn’t copy any of the files without being detected and what I read didn’t make a lot of sense. There was a list of employees working on the project, but they were all code names or in some kind of cypher; the only one I recognized was the project lead, Alexander Maxwell. His was the only name that was actually a real name, and not like mercury zeta, or something.”

“Wait, that doesn’t make any sense. Alexander Maxwell is a humanitarian; he donates a huge margin of his personal profits to charity and medical research. Why would he be overseeing a project like this?” Sara brings up.

“That kind of response is exactly why he donates to charity,” Aaron counters. “You can’t buy karma. Just because you give a few million out of your billions to others, doesn’t make you a good person. But it’s a great way to look like one. Trust me; I’m speaking from first hand observation.”

‘Mom,’ I mouth to a confused Sara and it seems to click, her eyes filling with new sympathy for Aaron; though I’m not sure he’ll like that response. Back on topic.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“Well, most of the really high level plans, logistical type stuff, were encrypted and locked up tight behind a firewall I didn’t want to risk breaking. But from what I saw, there were a bunch of references to another project, Deep Steel. I checked it out and it’s an undersea mining operation, supposed to be much more environmentally friendly than older methods. That one was housed with other projects, but it did have a group of files locked up with slimier security, way beyond anything else on that whole server. I couldn’t read them to confirm, but my guess, they found something they didn’t expect to find down there and are trying to keep it under wraps.”

“What could they have possibly found that’s worth all this trouble?” Aaron wondered aloud.

“Maybe something that lets you mix together species you aren’t supposed to,” Sara replies, back in cop mode. It sounds impossible when you say it like that, but I’m leaning on living proof that something fitting that description very much exists. I nod slowly resolving to ponder that later before turning back to Teegan.

“Thanks for this T; this helps us a lot.”

Oh, I'm not done, and don't call me T."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense, what else you got?" Aaron, of all people, asks. Teegan harrumphs but does continue.

"So when I hit a dead end with Deep Steel I decided to go back to the only thing I did have a solid lead on."

"Maxwell," I say more to myself than the others. Still rolling the taste of that one around in my mouth; I don't know if I like it or not.

"Yeah, him. I couldn't get into his personal files, but his e-mail wasn't so protected.

"You didn't..." Aaron almost sounds impressed.

"I totally did. Of course, the jackass had to be running his own signature e-mailing platform with its own encryption, which took a century and a half to crack, but I got it, which gave me everything he's sent in the last six months; guy should really clean out his inbox more often."

"I have to give it to you; that sounds really impressive, even if I barely know what you're talking about," Sara compliments.

"Thank you, I try. Let me tell you, with some of the stuff I know now, I could make a killing on the stock market."

"So do you want me to be a character witness at your trial, or would you rather I not lie while under oath?" I ask.

"Asshole. I said could, not would. I deleted all the stuff that didn't apply to you and cutie here. Besides, I would hate to take away Aaron's only way to contribute to the group."

“I knew you only loved me for my wallet,” he shoots back.

“Not even. It’s your mom’s wallet.”

“God, is everyone in your family teeth gratingly sarcastic?” Aaron mutters, exasperated.

“It’s an Irish thing,” T and I say in unison.

“Ok, that right there is scarier than anything Keravno’s ever done,” Sara remarks with an amused smile.

“Wait, what else can he do?” Teegan asks excitedly.

Nah uh, it’s still your story time, so what did you find in the e-mails?” I try to right the train of conversation once again.

“Fine, spoilsport. A lot of it was just plain old business jargon, and even decrypted I didn’t actually get that much. I have the feeling that Maxwell is being extra careful about whatever it is he’s doing. If I didn’t already know what I was looking for I wouldn’t have known he was talking about creating monsters. Something about this is super shady. There was a list of outside investors too, private military types mostly, all very hush, hush.”

“Wait, why would the head of one of the world’s leading R&D companies need to go to outside sources to fund one of his projects?” Sara ponders.

“Maybe because whatever he’s really doing is costing a lot more than the cover story he fed his shareholders would,” I answer. “And so he’s going to have his future buyers put up a little capital investment.”

“Future buyers?” Aaron asks.

“Think about it. Look at everything Keravno’s capable of and they were willing to just throw him out. He’s not even fully grown yet, but already he could cause some serious damage if he were so inclined.” I turn and look down at Keravno who’s cocked his head to look up at me now that I’ve started talking about him. “Not that you ever would boy. From what Mark told us, it seems pretty clear that they’re experimenting with whatever it is they’ve found to try to get the best combination of genes; once they have that, then it’s boom, mass production monsters for every private war.”

“That’s about what I figure it is, too,” Teegan adds in grim agreement.

“Are you really sure about this Wade? This is starting to sound like the plot of a bad sci-fi movie.” Sara’s skepticism is understandable, but Aaron shoots back.

“Well, if not exactly that, then it’s probably something like it. You can be sure of one thing though, in the end it all comes down to making a profit; it always does with people like Maxwell.”

“But you don’t even know the man. How can you just assume that?” Sara protests.

“I’m familiar with the type,” Aaron mutters. Sara seems unconvinced by his pessimism.

“Well, when I meet him I’ll just have to ask.” They all look at me like I’m crazy, even Keravno. “Because regardless of the particulars, something bad is going down here, and I don’t know about you, but I’m not just going to turn a blind eye and let them do it.”

“Look Wade, I’ve e-mailed everything I got off the servers to Aaron's laptop but, even if it is all vague and circumstantial, there’s no way it would hold up in court with the, well, less than legal way I got it,” Teegan says.

“Which is why I’m going to get more; something that can’t be ignored, if not by a judge,

then by the public. They've already proven that they're willing to kill over this, have and probably will again kill innocent creatures for it, and if I'm right people could be next to start dying. Screw that! We know about this, so we're obligated to do something about it, as decent people, as-" I get cut off by Aaron.

"As superheroes?" he inquires, more than a little pleased with himself. My cheeks heat up but I manage to meet his gaze.

"What's so wrong with being superheroes?" I manage to reply.

He shakes his head but he's smiling in a wry 'aw, what the hell' kind of way. "Well, I'm in this far, might as well follow you all the way down this rabbit hole. Just hope there's not a pit of spikes at the bottom."

I can hear Teegan start to chuckle over the speakers even if I can't quite see her. "Sure, this sounds like fun. We're all probably going to get arrested by the end of it, but that's never bothered me before. Count me in cousin." All eyes turn to Sara.

"What, no, no way. This is way out of my jurisdiction already." She pauses, a small smile forming on her lips. "But if you need someone to look after the little guy while you're off doing something stupid, I think I could help." I'll take it!

"So, oh heroic leader, what's our next move?" Huh, I should probably have one of those.

"Uh, well..." I sputter.

"Typical, well call me when you figure it out. In the meantime, I'll keep digging into Elysium Tech, see everything I can find."

“And I’ll look into some other places you can keep Keravno if things go bad,” Sara adds.

“And I’ll...keep paying for everything,” Aaron begrudgingly admits.

Keravno squawks his two cents worth, while I sit here stupefied at how I got so lucky to meet these people.

Chapter 15

I Take a Giant Lizard on a Road Trip

The next few days pass by quickly. I continue to pore over the information Teegan fished from Elysium Tech but it hasn't led me to any new discoveries. Everything is worded so vaguely that if I didn't have proof of something strange living under the same roof as me, I might start to doubt it myself. This Maxwell guy sure likes to go on about potential and improving one's self and such. By about the fifth time he implored whoever was reading to 'strive for the very best of their human potential' I was starting to hope that potential includes stuffing a sock down his throat.

Poor motivation lines aside, the only really new thing I have is several locations, all over the world, that keep coming up over and over again in reference to later stages of the project. But beyond that I don't have enough to make even an educated guess as to what they're really for. Testing grounds, potential clients, other research laboratories? Just something else I'll have to ask him to clear up, face to face.

Sara continues to visit, although not every day and never for very long, even if I get the feeling she sometimes wishes it so. She's back on the job and dispatch keeps her busy, from what I can tell. Only a day after going back to work, she was already helping me with a very important side project, finding a new home for Keravno.

As much as I hate to admit it the little guy isn't so little anymore; in fact, I would say he's getting downright big. In the couple of days between meeting him and Teegan's call, he's gone from a small cat to a large dog. But he shows no intention of stopping; if anything, his growth rate seems to be increasing. There are times I feel like, if I stared at him, I could actually see him growing bigger in real time, right before my eyes. Come the week's end, he's nearly as tall as I am at the hip and over ten feet from beak to tail.

By this point Aaron and I pretty much have him locked up in the pool house 24/7. I can tell he doesn't like it. We try to keep him distracted with TV shows and things like that, but I can tell he's getting antsy. Aaron can too and I think he's starting to worry. I mean if this keeps up, he may be too big to fit out the door before we can find him a new place to stay.

I think he misses being able to swim the most. The last couple of nights he's looked so pitiful that I've actually sneaked him outside after everyone else should have been asleep. Just sat and watched as he splashed around in the deep end. But even that isn't really deep enough for him anymore. I shouldn't have to hide him like this. He deserves the space to stretch out and grow as big as he needs to. Hopefully, Sara comes through soon with finding a new place for us to keep him.

"Sorry Wade, I've got nothing," Sara bemoans the next morning. "I've looked all over but the only places that could work are run by people I don't trust enough to bring in on something like this."

Keravno whines from his position splayed out on the living room floor. But before I can tell her that we're just going to have to trust one of them Aaron chimes in.

"Actually, I might have a place that could work."

"And you didn't mention this before I did all this leg work because?" Sara rightfully complains.

"I wanted to find an alternative. It's owned by my mom and I don't like the idea of keeping him somewhere like that; it doesn't feel safe to me. Like out of the pan and into the fire."

“Well, better the fire we know than the one we don’t,” I point out. He doesn’t seem totally convinced but continues on.

“It’s a big summer house a couple hours up the coast. My mom bought it as a vacation home before remembering that she never takes vacations, but by that time the market had tanked and it was just cheaper to keep it around as a rental. But nobody’s stayed there in a couple of years. It’s way off the beaten path, plenty of land, nice ocean views. If it wasn’t for the ownership I would have suggested it as the perfect option a week ago.”

“Well pack your bags, looks like we’re going to the beach!” I say excitedly.

“And how exactly is our guest of honor going to be traveling with us? I don’t think he can quite fit in the kitty carrier anymore,” Aaron points out, putting an almost immediate halt in my stride. I really need to start thinking this stuff through more thoroughly.

“There, I do have something.” Sara to the rescue again. “It shouldn’t be too much trouble to secure a horse trailer from my job. There are always a couple of spares down at the station.”

“Not that I want to stop you from being helpful, but are you sure? I’d hate to ask you to lie to your boss for us,” I have to say.

“What lie? Those trailers are to help animals in trouble; that sounds like this situation to a tee.”

“Can’t argue with her there Wade.”

And that settles that, at least as much as I’m willing to argue. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth and all that. It all goes down tomorrow morning. Sara should be by in the morning, at the price of another vacation day. She’s grumbling about using up all her spare time but I don’t exactly mourn

for her considering this is her plan in the first place.

There isn't much left to do now other than wait. Which is why, by the time night comes, I'm lying out here gazing up at the stars, my head propped up on Keravno's scaly flank. Curled up like this he's easily bigger than the old couch Aaron has in the main room of the pool house, and only slightly less lumpy. I should have been asleep a long time ago, but knowing that tomorrow is action day has me too wound up. So many things that could go wrong, and even if everything happens how we want it to, that still doesn't put us any closer to being through with this whole mess.

Even when we get this all sorted out, when not if, I have to think like that, I wonder if I'll be able to just go back to living a normal life. Back to the fruitless job hunt, in an empty house, with my unattainable dreams. Putting it like that sure doesn't make it sound too appealing. Still, I was safe, no one tried to shoot me, and I didn't have to worry about being hunted. But even with all that I still feel, closer, I guess is the right word, to actually doing what I want to do. Not since I was a kid have I ever felt like being a superhero was this possible.

Honestly that scares me a little. I've never had to truly consider what it would be like if I actually achieved my goal. Ever since I was little I was told it was impossible, could never happen, not in a million years. So the fact that it seems possible, even though that's what I want, unsettles me a bit. It feels like I broke something fundamental somewhere in the world and now I don't have any clue how things are going to change.

It's already started, too. I can feel it in my own body. The fast healing is just the most obvious example. The soreness has only gotten worse; most times I ache all the way down to the bone, it feels. There also seems to be a constant state of tiredness and no matter how much I sleep

it feels like I'm running off of three hours rest. I haven't told anyone because I don't feel like adding one more thing we can't change to the pile. Even if I need a doctor I can't go to one. Elysium Tech would find me, they already proved that once. Besides, by this point, I'm sure it has something to do with Keravno and there's nothing a doctor could do without knowing that.

Since Aaron and Sara haven't shown any signs of these changes, I have to believe that something unique happened between me and the little guy at some point; my bet is on the night we met. But whatever it was, it changed something in me, is still changing me. My gut bunches up in knots just thinking about it. Even on its worst days, this is the body I've had my whole life. Something messing with it doesn't exactly sit right with me. Still, if Keravno did this, I have to believe intentionally, then I'm going to trust him. Whatever he did it was for my own good. I know that may be ridiculous, but that thought is the only thing keeping me from running screaming to the hills, so I'm going to hang onto it until the world won't let me anymore.

For his part, Keravno doesn't seem to mind being the pillow where I lay my worries tonight. His head, now almost as long as my forearm, rests comfortably on his arms. He seems caught up in his own star gazing, not really concerned with sleep. I know I've seen him asleep before but, like everything about the strange reptile, it doesn't exactly seem to work the way it's supposed to. Almost like sleep for him is a recreation and not a necessity. From my current position that doesn't seem so bad. My eyes rise up to the vast blackness overhead; like this, there's not much difference between having my eyes open or closed.

A dark brown hiking boot to the thigh jolts me awake.

“You know, for someone trying to hide his giant lizard monster, you don't seem to be

trying very hard,” Sara says, standing over me, dressed in her animal control gear.

It takes a few moments for my brain to boot up before I can respond. It’s enough time for me to take in some details, birds chirping, check, sun shining, check, big reptile thing right out in the open, check. Dang it. “Had a rough night,” I mutter, still trying to awaken my faculties.

“Well, it’s morning now and I’d like to get a move on before anything else goes wrong.”

As if on cue Aaron stumbles out of the pool house wearing the same clothes he had on last night, looking around intently. He doesn’t look for long before he spots Keravno and me.

“Damn it, Wade! I thought you promised me no more late night field trips,” he says sternly.

“Hey, if Keravno wants out then he’s going to go out, not like I can order him around.” We both know that’s not true; if anything, it’s the opposite of true.

“Right, like-,” Aaron pauses mid retort finally seeing what’s in front of him for the first time. “Wade, I think we have a problem,” he states matter-of-factly.

“What is it now?” I moan. It’s entirely too early for this.

“How are we going to get that giant thing across my yard and into a truck in my driveway with no one seeing him?” Oh, well, that’s easy. We’ll just... huh, how are we going to do that? No way can we just walk Keravno around the main house in broad daylight with no one noticing. There’s always waiting for night, but I already think it’s going to be a tight squeeze getting him inside that trailer as it is; if we have to wait that long he might not fit at all.

I open my mouth to speak, only to shut it almost immediately. In all my pondering I fail to notice Sara slipping away. I notice her return though; it would be hard not to as she drives her

pickup, trailer in tow, across Aaron's yard towards us. Aaron and I just sort of stand there gawking until she hops out.

“There, problem solved. Now come on and load Keravno into the trailer, unless you want me to do that for you too,” she says, entirely too pleased with herself. Aaron's still staring at the path the four-wheeler has cut through the meticulously manicured lawn.

“My mom’s not going to be happy,” he says.

“And?” I ask, trying to pull a bemused Keravno to his feet.

“Fair point,” he admits, before shrugging and heading over to the driver’s side.

My hunch proves right regarding Keravno fitting into the horse trailer. The model Sara borrowed from animal control is designed with a single horse in mind. Even though Keravno’s not quite as tall as a horse, at least when horizontal, he’s easily twice as long. So it takes more than a little finagling to get him to fit. We finally manage it by having him wrap his tail between his legs, up under himself. Then, by lowering himself to all fours, he’s just out of sight of the windows. It doesn’t look particularly comfortable, but he’ll have to manage until we get to the beach house.

“Hang in there boy. Pretty soon you’ll have all the space you could ask for,” I soothe him, before lifting up the ramp into the door. A metallic tinged chirp echoes from inside as I make my way around to the pickup. It seems Aaron and Sara haven’t moved much from where I left them.

“This is my car, why would I let you drive it?”

“Because I know where we’re going and we’ll get there faster if I drive.”

Shaking my head, I open the door to the back seat. “Just let it go, Aaron always drives;

please just give him the keys so we can leave sometime today.”

Sara eyes him suspiciously but finally relents and hands him her keys.

“Thank you,” he says.

“Any scratches come out of your wallet,” Sara says before climbing into the passenger’s seat.

“He can live with that, now let’s go!” I answer before Aaron can, earning a glare but not a denial. After a few seconds of inspecting the vehicle, he too finally climbs in.

As we pull away from the pool house I get an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, a sense of saying good bye to this place for good, along with the peace and security it brought us.

Chapter 16

I Get Assaulted on the Beach

I suppose I should be thankful we've managed to drive for almost an hour before something goes wrong. That's about forty-five minutes more than I expected. We had made it out of town and been on the freeway for a while now, heading north.

As far as I can tell, nobody's made Keravno as of yet. I'm trying to scan the expressions of the passing drivers for anything that would give away a reaction to seeing a giant beaked lizard creature, but either he's doing a good job of hiding or that sight just isn't as surprising as I think it should be. Either case, we aren't drawing attention to ourselves. This is why Aaron's next line comes as such a shock to me.

"I think we're being tailed." I don't know which is worse, the idea someone is following us or the fact that I've been specifically looking for that kind of thing and didn't see them. This is why I let Aaron do the driving.

"Wait, what do you mean we're being tailed? How can you tell?" Sara asks.

"Well for starters, I've been going fifteen miles under the speed limit for the past ten minutes and one of the cars behind us still hasn't passed me." As he's talking, Aaron pulls off the freeway onto an exit but, once he reaches the intersection, he just gets right back onto the highway. "And now they just followed me off and then right back onto the freeway."

I begin looking into the side mirrors trying to catch a glimpse of our pursuers. Aaron seems to pick up on my intent, "Silver station wagon, never more than a couple of cars behind me. I think there may be a few other cars tailing us too, but that's the only one that followed me on the exit." He seems way calmer than I think is appropriate.

“Can you shake them?” Sara asks.

“I can try.” And with that he steps on the gas. Soon we’re pulling further ahead of the silver car, weaving in and out of spaces I wouldn’t think a pickup towing a horse trail should be able to fit.

This is also why I let Aaron drive; he’s damn good at it. Makes sense, considering it’s one of the only ways he spends money on himself. If it’s got an engine and goes fast, you can bet that Aaron has figured out how to drive it at max speed in new and creative ways.

However, after a few minutes of bobbing and weaving in and out of traffic, he settles into one lane and stays there. It takes me a second to figure out why, but then I see; in the rear view mirror, that silver car, further back than before, but still very much there and very much following us.

“So, about losing them...” Sara comments, head basically hanging out of her window to look back at them.

“Stop that! They’re going to realize we know about them,” Aaron insists, hand going to the back of Sara’s shirt to try to pull her in.

“I think that ship has sailed. Unless they thought all the bobbing and weaving was just for fun there,” she remarks, easily swatting away Aaron’s hand like it was a mosquito.

“So what are our options, driver?” I’m leaning forward arms resting on the two front seats so I feel like part of the same conversation.

“Unless you want us all showing up on the eleven o’clock news, then not a lot. I can’t do anything to shake them without causing a traffic accident, and even then I still might not be able to

lose them dragging this trailer behind us.”

“So what, we just turn back?” Sara asks head still craning to get a look at our pursuers.

“And what, confirm for them where we’ve been keeping Keravno?”

“Well we can’t let them see us take him to your beach house.”

“I know that-.” Aaron’s rebuttal fades into the background. My eyes now focus on the road ahead of us, specifically the upcoming exit sign. An idea is forming. I don’t like it, in fact I hate it, but it’s the only out I can think of for this situation.

“Aaron, you sure you could lose these guys if you weren’t pulling the trailer?” My question seems to catch him off guard but his answer is almost instinctual.

“In a heartbeat.”

Nodding, I direct his attention to the rapidly nearing exit sign. “Then get off here. Right now, go, go!” I encourage as he closes in on it. His face twists in confusion for a moment before he finally gives in and puts us over into the exit lane. Just in time if the honking of the car behind us is any indication.

The rapid movement jars Sara back inside and down onto her seat again. “Some warning next time guys!” she snaps before seeming to realize that we’re no longer heading the right way. “What’s the big idea anyway?”

“On that note, where am I heading Wade?” Aaron asks as I thank our lucky stars the light is green and we don’t get stuck waiting.

“The beach,” I say simply, pointing the way towards the coastline.

“So, are we going to show the little guy how to get a tan or...?” Even as he’s saying that I can see the gears clicking into place behind Aaron's eyes.

“We need to ditch the trailer if we want to lose our tail, so we’re going someplace where we can unload its cargo.” I’m trying to keep my voice as even as possible.

“You’re going to let Keravno go in the ocean!” She had just hit the nail right on the head, though she could have said that a little less incredulously. She continues, “Are you crazy? All this and you’re just going to let him go?”

“You think I like it any more than you do?” I don’t mean to snap at her, but still I do. “This is the only thing I can think of. I know Keravno can handle anything the ocean can throw at him, and that he’ll find his way back to me.”

The look, somewhere between pity and skepticism, on Sara’s face makes me want to cringe. “Do you really believe that?”

“I have to.”

A few minutes later, that feel like much longer, Aaron finally pulls us haphazardly into a too small parking space overlooking the beach. Gazing out the windshield from between the front seats I suppose I should be thankful. Since it’s early on a work day the sand is dotted with nowhere near as many people as there could be. But still, with every person I do see, I find myself thinking more and more about how bad an idea this is.

After this, it’s going to be out there. Maybe no one will believe what these people say they saw, but this will be the start, because, really, this is. There’s actually something for people to find

here if they're so inclined. That's more than can be said for most things like this. Am I really ready to deal with the consequences of that? Have I even thought through what those consequences might be?

No, not even a little bit. But I still have to do this, and I have to do it now or what little time Aaron managed to buy us will go to waste. Screw thinking about things I could affect any more; I have an electric lizard to set free. I finally realize that Aaron and Sara have been sitting staring at me since we parked; maybe waiting to see if the steam coming out of my ears means my head is going to explode. Well, too bad for them, I've made up my mind.

"Let's go." And I hop out onto the sand specked pavement. The two are quick to follow. I turn to them but my eyes are really still focused on the beach. "Go, start heading down the beach. I'll get Keravno. Try not to look like we know each other. If things go bad, they don't have to get all of us." But by the time I actually focus on them they're already long gone. "Gee, thanks guys," I mutter.

I rush to the back of the trailer, only to realize that I forgot to ask where Sara stashed the key. My eyes go to the passenger door, then back to the padlock in my hand. From behind me, back up the road we came on, the sound of an engine draws my attention. It's the silver car and another white one, which seems a little too in sync to be just an impatient tailgater. Out of time.

My eyes dart up to where I would expect Keravno's head to be located inside the metal walls. Well, it's not my trailer. I pound on the sheet metal wall.

"Break it down!" I shout. Without missing a beat there's a resounding clang, and then a red armored fist is protruding from the back of the horse trailer. This is followed swiftly by a beaked head and then the rest of Keravno, light blue scales shimmering in the open sunlight. Before I can

take in Keravno taking in his surroundings, I hear a shout from a ways down the beach.

“What the hell, Wade? I have to pay for that!” Sara screams over her shoulder as she continues down towards the surf. So much for not knowing each other.

I break Keravno from his pondering over where exactly we’ve dragged him to and wave for him to follow me. The cars are almost at the parking lot and they must have seen him by now, so I tear off down the path that leads to the sand. A light trot puts Keravno a little bit ahead of me. I glance towards the two that took off before me.

“Well, we’ll buy you a new one!” I shout back in response.

“Oh! We will, will we?” I hear Aaron respond in condemnation.

Keravno and I pass a lifeguard station. I catch the sound of someone revving up a whistle, likely planning to chastise me for running, only to hear it get cut off in a sort of choking, shrill squeak. I can’t help smirking; they must have noticed my jogging buddy. They probably aren’t the only ones, if the shouting and exclamations I can hear are any indication. But I don’t spare anyone even a glance. My eyes are locked on the surf. If I can just make it there, things will all work out, somehow.

But before they can, we have to make space for a fifteen foot dinosaur to pass. Aaron and Sara, for their part, seem to have picked up on that and are trying to motivate people to move, with middling success. They’re clearly not going about this the right way.

“Hey! Make a hole, big reptile coming through!” I shout at the reluctant swimmers. Keravno puts his two cents in with a rumbling cry. That gets them moving and pretty soon I’m the only one headed towards the sea; well the only human anyway.

Finally making it to the waves, I slosh my way till the water's up to my chest. Keravno stomps right past me and belly dives into an oncoming swell, showering me in spray. Coughing and panting, partly from the water and partly from the running, I rush to rub the salt from my eyes so as to catch one last glimpse of his back as it disappears out to sea, only to be met with a beak filled grin. Keravno has settled into the surf, waves lapping at his hide as he sits there looking at me.

"No, you have to go, get further out to sea!" I shout pointing to the horizon to give him the idea. He tilts his head quizzically before quickly shaking it no. A mischievous tail splash soon has me sputtering again.

"Damn it, no! You need to leave." Again his head shakes no, more vigorously this time. Of course he doesn't want to leave any more than I want him to. Sara and Aaron, who have previously been giving us some space, start wading closer sensing something wrong. I cast a quick glance back to the parking lot and choke up for a different reason this time. The two cars have turned into six and at least a dozen people are making their way towards us.

Running on fumes I desperately search for some kind of out. Then my eyes fall on the rocks, one of those artificial outcroppings made to break the big waves and keep the beach from eroding. The man-made bridge stretches all the way out into deeper water. That could work. Without much thought for an exit strategy, I force my legs into movement once again despite all their protest. Aaron sloshes up beside me.

"Where we headed now?"

"Those rocks; if he wants to stick by me, then I'll walk him out to the deep end," I pant, pointing to the end of the outcropping.

“Do you think it’ll take us out far enough? And it’s called a jetty, by the way,” Sara comments from somewhere behind me.

“How do you even know that?” Aaron questions.

“How do you not?” she retorts. Well at least we’re considering the important things.

By now we have reached the shallow water and can really pick up speed. I motion for Keravno to stay in the water and this, at least, he seems happy enough to oblige, splashing his way out beside the uneven rocks that make up the jetty. I say a little prayer that my soaking sneakers don’t go out from under me as they hit the paved top of the jetty. Here a few people are hurrying back to shore, but it seems those farther out haven’t gotten the memo yet that they should be headed for another beach.

“There’s been an emergency; you need to get back to shore.” I can hear Sara talking in her cop voice, but again my eyes are locked on the water to what is now just the outline of Keravno beneath the waves. At least we know that the jetty goes out deep enough; now if I could just figure out how to make him keep going. There’s a commotion of feet behind us.

“Shit.” Aaron really doesn’t have to say anything more than that. The Elysium Tech people have caught up to us.

We’ve almost made it to the end of the rocks. There’s one last person still oblivious, an older guy decked out for war, as long as it’s war with a fish, and wearing a pair of head phones blocking out the world. But he is paying attention to the water when a curious beaked head breaks the surface. Keravno eyes him suspiciously; the man takes a second look, then screams, then he’s pushing past me, his fishing rod abandoned to the waves. I again motion for Keravno to move

further out.

“You need to go, now,” I plead.

“None of you are going anywhere.”

“Step away from the creature Mr. Carpenter and this doesn’t have to go any further,” the lead goon says once my attention finally fixes on him. All of them are dressed the same, regardless of gender, in black sportswear. They might have passed for fitness enthusiasts if not for the poorly concealed holsters. The lead guy takes my silence as an invitation to continue. “Nobody has to get hurt here.”

“Do you only try that on the people who don’t get shot the first time?” I growl at him. He actually grimaces at this.

“That... was a regrettable independent action. My employers didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Regrettable! Is that what you call someone almost getting killed?” Aaron shouts before I have a chance to myself. “It’s always the same with people like you! Human life is just another God dammed resource!” Somehow I think that barb was aimed at more than just Elysium Tech.

“Please, Mr. Carpenter. You and your friends aren’t in any trouble. Just step aside; my team is on their way to reclaim the creature.” I’ve got to give it to the guy; he doesn’t have to be trying so hard to reason with us. But then his words sink in, ‘my team’s on the way’; he’s stalling. Either we go quietly like he asks or his people show up and make us go. It’s Sara that cuts me off this time.

“No way am I letting you take that animal back! I think he’s already been through enough

pain for one lifetime.” At the mention of him, I turn my head back and cast a quick glance towards the water. I don’t see Keravno, maybe he finally got out of here, but somehow I doubt it. Back with the goons, the head guy’s face has hardened in resignation.

“I appreciate the offer, but you can tell your bosses at Elysium Tech that I told you to sit on it.” Well that name drop got his attention. “Keravno’s not their lab rat anymore and as soon as I’m done here I’m going to be coming to them to say it in person.” Boss man doesn’t know how to take this, but his second in command sure does.

“All right, enough of this, step the fuck aside.” And now I have a gun leveled at me for the second time in my life. I hope this isn’t going to become a regular thing.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Just like that, there’s another gun alongside me; Sara’s pulled her duty pistol out from somewhere and has it leveled at the trigger happy second in command.

“Jesus! Where were you hiding that thing?” Aaron takes the words right out of my mouth. Sara doesn’t answer, eyes focused on the Elysium Tech goons, all of whom now have their various guns pointed at her.

I can feel this whole situation spinning out of my control. Aaron inches his way behind Sara, and I clench my fists impotently. I don’t think two years of karate in elementary school are going to be much help right now. A wave crashes against the rocks of the jetty showering us in spray. It almost looks like a gunfight scene from an old western; maybe the next wave will wash up a tumble weed.

It happens in slow motion, at least for me, the tensing of arms and shoulders, bullets are about to start flying. I can hear the scream of the sea, another wave crashing against the rocks. But

the sound doesn't stop there; it only grows louder, deeper, more familiar. A great shadow surges out from the breaking wave, its impact rocks the platform down to its core. I was wrong; it washed up something much better than a tumble weed.

There, in the space between us and the goons, stands the brilliantly imposing form of Keravno. Raised up on his haunches, he roars defiantly into the midmorning sky. The sound resonates down to my bones. Before I even realize it my own voice is added to the thundering noise.

“Kick their asses!” He doesn't need to be told twice.

There are half a dozen people behind the lead goon and all of them take a step back at Keravno's entrance; that's smart. But soon they seem to collect themselves and they press forward; that's not. Most of them never see it coming. In their time spent regrouping, Keravno's tail has already swung around. About half manage to hit the deck in time, the rest get pitched like softballs a few dozen feet into the churning waves.

The lead goon and second in command are among the few that manage to stay on the jetty, but it doesn't look like for too much longer. Scrambling to their feet, the remaining people open fire. The shock must be affecting their aim though, because Keravno doesn't even seem fazed, casually walking up to one of them and wrapping his red armored hand around her head. Lifting her up till her feet are dangling and she's dropped her gun to paw at his iron grip, she's released soon enough as he flings her after the others into the sea.

Now all that's left are the two leaders. Lead goon is shakily backing up from an advancing Keravno, but second in command is sneaking around behind him; evidently with a bit more of a grip, he's trying to line up a shot on Keravno's head. Hell, no.

Before I can think about it I'm charging second in command. Bastard's not getting a cheap shot off when Keravno's only putting himself in danger to protect us; not if I can help it. I plow into him unaware, my focus on his gun arm. I'm lucky; the force of my tackle combined with the slickness from the water sends the weapon sliding from his grip. I'm less lucky when the guy's boot plants itself into my stomach and he flips me over his head. Hitting the rocks hard, all the breath goes out of me. I try to rise but his right hook sends my head pinging back into the rock below. I see spots, followed swiftly by his grimacing face as he attempts to choke me out. I grip at his wrists, nails digging in, trying with all I've got to pry his hands away but my strength is fading fast. I can't breathe.

Things are fading to black, my grip goes slack. Then out of the corner of my rapidly darkening vision, a great red plated foot is rearing back. Next, second in command is going up, and up until he's going down and then, splash, another one in the drink. I lie there panting; everything still looks like the reception's gone out on reality. At least I tried to be helpful. Aaron and Sara rush over; she's still pointing her gun at the now lone lead goon. He looks across the lot of us, then drops his gun. Smart man.

Aaron helps me up. I'm a little shaky on my feet but I wave off his help; bigger fish to fry. Keravno glowers down at the now defenseless lead goon. I stagger over to him and pat his scaly thigh. Keravno glances at me in concern.

"Thanks for the assist, little guy, I almost had him though." Keravno snorts. "Well, more or less." I glance towards the lead goon. Keravno's eyes follow. "He's your prisoner." I gesture toward the man; his face pales. On cue, Keravno's hands encircle the man's waist lifting him up so he's looking into his reptilian eyes. Keravno roars directly in the man's face, then after giving him

a moment to think on it, chucks him unceremoniously over his shoulder to join his friends.

Message received.

Standing there next to him gives me a better look at his hide and my eyes widen. Those guys didn't miss; their shots were dead on. All across his body are bullets that look like they barely broke the skin; they're crushed flat like they were fired into a metal plate. Looks like my little stunt was pointless, I was worrying over nothing. Just what is the little guy made of?

"Your head ok?" Sara asks, her eyes softening in concern; it only gets worse when the hand I use to inspect the offending area comes back bloody. "You need a doctor."

I shake my head, realizing a second later that was the worst thing I should be doing. Pain ripples out in waves across my whole skull, but we don't have time to worry on me. Focusing through it I look back towards the parking lot. The number of cars has multiplied, now joined by what looks like armored personnel carriers, the type of thing I've only seen used by SWAT teams on TV. Keravno's noticed too and rumbles in challenge. Not good. Even if he could take on the private army that's on its way across the sand, I don't like him having to.

We're already going to get enough press. I can just barely make out people on the jetty across the way looking on, and holding up things that must be cell phones. I wonder if we'll live long enough to see our national news debut. Keravno doesn't seem to be moving, but that's only because we're still here standing around. I'm just about at the point of jumping in and swimming for it, when a deep honk draws my attention. What now?

It's a second before I can put the picture in front of me together, but once I do, it doesn't

help much; maybe that bump on my head has me hallucinating.

“Hey there, you nice people looking for a lift?” The cool as a cucumber voice drifts in on the breeze. All things considered, I really shouldn’t be as surprised as I am.

“You! The wiener man!” He looks like all the wind got knocked out of him for a second, but he recovers quickly and the million dollar smile comes back up.

“Yes, well I am a man of many hats; Nicholas Suttle, at your service.” He gives a little bow, managing to somehow make that look exceedingly smug.

“Who the hell is this?” Sara’s question is directed at me, like I have any idea how to answer that.

“Right now I’m the guy with the boat, sweetie.” Nick flashes her a smile and she flashes him a middle finger in return. Ha. He sighs, “So how about we begin boarding? I don’t think there’s enough room for your friends there.” He inclines his head towards the goon squad quickly making its way across the sand.

“Can we really trust this guy?” Aaron asks me. I had told him about my first encounter with Nick, but he didn’t think much of it; probably reconsidering that about now.

“Probably not, but we definitely can’t trust them.” I point to the goons as I make my way to the boat. One extra big step and I’m on board. I move aside while Aaron and Sara make the jump. Nick tries to help Sara on board personally, but she ignores him. He looks after her for a beat before shrugging and moving to the cabin. Aaron's already manning the controls.

“I’m offended by your lack of trust.” He reaches to touch something but Aaron swats his hand away and shoves him from the cabin. Nick looks puzzled and slightly offended for real this

time.

“He drives.” I’m surprised that Sara says it in sync with me. I glance at her but she just shrugs it off. I focus my attention back on the jetty and Keravno. Nick follows my gaze.

“Yeah, I don’t think there’s room for him either,” he says a bit uncertainly. Ignoring him, I call out.

“Keravno!” His beaked head turns toward me, noticing that we’ve all moved away. I wave my arm and just like that he’s sailing over us into the water. I nod at Aaron.

“Hit it.”

“Consider it hit.”

We hold tight as the dual engines of the boat propel us away from the beach. I worry for a second that we’ll leave Keravno behind, but a scaly head breaking the surface next to us moments later puts that to rest. Aaron takes us diagonally out and away from the jetty. By the time the Elysium Tech goons reach where we’d been standing, they’re barely bigger than ants.

Chapter 17

We Reenact Jaws with a Giant Salamander

It's maybe fifteen minutes later when I look over at Aaron and motion for him to stop the boat. He looks at me a moment before complying. I can tell the same thing's going through his head; we can't get to the house in this little fishing boat. Now's as good a time as any to do what we have to do. Nick and Sara look a bit confused that we've stopped, but catch on soon enough once I make my way to the little step at the back of the boat. I think it's supposed to help people pull their catch from the water, but it suits my purpose just fine.

I run my hand through the water as I wait; it doesn't take long for Keravno's head to break the surface. He seems happy as a clam, right at home bobbing in the ocean waves. I pat the end of his beak, he presses into the touch, his head almost as big as my torso now.

"You need to go now, boy." He looks up at me but doesn't move. "We're not in danger anymore, you don't have an excuse. I mean, just look." I gesture out into the vast blue waters. "Check out all that space, you don't have to worry, you can grow as big as you need to now. Just stay out there for a couple of days, enjoy it, be free." He cocks his head to the side, eyes filled with a sadness I've never seen before. "Don't give me that look, this isn't goodbye; after you've had your fun I expect you to come and find me. I know you can do it." On impulse I bend down and press my forehead to his. "Not goodbye, just see you later," I whisper. Then I push his head away. He looks back at me one last time before disappearing beneath the surface.

I stagger back into the boat and collapse against the side, the pain in my head joined by a dull ache in my chest. It's the uncertainty that bothers me the most. No matter what I tell myself, there's still this part of me that feels like I'm never going to see him again. I don't know why that thought bothers me so much, but it does.

“Well, that was touching,” Nick remarks, earning him a glare from Aaron. “What? It was. So where are we headed to now, driver?”

“We aren’t going anywhere until you tell us why you’re here,” I speak, head still down.

“That’s easy; I’m here because this is my boat,” he answers all too glibly. It’s Sara that glares at him this time.

“How about this; if you don’t give us a reason to trust you, you can swim back on your own.”

“Such harsh words from such a pretty face.”

“Ok, so swimming it is then.” Sara stands. I’m debating whether or not I care enough to stop her, when something bumps into the bottom of the boat. It’s not a soft bump either, but the kind of bump that sends everyone staggering and me sprawling onto the deck. My first thought is that it’s Keravno still refusing to leave, but that’s quickly dismissed. He wouldn’t be hitting the boat like this even in jest. I scramble over to the side and look down into the water. That’s when I see it.

It’s a faint glimpse, just a few seconds, but my mind recognizes it; a red tail with a long semi-clear fin running down the length of it, disappearing into the deep. Pieces start clicking into place, tadpole, giant, red ...crap. I turn to Aaron but another hit almost sends me over the side.

“Go, go, go!” I shout, clinging to the side. Aaron scrambles on hands and knees to the controls and gives it the gas, though if my hunch is right, that might not do much. At least the distance lets me get a good look at the thing and confirm that, yes, it is in fact a tadpole, a killer whale sized tadpole. When did my life turn into a bad sci-fi channel movie?

“We need to get to land right now,” I say never looking away from the tadpole.

“Is that-“

“Red. Unless you know another giant tadpole we’ve met in the last few days,” I cut Aaron off.

“I don’t know if land will help much; that thing’s a salamander pup,” Sara says.

“How can you tell?” Nick asks, sounding a bit stunned.

“The legs, for starters,” she deadpans. A closer look shows she’s right. I can make out two pairs of legs pressed against Red’s sides. The back pair looks small and skinny, but the front legs seem strong enough to haul the thing around just fine.

It suddenly dawns on me that I probably shouldn’t be able to tell what kind of feet this thing has. I mean, with it being under the water and all... oh crap. Yes, it really did take my brain a second to catch up to the fact that the salamander’s currently flying through the air towards us. Double crap.

“Aaron!-” My cry is strangled in my throat as I’m slammed to the deck, my balance taken by the swift movement of the boat as Aaron jukes it to avoid a collision. Even before the spray from Red’s splashdown reaches us, she’s changing course to follow us.

“Nice moves, driver,” Sara grumbles from a similar position on the deck, only sounding slightly sarcastic.

“We’re still floating, aren’t we?” Aaron rebuts before jerking the wheel in the opposite direction. The motion sends a staggering-to-his-feet Nick crashing back down.

“Do you mind!” he snaps, scrambling over to a duffle bag strapped to one side of the cabin. Ripping the zipper down, Nick removes a rifle, the kind people use in movies to take out high profile targets. Well, I guess they’re probably used for that in real life, too.

“Buy that with your hot dog money?” I ask. The ghost of a smirk possesses his face.

“Something like that. You may want to get out of the way,” Nick offers casually, like he’s asking me for a cup of sugar. That shouldn’t make me want to punch him as much as it does.

“That’s not going to work. Keravno took semi-auto fire without a scratch. It’s a safe bet that Red’s at least as tough.”

“So we, what? Wait here and ask them what they want?” Nick doesn’t even look up from the scope while he replies. As much as it irritates me, he’s got a point; we have to do something. Suddenly, something cool and metal bumps into my leg. I look back and see a bright yellow diving tank. It must have been thrown loose by all the zigzagging. Well, when life gives you lemons and all that.

“You ever see Jaws?” Nick actually pulls his face away from the scope to cock his eyebrow at me. At least it’s progress. I rise unsteadily to my feet, hefting the tank in my hands. He starts nodding slowly, smiling slightly.

“I like the way you think. So, how do we get her to chew on it?” Before I can respond, I feel the weight of the air tank leave my hands. Sara’s standing next to me, getting a feel for the balance of the thing.

“I’ve got it; I threw javelins in high school.” She adds that last part after seeing the looks we’re giving her. She moves to the back of the boat while Nick and I move forward towards Aaron.

“I’m impressed. I expected some crack about how she could handle your ‘javelin’ or something,” Aaron says, never taking his eyes from the sea in front of us.

“Please, I’m a gentleman; women love me because I avoid that type of vulgarity in favor of wit and charm,” Nick answers, disgusted at the accusation, rifle pressed tightly to his cheek.

“Is that what we’re calling it now-” Aaron’s comeback fizzles out when his sideways glance lands on Nick’s gun. “Jesus, that thing can’t be legal.” Before Nick can respond, a great splashing sound signals Red has jumped again. The sound is followed shortly by what can only be described as a war cry.

Sara pitches the tank overhand through the air. It flies surprisingly straight, all things considered, connecting nearly dead center on Red’s forehead. That is, of course, only for a second before a resounding bang rings out across the boat followed by a much louder bang that send everyone but Nick ducking for cover. The white vapor cloud shields Red’s head from view while she plummets limply back to sea.

The remnants of the tank go flying past my head, a whirling steel propeller blade of death, entirely too close for comfort. The canary yellow shrapnel splashes down somewhere ahead of our path.

A grin splits Nick’s face as he lowers the rifle to a resting position. He turns to a still cringing Aaron, entirely too smug smile plastered firmly on his face.

“Got the permits in my back pocket; want to check?”

I leave Aaron to deal with that gem and approach Sara; she was floored by the force of the explosion. I reach out my hand to help her up.

“Nice throw.” She raises her eyebrows at me, but takes my hand.

“What about lice bows?” she asks, bewildered. It’s all I can do not to double over laughing, although that may be the after effects of the adrenalin talking. I really should be more concerned; I hope there’s no permanent ear damage. I’ll be sure to ask just as soon as I can breathe again. Sara’s looking at me like I’m crazy, when suddenly the whole boat pitches to the right sending us slamming towards that side of the boat, and the giant angry amphibian that’s latched on there.

Red’s massive wrinkly head is clamped onto the side of the boat, shiny vinyl seat cushions pierced by a hundred rows of needle sharp teeth. I’ve got a pretty good look, being directly below them and all. The extra thrashing weight of the salamander has tipped the boat violently to one side and pinned Sara and me directly below the giant larva’s struggling jaws. There’s a nasty looking gash on the thing’s forehead; we definitely hurt her, but I don’t think we managed to do too much other than piss her off.

The report of Nick’s rifle rings out again, over and over, but he might as well be throwing thumbtacks for all the damage he’s doing. One of the compressed slugs actually pings off and nicks me in the forehead, sending a thin line of blood trickling down. Great, now I match the salamander.

Somewhere in my efforts to simply maintain a minimum distance from Red’s gnashing jaws, I’ve failed to realize that Sara’s standing up. But she’s more than just standing, she’s swinging a large cherry red fire extinguisher down onto Red. The salamander barely flinches, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned in the short time I’ve known Sara, it’s that she’s persistent. By about the twelfth time she brings the now dented hunk of metal down on Red’s head, I can tell the salamander is getting annoyed. There’s something subtle about the way she angles her body,

mouth just slightly more open, muscles tensing in this oddly familiar way, the same way Keravno tenses whenever he's about to do something unbelievable.

Moving without really thinking about it, I haul myself up, my fingers finding purchase on the cushions, mere inches from Red's gnashing teeth. But they don't stay there for long. I push off with everything I have, basically shoulder checking Sara out of the line of fire, and placing myself directly in front of Red as a high pitched tea kettle whistle emits from her mouth. The stream of vapor singes my right forearm before I can even consider pulling away.

My position, parallel with Red, means that my clothes protect me from most of it; only my exposed arm gets caught in the brunt of it. Sara, who was directly facing the creature, would have been hit square in the face. For a few seconds, the feeling of actually saving someone directly with my own hands, for maybe the first time in my life, washes over me. It feels good; this sort of lightness in my chest that tells me I've done something to truly be proud of. Then the pain hits me. I flash back to the time when I was three and I touched a hot stovetop with my bare hand. Except now it's my entire arm that feels like it's on fire. Only a few seconds exposure to that steam and I already want to just lop my arm off and be done with it.

Another bang from Nick's rifle has me looking up just in time to see Red's eye explode in a burst of crimson. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm vaguely aware that my moving Sara freed up the line of sight for that target. However, most of my mind is sort of preoccupied, first with the searing pain of my arm, then with the slight imbalance that a several ton salamander dislodging itself from the side of our boat causes. The ship rocks dramatically back the other way as counter correction. Already unsteady on my feet from the pain, I'm unprepared for the sudden shift in gravity. The right side railing catches my ribs as I fall, quite cleanly levering me over the

side and into the drink.

Chapter 18

I Continue Running Away from my Problems

Well, at least now I really know what I'm prescribing if I ever decide to rub salt in someone's wounds. I resolve to never be that sadistic, as a thousand needles join the fire already tormenting my right arm. I force my eyes open so they can get in on the salt water stinging party too; I'm just an inclusive kind of guy like that. Spots swim through my vision more easily than I do through the currents made by our boat's burst of speed at no longer being tied down by Red. Speaking of Red, I turn my head around as best I can, looking for my new favorite salamander. What I finally manage to see makes me sputter out what little breath I have left.

Red has broken off her pursuit of the boat. A couple of hundred feet out, the massive salamander is making a bee-line for my position. I kick my legs out, desperately trying to reach the surface. I'm not exactly sure what will change if I can make it there before she gets to me, but at least I won't give her the satisfaction of being an easy snack; though it looks like I don't have a choice. The surface is still a few feet above me as her open maw begins to eclipse my vision.

Before I can contemplate how many bites I will make, something blue and fast slams into Red's bottom jaw. The force of the impact not only crushes her mouth closed, but actually sends both forms shooting towards the surface. Before the pair disappear into a shadow in the sky, I catch the briefest glimmer of a blue and tan tail lined with boney spikes. I can't help the grin that breaks out on my face; it's automatic.

My head breaks the surface a few moments later, long enough to get a gulp of air before being pushed under again by the wave created by Red and Keravno's splashdown. Submerged again, I follow the violent trail of bubbles to the thrashing pair. Keravno has his arms locked around Red's neck, legs scrabbling for purchase on her underbelly, as Red bucks her body back

and forth with enough force to make the meanest bulls jealous. It reminds me of videos of burly men wrestling crocodiles in the amazon, the jaws pinned shut to prevent an early end to the affair.

Clouds of red billow up as Keravno clamps his beak onto Red's throat. She continues to try to shake him off, but he holds firm. Suddenly, a spasm goes through Red. This one seems almost unconscious, not like the previous concerted efforts. Then bubbles begin to rise from her nearly closed mouth. They soon start rising off the rest of her body too, until they consume even Keravno. I can make out a low pitched noise that I recognize; Keravno's crying out in pain. Then it clicks. Red's boiling the water around the two of them. The steam from before; this must be what she can do instead of electricity, some kind of temperature manipulation.

The pain finally gets the better of Keravno and he has to break contact, arching his body away from Red's, only remaining connected by his armored hands. This provides Red all the opening she needs to twist out of his grip and latch her wide jaws around his mid-section. Now it's Keravno's turn to dye the water crimson. His cry of pain resounds even through the barrier of water. The streams of angry bubbles rising from the sides of RED's jaws, where they clamp around Keravno's stomach, make my burned arm flair up in sympathy pain. I have more than a faint idea how much that hurts.

Keravno continues to cry out, pounding his hands down again and again on Red's head, but her jaws remain locked tight. Before I know what I'm doing I'm advancing on the grappling pair, my own impotence like a stone in my gut, but I can't just sit by and watch while Keravno struggles like this, I won't.

Before I even get close Red's eyes focus in on my movement. Her tail swings around and catches me right in the midsection. The water resistance is the only thing that keeps her from

snapping me in half. As it is my lungs forcibly collapse and eject what little breath I had into the water around me, and I wouldn't be surprised to find she just broke a rib or twelve. I float there fuzzy eyed and half-conscious near the surface, looking down on the still struggling pair.

The tone of Keravno's roars changes, he's pissed. The hands that had previously been flailing at Red's head now grip around it instead. Then a familiar crackling sound makes its way to my ears. Once I place the sound, I feel relieved and smile despite everything; check mate you overgrown tadpole. As if on my cue Keravno releases his built up charge and Red goes into a violent fit of convulsions. I quickly realize though, that Keravno didn't think this plan through, however, as the spasms send him rocking back and forth as Red's head jerks around.

It's over in a few seconds even if it feels like a lot longer. The two monsters are left floating, almost peacefully alongside each other, still slowly billowing clouds of blood into the water. I'm only about a foot from the surface at this point, but even the thought of moving sends pain radiating up from my diaphragm. My vision slowly begins to fade out while fixated on the still form of Keravno. A single rebellious thought drifts across my mind almost tauntingly, reveling in my inability to push it to the side. He's deathly still.

I'm almost out when I feel something grip the back of my shirt and drag me up; a bit more violently than my body thinks is necessary, but all the bruises may be making it biased. Before I know it I'm blinking slowly and gasping like a fish on the deck of Nick's boat.

"Thought we lost you for a minute there buddy," Nick says entirely too cheery.

"He's down there; we have to go back for him." At least that's what I'm trying to say but it comes out a bit more like the sputtering of an old car. I'm suddenly aware of Sara's firm presence next to me as I retch up more sea water from my lungs. My hand outstretches towards the sea,

desperate to get them to understand, when the calm surface erupts in a plume of steam.

“Doesn’t that thing ever get tired?” Aaron whines from the direction of the steering wheel, as the boat once more lurches into action. A few more shots ring out from Nick’s rifle but coughing’s still my top priority. Sara, placating hand still on my back, is the only one still paying me any mind.

“I know you’re still out of it but we’re going to have to move in a minute; you think you can do that?” she asks. Move? I follow her gaze upwards until I’m looking at the beach we escaped from earlier this morning. Great, all this and we went in a circle, right back where we started. We seem to be getting awfully close and we’re not slowing down. Oh...this is gonna be good.

Frantically nodding my head I reach over until I have an iron grip on the side of the boat. Sara and Nick do the same as Aaron braces himself against the steering wheel. Then we hit the beach.

We don’t go as far as I would expect, only about fifty feet up onto the sand. Everyone goes flailing around but somehow manage to remain inside the vehicle by the end of things. The impact even manages to knock the last of the water out of my system. Got to be thankful for the little things. Aaron, the only one of us to remain standing throughout, though if his trembling legs are any indication it may not be from his own power, is the first to regain his composure.

“Sorry about your boat,” he groans sweeping his gaze over our sprawled forms.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, it’s not my boat,” Nick replies looking up at Aaron from his position on the deck, still entirely too nonplused. He pulls himself up, dusts himself off, gives us a ‘follow me’ wave and hops over the side. Aaron stares after him for a beat before opening his mouth.

“Not your boa-oooooh shit!” His gaze locks onto the horizon, face twisting in horror before he follows Nick’s example and hops over the opposite side. Sara and I are a bit slower, still dizzy from the crash. Once my head clears the side though, I see what he means. It’s Red, big surprise, right? Looks like she has the same idea we did about how to get up onto the beach.

Sara and I sort of pull each other the rest of the way onto our feet and scramble over the side. And not a moment too soon, as I’m pretty sure I feel the wind from Red’s arrival blow past my feet. Her entrance sends the boat that apparently isn’t Nick’s sailing up the beach, only stopping when it smacks into the wall separating the sand from the parking lot. In its place sits a very big, very pissed off salamander pup.

Sara and I roll when we hit the sand, her out of skill and me out of clumsiness. But the effect is about the same in that it puts some distance between us and Red. Before we have time to collect our breath a war zone erupts behind us. It’s the goons; Red’s arrival has kicked up a black suited wasp nest and now they’re swarming, no doubt trying to make something positive out of this outing. They run right past us as Sara and I move up the beach, evidently not caring about us now that we are bereft one electric reptile. But, for as many as charge in with rifles and capture lines, equally as many come flying back from blasts of steam and wicked tail strikes.

Sara’s pulling ahead in our race to get anywhere other than here, by a good bit now. I can see the indecision on her face but I wave her ahead; no sense in both of us remaining in danger. She seems to make her decision and starts sprinting for the blacktop. Well, she didn’t have to hold back that much.

As I’m busy following her retreat up the sand I’m too preoccupied to notice who’s approaching until he plows into me. The impact would have knocked me off my feet had his hands

not shot out to hold me up by my throat. Struggling for air for the too many-ith time today I look down at my attacker. It's Mark; I should have expected him to be around here somewhere when Red showed up. I don't know how he got here or where he came from but he looks like a different man, his eyes filled with an animal kind of fury; eerily similar to Red's eyes.

"I won't let you hurt her, never again. I'll hurt you first!" he growls through gritted teeth. That's what this is all about? All this because I threatened to call animal control on Mark? This is stupid. I'm about to die and it's going to be because of something so stupid!

Suddenly something primal ignites inside me. Fight or flight power floods through my whole body, illuminating the darkness that had started to creep into my vision. No. I'm not going to die; I'm not going to let this asshole choke me out. My hands rise from my sides to grip around Mark's wrists, and I squeeze, digging my nails in as far as they'll go. Slowly but steadily I pry Mark's hands off my throat. Mark clearly isn't expecting this and the opening it gives me is all I need to bring my head forward and slam my forehead into his with a resounding crack.

The impact sends us both staggering back in opposite directions. I've never actually done anything like that before. I was running on pure instinct, and copying a bit from stuff I've seen on TV. Now there's only one thing running through my mind.

"Ow! Why is that a thing? I think I gave myself a concussion," I moan, clutching my head.

"You're the one who did it, you dick!" Mark shoots back.

"Because you were trying to choke me out over calling animal control; what the hell man?"

"Well, you can't push me around anymore. I'm a new man, and now I'm the one who'll be doing the pushing." With this, Mark seems to have worked himself back up into the rage that my

head-butt knocked out of him. I notice, after looking at him closely for the first time, that Mark doesn't look totally human anymore.

It's all subtle things, like a few too many teeth in his grimace, and the too red tint of his skin, but it's there. This may be a mistake; I start to back away from him. Yet something inside of me is excited by this situation, like some muscle that I never knew I had before is tensing in anticipation of use. We stand there poised like two snakes, each waiting for the other to strike first.

That is, until Sara hits Mark with her truck. In retrospect the engine noise should've been a tip off, but I guess I got tunnel vision from the fight. But before I can even register it, Mark is sent flying ass over tea kettle down the beach, landing in a limp pile among the surf.

To my utter surprise Sara is actually the one driving, looking quite satisfied with herself, with Aaron in the passenger's seat white as a ghost. Guess always drives doesn't cover hit and runs. The sky suddenly gets a lot darker and the pair of faces in the truck pale. I scramble out of the way as Red latches her massive jaws onto the hood of Sara's vehicle. To her credit she doesn't try to fight it, immediately bailing out with Aaron in tow as the entire cab of the truck is lifted up and slammed back to the sand several times.

With one last heft the huge amphibian flings the mangled pickup out to sea. Seemingly satisfied that the contraption will never hurt her human ever again, Red turns her attention to his crumpled body. The three of us take this opportunity to get the hell out of here.

"That thing wrecked my truck!" Sara bemoans.

"Don't worry, we'll buy you a new one," I reply.

"Oh! We will, will we?" Aaron counters.

“Fine, Aaron’s mom will buy you a new one.”

“Hey!” he shouts as we finally make it to the beach parking lot. There we are greeted by Nick, smiling smugly, behind the wheel of a silver convertible.

“I thought I’d go ahead and pull the car around. It’s a full time job bailing you guys out of trouble.

“So is this one actually your car then?” Sara asks acidly.

“A car this sexy? Definitely!”

“Gaudy’s more like it,” she snipes, climbing into the back seat. Nick looks genuinely reproached as he moves over to make room for Aaron to drive. As I climb in next to Sara I look back towards Red and Mark. The salamander has gathered him up in her jaws as gently as possible and is carrying him out to sea, shrugging off everything the goons are throwing at her.

And as he pulls the car away from the war torn sands, Aaron sums things up by asking the only question that really needs asking at this point.

“So, whose boat was it then?”