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WARNING: May contain coarse language, violence, gore or sexual content. Reader discretion is advised.

Chapter 11. "A Golden Rescue"

His chest felt aflame. Wisps of air came and left. It was like he forgot how.

He tried to cough. That required air. Panic started to set in. A fragment of air found his lungs. He tried his best to remain calm. He slowly drew a breath in, then released it just as slow. Breathing felt awkward. He was at a loss as to just how one forgot how to breathe!

His chest felt heavy. It hurt so much to breathe. The rest of his body felt as if it was coming around as well. It felt as if his whole body was asleep - like a foot when you sit on it - and just waking up. He tried to clench his fists and eyes to stave off the pins-and-needles feeling. The strenuous breathing during this seemingly never-ending time was, oddly enough, helping him...forcing him to remember how breathing was done. Though it still took a moment longer to fill his lungs through the pain.

More explosions. More shouting. The whole place seemed to tremble. Maybe it was just him. He finally got his eyelids to cooperate a bit. Everything was cloudy and blurry. After a few blinks, everything started to become clearer. They still felt extremely heavy but at least they stayed open halfway.

He thought he finally got his fingers and toes to move. It was so hard to tell. The ache became pure pain. Everything he thought was moving just made it worse.

There was a shout. Something slammed into the door. It was more like a dull *thud*. It reminded him of when he first met and tripped over Angel, then planted his chest into the carpet.

Troy lifted his head as the door slid open. A flashing light stung his eyes. He kept blinking to try and clear his vision again. A figure stumbled back as another landed on

top of it, then swiped at it. It was still so hard to see but his eyes, eventually, came to focus.

The creature looked up at him. Troy swore the thing was just another cat - its thin tail hovering behind it. It had small, round ears near the sides of its head. It was hard to tell details with the light blinding him from behind it. It seemed to be crawling on all fours towards him. It gained speed, leapt, and crashed into him - one of its hands around Troy's neck.

He willed his eyes to shut. They refused. He stared wide-eyed at the snarling feline as it breathed its carrion breath over his face. It leaned in and started...sniffing him.

Troy had enough. He fought through the pain and pressed his shoulder blades in while pushing his neck against the creature's clawed hand. He could feel the pressure building in his neck. He wasn't entirely sure if it was because of the creature's grip or just more of the pain he already felt. Something warm trickled down the sides of his neck. It felt gross. He just wanted all of this to end.

The pain. The captivity. The simulation. The other nonsense. His life. He didn't want to be saved. He didn't want this, quote, lost love. He just wanted everything to go back to normal - whatever that was anymore.

Perhaps it was his life in the manufactured home. His beat-up car that he liked fixing up. His construction job. His parents. The Hammerjacks.

...Angel.

The creature pulled its claws from Troy's neck. Its nose turned down from his head and continued sniffing. Its damp nose traveled along his face as its whiskers tickled his cheeks. Its eyes locked onto Troy's. It blinked once. Then again.

Troy swore that he still wasn't seeing clearly. Maybe the pain was causing him to hallucinate. There was no way that those eyes looked like unpolished gold orbs.

The eyes moved away as it began to sniff his cheek. Blasts of air shot into his ear causing him to wince. Nose and whiskers traveled down his neck. Troy tried to speak, but couldn't find the means. It probably wasn't worth it, either.

A commotion started behind the creature. The feline snarled as it tensed up. Spittle dripped on Troy's chest as the feline hissed. With a growl, it sprang from the table Troy was trapped on. Troy watched as the feline continued a low growl while running out the door and to the left.

Troy huffed out his breath as his shoulders slumped. His lower back pressed against the table. It felt cool to the touch. He tried to sit up to look out the door but the chest band held him firmly to the table. Past attempts came back to him all at once. He had to give it another try.

Troy grit his teeth and heaved his body with all his might. Through his slit eyes, he noticed his right arm was free. He collapsed back against the table and gathered his strength while observing his...skin?

It was a dark green color. It reminded him of the goop Shark Lady covered him in for his "bath." Something was different about this, though. He turned his hand over. There was definitely something...off.

Something warm trickled down his wrist. He brought his fingers together and against his palm as he moved them through the liquid. Blood. He could faintly see a handprint left behind by the feline. He kept rubbing his fingers against his palm. It didn't *feel* like his hand. With all of this obnoxious pain, it was hard to tell what was real. He clenched it and immediately regretted doing so as he discovered new pain. No...it was more like a cramp.

He opened the hand and it fell against his chest. He thought it was *his* chest. It wasn't covered in fur. It had to be his. His sense of touch was still dulled by pain. Regardless, his hand slid a bit and came to rest. He remembered that velcro sound. He gave it his all and sat up. It was easier to do with the table being at a slight incline. He brought the hand up and looked at it. His green fingers and green wrist were definitely covered in a bit of someone's blood.

He took the opportunity to look around. It didn't *feel* right. It was like when Horns fell asleep while Troy played ignorant. Speaking of: There was no Horns or any other creatures besides the dead one on the floor. He saw the "feeding" device to one side. The "extraction" device, stimulator, and crown on the other.

Troy groaned and brought his hand down to his stomach to release it. He reached over and released his other hand, then his ankles. It took a considerable amount of time, but he was finally...free.

"Now what?" He asked himself.

A few creatures ran by the door to the left carrying the guns that fired balls of electricity. They seemed to be firing ahead at some unseen target.

Troy willed his body to slide down the table until his right foot slid free from the table. He commanded his body to slide from the table to stand. At least he thought that's what he was doing. He found himself sailing forward. His foot touched but he immediately found his knee giving out. He felt as if he were falling back into the table so he swung his arms forward. The force propelled him forward - his foot acting as a fulcrum as he found his chest against the floor next to the body of the dead soldier...alien.

He felt paralyzed with pain. He clenched his welling eyes shut and hissed his breath from his mouth, then pulled his hands from under his head to lay it on the floor. He forced every last molecule of breath from his lungs before inhaling. Like a bodybuilder on his last bench rep, he hissed air from his clenched open jaw. His body quivered as he started to cry - first in pain, then in pity.

"Now what?"

Cries of pain from the hallway drowned out his sobbing. Troy pulled himself together and pushed off the floor to his knees. The effort was mostly in getting the movement to happen. The movement itself seemed near effortless. He felt, however, that it could just be the sensory receptors sending mixed signals. It just seemed easier to do than he remembered despite the stiff, robotic limbs he felt he had. An oncoming headache restricted anymore deeper thoughts. For now, this was a good position.

Troy crawled to the door and looked both ways. His vision was still a bit fuzzy at a distance. It appeared that the hallway was clear. He chose to go towards the various bodies strewn against the floor. Going the other way would probably only lead to more soldiers trying to kill anything that moved. Going towards the bodies...hopefully, anyway, the feline wasn't there to kill *him*. After all: It *did* pull its claws from his neck and left him be.

It was such a strange exchange. Why did it let him live? It even...*sniffed* him. It sniffed him, took the claws away, sniffed some more, then just...left. The blood it left behind...

The blood!

“Shark Lady!” He remembered. “There’s things in the...in the stuff!”

He couldn’t think of the words as clearly as the picture in his head of when she licked her fingers before touching anything. Troy used the doorway to prop himself up as he tried to stand. This time, he did it slowly and locked his knees to prevent them from wobbling too much. He looked at his hand, then wiped the other one across his neck and chest. There wasn’t much blood left. He willed his feet to go over to the cart next to the table. He felt way more like a robot now. A penguin robot with how he waddled to the cart and began looking over the top, then into the drawers underneath. He finally found what he was looking for.

Troy waddled back over to the dead soldier and uncapped the vial in his hand. He nearly collapsed to the floor as he kneeled, then pressed the mouth of the vial to the soldier’s neck and used his free hand to rock the body towards it. The vial slowly filled with the chilling blood of the...whatever creature this was. Troy felt he had enough and capped the vial, then reclaimed his feet underneath him.

Again he asked no one, “Now what?”

He had to get out of here and fast. To the left. Away from where the soldiers were coming from. He *had* to walk. It was going to be slow, but it had to be faster than crawling everywhere.

Troy made his way back to the door and looked both ways again. He pushed away from the door and moved out into the hallway. He used the wall to steady himself as he began the slow journey to...somewhere. His confidence was returning as the headache was slowly dissipating. If it weren’t for that awful alarm wailing, his headache would be tolerable.

He came to the first body. It looked much like the one back in the room. He, too, had his throat ripped out. A few feet later, he looked over and saw the eyes of that creature were raked and the neck at an awkward angle - a visible bump protruding from the side. Troy felt his insides twist. Med school couldn’t prepare one for this.

More bodies with various forms of rent flesh, disfigurement, and dismemberment littered the hall until he made it to an intersection. He rested upon the wall as he looked over his options. It didn't matter where he looked, there were bodies in every direction. Troy slid his foot around the corner and it bumped into something. He felt his balance teeter and was reintroduced to the unforgiving floor.

Troy looked over at the body leaning against the wall. It seemed to be a smaller creature - perhaps a mouse of some form based upon the ears and tail. His guts were slashed from his belly and spilled into his lap. Somehow, his heart was smashed through the breathing apparatus and now occupied his mouth. The neck seemed to bulge as if there was more than the heart smashed in there.

"That feline...I could have ended up like this," he thought.

It wasn't a desirable way to go, but it had to have been less painful than everything he was feeling now.

Troy heard a growl as he was getting back to his feet. He could see the feline running straight for him. An energy ball hit the wall behind her. The feline looked back and growled. The hallway lit up and he could tell that she was more than *just* a feline. She was definitely from the large cat family. Which one was a bit of a mystery.

He wasn't sure what to do. He was halfway to standing to the side of the narrow hallway. Troy saw it look back at him, Troy braced for the impact and it felt like it ran right over him.

The feline was running on all fours when contact occurred. Troy felt his breath being forced from his lungs as a head landed in his stomach. An arm struck his leg. The impact arched the feline's back and looked like a car folding in on itself during a crash test. Troy began falling backward as he saw foot pads inching closer to his face. He landed on his back as the feline somersaulted through the air. Troy's head landed hard onto the floor as the feline landed on top of him.

He groaned with clenched eyes as he struggled to regain his breath - a searing pain shot through his skull. Something warm and moist was against his mouth and nose. The creature on top of him coughed and began to heave air back into its lungs. Troy kept trying to bring air into his own.

He tried to open his eyes. It was dark. Something was definitely covering his eyes. What little air he could drag into his lungs smelled horrendous. It was putrid. It reeked of sweat, body odor, unwashed ass, and what could only be described as “rotting carcass.”

The creature moved from atop him with a flap of something brushing his face until light appeared. He watched as the feline slowly moved its torso until it sat on his chest. A hand tapped his head, dragged along his face, then gripped tightly around his neck. It was the same tight grip it had used before - claws digging into the sides of his neck. He could feel the heat rising in his face as the blood became trapped.

“Do it,” he mouthed to the feline as its golden eyes scanned his face.

It leaned in and sniffed his face. The grip around his neck loosened. Troy coughed and reclaimed some air into his burning chest. It suddenly looked up and growled. There was something feminine about the sound vibrating from its throat. He could see a bump in the wrapping around its chest. As it lunged off of him and sprinted away, he saw definitive female genitalia under the leather loincloth before a tail hovered over him and disappeared. He turned to his side to settle his breathing.

“This was a mistake,” he thought as he reflected upon the direction he chose to take. “I just...don’t get it. Why won’t she kill me? Just...*kill* me already!” Troy got to his knees as he coughed a few more times. “I just want to die. I’m not picky with *how*.”

Another stabbing pain traveled from his skull to the middle of his brain to end his thoughts. He brought up a hand to rub his head as he turned and began to crawl away from the feline’s direction. He quickly dropped his hand as he felt his body leaving the ground.

He looked over his shoulder to see the feline’s body. Muscle rippled under her fur as parts moved and her face looked of panic and anger. He was being half carried, half dragged along the floor as a toddler does to a kitten or a puppy. Troy watched with wide eyes as an energy orb splashed against the wall after they turned a corner. He had no idea where they were going. He wasn’t sure if the thing driving knew either.

This way. That way. It all looked the same. This feline wasn’t hesitating at intersections though. Maybe she *did* know where she was going. Maybe not. She could be just maneuvering to avoid getting shot. Blast after blast hit the walls as they continued to travel and dart around corners.

A few bodies littered the floor ahead of them. This scene looked familiar. She seemed to be breathing rather hard - or so he thought with all the growling she did. They turned right at the next intersection. Troy glanced over to see the mouse creature with intestines splayed before it. The heart from its mouth was lying in its lap and viscera spilled from its mouth. They were right back where they started!

They kept going. After a left, Troy could see small fires burning in the hallway. Bodies were strewn about. Some had armor and fancy weapons. Some were without armor but with weapons he recognized. They looked makeshift or modified in some way. He wasn't a gun or weapon guy, but they definitely weren't as advanced as the creatures that captured him.

A few bodies were on fire, some littered with shrapnel, some with bullet holes, others were missing limbs or torn apart by apparent explosive blasts. Large chunks of flesh were missing on others as with Shark Lady. Some eyes looked back at him with blank stares. A few looked back at him with pleading, empty eyes as they attempted to breathe. Parts of walls and floors were missing or littered with damage from bullets or explosions. The whole...ship seemed to be jittering again.

Troy felt himself slipping in the creature's grasp. She began to slow. Troy tried to look up. He could just barely see her looking around frantically. He got the feeling they were lost.

They passed through a door that looked forced in by explosives. He could see everything in this room. Everything in this room looked familiar. These were items and objects from the city he lived in. The room seemed to have no ceiling and no opposite end. There were even full houses here!

They finally stopped. The panting and growling feline set him down carefully. He rested on his hands and knees while looking at the feline. Her brow was furrowed, ears twitching this way and that, and the same could be seen in its golden eyes. They were lost.

Other than being in a lot of pain - even with adrenaline flowing - he didn't know why he was here...with her. Even with wanting to die, he felt a bit grateful that she was helping him - even though he didn't know why. He didn't have the slightest clue what was going on. Other than sheer curiosity, he wasn't sure why he was staring at her.

Her fur looked matted and dirty. There were faint black spots among the blanket of gross, brown looking fur. Her face had two black stripes down her inner eyes to the corners of her mouth. Shorter black stripes fell down her outer eyes to the middle of her...cheeks. Her ears were round and kind of cute. Her torso from under her armpits to the start of her hips was covered in a long strip of cloth like he'd seen women wear in films where it was a medieval setting and they were trying to pass as men. Then there was the flimsy brown leather loincloth. She looked emaciated, yet strong. There seemed to be rippling muscle underneath the fur as she flexed her hands and legs while looking around. She was just muscle on bone with skin and fur stretched over them. Her arms were rather long. It made sense when he saw her running on all fours. Her hands were large with webbing up to the first knuckle and ended with sharp claws. Her feet were similar-looking to her hands but appeared more like human feet. Her legs had an angle to them much like a normal feline. She didn't seem to look like the other alien beasts. She seemed more...feral...wild. Perhaps "normal" was the proper term.

He kept returning to her eyes. How could she see like that? Could she see? Was it some sort of disease or were they like a mechanical replacement inserted from losing them? They were captivating. It finally dawned on him that he's seen her before.

She shouted or roared as she threw her head back and clenched her hands - "Or is it "paws" to them," he thought - into fists. Troy saw movement behind her. A creature steadied a rifle at her and fired an energy ball her way. It zoomed out of the barrel. Troy panicked and couldn't think of what to do except just snap his fingers. She quieted immediately and turned to look his way, then back as the energy orb snapped through the air. Her body twisted, but she didn't make it in time. The air reverberated with a "clap" as the orb clipped her abdomen and sent her convulsing to the floor.

He felt his stomach clench, his heart skip, and his eyes bulged. He looked over at her killer in fear. He forced his body to move away from the attackers. He didn't want to die. He wanted to keep going with her wherever she was going. She was his second chance at living a full life. It had to be better than ending up dead on an examination table. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live! Death was becoming too scary.

Unless...unless this was indeed purgatory. It sure as fuck wasn't providence.

The creature aimed the apparatus directly at him. The room was quiet enough that he could hear the hum of the charge collecting in the barrel. They were far enough away that he couldn't see much, but he swore he saw the thing grinning through the blue liquid. Its tail danced at the tip as the rest slightly swayed behind it.

Strands of light danced across the four claws at the end of the muzzle. The creature slowly drew its finger back on the trigger. A loud “*click*” filled the air as it squeezed the trigger and light briefly blinded his eyes like a camera flash. A ball of light sailed Troy’s way. He felt paralyzed as he ogled the object of his demise.

A hand hit the ground between him and the projectile. Another slammed into the ground as the feline began to run his way. He closed his eyes and braced for whatever impact was about to hit him. Troy felt something crash into his back as one arm hit the back of his neck and another curl up between his legs. He felt himself being lifted off the ground as his body went limp. He pried his eyes open to see the ceiling...no...the floor. He felt his weight shift as the wiry, smelly feline clutched him against her chest while they somersaulted along the ground, then popped up as the orb struck just behind her.

He felt heavy as she hoisted him off the ground and began to carry him while running away from their pursuers. He felt himself slip as she repositioned him in her arms. He timidly reached out and clenched his arms around her neck. He held on as tight as he could while she ran. He could hear and feel her growling through her chest. He could pick out some whining as if she was in pain. He glanced up to see in her brow and eyes the pain she was feeling.

They came to a door with a sort of glyph drawn onto it. She carefully set him down and against the wall, then licked her fingers and spit on the door. She ran her hand along the door smearing spit atop it. She growled as she seemed to claw at it in frustration. She looked back, then around as she continued to growl between whines.

Troy could see the wound from the blast. The smell of burning fur and meat confirmed it. The cloth wrapped around her midsection had a softball-sized hole in it with singed edges. Small ribbons of string seemed to be barely holding the whole wrap together or it would have unraveled by now. She must have avoided the direct hit because it wasn’t nearly as severe as how Shark Lady looked from one.

She looked over at Troy. She walked over and squatted next to him. It was hard to look in her pained eyes. Even though they were intriguing, it was still similar to the feeling of looking in the clouded eyes of a blind person. He looked at her, then at his lap several times. She seemed to be...growling?...purring? She brought up one of her hands and then hesitated for a second before placing it quite harshly on the side of his face. She pulled her hand away as she slowly closed her eyes and leaned in to sniff

him. Troy saw her lightly clench her hand and place it against her chest. She was definitely purring.

Troy watched as she opened her eyes and looked up at him. She looked so...kind...for some reason. This all felt extremely awkward. The moment didn't last long. She turned her head and began to cough. Her ears perked up and she snapped her head to look behind her. She moved her hand down just under the wound. It looked extremely painful and needed treatment fast. Troy averted his eyes as her genitalia had become visible with her loincloth slid to the side.

He felt his face become warm out of embarrassment. It wasn't that he hadn't seen one before. He...just...thought it was rude to stare - even with her choice of outfits and lack of caring if she were exposed. It was hard to tell her gender otherwise with how thin and frail she looked. With how strong she was, she could have easily passed as a male. She was quite intimidating, too. She was always growling. But that look that she gave him...

She pivoted on her feet and lurched forward. She was soon gone in the distance. Troy looked over at the door. He'd seen that symbol before. It was on the monitor that Horns was using. He looked down at his hand. Somehow, he was still clutching the vial. He brought his other hand over to uncurl his fingers. He pulled out the vial, then brought it up to his mouth to try and uncup it with his teeth. He held the cap in his teeth as he pressed a finger to the mouth, then tipped the vial over. He recapped the vial, then stared at his finger. He brought it over to the door and pressed the bloody digit to the door. It opened after a slight hesitation.

Another...fucking...hallway!

Troy pulled himself along the wall as the pain reminded him it was still there. He made it to his feet and began to lumber down the corridor. He came upon a door and repeated the process to open it.

The light was intense as the door slid to the side. It was so much brighter than the surrounding hallway or even the vast room he was just in. He felt a desire to see those creatures taken out so he could explore that room some more. There had to be something in there that he could use as a weapon. Maybe even his house was in there. Perhaps even his car. A hammer would make a good enough weapon right now.

His eyes adjusted to the light. It looked like some sort of laboratory. Various tables, shelving, cabinets filled the room with various items and instruments similar to what he had on his world. Some things were very unique. He'd never seen anything like it. The door closed behind him causing him to jump a bit.

His eyes caught a body suit on a sort of mannequin. It looked much like the suits the creatures wore. The suits that they wore were tinted green with brown undertones. This was more of a metallic blue. He had no idea what would happen if he put it on. What properties did it hold? Would it even fit? Given the circumstances, it wasn't a big deal that he was running around naked - even if he was covered in some green substance. This was as good of a time as any to finally cover up.

It held fast to the mannequin. His hand cooperated as he uncapped the vial and touched the brooch or whatever in the middle of the chest. The suit seemed to release its grip from the mannequin. He opened up the front and pulled it free. It didn't look like he'd be in any danger putting it on. He did his best to concentrate as he kept his balance to place his feet in, then pulled it up his shaky legs. He imagined this was what it was like to put on a wet suit to scuba dive. He placed the vial down on a nearby counter, then pushed his arms through the sleeves. He pulled the chest together. As he did, it seemed to come together on its own. He pulled the hood over his face and tucked it under where the collar met.

The suit became uncomfortably tight. After a moment, it loosened and felt like he was wearing nothing again. Even the hood was comfortable. He moved his limbs and his face around. He couldn't even tell it was there. He could feel his feet rise up slightly as soles formed under them. Something dark formed at his knees, elbows, and pubic region. They looked like pads or some similar form of protection and the pubic region looked like a thin codpiece.

He looked down and saw a whitish tint near his hip. He was quite amazed at how clear his vision was looking through the hood. He touched the spot with his finger and it opened like a pocket of sorts. He placed the vial into the pocket and it sealed up with another touch. He banged his hand against it. It seemed like it was protected and he could barely tell it was there.

His eyes caught a glimpse of another item of interest. It was on a pedestal atop one of the countertops. It looked like a more advanced version of the gun that the others were carrying around. He wasn't sure how it worked, but he knew one way to find out.

The strenuous activity started taking its toll on him. He felt his throat closing up and it was becoming a struggle to breathe. He brought his hand up and touched the brooch, then pulled off the hood. He fell against one of the tables and pulled himself on top of it. He held his hand near his sternum as he gasped breath into his body. His legs felt like gelatin. His throat ached from the abuse the feline put it through.

He needed a name for her. He'd already named Shark Lady, Horns, Red Eyes, and Cane. Goldeneye? Goldy? Stinky? Rot Puss? Troy shook his head. "Goldy" worked just fine.

He could feel a bit of energy return to him. He needed to keep moving. He wasn't sure where to go though. He seemed to be safe for now. He looked around the room to see many armor or weapon-related items. This was more of a workshop than a medical laboratory. If this was here, there had to be a medical facility nearby. He chanced walking again. There wasn't much strength in his knees, but it was still a lot faster than crawling.

He slowly slid off the table and shuffled over to the door. Just touching it on this side made it slide open. He stepped back out into the hallway.

"I hope Goldy is okay," he thought as he saw the door still open down the hallway.

He looked the other way and pressed on.