

The Show

DTF

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Part I

The Show

Chapter 1

The Show

The attack on the city was fast, brutal and precise with intent to create maximum carnage. Buildings fell, fires erupted and the air was heavily laden with the terrified cries of the panicked masses screaming and fleeing for their lives from the invading monster.

But rather than a risen dinosaur from the depths, or a tentacles horror from the skies, the antagonist was a gray and tan seventeen year old coyote girl, clad only in a simple bra and loincloth made of dark brown leather. Long, unbridled auburn hair whipped in the hot wind generated by dozens of fires while tank shells exploded harmlessly against her legs and abdomen doing little but to anger the giantess further as she roared in fury at the world.

Skyscrapers fell like dominoes, her swiping paws, kicking feet and swishing tail never wasting a single stroke, as if she knew where to each one precisely to fold it in half. As if she had done this same vicious performance hundreds of times before.

And, in fact, she had.

How did it come to this? Ashley paused in between snarls to sigh tiredly even as she flashed her fangs at the overhanging tram which, in turn, flashed back at her with dozens of cameras snapping photos from the cheering tourists within. *I'm an actress, not a theme park ride!*

Paint red and blue in paint so old it was beginning to fleck off, the center of the tram was decorated with words MONSTER TOURS in gold letter. "HOLD ON PEOPLE!" The voice of the tour guide screeched over the shoddy PA system, "YOTEZILLA IS A LITTLE CRANKY TODAY!"

The lines were broadcasted from the PA both to give “atmosphere” to the tourists but also as cues for Ashley. Not that she *needed* a cue anymore, able to run the entire performance in her sleep.

Still struggling to look enraged instead of bored, she took a half step towards the tram, the motion slow and plodding and a mockery of just how fast she could have moved if she really wanted to.

“OH-NO! SHE’S COMING THIS WAY” Ashley raised a single paw menacingly in the air, “HANG ON, EVERYBODY,” and gave a single, half-hearted swipe that missed the car by a good thirty meters. Nevertheless... “WE’RE HIT! WE’RE HIT! OH GOD, WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!”

The ancient hydraulic system that swung the car from side to side, worn, near toothless gears creaking and moaning in protest, was probably a greater danger than she was, yet the passengers were clearly terrified of *her*, crowding back in their seats, away from the windows—as if that would really protect them were she truly the bloodthirsty beast she played.

This wasn’t what I expected when I was promised screaming fans. She hated that most; not her act, not even her stage name, but that her whole purpose in this facade was to make people *afraid* of *her*. She wanted to be liked, adored not feared.

“I’M HITTING HER WITH THE SMOKE BOMB, HOPE IT BUYS US ENOUGH TIME TO GET AWAY!” A cloud of harmless white smoke exploded from a canister beneath the tram. *I wish they’d use something that didn’t smell like burning tires.* Yelping in false pain and crinkling her nose in genuine disgust, Ashley stepped back and made clawing motions at her face.

The tram continued onwards, the PA still blaring the voice of the tour guide: “THANK-YOU, THANK-YOU! YOU’VE ALL BEEN A GREAT AUDIENCE.” The audience whooped, cheered, and to Ashley’s disgust *applauded* the talentless little troll while ignoring the *real* star of the performance: her, damn it, her!

As if picking up on her frustration, the tour guide chose that moment to add, “HEH, I DON’T KNOW WHY YOTEZILLA IS SUCH A BAD MOOD, TODAY, MAYBE IT’S *THAT* TIME OF THE MONTH!”

Laughter intermixed with applause. Ears burning in humiliation, Ashley had no problem finding the means to produce an enraged roar, centering it on the tram—and more importantly, the taunting voice within. *If I ever get my hands on that little two-bit hack, I’ll give him a real performance!*

Her indignant raging was interrupted by a dull buzz echoing from the center

of the “destroyed city.” It was meant for her, not the tourists, a reset warning. *And it starts all over*, she thought; stepping away from the scene as toppled buildings stood back up, fires winked out, and the rail-mounted military/emergency vehicles backtracked out of sight.

“Ready on set,” the automated voice droned from the speakers—*I don’t even get a flesh and blood director*— “Ready on the set—Next show in fifteen minutes.”

Fifteen minutes. That was how long it would take the next tram to load up and get down the track; with the same snarky tour guide and what would more or less be the same audience.

Chapter 2

Mistaken Identity

Ian considered it a good day until his hat blew out of the tram. His initial reaction to the event had been disappointment and indignation more than angst at losing the last thing his father ever gave him.

Everything else had been *perfect*: his tip jar was full, his manager slyly dropped the hint that he was looking at a promotion to supervisor, and then, in a cruel joke of fate, his *hat blew off the tram!* And it happened ten minutes before his shift was to end for the day, too.

It had taken every ounce of self-control and practiced cheeriness in the sixteen year old orange fox to avoid swearing profusely right in front of the elderly couple and soccer mom with kids in the front seat while mentally screaming as the tattered red cap fluttered out of the moving tram and into the unknown, *No! Not Dad's hat! Shit! Shit! Shit!*

Now, after hours, he went to find it. Twisting the hatch open, he was greeted by a warm blast of warm night air into the cool atmosphere of the maintenance tunnel he had used to slip in under the three hundred foot tall electrified fence line separating the public from the “attractions”.

Said attractions would be back in their pens for tonight, though, leaving him free to pursue his goal without worry of becoming one of the random disappearances the park played host to every year. Sometimes it was a maintenance worker, others, a drunk guest who slipped by security, none of whom ever turned up so much as a hair, not surprising, given how easily the towering carnivores could dispose of a body.

Climbing the rest of the way through the opening, Ian emerged onto a black-

ened rubber spread meant to look like paved asphalt. *Sure looks different from down here.*

From above in the tram, the city was a seamless illusion, but down here on the ground it was all too easy to see the joints and cracks between the panels, the exposed gears and machinery behind plants, fake rocks concealing fuse boxes and water mains.

Real cities were never truly dark; streetlights and buildings illuminating them well after the sun went down. This was not a real city. At ten pm, anyone who worked here during the day went home and maintenance flicked a switch, plunging the faux metropolis into darkness, leaving it monolithic and ominous.

Luckily, I came prepared, he grinned, producing a small flashlight from his right pocket. Despite being only palm-sized, it projected a beam bright enough to illuminate the darkened “streets” and, if he was not careful, could be spotted by security patrols.

Fortunately, Ian knew their patrol times and the donut munching, jargon speaking wannabes who spent the day chasing skateboarders never deviated from the schedules or stayed in an area longer than they had to. *It landed by the pizza house, I’m sure of it.*

The restaurant in question was no more real than anything else in the city, but the art team responsible for the designs felt that it added “color” to their set. *Come on, where are you?* Ian scanned the light frantically around the pizza house, fingers hastily setting the lens wider and wider, *I’m not losing that hat—even if I do get fired over this!*

“Lost?” Ian jumped in surprise as a loud feminine voice spoke from directly above. “It’s after hours; the park is closed, what are you doing in here?”

Crap! Security was here early—*Just my luck they’d pick tonight to actually give a damn!* From the sound of things, the rent-a-cop was up on one of the catwalks with a bullhorn.

A *female* rent-a-cop, and a young one at that judging by the soft alto. He frowned; *I thought we only had guys in the security department.* “Took a wrong turn, that’s all,” he lied, eyes still glued to the ground, frantically scanning within the scope of the light, *where is it, damn it?* If he was going to lose his job over this, he might as well not leave until he found that hat.

There was a long pause as his voice echoed between the metal structures; the security guard mulling over his explanation, making note of his uniform to see that he was an employee. “Wrong turn, huh?” There was a definite note of I-call-BS in her voice, a sharp, disdained edge. “Not much of a *guide*, are we?”

Ian growled; first he lost his prized possession, then his job, and to top it off he was getting critiqued about his performance by someone from the Minimum Wage Union. Well, if I'm getting the pink slip, might as well earn it.

"At least I have *value*, to the company," he replied nastily, letting his voice drip with arrogance and self-importance. "*I'm* the one who makes the stupid, savage beasts here attractive to the general populace. *I'm* the one who actually makes the money. Do you think anyone would want to look at these freaks without me there to spruce them up? Would anyone come see this 'Yotezilla' joke without my witty input?"

A wordless snarl of anger sounded from above—clear and without the scratchiness the security bullhorns and the tram PAs normally carried. Sensing a deep cut, Ian decided to twist the blade. "What significance do you have here, exactly?"

The lady security guard did not immediately answer. When she did, her voice was calm, unwavering with a deathly sweetness to it. "I think I can answer your question. Look up."

And for the first time in the conversation, Ian looked up, pointing his flashlight in the direction of the bullhorn voice as he did so. His jaw dropped. There was no catwalk. There was no bullhorn. There was no *security guard*.

But there *was* a giant, and very familiar, coyote girl staring down at him, propped up against the nearest tower, arms crossed disdainfully. Her hazel eyes glimmered bright green in the reflection of his flashlight, lips peeled back in anger to reveal sharpened fangs almost as tall as Ian was.

"As to your *other* question: Would anyone would come see Yotezilla without you," she licked her lips hungrily, lifting the corners of her muzzle in a nasty smile, "how about we find out?"

Chapter 3

Cat and Mouse

“Oh,” Was all Ian said upon the realization of who, what, he had just antagonized. All that kept him from screaming was the constant practice at hiding his true feelings from those around him and the ability to act in complete opposite; he could be perky when actually angry, intrigued when bored, calm when terrified.

Mind racing with primal fear, he concocted a desperate plan: the giantess—he hoped—would have as much trouble seeing a small speck of him at night in the blackened set as he would an ant. She can’t find me without the light, he thought, clinging to blind hope as though it were truth.

Tossing in the flashlight in the opposite direction, Ian bolted, back towards the manhole/maintenance cover. “Hey! Did I say you could go?” Yotezilla snarled, pushing herself off the building and taking a thunderous step in his direction; towards the flashlight, luckily.

Unluckily, her *second* step brought her foot down atop the manhole cover—the only way out. “I’ve been trapped in this dump, this same spot, for months. Do you think I wouldn’t know where all the rat holes are?” She gave a short, haughty laugh.

For the first time that night Ian felt no urge to rise to her baiting, spinning on one heel and darting down the adjacent alley. Though fake, the city inevitably had the same sharp turns and tight spaces of a genuine suburban sprawl.

A sharp, strong breeze whipped up at his back: her fingers, she had just barely missed grabbing him and ending it right there. Ian fought the urge to look back knowing he would freeze if he did. Regardless, judging by the heavy,

frustrated growl, he didn't need to look back to tell she was close behind him.

Hide, I have to hide! Heart thumping in his ears, the fox's mind was anything but rational, yet what little clear thought remained held a brief conference with survival instinct and determined that while he couldn't outrun the predator—she could easily cover five seconds of running with a single stride—he did at least have the advantage of concealment.

Plus, it was dark and he was small by comparison. “She can't find me without a light source.” Panting hard, his heartbeat throbbing in his ears despite only having run a short distance, Ian flattened himself against a wall, wishing desperately for the door handle at his back, another eccentric artistic touch, to actually open and lead him to the safety inside.

He expected to hear more taunting but there was only dead silence, which was far, far worse, as it indicated the huntress was truly dedicated to searching him out. At least the pounding of the giantess's footsteps told Ian how close she was, despite being unable to see exactly where she was. The set piece towers were tall and close enough to conceal both predator and prey.

Perhaps I can get back to the hatch, he thought.

A distant groan of a heavy object being dragged from one spot to another killed that plan. “Whoops,” Yotezilla jeered, “Better not leave this uncovered, some more vermin might get in.” Glancing around the corner, a pit formed in Ian's stomach as she daintily pushed a tank—a real one donated by the military in return for being allowed a recruiting station at the front gate—over the manhole cover.

Damn.

Okay, so escape was no longer an option, but Ian *still* had his Needle in a Haystack card to play. “She can't find me without light,” he repeated in a hoarse voice, mouth devoid of moisture. The footsteps were getting further away, swelling Ian's hopes as they did so. He could avoid her, for hours if need be, until she got bored and left, then it would simply be a matter of waiting until the park opened again and he got help.

The set promptly lit up like a Christmas tree, the wall behind him glowing white with heat and light. Yelping in surprise and pain, Ian hopped off the tower's side and into the street—directly south of Yotezilla.

“Ah, *there* you are.” Dropping into a crouch as if readying for a pounce, she afforded Ian a lovely view straight down her bikini top. A view he was unable to enjoy due to terror as she charged forward in a half lope/half pounce, sweeping her cupped hands forward, down and out.

Ian staggered back, feeling the ground shake and sway with her movements; wait, he thought that's not her. Then nearly fell down a yawning gap as the street split at his feet, the double yellow lines zigzagging as a wave of hot steam blasted up in front of him. *It's the damn show! She started it up when she hit the light switch!*

He was not the only one taken by surprise. A high-pitched yelp that was more embarrassment than pain sounded from the giantess. Having stepped directly over one of the "exploding sewer line" spigots, she caught the blast of warm air directly between her legs, billowing her loincloth straight up.

Of course, such an event had been planned for by the costume department. the Monster Tours being most popular with young children and the soccer moms who herded them through the park, thus the wardrobe malfunction revealed nothing more than a pair of short white gym shorts, keeping the monster decent, if not angry.

"You're gonna *pay* for that!" She snarled, pulling the lower half of her costume back down and straightening it out, the cavernous interior of her triangular ears beat red in embarrassment. "Think that was funny? Or are you getting off on it, you little pervert!"

"Me?" Ian cried from behind the prop car he'd taken shelter behind, "*You* turned on the set! That was your own fault!" Kicking himself, he realized too late that he should have stayed silent; her canine hearing could detect a mouse squeak as readily as an explosion.

But a summer spent as an informative/expert voice, the one person who *never* kept his mouth shut. It was practically instinct now, he literally could not stay quiet to save his life.

Yotezilla came for him again. There was no clean shave or near miss this time. Ian turned to run again only to see her tan fingers interlock ahead of him like the slamming gate of a prison cell.

Backing up, he ran straight into her cupped palms. Like giant pythons, the fingers coiled tightly around Ian, pressing the very breath from his lungs, threatening to crush his ribcage as if it were made of toothpicks, snatching him up, his heart plunging into his stomach as it had on the Suicide Climb he had ridden on a dare from his friend in Foods last week.

"Gotcha!"

Chapter 4

Consequences

No good calls ever came after midnight. Ten years in this cesspit of a park had taught Gerald this, ten years watching what had once been described as a wonder of the world decay and rot. The late fifties wolf, his formerly ebony coat streaked with gray, seriously considered rolling over in bed, away from the shrill ringing and letting his voicemail pickup the call.

But just as calls after were never good, they were never trivial, he thought with a grunt, picking up the receiver and placing it against a tattered, torn ear. “Go ahead.”

“We’ve got an issue on Set B,” security answered tersely, as if they had discovered a ghastly crime scene like on one of the TV dramas. “It involves that new employee you hired last May.”

Gerald groaned inwardly, knowing just who they were talking about. “Damn youth of this country.” Then into the phone, “I’ll be right there. Try not to call in the marines before I sort this out.”

Twenty-one, He didn’t bother to get fully dressed, grabbing only an old, tattered coat, faded with years of wear until the MONSTER TOURS patch barely hung on by a few strands of thread. He slipped it on over his boxers like a crude bathrobe and padded out the door into the crisp night air.

I told them the minimum hiring age should have been twenty-one. Kids in this kind of environment are never a good idea. But the upper management and HR wouldn’t hear it. Sixteen to eighteen was the golden age for jobs in the park.

The kids were fresh into the workplace, free from their parents oversight, eager to fund their new freedom and didn't yet know a raw deal when they saw it. *Unfortunately, they also happen to be careless, destructive hyper-emotional idiots.*

As he lived on the premises, Gerald arrived at Set B less than five minutes and quickly saw what security was complaining about: everything was on, running and *trashed*. "Hoo-boy, someone's head is gonna roll for this."

It looked like a hurricane had run through the fake city several times, tipping over the buildings that weren't supposed to fall, kicking vehicles and boulders about like soccer balls and even blocking the main maintenance hatch into the area.

Just as it didn't take long to arrive at the set, Gerald quickly located the source of the incident, even managing to approach the offender unseen. "Ashley Preston, you have some explaining to do!" He roared, stepping out from behind a clock tower, causing the shorter coyote girl to jump with a squeak.

She had been staring intently down at something in her cupped hands, and at the sound of his voice spun a full one-eighty, holding them behind her back guiltily. "I'm so sorry Mr. Cavenson, I didn't mean to."

Crossing her legs she looked downward like a toddler caught breaking a vase, a puppy caught tearing down curtains. Appearing cute, innocent and contrite, the act often worked to ease her boss's temper, just not tonight.

"Didn't mean to *what*?" Gerald crossed his arms. "Didn't mean to wreck up a multimillion dollar attraction; didn't mean to cost the park hundreds of dollars in electricity and water by turning the set on after hours? Please tell me what you *did* mean to do, Miss Preston. And please explain why I shouldn't fire you while you're at it."

Drooping her ears and tucking her tail between her legs, Ashley scrunched her face and began to sniffle. "I'm so sorry," she mewled. "I'll make it up, I promise. I'll work double-shifts; I'll even come up here on my own time to help fix it. Just don't send me back to the Reservation, there's nothing for me there!"

She was right about that. Gerald hated this job, hated this place, but it was still better than the government-approved wasteland where giants like himself and Ashley had to stay within the border of or get blasted on sight by land-based cruise missiles.

I just can't stay mad at her. She was like a daughter to him, a second daughter anyway; he'd miss her if she were gone. "Okay, Fine." Not wishing

too giving, he cocked his head down and pointed a finger at her. “But you’re on probation, young lady. Say good-bye to your next two paychecks,” he glared sternly. “And don’t make any weekend plans any time soon, either.”

“Oh thank-you, *thank-you!*” Gerald had to give the girl credit towards her acting skills; he was unsure whether her other responses had been genuine, but the relief and gratitude and being kept on seemed real enough.

She leaned forward and wrapped a single arm around him in a hug—and as she did so, he became aware of a series of faint, muffled cries emanating from somewhere nearby.

“I never did ask,” Gerald said, “What led to all this?”

Ashley flicked her right ear a few times as if unsure how to answer before slowly replying, “Well, I came back here to rehearse—with the power off of course—and when I got here, I found *this*.” She brought her other hand forward, opening it partially to show Gerald the squirming fox in her palm while keeping him pinned with her middle fingers.

Gerald didn’t recognize the fox, but he did recognize the uniform. “Oh, thank God, a supervisor! This crazy *bitch* tried to kill me!”

Ashley bristled at the notorious female slur, however technically true it may have been due to her canine ancestry. “I caught this little potty-mouthed twerp sneaking about. I *thought* I was just flipping the lights on with the main breaker—turns out it was more than that.”

“Switches that flip everything on tend to have the word *Main* in them,” Gerald scoffed.

“But it wasn’t *labeled!*” Ashley whined.

“My name is Ian Michaels, I work Tours and Information! I’m filing a report with HR for this!”

Ashley growled, lifting him up to the end of her muzzle, dangling him in front of her teeth like a strip of jerky, giving him a small but noticeable shake. “Your name’s going to be *lunchmeat* if you don’t shut-up!” Ian shut up.

Satisfied with having quashed the rebellion, she looked up to Gerald, “so, what do we do with him?”

The wolf shrugged nonchalantly, “the rules are clear; trespassers into our area can be dealt with however we deem fit. And since you caught him, it’s your call.”

“What?” Ian cried. “*But I work here!*”

The giants ignored him, or it seemed. “Even the ones who work here?” Ashley said, slowly, as if daring to hope for the fulfillment of her wish to see an end to the annoyance.

Gerald shrugged. “You and I work here. We can’t go into *their* side of the park, now can we?” Gerald indicated the massive, electrified fence surrounding the set. “And if we did, they’d call in gunships, bombers, missile strikes, the works, to stop us, to put us down like animals.”

For the first time, he acknowledged Ian’s presence, giving the little fox a nasty look. “And the littles know it, too, they all signed a waiver, remember?”

“Yeah!” Ian protested, “But they said that was just legal BS. I was assured that nothing would actually *happen*.”

“I’m going back to bed,” Gerald yawned once as though not having heard before turning around, “I suggest you hurry up and finish your business, then hit the sack as well. Tomorrow’s Saturday—you’re working it now—and you know how long and hard the weekend shift runs.”

“Of course, Mr. Cavenson,” Ashley said softly, turning to regard her prize with a predatory glee. “This won’t take long at all.”

The wolf padded away, leaving a sick-looking Ian in the paws of a triumphant Ashley. “Stupid kids,” he muttered.

Chapter 5

Judge, Jury, and Executioner

I got him! I finally got him!

Causing a plaintive squeak of a pained cry to issue from her cupped palms, Ashley did a small twirl of victory. For months she had listened to his taunting jeers, his patronizing dismissal of her as a simple beast. The sexist jokes had been the last straw.

No more! I'll never have to listen to him again after tonight! A hazy red murderous mist crept in and overshadowed her thoughts, a deep primal urging. Since that first show, when he called her the Hideous Horror from Hell, she had fantasized about the day his tiny body would squirm and writhe in her grasp, no longer able to hide behind the safety of rules and electrified fences.

But strangely, even to Ashley, her anger began to fade, replaced with desire. She didn't want to end the life in her hands because he had slighted her or that she thought he deserved it, she wanted to because she *could*. And it would make her happy to do so.

Now he's mine! And Mr. Cavenson says I get to do whatever I please with him! She paused in mid victory dance, *as soon as I figure out just what that'll be*. Slowly opening her paws and staring down at the small ball of orange-red fluff that regarded her with cool green eyes, she grinned directly at him, enjoying how he cringed away from her long, sharp teeth.

Never had this opportunity before and probably won't have one any time

soon—better do it right! Better make sure I enjoy this. Ashley licked her lips as her stomach growled. Dinner had been many hours ago, and the fox's bright orange-red and white coloring left him appearing oh-so-tantalizing like an exotic treat begging to be snapped up and savored.

On the other hand, she'd heard from her fellow stage actors that few pleasures in life compared to the visceral thrill of slowly pressing or squeezing the tiny things' bodies until the popped like a grape, leaking warm fluids and mush between their fingers and toes.

In the end, her dark musings concluded, it didn't matter *how* she choose to end the life, only that it happened. Everything else was just a matter of personal preference.

"Are you going to eat me or crush me?" Asked a small voice, cowed and fearful.

"What?" Ashley recoiled in half-surprise, having almost forgotten him, caught up in her internal musings. Her hand waivered, causing the fox to cling to the very finger he had been shying away from, but his gaze never left hers.

"I said, 'are you going to eat me or crush me'?"

"What makes you think I'm going to do one of those two things?" Ashley snapped, defensively, feeling her ears burn at having been found out so readily.

"It's always one of those two things." His voice was quiet, reserved; defeated and expectant, no longer the same insulting, patronizing voice she had grown to loathe in her time here.

He knew the end was coming and there was nothing he could do to avoid it. "That's what you giants do. That's why we use the trams; why we have the Reservations; we have the *fence*." The fox shivered, "Just please make it quick."

The fence. Hearing it mentioned cut through the bloodlust and savage inebriation enough for Ashley to remember the first time she had seen it, when she had asked Gerald Cavenson for its purpose.

Is it to keep thieves out?

No. The littles could easily fit through the gaps and there are a million other tiny entrances.

So what's it for, then?

To remove temptation.

What temptation?

The temptation you're going to feel every time you see one of those little metal boxes roll by full of toys and treats. I don't like hiring people your age for that reason; kids have poor impulse control, make bad decisions—and we're still paying off the last lawsuit when your predecessor slipped up.

But it's not my decision, we're losing money and Management thinks we need new attractions to get back in the black. Just remember, if you ever give in, assuming you're not blown full of holes, it's straight back to the Reservation and you'll never see anything but desert ever again.

She had remembered, every single time she felt the temptation. But as time passed and her infatuation with the stage grew. even as a B-grade monster, Ashley forgot the temptation, replacing that desire with the desire to be popular and beloved as a great stage icon.

Over time, she grew to see the little beings not as potential prey, but as something better, something even more gratifying: potential *fans*. If only she didn't have to play such a loathsome character!

They'd love her, she knew it, they'd recognize her talent, admire her abilities as a performer if only she wasn't forced to act like a brutal, unrepentant killer. *But that's exactly how I'm acting right now*, she realized with horror, stomach twisting in sickening clarity, *And no one's forcing it—this is all me!*

The temptation had resurfaced tonight; in fact it had never gone away. Buried yes, but never gone, emerging as soon as Mr. Cavenson gave her permission to indulge herself.

Oh God, what did I almost do?

"Still not sure?" The fox asked dryly.

Ashley was sure—sure of the only thing she could do. The only action left to her now.

"I'm not going to hurt you." The words rang hollow even as she said them.

He snorted lightly, disbelievingly. "Do you get off on your victims having false hope? I know you're lying."

"You know? You *know*?" She raised him to her face, lips peeled back in a snarl, but she felt more hurt than angry at this point. "You think you know me so well. Every damn day I hear you up there, telling those dolts and nincompoops about the dreaded Yotezilla, the vicious, terrible, man-eating Yotezilla."

Her fingers slowly closed, squeezing the fox into visible pain.

“It’s what I have to say,” He wheezed, tiny arms pushing futility against her fingers, “it’s what’s in the script.”

It was true, damn him she knew it was true. Hell, she had a *copy* of said script hanging in her room. “*I’m not a script!*” Ashley’s chest heaved until she thought it might explode, feeling tears sting at the back of her eyes.

But her fingers relaxed, freeing the fox that cringed, cowering in her hand, actually moving under the shoulder-width fingers previously squeezing the life out of him, as if they might provide shelter.

“I’m not *Yotezilla*,” she said, breathing slowly, heavily, feeling her cool return and her confidence with it. “And I’ll prove it to you.”

She took a deliberate step towards the blocked hatch and eased the tank off of it with one hand. Her other paw lowered carefully, steadily to the ground, gently depositing the fox onto the ground next to the maintenance hatch. “You’re free to go.” She paused, “and my name is Ashley, by the way.”

“Ashley,” he stumbled over the name—as if unable to associate a simple, normal girl’s name with the godlike being towering over him. “Thank-you, I guess.” He took two steps toward the hatch, and then stopped; turning to look back slowly, first up at her, then out into the set. “I appreciate you not killing me, but I can’t go yet.”

“And why not?” She groaned irritably, jamming her hands down at her sides in frustration. “What reason could you possibly have for wanting to stick around in here after the nightmare you just went through?”

“I still need to find my hat.”

Chapter 6

The Hat

After an hour of searching after his brush with death personified as a female titan, Ian found it. He found the hat.

After falling from the tramcar, the hat had drifted lazily in the breeze before snagging itself on one of the tramcar towers, midway down the steel structure, hanging off an emergency light at chest level to the giant coyote who dwelt here but it may as well have been miles or so above his head.

“Oh, hell,” The young red fox muttered, “there it is.”

“How are you going to get it way up there?” Ashley asked from behind him, her face, which Ian had to admit was quite pretty when not looming over him in a snarl, drawn up in a smirk. She tossed her long auburn hair lazily over her shoulder, her gray and tan furred tail swishing with interest in the tiny drama unfolding below.

Like a dog too large to drive away and too intrigued to leave on its own, Ashley being a coyote aside, she had followed him on his search through the park like the world’s largest shadow. “I’ll climb up,” Ian replied, coming to the iron struts buried in the concrete at the base of the tower. He eyed a maintenance ladder, tracing it all the way to the top. “It’s right near the top, how hard can it be?” He aimed a cocky smile up at her.

He may as well have tried to pierce a tank’s armor with a BB gun. “Good luck,” she replied coldly, crossing her arms and taking a step back. The message was clear: she wouldn’t kill him, but she was under no obligation to keep Ian from killing *himself*.

Gulping as the realization of scale came into play as well as Ashley's apparent refusal to do anything to prevent him from falling to his death, Ian began to ascend up the tower one rung at a time.

His progress began fast, then slowed after the first several minutes of climbing, his arms tired. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that he hadn't even passed Ashley's navel, hanging like a moon in the center of the flat field of her trim tummy, below which sat between her equally toned hips and thighs, all presented shamelessly as she was still wearing the tiny two-piece bra and loincloth costume serving as her work clothes.

Being a set piece monster must be quite the workout, he thought, hands growing shaky for reasons besides nervousness. Focusing back on the climb and putting all thoughts out of his mind, Ian continued to climb, his focus on the objective, on the fluttering red hat threatening to break free and fly off to god-knew-where.

Almost...almost. An eternity later he found himself upon a small walkway at the top of the ladder, though now only a dozen feet separated him from his prize. *Well, I've come this far, haven't I?*

Ian swung his legs over the guardrail, the night air pulling and tugging at his fur as he stepped out onto the narrow crossbar, arms to the sides like an airplane giving him the gait and appearance of a tightrope walker.

From behind him came a harsh bark of a laugh; Ashley found his trial amusing. "You look so cute," she teased. To her, such a life-threatening drama had to appear as little more than the antics of a single deranged insect.

Focus...focus. One foot over the other, Ian went down the thin strip of metal, gaze torn between the metal walkway and the red cap at the end. Left, right, left, right, on went the chant in his mind until he came to the end, swallowing hard at the strong breeze pulling his clothing and hair to and fro.

But it was there, right there! Just an arms length up and to the right hung his father's red hat, Ian's quest near completion. Biting his lip and grasping onto a low-hanging power cable running up to the tram wires, he leaned out over the abyss, knowing better than to look down.

*Almost...*His fingertips brushed the edge of the brim, causing the cap to shift, catching the wind and ready to fly away once more. *No!* Without thinking, Ian let go of the power cable and leaned the last several inches to grab his prize, giving a small cry of success as he took firm hold of the worn and faded cloth.

But scarcely had he time to celebrate when the young fox felt his balance, overtaxed and unsustainable, give way, his cheer turning to a yelp as he plunged

into space, closing his eyes so he wouldn't have to see the ground rushing up to finish him—

—Only to land on a soft, broad, fuzzy surface spread beneath like a trampoline after less than a second of freefall. Gasping in shock as if having landed in a giant tub of ice water, Ian opened his eyes, looking at his surroundings as a familiar face hovered over him. “You’re dumb,” Ashley said, lecturing him. “Do you know that?” He might have just imagined it, but there was a hint of playfulness in her scolding.

Ian swallowed, nodding sheepishly, grateful for the rescue regardless of what he had to listen to. “Th-thank you,” he said. “But I don’t know why.” The hand holding him slowly moved out of the structure of the tower, coming to rest, he noted with a burning blush under his fur, right between the grayish white furred hills of Ashley’s chest.

“Because Gerald would make me clean the smear up.” The hand tilted upward and Ian slid down the fuzzy plain of her palm, coming to rest in the crook of her cleavage, the soft fluff of her bosom catching him like a mattress as her hand folded inward to hold him against herself.

Though his head swam with hormones at where he was, looking up he saw no sign on Ashley’s part that this was for any purpose beyond making him easier to carry, like the tiniest of kittens. That she could put him here without any awkwardness of her own spoke volumes for how insignificant he must be a being like her.

Pressed as he was against her, Ian felt every one of Ashley’s steps, a tremor running up her body and through him. *Imagine what would it be like if I were under one of those paws when it came down.* A shudder; he had never felt so powerless and below another in his life.

For sure he had little to worry about Ashley noticing or smelling his reaction to where he was: she probably couldn’t even fathom the notion of one so radically different in size feeling any sort of physical attraction—neither could he up until a very short while ago.

It was a sobering reminder of how his kind was viewed to them, he thought, their lives, thoughts, and feelings inconsequential. She probably didn’t even care about his need to put himself in danger for the hat, but he was wrong to assume she cared nothing about him at all, as she had demonstrated by saving him. No matter how aloof and disdainful she was, Ashley *did* care about a life that in all likelihood she did not.

“It’s pretty late,” Ashley said suddenly, looking ahead as if she had been in contemplative thoughts of her own. “The ferries and the subways won’t be

running at this hour, meaning one way or another you're stuck on this island, and I'm stuck with *you*." She cocked her head down at Ian, "Where are you going to sleep? Where did you even plan to *go* after you got that hat back?"

He flushed, "I—I hadn't thought about it yet, to be honest."

"Big surprise," Ashley replied dryly. "I'd offer to take you back to my place, but I don't think you'd be safe there, not with the others." She frowned, "And some of them might wander down here when they learn of this little 'incident' to see the damage for themselves. I can't leave you alone, that's for sure."

Ian's stomach lurched as she sat down, leaning up against one of the larger structures on the set, reclining against it. "This looks as good a spot as any, I suppose. I'm quite tired, so forgive me if I'm not of a mind to chat." She gave a cavernous yawn.

He shivered at the sight of her swordlike teeth, but the worry was short lived. He'd gotten out of dinner at least, and though that still left breakfast. "I wouldn't really know what to say anyhow," Ian offered, nervous and intimidated, but not outright afraid of her anymore. "I've never talked to a girl I was below the ankle of."

"And I've never talked to a boy I could hold in one hand," Ashley replied softly, reclining further, wrapping her long fluffy tail over herself, atop her chest and forming a snug blanket about Ian. "But it looks like we're both in uncharted territory tonight."

Ian smiled, resisting the urge to make a comment about his surroundings; he finally had her in a good mood after all. "That we are," he said quietly, resting his head against the silken wall, closing his eyes, his worries, though not gone, were at least set at ease. "That we are."

Part II

No Good Deed

Chapter 7

No Good Deed

(Three Weeks Later)

Ashley knew the tram was in trouble even before the cables began to snap; it truth she was surprised it lasted as long as it did. Thousands of performances as “Yotezilla”, a theme park ride monster, had attuned her to the set in the same intimate detail as an architect to a building, an artist to a sculpture.

Knowing the set intimately, she could predict every seemingly chaotic even—from gas mains rupturing to cars crashing to buildings toppling, only the guests in the resort were surprised, only they were confused and unsure.

To her, it was as plain obvious as a flat tire to an auto mechanic. *That’s not supposed to happen...*were her first thoughts as the box-shaped tram shuddered to a stop on the rail, then jerked forward violently as the rear tether snapped, the thick cable whipping free in the midday sun.

Transfixed on the spectacle, Ashley forgot her role, her rampage coming to a stop as her jaw dropped in surprise. She also ignored, or rather treated as the harmless effects they were, the clouds of smoke and ash popping and booming as fake munitions exploded from the “military” around her.

Losing its equilibrium, the car titled sideways, the nose rising into the air like the bow of a sinking ship. From within the tram, over the PA she could hear the tour guide, Ian Michaels struggling to maintain the façade that the event was “All part of the show, people, don’t be alarmed,” amidst the screams and cries of surprise from over a dozen guests.

At that point, some useful idiot must have spoken up that he or she had ridden the ride before and this *never* happened. “It—it’s a surprise.” He said,

a damning trace of panic in his voice, “A little variety in the rides, to keep it from getting routine.”

They’re going to fall.

Belly tightening with dread, Ashley’s eyes wandered below the tram, knowing what she would see there but forced to look anyway. A pit of jagged metal and sharp rocks lay beneath in a small crevasse, the points driving upward like the teeth of some burrowed predatory insect waiting for victims to fall in.

It was all quite real; the park had opted for real metal and stone in its ride, citing that the foam debris was more expensive than just going to a scrap yard. The sharpened protrusions and debris would shred the car like a box of tissues in a turbine killing Ian and everyone else aboard, unless somebody intervened.

Like me, Ashley clenched her fists, feeling an odd stirring to action, I could save that tram, if I wanted to. The fate of the smaller people behind the fences had never been of much thought to her, but nearly a month ago she had literally held the life of one of them in her hands and had ultimately decided that she could neither harm or allow one to come to harm if she could prevent it.

But I can’t go over there....

Despite its peril, the tram was in fact, quite well protected—from her—by *real* military ordinance and a fence that produced more wattage than a small town like the defenses of a castle taunting an invader. Crossing the literal deadline would be the beginning of the end.

Buckling, the tram began to spin as the railway motor, still active, struggled to push through the blockage, oblivious as machines were to fact that its normal function was only making things worse. More cries echoed off the tram, panicked and afraid, like the squeals of small rodents and insects—but Ashley knew, *had learned*, each one of those small, inconsequential voices belonged to a living, breathing person just like herself.

I have to act. Swallowing her fear and inhaling deeply with her diaphragm, the coyote girl tied down the tiny two-piece costume and leapt *out* of the city, vaulting warehouses, electrical boxes and power cords the width of tree trunks as she bolted for the tram like a savannah cat bearing down on its prey.

This is gonna suck! Squeezing her eyes shut with her teeth set in a grimace of anticipation of the pain to come, Ashley crossed the deadline. All hell broke loose. Real military ordinance was louder than the glorified fireworks she saw every day on the set—and more painful.

Ashley grimaced, careful not to bite her tongue as burning shrapnel from the

minefield in front of the fence launched into her legs and feet. *Flak comes next!* Ashley thought, covering her face and head with her arms, feeling another wave of stinging insects racing up the back of her forearms, though thankfully not in her face.

Gerald, her supervisor, was missing half an ear and an entire side of his face was scarred heavily under his fur thanks to such a weapon. His words of advice rang in her ears, “Protect your eyes...they’ll always go for your eyes; once you’re blind, you’re *dead*.”

The firestorm died down as quickly as it began, the ammunition depleted in a mere three volleys. The stingy safety and security concerns of the park that had placed the Ian in danger were Ashley’s salvation as the park had only purchased the bare minimum as required by law.

Gasping as her body rocketed into full-on crisis mode, quashing the darker impulses that came with it, Ashley lowered her arms, tentatively opening her eyes. Her costume little more than tattered scraps, her fur was scorched and soaked with warm, fresh flowing blood soaking and matting both it and her clothing.

Having stopped running upon hitting the flak, she wanted nothing more than to drop to the ground and curl up in a ball. Or to cut loose with the pained angry she felt welling up like the pressure in a volcano, to tear through everything around in her full earnest.

No! No! No! Don’t lose control, Ashley forced herself to think, to feel, to be afraid and hurt, as the alternative was something more horribly entirely. She caught sight of the tram again. It did not look good.

Dangling from a single cable, rolling with the motions of both faulty machine and panicked passenger. Ears ringing, Ashley could still hear Ian’s voice on the tram, trying to reassure the passengers—failing, as now their screams could be heard over the PA too.

He’s not stopping, neither will I. Somehow, perhaps using the little fox’s talking as a beacon in the night, a lighthouse in the storm, Ashley managed to quell the burning rage in her breast and stay sane, stay focused on helping, not hurting and soon she was running again

One final hurdle loomed: the fence, taller than even her and charged with enough volts to power the park itself five times over. It was the final defense, the often bragged about total barrier that kept the monsters away from those they would devour, crush underfoot or toy with in unspeakably perverse ways.

Ashley hit it without pause or hesitation. There was resistance, the wires

seeming to push back., resisting her even before the electricity surged into her body, fiery pain arching up every nerve, muscles clenching.

But then she heard the sound of wires snapping, metal girders squealing in protest as they bent, then it was over, the fence was down in a heap on top of Ashley. Pulling herself out of the wreckage as much as she could, she crawled forward, dragging the mass of wires clinging to her torso.

That was the dreaded, all-powerful, unbeatable Super-fence they bragged about keeping us “Monsters” in with? She almost smiled at the thought of the much vaunted security feature being defeated by a seventeen year old girl.

Something struck her across the right shoulder blade—a concrete support pillar yanked down with the wires. With a grunt, Ashley rolled the heavy mass of stone off and crawled forward. The tram was ahead of her, less than half a dozen steps away.

The cable snapped. The tram fell. “No!” Ashley cried in weak desperation. There was no time to get up. Still hung up in the mass of cables, Ashley lunged, stretching out her hands as far as they would go, ignoring the protests of her sore muscles and bleeding arms, her palms skyward.

Feeling the weight of the tram striking her palms, Ashley dropped her hands to diffuse the force of the sudden stop on the contents of the car as if catching an egg. From inside came a mix of terrified screams, and much to her relief, Ian’s voice, saying hoarsely but in good humor, “see? See? All part of the show, I told you we’d be fine.”

Ashley’s arms buckled, threatened to give, but she locked her elbows into place and eased the car onto the ground just shy of the crevasse before sprawling onto her back in relief. *I did it!* Exhausted and sore from head to toe, she nevertheless felt invigorated in her good deed.

It was then that Ashley caught a flash of red from the corner of her eye—Ian. Crawling through one of the tram windows, he ran up to the side of her face, his tiny form appearing almost her size, close as he was to her eye. Off in the distance, she could hear a steady drone of rotor blades—rescue helicopters coming after their job had been done for them.

“You didn’t have to come all this way to say thank-you,” Ashley muttered, eyes half closed. A fluttering of bright-orange red prompted them open again. Waving his arms, Ian’s face was twisted in obvious stress, his mouth open—he was yelling. “I can’t hear you.” She tapped her ear, still ringing from the explosions, her hearing too damaged for his mouselike voice.

Ian slapped his hands to his side in frustration then ran closer, shoving his

head into the triangular funnel of her ear to scream, “GET OUT OF HERE, THEY’RE COMING TO KILL YOU!”

She frowned, now as puzzle and confused as those on the tram had been when their tour machine broke. “Kill me? But I just—.” The droning was louder now, closer.

Looking up at the approaching shapes, her stomach clenched. They were not rescue helicopters, they were *attack* helicopters with cannons and missiles visible even at this range.

Of course they are, Ashley thought with no surprise whatsoever, only bitterness that her expectations had been proven true. The attack helicopters were coming to stop the rampaging circus attraction that broke out of her pen, to put her down like the mad circus animal she was.

Chapter 8

Spur of the Moment

Ashley's mind raced, taking in the scene around herself and anticipating the coming vengeance about to be unleashed upon her in the name of protect those she had just put herself in harm's way to rescue. There was enough space between her and the tram that precision military fire could strike down the full hundred and ten foot length of her body and leave the car's occupants unharmed.

Except these *weren't* military aircraft with expert pilots and precision systems. These were outdated, forty year old choppers who relied on little more than a set of crosshairs painted on the canopy for aiming purposes. Their pilots were private security trained over the course of half a month and rarely allowed to practice with live ammunition lest the accountants and budgeting department throw a hissy fit.

In all likelihood, the actual bombardment would hit Ashley, the tram, what was left of the fence and probably everything within a hundred yard radius. *And Ian.*

Ashley could see him, standing by her muzzle now, he wore an expression of worry and helplessness as he put his hands the black tip of her nose. "Please get up," he mouthed, "You've gotta get up. I know you can!"

So small, so fragile...and yet his only concern was for *her*. He wanted her safe and out of harm's way, just as Ashley wanted with him. The beating Ashley had taken from the defenses, though painful, was all perfectly survivable and would heal in a matter of hours. Even the helicopters' payloads might fail to seriously damage her.

Ian and the others in the car, not so much. *He'll never get clear in time. And they'll hit the car for sure with those relics.* The helicopters were hovering overhead now, waiting, their pilots undoubtedly anxious and nervous that the day they had trained and fantasized about—a deadly monster tearing out of her enclosure, hungry for the blood of the innocent—had finally come.

It didn't matter what action she took, how hard she tried to look meek and unthreatening, there was only one inevitable conclusion. Every single one thought himself the brave hero, just like the soldiers they'd grown up watching shoot Ashley's ancestors in the old film documentaries. Every single one wanted to tell his grandchildren about killing her like a fabled knight slaying a dragon.

It's all I am to anyone, just a threat to be contained.

It wasn't a question of if, but when they would open fire. As if agreeing with her mind, Ashley's body gave a final dump of adrenaline and endorphins, her strength renewed and the pain lessened to a side distraction.

Squaring her jaw, she lunged, why drag it out? Her fingers closed around Ian who took a half step back with a yelp of surprise. *Déjà vu*, she thought, recalling how similar this was to the night they had met, his shock and his fear, tantalizing sweet then, and even remaining so now despite her intent being wholly different as a protector not a predator.

Can't change instinct, I suppose. But she didn't have to listen to it.

Not stopping, she rolled with her momentum—back into the enclosure and more importantly, away from the tram car, scrambling back through the mess of downed cable and concrete, tucking her closed hands against her chest, curling into a ball.

The helicopters opened fire.

"You're in a lot of trouble, kid." Gerald said for the twelfth time in as many minutes, wrapping a length of bandage dozens of feet long and wide as one of the charter buses that frequently visited the park around Ashley's arms. "A lot of trouble. Getting fired is the least of the things you have to worry about now."

The pair were "backstage," a section of the park where the monsters of Monster Tours changed, dressed—and in this case treated for injury after foolhardy heroics. Built from the remains of a former military base, the park retained many of its old buildings such as the wide room they both occupied that had

formerly been an aircraft hangar for the flying fortress class of bomber.

The furniture, too, had been converted from war materials. Ashley sat upon a large metal slab meant to be a table that began life as the front end of a navy destroyer melted down and repurposed into furniture for the giants. Her costume, little more than burnt strips, had been exchanged for the canvas half of a large outdoor tent, wrapped around her body like a gown of an ugly dark shade of brown.

Head spinning, Ashley replayed the events: the tram breaking, throwing herself into the containment defense, the helicopter attack and most recently, Gerald, her supervisor, descending like a strong-armed hawk and plucked her from ruins of the fence, pulling her to her feet and dragging her through the hail of haphazard cannon and missile fire to safety.

They were back now, outside the warehouse, circling like hounds around treed quarry. Ashley kept expecting to hear a police bullhorn over the droning of rotor blades, yelling for them to come out with their hands up, but so far, nothing. *Maybe they just don't have PAs in their helicopters*, she thought, then more darkly... *Or maybe they don't have anything to say to me.*

Even as he dressed her wounds, Gerald continued to remind of her of the sheer stupidity of her actions, as well as rattling off the damage estimates. "That fence cost a quarter of a million, fifty thousand a month to power. The munitions you blew through were about a thousand per pound and we're not even into the set damage."

"I didn't damage the set!" Ashley cried, flustered at the thought of yet more blame laid on her for daring to save these stupid little people and their stupid park. "That happened because those yahoos were *shooting* at me—*ow!*"

She winced as a spa's worth of hydrogen peroxide ran down her back from a dislocated oil trailer in Gerald's hands. "Haven't I been napalmed enough today?"

"Infection kills more of us than ordinance," Gerald replied matter of fact, tying off the end of the bandage. "You'd feel pretty stupid living through sustained anti-tank fire just to succumb to gangrene, wouldn't you?"

He was right, even with an enhanced immune system, resistance to various toxins, poisons and weapons whose usage construed a war crime, Ashley's body could still be overwhelmed by simple bacteria pouring into wounds measured in yards.

Sulking, Ashley steadied herself in the chair, repeating, "The set damage wasn't my fault."

"It's always your fault." Gerald said softly, pouring the rest of the disinfectant on, his voice distant, detached, aimed not at Ashley but somewhere, sometime, else. "Best intentions be damned, it'll always be your fault."

Ashley's tan ears drooped flat against her gray fur. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." In his most uncharacteristic act all day barring his rescue of her, Gerald smiled. "It's—refreshing to see someone who genuinely cares, naïve though you may be." His attention turned to Ashley's cupped hands resting in her lap. "I need to check your palms. Open your hands."

She looked off to the side, guilty. Her hands remained firmly clasped. "They're fine."

"Just the same, let me look. There was a lot of fire and shrapnel flying around, you could have nerve damage and not know you're hurt."

"Sir, please, I'm fine."

Gerald's face knotted in a frown at this unexpected resistance. "Your hands, please."

Ashley didn't open her hands. "Mr.Cavenson," she said nervously, "I need to tell you something first."

By reading Ashley's worried expression, her eyes told Gerald more than enough. A long, heavy sigh followed as he guessed the terrible truth. "You didn't?"

Ashley exploded into panicked explanation, babbled words firing from her lips with the same speed as bullets from the machine guns and rockets from the attack aircraft. "They were still shooting even as you grabbed me—you saw what they did to everything around me—they even shot *you*!"

Her lupine supervisor had his own nasty shoulder gash and few shallow—to him anyway—cuts on his legs showing through his pressed khaki uniform. "I *couldn't* let him go. He'd have died."

"Miss Preston, let me see your hands." Gerald's tone was back to its old stern gruffness, irritation heavy. "*Let me see.*"

Like a child caught snatching a piece of candy, her hands cracked sluggishly open, revealing the frazzled, shocked, but very much alive and unharmed Ian resting in one palm. Locking eyes with the mountainous grizzled and roughed up wolf, the fox gulped visibly, inching backwards.

“Do you know what you just did?” Gerald spoke softly, eerily calmly, eyes still on

She glared up at him defiantly. “Saved a life?”

“You took a *hostage!*”

Chapter 9

Hair-Trigger

“That was incredibly stupid of you.”

“Saving a life is *not* stupid,” Ashley retorted with a huff Ian couldn’t help but find cute despite being terrified near out of his mind right now at knowing where he was: back in the hands of the giants once more. She was feisty and spirited, he had to admit, though at the time of their meeting he would have used words like “terrifying” and “ominous.”

“Do you know what Security thinks, now? They think that you snatched a helpless innocent from the tram and are in here inflicting some perverse, horrendous torture. Or that you ate him alive. They *always* think we’re going to eat them.”

Gerald glared daggers down at the fox, prompting Ian to gulp and cower behind the curled fingers that formed his open-topped cage. Up to this point he’d been nervous around the fingers, imaging how easily she could close and crush him with them, but now Ian was grateful anything between himself and the giant wolf.

Ashley blinked once and looked down once at Ian as if he should have mentioned this earlier. “Well, then, I’ll simply take Ian outside and show the nice trigger-happy maniacs that he’s *not* been eaten, nor is he going to be,” she said that last part straight to Ian as if to reassure him, for which he was thankful.

A heavy droning could be heard outside, reverberating thunderously through the metal exoskeleton of the hanger-turned-dressing room. “The *second* we open those doors, they’ll launch a barrage of rockets and mortar fire in here.”

“Let me go out alone!” Ian was eager both to get away from the scowling wolf and at the same time assert *some* form of control in this powerless situation. “I’ll talk to them, get them to see what *really* happened.”

Gerald turned a cloudy eye down; it was located on the right side as his ear and scars. They really did a number on him, Ian thought, outside and inside. How did this guy end up in a theme park?

“Again, in case you weren’t paying attention, the second we open the doors, they’ll open fire. They will not wait to see who or what is coming out. And Security thinks you’re dead at this point.” He flashed toothy smile at Ian, “We don’t take prisoners; we just save snacks for later.”

Ashley glared at her supervisor as if she found the remark in poor taste. “Then why not just open fire on the building?” She asked. “They could Drop it on our heads.”

“They *could* bring the building down on our heads, but there’s no guarantee that would finish us off. It takes a lot to kill us. The last thing Security wants is to use up all their ammunition on the scenery and then run out. The real military will take hours to get here; we could do a lot of damage in that time, *especially* knowing we have nothing to lose.”

“Think they’ve already called them?” Ashley asked.

“Most definitely.”

“So they *are* going to kill us, all without even bothering to see if we’re truly a threat or not.” The coyote girl sounded more disappointed than afraid, as if having failed in a lifelong goal. “But you’ve worked her for years, surely that must mean something. Isn’t there *anyone* who trusts you?”

“No one trusts us.” He growled insistently, “ever.”

“Maybe it’s your warm personality,” Ian muttered, too quiet to be heard.

At least he thought it was too low to be heard. A piercing snarl—more of a roar, really and Gerald snatched from a gasping Ashley’s palm faster than a wolf that size should have been able to move. Spots dancing in his vision, Ian’s stomach plunged as he rose up with speed comparable to the Verticacclerator ride, squeezed by fingers wider than his shoulders.

“Mr. Cavenson, don’t!” Ashley’s shocked voice pleaded from far, far away.

The gray hand came to rest just shy of the wolf’s face, teeth bared angrily at the fox. *He’s going to bite my head off—literally!*

The impending likelihood of being devoured by a larger creature dominating the entirety of his thoughts, Ian finally understood what his psychology class teacher had meant during Phobia week by the term *primal fear*.

“Do you see this?” Turning his head, he presented the right half of his face like the craggy landscape of an over-mined mountain. “I had a ‘warm personality’ until *this* happened.”

Gripped by fingers that could have crushed steel, Ian fought the urge to struggle, afraid any action on his part would only enrage the wolf further. “You think I don’t *want* better than this? For myself? For her? For *everyone*?”

Ian struggled in a blind panic as the fingers began to tighten further, his upper chest burning and spots dancing in his vision. “You think I *like* seeing a young girl raised this way?” Spots were at the edge of Ian’s vision. “Having no greater option in life than to be a carnival freak? Do you think I’m happy that our promised Reservation turned out to be the irradiated wasteland they created trying to wipe us out?”

Trapped air burning his chest, Ian felt his ribs threatening to give. Inky blackness swallowed everything until all he could hear was the angry snarling. *This is it, I’m really going to die*, he thought, *he’s just going to squeeze and squeeze until....*

“I am not a freak.” The pressure let up suddenly, Ian gasping as air—and colored sight—returned to him. The gray of Gerald’s hand gave way about him and he found himself in a blessedly familiar tan colored palm he never thought he could have been so happy to see.

At the same time, he became aware of a gentler, but still firm pressure around him as Ashley carefully pried the constricting fingers apart with her own, retrieving her prize tactfully. Though having always been nervous in her tan-furred hand up to this point, Ian could have kissed the palm beneath him in gratitude, were he able to draw enough breath to move.

“I am an actress.”

Lying on his back and watching the light above filtered through the cracks in Ashley’s fingers as she protective closed her hand around him, Ian continued to hungrily gulp air, clutching his sides with his hands, fingers probing at his ribs.

They ached, but they seemed intact. From a mile away heard a sharp guffaw of laughter. “Of course you are, Ms. Preston. You’re our little starlet. They’ll dedicate a whole sidewalk for your footprints.”

“They’ll have to,” not a single note of sarcasm could be detected in her voice, “I have big feet.”

Shaking his head condescendingly as if she were a child proclaiming her belief in fairies, Gerald stalked to the back of the hangar, but not before, he tossed over his shoulder, “Gonna try to get in touch with Security and sort this mess out.”

He shook his head, “Figures that this would happen when Jenkins was on vacation and that green kitten Patterson was in charge.” He glared at Ashley. “Try not to do anything *else* while I’m gone.”

He slipped off into a side hangar serving as a phone booth with specially made equipment to allow the giants to talk to the little ones on the other side of the fence. Alone in the dressing room, but for Ian, it suddenly occurred to Ashley to check on her tiny companion.

“You okay?” Taking a seat at the desk in front of a towering vanity mirror assembled from the components of a solar panel array; she brought the fox, now in a sitting position, up to her muzzle, unfurling her fingers for inspection.

Appearing stunned and shaken up but not permanently hurt, Ian nodded shakily, and then cringed as her heavy sigh of relief disheveled his clothes, fur and short straw-blond hair. “You *really* have to control that mouth of yours.”

“How was I to know he could hear that well?” He snapped, more embarrassed than angry.

“What part of ‘enhanced sensory perception’ do you not understand? We hear like bats and see like hawks. I’d have thought it was obvious given how I managed to catch you last time. And, it’s one of the few things the government *hasn’t* kept secret about us.”

She looked down at her bandaged arms, frowning. “They won’t even let doctors examine us when we’re sick under the excuse of ‘protecting state secrets’.” In the government’s defense, allowing the likes of Gerald and Ashley’s physiology to be common medical knowledge would be the equivalent of publishing the latest stealth fighter plans on the internet.

“Of course, it’s not like anyone would come near us,” Ashley muttered, “It’s a moot point when everyone thinks you’ll kill them.”

Like Gerald almost killed Ian just now. Ashley’s belly tightened at the

memory, still raw and fresh. She doubted it had been intentional, she never would have managed to stop him in time if it were. Nevertheless, it was hardly a comforting thought; Gerald's little slip could very well have darker implications to it than a mere loss of temper.

"I never did say thank-you for saving me, and for helping me get my hat back." Ian's voice, tentative as treading on eggshells, interrupted to her musings.

"You're welcome," She answered. "And I never did ask why that stupid thing was so important to you."

To her surprise, he didn't reply with typical sarcasm or wounded pride. "Yeah," he said sadly, "It does seem kind of dumb. But my dad gave that to me when I was six," A pause, "It was the *last* thing he ever gave me."

"Oh." Ashley pretended to find floor interesting while Ian's gaze wandered the side as the two shared an awkward silence—or it would have been silent were it not for all insistent whirring buzz of angry war machinery outside. As his eyes, roamed, they took in the hangar earnestly for the first time.

Like the table, every piece of furniture was a hodgepodge welding of tanks, warplanes and other assorted military vehicles. Upon the desk sat a jet turbine converted into a coffee mug with the words BREAK A LEG written on it in bright red paint.

"So, uh, they sure do love making stuff out of hardware."

"It's what they had laying around when they built this place," she looked into the mirror,

"Maybe they were trying to be optimistic," he offered, "If *these* instruments of death could be repurposed for a peaceful civilian purpose—."

"Then so could *other* instruments of mindless destruction." She smiled, not sarcastically but in a genuine display of warm fondness. "You know, that was actually believed at one point."

"It was?"

"Yeah," She stood now, looking at him almost fondly. Despite the little fox's big mouth, his question had touched off a desire to make use of the rare opportunity fate had granted her. "Don't go anywhere; I want to show you something."

Chapter 10

Tarnished Beauty

Ian slapped his hands against his sides in an obvious *where?* gesture, “I’m standing on a platform thirty feet above the ground, I think I’ll be here when you get back.”

Surprising him with another first, a giggle, Ashley opened a wardrobe door, stepping behind it. The canvas flopped over the top; she was changing, her modesty protected by his immobility as much as it was the door. But what he didn’t expect was to see the bloody bandages flung casually aside with the remaining rags of her outfit.

“Hey! You need to keep those on!” Ian protested, surprised at the note of alarm in his voice. Well, Ashley had cared about his safety and well-being so far, snide as she had been. It was the least, and at the same time the most, he could do to counsel her health choices.

“No I don’t.” She replied matter-of-fact, “they were starting to itch. Now close your eyes.” Ian protested some more but Ashley was adamant on both the bandages coming off and his eyes closing. He finally relented, squeezing them shut and after hearing the telltale thuds of her footsteps as she drew near before saying in a sing-song voice, “okay, take a look.”

Ian opened his eyes. Then he gasped in disbelief, “no way.”

Like a princess, Ashley stood before him in an elegant white dress. There were no tatters, no deliberate holes, and while a trace of cleavage was bared at the top, it was otherwise quite conservative with the hem even reaching down to her ankles.

As for the gushing wounds he expected from seeing her remove the bandages, they had been replaced by short, soft fur, the sort of baby fuzz that sprouted on newborn pups. Nestled into her light brown hair and perched between her ears was a diamond studded tiara while a necklace of pearls hung from her neck.

Ian knew these had to be fake—no diamonds existed in the world that larger nor were there any oysters that could produce pearls of that size. If they did, they certainly wouldn't be used as costume props. *Still, it's a very convincing effect.*

"Well," Ashley gave a short twirl, arms out like airplane wings, the crystalline outfit reflecting the light back dazzlingly, seeming to channel the pristine beauty of her new look. "What do you think?"

"That's... it looks good on you," Ian said earnestly, uncharacteristically fumbling for words. "I didn't know you had a costume like that, Ash."

"It wasn't made for me. It was made for someone else." She paused, rewinding his words in her head. "And *what* did you just call me?"

"Ash?" He replied with a hint of nerves. "Sorry, I like to shorten people's names; makes it easier to remember who they are on the tours."

Planting a fist on a hip, she struck a no-nonsense pose with her head cocked down and to the side. "Am I really *that* hard to remember?"

"How about as a term of endearment?" He offered her a warm smile.

Saying nothing at first, she moved to lower herself down to his level, propping up on her elbows as if he were some intriguing kind of bug crawling across the dresser. "How about *no*?" She poked him in the chest—gently and with the tip of her claw turned to the side, but there was still enough force to topple him back onto his rear.

Ian swallowed, hard as he tried to recover his footing both literally and conversationally, "So... about that dress, I've never seen any of the other performers wearing that. Or any performances that would require it."

"The show was canceled long before I came here," She looked past him into the mirror. "I only learned about it from Gerald, and even he took a couple of months to trust me enough with it."

"What kind of show was it?"

"Not a tram-ride in front of a pretend monster, for one" she said haughtily. "It was a real *show*. Actors, a stage, a script, lines besides *roar-snarl-growl*. No

fences, no bombs, and no GODDAMN HELICOPTERS!”

She yelled the last words angrily through the walls at the droning from outside, her booming shout silencing even them for a second or two. Chest heaving as she caught her breath, Ashley sat down in front of him, crossing her legs testily in the chair.

“It does sound like a good show,” Ian hoped he sounded diplomatic, though he could not tell for sure through his ringing ears. “So, what happened?”

She didn’t immediately answer, turning her gaze to the floor before speaking slowly. “The script called for live actors, not automatons. Both sized actors would be on stage, *together*. There was even an audience.”

Ashley smiled for a moment, “it was meant to show the world that big people like me and little people like you could be together without it all ending in disaster.” Looking back up at him, her smile turned sad. “They only made it through one performance.”

Ian knew how the rest of *that* story ended all too well. Every year the news dragged out only the most heavily edited footage of the incident as a memorial piece.

Something in his expression must have betrayed his thoughts as Ashley nodded in agreement to the unsaid fact that some things were better left unsaid. “I’ll spare you the grisly details,” she said, “but suffice to say *this*,” she indicated the dress, “was the only costume piece clean and intact enough to be recovered.”

Ian did *not* need to hear any further details. “So what’s it doing here?” He asked, hoping to change the subject.

“I found it in storage the day I started working. Gerald wasn’t too happy about seeing the dress. I think it brings up bad memories for him, but he said I could keep it since they wouldn’t have us wearing anything but scraps of cloth and underwear.”

“A lot of girls would *love* to dress like that,” Ian snickered, then added quickly at the look Ashley gave him in response: “as a rebellion thing to piss off their folks and all.”

To his relief, she nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I thought so too at first. But then I realized that slutty clothes are only fun when people *don’t* want you to dress in them. And, much as I hate to agree with my mother, it *is* demeaning; like we could never wear anything better,” her voice grew soft, “never *be* better.”

Ian opened his mouth to say that *he* certainly thought Ashley could be better, but was interrupted by a heavy slamming of the side door as Gerald reemerged from the other hangar. The sound echoed through the metallic hangar like a captive thunderstorm, but was not nearly as alarming as the state of the wolf himself. His yellow eyes had dilated to the width of swimming pools, almost black like a shark's, while his nostrils were flaring in rapid breaths.

A quick glance at Ashley told him all he needed to know—this was not normal. Her own face was hanging with worry as her supervisor swallowed hard several times, before dropping hard into a nearby chair, a palm on his forehead, fingers clawing at his forehead. “Sir?” She asked, “Did you reach them?”

He shook his head. “The lines are dead. When the fence went down, it must have sent a surge back into the main fuse box. Everything's *fried*. I can't call anybody to get Security to stand down.”

Chapter 11

Prize Fight

“There *has* to be a way out of this,” Ian protested, sounding pitifully weak in Ashley’s hands. “There *has* to be. Let me go outside, let me *talk* to them.”

Gerald silenced him with a look before turning his attention back to her. “I’ve seen this before,” he said quietly, “I know what’s coming.”

She frowned. “Mr. Cavenson, I don’t like where this is going.” But Gerald scarcely heard her, talking more to himself now.

“They’ll keep us corralled, trapped. But they can’t finish off both of us in here. The landlines are down. They can’t call in an airstrike until they’re repaired. So for the moment, it’s just Security outside.”

He began to pace. “Disorganized, poorly trained, underequipped, maybe, yes, it can be done...” The wildness in his dilated eyes had gotten worse, to the point where it seemed that Gerald Cavenson, though present physically, was somewhere else mentally.

“Sir? What are you thinking?”

Gerald’s eyes narrowed, not in a manner suggesting he was going back to normal, quite the opposite. “All things, considered, they only have the firepower to kill *one* of us and they’ll concentrate on the one they *know* already killed.”

He looked at Ashley, mind made up, lowering his predatory eyes to her protectively knotted hands. “Preston, give me the fox.”

A chill ran up Ashley’s spine at the way he said her last name without

his usual formal *Ms* attached. Security called each other by their last names, security and the soldiers who had supervised her removal from the Reservation to the park. Gerald had been a soldier—and perhaps in his mind, he was one again right now.

And he thinks he's back in war, too. “Mr. Cavenson,” Ashley tried to keep her voice, even, calm. “We’re not on a battlefield. We’re backstage at a theme park. Those aren’t enemy soldiers out there; those are civilian security employees trying to contain what looks like a bad situation.”

“We can all still walk out of this!” Ian piped up, “Let me talk to them! I interned with Security last summer!”

“Ian, *shut up*.” Ashley muttered, poking him in the back with her finger, then to Gerald, “But you should listen to him.”

“Can’t listen to them; they don’t trust us. They will never trust us.”

“They trust us *some*,” she argued, “They built the fences and we have to stay on this side, sure, but they still leave us alone in here.” *Until I screwed it up.*

“No, no, they lie. They *always* lie. Anyone who trusts them is dead.” Tears ran down his cheeks, staining his matted grey fur. “I *told* them not to trust them. But they didn’t listen, and they all got killed for it.” He shook his head, looking at her with a hardened resolve born of madness. “Never again. Preston, *give me that fox*.”

Stomach flip-flopping as Ashley swept him up in her hands, Ian feared for a moment she intended to do as ordered. But rather moving forward she cupped them protectively around him like earlier, going even further by swiveling her waist sideways so that her body was physically between them.

“Why do you want Ian so bad?” Instantly the fox was wracked with guilt for doubting her.

Rising to his feet and advancing on her, and by extension, Ian with a stalking gait, Gerald’s face darkened as he explained, “when they see his mangled form clutched in my claws and his entrails hanging my teeth they’ll know I’m the bigger threat. They’ll put everything on me, but you, you can escape. You can *live*.”

It took a full minute for his words to sink in. “You can’t be serious,” Ashley whispered in horror. But one look in Gerald’s shark-like eyes said more than enough. “No, please sir, don’t do this; it’s not you!”

But the wolf was already beyond words, lunging at her—at the fox she held—with a feral snarl. Arms snaking around her torso, he bore her to the ground, the impact of their bodies undoubtedly rattling her cargo despite her best efforts to cushion him.

Gerald was bigger and stronger than her; she couldn't shield Ian the way she had against the ordinance, couldn't stop him from snatching him away.

There was only one chance the little fox had, she thought with cold, unforgiving clarity. Thrusting her arms out as far away from herself—and Gerald—as she could, Ashley half-tossed/half slid him across the smooth tarmac of the hangar floor with a desperate "Run!"

By luck, the momentum of her throw nonetheless—propelled Ian to his feet. Which was good—as had he not been already in motion the fox might have frozen or even been torn between running and the impossible effort of trying to help the coyote girl who deliberately tangled herself up in the wolf's arms and legs to slow him down as much as possible.

I have to get him to stop thinking about Ian, she thought, grunting in pain as a stray knee found its way into her stomach, thankfully lacking enough direct force to wind her. She knew what was going through Gerald's mind right now, the same murderous urges that nearly possessed and drove her to kill Ian. *I have to get him off Autopilot!*

There was a technically term for it, a long, nerdy science term that politicians tossed around when justifying keeping her and her kind locked up and guarded, but everyone she knew simply called it "Autopilot." It was the final word in the matter of why the fences stayed up, of why her kind were confined to reserved land with nuclear bombs pointed at them night and day.

A surge of pure raw emotion, a cocktail of hate and anger intermixed with euphoria and predatory instincts, those on Autopilot not only wanted to kill, they enjoyed it. The derived sheer *pleasure* from the act was greater than any narcotic and far more addictive.

Couple with Gerald's past trauma, his case of Autopilot would undoubtedly be more severe to Ashley who had yet to even be shot at before today. *Can't talk him down*, she winced, knowing what she had to do next, clamoring up his back and lining her head up behind his own like a shark.

If I can't stop it, maybe I can redirect it.

"Sorry about this, Mr. Cavenson," she muttered, and then bit him right on his good ear, her needle sharp canine teeth ripping and tearing at the soft, vulnerable flesh—the spot she knew he would react to through his bloodlust

state .

A howl of agony, then her vision exploded into stars as a gray furred arm smacked into her face, the elbow batting her in the side of the muzzle, threatening to send her to the ground, but Ashley wrapped her arms around his torso, tucking her head down to avoid his wild thrashing as the two canines rolled about the room, overturning and knocking down the furniture in the vanity room, including the mirror.

Through it all, she also fought a secondary battle, not against Gerald, but herself, her own Autopilot threatening to kick into high gear. Triggered as a stress response like a adrenaline, Ashley felt her mind growing fuzzy, the murderous red haze creeping over her. It was the same feelings she'd felt when chasing Ian, when his life had been in her hands and she had been all too eager to end it for her own pleasure.

Ashley could not let that happen again, not now. *Don't get mad, don't get mad, don't get mad, don't get mad....* She hoped the sanity mantra would work, feeling the temptation to go berserk right back at him. It wouldn't do to win the fight with Gerald just to turn around and eat Ian herself.

Yeah right, me beat him. But the thought that Ian's continued survival—and she'd put far too much effort into protecting him to give it up now—kept Ashley grounded enough to retain her presence of mind atop the snarling ball of fur, fangs and claws that was Gerald. He was bigger and stronger, but she was younger and faster, and while that meant little in such a contest of raw might, Ashley could still think, still take notice of—and use, her surroundings.

Wrapping her hand around the BREAK A LEG coffee mug—*Thanks, Mom*—she brought the cylinder of metal down atop Gerald's skull, the hollow crunch of metal on bone echoing through the chamber.

Made of lightweight materials, the cup folded on impact like it was paper, but it was still hard enough to brain her supervisor and knock him unconscious. The wolf went limp, collapsing atop her as so much dead weight. Dropping the cup, she pushed him off, wriggling free with a grunt.

Amazingly, her dress, necklace and tiara were undamaged, not as much as a tear or bent band, but she was concerned with something infinitely more delicate and valuable. "Ian?" She asked, voice soft, gentle, and without any ire or as she suspected he was already quite frightened by what he had witnessed.

Having lost sight of him during the fight her chest fluttered with anxiety and worry. "Ian, are you still here?" *Please tell me didn't crush him with all that rolling around.* No answer. Maybe he *had* been crushed, or maybe he'd been scared and run away.

“Whoa, that was *brutal*.”

Following the sound of his voice, Ashley spied the fox, and when she saw where he was, her concern turned to irritation at the sheer recklessness. Standing less than half an arm’s length away from where the melee had occurred, Ian’s eyes were wide with excitement, as if having just seen a particularly violent football game or hockey brawl.

Ashley crinkled her nose in annoyance. *Probably didn’t even run very far, the overconfident little twerp.* Though scowling and intending to be disdainful, her tail betrayed her by thumping happily in relief on the concrete floor of the hangar.

To make matters worse, as she scooped him up in her hand, Ashley had the strangest urge to hold him close as a matter of pure affection rather than just as a convenient way to carry him as when previously slipping him into her top. *Ah, hell, we’re probably going to die anyway, so why not?*

Gently, but firmly enough to enjoy the small red ball of fur against her neck, Ashley pressed Ian into the soft, gray-white ruff of her throat, sending waves of warm pleasure through her body that dismissed the lingering murderous impulses the battle had nearly invoked.

Apparently cuddling little people was a therapy for disarming berserker impulses. “Guess it’s just us now,” she slid him down her throat and up against her collar bone, a finger stroking him lightly across his back while looking down at him with a sigh that must have like being atop the park’s Balloon Bounce when it was inflated. “Too bad nobody saw me and Gerald throw down; you could have probably sold tickets to that—would be quite a show.”

Ian’s face suddenly brightened in intense excitement, “Of course!” Ashley felt little body quiver and shake till she thought he might explode, “Ash, you’re a genius!”

“A genius?” She snorted, confused at his sudden enthusiasm. “How? All I’ve done today is screw things up and make everything *worse* whenever I try to help. I’m not a genius, I’m an idiot and a klutz! And don’t call me Ash,” she added grumpily.

“Never mind all that.” Ian continued, running a hand soothingly through “And you’re not a klutz, Ash, you’re the brightest girl, prettiest girl I’ve ever met.”

Pretty? He thinks I’m pretty? Ashley assured herself it was exaggeration on her part, they were radically different; he could not possibly be attracted to a woman large enough to carry him in one hand. “Tell me more about how pretty I am.” But it was exaggeration she rather liked to hear.

“I’ll tell you all you like,” Ian replied with a laugh, “just do *exactly* what I say.”

“Is this going to work?” Ashley’s voice rumbled with nervousness through Ian’s entire body. Hearing such a powerful individual, a female titan of legend, so genuinely *afraid* was a humbling experience. *And yet I’m not afraid*, he thought, *Maybe it’s because I’ve been through so much mortal peril today...I’m feared out.*

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Ian replied, keeping his voice confident in the hopes it would inspire the same in her. “Open the door.”

“And if Gerald was right?”

“Like I said,” Ian kept his voice even while kneading the soft fur of her shoulder below him. How much of his touch she actually felt, Ashley didn’t let on, but she did tilt her head gently against him in response. “We’ll find out. Together. Open the door and let’s get this over with.”

“Ian?”

“Yes?”

“If we don’t—I just want to say,” the throat rippled with a heavy swallow, a wave through flesh and fur. “I enjoyed working with you. You’re an okay kind of guy. I’m glad I chose to let you go that first night.”

“I’m glad you did, too.” He laughed. “And you’re an okay kind of girl...a bit melodramatic maybe, but okay.”

This would have been her cue for a good-natured threat or a haughty response. Instead all Ashley did was nod thoughtfully, pushing against the heavy door of the hangar. With a screech of metal on metal, the heavy door slid open, sunlight and cool air spilling into the dark, humid hangar. The thundering drone of the rotors intensified, spotlights zeroed in, blindingly brilliant like the sun.

“Here goes nothing.” With Ian on her shoulder like another piece of her fancy costume, Ashley stepped outside of the hangar and across the runway cratered with fresh mortar and rocket impacts from earlier. The helicopters were there, no surprise, but there were tanks, too, the older, junky olive models with square bodies, exposed wheels and stubby barrels.

Nobody fired. “Walk towards them,” Ian called up to her ear, “Slowly. Keep your hands down at your sides and *smile*.” He paused, and then amended, “Lips closed, no teeth. Be friendly.”

Ashley did as instructed, her gait pronounced and formal, like an uptown lady attending a fancy ball. The virtual army outside still made no move; having expected a desperate attack or frenzied retreat, they did not know how to react.

Step one—get outside without being bombed—complete. Ian sucked in a deep breath, preparing his loudest, most informative voice imaginable. *Step Two: give the greatest performance of my—our—career.* Clearing his throat, Ian waved for Ashley to stop walking. Then, cupping his hands over his muzzle he said four of the most well-known words in either theater or film louder than they had ever been said.

“Cut! That’s a wrap!”

A full two minutes of tense silence passed before someone thought to get on the PA of a patrol jeep and yell back, “Say that again?” The voice was male, young—likely Patterson, the acting junior supervisor Gerald mentioned was standing in for Jenkins.

“I said, that’s a wrap. Performance over, good job, take five; break for coffee; smoke if you got ‘em.”

He paused, letting it sink in, knowing the peons would be confused, looking for an explanation—and conveniently *I happen to have one*, he thought, throwing his hands up in mock surprise and frustration.

“Didn’t *anybody* here read the script? The attack *ends* when Yotezilla is rescued by her mate after she snatches up the brave tour guide. Honestly, it was outlined in red and everything!”

“Uh,” Patterson’s voice was heavy with confusion, “We’re not here as part of the show—there was a Breach Alarm at HQ and I scrambled per protocol—”

“Didn’t Jenkins *tell* you this was going to happen?” Ian projected genuine shock. “I know your chopper pilots would have been surprised to see they were firing blanks otherwise.”

“Hold on a second.” Patterson got off the PA for ten minutes and no doubt into a frantic radio relay with his troops. “They don’t know anything about fake ammo or a script. Far as they know, they were trying to neutralize a rampant attraction.”

The fur around Ian spiked, Ashley bristling at being referred to as an *attrac-*

tion. “Steady, girl,” Ian muttered, caressing her some more. Security wasn’t shooting because the scene in front of them was more *weird* than scary, but that could be reversed at any time by any provocation. *One idiot gets nervous and we’re back where we started.*

He doubted she felt much, but the effort sufficed to calm her into laying her ruff down. Then through the bullhorn: “So then how do you explain my costar being perfectly fine after getting both barrels unloaded onto her?”

Ashley lifted her arms in demonstration, her smile taking a smug turn. Other than the lighter patches of fresh fur, there were no discernible signs of injury. While everyone knew about the giants’ regenerative abilities, few would believe in the sheer *speed* of it without seeing it firsthand.

Neither did Patterson. “I—We—there was nothing—.”

Sensing the upper hand Ian pounced, dangling an escape route before his trapped prey. “Look, it’s not your fault. Clearly there’s been a miscommunication. We’ll clear it *all* up in an hour. Okay?”

“Okay,” Patterson sounded relieved to have someone finally telling him what to do, someone else to make all the decisions.

“Great!” Ian put his absolutely best peppy enthusiastic voice on. “Now, you do me a favor and stop pointing all those guns at my costar? She’s very sensitive and gentle natured and positively *hates* violence.”

Chapter 12

New Hope

“Still in trouble with your boss?”

“No, we’ve patched things up fairly quick.”

“You hit him over the head with a *jet engine*! You gave him a concussion and fractured part of his skull!”

“He’s already healed. Besides, he was planning to get *killed* for my sake. What’s a little concussion between us?” Ashley shrugged—carefully so as not to dislodge Ian from her shoulder. She was starting to like having him there.

“Interpersonal violence is fairly common among us; just another side effect of being, well, violent.”

She looked away to the ongoing construction of her new set—*my new set*!—to replace the one damaged by *faulty special effects*, as the official explanation went. “Has anyone on your end told anybody what really happened?”

“Even if they know, they’re not going to admit to the public that disaster really happened. Now they have a popular new attraction, no pending lawsuits *and* the company gets to claim they’re progressive and ahead of the curve on little/giant relations.”

He laughed, “Out of all the risks we’ve taken today, having this little fib exposed is not one of them. We’re booked solid for the performances and nothing else. I think we can kiss Yotezilla goodbye.”

“Good. I don’t want to be a monster anymore.”

He looked down, embarrassed, “About that....”

Before he could finish his sentence, Ashley plucked him off her shoulder and raised him to her face in her cupped palms, smiling sadly to let him know she already knew the truth of the matter.

“I got the draft first. I’m still a monster; it’s just now that they’re willing to trust me with a live ‘victim’.” She sighed, hot breath blowing his fur and clothing, “if they can find someone insane enough to be near me.”

“Well that was easier to accomplish than you think.” Ian sounded a little embarrassed but still confident, “They went with the one person you’ve already proven you *wouldn’t* squash, namely, me.”

She laughed, “Guess that’s progress.”

“It is progress!” stood up in her hand enthusiastically, wavering arms out to the sides to keep his balance. “Yesterday you were behind a fence and worked with robots. Now they trust you with *people*. That’s not a little progress, that’s *huge*, Ashley.” A pause, “although, the company’s informing me that I’m no longer on their health insurance plan.”

“Can’t say I blame them, are not just a high-risk, you’re too dumb to live.” A sultry smile appeared on her face. “Speaking of taking chances, Ian, can you do me a favor?”

“Favor, sure,” he replied without thought. “What kind of fav—oomf!”

In a swift fluid motion she raised her hands with Ian up to her muzzle, pursing her lips carefully to plant a kiss against the side of the surprised fox’s face before following with a lick across his chest and a warm, affectionate nuzzle over his entire body. Tingling from head to toe, Ian barely heard her next words despite his close proximity to her mouth.

“Call me Ash.”

Part III

Upstaged

Chapter 13

Upstaged

“What’s wrong? You’re crying!” Ian moved to comfort the sobbing gray and tan furred girl whose face was buried in her dainty thin paws, down on her knees on the hard concrete floor painted to resemble a schoolyard. A fox like himself, she was a fennec with long ears like a rabbit’s and a desert-colored pelt similar to a coyote’s.

A white prom dress splayed about her like a frilly puddle. The sobs were heavy, pronounced, overdone, the orange-red fox often thought privately. Ian himself was dressed in a white button up shirt and suspended jeans and a pair of fake large framed red glasses—the classic nerd look.

“Ohhh, Stephan!” She howled in agony. “Chad dumped me in front of the entire school!” She pounded the floor with a fist dramatically. “It was so horrible. *Nobody* loves me; everybody *hates* me!”

Ian suppressed the urge to roll his eyes, not just at what she said but what he was about to say next, tugging slightly at his collar so the microphone in his white button shirt was close enough to project his voice. “I don’t hate you.”

Turning away from her, his eyes roamed out into the amphitheater, a crowded mass huddled on the freshly poured concrete seating that had yet to collect dirt and moss. “Come on, everyone; let’s tell Tracey that we *don’t* hate her.”

A few smart alics in the back yelled insulting things to the contrary, but the mass as a whole responded with a sickeningly sweet, “WE DON’T HATE YOU, TRACY! WE LOVE YOU!”

“See?” Offering to help her up with his right hand, Ian swept his left dra-

matically in front of the audience. “Lots of people like you, you have lots of friends! Now come on,” his sweeping hand came to rest pointing at the gym set piece, little more than a large cutout like the rest of the “school” that made up the stage, “let me get you some punch.”

“I don’t want *punch!*” Mike, the sound coordinator deepened her microphone’s projection to where “Tracy’s” voice was scrambled and amplified into a roaring baritone of rage and hatred. “I want *revenge!*”

The set went dark, red colored but otherwise harmless smoke hissing from the floor around them, Ian stepping back away as, unbeknownst to the audience, the platform that the sobbing, spurned prom queen occupied sank into the floor in the darkness and hissing gas.

At his feet, a series of green lights lit up, they were neither for him nor the audience to see—but for someone whom special precautions had been taken for not to accidentally step on him in the dark and smoggy confusion. Not that Ian was ever worried.

A roar sounded behind him. What the audience saw at that point was the stage bathed in a blood red hue to match the smoke as a large form plodded ungainly onto the set. A roar from the shadows, then the lights came up again revealing the coyote giantess named Ashley Preston.

She wore the same white dress as she had during their harrowing standoff with Security a month ago, and in fact it was the direct inspiration for Carla’s own costume. Arguably, the entire “Prom Date turned massacre,” storyline was a direct result of that.

Ears aside, there was a striking resemblance between herself and the fennec girl who played her “normal” form, Carla Jackson, thus the main reason she had been picked. It also might have had something to do with her uncle being the Director of Productions and Theater.

“RE-VENGE!”

“No, Tracy no!” Ian fell to his knees as Ashley swiped and pawed at the set piece buildings to prerecorded screams, kicking down them down like dominoes. “Oh, God,” He covered his eyes with his hands, “It’s so horrible! She’s spontaneously turned giant and now she’s taking revenge on everyone she doesn’t like in an orgy of death and destruction!”

Coming to the gym, Ashley raised her right foot deftly over the gym before bringing it down behind the one dimensional frame in a series of slow, exaggerated stomps. In addition to screams, Mike intermixed wet, crunching squelching sounds meant to be bodies popping like overripe grapes under her feet.

“DIE, PIG-HEADED JOCKS AND YOUR AIRHEAD, CHEERLEADING CONCUBINES TOO!”

Though now offstage, Carla still provided the voice of the Monster Prom Queen. Ashley had *not* been pleased to learn that her much coveted role as a performing actress would be without lines, though the matter had been brought up by Ian as she had no contact with anyone other than he.

The Director—Carla’s uncle—Vaughn Jackson had replied simply, “If someone wants to interview the ‘Monster’ later, they’ll expect to hear Carla’s voice.” Then he had snidely dropped a veiled threat at sending Ian back to his old job at working as a tour guide on tramcars if he objected.

The changes stayed, Ashley had no lines. But she still put her heart into every performance, as if she truly saw this as advancement not just for herself, but her entire race. *More power to her, I suppose*, Ian thought as she finished off the Prep Squad, *Personally, I’d threaten a strike*.

“HUNGER! I HUNNNNN-GER! I LIKE STEPPING ON PEOPLE. YOUR DEATHS TURN ME ON!”

Snapped from his thoughts as Ashley finished stomping the high school into oblivion and rounded on him, stalking closer, impact tremors rolling through his legs, Ian threw up his hands in mock terror, as if to shield himself. “Tracy, please, it’s me, Stephan!”

Her hand closing dramatically around his waist—purely for the audience as her hand was easily large enough to have fully enclosed him—Ian was lifted towards her snarling visage. “I’ve always loved you!” He cried in final desperation, but the ravenous beast would be swayed by only one thing.

“*MUST....FEED!*” Cupping her other hand beneath him both concealing and supporting him Ashley pushed Ian up to her muzzle—he screamed, the audience gasped and shrieked. Though he was nowhere near her muzzle, Ian still swallowed in nervousness as Ashley’s sharp canine teeth—each longer than his entire arm—gleamed ivory white in the dim lighting as she made chewing motions.

“*OM-NOM-NOM-NOM!*” Carla added for emphasis.

“Hanging in there, Ash?” Covering his microphone, Ian whispered up to the giantess. “Only two more shows tonight.”

Ashley couldn’t respond, of course, it would be too obvious, but she did manage a faint smile that Ian knew wasn’t part of the script and meant solely for him. It also seemed a tad bit sad as she sat him down in the green-tinted

“drop zone” offset before going back to her “rampage”.

After a few more minutes of scripted carnage, the set went dark once more. When the lights went on, the audience would see the set arranged perfectly as if nothing had been amiss; the same trick the now-closed Yotezilla ride relied upon.

Ian stood in the center repeatedly bowing as Mike announced from the sound room, “Let’s hear it for the star of our show!” Waving and alternatively making Sad, Angry and Homicidal faces, Carla sprinted out to meet Ian, locking hands with him and bowing excitedly.

“Be sure to stop by the gift shop on the way out!” She yelled to the cheering audience that actually remained in the stands instead of filing out of the stands and towards the merchandise-laden exit as was normal protocol for theme park shows.

Possibly because that fennec girl is just so damn cute, Ian thought, noting Carla’s long ears, round dark eyes and short, button muzzle framed by cropped brown hair a shade lighter than Ashley’s.

“Thank-you, thank you so much, you’re the best audience I could ever ask for!” Turning to face Ian, she smiled shyly, hands behind her back. “So, Stephan, you always loved me, huh?”

Leaning forward, ears back, eyes closed fluffy tail curled upwards, Carla kissed a very surprised Ian squarely on the mouth, slow and dramatically before rearing back to stick her tongue out at him. “Too bad I’m a *man-eater*!” The audience roared with laughter and clapped some more.

Ashley was not called onto the stage.

Chapter 14

Gimmicks

“New script, learn it by Tuesday or I’ll find someone who can,” Vaughn Jackson, Carla Jackson’s considerably less darling and far less cute uncle blew a thick cloud of cigar smoke as the stack of papers thumped ominously on the desk of the common room backstage at the Prom Date Massacre set like a tolling bell.

Around Ian the cast consisting of himself, Carla and Mike, shuffled under the late fifties fennec’s withering glare, the tight suit on his square frame giving Vaughn the classic slave-driver appearance. But while Ian *was* concerned for his job, he couldn’t find himself to be actually *afraid* of the man, not after his recent experiences with Ashley and Gerald.

The risk of getting fired was nothing compared to the risk of getting eaten or stepped on, he thought. Being confronted with one’s mortality in the face of beings who could take your life from you almost like gods was a wonderful cure for mundane financial worries.

“It’s already Monday now! And look how hard they’ve worked for already.” Carla protested, sweeping a hand in front of the staff that included Ian and Mike, the tiger looking about nervously as if wishing he could return to the sanctuary of his sound room. “Come on, Uncle Vaughn, be reasonable,” she pleaded with her uncle like the villain of a holiday movie.

The silence in the room was palpable, the other stagehands and performers wanting Carla to succeed but too afraid of her uncle’s wrath to voice his or her support. Nevertheless, succeed or fail, Carla’s standing with everyone could only go up from here: she was now their ally on the inside of the owning family, rather than its spoiled appointee in their ranks. As a former tour guide responsible for controlling the mood and interest of others, Ian couldn’t help but be impressed

at the ploy.

“Thursday,” Vaughn took a slow puff, pointing the butt at her sharply. “No excuses. Remembrance Day is this Saturday, you know what that means.” His dark beady eyes swept over them, “You *all* should know what that means.”

“Honoring fallen heroes and swelling bosoms with patriotism?” Ian asked sarcastically before mentally kicking himself for his tendency to spout off without thinking it through. One would think nearly getting killed by an angry giant *twice* would break that habit.

Carla shot him a reproachful look, but to the surprise of both, her uncle merely gave a rancid laugh. “Biggest day of the year for theme parks and barbeque merchants. Four day weekend, everybody will be down here—the hotel’s booked up and all the cabins will be so by tomorrow.”

“And *that’s* why you’ll have the new script memorized, rehearsed and ready to go by then. People expect Remembrance Day performances on Remembrance Day by well-rehearsed professionals, not your little high school drama club crap.”

The park prided itself on having The Largest Damn Barbeque in the Mideast, Period. Come the weekend Remembrance Day would feature both an invasion reenactment and an earnest one as scores of red blooded citizens poured in for grill, drink and fireworks.

“It’ll be the *best* Remembrance Day pageant ever!” Carla promised, smiling encouragingly at her costar, “Won’t it, Ian? Ian?”

Ignoring her, the top script book was already in Ian’s black-furred hands, an index finger flipping through the pages, white smelling of fresh printer toner. He frowned, then looked back at Vaughn. “Sir? There’s something wrong with the script.” Blinking her round dark chocolate eyes like a deer in headlights, Carla was genuinely speechless for once.

“I sincerely doubt it, son.” Vaughn tapped the end of his cigar depositing a lump ash onto the otherwise clean desk, glaring daggers at Ian. “I’ve had it commissioned by a team of expert stage writers and edited by my personal friend at Guten Press. That script could not be any *better*.” He smiled with pointy yellowed teeth and a blew a cloud towards Ian. “But please, let us all hear your opinion on why there’s a flaw.”

“Ashley is nowhere in this script.”

“Who?”

Slapping his hands to his side angrily, Ian felt his hackles rising at seeing

Vaughn's puzzlement was sincere. "Ashley Preston. The artist formerly known as Yotezilla the Terrible?" *The person who saved my life and made this little charade even possible?* He added silently.

Vaughn still looked puzzled, as though Ian had begun reciting lyric poetry backwards.

Carla, however, was not, pouncing into the discussion like a jungle cat from its concealment in the tall grass. "He's referring to the Attraction, sir. Ian is concerned that his performance might suffer if it doesn't involve his main talent of handling the Attraction. And, I admit, we've certainly invested a *lot* into him, haven't we?"

Officially, that was Ian and Ashley's cover story that the company had made up after the incident with the tram. He had been the product of a secret revolutionary giant-training program and Ashley was a new, carefully conditioned-from-birth docile version of the bloodthirsty living weapon people knew and feared so well.

If only they knew the truth, Ian often thought. She's not docile or any more inclined to gentleness over violence than any other. Ashley simply chooses not to eat me for real during every one of those performances. She chooses not to stomp into the audience and smear them onto the concrete like roaches under her heels.

But part of the deal was that nobody *could* know. With the old ride destroyed and dismantled, there was nothing for either of them to go back to. The truth getting out would mean Ian being fired and Ashley sent home to the Reservation.

Not even Vaughn was high enough in the ladder to know this, supposedly. Ian doubted such a hands-on manager would be out of the loop, and given her talent thus far displayed as his protégé, it was a good bet Carla wouldn't either. "Bah, I was told you were more than a one-trick pony, Mr. Michaels."

"I am." True, Ian had already been a successful guide before even meeting Ashley, playing the part of the brave guide through hellish lands unknown. "But the—Attraction—is what this show is all about. How can we go on without her?"

"Historical accuracy—her kind didn't exist until well after the Rout of Goldwheat Fields, the battle we 'remember' on Remembrance Day. Rest assured we've got a plan for a suitable replacement."

Vaughn took another puff. "Just leave the finer details to those of us in management and focus on learning how to do something besides scream at fake

monsters.” He pointed the red hot end at him like the tip of a dagger. “Thursday morning, seven am sharp.” Then he left.

Mike relaxed with a heavy sigh; he hated being around management, even when not the direct target, always looking over his shoulder as if worried he were being watched. Shooting an uneasy look at Ian as if he might be the source of more trouble, the tiger retreated to the sound room with a mumbled excuse about adjusting the subwoofers.

The two of them alone, now, Carla and Ian shared a paused silence broken first by Ian. “You didn’t have to cover for me.”

“Oh, pish-posh, think nothing of it, but a favor from a fellow artist,” Carla placed a dainty paw on her chest, fingers spread like a crouched spider. “Uncle Vaughn is a demanding man, but he’s as fair as he is tough.”

“I should know, he practically raised me.” She smiled sweetly. “Don’t worry; you’ll do fine in a conventional role. Just think of this as broadening your horizons. We must all learn to work without our gimmicks at some point.”

“Gimmicks?”

“It’s not a bad thing!” She said quickly, as though he might take offense. “Everybody has a gimmick, a particular trick, talent or feature he or she owes their success to. Mike’s gimmick is running the soundboard and being able to simulate a thunderstorm or a symphony on the same key. Uncle Vaughn’s gimmick is management and keeping everything smooth and effective. My gimmick is knowing how to warm people over with charm and cuteness—”

“—And mine is not collapsing into a gibbering mess when a ten-story predator grabs me and holds me in front of her teeth.” Ian finished wryly.

“Exactly!” Carla giggled. And yes, it was a very cute giggle he thought in annoyance as the indignation he should have felt refused to bubble up in the face of her perky mirth.

“But to expand our horizons, we must learn to go beyond our gimmicks. Think of this as a blessing in disguise, a chance to work without your gimmick and broaden your skill set.”

“Would *you* work without your gimmick?” He retorted. “Would you go out there without your cute charms?”

Catching the soft lighting expertly on her lightly tanned fur, Carla’s face practically shone like polished china as she smiled without a single hint of malice. “Just because we can’t rely on our gimmicks doesn’t mean we should stop using

them.”

Her smile faded as he turned to leave the room through the door leading back to the set—and Ashley. “Where are you going?” Carla asked from behind him in surprise at the sudden dismissal.

“To tell my ‘gimmick’ she has the weekend off.”

Over the last few weeks, Ian hadn’t spoken much with Ashley outside of some rehearsals—the only time he was ever actually on stage with her. And during said time both were strictly limited to speaking only lines—which in Ashley’s case were nothing but guttural snarls, roars and other monstrous noises.

For obvious reasons, giants and regular people didn’t mingle very much. We might never have even spoken face-to-face again if that tram hadn’t broken, he often thought guiltily. And we’ve barely had two words offset even now that we’re technically partners.

Though allowed out of the enclosure during performances, at night Ashley was quickly hustled back over the other side. Any attempts to make contact by phone were equally fruitless. The response was always, “We’ll have the lines connected soon, hang tight.”

This had been the stock answer for at least a month and Ian was starting suspect there was a determined effort to limit communication between them. *And now she’s not even in the play anymore...* That was the final straw.

Ashley was no longer just an attraction he worked on—she was his partner, and more importantly, she was his friend, he thought approaching the security station at the gap in the restored fence that separated Normal from Giant.

A simple, unassuming shack barely large enough for a single person, it seemed much too small for the two-door gate next to it standing over two hundred feet tall and four hundred feet wide.

“ID?” The gate attendant, a bored-looking sleepy orange cat yawned as he spoke.

“You should know me, Patterson,” Ian replied with irritation, recognizing the junior assistant manager who had been on duty that fateful day Ian and Ashley’s paths crossed again. Though he knew the security officer had just been doing his job in ordering an attack on Ashley, his callous indifference felt worse than any malicious intent. “Let me through.”

“Still need to see some ID, Mr. Michaels. Just make this easy on both of us.” Ian grudgingly handed over his driver’s license, then his employee badge. “Thank you,” Patterson barely looked at the cards before handing them back. “Now I need to see your passport with the permissible documentation.”

The fox cocked his head, puzzled, “I’m going to the other side of the park to talk to a coworker. Why do I need a *travel permit*?”

“Because you’re crossing a national border,” Patterson produced a map of the park, much different than the cheap brochures Ian normally saw. “Take a look for yourself,” he said handing it to him. Rather than using the public labels like Adventure Island and Wonder World, each section of the park was denoted by a letter and a number.

Adventure Island thus was S12, Wonder World was D5 and the section beyond the fence, the area he was trying to get into was labeled Sovereign Reservation. “Technically, *they* own that land and entering it is just like going into another country, required passports and all.”

You don’t have to tell me that, Ian thought, recalling how he’d been legally as much as physically at Ashley’s mercy when she caught him on her set after hours. As for Patterson, it quickly became apparent he wouldn’t budge an inch without the required paperwork.

Figured as much. After biting his lip for a moment of intense pondering, Ian shrugged, turning to leave without further protest. “Maybe you should try the embassy?” Patterson sounded surprised that the otherwise determined fox would walk away without further protest.

“Will do,” Ian called back over his shoulder, “If I have to go through the proper channels, then so be it. Besides, it can’t be more than what, a three month wait, right?”

“At most,” the cat said encouragingly. “I hear they’re even streamlining the process, you might even get it in *two*.”

“Great!” Ian said with enthusiasm that could have—and indeed was—mistaken for the genuine article. “You’ve been a big help, have a great night.”

Patterson didn’t even think to ask for his map back. *I got in without a passport once*. Ian flipped to the section labeled Electrical and Plumbing Access, tracing perspective routes with a single finger. *I can do it again*.

Chapter 15

Trial by Peers

The very same service tunnel that Ian had used to illegally cross the border the first time had survived the demolishing and reconstruction *and* it led deeper into the park—specifically, to the housing complex where the giants lived, conveniently at the center of the other rides that still ran.

Coming up under an old storm drain, the fox peaked beneath the heavy lid of a manhole cover into what Patterson’s map referred to as N1. The N likely stood for nexus as he was located dead center of the various branches of the Monster Tours section of the park.

Like the hangar that had functioned as a dressing room for the old Yotezilla ride, the complex was a series of base structures-turned housing and despite being decorated by its new occupants, still had the same olive drab paint on the outsides.

Which one does Ashley live in? Ian thought as he surveyed the row of hangars. *Don’t want to get the wrong one; don’t want to run into anyone else.*

His first experience venturing into the Sovereign Reservation had consisted of enraging then being captured by Ashley. The penalty for trespassing more or less equated to, “whatever the person who caught you deems fit.” Luckily, Ashley, for all her hostility, drew the line at actually hurting him.

But I can’t say the same for the others, he thought with a gulp as the ground shook with distant thunder, great plodding vibrations rattling through his body as the rest of the theme park monsters returned home for the day. Casting his hidey hole into shadow, the towering figures plodded into the Nexus area. Having worked on a number of rides before settling onto Ashley’s Ian

could name each and every one of them.

Directly next to his hiding space was a muscular lioness with short dark hair padded by in a white robe with golden bracelets and a pharaoh-style crown—the Riddling Sphinx. She would toss out a riddle at the audience, and regardless if the audience got it right or wrong, would promptly chase the tram through a mockery of pyramids over hills of imported sand. There was always one smart guy on that ride who'd point out that the Sphinx that told riddles came from the Mediterranean, not the desert.

Ian strained his memory to recall anything about that girl stood out, but he could only remember her character. Like how I could only ever think of Ashley as Yotezilla, he thought with a pang of guilt at having compacted such a complex person into a two-dimensional image.

The Sphinx waved to a wolf girl emerging from one of the backsets. Unlike the silky robe of the golden cat, the black furred and bleach blond haired canid wore a costume of thick leather body armor with a prop sword across her back. Red and blue runes had been painted along the blade.

The Fenrisian Warrior. He had only heard about her ride: a drop-down style rollercoaster above an authentically recreated Albion village being ravaged by the northern savage. Yet she looked familiar to him for some reason.

The wolf and lion moved towards each other with the quick, bouncy gait of two young girls eager to chitchat and gossip. Before he could ponder his unlikely familiarity with the she-wolf further, a flash of tan and gray drew his attention to an *especially* familiar coyote girl emerging from one of the smaller buildings.

Ashley!

He wanted to yell her name, get her attention—but the other two giantesses were much closer and would likely be the only ones to hear him. And something's not right, he thought with a frown, she looks stressed about something.

Head down, eyes straight ahead, her gait was hurried, as if not wanting to draw attention to herself. This of course, was quite impossible to do for someone ten stories tall and dressed in a flowing white gown intermixed with decorative jewelry. "How's it going, Diva?" The lioness called to Ashley. "Sign a lot of autographs today?"

"When's the movie deal?" The wolffess added, the sword shaking against her back as she laughed at her own joke. Refusing to acknowledge either taunt, Ashley quickened her pace as young girl who found herself targeted by a pair of bullies would do, seeking to get away quickly as possible.

“I hear there’s an Indy crew looking to do a Kaiju film,” the wolf continued. “What do you think, Mila, could we strap some wire on her face and call her a tentacle horror?”

“Nah, it’s not fair to the *real* tentacle horrors.” More laughter, jeering and persecuting. The pair began to walk towards Ashley in a stalking manner, circling her like sharks around a piece of bleeding meat.

Come on, Ash, Ian urged, Open the door and get inside.

Unfortunately, it looked like the door to the building was stuck in its track and was slow to open. This, combined with the lack of a response from Ashley only encouraged her antagonists further. “Oh, what’s wrong?” The Sphinx cooed, “Too good for us now? Think you’re something special because they take you out of your cage for walkies?”

“She’s just got a good wardrobe, that’s all.” The Fenrisian warrior smiled nastily with canine teeth that seemed larger than Ashley’s even at this distance. “I mean, look at that dress—no holes, tears or popped seams. We’re practically in *rags*; how can we compete with that?”

“How, indeed?” Mila said cruelly at Ashley, her eyes lowering down not at her, but at the beautiful ornate dress she wore. Her claws extended—the length of swords to someone Ian’s size. “Unless, of course, she suffered a *wardrobe malfunction*.”

Without a further word, the pair advanced on the coyote girl, trapped against the unyielding metal wall and unable to run or fight in her gown. Turning to regard them, Ashley swallowed hard before uttering a single, plaintive word: “Please.”

Unfazed by this, the pair didn’t even slow down before pouncing on their prey. The air grew heavy with snarling, growls and the sound of tearing fabric and cloth. They weren’t targeting Ashley; they were targeting the symbol of her uniqueness.

All Ian could think about were her words to him about the fight with Gerald: *Violence is common among us; it’s just an unfortunate side effect of being....violent.*

To Ian, Ashley had been towering and massive, a monolith of fur, teeth and claws, as unstoppable powerful. Yet against these two, she seemed petit, short and small bodied, as helpless as a child....

“ENOUGH!” The very air shook with the force of the bellowed command, and into the melee strode the towering form of Gerald, Ashley and the other

Attractions' supervisor, pushing and pulling the fighting girls apart like reeds in the wind.

"Finally, what took him so long to get here?" Ian muttered, relieved, despite having never thought he'd be happy to see the scarred, tatter-eared black furred wolf whose face was graying at the edges.

"I will *not* have my employees behaving like pretentious, spoiled brats." He glared at the Fenrisian in particular. "What's wrong with you, Calla? Is *this* the example you think I told you to set?"

"Sorry, Dad," The wolfess growled in a tone indicating she was anything but.

Dad? Ian blanched, Gerald has a daughter? And from the looks of things, Calla was every bit the sunny-sweat peach of her father, although her less-than-contrite attitude may have had something to do with the nasty looking bite wound bleeding down the left side of her muzzle—Ashley apparently having done more during the attack than just cower in fear.

"Go to your quarters. I'll deal with both of you later." He turned to look at Ashley as the two slunk off. "Are you okay, Ms. Preston?" His voice had softened. "Did they hurt you? Are you injured?"

Oblivious to the light cuts, bumps and scrapes, Ashley was looking down at the white dress, torn and smeared with dirt, stained and ripped. Sides heaving with withheld sobs, even at this distance Ian could see the tears in her hazel eyes, "I'll see if there's any way to get that fixed." Gerald offered.

She nodded wordlessly. Then, finally getting the door of the hangar open, Ashley slipped inside and slammed it shut, locking herself in and the world out.

Chapter 16

I Want You!

Dipping below the horizon in preparation for sleep, the sun cast long shadows over the buildings when Ian emerged from his hiding space. After witnessing their willingness to attack one of their own and the viciousness by which said attack had been carried out, he should have slipped back down the tunnel, but was driven forward by the memory of the look on Ashley's face before she disappeared.

Like a rat scurrying through a field he slipped from the manhole after the giants had left the area, sprinting across the open field, painfully remembering Ashley telling, and Gerald demonstrating, their superb sense of hearing. *I should wait until dark*, he noticed more looming shapes appeared as still more Attractions got back from work or just mingled out in the open as any other group of people would.

But he knew where Ashley was, if she left he might not be able to follow her. Besides, he thought with a pang, nobody seemed to be interested in visiting her. Call and Milla may have been the only ones who attacked her, but it had been in full sight of the others and only Gerald had intervened on Ashley's behalf.

Getting in was easy enough; the actual doorways into the building had been left during its conversion, and as nobody would be likely, or foolhardy, enough to go into a giant's living space, the doors were unlocked. Turning the door open with a click, Ian slipped into what had to have been a hallway for flight crews and officers, leading past several empty offices.

With what his father would have called, "military logistical precision," most the equipment and fixtures remained in the officers, left behind during their conversion. Duty rosters, flight schedules and old propaganda pieces from the

old war still hung, yellow, dusty and molding on the walls.

One piece in particular stood out to Ian, an old-time image of a line smartly dressed soldiers representing the navy, air force, army and marines respectively, all snapping a crisp salute framed in front of the blue and red cross pattern set against a white field; the national flag of Albion, both their and Ian's home country.

Beyond the flag stood shadowy figures, tall and ominous, their limbs elongated and distorted like those of spiders. Standing amidst the crushed, smoldering ruins of several obliterated villages of straw huts and burning jungles, they held a dark watch over a steady stream of refugees poured out of the devastation, fleeing the towering attackers. The top of the poster reading in bold, red capital letters: "ONLY UNITED CAN WE TURN BACK THE MONSTERS AT THE GATE! JOIN TODAY!"

Ian wondered what it must have been like for the soldiers stationed here during the war, on the island airbase, waiting for the call to take off into what was quickly turning into a hopeless war against a superior foe. Then again, the government probably hadn't told them it was going this badly, it would have served no purpose other than hurt morale.

They were probably told, day in and day out, that they were winning, that every death was a necessary sacrifice for victory rather than a desperate purchase to hold on to what little ground they could. "And then," his father would say with a cold laugh when recalling his war years, "and then it got *really* ugly."

As if to punctuate his thoughts, at that moment another poster caught Ian's eye tacked onto the side of the hallway. No mere propaganda piece, it was an official black and white (yellow now) bulletin with the seal of Albion Department of Defense and the signature of the Prime Minister himself on the bottom.

All enlisted men and women, regardless of age and physical condition, are henceforth ordered by the highest authority to submit to genetic screening. This procedure will be conducted by privately contracted medical practitioners and is intended to test and identify common genetic disorders and the recessive malignant genes that carry them.

Following the general directive was further instructions for those who tested "positive," and the details of the facilities they would be relocated to for corrective treatment. All of which, the bulletin assured, would be fast and painless "with no lasting effects."

A chill running down his spine, Ian decided he had enough of the past and hurried along the corridor, seeking to get back to the present as quickly as possible.

Chapter 17

Creature Comforts

The corridor opened out into the main area lit by searchlights hung where standard lighting fixtures would be. Like the bomber hanger converted to a dressing room he'd once been in, the room was a Spartan mix of furniture welded from various bits of tanks, airplanes and naval patrol boats, former military hardware repurposed to accommodate other former military hardware.

The white dress Ashley had been wearing lay draped at the end of a bed the length and width of a basketball court in the far corner. Below it rested a solid black box the size of a barn. Puzzlingly, there was a stack of hay sitting right next to it wrapped in a large tarp to keep moisture out.

Must be a prop she kept as a souvenir, Ian recalled how there had been a small random farm located on the old tram ride. *But why would she choose that?* Curious, he approached the box—only to stop as he heard a sound from inside it: Deep, resonating and monotone. *A stereo maybe? A CD player?* Frowning in puzzlement, he placed his hear up to the side of the wall—only to jump back in shock as he finally recognized the sound.

The box was *mooring*.

Ian could hear the shuffle of hooves and large mammalian bodies against the walls within. *Always wondered how they kept them fed*, he swallowed, backing away, recalling how the giants had a predisposition for live prey over prepared and already-dead food: yet more incentive to seek out their targets.

A loud howl of anguish and rage cut off Ian's progressively darkening thoughts. Snapping his head to the opposite end of the room, he caught sight of Ashley in a side maintenance bay. Clad in a tight sports bra and shorts the same color

as the gown she had worn over them, the coyote giantess was doing her best to destroy everything in the small room.

Unlike the main living area, here the hardware retained its original form—or at least did so until Ashley laid hands on it. A pickup truck lay at her feet, crumpled up into a ball like a piece of paper next to a single engine that had had its wings pulled off like a cricket. Grabbing a school bus in both hands, she snapped it in half like toothpick with a feral snarl.

Even the room itself fell victim to her rage. Standing to her full height, Ashley dug her claws into the steel wall, leaving marks the width of a man from the top of the wall to the bottom. Then, as if deciding the wall hadn't received enough punishment, she punched it repeatedly with balled fists, leaving cratered dents in the structure, the air compressed beneath his piston-driving fists like claps of thunder.

"Ash!" Ian called out to her, and instantly felt silly and insignificant for doing so as the sound of his tiny voice was swallowed up in the din. He may as well have been trying to yell over a tornado. Torn between running to her side and hiding in fear, Ian stayed rooted on the spot, mesmerized by the violent display.

But also like a tornado, Ashley's rage was intense, but short. Chest heaving with her panting, she buried her face in her hands as she sank to her knees. Ashley began to sob deeply and heavily, as if she were yet another broken thing.

Snapped out of his stupor by such a pitiable display immediately following one of such power, Ian sprinted towards her. Mouth dry, throat choked, for once in his life, he couldn't find words, couldn't manage a single sentence.

"Ash?" Coming up to her right leg, feeling the heat rolling off her body like the engine of a car that had been running hot. He placed a hand against the gray and tan fur, "Are you okay?" She didn't respond. His stomach sank. "Come on, Ash. Say something." Still no answer. "Hey," His voice rose in indignation. "I *know* you can hear me. Don't make me start yanking fur out."

"Why are you here?" She said slowly, face still in her hands.

"I came to see you." Ian began to caress her, plunging his hand into her fur up to the elbow in the hopes she would feel it. "I wanted to see how you were doing." *I wanted to try to cheer you up*, he nearly added but didn't have the courage to do so.

Snapping her head out of her heads, she snarled down angrily, "Haven't you learned that it's *dangerous* for you to be on this side of the fence? Do you have a death wish or something?"

With a flinching gasp, Ian took a short step back at the sharpness in her tone. Her eyes, normally a pleasant, warm shade of hazel had darkened at the edges as if she were wearing thick mascara in them. Gerald had made a similar physical change when the wolf was on the verge of a highly violent state of mind precluding a rampage that Ashley had referred to as going on “Autopilot”.

Ashley seemed at a midpoint of sorts, as if uncertain whether to go berserk or not. *Maybe I can still talk her out of it*, he thought hopefully. “Yeah, it was dumb for me to come here,” he said slowly, “But seeing a pretty girl—and an important member of the team—was worth it. Are you doing okay, Ash?”

She blinked a few times, though confused, as if unsure how to respond to a sincere inquiry to her well-being, her tan ears perking up at the words *pretty girl*. “Fine, I’m fine.” The blackness in her eyes seemed to recede some.

“No, no that’s a lie.” She sighed, rubbing her forehead testily. “I’m not fine. I’m *pissed off* at the whole damn world. Pardon my language.”

“Offstage, you can swear as much as you like.”

“Then get ready for a full artillery barrage,” she smiled, her hands descending and scooping Ian up in her hands, walking over to sit down on her bed and cradling him against her chest, caressing him gently with a finger. “Sorry if I scared you; that must have been awful to walk in.”

“I’m used to it by now, trust me,” Ian replied with a laugh, “but I know you’d never actually *do* anything to me, Ash. You’re too sweet and kindhearted to squash a guy.” Above him, the last inky pooling dark in her eyes faded, revealing her original color.

Nevertheless, a cloud of trouble hung over her face, as if Ashley herself was not so sure in Ian’s promises of his safety around her, so he decided to change the subject. “What were those things? Props, toys?”

“Stress outlets,” she explained with a note of embarrassment. “They give us junk from time to time that we can take our frustrations out on—sort of like a stress ball or a punching bag. I must look like *such* a savage.”

“Better that stuff than me,” Ian offered.

Ashley nodded, her thoughts distant and troubled. “You really shouldn’t be here. What if somebody *found* you?”

“Like Mila and Calla?”

“So you did see.”

“Yeah, what a couple of snots!”

“They’re my best friends, actually.” She sighed, “Or at least they were. Now it looks like it’s just Gerald.” A sharp laugh, “How pathetic; the only person I’m on speaking terms with is my sourpuss of a boss.”

“And me,” Ian offered, voice cracking into a squeak of nervousness at the look she gave him— a playful, mischievous and alluring all at the same time. “I’m your friend, too, right?”

Her index finger poked him between the shoulder blades before sliding down his back to his tail, resting above his hips. “I suppose you are.” The finger slid lower. “Or at least I find you too entertaining for a quick snack.”

“Glad your sense of humor is intact,” Ian gasped, trying unsuccessfully not to shudder. For someone who could bend steel like silly putty or tear it apart like tissue paper, Ashley’s touch was feathery soft when she wanted it to be. “I know you’ve been through a rough spot, but I have a bit of bad news.”

The caress stopped. “I’m not going to be in the Remembrance Day Show.”

“You knew?”

A nod. “Gerald told me. They run everything through him; he’s sort of our Ambassador *and* supervisor at the same time.” She paused, “In fact, I’ve known for over two weeks now.”

Two-weeks? So that’s why she’s been so down lately.

“All good things come to an end.” Ian’s stomach flip-flopped as Ashley flopped onto her back with a sigh, her fingers tightly interlaced around him in a protective cage. It was a more exciting experience than the sharpest drop on a ride, especially given the composition of the cushioning he fell into. “And they’re right—it is historically accurate for me not to be there.”

“Since when does anybody care about accuracy?” Wriggling his way out of her grasp, Ian crawled up to her face, refusing to let her not see him, blushing a bit as he found himself clamoring over the nylon-clad hills of her bosom, but not stopping.

“These are the people who wanted to paint your fur green to claim you were the product of a radioactive spill. Radiation, by the way, does *not* turn people big and green—least of all you.”

“Because we’re immune to it; the *only* reason we even have the Reservations to live on—because there happened to be large stretches of nuked landscape

that literally no one else could use.”

“One man’s accident is another man’s opportunity. My father used to say that.”

“An accident,” she sighed, rolling her head away from him to stare at the nearest wall, “That’s all I really am: an accident they turned around, but still unintended, too risky, too uncertain. Now it’s time to clean up the mess and make the accident go away.”

“It’s just this one time,” he half walked-half crawled across Ashley’s collar bone in pursuit of her gaze. *I came way too far to just let you minimize yourself*, he thought stubbornly. “Only for the weekend holiday. Then we’re back in business as usual.”

Ian leaned into the gray-white ruff of Ashley’s throat and in response she dipped her chin down to nuzzle him. He felt more so than heard the thrumming vibrations of her words as she spoke: “We both know it this wasn’t going to last forever. We had a happy coincidence, but I think the company’s fixing their oversight—returning the status quo, and they’ve decided to do it sooner rather than later.”

“Then we don’t let them fix it!” He cried, frustrated, desperate. “This isn’t like you, Ash. You barreled through a minefield and an electric fence to save a tramcar full of people who thought you were a monster,” he swallowed guiltily, “Including me. Now you’re just going to sit back and fade out without resisting?”

She didn’t immediately answer him. Ian’s hopes rose—perhaps he was getting through at last—only for them to be dashed when her fingers snaked up onto her neck and gently, but firmly closed around him into an iron container.

“It’s getting late. Gerald will be coming by to check on us before lights out and to make sure nobody’s abducting a little person for her own nefarious purposes.” She swung out of the bed and started for the door, “I’d best get you back to where you belong.”

It was said that dogs made good policemen and cats made better security guards due to their ability to sit in one spot late into the night with minimal movement. Patterson had never put much thought into species stereotypes, but he did enjoy the graveyard shift the most as it meant minimal contact with both the public and the rest of the park staff.

And nothing ever happens, he thought happily doodling away with his crossword puzzle while sipping from a blue coffee mug in the guardhouse. *Seven-letter word for Shoemaker*. He tapped the end of the pen thoughtfully on the hardwood of the small counter under the window. *Cobbler, perhaps? No, doesn't start with a B*.

Security was its own special little bubble in the park—people avoided you unless they had a problem and you avoided people unless it *they* were a problem. Simple and to the point, there was no need for all the sugar-coating apologist mentality that permeated every other position on staff. All in all, a pretty good deal, he thought while setting his puzzle down on the window sill while sipping nonchalantly from his coffee mug.

BA-BOOM! BA-BOOM!

The cat gave a sharp yowl of surprise—and pain—as a thudding vibration shook the security booth, splashing hot coffee down his shirt. “What the hell!” More vibrations, thunderous and steady, followed, causing his crossword and pencil to roll off the window sill, dropping to the floor.

Running outside the shack and into the fading dusk light, Patterson’s jaw dropped as a towering canine form emerged from behind the trees—a Biological Weapon of Mass Destruction, was right here, thundering at his little shack like a tsunami to a bamboo village!

Never mind that she was behind the fence; Patterson knew better than most that wouldn’t stop a dedicated BWMD, all the cat could think about as the coyote giantess stomped close was how she could smash him to paste under feet larger than his shack.

Oh, God, I’m going to die... then upon remembering his unfinished crossword puzzle: *I’m going to die without ever figuring out a seven-letter word for shoemaker!*

“Excuse me,” the giantess said politely, “My friend needs to cross, could you let him through?” Bending down at the waist, she set her cupped hands down at the opposite end of the gate, unknotting her fingers to reveal a familiar red-orange vulpine face that Patterson had spoken to mere hours before.

“Michaels?”

“Howdy.” The fox in her hands said glumly, a black paw waving halfheartedly, while his other propped his head up on his knee. Patterson could think of a lot of words to describe the emotion of being handled by a BWMD: terrified and horrified the most likely and *bumped out* the least.

Wait a minute; I've seen her before, The cat thought as his pounding fear lessened enough to recognize the giant coyote girl from his last encounter with one a BWMD. *The Engineered Docility Prototype.*

Well, it made sense: why else was the little fox still alive? Hopping out of her palms, Ian moved to the edge of the gate, stopping short to turn and look back up at his unorthodox means of transportation. "See you back on stage. *Seriously.*"

"Of course." She spoke patiently as if dealing with a small child. "Curfew's in a few minutes, I have to get back. Take care, Ian."

"I knew something wasn't right when you just walked away without a fuss." Patterson managed to wheeze at last after Ashley—EDP or not she still scared the wild daylights out of him—was a good respectable distance of a thousand feet or so.

Unlocking the gate and letting Ian back across the fence—off the reservation and back into his world. "You don't seem the type to just give up."

"I haven't given up," Ian sadly watched Ashley's figure receding into the falling twilight, the first stars barely visible in the spreading blackness of the night, "But she has."

Chapter 18

The Nook

Somehow, Ian memorized the script by Thursday, even though at that point he could have been fired on the spot and not have cared. But the repetitive monotony of memorization and rehearsal were a welcome diversion from thinking about Ashley's state, how she seemed to be on the verge of total depression.

She's down because she thinks she's being replaced, he thought, tapping an index card with a flowchart written on it to the inside of his right arm. Once this is over and we're back in the swing of things, she'll pick up. She'll realize she was wrong and that the show will go on.

The stage upon which Ian, Ashley and Carla had performed was presently a bare slab of concrete bordered by the sound and dressing rooms. Cranes and scaffolds rose over it like trees with the new set pieces covered by large white fabrics.

By the weekend's time, the set would be transformed, bearing no resemblance to its former appearance. A black stretch limousine pulled up the set, louder than one would expect a luxury car to typically be.

The rearmost left door swung open and out stepped Carla Jackson, The Princess of the Production as Ian had come to think of her, wearing high heels and a yellow sundress. "Stop what you're doing, everyone, I have an introduction to make!"

Everyone included Ian, Mike and a handful of indifferent construction workers smoking cigarette and leering lewdly at the fennec girl. "Say hello to Rami Saul, our new animatronics operator!" She turned and clapped enthusiastically at the car as if expecting Ian and Mike to join in. They did not.

A brown and black furred figure, short and stubby with a black furred mask of a face and dressed in gray pants and a blue polo shirt emerged from the limousine behind her. “Good day, everyone, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” A raccoon, he spoke in a slow, precise manner, not so much an accent as a mannerism.

Surprised at seeing Rami, at seeing one of his nationality here, Ian nevertheless knew better than to say aloud what was on his mind. Mike did not. “You went and got a Nook?” The tiger balked, fur bristling. “I didn’t know our pageant was going to be *that* accurate.”

“Mike, hush!” Carla scolded. “That is a *very* offensive name to call a person!” She turned her big, brown round eyes to Rami. “Please forgive my associate. He works backstage and is considerably *lacking* people skills.” She gave Mike a venomous look, “in fact, I think he has to backstage *right now*.”

“I take no offense,” Rami said diplomatically. “Nor can I expect a Benglan to greet me with open arms given our peoples’ turbulent history.”

“Even so,” Carla huffed, “I assure you that we have a *zero tolerance policy* when it comes to racial slurs and discriminatory behavior.” She spoke as if quoting from the employee handbook no one ever read. “It is our company’s belief that every culture is valid and accepted and all people are treated equally and fairly.”

“Including cultures founded on conquering their neighbors and plundering their land?” Mike snorted.

“And once you get above six foot eleven, you’re no longer considered a person,” Ian added sourly.

Carla glared daggers at the both of them, but before she could say anything, Rami took her hand gently as if she were a child. “It is only a slur if I choose to accept it as a slur. My people believe that the meaning of a word must be accepted by its recipient before it means what the giver intends.”

A shrug. “Therefore, only *I* can decide if the word, ‘Nook’ demeans or praises me.” He smiled peacefully at Mike, “And I choose to take it as a compliment.” The tiger did not return the smile. To the contrary, he looked to be contemplating whether or not to pounce on the raccoon.

“Well, then!” Carla clapped her hands together, “I’m glad we’ve got all that settled with.”

“You said he worked on animatronics,” Ian said suddenly, “Like robotic special effects?”

“The very best,” Rami smiled. “My family’s company—repurposed after the war—builds the best animatronics and robotic components in the world!” He paused, “But why use mere words when a demonstration will suffice?”

Producing a slender remote control, the raccoon pointed the device at a particularly large covered set piece. “As they say in your country, *ta-da!*” He pressed several buttons on the remote in rapid sequence.

A whirring of gears, a hissing of hydraulics and the white covering fell away as a massive form of steel frames and bulky plating rose from beneath it like a prehistoric beast emerging from the bowels of the earth. *And in many ways it’s just that*, Ian thought in amazement, *a monster straight out of the past.*

Shaped like an ant, its triple-segmented body was held aloft by six cylindrical legs bent into joints at the center. A double cluster of optical sensors and motion trackers were in the place of eyes while a pair of satellite dishes protruded from its frontal segment like antennae.

“You’ve got to be *shitting* me,” Mike balked, “I’m all for authenticity, but you brought in an actual war machine from the old Tanuken Empire? Carla, is your uncle crazy?”

Carla didn’t chide him or even respond to the accusation of insanity in her family, awed as Ian was at seeing one of the machines that had cut a swath of devastation across half a continent.

It’s also the reason Goldwheat Fields is called a rout and not a battle. Ian thought, recalling his history classes in school. A rout was utter defeat, devastation at the hands of an enemy so clearly advantaged they were hindered in their advance only by the time it took to cross the field.

“Any guns on that thing?” Ian asked in mortified fascination.

“It is *completely* disarmed,” Rami reassured. “This Strider is not even a restoration piece. It was built wholly from the ground up as a pure civilian show model.” He paused, “And in total Treaty compliance, I might add. You will not find a single vulcan shredder, flamethrower, flak gun or ballistic missile on it.”

“So all it can do is step on six people at a time,” Mike said sarcastically, “*That’s* reassuring.”

Ian was less concerned about the presence of the Strider than the implications of a company capable of production mechanical theme-park monsters—monsters that wouldn’t require housing and feeding. Monsters that would do *exactly* as they were expected. Monsters that would be utterly and infallibly predictable

and safe.

“This contract you have with us,” He asked slowly, “It’s only for the Remembrance Day show, right?”

“Oh no,” Carla piped in before Rami could answer. “My uncle has signed the Saul family on for a two-year agreement.” The look she gave him said the rest: *And now you see what I meant about working without your Gimmick.* “We’re going to be seeing a lot more of their work around here.”

And a lot less of Ashley’s, Ian thought worriedly.

Like a cat waiting on a mouse to peek out of its hole, Ian waited in the corner down the hall from Carla’s dressing room—he knew it was hers as only her door had a golden star framed with white angel wings, his tail switching in anticipation.

The door opened and out hustled Carla in the same business blouse she had worn while introducing Rami, clutching a load of folders, papers and book. A cell phone balanced precariously between her ear, cheek and shoulder.

Making his move, Ian slipped up behind the distracted girl as she struggled to balance a notebook on one arm while fumbling for the key to lockup behind her. “Tell me what’s going on.” He demanded angrily.

His movements sounding little more than a soft padding, Carla genuinely had not heard him coming in her distracted state. Jumping with a squeak at his voice—a cute squeak he thought in further annoyance—the papers, books and folders crashing to the ground in a heap. “I’ll have to call you back later, Yvette,” she said, closing the phone and putting it away. “Can I help you, Mr. Michaels?”

“Why are they replacing Ashley?” He demanded without any formality or politeness whatsoever. “She’s done nothing wrong, she even saved lives! But they’re treating her like a time bomb!”

Rather than a snap of irritation or a sharp bark of indignation as would be expected of someone backed into a corner, she instead brushed a loose curl of brown hair back into place over her long ear. Smoothing down the blouse, she gave a small shake of her head before answering in the most pleasant, diplomatic tone imaginable, “She really means a lot to you, doesn’t she?”

He nodded.

“That’s so sweet,” Carla gushed. “You two have *bonded* like an orca and its trainer.” Even with all his experience, after having spent countless hours faking emotions and reading the feelings of others, Ian couldn’t tell if Carla’s sympathetic smile was truly genuine or not. “I wish there was something I could do, anything I could say—”

“Your uncle’s the Director of Attractions and Theater.” He said pointedly.

The facade slipped, just a little. Carla’s perky brown eyes flashed with something besides manufactured cuteness and blissful insensitivity. “And he takes every opportunity to remind me that I’m no different than the rest of you at any given moment. The man never mixes profession and family. If he ever asks me for anything, he calls it my *professional opinion*.”

“He wouldn’t listen to you? Not even if you told him that you felt in your *professional opinion*, that audiences would better respond to what *won* the war rather than what started it?”

Carla didn’t immediately answer, instead looking off the side making a thoughtful “hmm” sound, tapping her fingers against the screenplay book thoughtfully. “You’re very passionate, an admirable quality to be sure.”

Nose flaring, she licked her lips as if his desperation were a thing that could be smelled and tasted, a flavor to be sampled. “Maybe we can work out something.” She paused, looking down at the floor and spilled belongings for a moment before up to meet his gaze once more. “Do you have plans for tonight?”

Having braced for a protracted uphill battle that would likely mark his days at the park as numbered, Ian was taken completely by surprise by her response. “Plans?” He grew hot under his color. The word was innocent enough—had she not said it in such a sultry, provocative manner.

“Obviously you have a lot of free time if you can stalk your costars and ambush them when least expected.” Taking a step closer, she moved to adjust her hair again—more slowly now. “So, how about we discuss this matter formerly over dinner, my treat.”

“Dinner?” Ian swallowed hard, imagination racing and heart pounding in his ears. “The two of us, out together, having dinner?”

“Purely business of course,” she said in a voice that was anything but businesslike. “There’s a new steakhouse less than ten minutes from here; it just opened and I’ve been dying to try it out; might as well kill two birds with one stone, right?”

Well I guess there’s worse things than having to go out with an attractive,

rich girl, he thought, taking note of her cute face and petite, slim frame that begged to be cuddled, though there was an odd sense of betrayal he couldn't quite place. *And if there's any chance it could help Ashley I have to take it.*

"All right," he repeated the terms, slowly "You. Me. Tonight. *Purely* business."

"Terrific!" She clapped her hands together enthusiastically to enunciate the word. "How about I pick you up at the Barberry Station at eight tonight?"

Ian fought the urge to sigh, instead taking a page out of Carla's book and smiling with warmth and sincerity. *How bad could it be?* "Sure thing."

Chapter 19

Night On the Town

The those who designed and founded the park had been hopeful that it would promote giant/normal interaction, but they hadn't been stupid. Located on an island in the middle of a deep channel, the only access to and from the park besides ferryboat was via subterranean subway tunnels that ran beneath the ocean floor.

The lead designer, a former army engineer, had minced no words. *Yeah, they're nigh-unkillable, but they're too big to fit in the tunnels and too heavy to float. And they don't have gills.*

The town of Barberry, little more than a collection of farms, suburbs and hotels, always seemed so small and primitive compared to its offshore counterpart, serving as little more than a stopover and a place to stay for prolonged visits, Ian thought, emerging from the underground terminal like a sailor given shore leave.

No building went higher than three stories, the architecture was simple and humble like the farmland it had first sprung from and continued to function as. And like most of the surrounding country, the town still was largely farmland. All the war had really brought—besides the usual death and destruction every war brought—was industrialization to the process.

But at the end of the day that's our best strength, he thought with a small swell of pride. *We're still about growing things bigger and better than anyone else.* A pang as his thoughts wandered back to Ashley. *And maybe that's also our biggest flaw.*

Passing through the turnstile and back to a world where the average height

was six-five and *my bloodlust took over* was not valid in court; he checked his watch: two minutes to eight as he scanned the tight, two lane road for Carla along a road mostly empty but for a few produce trucks and the occasional tractor.

The thrumming beat of a subwoofer amidst the quiet rural surroundings snapped Ian's attention to a white vehicle that resembled a cross between a stretch limousine and a military jeep, its elongated body rising up on fat, treaded tires.

The muffled music blared out at full volume as the rearmost window facing him rolled down and a sparkling diamond bracelet glittered in the sun as Carla waved him. In stark contrast to the white gown worn on the stage, she was clad head to toe in a black dress, the hem of which dangled teasingly between her knees and ankles. A wave of cinnamon scented perfume rolled off her like hot smoke from a fire.

"Ian, good to see you!" Popping open the door, she patted the seat beside herself, "Hop in! I've got tonight's game on the HD screen and there are sodas in the cooler if you're thirsty."

I'm doing this for Ashley. Adjusting the collar of the yellow polo shirt that felt woefully inadequate, Ian got into the car.

The "newly opened steakhouse" turned out to be a five-star café located within the thousand-a-night hotel built to accommodate the park's richer clientele. The building appeared to have not been built so much as carved from pieces of marble, crystal and glass.

Ian had been inside exactly one time as brute labor for moving in spa equipment, each tanning bed, masseuse chair and lotion cabinet costing more than a year's pay. The hotel was decorated and designed to look as much like a castle on the inside as out—tapestries and stained glass windows intermixed with barren stone corridors and columns.

Per the season, it was decorated with Coalition flags—despite the Coalition of Countries having been disbanded for decades its symbolism lived on—three interlocked circles of green, red and orange against a blue field.

The flags were draped over railings, hung from balconies and in case anybody wasn't feeling patriotic enough, a tarp-sized flag hung over the dining hall. The light that filtered through the flag cast long, multicolored rays over the otherwise low lit room.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Clara squealed, “So...so, *patriotic*.”

It soon became apparent that *everybody* knew Carla on a first name basis, especially the waiter; a middle aged bear whose brown furred pudgy face was wrinkled in a mix of worry and excitement at seeing her here. “The Presidential Booth, per usual?” He asked, “You and your date clearly want this night to be special.”

“Oh,” Ian objected quickly, “This is just business, I’m not really her—.”

“Of course!” Carla interrupted, “You always take such good care of me, Bruno.” Snaking her arm around Ian’s waist—for such a delicate-framed girl, she could muster an amazing amount of pull—she led him through the restaurant as if she were the hostess. “This way, Ian, you’re going to *love* the view.”

Bruno followed obediently behind, like a dog waiting for its master’s next command. *Seems to be a common reaction*. Ian observed.

Like ripples in a pond from a tossed stone, there was a noticeable tremor of activity that spread anywhere he and Carla went—people straightened their uniforms, formerly laid-back supervisors turned into drill sergeants and anyone clearly on his or her way out for the evening pulled a fast U-turn.

A crimson furred fox in a business suit—the manager—practically threw one of his underlings onto a piano to play a soothing melody. The other diners were similarly charged with energy, too, pointing with hushed whispers, phone cameras wavering frantically to snap an image of the passing of the princess. Anyone who didn’t automatically react thus did so only because of ignorance—a mistake typically corrected by partners and companions with a prompt arm tug and a gesture towards the vulpine couple with hasty explanation.

If Carla noticed any of this, she didn’t show it, ever as bouncy and bubbly, chattering up a storm unhindered as they reached the Presidential Booth. Clearly meant for large groups of very important people, the booth was shaped like a donut with a rounded table as the hole. Ian sat down at the far end, expecting Carla to take a seat across from him.

Plopping right down beside him rather than sitting across or even adjacent to him, the tip of her tail tickled against his leg whenever it moved; it moved a *lot*. “Now, here comes the best part,” she gave a curt nod to Bruno who pressed a button out of sight. With a low hum, the Booth rose a foot or two in a gentle slow spin that was still serviceable by the waiters. “Isn’t it cool?”

Then to the bear, “We’ll wait a bit before ordering, but I won’t say no to some appetizers.”

“Yes, *ma’am*.” Bruno said, dropping a basket of breadsticks and two glasses of water, before beating a hasty retreat, backing away submissively. The massive bear gave a visible relieved shrug of his shoulders when Carla’s gaze roamed away from him.

“Very,” Ian admitted. “I have to say, though, I’m not used to be treated *this* special.”

Another tickling flick up the side of his leg, “Do you like it?” Her eyes were inquisitive, her gaze hungry and her expression eager. “Give me your *honest opinion*.”

“I do like it,” he would have been lying to say he didn’t, given that he spent his days trying his hardest to stand out and be noticed. But this was different, this wasn’t a show—off the stage, Ian liked to turn the spotlight off, to be a normal seventeen-year old boy and do normal seventeen-year old things.

Things that Ashley can’t do—and maybe Carla can’t do either. “But I like to *not* be treated special sometimes. Don’t you ever want to turn it off and take a break?”

For the second time, he thought he saw Carla’s composure slip for a bit, her smile shortening, her eyes blinking a tad too quickly to be a blush of cuteness. “I wouldn’t know,” her voice had actually fallen flat. “My family owns the park—and my Uncle is here every other day of the week. The town has grown to the point where it relies on the park more than their own crops now. And since everybody thinks I’m the eyes and ears of my family then I get the red-carpet everywhere I go.”

She looked out to the restaurant—no one, staff or patron would meet her gaze. “After a while, you just start letting them treat you special all the time—and it’s really not so bad.” A sigh, “But eventually, you start to feel fake—and you wish people weren’t always so darn afraid of you all the time and would treat you like another person.”

Looking back him, she smiled warmly, taking a breadstick from the basket to nibble. “Kind of like you’re doing now, Ian. Why is that?”

His answer was simple yet to the point. “Ashley.” Carla’s smile grew thin at the mention of the name. “She’s really something else—after I met her, everyone else seems ordinary.” He shrugged innocently, “even you.”

“She means a lot to you, doesn’t she?” Carla’s voice was warm and friendly—her eyes though were cold, steady and calculating. “More than a Gimmick. More than a *friend*. Well, can’t say I’m surprised. She has all the desired womanly attributes, doesn’t she? Only bigger.”

“I—”

“Come on, Ian, be honest. I’m won’t judge, I’m just curious.” Like a housecat that could have been preparing to snuggle or claw him, she slid up along his side, their bodies pressed uncomfortably close together. The cinnamon scented perform was practically smothering.

“*Do* you have feelings for her or not?” There was a small pop as her hands snapped the crisp breadstick like a dry twig. “Yes or no, it’s a simple question.”

Opening and closing his mouth frantically like a fish plucked from water, Ian wished desperately for something, anything that would prevent him from having to answer *that* particular question.

Half a second later his wish was granted in the worst way imaginable as the soothing piano music and hushed whisperings gave way to a chorus of panicked screams and a staccato of gunfire echoing off the harsh crystal walls.

Chapter 20

Riley

Two things were painfully obvious to Ian. First, the posh, luxurious restaurant was under armed assault, the perpetrators very likely targeting the wealthy elite packed into its ornate interior. Second, he was with the wealthiest elite of them all, and they were in an elevated location to boot. All that was missing was a bulls eye on their foreheads.

“Down!” He hissed, grabbing the conveniently close fennec vixen around the waist and dragging her under the table with him. Carla squeaked and squirmed but otherwise did not fight him as much as one might have expected, almost as if a part of her had secretly been hoping him to make a move like this, albeit under different circumstances.

More gunfire; his recent experience of nearly being blown up by ordinance must have strengthen his resolve for it was only *after* they out of sight that Ian’s full shock set in. Questions bounced and ricocheted through his mind like bullets in a steel room: *what’s going on, who’s attacking on us?* Then upon looking into the eyes of his date—*why isn’t Carla freaking out more?*

Though obviously upset, she appeared more agitated than terrified—*annoyed* in fact. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she growled, “Right in the middle our *date*, too!”

“Thought this was supposed to be professional only,” Ian muttered, but Carla either didn’t hear him or chose not to answer. Inching forward, the pair of vulpine faces peeped out from beneath the tablecloth—the height of the booth allowing them to survey the scene from the floor level.

The assailants, all male and tigers like Mike were gathered in the main

waiting area, dragging patrons, waiters and even the terrified piano player to the center of the room, piling them up like spoils of war. Clothed in military style clothing, Benglan flags were wrapped over their torsos like bandoleers, many hanging next to actual bandoleers sporting magazines, knives and spherical balls of metal that looked suspiciously like grenades.

‘Their leader was a gaunt, tall specimen in a green vest sewn with various patches. Streaks of gray streaks ran through his brown hair and orange fur. He commanded attention despite not being the tallest specimen present, hopping onto a table with a rifle in one hand and a megaphone in the other.

‘But it was his frame that drew the most scrutiny. Hunched and bent, the man’s chest was sunken into his torso and his stomach protruded in an unshapely bulge over his belt. It was almost as if, as if..

“I should have known it’d be him,” Carla growled from beside Ian, interrupting his thoughts. “Blasted troublemaker.”

“Troublemaker?” A lot of words could be used to describe someone who would do such a thing as this, but *troublemaker* was the last he would have picked. “Who is he?”

Carla gave him a *what do you live under a rock* expression. “Carson Jeredith Riley. Former Colonel in the Benglan Armed Forces *and* the Benglan Resistance after their country was taken over and occupied.”

She closed her eyes, “Him and his followers—a group calling itself the Forgotten Warriors, have been harrying my family ever since we agreed to bring Rami’s company on site. They started with letters then moved up to petitions and picketing. Now it looks like they’ve escalated yet again.”

“Happy Remembrance Day!” Riley hefted the piano player to his grizzled face, the young red fox turning white as a sheet as he did so. “Take a good long look at us, son, without men like us *you* couldn’t sit here all prettied up in that six thousand clam suit!”

His eyes—one good sapphire blue the other clouded and milky white, roamed over the captive throng. “None of you could. You’d all be slaves in some Imperial Work-camp right now if not for us, toiling your days in dark mines and crowded factories.”

A pause in the speech. “Well, not all of you would be.” He looked at an elderly wolf, “You would be too old and just a burden to keep alive. Not even worth a bullet and a shallow grave to the Nooks, just a quick bayonet through the gut and tossed out for the buzzards.”

His milky eye turned on a young bear. “You too; oh sure, you’re big and strong, but the guards would be too afraid to keep you around.” Then to a panther. “And you’re just the wrong color.”

His good eye, moving almost independently, settled onto a white female rabbit, gradually bouncing to each and every woman present. “You ladies would be the lucky ones— a free extended vacation across the Empire stopping at each and every barracks along the way.” The others chuckled.

“Speaking of ladies,” Riley continued, “I hear we have a very special guest this evening.” Turning the megaphone up to his mouth, Riley boomed, “Miss Jackson, I know how much you love the spotlight. Care to grace us with your presence?” He let it set in over a full minute of pin-drop silence before adding. “And by the way, we *know* you’re hiding under the table.”

There was never anything *good* to listen to on Remembrance Day, Patterson thought in reserved annoyance as yet another wave of patriotic feel-good rustic country music blared into his ears through the tiny white buds sit into them.

Having your personal music with on you during shift work was utterly against regulations, a dangerous distraction, his supervisor had told him before whipping out the small color, TV he kept in a bag under his desk. They shared a laugh together on that one.

What was going to happen in the Magical Crystal Palace anyway? Nobody in here had worked a day in their lives, he thought with a snort, hardly likely to get unruly or violent. *It’s just a bunch of rich people sipping wine and arguing about the economy with a thesaurus vocabulary.*

Zippering his fly and adjusting his Class-A uniform; only the strangling polyester suits were allowed in such a place, he left the men’s room and reentered the lobby, resuming his normal patrol rounds. Or at least that was what he would have said to any supervisor who asked—in truth, Patterson sidled into a corner to fidget some more with his portable radio.

Ah-ha! Good old 346 “The Grind” FM! Closing his eyes, he smiled pleasantly as the soothing metal tones blared in his ears; the percussion loud and sporadic almost like....gunshots?

Don’t recall there being gunfire in Maestro of Marionettes. Puzzled for the briefest of seconds, the cat shrugged, turning up the volume and popping a shrimp in his mouth that he’d snagged from the buffet—another violation but who was counting?

Patterson had requested tonight's assignment in the because he needed a quiet, relaxing shift as far away from the BWMDs as possible after the EDP nearly gave him a heart attack two nights ago.

The whole idea of this place was insane, in his humble opinion, treating super-apex-predators like common zoo animals *especially* given the number of maintenance workers and after hours security types like himself who mysteriously disappeared every year after being dispatched to patrol or repair a remote section of the fence.

Forget the monsters, the bio-weapons, just give me plain old, normal criminals the same size as the rest of us, he thought exactly two seconds before turning the corner and bumping into a tiger twice his body size and armed with a machine gun the length of his leg.

Carla had been Riley's target from the beginning, Ian realized as they were led out of the booth at gun point, the snub nosed barrel of the rifle jabbing him uncomfortably in the kidneys. "Hmm," the elderly feline scrutinized Ian. "Doesn't look like an underwear model, an oil baron or even a vocalist. Tired of playboys, or are your tastes slipping?"

Carla's eyes flicked for a second towards Ian before back to Riley. "He's no one special," she replied dismissively, "Just a valet bringing my ticket when your thugs oh-so-rudely interrupted my dinner."

She looked to the other guests and hotel staff, "In fact, none of these people are worth keeping here. Now that you have me you should let them go." A few of the hostages looked up appreciatively at Carla like she was a potential savior.

Good grief, Ian thought as more and more hopeful gazes turned on the vixen. *If we survive this, her popularity will skyrocket!*

"Not just yet," Riley wagged a finger. The motion was stiff, twitchy. "We tolerated your country's decision to create those *freaks*, the Benglan Government-in-Exile approved their creation after all, so we're guilty of what came next. And if you want to put man-eating animals in a circus with children instead of doing the smart thing and putting them *down*, hey, your borders, your citizens."

"But we will not, will *not* tolerate you giving those damned Nooks the kiss-and-makeup treatment so they can hop right back to cranking out war machines again—one of which my sources tell me is already *here*. I've already been, shall we say, trampled underfoot by their oppression once before. Never again."

Now I understand, Ian thought in pure amazement, His body, twisted and bent like that, it's an old war injury. He got crushed. And survived it!

He gestured to his subordinates, "There is not a man in this room who has not lost someone or been injured by their hands."

"So what, you're going to hurt these people in turn?" Ian snapped, angry and irate at being rendered powerless. He should have been afraid, should have been petrified to by the armed militants, but wasn't. Riley had guns, but at least he wasn't over ten stories tall with unlimited strength.

"Who said we were going to hurt anyone?" Riley nodded to Carla, "At least, as much as *they* have." Before he could explain further, there was a commotion at the back of the room. The largest tiger Ian had yet to see marched towards them with a very nervous Patterson right behind him; a simple service revolver jabbed into his back.

The cat's eyes were wide as the moon and his fur stood on end—how he had been able to muster up the courage to "A-attention armed civilians." He stammered, teeth chattering the gun barely stable in his hands.

Besides his prisoner with his own orange coat of fur, Patterson looked like a cheap knock off of one of Riley's goons. "I ha-have t-taken your, uh, compatriot, into custody and you are all hereby ordered to drop your weapons and surrender." Patterson swallowed hard before adding, "Please."

"Toni," Riley spoke gently to his subordinate like a disapproving parent. "You seriously let this kitten get the better of you?"

"Guess I'm slipping with age, boss." Toni said sheepishly.

A sage nod. "Me too, should have sent three of you to secure that area; SOP even if we are undermanned nowadays." Then to Patterson: "Son, you do realize that we number over a dozen, are professional trained killers and armed with assault weapons? And you should also realize that every man here was willing to die upon my command during the war. Needless to say, we would have no problem shooting through Toni to get you."

The tiger Patterson was holding made no argument otherwise nor did he voice any protests at this apparent dismissal of the value of his life. "D-drop your w-wuh-weapons and surrender peacefully." Patterson insisted. "The police have been called."

A sharp, humorless laugh as Riley turned to look back at his men. "We've been told to surrender by an authority figure, and *the police have been called.*" Then the absolute last thing that anyone, especially Patterson, could have ex-

pected to happen happened. Riley dropped his gun. The others followed suite, the clatter of wooden stocks and metal frames against the hard floor echoing through the hall. “Guess we have no choice.”

Patterson blinked, “You’re—actually going to surrender to me?”

“They have no choice,” On impulse of curiosity Ian had snatched up the nearest rifle, turning it over in his hands, inspecting, noting the filled in barrel, the missing trigger—and the identical shape of the other weapons. “You’re the only one in here with a real gun.”

The local police—a potbellied badger sheriff and his deputy son—arrived twenty minutes later to take the Forgotten Warriors into custody. “Sign here, please.” The Deputy, a squat black and white badger in his late twenties, produced a roll of paperwork the width of an arm.

“What am I signing?” Ian asked, taking the paper.

“Chain of custody form. You handled one of the guns.”

“One of the *fake* guns,” he corrected with a snort of laughter. “Looked—and sounded—like a real gun, but no more likely to kill anybody than a water pistol.” The badger did not share his mirth, dark eyes steadily transfixed on the fox as if he could melt lead. Sighing, Ian signed the paper then turned to look at Carla.

Having only a single patrol car—the only patrol car in the entire town, shuttling them to the jail would be a tedious task. Papa was taking a pair at a time, leaving Patterson to watch the remaining twenty-eight surly-faced belligerents, the young security guard both terrified and amazed at his situation.

Like some sort of princess or high dignitary, Carla flitted about a crowd of media and guests, attempting to enact damage control by explaining that hostage situations were rare occurrences. “This was an isolated incident. The Magical Crystal Palace is quite secure—and as you can see, our top notch security responded immediately to the incident.”

Her cute-as-a-button routine was getting a full blown work-out tonight and yet seemed perfect as ever. Anyone she so much as glanced sideways at immediately nodded in agreement or sighed in relief and utter placation.

I have to learn how to do that, Ian thought, not a tad bit jealous that her empathy and emotional projection was so much better than hers. Then he gave

Junior his statement: “We were attacked by a bunch of old guys whose idea of a peaceful protest was threatening rich people with toy guns.”

“Your girlfriend seems to take it more seriously than you do.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” The Deputy cocked an eye at him with a sly grin, “And why the hell not?”

“Uh...” Ian couldn’t think of an answer besides *because I’m not into gorgeous and rich girls*. “It was just a business dinner, really—nothing special.” As if worried she might be lurking nearby and overhear his perfectly acceptable denial, Ian looked frantically for Carla.

She and Riley were having a stare-down, the gnarl bodied tiger managing to look imposing and threatening even in handcuffs. “Mr. Riley,” she puffed herself up, playing to the watchful eyes of the surrounding crowd. “I just want you to know that despite attempts at bullying and intimidation, my family and these good people are *not* so easily cowed by such a display.”

Ian’s stomach knotted up at the slow, knowing smile the cagey fighter gave her in return. “I should hope not,” Riley replied simply, “The real *display* is yet to come.”

Chapter 21

View from the Gallery

No fighting in the TV room—it was a golden cardinal rule, the one time when others besides Gerald would intervene should Ashley decide to lunge at her former best friend Calla. She knew it too; the cocky young she-wolf sat in a chair less than arms reach away and made no effort to avoid notice, turning her head in anticipation to see what would happen.

Consisting of a stadium screen and accompanying sound system, the TV was one of the few windows the Attractions had to the real world. Here the staff gathered twice a day—morning and evening—to see what was happening in the “Little World” they had been created to fight and die in before their existence became an inconvenience.

The Jumbotron was always set to pick up only the news; there was little interest in drama, not when you spent your days mocked up as fantasy. *What’s the difference between you and me?* Ashley sighed, seeing that the anchor on for the night half was a female coyote who could have been her mother. The woman even shared the same piercing blue eyes and mottled brown fur coat.

And thanks to the effect of her image being projected onto the massive screen, the coyote—indeed, everyone on screen—looked uncomfortably close to Ashley’s own size. *She looks more like me than that fennec fox; for sure—at least we’re the same species, originally anyway.* Ashley felt her tail switch in irritation, thinking about the manipulative, prissy little princess, Carla Jackson.

Though long accustomed to having her life jerked about by those below ankle height there was just *something* about Carla that caused her stomach to clench every time she thought of her on stage with Ian for Remembrance Day rather than with her.

“No costume tonight?” Calla asked, making note of Ashley being in a simple shirt and pants, dressed in the same manner as everyone else present. Though not intended to be a uniform, the effect was achieved regardless as there was very little variety in the clothing made for giants.

“You wore that gown every night in here—what happened to it?” She smiled nastily.

Feeling her claws itch and her lips curl, Ashley swallowed hard, mentally rechecking the safety locks on the Autopilot tendencies gnawing at the back of her mind. *I’m not giving you what you want.* She thought in defiance. Calla wanted a public scene ending Ashley being dragged out and tossed into the dirt outside.

But it’ll come. Not here, not now. Soon, very soon, but not now. Ashley shot the wolf a nasty look that said as much. Calla in turn nodded curtly with a smile and mouthed the word *Anytime*.

“Hey, they’re talking about *here*!” Bethany “Vixan” Wilson pointed at the towering ornate palace that both Calla *and* Ashley used to joke/fantasize about the best way to smash its lattice structure and delicate architecture. The black bat wings on her work costume that contrasted with her fiery red fur wobbled as she pointed at the screen. “Somebody turn it up!”

Their rivalry temporarily forgotten, both Calla and Ashley snapped their heads to the screen where HOSTAGE CRISIS flashed below the image of a line of parade of well-dressed and clearly rattled patrons intermixed with a group of tigers who looked like they would be better off playing shuffleboard than laying siege to a five-star hotel.

A gray and white male snow leopard dressed in a trench coat despite it being a clear night in the middle of summer was narrating the history of the park and accompanying hotel. “—Opening shortly after the park did, the Magical Crystal Palace has seen celebrities and foreign dignitaries during its twenty-year lifespan—” He adjusted his red tie before continuing to narrate, “And here are the hostages leaving the premises.”

The camera zoomed in on the main doorway of the hotel. Out came Ian and then everything else stopped registering to Ashley. Though having seen and held him hundreds of times, often right up to her face, his scent burned into her memory so deeply she smelled it any time she thought of him, Ashley had never seen him like now.

Ian was *her* size—with every physical detail accented and crystal-clear visible on the screen from his sparkling green eyes to the wavy straw colored blond hair on his head.

He's—beautiful! The realization left her with more shock than lust. *How long has Ian been this* handsome? And why had she never noticed?

In the time she'd known Ian, he had gone in Ashley's mind from a disembodied voice tormenting her from the tram to a pitiable bug she couldn't bring herself to squash to a cross between a friend who fit in her pocket and a pet smart enough to talk with.

A literal wolf whistle came from beside her. Calla also saw Ian. "Oh, I take it all back," she sniggered, "Getting to work with *that* piece of ass would have me trussed up in lacy doll clothes *any* day of the week."

Ashley ignored her, not because she was practicing the age-old anti-bully technique but because she was still too stunned to remember to be mad at Calla. *How—how long as he looked that way. How—how long as he looked that way?* The stuttering mantra of puzzlement was all she could hear.

Until....

"I smelled him around your door, earlier today." She licked her lips, "Does he come see you after hours? Does he like riding your *flume*?"

"Calla," Ashley growled low in her throat, teeth bore, anticipating the next part. "Don't you dare—"

"Maybe you could you introduce us sometime? I could show him a *real* ride—"

All Ashley remembered after that was a flash of red—literally, she saw red—then her face pressed down to the hard concrete of the floor, a mangled pile of metal that had once been a chair lying nearby, one of the legs pulled off and bent in the middle. Her nose was bleeding and her neck ached as having been clamped in a vice with a line of shallow puncture wounds bleeding down her chest, turning her torn shirt bright red.

Calla was nearby, also pinned, her left ear hanging on by a flap of skin, an X-shaped pattern of claw marks over her forearms where she'd shielded herself. Amidst her long dark hair, a bump the size of a small hill to a person Ian's size was starting to form. "I'll tear your kidneys out," she snarled, struggling to get free, "I'll gouge your eyes with my claws! I'll eat your heart, *bitch!*"

"I'll fucking *kill* you!" Ashley screamed, spending little on hyperbole.

Nobody reacted with as much as a gasp to the exchange. Death threats were commonly viewed as blowing off steam and the general consensus was that if you were mad enough to try to kill someone, you would just *do so*.

“Well, no tearing, gouging or killing in the TV room.” Beth said from atop the pile. The vixen tisked at them like a disapproving parent, also completely missing the point just like said parent. “I’m disappointed in both of you—best friends as long as you’ve known each other and you’re fighting over a *guy*? Look, he’s even already got a girlfriend!”

“Huh?” Ashley looked back to the screen, confused.

Carla—the fennec fox, her stand in, her *replacement*, was now standing beside Ian, holding his hide, shyly sidled up against him as if she were a delicate frail thing that couldn’t stand on her own without him.

Then she kissed him. Smack-dag on the mouth, wrapping her arms around Ian’s waist and pulling him closer. “A touching moment of relief after an hour of terror on the eve of our nation’s greatest holiday,” the cat commented. “Truly, we’re looking at the calm *after* the storm.”

There were five places in the fence that Ashley knew for a fact had no power, three of which with no cameras, of those two spots where the seismic sensors had gone bad and never been replaced and out of that pair, exactly one location that would be out of sight by satellite after dark in between Gerald’s second and third room checks.

Breaking curfew is going to be the least of my offenses after tonight. She thought darkly, popping the bottom mesh of cables out and wriggling through on her belly like a snake. *I’m getting really good at this.*

Standing up to her full height, Ashley licked her lips and sniffed at the wind, as if the air itself was a better flavor outside of the pen, stretching her arms and squaring her shoulders. *Free, I’m—well I’m still on an island, but I’m out of my enclosure and nobody knows I’m here!*

The grassy hills on the this side of the fence should have felt identical under her bare feet as those on the other, yet Ashley couldn’t help but wiggle her toes with a sigh of comfort. She wished Ian were here, she would have loved to show him her secret getaway, where she came when stressed out and knew a visit to the Toy Room would just make it worse—such as tonight after the fight with Calla.

But he’s off with the fennec, she thought sourly. *And they’re probably....kissing....right now.* A nearby oak tree splintered and cracked, exploding into timbers in her crushing grasp—she had destroyed it with barely a conscious thought.

Her hand continued downward, palm grinding the stump into the ground while her claws left furrows in the earth that could have been used as farming tills. She didn't know who to be angry at right now—Calla for threatening Ian, Carla for *kissing* him, or Ian himself for being the subject of so much emotional turmoil, especially now that she knew he was drop-dead gorgeous—and *he'll go* squash like a bug *if I ever try anything* serious, she reminded herself bitterly. *I really could have done without learning that.*

It was so much easier when I was just Yotezilla. A part of her was starting to wish for the old days, when Calla was still her friend, all the boundaries were clear, and Ian was only a voice and a little orange blur on a cable car far, far away.

Sighing, she laid on her back, eyes closed, enjoying the illusion of freedom for how long it would last.

“What was *that*?” Ian said to Carla as they rode home from the media circus, wishing for nothing more than to get to his bed and collapse. He rubbed at his mouth, as though it stung. “*Kissing* me on national TV?”

Try as he might, though, Ian couldn't summon up the indignation and anger he so desperately wanted to. If anything, the memory of her fragrance, the warm of her body pressed to his, made him wanted her to kiss him *again*.

“Was I too inappropriate?” Carla asked innocently, able to pull it off despite all he had learned about her in the past few hours. Tucking her legs back under the seat of the limo, ears drooping, eyes miles beyond puppyish, lower lip quivering, she reached over to place a hand lightly on his leg.

“Sorry, I don't know what came over me. All that excitement, that attention, I was ready to swoon.” A dazzling smile. “You were *so* brave tonight, trying to protect me the entire time from those scary old men. I just *had* to give my knight in shining armor a reward.” A pause, “Maybe it wasn't enough? Is there some *other* reward you would like?”

“Yes,” somehow Ian kept his voice even though his heart pounded in his ears, “We can talk about Ashley like you promised.”

Carla went ramrod straight in a heartbeat. “I see” her voice dropped flat. “It's really important to you, isn't it?” Something about the way she said *it* indicated that Carla was not referring to the proposed chitchat.

“She's my friend.” He replied truthfully. “not a gimmick, not a meal ticket,

a *friend*.” He paused, “And I want to know why your family wants to get rid of her so badly.”

Carla didn’t immediately answer, quiet under the drone of the limo-jeep’s engine and the muffled announcer on the TV, the pulsing throb of the subwoofer tinted music. “It’s nothing against her *personally*,” she said at last. “I have no doubt in my mind that all those nice things you say about, Ashley, are true.”

“But?”

“But a mentally disturbed individual who turns serial killer’s mother will say ‘He’s a good boy, he just needs to be understood’. A wild animal-turned pet that mauls someone to death’s owner will argue ‘They’re sweet-natured, he just got spooked’. Someone whose gun kills a child that thought it a toy will insist ‘They’re perfectly safe if handled right’.”

“Except Ashley’s not mentally disturbed, a wild animal, or a *gun*.” Though he had to secretly admit, a combination of all three elements came uncomfortably close to describing one of her race when all their inhibitions were dropped, or just happened to be in a bad mood.

“Of course not,” Carla’s voice was placating, “And yes, I know she has *never* harmed anyone,” a pause. “Yet.”

“I’ve never harmed anyone *yet* either,” Ian replied sarcastically, “Better to have me locked behind an electric fence just be on the safe side.”

Carla looked off to the side uncomfortably for a moment, her muzzle down, brows furrowed in thought before turning back to him. “Would you like to know a secret?” She said quietly, “Something that would get me in a *lot* of trouble if it got out that I had told you?”

“What, like State Intel, spies and secret formulas?”

“No, nothing like that.” She swallowed, “This would be the sort of trouble involving my *uncle*. It’s about the park, about what happened seven years ago when we tried our first ‘live show’.”

“I already know what happened. You got the cast and the Attraction on stage, something happened, it went wild and a lot of people were crushed to death, eaten—killed in ways I didn’t learn about until I had *the talk* with my grandparents—then the military came in and killed it with an airstrike.”

“Do you know *why* it happened?”

He shrugged, “Loss of control, tempted by all the prey species at their feet.

I've heard them all on the news and in history class—everybody's got a theory, but no one can agree on it. Suffice to say it happened, and we'll never know what made it happen, so they gotta stay on the reservations and behind the fences *just to be safe*." He said the last part pointedly, staring hard at Carla, "That's what you wanted to hear, right?"

"There was a specific catalyst," Carla said sadly. "A lighting fixture near the Attraction's head blew out. This startled her, and—well, your oversized friend would refer to what happened next as *Autopilot*."

A pained smile. "We've always known what *exactly* happened—but we went with the random cause story to reduce the number of liability lawsuits. Conveniently, there was nothing left of the theater so the investigation had little to pin on us."

He blinked, "Seriously?" Carla nodded, visibly embarrassed. "Wow. Your family is a real piece of work."

"That we are," she made no attempt to defend the House of Jackson. "But, leaving my family's dubious decisions aside for a moment, there are things in this world that, though almost always safe and *properly handled*, will never be *completely* safe, and will cause too much pain, too much misery should there be a slip-up or an accident, even *just once*."

"You've worked with Ashley for weeks," but even as he said it, Ian knew it would matter little as the two had barely interacted. Even on stage Carla was always well out of the way before Ashley showed up—and now he understood why.

Vaughn would *never* put his own niece in such 'danger', but he was desperate for anything that might sway an already lost cause. *Though I'm apparently a calculated risk...* "You must know by now she's not a threat."

"I'm afraid she will *always* be a threat. Maybe not as *great* a threat as others, but a threat nonetheless." Carla placed a hand on his shoulder as if to comfort him, "And we already learned that lesson once. I'm sorry, but even a slight chance of a repeat performance is one too great."

Shoulders slumping under the bite of the seatbelt, Ian shrugged angrily away from her hand. "Then why bring me out here, why tell me all this, if you already had your mind made up in the matter?"

More silence. Then, "Because even though I know what *she* is like, I wanted to see what *you* were like," Carla's voice was low and heavy with intrigue. "I wanted to see what kind of a person you were, willing to put yourself in *such* danger—."

“Ashley’s not dangerous.”

“—Such *apparent* danger time and time again.” She smiled, “And you’re quite easy on the eyes, too.”

This was what she had been building up to all evening, the point where a night of flirtation culminated in inflamed libido. Ian would grow hot under the collar, squirm like a worm on a hook and transfer all thought process and cognitive judgment to Mini-Ian down below.

As if knowing this herself, Carla drew closer, her breath on his neck, her perfumed scent in his nose—yet rather than thinking about the *painfully cute* fennec practically wriggling into his lap, a sobering bolt of pain pierced the hazy cloud to dump a buck of cold water on him.

I’ve failed Ash. Attraction and growing libido be damned, it all evaporated in sobering reality that his goal of persuading Carla to help him keep Ashley in the live show—and perhaps even in the park itself—had fallen short. Nothing could distract him, not even the smoking hot vixen practically lying on top of him.

“In that case, I think we’ve talked enough,” he said aloud, voice steady, *sharp*. “Thanks for the wonderful evening—sorry it couldn’t go on *longer*. I’d like to go home now.”

Carla recoiled as though he’d slapped her, blinked, inching back on the wide seat. Not immediately answering, she sat back, scrutinizing like a burglar who had found a second lock underneath the first he had been steadily prying apart and wished to assess which tool would be best for this new challenge.

“Of course.” She said at last, pressing the intercom to page the driver. “I’m just sorry that it didn’t turn out the way *we* thought it would. Maybe next time?”

“I don’t think there’s going to be a next time,” Ian said, more coldly than intended but still intended.

Like a duelist agreeing to a choice of weapons, Carla nodded in cagey respect. “I guess we’ll just have to keep it professional from here on out.”

Ian often joked that he pulled so many double-shifts, third shifts and over-time at the park he may as well have lived there. Ashley, of course, *did* live on the island and knew for a fact that there was one other group of staff that did

so as well: the administration.

And I know where they live, too. She thought, laying flat on her stomach by the serpentine, curving road that led from the executive housing complex to the subway station. The cool breeze blowing through the valley pass would have felt wonderful at any other time, but Ashley was too tensed to think of anything but her driving mission.

Set into the craggy volcanic pass leftover from the island's formation millions of years ago, the executive housing was atop the tallest of the peaks, meant to give the administrators both a scenic view over the ocean and also to serve as a last-ditch hold out should the Attractions break out en masse and go hunting.

Like I'm doing right now, She thought.

In contrast, the Visitor's Center and the island side hotel were on flat, open ground, easily accessible by foot leaving Ashley to wonder if this was deliberate to provide a more tempting target while help was sought for. Either way, her business tonight was *here*, or rather, on its way here, winding up the road, recognizable as the expensive hybrid car Carla Jackson drove to work like a fairytale princess's carriage every day—the car she was driving home after her *date* with Ian.

Though quiet as a mouse, it was also bright jade green like an eastern beetle. The hybrid would have been easy to spot even without the current full moon, its headlights sweeping the street in front of it. Pouncing from the side of the road like a cat out of the bushes, Ashley swept the bejeweled bug up in her hands, suppressing the urge to giggle at the tickle of the squealing tires against her palms.

Lifting the insignificant wrapped of aluminum and fiberglass to her face, the giant coyote girl flashed her fangs in a toothy grin through the windshield at the considerably surprised fennec fox inside, Carla's hands gripping the wheel as if it could provide some modicum of safety from the hands holding the car that could wad it into a ball of metal plastic and flesh in seconds thanks to both strength *and* practice.

"Hello, there," Ashley said softly.

Chapter 22

Girl Talk

“Spill it. I want to know *exactly* what’s going on between you and Ian. What do you two mean to each other?”

“I-I—uh...I mean, uh, we are—”

“Don’t get tongue-tied now. *You* initiated this conversation.” Carla looked expectantly up at the giantess, seemingly oblivious to how Ashley was limited only by her imagination in the number of ways she could harm her.

At what point, did I lose control here? Ashley recalled setting the car down with her other hand after ordering Carla out, scooping her up in her palm intending to make full use of her size advantage to intimidate the socialite, and from there things spiraled steadily downhill for her.

Treating the matter as little more than an inconvenience, the little fennec fox, delicate as a reed next to the muscles in Ashley’s hand alone, now sat in cross legged in her palm, arms folded across her chest, button face gazing up at her expectantly.

“I can tell he means a lot to you,” Carla suggested with a knowing smirk. “Look at what you’ve done and the risks you’ve taken, just to come out here to get me to say that nothing is happening between us.”

Ears perking forward, Ashley moved the hand closer—Carla seemingly unfazed by the long white canines approaching her face—even Ian gave off a small nervous smell when she brought him near there. “So...you’re not dating?”

“Believe me, I tried to initiate it by using the very same tricks my aunt

did to snare my uncle back in the day.” She sighed as if confessing to a failed seduction was like telling someone you lost a round of cards, “But Ian’s clearly got his heart somewhere else—or *someone* else as the case more likely is.”

Ashley tried to snort derisively, it came out as a stuttered huff as her heart fluttered in her chest excitedly. “He can’t possibly think—no, not with *me*.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I’m....big.” Ashley wanted to wring her hands together in frustration but caught herself at the last second with a timely reminder that doing so would lead to gore-streaked palms—*I’m not squishing Carla, I’m not squishing Carla*—“And he’s so..tiny.”

“Maybe he’s into taller women?” Carla shrugged off her completely rational reason, “I know this badger of an oil tycoon who buys his mastiff wife nothing but platform shoes, cowboy boots and high heels. He has a...kink, for lack of a better word.”

“First, we all thought it was a fashion statement, but then she got drunk at a children’s hospital fundraiser and started to reveal the things he made her do for him. Needlessly to say, my uncle quickly cut all ties with the man, our being a family-oriented company we couldn’t be seen in open collaboration with that sort.”

“Ian’s not some closet pervert,” Ashley replied defensively, “And I don’t have that sort of interest in him. Now, I know you’re going to respond with *then why do you care about us dating* and I’ll answer that right now.”

She took a deep breath—it was a full two minutes before *right now* came along—then said, “Although Ian’s just a friend, and I’m still worried about his well-being.” She glared at Carla, feeling a measure of controlled sharpness return. “Specifically, I worry that *you* might hurt him.”

A roll of the eyes, “Yes, yes. I’ll lead him down a path of lavishness and extravagance, causing him to abandon everything and everyone he holds dear, and then when I’m bored with my toy, I’ll kick him to the curb.”

“Broken and used, poor Ian will be incapable of lover ever again.” She snorted, “Honestly, I didn’t know they printed dime store romance novels in two-thousand font size.”

“It’s fifteen hundred font size actually,” Ashley muttered, knowing she’d lost control of the situation yet again. “Why the hell aren’t you afraid of me like everyone else?” Clearly inept at Carla’s fencing, she opted to remind her opponent that she was the sledgehammer to her rapier, shaking her palm a bit,

toppling Carla into a sprawling position in her palm. “Don’t you know what I am? What I could do to you?”

Carla didn’t immediately answer as she gathered herself up. When she did, her voice was so low that even her proximity to Ashley’s ears that were of superior quality was almost not enough to be heard. “Do you think this is the first time I’ve ever been completely powerless?”

“Don’t BS me,” Ashley gave a sharp laugh, “You live in a marble palace, drive foreign cars and dine on lobster every night. If you say *jump* to anybody here, they say *how high*.”

“And because I’m rich and powerful, I don’t know what it means to be helpless and at someone else’s mercy, right?” She shook her head. “I didn’t always *live in a marble palace*, you know.”

“My family has always been rich, sure, but once upon a time, our palace was just a simple two-story house with a white picket fence. My father felt that outgoing displays of wealth and influence were a waste of time and money that were better spent on productive tasks.”

“He was a philanthropist, an idealist.” She paused, “Do you know this park was originally *his* idea?”

“I—didn’t.” *Crap, not a third time.*

“A place where both sides could experience and familiarize with the other in the hopes of a peaceful coexistence—that was his dream, to create a place of healing after the horrors of a world war, a symbol of the great rebuilding of nations following such wanton, senseless destruction. I think he wanted to prove that the world was just as capable of great good as it was of great evil.”

“So he poured the entirety of his fortune into this place and staffed it primarily with returning veterans unable to find or hold down jobs because they were damaged physically and psychologically or were victims of the bad economy following the war.”

“It was less a park and more of an embassy—and for a while, it seemed to be working. There was even talk of taking *down* the fences and removing the landmines.”

“Until one of us ruined it,” Ashley finished. “I’ve heard that story dozens of times—and once more from my mother right before I came here. It’s sad, but you weren’t even around then, none of us were.”

“I’m getting there.” Carla replied coldly, “The important part of my story

happened years later, after I was born and still just a child. Though having lost millions on this failed venture and having to pay for the damages out of their own pocket, needless to say, no insurance company would go near it, my father and mother were still better off than the majority of the country after the war—and others knew it, too.”

Ashley’s stomach sank, despite Carla being her rival professionally—and maybe even personally, she had to cringe for what was coming next.

“My father saw the good in everyone and refused to have guards and barriers around his home like his brother. My uncle tried to get him to change this multiple times, told him to think of his daughter, but he refused. He wanted me to be like any other girl, to have a normal life and to not live like some precious stone kept locked in a safe. But he was blind to the truth: there was no normal for us. There never could be.”

For the first time, Carla appeared to have trouble speaking, and under the porcelain mask, some cracks were starting to show. “I was six when it happened. Some men came to the door, soldiers who were never paid by their collapsed government and impoverished country and were looking at the streets—the very people my father had tried to help.”

“But my family was just an out to them. My father tried to stop them; they killed him and took my mother hostage intending to get a ransom out of my uncle. The police tracked them down; there was a shootout and she was caught in the crossfire.”

She looked pointedly up at the coyote, “I still remember it—screams, begging, pleading followed by gunfire, then silence, a *long* silence. My uncle, the police, *everyone*, thought I was with my mother but I was alone in the house, clutching my father’s body form for hours, too scared to leave, still thinking he might be alive, until a passing neighbor heard my cries.”

“You ask me why I’m not scared of you when everyone else is. It’s because unlike most others I know what it means to be small and helpless, to have no control over my own fate, to not know what’s going to happen next, if I’ll live or die. Most people don’t—and it’s a very rude awakening the first time it happens.”

Ashley had set Carla down before she knew it. “Guess you’ll have me shipped back to the Reservation, then.” She said glumly, knowing that she hadn’t the heart to do what any other Attraction/Giant/BWMD would do to keep the vixen from leaving the roadside.

“Why would I do that?” Carla sauntered over to her car, inspecting it for damage, frowning briefly at the massive smudges on the paint from Ashley’s

fingers. “All we did was discuss work and compare notes on our fellow coworker, Ian Michaels. Hardly worth firing somebody over, don’t you think?”

“You’re not going to tell anyone?”

Opening the door to her hybrid, Carla slid into the seat and keyed the ignition. “The paperwork and the logistical arrangements alone would take weeks. There would be plenty of time to get out of your pen again and rampage through the park during peak hours once you realized your life was over either way.”

She smiled nastily, “And you *would* get out again, you’ve already proven to be quite an escape artist.”

“That can’t be the *only* reason.”

“It’s not; I would hate to see what it would do to Ian.” Carla had her hand on the shifter but didn’t engage the drive, not yet. “Admit it or not, he *does* care about you. He sees the best in you and won’t be told otherwise. He’s another idealist,” she said regretfully, “Misguided and utterly wrong, yet I can’t help but want to root for him.”

She put the car in drive. “I just hate how it’s going to destroy him. Ian is a great guy, but his compassion blinds him to reality and causes his feelings about what he thinks should be right overriding his ability to see how the world really works, just like my father.”

“Wait.” Blocking the road with her arm, Ashley dropped to her elbows in front of Carla, grabbing the rear end between two pinched fingers. “Can you talk to Ian, offer him a different job—get him in another department, maybe?”

“I don’t see how,” Carla replied, shaking her head. “He spends more time worrying about your absence in the Remembrance Day performance than in actually rehearsing for it. I’ve had to talk my uncle out of firing him *twice* already—but I can only vouch for Ian so many times before it happens. Fact of the matter is, he cares more about *you* than he does keeping his job and furthering his career. Admirable, but it can only end one way.”

Ashley’s fingers slid off the rear of the car as she sat up, leaving the road clear, defeated. “I’m glad we got to talk,” Carla said, putting around her like a fallen tree. “I’ve wanted to meet you for some time, but my bodyguards and Uncle Vaughn wouldn’t let me. Tell Ian I said *hi* next time you see him.” She waved like a queen from a limo before driving off into the night.

Ashley stared down at the ground for a long time afterwards, hands curling into fists defiantly as Carla’s words echoed in her skull. Ian—cared about her,

really cared. And she cared about him—*really* cared.

He cared so much that he risked his life crossing the fence to see me, she thought, Even knowing what would happen if he were caught....Carla was right on both accounts, about her and Ian—and how he couldn't see the danger right in front of his eyes that being near her meant. *But I can see the danger coming, what'll happen to him—and can't, I won't let it happen.*

Rising to her feet, Ashley started back to the opening in the fence, walking as if her legs were made of the greatest concentration of lead on the planet. *No matter what it takes, I won't let it happen.*

She just hoped Ian would be able to forgive her someday.

Chapter 23

Machinations

Mike had rewired the same speaker box for the eighth time—a nervous habit and he was *very* nervous tonight—when Carla finally drifted into the darkened office in the emptied administration building like a ghost in a haunted house. “What took you so long?” He asked nervously, “Security keeps popping in to ask what I’m doing here after hours.”

“I’ve cleared you with everyone below the Board of Directors,” she replied dismissively, “Security suspects nothing; they’re just bored and nosy.” Pulling up her uncle’s chair, Carla plopped into it like it was a good fit. “So...are we ready for Remembrance Day?”

“Everything reads green and all tests are passed.” Mike’s voice waivered a little, “If you want to back out, to forget this whole thing ever happened and go on as per normal—now’s the last chance we’ll have to stop it.”

“Proceed as planned,” she said without a moment’s hesitation. “I got over my reservations a long time ago—as you should have.” She narrowed her gaze at him skeptically, “You *are* with me a hundred percent, aren’t you?”

“Of course, Ma’am, I just wanted to mention—.”

“Because if I *did* decide to cut my losses, the first thing I’d do is reveal who provided the Forgotten Warriors with the flash cartridges and the sound projectors for their little performance tonight as well as that party’s direct connection to the group.”

“I’m with you,” Mike said quickly, swallowing nervously, tugging at his collar with a claw, “I just thought I’d ask.”

“Just make sure everything does what it’s supposed to,” Carla replied. Then she smiled in her traditional perky-excited manner. “I do have some good news for you—your grandfather and his bridge club all made bail tonight, courtesy of the same discreet bond agency my uncle uses when his idiot son gets thrown in the drunk tank once a month.”

Her smile took a predatory turn. “They’ll be out just in time for the holiday show, in which you *all* have a very important part to play.”

Ian’s world wouldn’t be right until he saw Ashley again, of that the young fox was certain a hundred percent. Slipping into the hangar/quarters through the same side access as before he barely spared a glance at the Toy Room as he passed the twisted metal carnage.

Getting ambushed by the Forgotten Warriors was nothing compared to the stunt Carla had pulled in terms of nerve-wracking. While Ian had no idea what the giants’ media viewing was like, he had taken precautionary measures in the form of a hastily procured bouquet of flowers.

Hope she likes marigolds. Ian’s knowledge of flora bouquets was even worse than his knowledge of women, but he hoped the intention would be adequate enough to compensate for any shortcomings.

“Ash?” He called, poking out into the massive dark space of the hangar—all the lights were out and the gargantuan bed clearly hadn’t been slept in. “You there?” He held out his bouquet to the darkness expectantly, “I brought you a present.”

No immediate answer, then from behind his exit: “still stupid with no sense of self-preservation I see.” Turning, he saw her crouched beside the doorway in an almost catlike pose, as if readying to pounce. “And you brought *flowers*, how nice.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm, “They’ll go *perfectly* with my ottoman rug and the green wallpaper.”

“Uh, yeah.” Ian held up the bouquet for a second, realized she probably couldn’t even grasp them between the pointy tips of her nails and lowered it sheepishly. “I could go find a vase or empty jar for that part. I think I can see a nice spot over by that bomber shed.”

“You sure that’s why you brought them?” One arm over the other, Ashley stalked forward, making him feel very uncomfortably like a mouse before a cat. Even her back was arched in a hunter’s pose, as if her body was awaiting the command to pounce. Her dagger-like claws click-clacked on the hard concrete

of the hangar floor.

Stomach churning, Ian forced himself not to acknowledge the bubbling fear welling up as she drew closer—this was *Ashley* damn it. She wouldn't—couldn't—hurt him. *No matter how much my gut tells me otherwise*, he thought, telling his fluttering heart to shut up and continuing as if there were nothing amiss.

"It wouldn't be because you expect me to forget about you traipsing around town last night with my *replacement*?" Her black lips peeled back in an ugly snarl. "Are you planning to pass that off as a rehearsal for your next *kissing scene*?"

Oh, damn. She did see that broadcast. "Ash, nothing happened. It wasn't like that." He said quickly.

"Like I'm going to believe *that*." She rolled her hazel eyes. "You're not fooling me, Ian. I know you see that prissy little doll as the next rung on the ladder. I've gotten you as far as I can, haven't I? It's time to *trade up*! First you tamed the beast, now you've seduced the duchess!"

"Are you—are you calling me a womanizer?" For a moment, he wasn't sure whether to take offense or find it humorous.

Ashley quickly solved that conundrum with a sharp bark of a laugh. "Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? For to me to have some kind of desperate misguided romantic inclinations for a guy the size of my pinkie. Bet you'd get a real laugh out of it with the boys."

"Ash? What's with you?" Ian looked down at his bouquet, "I wanted to come by to see you. I'm sorry if you think anything happened between me and Carla—."

Before he could finish the rest of his sentence, she pounced, squeezing the air of his tiny body as her fingers slammed closed around him like the jaws of a vice, crushing the flowers against him in a snapping of stems and tearing of petals.

"What's *with me* is that I'm tired of you little people playing your games and using me for your own ends." Still hunched, she brought him to within a foot of her fangs. "Ever since I can remember, my life has been dictated by bugs. And I'm *sick* of it. My parents' generation should have gone with their original plan of flattening every city on the continent then taking over what was left."

Finally managing to suck some air in, Ian gasped in shock that his sweet natured friend would say such a thing. "You can't seriously mean that!" Prob-

bly the greatest source of bad blood and outright fear between normal folk and the living weapons they created was the eventual revelation that the latter had come up with a *drastic* plan to ensure they weren't simply crammed back into cages as science experiments when the Tanuken were defeated.

The plan had been simple, honest and brutal. Once the Tanuken Empire was dealt with, the victorious BWMDs would immediately turn on the depleted counties whose militaries were in no shape to stop them from taking over. Given what he'd learned of people in his short life, hell, given what he'd learned from *Carla*, Ian often wondered why they hadn't carried out that final terrible plan—but the world was grateful they hadn't, whether most people would admit it or not.

"I can tell you're upset and unhappy," he began slowly, looking to establish some traction. "But this isn't you, Ash. You can't fool me."

He nuzzled her nearest finger affectionately, ignoring the burning in his ribcage from the crushing pressure of her grasp. "You're a *good* person."

There was a flicker in her hazel eyes—a flash of acknowledgement—his heart and hopes were raised as her iron grip began to slacken to its more familiar gentleness...

Ashley plucked him up by the collar of his shirt, like a cat holding a disobedient kitten by the scruff of its neck. "I'm leaving the park and going back to the Reservation." She said flatly. The words crushed Ian greater than any force on Ashley's part could have. "Why?" He protested. "You were making *progress* here. We had a *live audience outside the fence*. And you're just going to give that all 'up? What about your dream of being an actress?"

"It was just that, a dream." She replied bitterly, "Now it's time to face reality. Both of us."

"You can't really believe that." Ian protested, trying to ignore the jarring sensation from his feet that rattled his teeth as he was set roughly down on the hard floor. "It's Carla, isn't it? What did she say to you, Ash?"

"Carla has nothing to do with this—."

"The hell she doesn't," now it was *his* voice crept with anger. "I know how she works, what she does to people."

"Ian, drop the hero act."

But Ian wasn't going to drop it. Not even if Gerald were in here wearing cowboy boots would he drop it. "Well, you listen here. I spent all of last night

sweating like a pig under my collar, had guns jammed in my face even, and the *only* thing that kept me going through it all was that I was doing it for you, for your *dream*. And now you expect me to believe you don't care about any of that anymore?"

"I said *drop it!*" Ashley snarled, slamming her palms down to either side of him, creating a shockwave of air and kinetic force that knocked Ian sprawling onto his red tail.

She bore her teeth down to within inches of his face, "Your little white knight routine has gone on long enough. I'm *ending* our professional relationship and if you keep pestering me, I'll end a lot more than that."

Clamoring to his shaky feet, adrenaline coursing his veins as common sense told him to run; Ian tried to plea one final time for their friendship. "Ash, please don't do this. Don't shut me out. Let me help you."

"Leave, Ian, just leave." She whispered deathly soft, "*Now*. For all we've been through together, I'm letting you go this one time." She looked off to the side in dismissal. "If I catch you in here again, I'm going to do what I should have done the *first* time you weaseled your way over here."

Mouth moving in a futile effort to find words, Ian, for once in his life, could think of nothing to say. All he could do was nod in surrender, turn and walk away, only able to manage to manage a faint, "Take care of yourself."

Chapter 24

Festivities

Remembrance Day came once a year, a fact for which the park staff was grateful. While the summer months were always crowded, hot and full of pushy drunks, R-Day was the hottest, drunkest and most crowded of them all. Supervisors threatened anyone who skipped it with termination while the kids working their first job here learned that holidays were not equally as fun for everyone.

All of this blew over Ian's head as he tromped into the below-ground staging area for the set,

mentally calculating the response time of Carla's bodyguard entourage if he were to lunge for her slender throat. Carla was on the submerged platform, rehearsing her lines with Ian's understudy, a bright orange fox of a slightly slimmer build.

Mike and Rami were off in the side hangar where the Strider sat on coiled up legs; the multiple sensory eyes dark were going over the "final preparations" for the Strider's appearance during the main show tonight.

"There you are!" She shooed off his understudy. "And to think, Uncle Vaughn actually thought we needed Lenny here."

Lenny slunk away disappointed, no doubt having thought—hoped—that he had finally caught a lucky break and would be on stage with the lovely Carla Jackson. *Keep your hopes up, buddy.*

Protocol dictated a visit to HR and two weeks' notice, but after last night, Ian was in no mood for formalities. He wanted to make sure Carla knew her involvement in this as he threw his ID badge and gate-pass at her feet. "I quit."

Mike blanched. Rami looked on in interest, Lenny brightened like his uncle's lava lamp collection. "You quit?" Carla blinked her dark eyes in apparent confusion, "Why, Ian? Are you not happy here? Is there anything I can do to make you reconsider?"

"There is one thing." Moving in close so only Carla would hear, Ian whispered deathly low, "You can tell me what said to her."

"Hmmm?" If Carla was anything but genuinely confused she didn't show it. "Say what to whom?"

"Ashley. She's *quitting* the show and going back to the Reservation."

To her credit, Carla at least didn't pretend not to know who Ashley was. "Can you really see me convincing someone like *that* to do something they don't want to?" A pause, "Maybe she's decided this isn't her path in life."

"You have everyone else fooled, but not me. Did you threaten her? Did you promise her something she needed if she'd leave? What, Carla, what did you use against Ashley to make her give up her dreams?"

Carla let the façade drop. Her round dark eyes hardened into sharpened points, like those of a prowling shark. Her buttoned face narrowed to a rapier's edge with furrowed brows and a squared jaw. *This* was who she was when appearances were no longer an issue—and now Ian understood why Carla went to so much effort to hide it. She made Vaughn look like an amateur when it came to intimidating appearance.

"I informed that girl of the *damage* she could inadvertently cause to others—and not just with her bus-sized feet. She refuses to see those closest to her harm themselves and their prospects in life for an Attraction—she doesn't want those she cares about bringing themselves low for a lost cause. *That* is why your Gimmick is leaving you."

Ian took a staggering step back as if punched in the stomach. "She's— she's doing this for me?"

A nod, "And imagine how she'll feel to know her efforts are in vain—if you quit that is." Carla looked down meaningfully at the cards on the floor—Ian had thrown down his hand and it hadn't been enough, nowhere near enough.

"But you're not quitting, are you? You just dropped your ID and pass on the floor and you're going to pick them up now and get into costume with the rest of us." Still indulging her true nature, a wry smile crept up the side of the fennec's short muzzle.

Feeling the defiant fire in his chest snuffed out, Ian nodded, reaching down slowly, mechanically, to retrieve the cards. “You should be more careful,” the vixen slipped the mask back on, voice rising to audibility for the others. “Lose those and you can’t get in the park and we *need* you here, Ian.”

I’m sorry, Ash, Ian thought.

Damn, she’s scary. Mike thought with a shudder as Carla and Ian went backstage for their final makeup and costume checks. Though he felt sympathy for Ian, he couldn’t help but be relieved whenever the fox was present as it meant her all-seeing eyes were on someone else for a change.

“In the old days of my country’s empire, she would have had a husband in the inner circle of the Party for sure.” Rami said, obviously impressed. “We always used to say that behind every great General was a great woman.”

Figures the Nook would admire her. For a week straight, Mike had been clenching his teeth every time he spoke with Rami while going through a dozen pairs of gloves before managing to keep his claws sheathed in the raccoon’s presence.

Even now a little voice at the back of the tiger’s mind told him to reach over and crush Rami’s throat. *But I can’t. Too much depends on the little weasel.* “The engineering systems have been rigged to give false readings per your instructions;” he said evenly, “Carla knows nothing about the *modifications* we made to the Strider.”

“Excellent.” Unlike Carla who dropped her mask of sincerity and politeness when she knew the other person saw through it, Rami never broke character. In many ways, he was a better liar and manipulator than even her.

A tingling hum on his thigh broke Mike’s thoughts. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he flipped it open to see a familiar aged face—his grandfather—on the contact list. “Colonel?” Setting the phone down, he put it on speaker so he could continue working.

It was his grandfather who insisted on being called by his Resistance title at all times, even by family. “Snake is in the nest. Confirm the ant marches at fifteen hundred?”

“Confirmed.” Mike rolled his eyes at the old resistance lingo and military jargon even though the Colonel couldn’t see the gesture. “How was your night in redneck jail, by the way?”

“Better than the work camp your grandmother died in.” The old tiger shot back, prompting a wince from his grandson in anticipation of a rant. “Better than the irradiated slum that claimed your *parents* with cancer in their thirties. Better than the stomachs of the BWMDs were for our people.”

Rami flicked his left ear, but otherwise made no acknowledgement of his country’s contribution. Winded from his speech, age and the old injuries resulting from having his chest compressed by the very machine they were working on, a wheeze was audible in the Colonel’s voice as he finished, “Have the cans stringed by fourteen-forty-five. Copy?”

“Copy.” Mike sighed, before they hung up after another exchange of garbled messages, turning to Rami, “He’s a real piece of work, isn’t he?”

“The only one of you we ever feared,” Rami agreed. “And the rest of these people are about to learn *why*.”

Chapter 25

Departure

Looks the same as the day I came in, Ashley thought, standing on the thick concrete of the ship-dock with her things assembled in a set of extra-large cargo containers converted into suitcases via large metal handlebars welded on top. She stared down at her reflection in the swirling blue-green waves crashing against the unyielding pillars.

The dock was sturdy, built to hold the multi-ton beings that trod upon it, yet some day it would crumbled under the relentless pounding of the sea and collapse into the water, so much rubble. For all its size and strength, the dock just couldn't change the way nature acted against it.

On the horizon was an approaching ship. Even a good thirty minutes out from port it still appeared the size of a car and steadily growing. One of the super-classes, it dwarfed everything shy of an aircraft carrier, loaded with containers from bow to stern. *There's my ride.*

Carla had been right about one thing, the requirements for getting a ten-story person to and from an island was no easy matter logistically or bureaucratically. After the obvious physical needs came the red tape required for essentially transporting a war machine across international boundaries.

Yet *miraculously*, Carla had just happened to find an empty freighter swinging by whose captain *graciously* agreed to pick her up. And—surprise, surprise—all the forms had been approved weeks ahead of time just waiting for Gerald's final signature.

Her being slime doesn't change the fact that she's right. Partly from boredom and partly to ensure she wouldn't be tempted to snack on the crew, Ashley gave

the black box at her feet a kick, prompted a chorus of panicked lowing from inside. Peering down, she cracked open the lid and did a mental roll call of the contents.

All still alive, good.

Even refrigerated, the longer something was dead, the less palpable it was to her, even inedible past a certain point. The scientists hadn't cared about the long-term survival of their weapons, just that they had enough reason to seek out concentrations of enemy troops and population centers. Few things were as powerful a motivation as hunger and starvation—and there was talk that maybe they intended it as a means of “deactivating” their otherwise nigh-invulnerable weapons.

Deciding it would be pertinent to take the edge off before boarding, Ashley snaked her hand into the box and withdrew a kicking cow. Four times the size of its natural born counterpart it was in many ways the forerunner to the coyote giantess about to consume it.

The bovine's solid black body was so muscular and wide in the haunches it couldn't even bear young without artificial insemination and a C-section. Stuffing the cow headfirst into her mouth, Ashley's teeth came down on its stubby neck with a wet crunch. The cow went still, but for a few twitching kicks.

Acknowledging that she had just taken a life, Ashley's subconscious flipped a switch in her brain, signaling her endocrine system to release a flood of endorphins, the feel-good chemicals of the body, aka Nature's High.

Closing her eyes, Ashley moaned as the wave of pleasure rolled over her, enjoying her “reward” for the act of killing, and then reminded her of her hunger, ate the cow quickly, desiring the blood as warm and still soaked into the meat as much as possible while flowing down her throat.

Glad Ian never saw this, Ashley thought, licking her fingers clean. Discovering what a typical meal for her people consisted of had been as much a reason for not wanting him to come over the fence to see her as had been the worry that he might be added to said meal.

“So here you are, crawling off with your tail between your legs.” Calla sneered from behind her, her dark form reflected beside Ashley in the water below the dock. There was an unmistakable challenge to her voice, a desire to finish their fight from earlier.

“Why are you here?” Ashley said without turning around, having known of her approach due to a combination of her heightened senses and the fact that

it was quite hard for one earth-pounding giant to remain silent coming up on another.

“Dad told me you were leaving. Didn’t believe him so I had to see for myself.” The she-wolf moved up beside her, but stayed at an angle, as if waiting for her turn and attack. Ashley did nothing. “Have to say, I’m disgusted with you. When did you become so weak-willed?”

Ashley continued to stare straight ahead at the ship. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“What I *wanted* was for you to stop acting like you were special, like you were better than the rest of us.” Voice softening, Calla sounded almost contrite. “I never wanted you to *leave*, just to come to your senses and stop trying to be one of *them*.”

“Then I guess neither of us is getting what we want.” The freighter blew its horn, signaling to the dock crew inside the armored bunker below their feet that they were almost to port and ready to receive freight, all of which would be loaded by automated cranes.

Calla growled, voice hardening again. “My best friend must have gotten on that boat weeks ago, because the Ashley *I know* would tear my face off for talking to her like this. The Ashley I know would go out and stomp on whatever little insect was screwing with her life.”

“Clearly, I’m not the Ashley you know.”

Calla snarled wordlessly, looking as if she might attack out of anger and frustration. Instead, she turned and stomped away, but not before knocking over one of the cranes, the towering metal structure tipping into the bay. “I’ll leave you to your self-pity. Enjoy your self-imposed exile, *weakling*.”

Chapter 26

Revelations

Ian took what little comfort he could find in standing upon a fifty foot scaffolding serving as the reliable narrator—unfortunately extreme heights and narrations only reminded him more about Ashley, their first “gig” together as it were, although neither had even known the other’s name.

Back then we were just set pieces to each other, he thought with a sigh as the green lights in the floor came on. A volley of fireworks exploded over head in the night sky, just to make sure the audience was fully awake.

Like all Great War stories, there was the mandatory history that everyone knew. Ian could have recited the first part even had he not memorized the script. “In the beginning, the Nations of the world lived in harmony, cooperating and prospering as one.”

A Jumbotron screen hanging behind him flickered to life showing a map of the world—a rolling ocean broken by continents dotted by islands and peninsulas on the outskirts. The park was one such island with a yellow arrow pointing it out with YOU ARE HERE outlined beside it.

“Each nation provided something of value to the others, and in return received what was needed.” The borderlines began to form on the map, each a different color to the corresponding country it outlined.

“From the sandy deserts of Mesaverd came stone and metal for building, and latter fuel for industry.” As each country was named, the screen changed a brief snapshot of the landscape—in Mesaverd’s case it was a rolling desert broken by plateaus and oil wells. *Why did Mesaverd have to be first on the list?* Ian suppressed the urge to sigh sadly, knowing the microphone headset would

pick it up. *That's where the coyotes come from.*

The rolling desert plains gave way to a spread of jungle broken intermittently by towering steppes. “Dwarfing all other nations in size and population is Bengla, from which came things of great beauty and luxury: fine silks, tea, jade, terracotta pottery, and ancient philosophies and sciences that changed our very understanding of life. Its people were a treasure unto themselves, enlightened, cultured and unchanged for thousands of years.”

The mountainous jungle was replaced by the familiar grassy fields and dense forests that Ian knew very well from his time living among them. “And who could ever forget the great farmlands and plentiful forest bounty of Albion?” As the owners of the parks and the founders of the Remembrance Day celebration, this was the largest portion of the speech.

“Providers of food and medicine, ever seeking new ways to grow crops bigger, to make livestock fatter, to improve the health of all,” he paused for dramatic effect, “And who discovered the key to defeating the Greatest Enemy the world had ever known, a triumph of ingenuity and spirit!”

The screen changed to display the Albion flag, Red, White and Azure, while a silver colored falcon swooped in the background, Mike having programmed the system to fluctuate the volume in pitch with its shrieking cry as the national anthem blared through every available speaker. The fireworks launchers fired over a dozen skyrockets simultaneously.

Ian ticked off the rest of the nations with considerably less fanfare. Even the audience was less interested, having sat through the gratuitous Albion portion and now in eager anticipation to hear about the Designated Villain of the Great War.

“Last in our tale is the Tanuken Archipelago.” The screen showed a cluster of islands and tightly packed cities occasionally broken by a mountain range or forest. “Small, yet densely populated, the Tanuken’s fields and mountains were stripped bare long ago.”

“The Tanuken had little to export, but much to import, they traded people for goods, sending workers, craftsmen and even soldiers to every corner of the globe. They performed the necessary menial labors that others could not or would not do. And for a time, they were satisfied with this.”

A pause, Ian dropped his voice to ominous tone, “For a time.” The years leading up to the war and the economic collapse that kick started could have—and did—compromise countless thousands of textbooks and history classes. Nobody could agree on what went wrong other than that something had gone terribly wrong—the wrong people in power at the wrong time namely.

“We can cut that part,” Vaughn had said after taking a single cursory glance over the script through a cloud of smoke. “Long-winded and wordy, the last thing I want my audience feeling is catharsis or worse, sympathy for the wrong side. Get straight to the action, my old man always said.”

“The Tanuken grew ambitious,” was all that was to be said about a twenty-year period of social, political and economic upheaval. “They looked to their wealthy neighbors, long their source of income and sustenance and thought that it would be best to take everything at once. And what their empire lacked in resources, it more than made up for in ingenuity when it came to the art of war.”

Beneath Ian the ground trembled, rattling scaffold to the point where he wasn’t sure it would stay upright. The entirety of the stage opened below, a yawning chasm into the earth. From within rose the Strider, prompting cries of awe and gasps of fear from the audience.

“The War Strider,” Ian introduced the weapon like a celebrity. “The ultimate engine of war, the Tanuken Empire’s means of repelling invaders for decades, finally unleashed upon an unsuspecting world as an offensive weapon. Capable of carrying troops and heavy weaponry alike, its two most distinctive features were its size—and its horrific Sun Cannon.”

On cue, the pyrotechnics installed between the Strider’s mandible-like components spat fuel over a sparking pilot light causing a few short plumes of flame to flicker out of its “mouth.” It was a pitiful homage to a weapon capable of hours of continuous use without needing refueling while reaching temperatures hot enough to melt iron, a weapon capable of ranges greater than even some projectiles, but the audience oohed and ahed nonetheless.

As the platform finished its ascent and locked into place, the Jumbotron displayed Bengla again, but not of the mountainous jungles from before. Instead, it was of the eastern coastline—and the devastation that obliterated most of them. A wall of fire swept inland, consuming forest and village alike, intended to create a wide swath of no-man’s-land, denying cover to any counterattack as a defense for the Tanuken’s beachhead.

Behind the rolling inferno came the War Striders, emerging from the ocean like primordial sea monsters, having *walked* along the sea bottom to get there. Sporadic puffs of white smoke marked Benglan firing lines and artillery trying in vain to stop the advance before being swallowed by fire.

“The closest nation to their domain, as well as the largest source of what they primarily desired, land, Bengla bore the brunt of the assault. Armed with little more than flintlocks and cannons to defend themselves, the country quickly fell to the invaders.”

Tanuken's borders were colored a dark purple, almost black that swelled, creeping across the map like the arms of a great violet spider. The Imperial flag sprang up dead center in Bengla like a poisonous tree. "The other Great Nations of the world, faced with this threat. Thus, the Coalition of Nations was born."

The other borders all turned a uniform bright gold, the allied countries merging into the shape of a flag with the CON emblem against a silver field. "United as never before, the Coalition sent their best militaries and their brightest generals against the incursion."

Blue arrows representing the combined arms of every other country in the world spread east towards the toxic colored blight of Tanuken-occupied territory. The arms of the Tanuken and the Arrows of the Coalition angled narrowly towards each, finally coming to a point at the western Benglan border.

"And they place they met—was Goldwheat fields!" The arrows/arms met in a class of bright orange/red flashes. From opposite of the Strider rolled several tanks donated by Security, like the Strider they were remote controlled and carrying dummy rounds. Barrels rotating upward, the tanks fired a volley of flash powder at the Strider which puff-puffed fire back at them.

"Sadly, the Coalition's valiant efforts were met with defeat." One by one a column of smoke rose from the turret of each tank, signaling it had been defeated.

"Many, many brave men and women lost their lives that day—and although the Coalition eventually prevailed through determination and ingenuity, we did not forget them. To commemorate their sacrifice for liberty, we have Remembrance Day, to honor the virtues of freedom, democracy and hope!"

This was to be the part where Carla would emerge from below ground as the Spirit of Hope, complete with angel wings and the war banner of the Coalition and singing the Battle Hymn of the Coalition. Suspended by wire, she would rise above even the Strider, which would be "vanquished" by a shift of pure white light—the ultimate triumph of spirit—and sink back into the ground in a plume of smoke.

Nothing happened. At least not at first. *Did the miss the cue?* Ian thought, puzzled. Not likely—Carla pushed the button herself for this part. The audience was beginning to shuffle uncertainly; he could hear noses blowing, coughing and even a little kid in the front row saying, "Laaaaaamme!"

"Uh, one moment ladies and gentlemen," he apologized, "We seem to be having some technical difficulties." As if to punctuate his words, at that moment everything on the set: lights Laughter came from below, sharp and mocking.

“Refund! Refund! Refund!” Someone started to chant. A few more joined in.

Not good, time to stall. Ian fell back on his old tour guide routine as he had often done when the tramcar stalled and needed something to take people’s minds off the lack of motion. “Hey, here’s a fun fact I bet you didn’t know. Can anyone guess how many miles of cable make up the Security Fence that runs around the border of the park?”

More laughter. “Can anyone guess how big of a *tool* this guy is?” Apparently what worked in a tramcar didn’t work on the stage. Ian switched his microphone over to the control channel that would put him in contact with Mike down below the set. “Guys? Any chance we could get Carla up here now? I’m dying here—ahh!”

Piercing his ears like nails on a chalkboard, a blast of screeching static assault Ian. Tearing the headset down he rubbed at his ringing ears, his sense of hearing recovering just in time to see the Jumbotron go dark. He recognized this: the computer had been shut down.

Maintenance reboot? It seemed extreme to pull now—but maybe it would fix whatever was wrong with the show. The widescreen hummed, beeped, and then flickered back to life. There were no maps, no landscapes, no propaganda arrows or recordings.

Instead, the screen presented Colonel Riley’s smug face leering down towering over the theater like a vengeful god. However, he was not the focus of Ian’s attention, but the other people present were. Held by the Forgotten Warriors, Vaughn Jackson and Carla sat bound and gagged.

“Do not adjust your set.” Riley said, voice loud and reverberating—as he did so, one other piece of equipment came back to life—the Strider. Running lights in its compound eyes-cameras lit up like some malevolent intelligence, it stood up to its full height now, towering above Ian on the scaffolding.

“Everything is under control.” Something fell from the head—a collection of tubes and nozzles surrounding a tank and pressurized gauge. The pyrotechnics equipment, dropped like a spent bullet casing to the ground.

“Your Remembrance Day experience has just been *upgraded*.” A cold, wet fear gripped Ian as he realized where Riley’s voice was coming from—not out of the speakers around the amphitheater—but from the Strider’s PA.

He’s inside. Riley’s hijacked the strider!

“I’ll keep *my* story short and sweet and factually accurate. Apologies in

advance for staying true to the movies. You lost the war—at Goldwheat fields and everywhere else your governments haven't told you about—and created *monsters* to set loose on our sacred soil. Then you *nuked* us because they were uncontrollable and out of fear they'd come home to roost."

The Strider lifted its head to the sky, the mandibles parting wide. "Time for you to learn what fighting the Nooks was *really* like. We'll start with an upgraded fireworks show."

Night became day.

A literal river of fire erupted from between the metal mouthparts—Ian felt his fur being singed and he wasn't even remotely near the front of the Strider. The gout ceased and there was a crack of thunder.

Like the after-effect of lightning, the air within the spread had been burnt up leaving the cooler surrounding atmosphere rushing in. The Strider was not only hijacked—it was armed with a fully functional Sun Cannon.

"Keep your hands inside the ride at all times. Secure all loose articles and secure your seatbelt tightly. Remain seated until you come to a complete stop." The Strider stepped forward towards the audience and the crowded park behind them. "Feel free to scream all you want."

"Everyone try to keep calm, please do not panic!" Ian may as well have instructed them to flap their arms and fly. His headset still screeching static, he'd picked up a megaphone kept on the scaffold for emergencies, yelling in utter futility at the screaming throng to, "Make your way to the nearest exit in an orderly manner."

His stomach twisted as he saw an old cat go down under the panicked trample—he did not get up. Even if the Strider chose not to roast everyone in the stands like popcorn kernels in a microwave, there were sure to be injuries and possibly even fatalities just as a result of the panicked masses trying to flee.

The only good thing about being trapped up here, he thought, in addition to the sickening knowledge that he was being forced to watch it all, helpless to do anything to stop it. *Riley really went all out*, Ian thought, *He seemed so...harmless...before*. Clearly that was what Riley wanted everything to think, right up until playing his ace in the hole.

A hissing of hydraulics and pressurized air announced that the Strider was moving again, its six-piston-like legs leaving deep puncture wounds in the con-

crete of the stage. Having intended only to be stationary in the performance, no thought had been given to the rest of the set's condition if it were to actually leave the reinforced steel platform.

Including the distance of the scaffold, Ian thought, stomach twisting as he saw a spindly limb swinging in his direction, ready to tear through it like a house of cards with nowhere for him to run.

Chapter 27

Phase Two

Fingers shaking, Mike stared at the screen of his laptop, the portable computer jacked into the park's control mainframe. Carla's security pass apparently was still good meaning nobody knew Riley had her yet, and displaying a simple query: Execute? He wished it had picked a different word. *Execute* reminded him too much of the fact that he was a push of a button from being complicit in mass murder.

Like most technically inclined Benglans, Mike had gone abroad to study, learning at a Mesaverd University of Technology before finding a job outside the country. Though having signed on as a sound coordinator, his computer skills went beyond just making the right sound appear at the right time or ensuring all the speakers worked.

Nervously, he glanced at the countdown display beneath the timer: twenty seconds to go. Riley had wanted his plan to go off as precisely as possible—probably the strongest point of agreement between him and Rami; an old black joke about the Tanuken occupation went: at least the trains to the camps ran on time.

Fifteen seconds—enough time for me to turn it off and just walk away. Mike had trouble killing spiders—his childhood spent avoiding fights rather than starting them. Hardly the temperament one expected from the grandson of a famous freedom fighter, a man stepped on by a War Strider only to shove a grenade into its joints in response.

Perhaps that was why he was doing this—for the Colonel's approval. Losing his son—the last tie of his old life—to the fallout plaguing Bengla had killed every last bit of affection Colonel Riley had shown his grandson, treating Mike

more of an unexpected burden thrust-upon him than his last living relative.

Ten seconds left. Now or never.

“Do this one thing for me,” Riley had said to when he voiced his hesitation, “In honor of your mother and father—my son—do this one, simple thing for me: be brave. Prove to me we are related.”

I am brave, he thought as the timer reached zero. *I will prove myself*. With a single keystroke, Mike *executed* the future of every man, woman and child on the island.

“Take off their gags.” Riley ordered his men as soon as the PA was off. “I would like some constructive criticism of my performance.” The interior designed like a bridge—the Strider for all intents being a land-based battleship—Carla and Vaughn were strapped down into a pair of seats behind the commander’s chair where Riley sat.

Below them, on the screen image projected by the clustered camera-eyes on the outside of the vehicle, the audience finally realized that the Strider was not supposed to leave the stage and predictably enough, all the exits to the theater were crammed by massed bodies, preventing the greater crowd from escaping.

Vaughn began raging the second he could speak, “You maniac!” He roared, “You’re going away for a long time for this! I’ll tell the judge to toss you in the deepest, darkest pit he can find and leave you there to rot.”

“I’ve been to that place—it’s called *home*. You know it as Bengla, the site of your glorious victory.” Vaughn shot him a poisonous look, huffing as if the entire affair were just a minor inconvenience like getting stuck in traffic. “Just name your ransom and be done with this. How much will this cost me?”

Riley and the Forgotten Warriors laughed. “Cost? You mistake us for material men, Mr. Jackson. I’ll admit it was fun working for your niece, staging our little protests and rabble-rousing to make you look bad—a reminder of the good old days. I always used to say that Revolution is one part force and two parts Public Relations.”

Vaughn turned his head—the only part of him capable of movement—to look at Carla, “What is he talking about?” She didn’t answer, looking off to the side guiltily. Vaughn had fired enough corrupt board members to know it was as damning as any confession. “He worked for you?” He spluttered, flabbergast, “Why? What could this rabble give you that I could not?”

“Your job,” Riley supplied, “Take it from someone who knows a *hostile takeover* when he sees it. Miss Jackson here gave my people access to the park’s intimate workings—we were to cause a scene in the middle of the Remembrance Day pageant and undermine the company’s confidence in you as Director.”

“Of course, the corporate charter prevents anyone but a member of the family from presiding as Director of the Board—that’s where she would conveniently step in when you were removed from power. Quite the clever little vixen, and it would have worked—had we stuck to the plan of course.”

“Why?” Vaughn asked Carla again, voice shaking. “Why would you betray me? I took you in. I raised you, I taught you everything I knew, I brought you up as my own!”

“You just answered your own question.” She replied coldly. “Because you taught me everything you knew.”

“Not treachery.” Vaughn growled, “I never taught you to betray me.”

“You taught me that my father was a fool,” Carla’s eyes blazed with anger—hatred—“you taught me that his way of thinking and his inability to understand reality got himself and my mother killed. You taught me that we were different, that we had to live by a different set of rules than the common folk he so foolishly embraced and that to survive we must seek any and every advantage we can *whenever we can*.”

Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. “Lesson learned.” Vaughn could no longer meet her gaze, turning his eyes downward with a choked sob, his legendary hardness shattering like a glass sculpture.

“Speaking of learning lessons...” A loud, deliberate cough drew their attention back to Riley. “It seems the monster-making has continued even after the war—all the more reason I must educate your country about the folly of its ways. It’s not your fault; really, you just don’t know what it’s *like* to face monsters.”

“So you’re going to slaughter thousands of innocent people?” Carla’s voice had softened to its honeyed song, but still had a bit of force in it leftover from her confrontation with Vaughn. “Sales counted Benglan customers twenty-percent of ticket sales last Remembrance Day—and this year they’re projected a fifteen percent increase. It is likely that a third of the people in the park are your own.”

She let it hang for a moment before continuing. “Would the great champion of Bengla, the freedom fighter who stood up to an empire, faced an implacable foe the combined might of the rest of the world couldn’t stop, truly slaughter

in his own just to make a point?"

Riley stepped closer, taking Carla's chin gently in his hand, as though she were a child. "My dear Lady, *I'm* not going to slaughter anybody. That's what *your* people do." He sat down in the command chair, nodding at Rami down in the pilot's chamber, a sunken depression in the head of the Strider they occupied.

The Tanuken raccoon sat at the controls, his expression as detached and professional as the chauffer who'd brought Carla and Vaughn to the set that day. "You know where to go. Take us there, and do be careful not to step on anyone along the way. I know better than most how painful that is."

"As you wish," the raccoon replied, throwing the Strider into a steady march, the interior swaying with the motions, as if they had been swallowed into the stomach of a great beast. Much to the visible relief of the passengers, the Strider stepped daintily over the stands and walkways, away from the denser portions of the park and towards the outer edges.

"New Party?" Carla asked of the raccoon. "I didn't recognize you without the goose-stepping."

"Correct." Rami made no acknowledgement of surprise that Carla guessed his political affiliations. "The 88th perseveres through generation after generation—and chooses not to acknowledge the meaning of the word *surrender*."

"You have no idea how long he's been waiting use that line," muttered Riley.

"Curious choice of allies, though." She pressed Rami harder. "What's your stake in this?"

"Revenge, obviously. Pure opportunistic revenge," he didn't even turn around. "However this ends; whoever prevails today, it will end with the most hated enemies of the Empire suffering and dying in agony."

"I'd have thought you *businesspeople* would know pragmatism and compromise when you saw it." Riley added dryly.

"The Strider's been hijacked."

"*What?*" Patterson couldn't have imagined his CO more shocked and horrified than if someone had told him all the Attractions just broke out of their pen and were using Ferris Wheels full of people as hoola-hoops. He pictured the

grey fuzzy jowls of the old terrier quivering as they always did when told bad news.

“I said, the Strider’s been hijacked.” Clamoring into a gas-powered jeep—no heavy weapons but for a grenade launcher under the passenger’s seat—Patterson keyed the ignition and threw it into drive, following the Strider’s insect-like profile in the distance. “I’m behind it and in pursuit. It’s going northeast from Theater-12.”

Fortunately the park had been built with “streets” to allow both heavy pedestrian traffic and security and service vehicles—even tanks if need be. Unfortunately, the streets had been packed *before* the Strider sent the throngs in a panicked flight back to the subways and ferries, the jeep swerving and banking multiple times to narrowly miss pancaking a guest.

A group of young foxes wielding landscaping rocks were working up the courage to smash the window of an abandoned gift store—upon seeing the jeep round the corner they scattered. Not very far, though, they would likely return soon as Patterson vanished from sight—but at the moment he had far greater problems to deal with.

“Repeat that direction again,” Chief Jenkins’ voice was grave, “It’s going *northeast* from Theater-12?” Patterson didn’t blame him; he wouldn’t have wanted to believe he’d heard right, too, considering what lay *northeast from Theater-12*. “And it’s not changing direction? No deviation in course at all?”

“Not at all,” he replied, teeth bore grimly, stomach filled with cold ice, barely able to say the words that came next. “It’s heading straight for the Security Fence.”

Built below the center of the park, dead center by all maps and topography was the Security Control Bunker, the nerve center for the park’s protective services. Here, long tunnels ran to every point on the island to allow rapid dispatch of armored forces should an Attraction get loose.

Though normally quite active, mostly with panicked calls from adults who’d lost their children in a ball pit or thoughtlessly left them in a gift store, today it was a frenzied bee hive of activity. And *then* the call had come in from Patterson about the Strider being hijacked.

“Get me a line to that thing.” Security Chief Paul Jenkins barked—almost literally in that he was a dog, a terrier to be exact. He normally tried to avoid such sounds—it was undignified—but with Patterson’s alarming report about

the Strider's course the last thing he cared about was being a stereotype.

"What makes you think they'll talk to us?" Asked a rookie female collie as she handed him a phone receiver, one specially connected and tuned to the Strider's communication radio.

Installed as a means for the crew to call for help should there be a mechanical problem, Jenkins never imagined having to negotiate a hostage situation through it. "All these psychos have a manifesto they preach at the drop of a dime," he said, dialing.

After a few tense moments, the receiver was picked up. "Hello?" An older male voice said.

"This is Chief of Security Paul Jenkins. Are you the one in control of the Strider?" The conversation was playing over the speakers—the room growing silent as the grave while everyone turned their full attention to the exchange.

"I am," the voice replied jovially, as though partaking in a prank phone call. "Is this the part where I ask for a helicopter and a million dollars in unmarked bills?"

Just what I need: a terrorist with a sense of humor. "This is the part where I tell you that unless you stop that Strider—immediately—we're coming after you with bit of hardware in our arsenal."

The voice on the other end laughed, softly, "But my hostages...would you truly sacrifice the sweet, beautiful Carla Jackson to stop me?" Another laugh, "I won't insult your intelligence by asking the same about Vaughn."

"I'll lose a lot of sleep over it—but if I have to choose between her life and the lives of everyone else on the island, then I will make that choice as need be." He paused, "Don't make me do this."

A pause from the other end, "I believe you truly will. You are an honorable man, a protector others. I wish that I had not spoken to you before having to do this, Mr. Jenkins. I must remind you that this is a full operational War Strider complete with a Sun Cannon."

"While the modern Albion military possesses the hardware to deal with us, your security forces are in fact equipped with the very antiquated tech it bested a generation ago. Though you would sacrifice the hostages to end our threat, I wonder, would you sacrifice your men trying to stop us when you know it to be in vain?"

"As you said, the military can deal with your museum terror easily enough.

And they're just a phone call away."

"True," the hijacker agreed, "But you don't realize just *how far* one phone call away truly is—until you have no phone. Good-bye—if I were you, I'd stay in that bunker. It's now the only safe place left." He hung up.

Snarling in frustration, Jenkins picked up the phone, dialing off the island—straight to his nerve center's big brother on the mainland. *Sorry, Miss Jackson*, he thought, mashing the dial pad and signing her death sentence at the same time, putting the receiver to his short stubby ear awaiting the indignant gruff voice of some Two-star general being punished with baby-sitting the park for a minor offense.

Nothing. Not even a dial tone. Frowning, Jenkins dialed it again. "Something's wrong with this phone," he said to the collie, "I need another."

Before she could answer—or get him another phone—the room went dark. The monitors shut down; the ringing phones went silent at once. A few seconds of pitch black and then the emergency power kicked in, illuminating the nerve center in a blood red hue, but all the surveillance—and communication—machinery still sat dead and dark, so much lumps of metal and plastic now.

Jenkins picked up a line of phones in rapid succession, placing each one against his ear before slamming it down with a curse. Reaching down to his belt he grabbed his radio, pressing the stalk button—a banshee's cry of static was his answer: a jamming signal. Even the on-site tower had been compromised.

"Sir?" The junior officer asked nervously, "What just happened?"

"We just lost all communications," Jenkins said gravely. "Off the island—and on it. We're effectively blind and muted."

"If we can't talk to him, how is he going to broadcast his demands?"

"I don't think he has any demands. This isn't a kidnapping or even a random act of violence—it's a classic shock and awe, —disorient the enemy, cut him off from support, then separate and destroy his forces a chunk at a time."

"He can't do all that with just one Strider can he? It's not even fully armed—surely we can stop it with something fast like helicopters." She took a frantic step sideways, as if torn between staying with Jenkins and running outside to rally the troops from horseback like during the Colonial period.

He swallowed hard, remembering the last thing Patterson had told him about the Strider's course of direction. "I don't think he's going to destroy the park with the *Strider*. I think the Strider is just the catalyst, the key to the *real*

weapons.”

“Oh?” A second later, her eyes widened as she understood his meaning—the true attack had not yet begun. “*Oh!* He can’t possibly be planning to—.”

“I believe he is,” Jenkins looked down at his watch: It was a quarter after three, just fifteen minutes before he would be required to send his daily progress report—affectionately referred to as an “Alls-well”—to Fort Warren. The military took their Alls-wells very seriously and would respond immediately to any lateness or outright absence.

“He’s going to set the BWMDs loose. And if they don’t finish this place off, the military *will* when they come to investigate the lack of communications—assuming the worst—and take all means necessary to ensure our Attractions don’t get off the island.”

Chapter 28

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down

“We’re here.” Rami announced singsong as if ending a car trip to the grocery store. “Target in range, setting maximum charge, angles locked; it is ready to fire whenever you please.” Ahead of the Strider, towering even larger than its frame, stood the monolithic Security Fence, the barrier that kept the Attractions separate from those they had been created to prey upon.

“Don’t do this,” Vaughn pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes. They were the first tears even Carla had ever seen—and she remembered every painful detail of her parents’ funeral. “For the love of God, Riley, don’t do this!”

“Spare me appeals to deities,” Riley’s voiced hardened. “After a few thousand of his people have been devoured alive with a million more scorched to ash and *ten million* poisoned by radiation in the fallout that ruins most of his homeland, a man tends loses his faith quite rapidly.”

A pair of red crosshairs hung over the base of the structure, a shuddering tremor running through the bridge as the mechanical head lowered itself to aim accordingly. “You’ll murder hundreds of innocent people,” Carla said as if it had slipped Riley’s mind. “Is that who you want to be? Are you truly happy as a *terrorist*?”

Riley continued to stare ahead at the screen, at the fence. He didn’t answer immediately, and when he did, his voice was small, tired—far different from the boisterous charismatic rebel everyone knew. “I wanted to be a jade merchant.” He said softly. “That’s who I was *happy* as. I had a family, a wife, children,

and a warm house that was the envy of the neighborhood. I was content then, wanted nothing more. I thought my life was complete and would never change.”

His eyes roamed about the cold, metal interior of the Strider, taking in its engineering and architecture, alien to all but the Tanuken who built it. “Then these *things* came out of the ocean one day—and what I wanted no longer mattered. I discovered that it’s never too late to change.”

Bent frame collapsing into the hard back of the chair as if it were too big, his fingers wrapped about the rod-like firing controls of the Sun Cannon—only the captain of a Strider could use its most potent weapon. “I never wanted to fight, never wanted to kill. Never my choice...”

“But you have a choice *now*.” Carla insisted. “Stop this madness, Riley; it’s in your power to do so.”

The soft persona vanished in a blaze of defiant pride as Riley glared at her sharply, straightening up in the seat. “Yes, it *is* in my power, isn’t it? For the first time, a Benglan has *all* the power. And for the first time, *an* Albion does *not*. For the first time, you are the ones powerless to watch as someone else turns your homeland into a scorched wasteland of death.”

He pressed the trigger.

Eyes burning from the residual heat, stung by the incendiary brilliance illuminating the night, Patterson wanted to look away, but couldn’t, frozen in horror as the Strider belched another fiery blaze from its metal innards. “No,” he cried, “No, no, no!”

The fire arched ahead, igniting tree tops, striking the base of the fence and the surrounding ground around it. From there it spread as a pooling inferno that melted through the supporting pillars of the fence, heat seeping into the ground to the landmines clustered on both sides. They detonated in a far greater display than the fireworks from earlier, orange-red plumes climbing into the sky like the gates of hell opening.

Buffeted by the shockwaves from the explosions and with only molten slag holding it up, the top-heavy fence collapsed, wires snapping and waving free in the night sky, outlined against the full moon like as in death throes, metal groaning as if in agony as it fell, crushing the nearest line of trees.

A gaping wound had been torn in the barrier between the park and its Attractions, like a rift between worlds. “Oh, God.” Patterson moaned. Clumsily,

he fumbled with the radio on his belt dropping it into the floor several times before picking it up, squeezing its talk-button, "Sir, sir! The fence is down, I repeat, *the fence is down!*"

Only white noise answered him—static, scratching, screeching and continuous. Patterson did not notice this, nor did he notice the Strider beating a hasty retreat in the opposite direction after its strike. His eyes were fixed straight ahead, at the gaping hole in the fence, beyond the burning tree line of the forest to what lay beyond.

Shapes were approaching on the horizon—giant shapes, some even blotting out the stars as they approached. No doubt they had been attracted by the sound of the explosion, coming to investigate. Patterson wondered what thoughts were coursing through those skulls the size of houses as the BWMDs realized that yes, the fence was down.

Chapter 29

Rampage

At least the lights are still on. Patterson wondered if the saboteur had been unable or too strapped for time to disable them or was just being sadistic, leaving them on so people would be able to see the BWMDs coming for them. Soon as the gripping horror of seeing the fence come down abated enough to think straight, he'd spun the jeep in a one-eighty and blasted back into the park.

No longer concerned with following the Strider, his primary concern was getting the crowds to the safety of the shelters, subways and ferries. "Holy shit, look at the size of them!" Exclaimed Jonah, another guard he'd happened upon and taken aboard, gasped at the approaching silhouettes.

Recently hired, the leopard had spent his little time here patrolling the carnival section of the park after dark, and thus had not seen the Attractions—up until today. "This is insane! I didn't sign up to fight a bunch of damn Kaiju!"

Communications were still impossible—all the phone lines were dead, the radios were deliberately blasting white noise and even the local cell phone tower had been taken offline somehow. "Everyone to the shelters!" Patterson yelled through his jeep's PA, "Follow the white arrows, follow the white arrows!"

The possibility of the Attractions getting loose had been planned for—and every month there was an in-service drill all Security personnel had to attend. But it had been assumed that at least the shortwave radios would be working, the present lack of coordination making the task nigh difficult. "White arrows! Keep following the white arrows!"

"We're wasting our time," Jonah complained, voice rising pitch until he was

practically mewling. “These people aren’t listening to us. We should get out of here before they swarm our jeep.”

Surprising even himself, Patterson spun, grabbing the other feline by the collar, growling angrily. “*These people* are scared for their lives. We’re the *only* ones who can get them to safety, and if you aren’t willing to help me do that, I’ll toss you right out of this jeep and find someone who can!”

Jonah recoiled as if struck, “I’ll report you for creating a hostile work environment!”

“You can file all the paperwork with the office you like,” Patterson replied, shoving a second bullhorn into his hands, “Once we’ve made sure that there’s still an office to file paperwork *to*.”

Nobody on the other side moved a muscle when the fence blew. The Attractions were just as stunned by the sudden fiery violence as the little people Riley intended them to devour in their orgy of violence.

Gathered on the closest hill to the main theater, the Attractions had sat watching the fireworks show, oohing and ahing at the display, listening to the scratchy music and vocalizations from the distant stage. Then the Strider had sidled up and casually blasted a hole into the fence, taking off as quickly as it had arrived, leaving the young, mostly teenage, performers collectively stunned.

Opinion was split from there. Vixan, The Sphinx and Kat Kong wanted to go into the park, arguing they would never have this opportunity to “explore the smaller world” they were all admittedly curious about, again.

Draco, Tigra and Leo! King-of-the-Jungle, argued that it would be better to stay put and bring the matter up to their supervisor, Gerald. Finally, the Three-Tailed Bear suggested they put the matter to a vote, although even that took time to start as there were some objections that they couldn’t vote without The Fenrisian Warrior and Yotezilla, both of whom were absent.

However, this was quickly overridden by pointing out that Yotezilla had quit, leaving the island that morning, and the Fenrisian Warrior might run to her dad even though she seemed to rebel against him at every turn.

In the end, they voted 4 to 3 in favor of going into the park, Tigra sheepishly admitting that she’d always wanted to see a Ferris wheel up close. “And give it a good spin or two.” She added with a giggle.

Like a smaller bug atop a larger bug, Ian crawled along the top of the Strider, flat as he could manage, its segmented body swaying beneath him with its movements. This high up the wind whipped savagely at the fox's black tipped ears, forcing him to lay them down on his head, turning it sideways as he searched any sort of purchase or shelter before a well-placed jolt sent him tumbling to the concrete far below.

Palms and upper arms sore beyond all measure, he was still amazed that he had managed to not only launch onto the cylindrical leg as it tore through the scaffold, but shimmy up it to the top of the great machine.

Especially since I never made it more than halfway up the rope in gym class, he thought. It was true what they said about life-or-death situations driving you beyond your limits— a lot like Autopilot, he thought darkly. He could not begin to imagine what sort of nightmare was happening behind him with the fence down, fearing a worse one about to happen around him with the Strider in the hands of a determined attacker surrounded by crowds of innocent people.

But rather than burning a trail of death and destruction across the park, incinerating thousands of fleeing civilians as Ian had initially feared, the Strider was moving through the emptiest parks of the park, passing over the juiciest targets of the crowds and attractions in favor of closed avenues and cleared lots for future development.

Could this just be another elaborate scare? No. The Sun Cannon mounted on the Strider was very real, very lethal. But if he didn't know better, he'd have sworn that Riley was trying to *avoid* the spotlight now that he had seized it along with the Strider, Carla and Vaughn.

Ian could see the sweeping dishes on the "head" section, wavering like antennae, collecting sensory data in tandem with its optical camera clusters. Riley was in this to do damage, but neither could it be said that he was lashing out in a random burst of violence. He was too smart, too calculating, too experienced a guerilla tactician just to attack haphazardly.

Coming up now was the Forgotten City resort, a beachside hotel being built on the island next to the ocean shaped like an ancient city raised from the depths complete with fake seaweed all over it.

The sun was rising over the ocean horizon now, casting it into a beautiful, pastel scene that was exactly the reason the Forgotten City was being built. Even the Strider probably shone pretty in this dawn light, Ian thought. Then his stomach lurched forward in his chest as the Strider came to a sudden, violent

halt.

Here? But why—before he could complete the thought there was a series of hissing pops along the Strider’s body, narrowly avoiding falling into one such opening, its topside becoming porous as certain types of cheese.

More hidden weapons?

Missile batteries, the military documentaries used to say, were common armament for War Striders, allowing them to engage warships that would have otherwise used speed and distance to pick them off from a safe perch. Sometimes they were even armed with intercontinental models with rumors that nuclear warheads would have been added to the arsenal should the Tanuken have managed to split the atom first.

Could that have been why Riley was on the outskirts of the park, because he intended to launch a devastating volley into its center? Another sharp lurch—the Strider had resumed its motion, its spindly legs stabbing into the imported sand dumped all along the beach.

Past the patch lay the ocean. The recording from the show flashed into his mind—the Striders assaulting Bengla’s eastern coastline—*rising from the ocean*. The holes opening around him led to *ballast tanks*, not missile batteries.

Riley and his crew were taking their new toy and hostages off the island, to walk underwater and across the ocean floor to escape the island. He meant to slip away in the resulting chaos of Security, the Attractions and eventually the military when they got involved.

And Ian would still be on outside when they went down.

“Watch out!” Jonah screamed hysterically as Patterson swerved the jeep with an oath, narrowly being flattened by a black paw longer than the vehicle itself, slamming it into a ticket-booth/concession stand combination in front of a Merry-Go-Round, a shower of popcorn spilling down over the hood.

They had been on their way down Carnival Row, following a bear with feet the size of tanker trucks, when the giantess had emerged from behind the Flying Swing set and the Ferris Wheel. *How the hell do these things manage to be so sneaky?* Patterson gasped, pulling himself back up in the driver’s seat.

Not wearing seatbelts, thankfully the interior and front sections of the jeep were padded with Patterson being forced to drive at a relatively slow speed

through the crowds, leaving the occupants shaken but unharmed.

At least until the giant vixen took an interest in them, he thought, throwing the jeep in reverse—only to hear tires squealing ineffectively as the front-drive only tires were caught in the debris, suspended above the pavement.

Figures I had to grab the one jeep on the island that wasn't an actual military jeep—damn civilian imitations! If Patterson survived the night, he was going to personally roll this so-called J-3 off the nearest cliff and into the ocean.

Jonah screamed, pure unbridled hysteria, diving to the floor as if he could crawl under the seat. A shadow fell over them, Patterson looking up to see the rest of the vixen crouching over them, like they were some sort of interesting bug, her tail switching side to side. The cat swallowed hard, gunned the gas pedal again, cursing aloud, still nothing!

“Sorry about that.” The voice was loud, but soft, feminine, gentle, it took almost half a minute for him to realize it came from the fox. “I didn’t see you guys—everything’s so small, and it’s all moving at once, it’s kind of hard to keep track of it all.”

The killing machine had her hand her mouth, nibbling her fingertips nervously like a child just realizing he was in trouble for breaking a window with a baseball. “You’re not going to report this to my supervisor, are you?”

Jonah was a gibbering mess, Patterson wasn’t much better, though having had *some* experience with these beings thanks to his few encounters with the Engineered Docility Prototype, he had managed to get to where he could at least still think straight through his gibbering terror.

Patterson took a deep breath, intending to tell the red furred giantess that this was an emergency and it would be best for everyone if she just turned around and went back to her enclosure while Security tried to sort this mess out. Hopefully he could put at least two words together through his chattering teeth.

Two things happened before he could act. First, she reached down for their jeep with one and that could have crunched it like an empty beer can with a well-meaning, “I can help you get unstuck!” She asked sweetly, a young lady trying to charm the policeman out of writing her a ticket. “Would that make us even?”

Second, Jonah popped back up in the seat with the jeep’s emergency grenade launcher, Patterson realizing too late that was what he had been going for. With a death grip on the metal tube and a manic look of wild desperation in his eyes, he shrieked, “DON’T COME ANY CLOSER!”

“*Wait!*” Patterson lunged across the front compartment of the jeep, intending to knock the launcher from Jonah’s hands, even if it went off here in the cabin and killed both of them—it was still better than what would happen otherwise, better for *everyone else*.

But the lunge was too slow. With a *thoompf*, a puff of smoke and a burning scent of ozone and accelerants, Jonah fired a grenade straight out of the top of the jeep and into the surprised fox’s face.

The surprised Biological Weapon of Mass Destruction’s *face*, Patterson thought, a cold, wet pit forming in his stomach as he heard a loud pop and yelp of surprise and pain. The vixen recoiled backwards, more from shock than actual force, blinking her green eyes, rubbing her sensitive nose as she looked to have taken the round directly to the end of her muzzle.

“Ten points, bitch!” Jonah dropped the spent tube and raised his arms like having scored a touchdown. “Security, one, Monsters, zero!” He noticed Patterson’s expression; the orange cat’s face a mix of horror and anger. “What? She was going to kill us.”

A snarl filled the air, deep, primal. As one, both feline security officers looked up to see the vixen’s bright green eyes had darkened to the blackest of black. She arched her back, dropping to all fours. The stance wasn’t combative or even defensive; not that of a fighter, but of a hunter, a predator. Any and all empathy she might have had for them had burned up with the grenade.

“No,” Patterson said quietly, as she reached for the jeep again, “*Now* she is.”

Chapter 30

A Spot of Hope

Captain Piers hated working with coyotes. The day this stopped being an International Police Action and the small flotilla perpetually engaged in what he called Operation Security Blanket reverted to full Albionan control would be the day he personally threw every last Mesaverd sailor, officer and marine off his aircraft carrier.

Starting with the diminutive tyrant right in front of me, he thought, trying not to glare at the brown furred male specimen who only came up to his sternum, Napol Atil. An admiral back home, he automatically expected to be the carrier group's de facto leader rather than its Co-commander, hence why he had stormed into the captain's quarters in full regalia clutching copies of the communication reports already laying on Piers' desk.

"Unacceptable. This is unacceptable! Were you under my command, I would have you shot, flogged and relieved of your post for this lapse! And yes, in that order!"

Screw throwing them off, I'll use the goddamned catapult. Piers pictured the yappy, funny-talking lot launching from the aircraft carrier sans aircraft, waving their arms comically in the air as if they could fly before splashing into the bright blue ocean.

"Action must be taken! Communication with Site B has ceased!"

"I'm not launching a supersonic bomber wing into the middle of our biggest grossing amusement park on the biggest grossing holiday of the year," Piers rubbed his forehead exasperatedly, already picturing the flood of inquiries and nosy reporters who'd swarm him like army ants.

“So you’re just going to *ignore* this potential threat?” Atil’s lower lip quivered. Piers wished Admiral Atil’s successor was still here and not in permanent command of a submarine under the ice caps for cracking a joke about the Mesaverdan President-For-Life’s beard on his heavily monitored Web profile.

Although no less unbearable and pompous, he at least had seen communications with the park go down enough times not to declare Defcon One every time it happened. “It’s probably just a malfunction; the place runs on ancient hardware. Rule of thumb is we give them four hours, *and then* send out the flyboys.”

Atil growled challengingly, but seemed to realize that Piers was not going to just push the proverbial big red button because the phones on an island weren’t picking up. “It is true that your country’s capitalist-hindered infrastructure is outdated and unreliable. You may wait two hours.”

“Three.” Piers ignored the slight of Atil using the word *may* as if he needed permission to act on his own ship. “One hour is how long it takes them to figure out they *have* a problem.”

“Two and a half.”

“Fine,” Piers hissed, knowing he had to let Atil have the final word just to shut him up. “Better get back to your cruiser—your boys might be on our wireless network, browsing with unfiltered search engines,” he let it hang for a moment, smiling nastily, “*Again.*”

The failed hacking attempt to eavesdrop on Albionan’s private communications should have been a greater source of annoyance to Piers, but he loved how Atil puffed up like a poisoned wound every time he brought up the fact that his cyber operatives had also taken the opportunity to peek at sites that were censored back home and download a few gigabytes of banned movies and ebooks.

“Two and half hours, not a second more!” Before stomping out, he glanced at the antique clocking hanging on the wall to the right of Piers’s desk. “And I suggest you set your clocks fifteen minutes ahead to match ours!” Then he was gone.

I really hate working with coyotes, Piers thought.

Patterson leapt from the jeep, not to run—he knew he couldn’t get away, drawing his service pistol, not to kill the giant fox—he knew that was equally

impossible, but to distract her. There were over five hundred people less than a half minutes' jog—far less for the BWMD—away.

Every extra second she takes killing me is a potentially a second someone else could possibly need to get away. Never particularly brave, he acted out of the acceptance of his impending demise and a determination to make it count for something.

Yet she continued towards the jeep as if whatever faint a trace of rationality lingering in her triggered response recalled that it was the source of the offensive attack. Patterson soon saw another reason why—Jonah was still inside, firing widely with his own pistol.

Move, you idiot! Patterson thought helplessly. Jonah chose instead to put the retractable roof cover up. Patterson unloaded his own magazine to useless effect—not even managing to distract the giantess from tearing the roof and roll bar off the jeep like the lid of a pudding cup.

The tip of her black nose bearing a gash where the grenade had struck, the vixen slid her muzzle into jeep to slurp the spotted feline out of the car with a tongue larger than he was. Closing her mouth with an audible clack of teeth meeting, she lifted her head out of the jeep, the muffled screams of the cat in her mouth still audible.

She swallowed and the screams cutting off as her neck ruff shifted slightly to indicate he was gone. Then, licking her chops, she tossed the crumpled jeep aside like a wrapper and advanced on Patterson who was torn between firing his remain shots at the fox, or turning the gun on himself as her extended hand seemed to fill his entire vision.

Before he could make the decision, however, the vixen was struck by a fast-moving tan and grey blur even larger, the air full of canine snarls and growls as the cat became vaguely aware that a *second* giantess had appeared on the scene and was scuffling with the first. A coyote, he realized, and a very familiar one at that,

The Engineered Docility Prototype was back and currently anything *but* docile, tackling the vixen face-first into the Ferris Wheel, the combined weight and force of their bodies snapping the metal supports of its axel and tipping the entire thing onto the merry-go-round, plaster horses and baskets sailing in all directions.

Like a cage match without a referee or rules, the pair of combatants scuffled amidst the twisted wreckage and settling dust, the air heavy with their cries of pain and snarls of anger. *I just hope they're not fighting over dinner!* Patterson thought with a gulp.

The vixen fought like an animal, biting, clawing, trying to tear at her opponent's belly and face, while the coyote hammered her with fist strikes, jabbing her repeatedly in the knees and stomach with her elbows and knees. Even at a respectable distance, Patterson could feel the concussive force of each blow, some of the heavier ones even rippling his fur like a summer breeze.

Just when the thought the fight would split the crust of the very earth beneath them, the coyote managed to wrap her arms around the vixen's neck like a strangulating seatbelt, crushing down on her neck. The vixen thrashed, screamed, bit and clawed, but gradually her movements slowed, then ceased, going limp in her attacker's hold with a strained gurgle.

To Patterson's surprise, the coyote let go of the fox soon after she went limp, rather than smothering her completely to death as expected, sliding her unconscious form carefully onto the ground, almost respectfully. "I'm sorry, Beth." The EDP said after a second or two of strained panting "But I know you're a good person; you would have wanted me to do that."

Jaw-dropped, dumbfounded, he stared at the contrite softness coming from the bloodied living weapon, until she turned her hazel eyes on him and said, "Patterson, right? I saw you in the jeep, tried to get to you first." She tilted her head suddenly, as if remembering something "Wasn't there another guy with you?"

He blinked, remembering it too. "S-she—she—" All he could manage was to point a shaking finger at the splayed out vixen at the coyote's feet. "She—she—she—"

Ashley figured out what he was implying and recoiled visibly, looking sick. "Oh, Beth, how could you?" She looked back at Patterson, "Did she chew?" He hesitated. "*Did she chew?*" She barked loudly. Patterson shook his head frantically, no. She turned her friend partially on her side, like a passed out pledge at a frat party.

"Sorry again." Without further hesitation, she dropped her elbow dead center in the vixen's abdomen, right at her navel. A shudder ran through the fox girl's unconscious body, she heaved once and then a rancid spew of bile and chunks meat erupted from her mouth along with one very traumatized Jonah who began to scream as soon as he could draw fresh air.

"Anyone *else* in there?" Ashley asked.

"Don't think so," Patterson said cautiously, but at the seeing a lack of black-eyed madness in the coyote—plus she was talking to him *and* had saved his life, was slowly starting to consider the possibility that she wasn't going to kill them.

“Good.” All potential reassurance vanished as Ashley dropped within a half a dozen feet of him, causing the cat to take a step back then fall on his rear at the vibration of her propping up on her elbows, staring down intensely. “Now tell me something, where’s Ian?”

Chapter 31

Handling Explosives

“A little to the left, no, no too far! Go back to the right—*slowly!*”

“Would you hurry up? My arm’s getting tired.” Ashley snapped, frustration growing with the little cat in her hand, her arm stretching upward like a crane. Despite his evident fear of beings her size, Patterson seemed to have adapted well to giving orders now that she had agreed to help him.

Probably because he still thinks I’m the “Good” giantess, she thought, fighting the urge to lean against the old, rusted columns of the communication tower that stood about one and a half times her own height. Predictably ancient as everything else here, it swayed and creaked in the sea breeze blowing in off the ocean and up the extinct volcano that was the highest point on the island.

“If that carrier group doesn’t get an answer from us soon, a *tired arm* is going to be the least of your problems.” Patterson scanned the labyrinthine tangle of wires, parts and antennae, a veritable rat’s nest at the tower’s top. “Damn it, they been putting stuff in for years but they never took any of the old junk *out*.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

Patterson flashed a cocky smile even if the rest of his facial and body expression said otherwise. “Unless you have the blueprints for the tower and a repair crew hidden in that parasail-sized bra you’re wearing, you’d best just keep focused on the brawn-oriented tasks and staying pretty and while I handle the technical stuff, Missy Coyote.”

Maybe I should tell him that EDP stuff is a crock of bull, she thought with

a scowl, See if that changes his attitude.

In truth, it wasn't Patterson that was the source of her frustration, but Ian. Specifically that he was missing in the middle of this crisis and nobody knew where he was. Ashley didn't want to be up here on the mountain messing with antiquated technology knowing that he might lost in the panicked crowds, directly in the path of the rampaging Strider.

Or worst of all, in the grasp of one of her friends. Like Beth, they were not so much malicious as intrinsically curious about the smaller world they had always seen but never touched. And, like Beth, they were unaware just how fragile that world was—and the importance of keeping off Autopilot in the middle of it.

That's why I'm so worried. I know how they feel about this because I used to be just like them before I met Ian—before I really had to worry about going Autopilot. As Gerald had put it once during her orientation, "Little people don't heal like us, and even if they did, it's rather hard to heal from being crushed or digested."

She wanted to be back down in the park and start looking—no, that wasn't the right way to put it. Ashley didn't want to search the park for Ian; she wanted to *tear* the place apart until she found him, never mind that that was exactly what Riley and his men wanted her to do.

But he would want me to help...to save as many lives as I could.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath, "I'll see what I can do." Steadying her arm, she lifted him up and to the left, nibbling her lower lip in worry while silently pleading with whatever cosmic power was willing to listen to keep Ian safe while she honored his unsaid wishes.

"All right," Patterson's voice grew low and quiet, "I think this is it." The cat was fixated on a refrigerator sized black box nestled underneath the main dish. Beneath lay a set of cylindrical rods connected by a mesh of red and yellow coiled wires. "Yeah, pretty sure this is what's causing all the interference."

Ashley cocked her head, squinting to get a better look at the ebony colored contraption. "How do you know?"

"Because," Patterson swallowed several times in rapid succession before he could finish the sentence, "There's a bomb under it."

"Oh?" Far from afraid; unless there was a nuclear warhead on that thing she had little fear, Ashley was instead quite curious. "If they got a bomb here, why the magic box? Wouldn't it be easier just to blow up the top of the tower?"

“It’s not for the tower,” his voice fell flat. “It’s for *us*.”

“Us?”

“They set up a secondary,” he explained, still watching the device as if it might explode just from hearing them speak about it. “Militants use them all the time: set off one bomb to cause casualties then a short while later off goes a *secondary* to take out emergency responders and any Good Samaritans who try to help.”

“But why not blow the Tower?”

“It took me a while to notice the bomb,” Patterson, mouth set itself in a grim line. “It’s nestled in there pretty tight amongst all that junk, I only spotted it because of this unconventional angle you’re holding me at.”

“And even without the Tower, IT and Maintenance might be able to jury-rig a temporary alternate solution—but if the technicians and engineers were to come up here to try to fix the Tower, not knowing it was booby-trapped...”

“Riley puts communication down and the loss of the repair crew makes sure it *stays* down.” Ashley finished for him. “Wow, you tiny folks are way ahead of us when it comes to killing. Yet *you* are scared of *us*. Funny, isn’t it?”

If Patterson also found this funny, he kept it to himself. “Then we—I—have to disarm this thing right here, right now.” He began to reach for the bomb, but suddenly found it a good thirty feet away as Ashley brought him back down to face level, a determined look on her face.

“Forget it,” she brought him back down face level, securing her thumb about his chest as if worried he might spring from her hand climb back up to the device. “You’re a rent-a-cop, not an EOD technician. You mess with that bomb and I’ll be picking bits of you out of my hair, not a fun time for either of us.”

“We don’t have time to debate this.” Unlike most of Security, Patterson didn’t take offense at what she called him. Then again, given what she’d learned of him in their time together, it was quite possible that he would have *liked* to be nothing more than living sign post.

“The longer communications stay down without putting in a call to Control, the more likely we’re going to end up with a bloodbath between my coworkers and yours.”

“They’re not trying to hurt anyone, they’re just curious.” Ashley growled in defense of her friends. Though she knew they had to go back across the fence for everyone’s sakes, she still felt protective of her fellow Attractions and wished

she could have encouraged their exploration that mirrored her own experiences.

“We felines have a saying,” Patterson’s voice turned dry, “Curiosity often begets disaster.”

“Do you also have a saying about how stupid it is to fire peashooters at people a hundred times your size?” She asked snippily. “Honestly, the best thing the pseudo-army could do right now is order the troops to stand down until Gerald can round them up. Worst you’re looking at then is some *inadvertent* damage, but at least nobody gets eaten.”

“Not a bad idea,” Patterson admitted, clearly recalling how Beth had only turned homicidal *after* being shot at. “I’d make that call right now—except that to do so, we have to get that piece of tech *off* our tower.” He looked meaningfully up at the top of the tower. “Which is why I need to go back up there, risky or not. By now, there’s a recon flight on the way. When it arrives and sees that hole in the fence we will be royally screwed.”

“I’ll tear it out of there, I’m plenty strong enough.”

“The bomb is part of the device and the whole thing is welded to the main support columns,” he shook his head, “You’ll likely bring the whole thing down with it. On-site disabling is the only way.”

“Patterson, this is your *life* we’re talking about here.”

“This isn’t just *my* life we’re talking about here. We’re talking about hundreds, possibly thousands of other people. I have to take that risk.”

Just what Ian would have said. Ashley sighed. “Fine. But be careful. If that bomb goes off...”

“Yes, yes, bits of me all over your pretty little face.” Patterson snorted as her hand leveled him back up underneath the jamming device and attached explosive. “Trust me. I’ll be getting the worse end of this deal if this bomb goes off.”

Not if my Autopilot goes off with it, she thought darkly, knowing better than tell Patterson as it was one less distraction he needed right now. Fortunately, Ashley at least had experience with controlling her the urges and had managed to do so even while wading through a minefield, getting shot by artillery and through two-fights with other BWMDs.

It still didn’t make it any easier. If anything, it was worse to know what was coming, worse to know how strong it would be and how easily you could lose yourself with just a single moment’s lapse. *Kind of like defusing a bomb...she*

thought as Patterson produced a multi-tool from the pocket of his cargo pants and set to work on the wires.

“Okay,” he talked to himself as he worked; Ashley’s superior hearing picking up every word as well as the notable tremble in his voice. “Remove the outer casing. Done. All right, yellow wire gets cut first—at least that’s how it works in the movies.”

“And we’re off to a great start.” Ashley muttered as she pictured her plain manila colored shirt and pants splattered with red and brown. “Would it help if I hung you upside-down by your ankles like in the movies, too?”

“—Ignoring female input, isolate and cut the detonator’s power cord.” Patterson stretched the yellow wire out. “It’s *always* the yellow wire,” the shaking of the multi-tool’s scissors against the wire suggested he was not as confident about this as suggested.

“Patterson, this is a *really* bad idea—.”

Snip, went the scissors. Both cat and coyote held their breaths. Nothing happened; Ashley let hers out slowly in relief. Perhaps she was wrong; perhaps the determined little gate guard *could* disarm the bomb.

“Shit,” Patterson swore as a loud chime was heard.

Nope.

The front of the bomb lit up with a green display of Benglan characters while at the same time the country’s national anthem played in an eerie encore reminiscent of the Remembrance Day pageant. Though the characters were indecipherable to the pair raised on Common language and writing, the meaning of the sudden series of rapid changes was all too clear: a countdown.

“That’s it, you’re out of there.” Ashley said.

“No, no! Let me stay!” Patterson pleaded, “I can fix this! I just need to cut another—.”

Enough of this spy crap, Ashley tucked Patterson against her stomach, curling her top half over him. At the same time, her free hand rose up to the top of the tower, not to tear the bomb out of the structure, but to enclose her hand tightly around it, shielding the rest of the tower from the blast.

The sound itself was muffled by her closed fingers, but that only intensified the force of the explosion itself in the confined space of her hand, the equivalent of holding a grenade. Her palm erupted in fire as the shockwave rippled through

her hand and down her arm, as jagged bits of metal pierced the soft flesh like razors.

Worse than even the landmines she'd stepped on months ago, worse than the tank-killing rounds fired at her, Ashley thought her hand had been dipped in molten lead. Pulling her hand away from the tower, she gaped at the bloody mess of her palm, burned and shredded with bits of fur, skin and shrapnel intermixed.

Fire. Pain. Hurt.

Tears welling in her eyes, her mind was assaulted by a mix of knee-jerk responses, some natural, others engineered. Memory, awareness of her surroundings and instinct all flooded in at the same time to form a confusing, decidedly *lethal* cocktail.

Ian was gone, she didn't know where he was, if he was safe, if he might even be—

Loss. Sadness. Helplessness.

And Carla, she *had* to be involved somehow. Surrendering her future—and her Ian—to that manipulative little bitch hadn't been enough for her it seemed. She should have crushed that stinging insect when she had the chance.

Anger. Vengeance. Rage.

She looked down at the wide-eyed cat in her good hand. Patterson watched her expectantly, likely flashing back to the reaction a much smaller blast had had on Beth. Undoubtedly, he was wondering just how supposedly “safe” the safe model truly was.

Prey. Hunger. Desire.

No, no, no! Don't do it! She couldn't do this, she was *better* that.

But what had being better accomplished? What had these higher standards Ashley set done but lead to pain, lead to others taking advantage of and manipulating her? Patterson's heartbeat was increasing steadily against the finger over his chest. A little more intensely and she might even be able to hear it.

Why not indulge just this once? Why not be who she really was, just one time when there were no witnesses?

Because this is not who I really am! Like a member of Gerald and Calla's race, Ashley tilted her head to the sky and *howled*, long and hard, venting her

frustrations, rage and pain. Her vision turned red, and for a second she feared to be losing herself, but thankfully, the haze slowly cleared until her body and she found herself breathing heavily, simultaneously relieved and disappointed—to still be aware and in control.

“Guess you were right.” Patterson said quietly from a mile away, a quiver in his voice, the tone of someone who had just narrowly stepped out of the path of a train and not yet fully realized it. “That looks pretty nasty. I think I can treat it with a med kit in the jeep.”

“Forget my hand,” She growled through a heavy pant. “Did I save enough of the tower to call off the military?” Even though it still stood and the explosion had been contained, there was still a great deal of obvious damage visible on scorched metal.

Before Patterson could answer, there was a low roar from the distance. The pair snapped their heads up to see a line of silver objects streaking through the clouds and over the island. The recon flight had arrived.

“We’re about to find out,” he replied ominously.

“All we know is, there’s a gap in the fence and we’re detecting *massive* heat signatures moving through the area.” The voice of the lead pilot in the recon flight sounded like he was watching a train crash—horrified but unable to look away. “Judging by the size of the signatures, we can tell that some are large groups of people—others are groups *of* large people.”

“Are you positive all those signatures are genuine?” Piers’ claw tips dug into the metal armrests of his chair until one of them chipped clean off. Infrared imaging was a relatively new technology, in service less than two years, and despite repeated assurances by the, still prone to bugs and false readings.

“We got a few ghost-blips down in the channel as we flew out here,” the flight leader admitted, “Knew those were bogus. So I took us in for a visual confirmation.” The normally cocky, cavalier toned pilot’s voice turned hard and grim. “No mistaking it, over a dozen BWMDs is free and clear with unrestrained access to the rest of the facility.”

Piers knew what he was thinking: if he was the flight leader who’d have to order an air strike on his own soil and against the very civilians he was sworn to protect. And I’m one the one who would have to order *him*, Piers thought; feeling every eye in the tower on him, even those who would normally be glued to their consoles and instruments.

The silence in the conning tower of the carrier was palpable, or it would have been but for the sounds of equipment and the back and forth chatter between air controllers and the fighter/bomber wing presently taxiing out onto the deck in preparation of launch.

“Copy that.” He said at last, “Hold until further notice.” A collective heavy sigh of relief swept the tower—they weren’t going down in history as the crew operating the ship that committed the most controversial act in military history since the decision to *make* those damn creatures in the first place.

Piers sucked in a deep breath himself, holding it for ten seconds before he let it out to take another. And another. This assignment was meant to be a *paid vacation* in terms of risk versus reward. Captains and admirals came here for an easy command—well it would be easy without the Mesaverd demanding constant updates and assuming there was a rundown in discipline because there were no floggings before the masts occurring in public.

“This doesn’t leave the bridge and it sure as hell isn’t getting broadcast to our ‘friends’.” He said, voice unwavering despite the tense level of stress squeezing at his chest. “If Atil gets so much as a headwind of this, I’ll have every last one of you reassigned to the coldest base in the arctic circle I can find.”

Atil would flatten the island. Even if their military’s assurances that their ships’ armaments were nonnuclear were true, he still had enough conventional ordinances between the single cruiser and pair of destroyer escorts to manage the task.

The Mesaverd feared the BWMDs almost religiously, viewing them as perversions of nature through the warped sciences of a culture they had been taught to see anathema. Yet they need our genetically engineered crops and livestock so their much vaunted “World’s Largest Army” doesn’t starve, Piers thought.

Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that a gag order would not be sufficient to keep the wool pulled over Atil’s eyes. “The Mesaverd ships are leaving the battle group,” a feline officer reported suddenly, turning pale under his black fur. “They’re making a beeline for the park.”

“I thought you said our lines of communication were *secure* again!” Piers roared in frustration. His bridge staff looked at him uneasily. Growling heavily, he grabbed the ship-to-ship and called the *People’s Salvation*, Atil’s flagship. “Napol, return to formation *now*. That’s an Allied command!”

His only trump card might be the political officer’s enslavement to bureaucracy, the willingness to adhere to all rules and regulations—

“I cannot obey that command, Captain.” He replied coldly. “Not while a threat to the homeland is present. I believe that *supersedes* your authority.”

“It’s an *island*, they can’t get off!” Through the windows of the bridge he could see the trio of warships turning away, like spear tips pointed at the collective heart of the civilians who had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“And I will ensure that they never will.” Atil replied coldly, “You may assist us in this task, or you may stay out of our way. But do not try to interfere with my duties—any action against us will be considered an act of war. This is your only warning.”

He cut the line.

“What do we do sir?” The tac-officer asked quietly.

“Seems we’ve been given an ultimatum,” Piers felt his voice waiver as the full gravity of the situation dropped on him like the carrier’s massive anchor. “Sacrifice thousands of our citizens’ lives to that pint-sized warmonger—or start the Second World War.”

Chapter 32

Ultimatum

Like a crab, the Strider scuttled across the bottom of the ocean, ballistic tanks and stilt-like legs keeping it from sinking into the deep mud like a treaded vehicle. Indeed, many of the Tanuken's early efforts developing their signature war machines ran into just such a problem. So this is what they saw before they invaded Bengla, Riley thought, unhappily aware of the irony in him being in the command chair of a Strider.

The piercing black gloom of the bottom of the ocean was displayed on the bridge screen—the Strider's lack of a viewing pane in favor of image capturing cameras eliminating a potential weak point for the crushing water pressure in the submarine environment. For the first time in countless millions of years, the inky blackness was pierced by a bright light—the Suncannon steadily at work.

Tired of Vaughn's pleas and sobs and wary not to let the shrewd Carla see and hear too much—Riley had ordered his hostages taken to the back of the Strider. "Progress on the tunnel?" He asked Rami. The Tanuken was pleasant and chipper as ever, like a musician with an instrument as he operated the weapons' station now that the "commander" had activated the Suncannon.

"Not long. We estimate a breach in the next five minutes or so. It'll only take a pinprick; water pressure will do the rest." A laugh, "It helps that they dug it closer to the surface than they were supposed to. Honestly, this whole place is like a house of cards, one blow and the whole thing caves in."

Like an undersea welder working on the underside of a ship or the submerged portion of a drilling platform, the Strider bored down through the seabed into the outside of the subway tunnel that from the island to the mainland. Though fiery in appearance, the Suncannon was in fact plasma based and thus could

burn as easily underwater as above.

“Three ships approaching from long range.” Reported Sykes, as former radio operator and part-time sniper during their time in the dense jungle as guerillas. His small, thin frame had been perfect for scrambling up trees to hang temporary antennas and alternatively take out Tanuken officers.

“Two destroyer one cruiser class.” Now, with a pair of headphones larger than his entire head, he manned the sonar station, listening to the surrounding waters.

“Kill the sonar. Don’t want them even suspecting we’re down here.” Riley knew about the babysitters, his release of the BWMDs was necessary to keep them from pursuing the Strider once he left the island. Even with the secretly applied stealth plating, the Strider was *still* an eight-story tall mechanical insect and easily tracked—and destroyed by those with the right equipment.

“They’re Mesaverd.” Sykes said quietly, still listening, “I can tell by the sound of their engines.” His green feline eyes had dilated much like one of the BWMDs in the midst of one of their hunter-killer frenzies that Riley saw every time he closed his own.

Knowing what his crew were about to ask, Riley fired off a preemptive “no. We’re not taking them out.” Every man in the room hated the country of Mesaverd as much as they did Albion, some even more so. It was the Mesaverd military that had ultimately decided to drop the nuclear bombs on Bengla to “contain” the BWMDs by wiping them out—along with millions of innocent bystanders caught between the devil and the fire.

In fact the Mesaverd *had* been their original target, the Forgotten Warriors planning to infiltrate and sabotage a few of their shoddily constructed and dangerously unstable reactors. But then Carla had contacted them, seeking their help in moving up the corporate ladder by disgracing her uncle, thinking them starving dogs eager for scraps off the table.

If there was one thing being a guerilla fighter had taught Riley it was to always be ready to swap plans at a moment’s notice and hit the juiciest target with the most obvious chance of succeeding. That didn’t mean everything was forgiven with the coyotes by his men or even himself. *But the mission comes first, always.*

“We can vent our ballast, time our rise until they’re overhead then *melt* the bottoms right out of them. The Yellows will never see it coming.” Sykes’ voice dropped low, a subconscious habit from spotting targets. Once he had something in his sights—figuratively or literally—

“I said no,” Riley snapped. “The battle group is fixated on the BMWs—thinking them the true threat—and has not been told of us thanks to my grandson’s efforts. They must not learn there is a second enemy in their midst for as long as possible.”

How long that would be was up for guess. The bomb on the tower might work to delay them—or it might be detected and defused. This could happen in hours, a day, or five minutes ago. Have to always expect the worst, he reflected, And be ready to act on any opportunity at a moment’s notice.

Riley indicated the image of the plasma bore. “This is why we are here, why we are doing this—so they cannot just evacuate through the channel tunnel.” Riley had learned to live with targeting civilians long ago—they were always collaborators after all—but he didn’t enjoy it. “The military *must* be fully committed to the crisis on the island and not looking for us.”

Misdirection—his greatest weapon during his war against the occupation. Set a barracks on fire—then raid the armory on the other side of the base for weapons and more explosives. Kill a low-ranking but popular member of the puppet government with an arranged car crash to draw out his higher ranking superior who would have to make a cursory appearance at the funeral.

“We have a breach.” Rami announced. On the screen, a swirling torrent appeared in the glowing light as countless thousands of gallons of water poured into the channel tunnel, widening the breach until the seabed below them collapsed inward.

“That should buy us some time.” Riley nodded. “Take us to shore. We can do no more damage here.” He paused then added, “by ourselves.”

“Patterson to Control, come in! Do you Copy?” I better not have gone through all that for nothing, the cat thought, gritting his teeth as he grimaced with worry—and simultaneously cringed as a nearby scream was cut short with a wet crunch and snap of bone and sinew being torn by fangs half his size.

I’m never going to stop have nightmares about today; he thought as Ashley polished off the last of the goats and baby deer, setting her sights on the llamas like the second course in fine dining. “This is Officer Patterson. I’m at the Petting Zoo—what’s left of it.” He muttered under his breath as the llamas stampeded pitifully to the other end of their pen as the coyote giantess stepped over the fence towards them.

With a thundering crack and a splintering of white wood flying in all di-

rections, the front half of her foot caught the fence and tore it apart. “Oops,” Ashley huffed in embarrassment. Though she attempted to pass it off as a result of clumsiness, truthfully Patterson had noticed a certain sluggishness to her movements recently, which was why they were here in the first place.

Ashley’s metabolism had kicked into overdrive to power the accelerated healing process for the hand injuries she’d sustained “defusing” the bomb combined with their steady pace across the island. This might not have happened had she not just gotten out of a life-or-death brawl with another BWMD combined with a long sojourn across the park.

Having to choose between stopping for a potentially twelve-hour long nap or a decent meal to fuel the quick-burning fire, Patterson had reluctantly agreed with her on the latter. At least until it turned out that would require more than just letting her empty out a few hotdog carts.

I forget they need *live* food, he thought with a shudder. And that they acted like it was no big deal, too. No, worse than that, he recalled squeezing his eyes shut only to hear the *moaning* begin shortly afterwards, they *enjoy* it.

Pausing only when he brought up the fact that they didn’t have permission to eat the Petting Zoo animals, Ashley had countered with, “If I don’t, someone else will. And I’m *starving*,” in a matter of fact manner. At that point his self-preservation since had flared up bright as the Strider’s Suncannon, a little voice in Patterson’s head telling him the *last* place he wanted to be was between her and breakfast.

It was the *casualness* of the act that disturbed Patterson the most. He could have understood it as a desperate, last ditch measure. Maybe. But it was how Ashley sucked the gristle and blood off her fingers like the sauce and juice of a hamburger at any fast food restaurant as she finished her meal, even salivating visibly as her stomach growled upon first seeing the animals.

I almost started thinking of her as a normal person, just bigger, he shuddered a second time.

Patterson’s thoughts grew progressively darker. What’s going to happen when all the *others* get hungry? He thought. Ashley wouldn’t stop defending her friends as innocently curious but as he had learned when dealing with the public, people got cranky when they got hungry.

A squawk of static interrupting his brooding, Patterson heard an unfamiliar female voice say, “Officer Patterson, this is Control. Heard you on the other channels, but this is the only one that has working two-way.”

“Can you reach anyone off island?”

“Negative,” the frustrated tone of her voiced indicated she had been trying nonstop since realizing there were working communications.

Better than nothing, he thought, wishing they could have saved more of the comm. tower. “Good to hear a friendly voice at least. I need to speak with Chief Jenkins immediately. Is he there?”

“The Chief went out with an armored convoy to try to organize and evacuation back here. We’re going to try to get as many people below ground as possible before the Strider comes back, the BWMDs snap or the military goes Zombie Containment Mode on this whole place.”

“I thought the plan was to get everyone to the subway?”

“The tunnel’s flooded. Nobody’s getting on or off without a boat or by swimming.”

“Flooded?” Patterson stopped himself from adding, *But how?* Clearly, somebody up there hated this place. “What about the ferries?”

“Sold the last one five weeks ago in order to grease up the budge for the recent new performances. The argument from accounting was that we didn’t need them while we had a subway tunnel under the channel.”

Typical. “All right, fine. Where is he, I’ll go find him in person.”

“Zone 56,” she replied, obviously having been told rather than shown. “Candy Mountain,” she added quickly, “He told me everyone was more familiar with that name.”

Candy Mountain was dead center of the park, visible from all corners, and while not made of actual Candy, it was very close to the size of an actual mountain. There was even a slalom course on the far side people could go skiing down in the winter—or had been, until it was closed indefinitely after a guest struck a metal lollipop at a downward speed of fifty miles per hour leaving them severely hospitalized.

The most visible rally point—albeit pink. Smart, Patterson thought, even if Jenkins couldn’t contact anyone by radio, a few flares fired from the top would be visible to anyone anywhere else, guard and guest alike.

“Did she just say Candy Mountain?” Ashley asked crouching behind him, brows furrowed in worry, having crept up while he was distracted somehow. A small trail of crimson leaked down the side of her mouth, just a small smudge from her perspective—a veritable river of blood and gore from his,

“Yeah,” Patterson said uneasily, staring at her bloodied fangs. “Chief probably picked it so he could use it as a command post.” Despite everything, Patterson almost smiled as he pictured the jowly old dog yelling through a bullhorn atop a tank under the shadow of a giant, pink gingerbread landscape with fake frosting as snow.

A pause as she looked to the side for a moment then back. “That could be a problem.”

Of course it was. Patterson sighed. “Why?”

“My friends and I talked about it a lot,” she said slowly, “We argued a lot about whether or not it was *real* candy.”

“Of course it’s not real candy,” he snorted, “It gets over a hundred degrees at the peak of summer—the whole damn thing would melt if it were real.”

“That’s what I always said,” she frowned, “But even so, we kind of had an agreement going about Candy Mountain.”

Patterson didn’t even want to ask, but not waiting, Ashley continued. “We always said that if the fences ever came down, the first place we’d go was there to see if it was real and put that debate to rest once and for all.”

So that’s where they were all headed—along with Chief Jenkins and over half the Security on the island which would included armored vehicles, rocket-laded helicopters: lots and lots of explosions to trigger Autopilot every which way.

“If you’re finished with your meal and all the batteries are recharged,” he said, “We need to get there fast as *your feet* can take us there.”

“Agreed.” Ashley said, scooping him up with renewed energy. She surveyed the remains of the Petting Zoo, torn mesh pins, broken stables and scattered pools of blood and gore like a serial killer’s childhood. “Good thing we found this place, right?”

“Terrific,” he muttered glumly, not enjoying this part of the long talk he’d be having with the Chief when they got there.

Whether or not he could win a fight with Atil’s ramshackle squadron wasn’t the issue—the aircraft carrier’s anti-aircraft batteries alone could send each and every one of the outdated hulks to the bottom of the channel between the island and mainland, never mind its aircraft and escorts.

It was what would come *after* that had Piers going through his fourth cigarette in a row, having ordered the remainder of the fleet to pursue the small squadron at top speed, vast prows and wakes upturned by their iron bows pushing through the water determinedly.

He had ordered the remainder of the battle group to follow at a safe distance and not reform around the rogue squadron under any circumstances. For further precaution, he had ordered a zigzag pattern to their movements just in case.

They have the bomb, he thought watching the three grey shapes on the crystal blue horizon steam towards thousands of innocent lives. The Mesaverd have the bomb and they love reminding all of us that they're the only ones who have it and they aren't afraid to use it. The international treaty banning the development of "super weapons" did not include those already in use.

Mutual distrust between the nations had prevented any sort of international effort, too concerned they had been about spies leading to each country pursuing its own super weapon projects after conventional weapons and war machines failed. Most of these projects went nowhere, but two of them had succeeded, horribly so in Piers' opinion.

Mesaverd had split the atom and harnessed the energies within for destruction, while Albion had turned to their best geneticists and bioengineers to produce a flesh-and-blood counter to the Tanuken's war strider. The latter had been used first with the excuse of lacking radioactive fallout then the former against the consensus of the Coalition because no one would argue with a nuclear power.

"What are the odds they have nukes?" He asked his XO flatly. The shorter grey furred fox, still young, it was just his natural coloring, was already appraising their potential targets in the event this turned into a shootout.

"They can't seriously think a few unguided rockets and deck guns will be enough firepower to conventionally decimate an island large enough to hold a major city—or kill over a dozen BWMDs that would likely survive said decimation anyway."

His XO replied, "We inspected every inch of their ships—that they allowed us to inspect—and they were expressively prohibited from arming their vessels in such a manner at the risk of *increasing* the sanctions already imposed after they shot down Albion Airways Flight 345 last year under suspicion of being a spy plane when it accidentally crossed their border." He paused, "I'd say it's almost certain."

Piers nodded grimly, "Atil is a megalomaniac, but not an idiot. He wouldn't challenge us unless he had an ace in the hole. A nuclear warhead fired against

our battle group would be as devastating as it would against the BWMDs.”

“Wonder why he cares so much about the BWMDs.” The XO mused, “Even if they could get off the island, they’re surrounded by the breadbasket of Albion, lush farmland and sweeping forests and interspersed cities. *We* would get the worst of this accident.”

“Assuming this truly was an accident.” Piers recalled the mutual paranoia shared by the two nations who bordered one another. “Perhaps he’s worried that we intend to release them into Mesaverd to damage their own infrastructure and pass it off as an accident.”

“He thinks we did this on *purpose*?”

“Tragic and negligent but not malicious and it could not be proven as grounds for war. For all Atil knows, we’ve secretly given the BWMDs orders to seek out and destroy as many of his country’s nuclear facilities as possible to cripple their ability to stop an invasion. The loss of a thousand or so of our own civilians would be a small price to pay for such an advantage.”

The grey fox snorted, “Because that’s just what *he* would do.”

“Indeed.”

“But are *we* going to do?” There was an increasing note of desperation and panic in his voice.

Desperation and frustration that would not be abetted in the slightest with what Piers said next. “Only thing we can do.” He turned to his comm. officer, face grim, mouth in a firm line. “Open a channel to Atil—tell him that we’ll take point on the island.”

“So we *are* opening fire on our own soil.”

“We will use the most precise fire possible.” Piers replied, “Hopefully we can minimize civilian casualties with selective targeting. But this tumor must be removed. It’s only a question of whether it will be done with a scalpel or a sword.”

Chapter 33

The Battle of Candy Mountain

To the distance observer, it would have appeared that Candy Mountain, the towering monolith of pink and white dotted with ceramic and metal strawberries and various sweets would be some sort of final bloody contest between Man and Monster. Security and Attraction alike faced off uncertainly, standing at the ready like gunslingers about to duel.

Don't understand why they're all so obsessed with this thing. Patterson thought, sparing a moment to appraise the artificial mountain. Perhaps from afar it had looked attractive, but even from a few thousand feet away one could see where the white and pink paint was coming off to reveal the drab gray metal structure underneath.

A long streak of light caramel brown appeared to run down the far backside of the mountain, looking relatively new, Patterson not recalling having seen it before. He'd heard there were plans to turn Candy Mountain into a volcano that would erupt in root bear complete with a syrupy chocolate "lava flow." *It's going to be red if we can't figure out a way to diffuse this,* he thought, turning his attention back to surveying the combatants.

On the Eastern side sat a row of armored vehicles, a flight of helicopters hovering at the ready. Gun rotaries spun in preparation while cannon turrets rotated up and out for a deadly barrage of artillery. Across from them stood little over a dozen giants, a mix of species and color, less resolved and more nervous, clinging together instinctively for protection.

“Well, this is a fluster cluck waiting to happen.” Patterson subconsciously avoided the use of profanity around a female as his father had taught him. Sitting on Ashley’s shoulder, they surveyed the scene together, concealed from both sides’ view by Moriarty’s Massive, Monstrous Mansion: a haunted house boasting, “Ten stories of Terror!”

“It’s ‘*Charlie Foxtrot*’ if you wish to be polite,” She corrected with a grin, “Gerald told me the other words.”

“Did he also tell you how to choke out people?” Patterson spoke idly with her, the pair chitchatting to downplay the jittery nerves clawing at them. The cat was unsure if the pounding in his ears was his heart or Ashley’s thundering within her own mountainous chest that he struggled not to stare at.

Giant or not, she was still a pretty girl, he thought, with all the alluring components present. The neckline of her shirt was ripped into a ragged plunging V from the earlier fight. Further adding to the distraction, she had torn off the bottom of her shirt to make a bandage for her hand as well as the lower legs of her pants to allow greater freedom of movement.

“Wasn’t *all* he taught me, but yeah, I’ve spent the last couple of months seeing him after hours for *special instruction*.” She swelled with pride. “He said, ‘If you’re going to keep jumping on killing machines locked into rampage mode, it would behoove you to have a means of subduing your target besides a blunt object to the back of the head.’”

“How did *he* learn all that?” Patterson couldn’t recall any Self-Defense-For-Big-People courses being offered at the local community center.

“He learned it when he was in the military, of course.” She gave him a pointed look, though turned her head carefully to avoid knocking him off, “And *small*.”

“So he is one of the originals.” Patterson had long been suspicious, given Gerald’s partially misshapen face. BWMDs did not get scars, but there were still some with such markings due to having received them during previous lives as normal-sized folk, as if their own bodies were protesting against the injustice against them and nature itself.

She chortled lightly, “You know how it’s hard to picture your parents, your teachers and your boss as kids once because they always towered over you? Imagine what it’s like thinking of them as standing shorter than your *ankle*!”

Patterson’s voice dropped low as a new thought occurred to him. “Is that why he wasn’t at the Remembrance Day pageant?”

Ashley nodded, or rather, bobbed her nose to avoid making him uneasy about being shaken off. “Brings up a lot of bad memories for him. He said he couldn’t stand to see a propagandized version of the nightmare he lived through and remembers all too well.”

In the distance, they could hear the scratchy blaring of PAs, ordering the nervous teenage super weapons to disperse peacefully and likely having little effect being that the technology was old and the recipients of the message too frightened and confused to pick out said message even with their enhanced hearing.

Patterson spoke first this time. “I guess we have to split now. Can’t have you just stomping up to Jenkins with everything about to boil over.”

Ashley nose-bobbed again, gently taking him off her shoulder with one hand and holding the cat in front of her face with the unmistakable fondness of a newly grown bond. “Good luck with your people.” With her other, she set down the jeep she had carried across the park, Patterson adamant with her the entire time not to turn it upside down or even vertical.

Now, however, his voice was softer and more reserved, saying almost respectfully, “Same to you, ma’am.” Smiling good naturedly, he climbed into the seat and keyed the ignition. “You know, you’re not so bad. I used to wonder if that EDP stuff they told us was a load of crap, but you really *are* different, aren’t you?”

He laughed, “Don’t think I could have made it this far if you were standard issue.”

“I sure am,” Ashley said, voice flat.

“But I don’t wanna go baaaack!” Tiffany “Tigra” Wilson whined. Her sapphire eyes were so wide and deep in pouting Ashley was worried someone might think she was going on Autopilot. “We just got to Candy Mountain; we still have to see Space City and Wonder Town!” Her lips curled up and she pouted cutely, “*You* always wanted to see Wonder Town; you told me so a million times!”

I knew that would come back to haunt me some day, Ashley fought the urge to sigh, keeping her shoulders ramrod straight, her ears erect and her posture leaning forward as her mother did when going from gentle to firm with her and her sister back home. “This is not a field trip,” she growled, “This is a *disaster* in the making and it’s only pure dumb luck that’s kept Security from shooting

the lot of you. We need to go back over the fence, *now*.”

Behind her, Patterson had pulled his jeep up alongside a larger, more heavily armed one. In it sat an old grey furred terrier with fuzzy brows and furry jowls. Security Chief Jenkins, Ashley recognized, thankfully seemed to be buying Patterson’s explanation that the EDP had arrived to round up all the wayward Attractions and lead them home.

Past the row of museum piece war machines sat a row of rust-red Bloodhound charter buses commandeered from their normal duties and repurposed for evacuating guests, vendors and the ride staff responsible for pressing the go-button over and over again all day. If Security was nervous about the close proximity of the Attractions, these people were one good scare away from turning into a stampeding herd.

Swiveling her right ear back she could make out the relief in Jenkins’s voice as he complimented the junior officer: “—had you pegged for a lazy good-for-nothing cat who wanted to just snooze in his guard shack all day. Wanted to fire you a dozen times, but your dad—my war buddy—kept insisting you were worth something, said you’d do right when needed. As always, I could never see what he was getting at, but as always your old man proved me wrong!” He thumped the cat on the back good-naturedly, Patterson grimacing with a strained smile.

Now if I could actually accomplish something on my end, Ashley refocused on the Attractions. Lacking the age and authority of Gerald or even Calla who enjoyed the unofficial position of Boss’s daughter, Ashley couldn’t simply order the other kids to leave.

And they *were* kids, she thought, herself and Calla being the oldest at seventeen and eighteen, Tiffany and the others being a mix of fifteen to sixteen years old with Beth the youngest at fourteen. “You have to go back,” she repeated, “Or have you forgotten about all the hardware pointed at us?”

“Their funeral,” muttered Bruno, the large brown ursine individual breaking his normally quiet demeanor.

Ashley’s stomach twisted as she watched a similar look of defiance passed around and taken up among the others. Damn, she thought, they figured out just who had the upper hand here and it wasn’t the private army. Though Security had enough firepower to individually overpower one or two Attractions, fighting a group was a whole other story.

She could see the sentiment spreading through the others—they *liked* being out and they knew there was little the likes of Patterson and Jenkins could do to stop them. “Have you not been paying attention to the skies?” She said at last,

“The military has been buzzing overhead for an hour. You might not be afraid of those antiques pieces,” she lowered her voice as much as possible, praying nobody was close enough to overhear, “But what about the modern stuff?”

That had them until Bruno spoke again, “They’ll kill all their own people in the process.”

“They nuked us before,” she replied quickly, “They killed way more Benglans than us, but they did it before, they’ll do it again.” She paused, “Is that really worth getting to see Wonder Town?” Speaking of wondering, she thought, I wonder if I’m going to have to take him on to get the others to listen.

Though younger than her by two years, Bruno was still larger and stockier with longer claws. His short, stubby muzzle twisted into a scowl as a low guttural sound rose in his throat. Ashley tensed, readying herself both to fight *and* to resist going Autopilot but to her immense relief, the bear’s shoulders slumped in surrender. “Good while it lasted,” he huffed.

Tiffany gave him a reassuring hug with one arm around his massive shoulders. “It was. It really was.” One by one the other Attractions voiced similar sentiments of compliance or nostalgia.

“Thanks, guys.” Ashley sighed in relief, and then turned to walk back to the convoy, slowly and as nonthreatening as possible, reminded of the time she had done so with Ian on her shoulder. Ready to face the unknown together, he had stayed with her the entire time, even though he could have easily slipped out or run away on his own.

Ian...

Once this is finished, she promised him silently, I will find you. And if you’ve been hurt, I don’t care by who, by Carla or Riley, there won’t be a wall high enough or a military strong enough to stop me from breaking every tiny bone in their little bodies!

The internal oath of bloodshed boosting her confidence, Ashley strode forward with renewed purpose, ears detecting a steady cocking of weapons and locking of slides, but at the same time she heard Jenkins ordering his men not to fire. “One bullet goes free,” he bellowed, “And I’ll shoot you myself!”

Glad one of them can think straight; she understood now why Gerald trusted the dog, Jenkins deserved it for reasons beyond merely serving in the same unit. Whatever was yet to happen, it looked like this particular confrontation was about to end peacefully and without wild, panicked firing at a charging, berserk giant.

That's what it looked like....

Ashley was less than halfway to Patterson, halfway to Jenkins and the total disarmament of this tense situation, when there was a cry of alarm from the rear of the convoy—the civilians on the buses.

She heard a roar as the caramel spread on the south of the mountain sprang to life and rolled down the side amidst a flurry of haphazard shots revealing itself as a lioness, Mila. Ashley recognized her former friend on Autopilot and apparently having chosen subtlety over brute force by hunting as an ambush predator instead of a charging berserker.

As if stalking a herd, she lunged at the rear of the convoy and snatched up a single Bloodhound bus in her paws. "Hold fire! Hold fire!" Jenkins, Patterson and a number of other officers bellowed at emergence of an evident hostage situation.

I wish it were only a hostage situation, Ashley thought, stomach twisting as she spied Mila's claws and muzzle were already stained red. Whatever had set her off had happened elsewhere, perhaps with an isolated patrol or Security checkpoint, but the damage still remained.

Turning, Ashley looked at the rest of the Attractions staring in horror and confusion at the nightmare unfolding. Still gripping the bus, Mila swept back up the decorated slope of the artificial mountain and through a veritable forest of lollipops, taking her prey somewhere private to feed. Within a matter of seconds, the bus would be cracked open and cleaned out like a sardine can.

Ashley looked frantically at the rest of her companions. "Nobody, move a muscle!" She ordered them, "I'll deal with this."

Stunned by the impending carnage they froze in place like statues, eyes wide in horror. Only Tiffany, ever the chatterbox, managed to pipe out, "But we can help." No doubt they were picturing grabbing and pinning Mila as they had Ashley and Calla during their TV room brawl.

Except there were no little people at risk then, no nervous security grunts with guns who might shoot and set them off. "Too risky," Ashley replied. "You don't have practice holding it off."

"And you do?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Before they could muster further questions, Ashley broke into a dead run, hoping that Security was fixated on Mila or still remembered the order not to fire as she barreled down on the line of tanks and artillery.

As expected, all of this went out the window in the face of an apparent charging giant coyote girl whose piston-driving legs must have shook and thundered against the ground. Small arms fire pattered harmlessly off her legs and stomach while poorly aimed grenades spiraled in all directions hitting everything *but* her.

Mortar operators scrambled to load shells while tank turrets and rocket batteries swiveled to track her. *Déjà vu*, she thought with an exasperated sigh. But unlike the last time, Ashley had anticipated this, had a plan and was ready to act. “FRIENDLY FIRE! FRIENDLY FIRE!” She yelled.

Inefficient as it was, Security’s training still had its roots in military culture, sharing some of the terminology and phrasing, Gerald had explained before mentioning the two-word phrase Ashley thought she’d turn blue in the face shouting. “FRIENDLY FIRE! FRIENDLY FIRE!”

But it did the trick. The same knee-jerk reactive mindset that had Security ready to blast her full of holes also caused them to hesitate as the thundering female titan suddenly sounded strangely like one of their own caught inadvertently in the crossfire. The heavy ordinance remained silent and even the small arms fire stopped but for the occasional shot here and there.

Aware of the various tears and rips in her shirt and clothing Ashley hoped there nothing inappropriate showing as she vaulted over the tanks. *Maybe that’s the real reason they’ve stopped shooting.* She swallowed, reaching the base of Candy Mountain and scrambling up it on her hands and knees.

Mila saw her coming up the slope and arched her back with a hiss, gripping the bus in both hands, crunching the front and back ends, thankfully not enough to compromise the structure but effectively caving in the doors and trapping the occupants who moved within as a jumble of shadows behind the tinted glass.

This is not going to end well, Ashley thought as she neared the peak, topped appropriately with a cheery the size of her head. The lioness wrenched it off and threw it like a ball at the coyote who batted it aside with her arm, surprised at the lightness, hoping it didn’t land on anyone.

She’d gotten the jump on Beth, who had been much younger and decidedly smaller. Mila was a year her junior, but bigger and stronger and knew Ashley was coming, intending to defend her “kill” from another predator. She growled, warningly, making it clear that if Ashley came closer there would be blood.

You might kill me, Ashley growled back, climbing closer, But you’ll have to let those people go to do it.

True to her prediction, Mila let go of the bus—it slid down the flecked white

slope a short ways before stopping with a crunch up against a pair of chocolate kisses that poked up from beneath the white ground like pointy boulders. And also true to her prediction, she lunged toward the coyote, locking arms around Ashley and bearing her down the mountainside.

Had they been on level ground, Mila's greater size and weight would have ended the fight in seconds, but they were rolling down the side of Candy Mountain, snapping lollipops from their aluminum stems and breaking steel candy canes in half. *Have to stay up here*, Ashley thought, struggling to stay mentally oriented, head spinning with dizziness as they fell. *I'll lose for sure otherwise.*

Grimacing at the sharp points of jagged metal poking and tearing at her, Ashley trapped the lioness's left arm under her own while wedging her right forearm up against the big cat's throat, keeping her teeth at bay. The fake snow being made of coarser substance than its real counterpart allowed the fighting giantesses to brace their legs against what would otherwise be slippery surfaces, finding purchase on various bluffs and protrusions of fake rock.

Below them, vehicles and foot patrollers alike scattered, anticipating the crushing fall of one or more combatants, to say nothing of the debris raining down from the struggle. Yet another reason Ashley couldn't fight Mila on the ground—unlike with Beth, this was a crowded area where two flailing bodies would likely crush many innocent bystanders before they could get out of the way.

Mila swiped at her with her free arm. Ashley ducked her head inward to avoid the raking claws but this put her closer to the lion's needlelike fangs that snapped inches—feet if one got technical about it—from her sensitive ears and face.

To make matters worse, her footing chose to give way, or rather; the ground did with a crunching snap. What Ashley had thought to be a sturdy bluff of orange and yellow candy corn turned out to be a hollow cone of plaster, falling away in several broken pieces.

Still holding onto Mila with one arm, Ashley pulled her down as she fell in an avalanche of flesh, fur, plaster and metal, flailing the entire way both at each other and at their surroundings. The paved streets—thankfully bare, Security having taken the hint and backed away from the base—flashed towards her.

Only going to get one shot at this. Striking the ground, Ashley threw her right shoulder back, rolling with the force of the impact to get on top of Mila. Putting her full weight on her right arm, she pressed down onto her cream colored throat.

Against another canine in the thralls of instinct, the pinning and throat hold

might have led to submission, but the lioness fought not to dominate, but to kill. Whether due to some held over reasoning bubbling to the surface or pure luck, Mila bucked her hips underneath Ashley, throwing her forward and causing her to lose her grip.

Off balance and unprepared for the sudden upheaval, Ashley tumbled back—leaving Mila free to wrestle her way up top. Their positions now reversed, Mila’s claws sank into Ashley’s arms, pinning them to her sides as her head dipped, the coyote unable to do little besides tilt her chin down in a futile attempt to shield her vulnerable throat—

Then suddenly there was a mass of black, blotting out the sun as two strong lupine forms barreled into the melee, pulling Mila off Ashley and shoving her roughly to the ground while a familiar gruff, authoritative voice said, “I see you’re in trouble again, Miss Preston.”

“Gerald!” Ashley gasped in relief as her supervisor peeled the lioness off her, holding her arms as she yowled and spat in protest. Mila bit him in the shoulder, but he may as well have been made of iron for all the effect it had other than a strained grunt.

“And don’t forget his lovely assistant.” Calla, the second wolf present, said in her traditionally snide manner, grabbing Mila by the legs so she couldn’t kick or find a bearing. “I’m the one who went and found his ass.”

Releasing a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, Patterson slumped down in the chair of his jeep, having driven straight back amidst the mad scramble during the mortal combat atop Candy Mountain. “Worst is over,” he said quietly, letting himself forget that they still had an unreachable alerted military *and* a renegade Strider on the loose to deal with.

Burned out, he could only imagine how Ashley had to feel, Patterson closed his eyes, wishing he could just drift off, fall asleep and this whole nightmare would be over by the time he awoke. But before he could possibly pursue this goal, Patterson was jostled rudely awake by an electronic squawk from the glove box of the jeep, shooting up in the seat, hearing muffled sounds from inside the metal compartment.

Opening the lid of the box, out tumbled the headset he had been wearing during the Remembrance Day pageant in case. Patterson had shoved it in the glove box when things went sour and thought nothing more of it—the set was destroyed and until very recently, all communications had been down.

But apparently, the stage pieces were among the few bands still working as the headset squawked again, but fainter as a familiar young voice said, “This is Ian Michaels, can anyone hear me?”

The fox from the show was alive! Patterson had secretly suspected he was dead and had spent the trip over to Candy Mountain trying to figure out how to break the news to Ashley without prompting a grief-stricken rampage.

“Michaels?” Patterson said eagerly, pushing in the talk button. “What happened, where are you? Your ten-story tall, potentially-psychotic girlfriend is here and is worried sick about you.”

This should have promoted a quick denial of such a relationship, the classic *She’s Not my Girlfriend* response. “Ashley’s here?” Was what Ian said instead, concern evident even through the scratchy connection. “Is she okay? Is she hurt? I know the fences are down and the military’s been scrambled—.”

“She’s fine. She’s safe.” Safe as anyone can be right now, Patterson added silently. “But where are you?”

Ian didn’t immediately answer. When he did, his voice was low and steady. “Listen very carefully;” he said, “I’m inside the Strider. And I know what Riley’s planning to do.”

Chapter 34

Twenty-One Gun Salute

Like storm clouds gathering off a peaceful shore Jenkins could see the naval ships gathering. At their present distance they were small and almost nonthreatening, tiny like toy boats in some child's bath tub. If they were aiming cannons and arming missiles, he thought, we won't know it until the first volley is fired, and by then it will be too late.

Not if I have anything to say about it, the old terrier set his fuzzy but still square jaw in a determined. Standing up in the jeep like one of the generals of old, he raised the radio to his face and spoke not to one of his men or to the Control Center, but from the park's Special Effects department.

"Are we good for this, Ed?" He asked.

"Yeah," the surliness was audible over the scratchy old radio. A fluffy terrier like Jenkins, Ed differed in that, perhaps as a twist of irony, he had been born with a snowy white fur coat that was constantly singed and smudged with spots and flecks of black from pyrotechnic displays. "I'm going to catch hell at our next Budget meeting for this though. Do you have any idea how much money we're about to burn up?"

"Your noble sacrifice will be remembered for all time," Jenkins replied dryly.

"Sir, what should do we about *them*?" Nervously asked his driver, a bear, quite short for his people but still large enough to fill the entire front compartment of the jeep.

"Them, who?"

“*Them.*” He jerked a thumb upwards.

Oh, them, Jenkins thought, unpleasantly reminded of the weapons close by that he had forgotten in worry about the ones off in the distance. *So worried about the weapons out there I forgot about the ones right here.*

BWMDs were off to the side, huddled around Gerald, his daughter and the so-called “docile” model from the shows who had the lioness bound up with lengths of wiring taken from the remains of the destroyed fencing.

Mila, he’d been told was her name, had come to, and according to the older wolf Jenkins had gone through basic training with before his “transfer” to an unnamed special unit, was in a transitory state between Autopilot and free will.

Eyes still dark and incapable of speaking, she was curled up in a tawny ball, sobbing and shaking. The crimson stains on her claws and teeth flashed in Jenkins mind: he would not relish learning where it came from.

“I think they’re not a threat anymore, son.” He said softly.

“But—.”

“I said, *they’re not a threat anymore.*” Jenkins bellowed forcefully. Turning, around, he glared at half a dozen other lower officers lined up to the side of his jeep undoubtedly intending to express similar concerns. “We’re not shooting a bunch of kids if we don’t have to, understand? No matter how big they are.”

They understood. The only question now came from a tall, snowy white female cat with piercing blue eyes. “Should we go back to evacuating the guests and noncombatants below ground?”

“Sure,” Jenkins said wearily, “If we can convince them to go.” Not all, but most of the civilians present had gathered at a distance that was anything but safe from the BWMDs, snapping pictures and gawking, more curious than afraid. “Get them back on the buses.”

Glad for something to do, the Security personnel scattered and made for the guests. People hating being helpless in a crisis, Jenkins reflected. They would often follow any command or suggestion just to feel like they were making a difference, doing tasks for tasks sake.

In truth, he thought as the radio blared with the pickup signal again, *The only task that matters right now is Ed’s.*

“Payload ready,” the other canine replied, still surly and unhappy at the prospect of that budgeting lecture. “Five hundred thousand smackers set to

burn up on your command. Hope this is worth it.”

“Light it.” Jenkins ordered.

Like during the show the night before, the sky over the park lit up with bright incandescence, white streaks erupting from the ridgeline of the mountainous section of the island. Launched all at once instead of piecemeal in a typical script, the fireworks burst all at once, and multicolored patterns of everything from sparkling twists to crackling swirls.

Except this wasn’t a celebratory display but an engineered signal out to the ships in the channel, informing them that the island was still under control—and, he thought sardonically, to please ignore the BWMDs stomping around outside their pens. At the sight of the display, they snapped their heads to the sky in surprise, but while the explosions were certainly startling, they were thankfully distant—and familiar as everyone had seen fireworks before—to avoid tripping anybody’s Autopilot.

Did it work? Jenkins thought, hopeful, Did we convince the fleet to stand down?

A second later the ships answered both his thoughts and the park’s rocketry display with a larger, far more destructive version of their own.

“Ten seconds to detonation,” the XO counted in a monotone, emotionless voice, the bridge of the carrier silent as a grave, one of thousands that such a spread of ordinance would result in being dug. The Mesaverd, always leading the charge had fired a full ten seconds before the Albion fleet, nonnuclear at least, Piers thought, for what small consolation that was.

Why would they risk sanctions and international outrage when we are about to go down as the bad guys? Though the squadron could inflict considerable devastation with each volley, ultimately it would be his greater portion of warships that would bear the blame.

“Detonating now.”

Or they would have bore the blame were said ordinance to actually land on the island. The windows of the conning tower filled with a series of bright flashes as the Albionan ordinance intercepted its Mesaverdan counterparts with the remainder set to pass harmlessly over the island.

Silence continued to reign after the last explosion subsided, leaving blackened

clouds staining the crystal-clear blue sky that. “Any of that make landfall?” Piers asked, voice unwavering.

“Registering two impacts in the upper mountains, but everything else was either destroyed by our remote detonations or fell harmlessly into the channel.”

The room erupted in cheers and claps, Piers and his officers thumping each other on the back and even embracing despite regulation being against it. It was several minutes before the radio operator managed to call attention to the fact that they were being hailed from the Mesaverd cruiser.

“Put him through,” Piers said triumphantly, “And I’d take the headphones off, if I were you son. It’s gonna be loud.”

Loud was an understatement. Atil’s enraged voice blared into the tower, as if it would physically rattle the windows and equipment as the passing of a recent jet had when its hotshot pilot decided to buzz the tower. “I demand to know what sort of treachery this is! What have you, done, Piers?”

“Yes, about that.” Piers said in his most contrite manner, “It appears that we have encountered a digital malfunction at our end. Specifically, our firing systems and tracking computers have become—rather inexplicably—linked to your own. And our ”

There was a pause. He imagined the Mesaverd admiral spluttering with a line of drool running down his chin, “What?”

“Simply put, our, inferior weapon systems are taking your own firing data and projecting it into our own vectors.” Since they were communicating by voice over, Piers was tempted to grin in a juvenile manner, but remembered his junior officers could still see him.

He did, however, allow the left end of his lip to perk slightly. “It seems that, inevitably, any shots you fire will be intercepted by our own. An amazing coincidence, I simply cannot imagine how our systems would become so intricately linked.”

Actually, he could do more than imagine. Cyber-ops go both ways, you little bastard, he thought, Maybe you should get a decent firewall before you start a hacking war.

“Then do not, fire.” Atil sneered. “Let us cleanse this outbreak ourselves.”

“But with what? Your three vessels cannot possibly have enough remaining ammunition to thoroughly level the facilities—and you’ve already expended so much. It’s not like we’re talking *nuclear* armaments here.” And it’s not like we

couldn't intercept those as well, he added silently.

Another pause. Atil, angry and aggressive but never a fool, realized he had run out of hands to play. Launching a nuke now, even at the Albion fleet as he undoubtedly wished he could, would accomplish nothing beyond embarrassing his country and likely resulting in his joining his predecessor on that submarine below the polar icecaps when it all rolled downhill.

When he spoke again, it was slow, controlled with a calm, tranquil fury. "Is there any way to desynchronize our weapon systems?"

"Well, of course we can," Piers gave a manufactured sigh, "But I fear it will require a total reboot of both systems and a complete wipe for each. That will likely be a six hour job for us—twelve hours for you." Then, just to twist the knife further. "It seems we'll be delaying that strike for quite a while."

Chapter 35

Belly of the Beast

Crawling through the interior of the Strider's service tunnels like a tapeworm in the bowels of a cow, having managed to pry open an outer service hatch before it submerged, Ian was struck by just how robust and arcane its design truly was despite its outer appearance as a technological marvel. On the inside, the main chamber of the Strider was a series of catwalks suspended above moving parts, loud, noisy cogs, gears and belts whirring, clicking and clanking.

Electricity crackled through coiled wirings and jumped between orbs held aloft on spires like in a mad scientist's lab. Capacitors stuck out at angles like glass knobs, filled with fluids of various colors and purposes he couldn't begin to understand.

The bridge, armory and crew quarters were quartered off into modular chambers instead of as true rooms. It was as if the Strider was a living creature and its crew/passengers were but microbes performing functions within the organs of its body.

The Tanuken Empire's isolation from the rest of the world had produced a line of technology, perhaps even a line of thinking, in many ways alien and divergent from what was familiar to most people. *I suppose we look the same way to them*, Ian thought as he reached the end of the service tunnel and looked for a way out. *Maybe that was how they rationalized invading.*

The sound of voices drew his attention to a quartet of tigers half leading/half shoving two Fennec foxes—Carla and Vaughn—down the narrow corridor leading from the Strider's control bridge. "First class seating this way," joked one of the Forgotten Warriors, "We're out of peanuts, though."

Laughing, they separated the pair—Carla stoic and impassive while Vaughn looked dejected and broken—locking them into a pair of rooms that could have only been crew quarters.

From where he watched, Ian doubted he could free them. Riley had a double guard at each door, and at any rate, the modules could be seen from each other meaning it would be a simple matter for the first pair to alert the other. However, peeing up passageway, he saw that the maintenance tunnel went directly over the crew quarters.

Five minutes of slow, careful shuffling later to avoid tipping off the guards—thank God the Strider’s insides were so noisy—Ian found himself peering down through a mesh covering into Carla’s cell,

Vaughn’s unfortunately, was not reachable. It was unfortunate because Ian would have preferred the surly director he could reliably predict and knew was self-interested but not a traitor, over his wildcard niece. Presently, Carla was pacing around on the floor of her cell, no doubt trying to think of a means to charm her way out of this.

Yet she didn’t show any outward sign of distress. There was no weeping, no uncertainty or frustration evident on her small face that could have been carved from marble. Imprisoned within an ancient war machine on the bottom of the ocean by terrorists, Carla outwardly appeared no more concerned than if she were attending the opening of one of her family’s new hotels.

But she still jumped when Ian rapped on the grating, her tail fur fanning out comically like a white tipped duster. Blinking her dark brown eyes in confusion, she glanced left and right, even down as if thinking it were one of the gears below her slipping out of its track, before Ian rapped again and said, “Up here.”

Her jaw dropped as she stared upward, “Ian? What are *you* doing here?”

“It’s a long story,” Ian said reflexively, though in truth he could have summed up his tale in a matter of few words: Fell on the Strider, found a way inside when it went under. Having had to cut down many scripts, he had developed a knack for brevity and quick wit. “What’s Riley planning?”

“How should I know?” Carla placed her fingertips on her chest in an innocent, clueless damsel-in-distress pose. “Why would he tell his hostages anything?”

Ian gave her a look. “Because he’s working for you. Because he couldn’t get control of this thing without *someone* on the inside helping, someone high up, someone who would have to spend considerable time around him and was clever enough to learn his personality and inclinations.”

He paused to let her accept that she couldn't deceive him about her involvement with Riley. "And because he would want to let you know how royally you screwed up and how he was about to drag your family name through the mud."

Carla stiffened, and there was an almost physical transformation as she reverted back to the hard-as-nails posture he had seen her in before announcing himself. "Very well, then." She said calmly, evenly. "Riley has no interest in what happens to the park."

"It's all just a convenient distraction for him, a way to keep Security and the military occupied while he gets the Strider out into the ocean."

"You're saying he did all of that back there just to cover his escape? And steal a giant piece of history?" It sounded more like the plot to a weekend cartoon.

"Think about it." Her gaze narrowed, "He was once a guerilla fighting against the Tanuken's occupation force. In his mind, that war never really ended, the enemies just changed." Carla began to pace again. "Or rather, his theater of operations has changed. Before, Riley's band was focused on getting the Tanuken army out of his homeland. That was accomplished, but at the cost of widespread devastation from both the BWMD deployment from Albion and the Mesaverdan nukes that followed."

"In his mind, he is still fighting to defend his homeland from foreign powers—and, like any guerilla, Riley knows that the key to weakening his perceived enemies is to attack not their troops, but their infrastructure."

Everything fell into place for Ian, then, oddly enough to the tune of the patriotic music and the script he had read aloud in the pageant listing each great country's hat, its unique qualities and achievements on the global scale. "He's going after Albion's farms," Ian said quietly.

"And through them, everyone who depends upon Albion for food, *especially* Mesaverd, loathe as they are to admit it." Carla agreed darkly. "With the Strider's ability to burn large swaths of land and then retreat into the ocean to avoid reprisal, Riley will cut a path of destruction up and down the coasts."

"Can he really do that with just one Strider?"

"Perhaps he will be stopped," she admitted, "But even if they catch Riley later, *right now* he has a prime opportunity to march ashore and torch the nearest town, I believe it will be Barberry, the site of that lovely dinner we had, and get away before the military can be called in. A lot of people will die regardless of whether Riley's caught by tonight, a week, or in ten years."

“We can’t let that happen,” Ian said, after Carla finished her explanation. “We have to figure out some way to disable this thing from the inside.” He looked about the dark interior of the crawlspace as if the schematics to the Strider’s critical components were drawn on the wall complete with directions to them.

And in fact they were, the builders having put a map every hundred or so feet in the crawlspace and junctions. The instructions were written in Tanuken, but arrows pointed towards each section of the Strider’s structure with a helpful picture drawn in to indicate what said structure point contained.

I’m guessing that big fire picture is the Suncannon’s internal workings, he thought, staring at an elongated tube running into the center of the Strider which a lightning bolt indicated to be the power plant. *Maybe I can turn the whole thing off.*

“That won’t work.” Carla said, as if reading his mind.

“Why not?” He protested, “I’m inside the maintenance corridors, and Riley and his goons don’t know I’m here. I could go disable the engine, maybe even the Suncannon.”

“And then Riley *will* know you’re here, catch you, repair whatever meager damage you can cause since you came here without any type of explosives or tools, and resume his course with nary a hindrance.” Carla shook her head. “This isn’t the movies. You’re not going to magically sabotage his doomsday device and take out his men one after another while they make stupid mistakes chasing you around.”

Annoyed, Ian huffed, “If you have a better idea, I’d love to hear it.”

Furthering his annoyance, Carla gave her sweetest smile. “I’m so glad you asked. As I told you, Riley’s biggest advantage at the moment is that nobody knows what he’s up to, where he’s going. Security knows about the Strider, but the military does not know, thanks to Riley’s severing the landlines—”

“How did he pull that off, by the way?”

“Mike’s his grandson,” Carla answered, ignoring his shocked reaction and continuing without pause. “Security has no way to communicate the situation and both sides will inevitably be trying to figure the puzzle with only half the needed information. Invariably, they will both get it wrong.”

She took a deep breath, the smile fading from her face. “Therefore, our best chance at averting disaster is to fill in the blanks for them.” She cocked her gaze at him. “Do you still have your headset from the show?”

Reaching down to his pants pocket, Ian produced the microphone in question. “I tried it already. We’re too far down and surrounded by metal.” He wanted to tap the metal wall for emphasis but didn’t as it might have alerted the guards.

“Good,” Carla acted as though she hadn’t heard the last part. “They took mine when Riley had me searched after being brought on board.” She shuddered, as if reliving the experience of being pawed and groped over, “Dirty old lechers.”

“Carla...”

“Yes, yes....you want an explanation.” It was clear from her tired tone that Carla didn’t enjoy giving them, not truthful ones at least. “The Tanuken built powerful transponders into their Striders—they needed to communicate with each other and ships on the surface even while on the ocean floor.”

“As this Strider was supposed to originally be a showpiece in the Remembrance Day pageant, there were adaptive connections installed. Connecting your headset to the main grid should boost the signal enough to reach Security *and* will clear the interference preventing communication with the military.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“It’s a simple plug-in system.” Carla repeated. “You’ll recognize them because they look *normal*.” For someone who primarily acted like a sweet, cultured princess, Carla could sound incredibly snide when she wanted to.

“All right.” Ian conceded, turning to look at the diagram on the wall again, following the arrows to the very rear of the Strider where an old-style box radio and earphones had been drawn. If this Strider was a recent creation, its technical manuals were seriously behind the times. “Carla,” he said softly, “If this works and the military learn what’s happening...”

“I know, they can’t exactly ‘arrest’ a giant mechanical bug with the power to scorch a tank battalion to ash even in this day and age.” Sadness could be heard in her voice. “But I will have paid for my crimes, at least.” Her long ears drooped, “I’m sorry you got caught up in this. I never wanted to hurt you, Ian.”

He snorted, “Just my ‘gimmick’.” He hoped Ashley wouldn’t blame what happened to him on the world she wanted to join so desperately like a fairytale mermaid, and that she wouldn’t become jaded, bitter and cynical like Riley and Carla. “My *friend*.”

“Seems I didn’t know either of you as well as I thought,” she looked guiltily down to the side. “A pity we’ll never get that second date.”

“Yeah,” Ian turned to begin crawling towards the rear of the Strider, leaving her alone to her thoughts. “A real shame.”

True to Carla’s words, it took Ian longer to get to the thankfully empty rear section of the Strider and climb out of the crawlspace than to locate and connect to the actual radio system itself. In the midst of its rampage, it was easy to forget that the Strider had been nestled backstage with maintenance and cleaning crews going over it.

While the Suncannon had been concealed, likely due to Carla’s interference, everything else was labeled with marker writings on the wall and sticky notes. The terminal for communications itself was a square black box with a yellow sheet of paper stuck to it where someone had scrawled PLUG RADIOS HERE.

I’m only going to have one shot at this, Ian thought, his hand hovering over the socket with the plug. *Riley will probably know this is being used*. But if Ian could get through to whom it mattered, then what happened to him, and Carla, was second priority.

It was a strange feeling, knowing you were going to die. Having grown up watching video after video about the global war and the efforts to contain rampaging BWMDs, Ian had often fantasized about what it might be like to give his life in some selfless heroic manner as his father had given his life, leaving his son with nothing but memories and an old hat.

Now, faced with the reality, all he felt was a sense of incompleteness. Yes, this had to be done, but there was nothing glorious about it. The circumstances leading up to this were not some epic good-vs.-evil conflict, but rather a series of sad mistakes, of a million little bad decisions, any of which that could have averted this disaster if they had but been made differently.

Did Dad feel this way, right at the end, too? Rolling the wheel of the headset’s power switch all the way forward, Ian placed the headset on his head and winced as there was a squeal of static and a loud beeping affirmative in his sensitive canine ears.

“Hello?” He said experimentally, “Hello? This is Ian Michaels, can anyone here me?”

Nothing, at first, Ian fearing he had just wasted their chance at stopping

Riley. But then a confused and familiar voice from the other said, “Michaels? What happened, where are you? Your ten-story tall constantly potentially-psychotic girlfriend is here and is worried sick about you.”

Patterson? Of course, the headset was still set to the frequency for the show performers, and as the guard assigned to attending the stage, Patterson’s own set was still set to pick up Ian’s. A greater concern pined at him. “Ashley’s there? Is she okay? Is she hurt? I know the fences are down and the military’s been scrambled—”

“She’s fine. She’s safe.” The cat was notably less concerned for the ten-story tall living weapon of war than Ian was. “But where are you?”

Snapped back to his own situation by the question, Ian spoke in a steady voice. “Listen very carefully. I’m inside the Strider. And I know what Riley’s planning to do.”

Patterson’s end suddenly went dead. Before Ian could call again, the line picked up, fainter, scratchy as if pushing through a dense fog from far away. Then a new voice, deep and commanding said, “This is Captain Richard Piers of the *A.N.S. Endeavor*. How did you get this frequency?”

And there’s the military.

Security must have been using the main emergency channel, the same channel the military would logically be scanning for activity, for the all-important show as most of the radios were so old they only picked up two or three channels spottily at best. For once, the park’s services cutting corners was a good thing.

“This is Ian Michaels,” he repeated, “I work for Monster Tours, at Colossal Fun and Giant Thrills.” Saying the park’s full name, its third name in as many decades, out loud always felt nerdy and awkward, hence why nearly everyone referred to it simply as the Park. “Am, I, uh, talking to one of the navy ships out in the channel?”

“You’re speaking with an aircraft carrier serving as the command ship for a battle group that’s part of an international peacekeeping force. So, yes, this is *one* of the navy ships out in the channel.” He paused, “And did I hear you correctly, son? You’re a tour guide, and you’re *inside a Tanuken War Strider?*”

“Um, yes sir.” Ian could tell by the flabbergasted nature of the captain’s voice this was seriously unexpected news. *Why do I get the feeling that they omitted the Strider being in the show on purpose?* The only way Riley’s job could have gotten any easier was if the town of Barberry offered to burn *itself* down.

Before either Ian or the Captain could say anything else, Patterson was back on the air, his voice high pitched and cracking as if he were in great duress. "All right, all right, I pressed the talk button. He'll hear anything you say." Following this was a high-pitched scream, a wordless yowl of terror, the only coherent words being, "Oh, God, oh God, not so close, NOT SO DAMN CLOSE! Teeth! Teeth! TEETH!"

Then a voice Ian thought he'd never hear again for sure cried out in sheer exuberant relief "Ian. You're alive!"

"Ashley," he said with a mouth as dry as the plains of Mesaverd. "You're with Patterson?"

"He's letting me use his microphone." She sounded embarrassed. "And he's still wearing it."

Ah, so that explained Patterson's hysterics. Ashley must have been holding the cat, headset and all, right up to her mouth like a microphone. "I guess I should just take it from him."

"Yes, he'd probably appreciate that greatly." Ian knew from personal experience just how terrifying her lovely face could be when you found yourself before, massive canine jaws that could crush your whole body to paste with teeth the length of your legs.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she sounded almost as if she might sob with relief, but held it back, being well practiced in controlling impulsive emotion between her job and her programming. "I heard you were near the stage when that thing attacked the park."

"Come on, Ash." Ian said playfully, "If there's one thing I've learned from being around you, it's how to dodge big stomping feet trying to squash me like a bug."

She laughed, and it was the most wonderful music Ian had ever heard. It warmed the emptiness that had been growing in him, replacing it with radiant joy and pure happiness.

Yet such feelings would as briefly as they burned brightly, doused by a cold shower of reality. "Touching as this reunion is," Captain Piers interrupted, "I need to know about that War Strider you're on, Michaels. Do you know its heading or anything that could help us predict it?"

"Yes," Ian sighed, "I do." He told him everything he had learned from Carla. Piers ventured a few questions, but otherwise interrupted very little. Understandable, Ian thought, as a military commander, the captain had probably

heard a *lot* of men giving final intelligence reports.

“That’s all we know, Captain,” he finished. “Riley’s headed for land, likely Barberry since it’s closest and is both an agriculture center and a distribution point. You have to stop him before he gets there.”

“And you have to get Ian out of there,” Ashley pressed, full of concern, too concerned to see what had been evident to Carla, evident to Ian and now evident to Piers. “You have SEALs, right? I saw this TV program on them; I know they can get anyone out of anywhere!”

Ian knew that he said next would tear Ashley’s heart to pieces, cruel and necessary though it was. “Ashley,” he said as if speaking to a child who’d just seen their first pet die. “They can’t rescue us. Riley isn’t going to up and surrender. He’s committed, this is a fight to the death for him, him and his followers are going to keep fighting, keep hurting others, until they can no longer do so.”

“No, don’t say that.”

“It’s the truth,” he said simply, “You know it. I know it.” He sighed, “Let’s be honest with each other for a change. No more lying to protect each other—it just fails miserably each time you try.”

She didn’t answer, the silence so palpable Ian feared the radio had cut out, or worse, been severed. When Ashley did speak again, her voice sounded hollow and weak, like glass crinkling and about to shatter. “Okay,” she breathed, and Ian knew in that moment tears were in her eyes. “All that crap I said to you, those horrible things I said. It was—”

“Fake?” He smiled, even though she couldn’t see it. “You think so, Ash? You think I don’t know you—know your acting—well enough not to see that? For what it’s worth, I never considered our *professional relationship* ended.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” Ashley’s voice became strained. “It was never *professional* to me, Ian. You’re the most important person in the world to me, more important than professional or as a *friend*.” Ashley sounded as if she might waver, break, but she was too strong to do that. “I should have told you, but I was afraid, afraid I’d hurt you. I thought you’d be better off with someone else.”

From there, she unraveled into a veritable yarn ball of explanations, apologies and recollections, Ian registering it as white noise, closing his eyes and forgetting where he was and what was about to happen. All that mattered now was her.

“Ashley, it’s okay. I understand.”

“Ian,” he could hear a pronounced tremble as she spoke. “I don’t want to lose you...not now.”

“You won’t,” he reassured. “Ashley, can you do me a favor?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“Picture us together, you and me with nothing keeping us apart. No ocean, no bad guys, no fences.” *Not even size*, Ian added silently as he closed his eyes, shutting out the cold air of the Strider’s belly, of the echoing clanking din of the mechanisms around him. “Picturing us, yet, Ash?”

“Yes.” She answered quietly.

“Good.” Ian pictured the impossible: the two of them at the same size and somewhere without fences and guns separating them, no genetic differences, no social prejudices, just a boy and a girl. Ian would tenderly brush her hair back, noting how its light auburn color caught the sunlight perfectly.

His hand would find her chin, guiding her gaze to meet his own, up, or perhaps down. Ashley’s mortal body being still taller than his own would be absolutely *hilarious*, he often thought. Supposedly, there was a formula for figuring it out; it came up once in math class, Ian wished he’d paid more attention.

But taller or shorter, Ashley would meet his eyes, hazel to green, and Ian would kiss her long and passionately. They would hold each other as people were meant to hold each other, arms wrapped in a tight embrace before drawing back just a fraction of an inch to speak the words that had lingered on both of their minds for weeks, perhaps even months, always buried by internal or external factors, now rising to the surface, revealed as a shared treasure.

“I love you.”

He waited for her response, waited to hear the words repeated back to him, a simple spoken contract of mutual affection and union that predated contracts, predated words. No matter happened past this point to either of them, no matter how great the distance of separation increased, Ian and Ashley could face it together, of that he was certain. Ian waited to hear the words.

Instead, he heard the radio go dead with a brief electric squeal. Then he heard the click of a rifle action setting. Opening his eyes to turn his head slightly, still keeping the headset on, desperate to hear the words that would not come now the radio had been shut off, he met the familiar gaze of someone who knew well from work, or thought he had known.

Mike, the quiet natured sound operator, now dressed in fatigues and holding

an assault rifle in his hands with a look of irritation, almost as if perturbed at having to pick the gun up in the first place. He'd probably been working on something before stumbling across Ian in the compartment, his natural habitat being sound rooms of any sort.

"You're in deep shit, lover boy." He cracked the butt of the rifle over the back of Ian's skull. Sinking into black oblivion of unconsciousness, Ian held onto the image of Ashley's face until darkness finally overtook him.

Chapter 36

Desperate Measures

“Where the hell did they *get this thing?*”

“It was a custom-ordered showpiece for the pageant,” the head of the island’s security, Jenkins his nametag read on the uniform that looked closer to a cop’s than a soldier despite having to serve in a military capacity, sighed. “Our showpiece turned out to be more realistic than we thought.”

“Obviously,” Piers snorted, crossing his arms over the vest and jacket he wore over his captain’s uniform while around him the marines shuffled about nervously. “I would think that, as security, you would inspect such a machine entering the premises for a little thing like a plasma projecting cannon.”

Few things would scare a full platoon of jarheads—one of which was located nearby, casting a long shadow of the meeting between the two parties. *They’re a lot bigger up close*, Piers had thought, seeing the BWMD sitting on the beach beside the greeting party from the security detail from the interior of the helicopter.

Even after being reassured by security that this particular unit was hard-wired differently than the psychotic models, he nearly had to threaten the pilot with a court martial before he would land anymore remotely near the beach.

And of *course* it would be a coyote Piers thought with a sigh. But, given what few details he knew about Project Behemoth, immigrants had been a much more desirable stock than Albionan citizens whose alterations would lead to greater outcry.

This particular specimen appeared to not even notice them, gazing out into

the ocean with a haunted look, distant and aloof. Perhaps the security personnel had tranquilized the thing, Piers mused, though having no idea where would one find sufficient quantities of drugs powerful enough to overwhelm the self-correcting body chemistry and regenerative abilities that made BWMDs immune to both biological weapons *and* the sterilization efforts that had failed to keep their numbers at a manageable level.

Having decided that firsthand contact was the only way he would get a full account of the situation enabling him to make the best decision he could, Piers had elected to depart by helicopter, overriding the extremely vehement protests of his XO and every other junior present. "Send someone else," the XO had insisted, "Delegate and follow protocol, for godsakes."

"We don't have time for errand boys running back and forth with bits and pieces." The transmission from within the War Strider had been cut off abruptly, the only sounds on the line for several minutes being a series of choked, horrified cries from the girl Piers had heard speaking with the boy who had somehow found a way to contact them from within the hull of the Strider.

The anguish and pain in the girl's voice had been too real for him to believe this was anything but the truth. Assigned to a small patrol boat doing the war, Piers had witnessed seen firsthand the devastation they caused as they had cruised up and down the ash-soaked rivers of Bengla, villages mercilessly wiped out for giving aid to guerillas and Coalition troops.

"It's on its way to the mainland, we know that now." Jenkins' voice snapped him back to the present, holding a map spread in his gray furred hands as he pointed at a narrow strip of blue between two adjacent green masses. "Can you track the Strider down; perhaps destroy it with depth charges and torpedoes?"

"We're hitting the floor of the channel with every active locator we have," Piers said, "But nothing's coming up, almost as if it's been stealth-rigged." He paused, tempted to add that this was yet another modification that should have been obvious but decided to let it pass: there'd be plenty of time for inquiries and tribunals once this was over with, and undoubtedly Piers himself would face his fair share of pointed questions.

Solve the problem first, place the blame second. That was the difference, he often thought, and occasionally said after a few drinks with his closest friends and family, between a soldier and a politician. Piers let his gaze wander over ornately decorated gates and the rides behind them. *And a soldier wouldn't build this nightmarish funhouse.*

"Could you spot it with aircraft?" Jenkins asked. "Even below the waterline, it would be visible from above."

“I’ve ordered constant recon flights up and down the coast. But there’s no guarantee they’ll catch it coming out of the water. I’m afraid it’s becoming increasingly likely that we won’t know Riley’s exact location until he strikes.”

“Michaels said he was headed for Barberry.” Patterson, who had been silent in the face of both grizzled veterans who were his superior, chimed in nervously, more nervous, in fact, than he had sounded when speaking from the grasp of the BWMD.

“And I’ve included it in their flight pattern,” Piers said, factually more than chidingly. “But just because that’s his *likely* destination doesn’t mean he’s going there. In fact, if Riley knows we’ve been tipped off, he just may abort his current plan and wait for a better opportunity to present itself.”

The two security officers traded a look. “No, he won’t.” Jenkins said politely but firmly. “Riley is a death seeker. He’s at the end of his time and he knows it. He wants the most spectacular finale to his lifelong saga possible, and a last stand that will leave his enemies reeling and grieving is just the sort of end he desires.”

“You’re so sure,” Piers’s words were in disagreement but his tone indicated he understood where Jenkins was coming from. “The man has outmaneuvered and outsmarted you at every turn. Why do you think you know him so well now?”

“Call it an old soldier’s intuition,” Jenkins said, tilting his head back as if in remembrance. “You and I got old but would never have been satisfied with retirement, so we became glorified babysitters within and without the military. Riley and his band never retired, and they sure as hell don’t want to fade away.” His voice lowered. “And, there’s one other good reason for him to attack Barberry.”

“Which is?”

“Although the majority of the guests were trapped on the island when the tunnels flooded—more of Riley’s doing, no doubt, we did manage to get several hundred out beforehand.” Jenkins face fell, as if recognizing yet another inadvertent victory he had handed the Forgotten Warriors.

“They have been relocated to our luxury hotel,” the tough-as-nails terrier couldn’t bring himself to call it the Magical Crystal Palace as its proper name went. “Riley can still rack up an impressive body count and likely knows it if he’s this deep into our infrastructure.”

The naval captain frowned, but after a moment’s thought, made a *hmm* sound of agreement. “Then that brings us to our next problem; how to intercept

and engage the Strider without causing high collateral.” He sighed wearily, “Just when I thought I no longer had to deal with *that* particular monkey on my back.”

“Send me after the Strider.” All three of them started in surprise—the voice was a soft female alto and oddly familiar to Piers, so clear that it could have been projected from a surround sound system.

“Send me,” the voiced repeated, pleading yet determined, much in the same manner as a Special Forces commando would ask to lead a suicide mission to rescue his friends from a POW camp. As one, the trio looked to the source of the voice and saw it belonged to the giantess, her gaze no longer distant and fractured but focused and razor-sharp.

Her hazel eyes glimmered with an intensity that made Piers feel like he was standing directly in front of an armed fighter jet ready to launch and devastate some tin pot dictator’s third world army. “I’m not a bomb. I can take the Strider down without harming other people.”

Though she made no move other than to speak, the marines sprang into action, forming a tightly knit cluster about Piers to the bellowing of their lupine staff sergeant, all weapons pointed at the BWMD who didn’t react to the display of the force in the slightest.

“Give it a rest, Bristol,” Piers rolled his eyes, pushing out from between the square-bodied troops, “You didn’t bring near enough men to scare her off.” Then to Jenkins and Patterson. “I am unfamiliar with the layout of your facility, but I believe that the BWMDs are supposed to be behind a fence, not sunning themselves here on the beach.”

“Riley brought down the security fence during his initial attack,” Jenkins explained, “The BWMDs saw an on opportunity and decided to take a little stroll through the park.”

“But Preston helped get them under control and back over to the other side.” The cat jumped in quickly, his green eyes wavering back and forth nervously as his said the words, as if unaccustomed to free speaking at his superiors or standing up for others. “Without her, a lot of us would be kibble right now.”

“Preston?” Piers looked confused. Patterson jerked a thumb upwards. “Her name is *Preston*?”

“Last name, yeah,” the cat supplied, “She’s the engineered docility prototype; doesn’t go crazy like the others.”

“Thank-you, Patterson.” Jenkins gave the cat look clearly intended to shut him up. “Utilizing the EDP seemed like the best solution at the time given how

our communications were severed with units spread out everywhere. Fight fire with fire, so to speak, risky as it was.”

“And we decided to keep her around in case any more of them go crazy and jump out at us. She’s quite good at knocking them out; you should see her in action. She’s like a big, sexy MMA fighter.”

“Patterson!”

“No, no I understand.” Piers held up a hand, “You had a difficult situation you were sorely ill-equipped and briefed to deal with. Believe me, this has been a day for unorthodox but necessary solution.” He flashed back to the three Mesaverd ships currently under guard by the remainder of his fleet.

“But what you’re talking about, taking it—her,” he quickly changed pronouns upon seeing Ashley stiffen visibly, “out of a controlled area and onto the mainland is a whole other ballgame.”

“But she’s different,” the cat offered, “Engineered Docility Prototype, remember? She doesn’t go crazy like the others.”

“So the PR department said,” Piers replied dryly. “And while I have nothing but full faith in the truthfulness of the words of corporate spokesmen, I still won’t risk trading one rampaging killing machine for another.”

He leaned in close then added darkly, “And my friend who works in the highest tier of the Center for Bioengineering and Genetic Manipulation was positively *baffled* when I asked how they finally figured out how to change the BWMD templates that have rejected any and all attempts at alteration thanks to their regenerative properties correcting all natural and forced mutations.”

Patterson blinked a few times, then, jaw dropping, shot a glance upward at Ashley. He tried to speak several times but only high-pitched squeaks and gasping were heard for several minutes. “I was in her *hand*.” He managed at last in a shallow voice. “And she had a *bomb* go off in her other...,” the rest of the sentence became strained gurgle as he pitched forward, imagining what might have happened with his head down between his knees with a sickened moan.

“I was skeptical myself.” Jenkins nodded sagely, clearly less surprised though quite unsettled as if having been proven in his suspicions and unhappy to be right. “But you know how the private sector is: don’t call bullshit on the boss if you want to keep your job.” He paused, cocking an eye, “That said, I can’t help but feel that the girl is our best chance at bringing Riley down with minimal civilian losses. Autopilot or not, she’s endured far worse than what would typically set one of her kind off and remained lucid.”

"I can't act on *feeling*, Chief." Piers responded pointedly. "Here she is contained by the natural barrier of the water should something go wrong, as was the island's design. But on the mainland with the whole of the homeland spread bare and vulnerable? She could get loose and cause even more damage than the Strider and our weapon systems combined."

In addition to the Striders' devastation, Piers had seen what the BWMD deployment had wrought: a far greater toll of life even worse than that inflicted by the invaders. "I'm sorry, but we'll engage the Strider with conventional methods when it surfaces."

His face grew heavy, "The civilian losses will be my burden, not yours. You've done your jobs well," he looked up at Ashley, "All of you. But your role in this is over."

"No, it's not." She said quietly, though audibly. Then she made her move.

The marines saw it coming and clustered protectively around Piers once more, some even firing their rifles, only to be brushed aside like a house of cards, flying every which way and that, landing on the ground and atop each other, moaning in pain.

Piers's vision was completely covered in the tan fur of a hand several times larger than he was, fingers wrapping around him. The elder fox's blood rushed to his head as he was briefly aware of being lifted up high at dizzying speeds until his blurred vision cleared enough to reveal that he was in front of a female visage that was impassive no longer.

"Let's talk about where you, Ian and I are at the moment." The giantess peeled her lips back in a nasty snarl. "I am beyond caring about the meaningless lives of small prey, all except for one. That one is in the Strider, thanks to petty rodent squabbles and insignificant anthill politics."

The radio conversation flashed back in Piers' mind: he recognized the voice now. *That was her?* He balked in surprise; *The boy was professing his love to her?* How would that even work?

"And I will gladly do anything I feel is necessary to get Ian back, which brings us to *you*. You are in my hand, and if I so much as flex my index finger, your guts will shoot out your ass and mouth."

She put a modicum of pressure on Piers chest—to her, to him it felt like having a dumbbell weight laid over his sternum. "I *am* getting to that shore, and if I have to hold onto you the entire way, so be it." She peeled her lips back

To his credit, in the face of the closest thing one could find to the personi-

fication of widespread devastation, Piers held his composure and returned her steeled gaze with his own. "Killing me won't accomplish anything; my XO is in charge and will carry on in my absence."

"True," Ashley replied with a knowing smirk. "And how many of them would be willing to do something as *unorthodox but necessary* in your absence if it was needed?" She was playing off his pride and maverick personality now, and damn it all, doing a decent job at it.

"You're unpredictable," Piers insisted stubbornly as he squirmed; her fingers were beginning to tighten and he could feel her claw tips in his back. "What if you become emotionally compromised?" Or rather, he thought as her eyes began to darken at the edges, emotionally compromised *further*?

"Then you can bomb *me* too!" The blackness was spreading like spilled oil from a supertanker Piers had assisted in the cleanup of. "Put a radio transmitter on my head; paint my furry ass with a laser or something. Keep your damn missiles locked onto me the whole time. If I so much as put a paw out of line or look the wrong way at innocent people then blow me to kingdom come."

Her grip slackened, for which Piers was grateful feeling his chest able to expand fully once more. Ashley's voice grew soft and pleading once more, "Just gives me a chance to save Ian. That's all I ask."

The hand lowered down, sliding Piers out onto the soft sand. The marines hustled about to drag him away from the giantess, waving their guns and yelling some more, neither she nor Piers really noticed them. She's letting me go, he realized, despite all her threats, she's letting me go.

"Wait!" Holding up a hand, he brought his escort to a stop, pushing his way past their square bodies and locked jaws and making his way back over to Ashley. "You understand what position you'll be in," he yelled up at her through cupped hands, figuring he had to sound like a squeaking mouse to one like her.

"If you lose it for one second, *one second*, I'm going to have to bring my full fleet's firepower down on you." She nodded. "And even if you don't, Command might order your death regardless, if not from me, then someone else."

Another nod. "Ian's already put his life in danger for you people," Ashley replied evenly, "for his sake, I'll do the same."

"Then, let's get on with the business of doing the wrong thing for the right reasons," Piers said quietly.

“Go ahead, say what you’re thinking.”

“Your career is over. Hell, *my* career is probably over for not having you relieved and confined to the brig.” The XO practically trembled, utterly aghast ever since Piers had come back aboard the *Endeavor* and announced his “contingency plan” for stopping the War Strider.

“You can still do that.” Piers pointed out, trying to ignore the aching in his ribs. “I’ve also failed to notify our superiors of our situation.” The communication blackout was necessary for two reasons: to keep the Mesaverd from learning he was breaking containment and his superiors from ordering him to abort this foolhardy mission.

“I can do still that,” the XO echoed, turning to look out the conning tower at the massive tan and gray canine form sitting upon the center of the carrier’s flight deck, the rest of the planes having been taken below to make room for the BWMD.

“But I’m too much of a damned loyal fool to follow common sense and lock up my clearly insane CO.” He shook his head, “They might have let us off for firing on the Mesaverd—”

“*Over* the Mesaverd,” Piers corrected.

“But transporting a biological weapon of mass destruction from its containment area to a populated civilian center? We’ll be lucky not to *hang* for this.”

“Just say you were following orders when we go to court martial,” Piers joined him at the bridge window, looking down to the flight deck where a good portion of the *Endeavor*’s male crewmembers had suddenly found an excuse to come above deck.

It helped, Piers noted, that they were largely young men and the BWMD, though a towering weapon of war with a built-in berserker hair trigger and a preference for live prey, happened to be in the form of a young girl whose clothing had been shredded and torn leaving her long legs and midriff bare with ample cleavage.

Add in her long hair flapping in the sea breeze air, and she—*Ashley*, he recalled her name, resembled the image of an Amazonian warrior, riding her chariot, the *Endeavor*, into battle against some horrific monster. Said monster was already ashore had headed inland, towards the town of Barberry as the security chief had predicted.

By itself, Barberry was too small to be a viable target. But its numbers had swelled with revelers and partygoers and of course, those people whom had been evacuated off the island, away from the BWMDs previously thought to be the true threat.

“Anything new from the civilian bands?” He asked the comm., officer, having ordered a tune-in to the emergency waves knowing that inevitably it would be the overmatched emergency responders that would make first contact with the Strider, god bless them. “Where is the Strider now?”

“Still on its present course.” The wolf’s thin, white furred face looked strained, Piers could understand, it must have been agonizing listening to countless cries for help doomed to go unanswered, many of which being from those who normally did the answering.

“When the Strider was spotted, the local sheriff called in the police from the neighboring four towns to try to stop the Strider from entering town,” he swallowed, hard. “The ones left are just trying to keep people from straying into its path. The fire department is split between saving the residential areas the Strider set ablaze and preventing one of the—remaining—fertilizer plants from exploding.”

The Strider had emerged right in the middle of seaport, Piers thought with a cringe as the burning remains of what had once been a bustling hub of activity came into view as the carrier entered the harbor. Even knowing what to expect after having seen the towering column of smoke from miles away, it was a sobering sight with a pall falling over the bridge.

The docks were in flames with dozens of ships laying half-submerged in burning. To his dismay, he recognized the wide framed hulls of several of the park’s ferries. “Have we picked it up on radar or AEGIS?” Piers’ authoritative voice brought the stunned crew and officers back to function.

“Still invisible electronically,” the XO replied, “Not that it’ll be heard to acquire *visibly*.”

“Good,” Piers braced himself, aware that if there was going to be a mutiny, it would happen in the next five seconds. “Helmsman, take us to the dock.”

“The dock is *gone*,” the black terrier replied, the quietness in his voice indicating it was more an observation than a complaint.

“Run us aground if you have to,” Piers replied, “Only getting our package to show matters now.” If Riley knew the Navy was after him, the captain thought grimly, if he knew the ocean was cut off from him, he probably wouldn’t try to return to the sea, but would head inward to get as far from water-based military

assets as possible while continuing to maximize his destructive potential. “We’re fighting a land based war.”

Chapter 37

Clash of Titans

This is the real world. Ashley marveled at the doll universe about her, having only known the Reservation and the mockups of the park, particularly the fake cities she had stomped through during her performance time and time again. But those had all been fake, obviously fake, only painted to resemble real buildings from the front that the guests saw. From where Ashley had always stood, she could see all of the moving gears and parts.

She had seen pictures of “Tiny Towns” in school growing up on the Reservation, and at any other time, would have been as giddy to be in one as her friends had been after getting out from behind the fence. People there didn’t live in used hangars or repurposed bases. And inside the houses were furniture made of wood and cloth. Small bowls of water were often in the backyard, pools for swimming, yet something else she had seen but never experienced.

Her nose crinkled at the smell of burning materials; *Make that the real world* on fire. After hopping off the aircraft carrier and making her way to the harbor then up on land and down the streets of Barberry, she had found the Strider’s trail tragically easy enough. Riley had thrown subtly and sneakiness to the wind and had literally blazed a trail through the town towards the Crystal Palace.

More buildings were on fire than she cared to count and a stream of cars and people fled out in all directions from the disaster with the giant coyote stomping into town as the icing on the cake. Ashley spied a badger family desperately trying to force an elderly male into a car, pointing at her as evidence even as she passed them by without incident.

Though she heard sirens, they were moving away. *Good.* With all the confusion and communications still disrupted it was inevitable that anyone she

ran into would see her as a threat, and the last thing Ashley wanted to deal with was a bunch of tiny blue policemen shooting at her and literally getting underfoot.

So glad I'm off that boat. Going out over deep water was one of the few things her kind genuinely feared, or had genuine reason to be afraid of. One of few things, she thought, hearing a familiar droning of rotors, but not the only one. Turning her head slightly she saw a heavy black helicopter several thousand feet away, the doors open with soldiers pointing long barreled devices at her—not guns, but laser targeting equipment for the firepower floating in or flying over the channel.

Piers had agreed to her terms, not that they were particularly favorable for her: in exchange for ferrying her to shore to take down the War Strider and rescue Ian, she in turn would allow a team of SEALs to shadow her with laser targeting equipment, useless against the Strider's stealth rigging but not against her. The beam itself was near invisible and no more noticeable than a beam of light.

Yet every guided weapon from the ships and aircraft out in the channel would follow it straight to her, ensuring that if she went on Autopilot, her rampage would end before it could begin. *It's not because they trust me,* she thought, *It's because they have no other choice.*

She entered the suburbs, finding the road narrowing here with houses pressing in to form a tight lane. No sign of the people, either they had cleared out or were pretending not to be home and praying the coyote giantess stomping around the cul-de-sac was not interested in a door-to-door search for dinner.

The road cracked beneath her feet, each step sinking into the asphalt with cracks spider-webbing from where her feet fell. Something grabbed her tail that had been swishing left to right in thought—looking over her shoulder she saw it was tangled in a set of power lines.

Pausing, Ashley made every careful effort she could to untangle herself without damaging the delicate telephone poles. Said efforts were rewarded by wood snapping and wires popping free as the entire line of poles were torn off their base or right out of the ground.

"Damn," she swore as the transformers exploded in a shower of sparks and every light on the block went dark. "Even when I'm offstage, I'm still Yotezilla the Walking Disaster." It was a sobering reminder that this world simply was not made, not meant, for her kind.

The black ops helicopter zoomed in closer, circling over Ashley's head in tight turns as if to scold her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to." She called up, gathering her

tail behind her in her hand like the long hem of a dress. The helicopter waggled at her then buzzed off.

Well, fine, I don't plan on staying here anyway. The only part of the world she wanted right now was Ian, the boy who cared for her.

Who loved her.

Ian *had* to be alive, he just had to be. Ashley wouldn't think of any other possibility, she utterly refused to. Nothing mattered, not the Strider, not all these people. Only the burning desire to find Ian, to make sure he was safe—to reply to his declaration that, yes, she loved him too.

The Crystal Palace loomed ahead. Shaped like a spire with accompanying smaller towers at its base it resembled a castle made out of glass, roughly five times a BWMD's height. Its pristine white coating refracted the sunlight into the visible spectrum like a kaleidoscope. It had been built fairly recently compared to the rest of the park.

All the parking lots for full of cars and cross-country buses, there had to be thousands of people inside, probably *tens* of thousands, Ashley thought, given how small and easily packed into larger structures they were. Like ants, really.

Yet as she drew closer, Ashley saw there were no fires, no signs that the Strider had been here. *Did I lose the trail?* She thought. *Did it go some other way?*

"I MUST REALLY HAVE THE IMPERIALISTS BY THE BALLS IF *THIS* IS THEIR RESPONSE." A loud, elderly male voice called out, causing her to freeze and come to a stop at the edge of the parking lot.

From behind the central spire trotted the Strider, its dish antennae and camera clustered eyes tracking the new arrival to the battlefield. "I INTENDED TO TAKE THIS BUILDING AND ITS INHABITANTS HOSTAGE; PERHAPS THEY INTEND TO MAKE A STATEMENT—THAT THEY WOULD SACRIFICE THEIR CITIZENS' LIVES RATHER THAN NEGOTIATE WITH TERRORISTS."

He's *talking* to me? Ashley cocked her head. Every other small person treated her like a living prop or a trained animal upon their first meeting. And given what Patterson had told her about this Colonel Riley and his motivations, Ashley hadn't expected him to view her any better.

"THEY COULD HAVE AT LEAST SENT A MALE AFTER ME, NOT THAT I'M COMPLAINING. NICE TITS BY THE WAY. DO YOU FEMALE TITANS TRY TO KEEP YOUR WEIGHT UNDER A THOUSAND TONS?"

More petty insults and taunts, words that made Ashley want to spit back an angry, sarcastic response of her own. But she held her tongue....Perhaps Riley didn't know for sure she was anything but an aimed device.

Maybe he doesn't know I'm intelligent, she thought, Maybe he's trying to get me to say something, to figure out if I can be manipulated like he has everyone else up to point. Like everyone else, she knew of Riley, knew he was famed for his charisma and ability to influence others. He was celebrity in his own way, of war rather than theater. She answered him with a low, wordless growl, but not a single word.

"CAN YOU TALK, BEAST?" It may have been her imagination, but Ashley thought she might have heard a note of hesitation in Riley's voice. *He's not sure*, She realized. In that moment, Ashley knew what she had to, how she had to *act*, to win against Riley and his Strider.

As she had seen—and done—countless times in earnest, Ashley now did so in deceit, stalking forward, arching her back and baring her teeth in the same feral manner as one would when in the throes of Autopilot.

Riley, with all his grand schemes and manipulations, for all his maneuverings and aces up his sleeves, had one weakness, uncertainty. He wasn't sure if he was dealing with a soldier or a deployed weapon.

And that's what I have to be now, Ashley felt oddly calm even as she bared her teeth in a snarl, howling a challenge as her fur bristled. *He can't think I'm anything but a weapon*. Prejudice was her unlikely ally now. *I have to play the role*.

"CAN YOU UNDERSTAND MY WORDS, MONSTER?" The Strider took a braced position with its mouth pointed at the base of the spire, readying a gout of flame to bring the entire thing down. "I WILL BURY EVERY LAST MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD IN FLAMING RUBBLE IF YOU COME ANY CLOSER."

A soldier would not put innocents in danger. They had moral codes and laws to follow. They had a conscience that would stop them. But a *weapon* was different. A weapon did not know morality. A weapon did not have a conscience. A weapon would not feel guilt, would not hesitate, would not care what lay between itself and its target, would not care what side effects of usage would entail.

Though she knew Ian was likely somewhere within the Strider, she also knew that to pause, to second-guess now, to *break character*, would be to fail. Ashley did not hesitate, and perhaps in a way she *was* falling into Autopilot, channeling its limitless resolve into performing a role that was as ingrained into her being

as any artificial instinct or biological directive. “I’M SERIOUS,” the mandibles parted. “YOU ARE TESTING ME.”

No, she thought. You are testing me.

Countless performances as a berserk monster had readied her for this: pretending to be a crazed attacker when she really wasn’t. Her right hand snaked behind her back and flashed a quick thumbs-up to the helicopter that she hoped Piers would understand.

Here goes everything. Ashley lunged forward in a charge, claws forward, calling Riley’s bluff while playing her own. Running forward, she felt cars and buses snap and crunch under her bare feet—no screams or wet popping of bodies, thankfully.

There was enough time for the Strider to bring down the spire as Riley threatened, but doing so would have left him exposed and being a mindless killing machine, it would have done nothing to slow or cow her assault. Instead, the Strider pivoted on the spot and met her with a wall of flame belched into the parking lot, several dozen cars and buses melted to slag or exploding when the heat found their fuel tanks.

Her right leg erupted in pain as the Strider fired again but it was just a graze. A graze that scorched off a chunk of fur and left the exposed flesh red and welting. *It’ll heal*, she reassured herself, still able to walk on that leg albeit in pain. *If I survive this, it’ll all heal.....if I survive.*

It had been her mother who told her about fighting the striders. Gerald rarely spoke of his experiences in the war. You learned real fast, she had explained, even on Autopilot, not to attack head-on.

Head-on would get you burned, get you killed. We used to hit them in threes—one to draw attention, two to come from the sides and rear.

Close in, she thought, dodging past the expanding ball of fire and shrapnel, I have to get in close. Whoever was piloting the Strider knew their craft. Ashley angled around the fire-spewing head to the left, so close she felt it singe the ends of her fur. The Strider lashed out with one of its pair of forelegs, slashing at her with the sharpened tip while scuttling back on its remaining five,

Ashley grimaced as she felt the pointed tip slash across her forearm, drawing blood, but rather than drawing back and shielding herself, she moved in and grabbed hold of the spindly appendage, grunting in pain as the other forelimb slashed across her back, leaving another shallow cut but doing no major damage.

First rule of a knife fight, Gerald said during one of their training sessions.

Accept that you'll get cut. After that, it's just a matter of keeping it from being a bad cut.

Oh yeah, she'd snorted, crossing her arms in disbelief, Like I'm ever going to have to worry about *knives*. The little people's rules won't even let us make forks and spoons, like they're afraid we'll scoop them up from the other side of the fence.

They are, Gerald replied, because at one point, someone did.

Wrapping both hands around the joint of the Strider's leg, Ashley *pulled* and was rewarded by a screech of metal separating as the lower segment popped free in a shower of lubricating fluids and sparking wires. Wielding it like a bludgeon she swung it at the Strider's head section, severing one of its dishes and smashing a dozen or so of the individual cameras that made up its eye cluster.

In response, the pilot jerked turned away its head, and by extension, the Sun-cannon, away, attempting to shield itself with its remaining front leg. Evidently the head was just as critical to the Strider's operation as to a flesh-and-blood creature.

"WE HAVE YOUR TRAINER!" There was a noted desperation in Riley's voice. "IAN MICHAELS IS ABOARD THIS VESSEL. I WILL PUT A BULLET IN HIS HEAD PERSONALLY! IF THE BOY MEANS ANYTHING TO YOU, STAND DOWN OR HE *WILL* DIE."

Ian *was* still alive. And Riley had him. Ashley's heart tore itself in two at the thought of him being threatened, of being harmed nearly stopped her in her tracks. But she couldn't stop, couldn't show the slightest hesitation and it was this bitter determination that kept her from freezing, from the fatal display of emotion that would have revealed her weakness.

Another howl, one part anger one part anguish, and Ashley slammed her fists against right side of the Strider's body, crushing the section where the legs met the abdomen, crippling its movements and stopping Riley's attempts to retreat or get around her, forced now into a brawl he was sorely equipped to win. The armored plating that had stopped everything from tank rounds to bombs bent beneath her hammering blows like cheap aluminum.

Just don't crush any sections that could hold a person, she thought, ducking to narrowly avoid taking the other spike-tipped leg to the face. *No idea which part Ian is in*. Another jab, she ducked a smidgeon slower than last time and felt a warm trickle of blood creep down the side of her right cheek before even registering the pain. *Really wish I had one*.

The Strider stabbed at her a third time. Ashley moved her left arm to block

it—then cried out in pain as sharpened point speared her through the shoulder, tearing through skin, sinew and muscle, lodging itself in bone. Leaning forward on the appendage, the war machine forced her down, swiveling the head to unleash a point-blank firestorm into her face.

The mandibles parted. Ashley could see the Suncannon itself now, a deceptively fragile looking device resembling a spread flower in design. The outer edges glowed white-hot and in the center sat a crystal almost as clear as glass. Behind the crystal boiled a sea of orange, the fire itself, ready to be focused and spewed forth.

But Ashley too had a weapon still in her free hand, courtesy of the Strider. Abandoning her efforts to free herself, she took up the spearlike half of the forelimb she had torn and stabbed it between the Strider's mandibles. The Suncannon itself was quite fragile, hence its protection behind the shield of the mandibles.

Thankfully, it did not explode as it undoubtedly would have in an action movie, but instead *shattered* and crumbled as she ran the metal shaft through the Suncannon. Bits and pieces of metal and glasslike substances rained down from beneath the head of the Strider.

Letting of the spear's shaft, Ashley wrapped both hands and pulled the impaling forelimb out of her shoulder, gallons of blood spilling down her arm. Hurting more *after* she had pulled the long shaft of metal free, she felt her lower arm threatening to go limp thanks muscle and tendons torn in her shoulder.

But there was enough functionality in it for her to grab the Strider at the junction between its head and thorax and, pushing against the ground with her back legs, flip the Strider onto its back like a giant metal beetle.

Slowly, slowly, Ashley held on to slow the Strider's descent as much as possible. But with three dozen feet to go to the ground, her grip gave way and the war machine crashed to the ground with stomach-sickening sounds of break metal and shattering glass.

Within the abdomen section were the sounds of liquids spilling and gears slipping with squeals of protest. Like an insect that had been crushed but was still alive, the Strider's remaining legs thrashed wildly in the air, twitching and kicking as if in refusal to die. Yet these death throes were exactly that, and with a mechanical gurgling, the War Strider fell silent.

In the movies, when two monsters fought and one prevailed, the winner would

roar or howl over the shattered corpse of its fallen foe in glorious triumph. But Ashley didn't feel triumphant. She felt hurt, tired, and scared—scared for Ian who was somewhere within that maze of collapsed wreckage, spilled chemicals and cornered terrorists.

As a predator would butcher its kill, she sank her claws into the underbelly of the Strider—unlike the underbelly of an animal, the armor here was quite thick, thicker even than that on top, no doubt made with the impression of stopping weapons fired at it from below by soldiers, *peeling* it from head to abdomen.

The inhabitants of the mechanical bug, like parasites, lay about the ceilings that had become floors, some moving, and others still. With the interior lower bulkheads torn free, Ashley had a surgeon's view of the interior of the Strider, like a kid's book detailing each compartment and section of a vehicle, seeing Tigers, two fennec foxes, a raccoon...

And Ian. Except for a gash across his forehead, he appeared relatively undamaged, staring up at her with a surprised look on his face, as if having not known she was here before this point. Uncurling himself from a ball on the "floor", he pulled himself shakily to his feet, hobbling toward her with joyous smile.

He opened his mouth to speak. Heart fluttering in relief, Ashley lowered her hand tenderly into the destroyed cockpit to collect him, to get him safely back with her where he belonged, but before either of them could act, an orange blur of movement grabbed Ian from the side and pulled him further back into the Strider.

"You almost had me fooled," the oldest tiger of the group, a misshapen figure wheezed, one arm around Ian's chest while his other hand jabbed the tip of a long combat knife up against Ian's lower back. "Truly, a performance worthy of the ages."

There was a dark stain spreading across the lower section of his fatigued shirt, soaking into his vest. What looked the remains of some sort of command chair lay twisted in a pile of sharpened metal on the other side of the cockpit. Riley, for it had to be him, had been hurt badly, and what little action he'd taken to grab Ian must have only made things worse.

"But I watched you. You were holding back." He looked meaningfully at Ian, "Because of *him*." Red foam dribbling from the side of his mouth, Riley appeared to choke for several seconds before he could talk again. "You *care* for him, don't you? My grandson told me how it was *you* he was speaking with. I didn't believe him. I couldn't believe that a disgusting, perversion of nature could feel anything at all."

“He was right. Damn my pride, he was right.” Riley began to shake, tears welling up in his wide, green eyes. He turned his head slightly, lingering on a form laying against the shattered remains of the viewing screen, even with the difference in scale, Ashley could see that the young tiger’s head was twisted at an angle. “Bless his soul, I didn’t believe him.”

Riley was dying; Ashley’s predatory senses told her that. Patterson and Piers told her that his family—all of his family now—was dead. Whatever plans he had were broken along with the War Strider. But ever the defiant warrior, he wouldn’t quit.

He would kill Ian, just to cause more suffering, even if it only affected those who loved and cared for him. As if reading her thoughts, Riley nodded, “At least I can make you know pain like I do.” He moved the point of the knife down to Ian’s lower back, ready to plunge it into his kidneys. “He’ll die slowly, in agony, as I’ve been dying for a lifetime.”

Her hands would be too slow, too clumsy to separate them in time. Riley needed only a millisecond to stab him, and whatever Ashley did to him after that would be a shallow vengeance. But vengeance only worked if it actually would hurt the recipient—or at least appeared to.

“I don’t give a shit about him.” She snorted in the most disdainful manner possible. “You’re *all* just meat to us.”

Riley blinked once, confused, hesitating, doubtful of his total control and unsettled, even now at losing it. She had just agreed with and reinforced everything he knew and expected from her kind, and it made Riley pause. It was all that Ashley needed.

Parting her jaws as wide as they would go, she shoved her face into the underbelly of the Strider, snatching up Ian and Riley’s intertwined forms, snapping her teeth shut around them in an ivory cage. Their struggling forms tumbled over her tongue, threatening to fall into her throat, but she lifted the back of her tongue to block it off, before wriggling the upper half between the two of them.

Feeling Ian’s lithe body and Riley’s hunched form in her mouth, Ashley separated the pair, pushing Ian to the front of her mouth and Riley to the back. A slight tickle against her gums told her that he was stabbing her mouth with the knife in a mad frenzy, wailing and cursing her to the very end.

An end that came all too swiftly as Ashley caught him between her rearmost teeth and bit down. The movements stopped, she tasted warm, delicious blood in her mouth. Pleasure rolled over her, euphoric and hedonistic. There were two bodies in her mouth, one live, the other dead. The pleasure would fade, and

the pain return, but she could prolong that effect, if she simply were to chew the other one....

A brief shake of her head to clear the dark thoughts, then quickly as she could without risking dropping him, Ashley rolled Ian out of her mouth with her tongue and into the safety of her good hand. “Ash.” He cried, but the rest was muffled as her fingers closed totally around him—there was still a good number of terrorists with guns still alive plus the military to worry about.

Tucking her closed hand against her chest, Ashley leaned down into the Strider once more, dropping Riley’s mangled form out of her mouth like a caught mouse. Even now, there was a certain regal appearance to the old fighter, his head and face intact.

Ashley felt little pity for him. He had attacked her home, used her friends as sacrificial pawns, and nearly killed her love, but as a discarded weapon, or rather the *child* of a discarded weapon, she understood Riley in a way few others could.

Upon seeing their dead leader presented before them, Forgotten Warriors let out a collective howl of misery and grief, crying out with a sorrow that keened not just for their dead leader, but all they had lost in the past as well. It was a cry of anguish, of total and utter loss.

But it was also a cry of surrender, and with it, the final battle of the war was over.

Chapter 38

Going Home

“Is this really necessary?” Ian squirmed within the confines of a prison he found cozy, sensual and humiliating all at the same time. A thrumming moan, almost a purr, answered him, rolling around and through his body that was pressed inward by a pair of silken soft fur covered hills in turn held down by a sports bra that could have sailed a small boat.

“Say it again.” Ashley smiled down at the fox she had tucked deep into her cleavage as any girl might a cell phone or a small coin purse. Having washed off the bloodstains from her fur in the ocean, she looked beautiful, crisp and smug, very, very smug.

“I love you.”

“Say it like you did earlier.” She teased, putting her index finger against his chest and pushing him down another foot. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back, her wet hair draped across her shoulders like another flag upon the aircraft carrier upon which they rode back to the park, or what was left of it. “I’m picturing us together again, you and me at the same size. Say it again, Ian Michaels, like before.”

It was a request only one stage actor could make of another. Careful not to sigh or mutter how sappy it was doing this outside of a guaranteed death scenario, knowing she’d hear, Ian adopted the same impassioned tone of voice as before and said in full fake earnestness, “I love you, Ashley Preston.”

Another crushing, yet feathery soft compressing sigh. Opening her eyes again, Ashley brought her lips together in a sickly sweet pout. “And love you too, Ian Michaels.” She said the word *love* as if it were spelled w-u-v.

Ian had initially been concerned that killing Riley deliberately, and Mike inadvertently, would have damaged Ashley emotionally, scared her deeply and irrevocably. But while she expressed regret about their fate and the part she played, otherwise it seemed to bother her no more than swatting a gnat.

For his part, Ian still cringed a little every time he recalled the hot, moist cavern of Ashley's mouth, surrounded by moving teeth half his size, thankfully spared from seeing Riley crunched beneath them, although he'd heard the tiger's final agonized cry before it was cut short with a series of wet snaps of bones breaking between the unimaginable pressure of the coyote's jaws.

She's a good person who would never kill if weren't necessary, he concluded at last, *but she's also someone who wouldn't hesitate to kill if it were*. Ashley was one of the sweetest, most gentle-natured and outright compassionate people he had ever met. She cared, she dreamed, she wanted to do and be good. She had a moral code and an optimistic outlook on life few could match.

She was also a bioengineered weapon with ingrained berserker tendencies and so predatory in nature that she had to kill her own food. A tender-hearted weapon, she was a compassionate instrument of death. Loving her was in all logic insane and doomed to fail, but Ian loved her nonetheless.

"Can I come out now?"

Ashley made a display of humming and appearing to think it over. "No." She said perkily after half a minute, caressing the top of his head with the same finger she had pushed him down with. "You'll be kissing divas and riding inside a mechanical bug the second I turn away."

Ian smiled weakly, "But I came back."

"And I'm never letting you go again," she cooed, reclining back against the conning tower of the *Endeavor*.

"You know they're staring at us." The bridge of the aircraft carrier was packed to capacity with enlisted men of all ranks eager to get a look down at the quirky amorous scene unfolding below.

"Let them stare," Ashley retorted playfully, "I'm a showpiece, remember? My *job* is to get stared at. This is nothing new to me."

"It is to *me*," Ian muttered, trying to block out the cheers and whistles from the very entertained crew, having always been just a background element to the spotlight, rather than the full focus as he was now. In response, Ashley pushed him further down in her bra until all he could see nothing but white with a chiding shush.

“You know, if you keep getting out of your kennel, someone *will* eventually call the dogcatchers on you.” The snappiness in Carla’s voice, far from raising Ashley’s ire, instead created guilty pleasure she knew she could only keep to herself.

The pair had met in the same blind spot by the fence as before, in more or less under the same circumstances, although this time Carla had the foresight to pull her car over and step out expectantly with a tired sigh.

Ashley wobbled her palm, throwing the vixen off balance and comically onto her hands and knees. “Sorry about that, I’m rather clumsy sometimes. It’s a common problem for us big folks.”

The sour look that spread over Carla’s naturally adorable face said plainly that she knew it was anything but clumsiness. “Congratulations on your promotion,” Ashley continued as if not having seen it, “Director of Entertainment and Attractions certainly has a nice ring to it.”

The board of directors had near-unanimously voted to remove Vaughn Jackson in the wake of what was quickly turning into the worst PR-disaster since the Park’s disastrous first live show with the blown out lighting fixture startling the BWMD in the packed crowds.

Per the corporate charter, the mantle had fallen on his niece, just as she had originally wanted. Whether or not Carla had planned for all the carnage that occurred on and off the island, and Ashley and Ian were not entirely she hadn’t, her plan had nevertheless achieved its desired effect of granting her more power, wealth and prominence in her family’s company.

“Thank-you.” Carla said mechanically, artificially. “Is that all you wanted to tell me?” She made to pick herself up, but was thrown off again as Ashley lifted her closer to her muzzle, making certain her teeth were prominently in view.

There were a million subtle ways Ashley could have insinuated the next part. Despite her rampage-themed scripts and monstrous role on stage, she knew how to say she needed to with all the subtle grace and tact of a salesman or politician, to imply without telling as Carla would have done. There was no need to rely on brute intimidation tactics.

“If you ever manipulate or hurt Ian again, I will kill you.”

No need, but she wanted to. The green limited edition foreign model dis-

appeared beneath a single foot, ground down with a crunching of its fiberglass body and the squealing cries of its metallic components complete with the popping of all four tires blowing out simultaneously.

Ashley crushed the car four times slower than she normally would have taken, watching Carla wince and cringe with each sound. “Do yourself a favor; don’t think about what it’d be like if you were still inside.” She smiled cruelly, knowing now that was *exactly* what Carla would be thinking about now, hopefully long after this conversation ended.

“You should work on your tact,” Carla replied venomously, fur bristling and standing on end. For all her charm and natural cuteness, she was not the sort of girl who looked good when angry, more like a long eared porcupine. “There are better ways to put what you just said to someone who runs this place now.”

“I could,” Ashley admitted as she took her foot off the flattened remains of the car, shifting her position they could both see her handiwork. “But I don’t want to, kind of tired of all this verbal fencing, really.” Setting Carla down now by the ruins of her car, Ashley lifted her paw just enough to show the arch of her foot meaningfully. “My people don’t fence with insects, we just step on them.”

“Tough talk from someone about to be shipped off-island with the rest of her freak friends.” Carla said nastily, unperturbed about the brown-furred stompers less than a meter or so from her. “How would you plan on getting to me from that Reservation of yours?”

“I found a way to get to *Riley*, didn’t I?” Though she knew it was in all likelihood an idle threat and that the circumstances were far different now than then, Ashley still had the pleasure of watching Carla flinch at the name. “As you obviously have a long walk ahead of you, I won’t keep you here longer than need be. Ciao.”

Turning away with a swish of her tail, Ashley left Carla behind. From behind her, she caught the sound of the vixen saying something, a final retort to prevent her from having the last word, but even with her enhanced senses, Ashley did not hear it, nor did she need to.

Chapter 39

Endings and Beginnings

Patterson wanted nothing more than to bury his face in his crossword until the fox standing outside his guard shack quit rapping on the glass of the window over the door and went away. His gut told him that if he were to answer, to acknowledge, to so much as *look* at Michaels, he'd never know peace of mind again, having just got back into his cushy post at the border fence.

In truth, there would be no going back. The damage would be repaired, the surviving Forgotten Warriors locked away for the rest of their short lives, but in a way, Riley had accomplished his final mission; to scar and traumatize those whom had dismissed him a trifle threat.

The park was closed, the BWMDs would be shipped back to the Reservation and even the military policing force had been recalled and shaken down. Chief Jenkins had been the last one to speak with Captain Piers, and from what he had relayed to Patterson, the naval officer would be looking at an early retirement to avoid a prison cell.

"His superiors more or less agree that he did the right thing," the terrier had replied, "And that's why they're giving him this choice. Otherwise, he'd go to a trial he could never win. Deploying a BWMD without the President's order or a majority vote from Parliament is more or less an automatic guilty verdict."

"What, now?" He said crossly as he opened the door and stepped out into the cool night air. "Can't I get a quiet night for once? No drama, no crisis, no monsters, is that too much to ask?"

"I just wanted to say thank you for all that you did for Ash," Ian had his father's old cap held in his hands like a gentleman. "I know she can be feisty

and difficult to work with sometimes. But thanks for helping her when I wasn't there."

"If you want to thank me," Patterson snorted, crossing his arms over his uniformed chest, "Then keep the tall-as-trees people the hell away from me. I don't want to see so much as a pro-basketball player for the rest of my life."

Rather than looking offended, Ian's face suddenly became full of a sly grin, the sort that accompanied the knowledge of a joke unknown only to the recipient. "That might not be in the cards. I came to see you about what's going on, the changes they'll be making around here."

"I want no part of that," Patterson retorted, "And shouldn't you be filling out job applications now that they've closed the Theater department and are sending the BWMDs home?"

"Not permanently," Ian corrected him, the grin widening. "Just until they've repaired the damage to the park. You can call it a goodwill gesture or a publicity stunt, but either way, Monster Tours will be back and better than ever."

"In the meantime, the company's agreed to let one of the BWMDs stay as a sign of goodwill that the others will get to come back to," pausing, his voice fell, no doubt thinking of the lioness. "Well, most of them. They've also decided that there needs to be a representative on *their* side, like Gerald was for the Attractions."

"And let me guess," Patterson scoffed, "You're going to be this ambassador type and Missy Coyote will be the goodwill case? It'll be nice to finally have a piece of meat to throw to those press-sharks circling the island."

As if the island were under siege, Park security had been turning away boats, planes and helicopters full of media all day after the attack, the reporters being hell bent on securing a personal interview with anyone even remotely connected to the incident with Patterson himself forced to hide behind his answering machine.

"Nope. We'll be back on stage come next summer, but otherwise, both Ashley and I agreed that PR just wasn't for us. Well, I could probably do it, but Ashley told me her idea of diplomacy was knocking out everyone present."

Patterson opened his mouth to demand Ian either spill his guts or leave him in peace, but was interrupted by a thundering impact tremor he knew all too well. "Oh, shit, not again." The cat hissed as he saw Ashley's familiar silhouette emerge from the treeline beyond the fence.

With the power still out, the gate was still open from where the BWMD's

had crossed back over. While he would close it as soon as the power was restored, Patterson had to admit there little reason to care too terribly, what with there still being a gaping hole in the fence.

Ashley wasn't alone. A tall, dark lupine shape followed, her midnight fur offset by shoulder length blond hair. Patterson initially mistook it for Gerald but saw as she neared to be his daughter. She had also tailored a plunging neckline into the otherwise plain, unassuming shirt.

As one would expect from a pair of teenage girls, the two were chatting as they strolled closely together, occasionally giggling at a joke, looking each other in the face but nowhere else, least of all down.

"They know we're here, right?" He asked Ian, a note of panic in his voice.

"Of course they do." He replied.

The two canine giantesses came closer, not slowing in the slightest. Ian's confident look started to waver some, then it wavered a *lot*. Just when all Patterson could see was monolithic, yet attractively feminine legs and feet dropping to the ground to leave craters he could crash a car in, Ashley came to a halt and grabbed her friend roughly by the shoulder, stopping her as well.

"What did I tell you, Calla?" She scolded her companion as a schoolteacher would a forgetful pupil. "You have to look *down* at all times!"

"Huh?" The wolf blinked once, and then followed her friend's pointed index finger down to the pair of less-than-ankle high boys standing less than two strides away from her bus-length feet. "Oh, right. *Down*."

Patterson released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "My date," Ian explained with a happy grin, as if just saying the words were magical. "I know the guy usually picks the *girl* up, but it's just one of many little unorthodox adjustments Ash and I have had to make for this relationship."

"Obviously," Patterson muttered. "But did you have to meet up here and nearly give me a heart attack?"

"Well...., that's not the only reason we're here." Ian scratched the back of his neck. "I also wanted to introduce you to Calla....she's taking over her Dad's job for a while. He wanted to go back to the Reservation, touch base with some old friends, and after getting to go over the fence once already, Calla would love an opportunity to do so again."

"Her?" Patterson gave a sharp bark of laughter, a true achievement for a cat. "If *she's* going to be the Attraction rep, I sure pity whoever the poor bastard

is on the other end of the deal.”

“That would be *self*-pity,” Ian said quietly.

Patterson stopped mid-laugh, catching the meaning of the word all too painfully well. “Oh, *hell* no.” He backed up into the door frame, threatening to shut it. “No, no, no, a thousand times no!”

“You’re the best choice, really.” Ian took a slow, cautious step forward to the shack as if Patterson might bolt like a frightened rabbit. “Chief Jenkins agreed and has already made the necessary arrangements. After me, you’ve spent the most time around the BWMDs.”

“Then *you* do it,” the cat wailed.

“Can’t,” Ian replied sheepishly, the insides of his ears turning pink. “I’m going with Ash to the Reservation. Radiation levels have been down for years, people can walk around without lead lined suits now. It’s actually quite habitable, although nobody’s in a hurry to move there for obvious reasons.”

Ian chuckled a bit before turning serious. “We need to get away from all this attention and red tape, have some privacy, some time to ourselves, time to figure out how we’re going to....make it work.” He swallowed, and for the first time that night, looked nervous. “She also wants to take me home to her family.”

“But why *me*?” Patterson moaned.

Ian shrugged. “Ash told me she really liked you; said you had an easy-going, warm personality and you’d hit it off with the other Attractions. She told Gerald the same, Jenkins agreed, and all three recommended you personally.” He looked up, expectantly, at his new girlfriend. “Go on, tell him what you told me.”

But Ashley was preoccupied with talking to Calla. “Now remember, they don’t heal like us. And if even they did...”

“...You can’t heal from getting squashed,” she said exasperatedly. “I know, I know. Dad told me all this stuff before.”

“You never listen to your dad.”

“I listen to you.”

“No, you don’t.”

Calla ignored her, instead dropping down to her knees in front of Ian and

Patterson. "Ooh, that one's mine, right?" She pointed at the cat while looking back at Ashley eagerly, like a kid leaning against the glass window of a pet store. "He's cute."

"Yes, Calla," Ashley spoke patiently, as if to a toddler, "His name is Patterson, and he's going to be the representative on the little people side. The fragile, little people, remember?"

"Uh, huh. No squishy, got it." Turning her predatory gaze back down to the feline, Calla grinned in a manner that would have been described as wolfish were it not redundant, then extended her hand out at ground level, palm up towards him. "Here kitty, kitty, kitty."

With a strangled cry of fear, his orange tail puffed up in a fan, Patterson ran back inside the guard shack, slammed the door with a heavy thud that rattled the windows in their panes, locking it. Peering through the window, he watched the BWMD-formerly-known-as-the-EDP assuming a kneeling pose similar to Calla's. The fox all too willingly and eagerly hopped into her palm, her hand curling protectively around him and lifting to her face.

"Glad somebody's happy," he muttered, watching Ian lean forward to share a passionate kiss before Ashley turned and carried him off over the border and into the night, a perky spring to her step like a girl on her way to prom.

Then they were gone, off to whatever new insanity awaited them. Patterson was alone, or so he would have liked to be but for the lupine giantess outside his shack, observing him with eyes larger than his head like he were some sort of interesting bug in a jar.

Lying on her stomach, she rested her chin on her hands with a scrutinizing smirk on her face. Patterson stared into her deep yellow eyes for several minutes, hardly making a sound, not moving a muscle.

"Well?" Calla asked sultrily after another minute of silence, "Are you going to keep a girl waiting outside all night by herself?" She smiled mischievously, bringing her muzzle to within a foot of the shack door, her warm breath fogging up the glass windows. "Or am I going to have to huff and puff?"

Might as well face facts, Patterson thought with a sigh of reservation, reaching down to twist the door knob, stepping outside and into a whole new insane world of his own.

The quiet nights were officially over.

The End